



INSTITUTE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION
IDE
Rajiv Gandhi University



MAENG-504

Literature and Gender-I

MA ENGLISH
3rd Semester

Rajiv Gandhi University
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Literature and Gender I

MAENG504
III SEMESTER



RAJIV GANDHI UNIVERSITY

Arunachal Pradesh, INDIA - 791 112

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About the University

Rajiv Gandhi University (formerly Arunachal University) is a premier institution for higher education in the state of Arunachal Pradesh and has completed twenty-five years of its existence. Late Smt. Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India, laid the foundation stone of the university on 4th February, 1984 at Rono Hills, where the present campus is located.

Ever since its inception, the university has been trying to achieve excellence and fulfill the objectives as envisaged in the University Act. The university received academic recognition under Section 2(f) from the University Grants Commission on 28th March, 1985 and started functioning from 1st April, 1985. It got financial recognition under section 12-B of the UGC on 25th March, 1994. Since then Rajiv Gandhi University, (then Arunachal University) has carved a niche for itself in the educational scenario of the country following its selection as a University with potential for excellence by a high-level expert committee of the University Grants Commission from among universities in India.

The University was converted into a Central University with effect from 9th April, 2007 as per notification of the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India.

The University is located atop Rono Hills on a picturesque tableland of 302 acres overlooking the river Dikrong. It is 6.5 km from the National Highway 52-A and 25 km from Itanagar, the State capital. The campus is linked with the National Highway by the Dikrong bridge.

The teaching and research programmes of the University are designed with a view to play a positive role in the socio-economic and cultural development of the State. The University offers Undergraduate, Post-graduate, M.Phil and Ph.D. programmes. The Department of Education also offers the B.Ed. programme.

There are fifteen colleges affiliated to the University. The University has been extending educational facilities to students from the neighbouring states, particularly Assam. The strength of students in different departments of the University and in affiliated colleges has been steadily increasing.

The faculty members have been actively engaged in research activities with financial support from UGC and other funding agencies. Since inception, a number of proposals on research projects have been sanctioned by various funding agencies to the University. Various departments have organized numerous seminars, workshops and conferences. Many faculty members have participated in national and international conferences and seminars held within the country and abroad. Eminent scholars and distinguished personalities have visited the University and delivered lectures on various disciplines.

The academic year 2000-2001 was a year of consolidation for the University. The switch over from the annual to the semester system took off smoothly and the performance of the students registered a marked improvement. Various syllabi designed by Boards of Post-graduate Studies (BPGS) have been implemented. VSAT facility installed by the ERNET India, New Delhi under the UGC-Infonet program, provides Internet access.

In spite of infrastructural constraints, the University has been maintaining its academic excellence. The University has strictly adhered to the academic calendar, conducted the examinations and declared the results on time. The students from the University have found placements not only in State and Central Government Services, but also in various institutions, industries and organizations. Many students have emerged successful in the National Eligibility Test (NET).

Since inception, the University has made significant progress in teaching, research, innovations in curriculum development and developing infrastructure.

About IDE

The formal system of higher education in our country is facing the problems of access, limitation of seats, lack of facilities and infrastructure. Academicians from various disciplines opine that it is learning which is more important and not the channel of education. The education through distance mode is an alternative mode of imparting instruction to overcome the problems of access, infrastructure and socio-economic barriers. This will meet the demand for qualitative higher education of millions of people who cannot get admission in the regular system and wish to pursue their education. It also helps interested employed and unemployed men and women to continue with their higher education. Distance education is a distinct approach to impart education to learners who remained away in the space and/or time from the teachers and teaching institutions on account of economic, social and other considerations. Our main aim is to provide higher education opportunities to those who are unable to join regular academic and vocational education programmes in the affiliated colleges of the University and make higher education reach to the doorsteps in rural and geographically remote areas of Arunachal Pradesh in particular and North-eastern part of India in general. In 2008, the Centre for Distance Education has been renamed as "Institute of Distance Education (IDE)."

Continuing the endeavor to expand the learning opportunities for distant learners, IDE has introduced Post Graduate Courses in 5 subjects (Education, English, Hindi, History and Political Science) from the Academic Session 2013-14.

The Institute of Distance Education is housed in the Physical Sciences Faculty Building (first floor) next to the University Library. The University campus is 6 kms from NERIST point on National Highway 52A. The University buses ply to NERIST point regularly.

Outstanding Features of Institute of Distance Education:

(i) At Par with Regular Mode

Eligibility requirements, curricular content, mode of examination and the award of degrees are on par with the colleges affiliated to the Rajiv Gandhi University and the Department(s) of the University.

(ii) Self-Instructional Study Material (SISM)

The students are provided SISM prepared by the Institute and approved by Distance Education Council (DEC), New Delhi. This will be provided at the time of admission at the IDE or its Study Centres. SISM is provided only in English except Hindi subject.

(iii) Contact and Counselling Programme (CCP)

The course curriculum of every programme involves counselling in the form of personal contact programme of duration of approximately 7-15 days. The CCP shall not be compulsory for BA. However for professional courses and MA the attendance in CCP will be mandatory.

(iv) Field Training and Project

For professional course(s) there shall be provision of field training and project writing in the concerned subject.

(v) Medium of Instruction and Examination

The medium of instruction and examination will be English for all the subjects except for those subjects where the learners will need to write in the respective languages.

(vi) Subject/Counselling Coordinators

For developing study material, the IDE appoints subject coordinators from within and outside the University. In order to run the PCCP effectively Counselling Coordinators are engaged from the Departments of the University, The Counselling-Coordinators do necessary coordination for involving resource persons in contact and counselling programme and assignment evaluation. The learners can also contact them for clarifying their difficulties in then respective subjects.

SYLLABI-BOOK MAPPING TABLE

Syllabi

UNIT I: Simon De Beauvoir

The Independent Woman

UNIT II: Virginia Woolf

Sexual and Textual Politics

UNIT III: Akice Walker

The Color Purple

UNIT IV: Sarojii Naidu

Songs of Radha & Pardah Nashin

UNIT V: Emily Dickenson

I Felt a Funeral in my Brain & Because I Could not Stop for Death

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 - 7.4.2 Analysis
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UNIT 1 SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

Structure

- 1.0 Introduction
- 1.1 Unit Objectives
- 1.2 Beauvoir, the Feminist Writer
- 1.3 'The Independent Woman'
 - 1.3.1 Themes
 - 1.3.2 Motifs
- 1.4 Summary
- 1.5 Key Terms
- 1.6 Answers to 'Check Your Progress'
- 1.7 Questions and Exercises
- 1.8 Further Reading

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986), a French national, was a feminist, an existentialist philosopher, political activist and social theorist. *The Second Sex*, one of her most acknowledged work, laid the foundation for contemporary feminism. It takes a look at history from the feminist point of view. The book earned de Beauvoir several admirers as well as critics.

Today, however, this meticulously researched volume is considered a pillar of feminist thought. De Beauvoir's primary argument has been to oppose the concept of women as 'others' as characterized by men after oppressing them. The women or the other are considered the exact opposite of the men; while the man considers himself to be the subject and plays the role of the self. This makes the man the absolute. He is the only essential and transcendent. The woman is inessential, incomplete, helpless and even amputated. De Beauvoir has tried to fight this distinction in all her works. Human, she says, by nature study themselves as opposed to others. The same logic does not work in case of gender issues. By referring to the woman exclusively as 'the other', man is denying her humanity. This unit will understand the body of work by Simone de Beauvoir, with emphasis on 'The Independent Woman', one of the last chapters of *The Second Sex*.

1.1 UNIT OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Understand Simone de Beauvoir as a feminist writer
- Describe significance of 'The Independent Woman' in *The Second Sex*
- Recall the author's understanding of women and liberation

1.2 BEAUVOIR, THE FEMINIST WRITER

Simone de Beauvoir was a feminist writer, existentialist philosopher and public intellectual. Her close relationship with fellow philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre that lasted

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a lifetime is well known in the field of literature. In 1949, she wrote *The Second Sex*, a work of feminist literature that details women's oppression. Her legacy has only grown since her death. There is a bridge in Paris in her honour. She was a French writer and feminist, a member of the intellectual fellowship of philosopher-writers who have given a literary transcription to the themes of Existentialism. She is known primarily for her treatise *Le Deuxième Sexe*, 2 vol. (1949; *The Second Sex*), a scholarly and passionate plea to abolish the myth of the "eternal feminine." This seminal work became a classic of feminist literature.



Fig. 1.1 Simone De Beauvoir

She did her schooling in private institutions, and went to the Sorbonne, where, in 1929 where she studied philosophy and met Jean-Paul Sartre. Before taking up writing as a full time profession, she worked as a teacher from 1931 to 1943 at a number of schools. In 1945 she and Sartre founded and began editing a monthly review titled *Le Temps Modernes*.

Her novels highlight existential themes, demonstrating her conception of the writer's commitment to the times. *L'Invitée* (1943; *She Came To Stay*) describes the subtle destruction of a couple's relationship brought about by a young girl's prolonged stay in their home; it also treats the difficult problem of the relationship of a conscience to "the other," each individual conscience being fundamentally a predator to another.

Of her other works of fiction, perhaps the best known is *Les Mandarins* (1954; *The Mandarins*), for which she won the Prix Goncourt. It is a chronicle of the attempts of post-World War II intellectuals to leave their 'mandarin' (educated elite) status and engage in politics. She also wrote four books on philosophy, including *Pour une Morale de l'ambiguïté* (1947; *The Ethics of Ambiguity*); travel books on China (*La Longue Marche: essai sur la Chine* [1957]; *The Long March*) and the United States

(*L'Amérique au jour de jour* [1948]; *America Day by Day*); and a number of essays, some of which are long enough to be books. The best known of which is *The Second Sex*. In 2009 a new English-language translation of *The Second Sex* was published, making the entire original text available to English-speaking readers for the first time; the earlier translation (1953) had been severely edited.

Several volumes of her work are devoted to autobiography. These include *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* (1958; *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*), *La Force de l'âge* (1960; *The Prime of Life*), *La Force des choses* (1963; *Force of Circumstance*), and *Tout compte fait* (1972; *All Said and Done*). This body of work, beyond its personal interest, constitutes a clear and telling portrait of French intellectual life from the 1930s to the 1970s.

In addition to treating feminist issues, de Beauvoir was concerned with the issue of aging, which she addressed in *Une Mort très douce* (1964; *A Very Easy Death*). This was based on her mother's death in a hospital, and in *La Vieillesse* (1970; *Old Age*), she reflects bitterly on how indifferent society can be towards the elderly. In 1981 she wrote *La Cérémonie des adieux* (*Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre*), an account of how Sartre spent his last years. *Simone de Beauvoir: A Biography*, by Deirdre Bair, appeared in 1990. Carole Seymour-Jones's *A Dangerous Liaison* (2008), a double biography of de Beauvoir and Sartre, explores the unorthodox long-term relationship between these two individuals.

Simone de Beauvoir came across as a courageous woman who possessed integrity and whose life reflected in her thesis: the basic options of an individual must be made on the premises of an equal vocation for man and woman founded on a common structure of their being, independent of their sexuality.

Throughout *The Second Sex*, De Beauvoir refers to a number of historical figures. This short list attempts to place them in their context and, in some cases, to explain how De Beauvoir uses them in her work.

1. **Alfred Adler (1870–1930)** - He was a psychoanalyst known for the 'inferiority complex' theory. He disagreed with Freud over the role of the libido in individual psychology. He developed a new branch of psychoanalysis, which he called individual psychology. According to him, the urge to be superior or attain self-realization drives men. If men fail to fulfil this desire, they develop an inferiority complex and various neuroses follow.
2. **André Breton (1896–1966)** - He was a French poet, critic, and major proponent of the Surrealist movement. He was once a student of medicine and was deeply influenced by Freud's theories of the unconscious. He was interested in eliminating the distinction between subject and object, dream and reality, sanity and lunacy. De Beauvoir talks of his work in Chapter X, 'The Myth of Woman in Five Authors.'
3. **Casanova (1725–1798)** - He was an Italian adventurer who left behind a collection of memoirs and was known for his association and affairs with women.
4. **Paul Claudel (1868–1955)** - He was a poet, playwright and a popular figure in French literary circles in the early twentieth century. He had immense faith in God, a rarity in the age of Modernism. The conflict between human and divine love tormented Claudel throughout his life. De Beauvoir analyzes his work from a feminist perspective in Chapter X, "The Myth of Woman in Five Authors."

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21. **Emile Zola (1840–1902)** - She was a French novelist, journalist, and founder of the naturalist movement in late nineteenth-century French letters. Zola's novels, especially *Nana* (1880), are known for their stinging depiction of the moral decay of French society. De Beauvoir cites Zola's realistic depiction of the situation of women.
22. **Isadora Duncan (1878–1927)** - She was a legendary American dancer whose performances were inspired by Greek classical art. Duncan wore a Greek tunic, flowers in her hair, and flowing headscarves. Her autobiography, published the same year of her death, supplied de Beauvoir with many examples of female vanity but also of the rewards of artistic accomplishment and of achievements independent of male influence.
23. **Helene Deutsch (1884–1982)** - She was an early follower of Freud who became known as one of the first psychoanalysts to introduce theories of female sexuality into public discourse. A pioneer for women in fields of medicine and psychology, Deutsch had a troubled relationship with her parents, which she used as the basis for many of her later theories in her most famous book, *The Psychology of Women* (1944–1945). She argued that girls' problems stemmed from the inability to detach from their mothers.
24. **Juliette Drouet (1806–1883)** - She was Victor Hugo's first and most important mistress. Drouet was his companion for such a long time that his family eventually accepted her. De Beauvoir discusses Drouet's never-ending devotion in "Justifications."
25. **Marie Bashkirtsev (1858–1884)** - She was a Ukrainian-born painter and writer who made a huge splash when she arrived in Paris. Her diaries, first published in 1889, five years after her death, provide De Beauvoir with an example of female narcissism.
26. **Madame de Pompadour (1721–1764)** - She was a middle-class woman who used her intellect and guile to become mistress of King Louis XV of France. Madame de Pompadour was hugely influential in matters of art and culture.
27. **Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–)** - He was a French anthropologist and pioneer of structural anthropology, a theory that values the structure of myths over their specific narrative content. Rather than see Western civilization as elevated and unique, Lévi-Strauss sought connections between primitive and modern societies. He believed that the savage man was equal to the civilized man and that man's character was identical everywhere, regardless of culture or epoch. De Beauvoir leans on Lévi-Strauss's theories in her analysis of myths.
28. **St. Catherine of Siena (1347–1380)** - She was a fourteenth-century nun who lived through the Black Death and one of the few positive examples de Beauvoir provides of a woman transcending her given options. De Beauvoir rejects Joan of Arc as a role model and instead praises Catherine of Siena, whose benevolence and inner visions gave her authority over some of the most important men of her age, including two popes. She experienced numerous visions and ecstatic encounters with the divine, and was also known for her cogent writing style.

Check Your Progress

1. What is De Beauvoir's primary thesis?
2. What is the main theme of the book *The Second Sex*?
3. Name a book written by Andre Breton.
4. Who wrote the book *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*?
5. When did Freud write his book *The Theory of Sexuality*?

1.3 'THE INDEPENDENT WOMAN'

'The Independent Woman' is the first chapter of Part VII of Beauvoir's famous work *The Second Sex*. In this chapter, while insisting upon the importance of economic independence of women, Beauvoir enunciates the difference between a male, who has enough freedom to move to a new city and get a hotel, and a female, who does not share this independence with the male and, therefore, feels the necessity to establish a household.

Carrying on the same line, she talks about women with successful careers to show how economic freedom helped them escape masochism and sadism of the essentially patriarchal society. Beauvoir mentions that in spite of women being granted the right to vote and French law not recognizing obedience as the duty of a wife, women are far from achieving social and economic autonomy. In fact, only handful of women, according to Beauvoir, has attained the state of social and economic autonomy and equality. In a footnote, she cites the example of Clara and Robert Schumann. Beauvoir argues that an attempt to be a good wife can be consuming and overwhelming, for a good wife means to be elegant, excel in housekeeping and be a fulfilling mother. Such a demanding role that women have to play in almost every social and cultural setting makes women victim of forgetfulness of herself. And it is this forgetfulness acts as an impediment for women to accomplish great things.

But for Beauvoir there are women who are immune to this forgetfulness, for their profession reinforces 'their femininity', instead of discouraging it. To this category of women belong singers, actresses, and dancers. These women, says Beauvoir, are able to 'transcend their given characteristics' through their 'artistic expressions'. But expressive arts are not the only form of art that women are getting increasingly engaged with. The social situation of the women compels them to get inclined towards literature and art.

While talking about literature Beauvoir mentions women writers like Emily Bronte, Virginia Woolf, and Mary Webb (she also fleetingly mentions Colette and Mansfield) as an example of writers who tried to decipher the conundrum of 'nature in its non-human freedom'. And in spite of such the great achievements of Bronte, who to deal with the idea of death, Woolf, who addressed the life, and Mansfield, who, though 'not very often', dealt with the idea of everyday suffering and contingency, no woman ever wrote books as great as *The Trial*, *Moby Dick*, *Ulysses*, or *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* – books diving as deep in to the human situation as one could ever possibly imagine.

Beauvoir argues that the reason women fail to contest the human situation is that they have barely even begun to understand and come to terms with it. It should be noted that the majority of the men share the similar limitation, but there are a few who do not – few rare men who deserve to be called great artists, and when the women of achievement are compared with these few rare great men, they appear to be mediocre. But the reason behind this apparent mediocrity of women is not some special destiny but social, cultural and economic circumstances.

Beauvoir says that it is easily comprehensible that why women have not been able to achieve the loftiest limits in the sphere of art and literature, and hints that they may not be able to attain the said limits for some time. The few men, who we call great artist, before creating what they did took the burden of the world on their

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are certain socially defined set 'duties' that is expected of a wife and that she will perform them perfectly. But in the midst of highlighting 'duties' the 'rights' are completely overlooked and somehow these duties start defining the women and their existence. A good wife follows the socially set codes of 'how to do 'things religiously''. A woman is never detached from the designated mythical and stereotypical image that is attached to her all the time even as she changes her roles and positions. These myths only put the women in an even more delicate position because she is now married and has to discharge her responsibility towards her new family and world at large.

The biggest challenge a woman faces is that is 'not permitted to do anything'. But the greater trouble lies in the mindset that a woman is not efficient enough to do anything. In a husband-wife relation a woman is never an equal but ends up being the 'other'. Man, who stays at an elevated scale occupies a more subjective position and becomes the automatic qualifier for the 'doer', whereas the woman is relegated to the margins of an object. She becomes and remains submissive and passive as that is how she is supposed to be and nothing else. She transforms into the silent 'other' but this does not imply that she is devoid of a voice. The real issue lies with the androcentric world that is just not capable enough to comprehend her language. Thus, she tries to do things which will make her reach that 'true self' that she has lost in the maze of her role playing.

Simone de Beauvoir suggests that religion or love is the two means which are viable to women to attain that 'true self'.

1.3.1 Themes

Immanence vs Transcendence

Beauvoir uses the word 'immanence' for the domain which has been historically assigned to women. It is a place where women can remain passive, static, and spend time with themselves. While the word 'transcendence' is used for the opposing characteristics of men, like being active, productive, creative, powerful, engaging and interacting with the outside world. Beauvoir argues that one's life must have the interaction of both immanence and transcendence, but unfortunately woman has been denied the latter by man throughout the history. While explain the women's situation in the society, Beauvoir exposes the ways in which women have been compelled to dispense with their right to transcendence and accept the passive and circumscribed incarceration. And the only way to escape through this incarceration for woman is through man, and this is what makes the entire situation of women problematic. Where man has various things to occupy himself with and look forward to, woman has only man.

Nature vs Nurture

Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, argues that women's inferior and passive position in the society has little to do with biological difference between the bodies of a male and a female. She designates the difference between the social position of man and woman to the difference between the ways they are brought up. She argues that the male social domination is not a result of some inherent quality or predestination but is a social conditioning that one can witness at every stage of his development. She writes that the power a man enjoys is not innate to him, and says that a 'man learns his power'.

Following the same line of argument, Beauvoir asserts that a woman is not born passive, mediocre, and powerless. These are the qualities which she is conditioned to learn during her development from a girl to a woman. She is made to believe that these characteristics are essential to her development as a woman, and that the only way for her to achieve happiness and gain acceptance is to deny her own self. Beauvoir says such conditioning of young girls and boys to become what they do must change. And since both boys and girls are born equal, there is a strong possibility of their being equal as men and women in their adulthood. But, for such a change to take place it is imperative for the society to change its traditional perspective through which it sees and defines the roles and responsibilities for men and women.

Production vs Reproduction

Women's ability to reproduce is one of her characteristic which is both treasured and reviled, and according to Beauvoir, one of the most crucial aspect of the women's situation is problems and difficulties faced in harmonizing her productive capacity with her reproductive capacity. Productive ability of woman means her participation in labour and her contribution in the economy of the society she live in. And it has been widely believed that it is because of her reproductive function that women cannot harness the productive side of her personality. But in a closer study of these two functions, Beauvoir shows they are not mutually exclusive, i.e. the performance of one function should not hinder the performance of the other. She says that a woman's ability to reproduce must not stop her from contributing to her society. A woman should neither be considered exclusively as a womb nor exclusively as a worker.

It is apparent throughout history that the functions of the women have been restricted to her ability to reproduce, which has been the only contribution that she has made or has been allowed to make to the society. Her life, even till the present time, has been but a sequence of uninterrupted pregnancies. Most of the time she is left alone to carry the burdens of childbearing, an exhausting task even for the most energetic women. And because of these burdens, a woman has never been able to find her ways into the workplace.

Liberation of women and change in her social position is not possible unless they are able to leave the boundaries of their homes and enter the workplace as men's equals. And for such a thing to happen, it is crucial that the idea of nuclear family must be reconfigured so as to allow the women freedom to engage and interact with the outside world. Women should be able to take charge of their own bodies and pregnancies, and for this to happen it is important for the society to do away with the stigmas associated with unwed mothers and abortion. Beauvoir says women must not only aim to enter workplace and participate in work, which she insist is important, but they must become the part of the 'totality of human reality'.

The writer is of the opinion that if a woman can earn for herself, she can bring about change in her status: 'When she is productive, active, she regains her transcendence; in her projects she concretely affirms her status as subject; in connection with the aims she pursues, with the money and the rights she takes possession of, she makes trial of and senses her responsibility.'

Even women know the importance of having a job that helps them fetch money. De Beauvoir does not believe that 'the mere combination of the right to vote and a job constitutes a complete emancipation'.

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De Beauvoir is of the opinion that women tend to think that in an arrangement like this they use men for their satisfaction, yet at the same time they are also taking away something. In reality, no such thing may happen. In a sanctioned relationship, desire and dignity play together. But here, 'when a male enjoys a woman and gives her enjoyment, he takes the position of the sole subject; he is imperious conqueror or lavish donor; sometimes both together. Woman, for her part, also wishes to make it clear that she subdues her partner to her pleasure and overwhelms him with her gifts. Thus, when she imposed herself on a man, be it through promised benefits, or in staking on his courtesy, or by artfully arousing his desire in its pure generality, she readily persuades herself that she is overwhelming him with her bounty. Thanks to this advantageous conviction, she can make advances without humiliating herself, because she feels she is doing so out of generosity'. No man will like if the woman makes the first move.

Talking about the sexual activities carried out by men and women, de Beauvoir claims that women can under no circumstance forget the superior status of men. He always asks for her to surrender. Explaining herself further de Beauvoir suggests 'he is eager to take and not to receive, not to exchange but to rob'. But problems crop up when she tries to make herself heard. The 'tension', thus surfaced boosts the ego of man. Yet ironically when the woman detaches herself from her passivity 'she breaks the spell that brings on her enjoyment, if she mimics dominance in her postures and movements, she fails to reach the climax of pleasure'. This, according to the author, this turns most women frigid.

ACTIVITY

Draw a comparative analysis of the views of Toril Moi's with those of Julia Kristeva.

DID YOU KNOW

The chapters of *The Second Sex* (original French title *Le deuxième sexe*) first appeared in June 1949 in a French Journal called *Les Temps modernes*. The second volume of the book appeared after few months of the publication of the first volume in France. The book was quickly translated as *The Second Sex* in English by Howard Parshley, who translated the work at the insistence of Blanche Knopf, wife of the publisher Alfred A. Knopf. Though, this translation allowed the book to be published in America quickly, but it also affected the content and the message of Beauvoir. Parshley was a biology professor in Smith College. His understanding and familiarity with both French language and philosophy were limited and therefore his translation of the Beauvoir's book completely distorted the meanings and the arguments. The book was not only mistranslated but also inappropriately cut, thus distorting the very basic ideas. For several years Knopf did not allow an accurate translation of the Beauvoir's work, in spite of various efforts made by the existentialist scholars. The second translation came recently in the year 2009, marking the 60th anniversary of the first publication of book. The second translation was done by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, which is the also the first complete translation including one third of the original work which was previously cut from the first translation.

Check Your Progress

6. What is the focus of *The Independent Woman*?
7. Beauvoir abstractly developed this idea of _____ in her 1945 lecture *The Ethics of Ambiguity*
8. According to Beauvoir, Liberation of women and change is her social position is not possible unless they are able to leave the boundaries of their homes and enter the workplace as men's equals. (True/False)

1.4 SUMMARY

In this unit, you have learnt that:

- Simone de Beauvoir (1908 –1986), a French national, was a feminist, an existentialist philosopher, political activist and social theorist.
- *The Second Sex*, one of her most acknowledged work, laid the foundation for contemporary feminism.
- Of her other works of fiction, perhaps the best known is *Les Mandarins* (1954; *The Mandarins*), for which she won the Prix Goncourt. It is a chronicle of the attempts of post-World War II intellectuals to leave their 'mandarin' (educated elite) status and engage in politics.
- De Beauvoir's primary argument has been to oppose the concept of women as 'others' as characterized by men after oppressing them.
- In addition to treating feminist issues, de Beauvoir was concerned with the issue of aging, which she addressed in *Une Mort trs douce* (1964; *A Very Easy Death*).
- 'The Independent Woman' is the first chapter of Part VII of Beauvoir's famous work *The Second Sex*. In this chapter, while insisting upon the importance of economic independence of women, Beauvoir enunciates the difference between a male, who has enough freedom to move to a new city and get a hotel, and a female, who does not share this independence with the male and, therefore, feels the necessity to establish a household.
- Beauvoir argues that the reason women fail to contest the human situation is that they have barely even begun to understand and come to terms with it.
- Beauvoir claims that except Saint Theresa there is hardly any woman who has lived the human situation in the state of complete desertion.
- In the final two chapters of *The Second Sex* – 'The Independent Woman' and the 'Conclusion', Beauvoir illustrates the then contemporary situation of women, while tracing the achievements already accomplished in the past and the changes to be done in the future.
- Addressing the idea of sexual difference, Beauvoir mentions that the dismantling of the myth of woman does not necessarily mean that the future will be androgynous, for the sexual differences will continue to prevail, given the biological reality of the body.
- For Beauvoir, the liberation aims to attain a state marked by the mutual acknowledgement of one another as not only free but also as other.
- Before moving on she tries to explain that the 'wife' is a role that is must for a female to undertake. The human society, almost unanimously accepts that marriage is the final destination that a woman – can avail.
- The biggest challenge a woman faces is that is 'not permitted to do anything'. But the greater trouble lies in the mindset that a woman is not efficient enough to do anything.
- Following the same line of argument, Beauvoir asserts that a woman is not born passive, mediocre, and powerless.

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- Women's ability to reproduce is one of her characteristic which is both treasured and reviled, and according to Beauvoir, one of the most crucial aspect of the women's situation is problems and difficulties faced in harmonizing her productive capacity with her reproductive capacity.
- Liberation of women and change in her social position is not possible unless they are able to leave the boundaries of their homes and enter the workplace as men's equals.
- Beauvoir delves deep into the myth of what she calls 'the eternal feminine' or the 'vague and basic essence, femininity,' only to demolish the myth and to expose how it has worked its way up for centuries to aid in the suppressed and passive social position of women.
- Drawing our attention to some contemporary debates that prevailed then, the writer points out that feminists and anti-feminists perceived the subject of emancipated women differently.
- Anti-feminists clearly spell out that 'the emancipated women of today succeed in doing nothing of importance in the world and that furthermore they have difficulty in achieving their own inner equilibrium'. While, feminist organizations do not agree with the idea of importance of 'inner equilibrium', they focus more on the results produced by professional women.
- Simone de Beauvoir underlines the idea that life of a man is never contrasted or compared in relation to female. Yet the same technique is adopted to define a woman.
- Talking about the sexual activities carried out by men and women, de Beauvoir claims that women can under no circumstance forget the superior status of men. He always asks for her to surrender.

1.5 KEY TERMS

- **Existentialism:** It is a theory that states humans are free and responsible for their own actions in a world without meaning.
- **Transcendence:** It has been used to describe the opposing characteristics of men, like being active, productive, creative, powerful, engaging and interacting with the outside world.
- **Eternal feminine:** It is a psychological archetype or philosophical principle that idealizes an immutable concept of woman.
- **Androcentric world:** The world which is dominated, focused or centred on men.

1.6 ANSWERS TO 'CHECK YOUR PROGRESS'

1. De Beauvoir's primary thesis is that men fundamentally oppress women by characterizing them, on every level, as the 'other', defined exclusively in opposition to men.
2. The main theme of the book *The Second Sex* is women oppression.
3. *Nadja* is one of the many books written by Andre Breton in 1928.

4. Havelock Ellis had written the book *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*.
5. Freud wrote *The Theory of Sexuality* in 1905.
6. 'The Independent Woman', the first chapter of Part VII of Beauvoir's famous work *The Second Sex*, talks about the importance of economic independence of women. Here Beauvoir enunciates the difference between a male, who has enough freedom to move to a new city and get a hotel, and a female, who does not share this independence with the male and, therefore, feels the necessity to establish a household.
7. Ambiguity
8. True

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1.7 QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

Short-Answer Questions

1. List a few books written by Simone De Beauvoir.
2. When was *L'Invitée* written?
3. What is *Les Mandarins* about?
4. In which book did De Beauvoir address the issue of ageing?
5. Write a short note on Alfred Adler.
6. List a few works of Sigmund Freud.
7. Who was Juliet Drouet?
8. Trace a few lines to reinforce De Beauvoir was a feminist writer.

Long-Answer Questions

1. Write a note on a couple of writers referred by De Beauvoir in her works.
2. Explain a few qualities that De Beauvoir appreciates in women.
3. Explain the theme of 'The Independent Woman' from *The Second Sex*.
4. Quote a few instances which make you understand that De Beauvoir was a feminist writer.
5. Based on your reading, explain how men are different from women?
6. Write the part which you like the most in the essay and also state why?

1.8 FURTHER READING

Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex: New Interdisciplinary Essays, (edit: Evans Ruth) Manchester University Press, UK, 1998.

Translating Women, (edit: Luise von Flotow), University of Ottawa Press, 2011.

De Beauvoir Simone; *The Second Sex*, Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012.

UNIT 3 VIRGINIA WOOLF

Structure

- 3.0 Introduction
- 3.1 Unit Objectives
- 3.2 About the Author
- 3.3 *A Room of One's Own*
 - 3.3.1 Critical Appreciation
- 3.4 *Mrs. Dalloway*
 - 3.4.1 City: A Symbol of Trajectories
 - 3.4.2 The Narrative
- 3.5 Summary
- 3.6 Key Terms
- 3.7 Answers to 'Check Your Progress'
- 3.8 Questions and Exercises
- 3.9 Further Reading

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3.0 INTRODUCTION

Virginia Woolf is considered one of the earliest modern writers. From an early age she was acquainted with literature and art. Her parents were renowned personalities from the field. Though she never had any formal education, Woolf went on to produce a number of literary work and even delivered lectures at Cambridge University. Virginia's marriage to Leonard Woolf resulted in the founding of the Hogarth Press which went on to publish not only her works but also works of authors like T. S. Eliot and Laurens van der Post. She committed suicide by drowning on 28 March 1941.

This unit will study the life and work of Virginia Woolf and critically assess two of her works — *A Room of One's Own* and *Mrs. Dalloway*.

3.1 UNIT OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Discuss the life and works of Virginia Woolf
- Summarize the theme of *A Room of One's Own*
- Describe Woolf's creative genius by analysing her novel *Mrs. Dalloway*
- Explain Woolf's significance in the literary world
- Evaluate *Mrs. Dalloway* critically

3.2 ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Virginia Woolf was born on 25 January 1882 at 22 Hyde Park Gate in London. Her father Sir Leslie Stephen was a founding editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*. He was also a renowned historian, author, critic and biographer. Her mother Julia Prinsep Duckworth (née Jackson) was a renowned beauty and modeled for the pre-Raphaelite painter Edward Burne-Jones. It was a second marriage for

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both her parents. Consequently Virginia Woolf was surrounded by three sets of siblings: those from her parents' first marriages, respectively, and her own biological siblings. Her father's professional commitments meant that the influences of Victorian literary society surrounded the children in their impressionable years. They had interactions with Henry James, George Henry Lewes, and James Russell Lowes among others.

She was home schooled as a child. Along with her sister Vanessa she was taught the classics and English literature from the extensive Stephens' library at home. Her brothers, however, went to Cambridge, a fact she would resent later in life. Her memories of her childhood years find expression in her work. The Godrevy Lighthouse near the family's summer home Talland House plays a central role in the novel *To the Lighthouse*.

Her mother's death in 1895, followed by her sister Stella's demise in 1897, catapulted Virginia Woolf into a nervous breakdown. Despite this trauma she successfully completed courses, some at degree level, in Greek, Latin, German and history at the Ladies' Department of King's College London. Her second nervous breakdown was occasioned by her father's demise in 1904. This was so severe that she had to be institutionalized briefly. Many biographers attribute the sexual abuse Virginia Woolf suffered at the hands of her half brothers George and Gerald Duckworth as the cause of these recurring bouts of depression. She mentions them herself in *A Sketch of the Past* and *22 Hyde Park Gate*.

Their father's death and the subsequent depression caused the sisters to sell their house and move to a new residence; 46 Gordon Square in Bloomsbury. Here they came into contact with many intellectuals like Lytton Strachey, Clive Bell, Rupert Brooke, Saxon Sydney-Turner, Duncan Grant, Leonard Woolf, John Maynard Keynes, David Garnett, and Roger Fry. Together they came to be known as the Bloomsbury Group. The group's ethos encouraged a liberal approach to sexuality. Woolf indulged in this with Vita Sackville-West. Her experiences are recorded in the novel *Orlando*. In fact, Sackville-West's son called the novel the 'most charming love letter in literature.'

In 1906, Virginia lost her brother Thoby. The incident broke her mentally. This was just the beginning of a series of mental problems that plagued Woolf's life. The following year, Woolf's sister Vanessa Stephen married Clive Bell. In 1912 Virginia married Leonard Woolf. She called this a 'complete' marriage. Around this time she completed her first novel *The Voyage Out*, which was published in 1918. The same year Hogarth Press published Katherine Mansfield's *Prelude* (1918) followed by T. S. Eliot's *Poems* in 1919 and *The Waste Land* in 1923. Virginia's next work, *Night and Day*, was published in 1919. Based in London, the novel sounds rather realistic and juxtaposes the lives of two friends, Mary and Katherine. In 1922 she wrote *Jacob's Room*, which was based on the life and death of her brother Thoby. With the publication of *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *The Waves* (1931), Virginia Woolf consolidated her position as a modernist writer.

Woolf wrote two biographies *Orlando* (1928) and *Flush* (1933). The former was dedicated to a close androgynous friend, V. Sackville-West and the latter narrates the romance between Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning as seen from the point of view of Elizabeth's pet dog (Cannine). The experimental work, *Between the Acts* (1941) was published posthumously.



Fig. 3.1 Virginia and Leonard Woolf

The world of literature considers Woolf a major proponent of the 'stream-of-consciousness' technique. Her contribution to the feminist critics has been rather significant. Her *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and its sequel *Three Guineas* (1938) are now acknowledged as the most important creations in this area. Virginia Woolf drowned herself during one of her nervous attacks.

This was brought upon by many things; she was depressed by the lukewarm reception of her biography of Roger Fry. The destruction of her home during the Blitz and the onset of the Second World War only worsened her malady. Her completing the manuscript of her last novel she realized that she could not write any more; hence there was no incentive left to live anymore and she committed suicide.

Work

Woolf's first professional piece was a journalistic piece on Haworth, the home of the Bronte family, published in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1900. Most of her work was published by her own publication house, the Hogarth. In 1925 she published *Mrs. Dalloway* and followed it with *To the Lighthouse* (1927). The latter novel deals among other things with the theme of the creative process. It also explores the passage of time, and how women are forced by society to allow men to take emotional strength from them. She was invited to Newham College and Girton College, the only women's colleges at the time to deliver a series of lectures on women and fiction in 1928. These lectures were published in book form in 1929 and were called *A Room of One's Own*. Since their publication they have become synonymous with feminist

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criticism. In 1931 she published *The Waves*, a novel whose narrative technique is akin to a prose poem. She wrote *Flush: A Biography* (1933) from the viewpoint of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's cocker spaniel. *Between the Acts* (1941) is written in verse and is her last work. It encompasses almost all the themes she spent her life writing about: the transformation of life through art and sexual ambivalence. *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938) delineate the difficulties female writers face because the reins of legal and economic power in the hands of men. This power implies that they are in the position to make decision for women concerning all areas of their welfare without consulting them. She argues that such a position further weakens the female sex. The situation can only be altered when women challenge the status quo and work actively to thwart and change it.

Characteristics of her work

Virginia Woolf was an innovator and experimented with stream of consciousness in her works. In her novels the narrative is refracted and sometimes collapses beneath the characters' receptive consciousness. What is interesting about the narrative is that it is extremely uneventful and commonplace to begin with, nothing out of the ordinary happens in the novels. Her narrative style is lyrical and projects a world full of auditory and visual impressions. In other words her narrative style lifts the ordinary and makes it extraordinary. According to many critics Woolf's work is marked by an attempt to negotiate with the Bloomsbury group, especially its tendency towards doctrinaire rationalism.

3.3 A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN

A Room of One's Own is a comprehensive composition by Woolf. Initially published on 24 October 1929, the composition was based on a sequence of lectures she gave at Newnham College and Girton College, the two women's colleges at Cambridge University. Although this comprehensive composition actually make use of an imaginary storyteller and storyline to look at women, both, as writers of and characters in fiction, the text for the delivery of the series of lectures, named 'Women and Fiction' and consequently the essay, are regarded as non-fiction. The composition is by and large viewed as women-oriented and is well-known in its argument for both, a factual and outlining space for women writers in a literary practice governed by.

Chapter 1

The chapter opens with Woolf saying she has been asked to give a lecture on women and fiction. She tells her audience that the topic made her think on subject matters from a woman's viewpoint: what was it that made a uniquely female experience, what were the salient features of the fiction women themselves wrote and how was it different from the creative output of men when they talked of women in their works. She goes on to say that she could not come to any definitive conclusion in her ramblings. She did, however, come to one conclusion and that was 'a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction'. To further explain her point she decides to use the fictional narrator Mary Belton as her alter ego.

She goes on the say that a week ago she was sitting by the riverside and thinking about the topic. However, her thoughts were not very productive. She compares them to the measly catch of a fisherman who throws the half grown fish back into the water

Check Your Progress

1. What caused Virginia Woolf to commit suicide?
2. What was Woolf's first professional piece?
3. Which of her works delineate the difficulties female writers face because the reins of legal and economic power in the hands of men?
4. When was *The Voyage Out* published?
5. Which press did the Woolf couple establish?

since it is useless to him. However she is excited by the simile and rushes over the lawns of Oxbridge to go to the library. However she is stopped and told that she cannot be there since only 'fellows' and 'scholars' are allowed. She forgets whatever she was thinking about at this interruption. Her thought changes direction and she wonders as to the creative genius of the literary giants like Milton and Shakespeare. She decides to research their creative minds in the library. However, she is denied entry again: women can enter only if they are accompanied by a scholar or if they can produce a Letter of Introduction written by one of them. She is angered by this denial and refuses to enter the library again. While leaving she passes the chapel and notices a service about to begin. However she doesn't contemplate entering: she would only be denied entry. At this point she looks at the wealth that was consumed to create these magnificent structures and realizes men can create these because they have money.

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She goes to lunch and sees a huge variety laid out before her: soles, partridges, a delicious dessert, and excellent wine. The relaxed atmosphere and the food inspire 'rational intercourse' in the conversation. At this point she sees a tailless minx cat and feels as if something is lacking in the scene. When she goes back to Fernham College, where she is staying as a guest, she has a plain dinner. The food is starkly different from that served in Oxbridge: it comprises of plain soup, mediocre beef, vegetables, potatoes, bad custard, prunes, biscuits cheese and water. She starts a conversation with her friend Mary Seton. As the conversation meanders she thinks of kings and magnates and their contribution to the field of education. Looking at the bare food and surroundings she is reminded of the opulence she saw in the morning. The women wonder what lies beneath their building and Mary talks of the perpetual shortage of funds required to run the college.

Their strained circumstances make the women realize that their own mothers did not leave them any monetary legacy; had they done so they would have been financially independent and could have lived a life of luxury as enjoyed by their male counterparts in Oxbridge. However, as they discuss this the narrator realizes two things: one, women never had ownership of their own wealth and it passed from father to husband. The situation had changed only in the last 48 years. She also realizes that their mothers would have had gone into business to earn financial independence and there is a real possibility that they would not have been born. In other words it seems a Hobson's choice. On the way back to her inn, the narrator ponders over issues of wealth and poverty and how the former is assigned to men and the latter to women. This in turn leads her to think of the issue as to whether this has any impact on the literary tradition or the lack of it when it comes to creative writing by women. This is her last thought as she goes to sleep.

Chapter 2

The next day the narrator goes to the British Museum in London in an effort to get some answers to questions regarding men, women, creativity and wealth, that had occurred to her in her ramblings. When she reaches the hallowed halls of the Museum she realizes that there is no dearth of books on women. However, she is dismayed to learn that most of these are books about women, but written by men. In other words the male mind has been constructing the approved female mind and is playing it for consumption for a long time. In contrast she finds that there are very few books on men written by women. She selects some of these books randomly and studies them in order to get a satisfactory answer to the question as to why women are poor. Trying

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to come up with an answer for why women are poor, she locates a multitude of other topics on women in the books, and a contradictory array of men's opinions on women. She is frustrated in her endeavors and imagines that these tomes expounding the inferiority of women have been written by a dour, angry looking professor. It is at this point that she realizes that it is the professor's anger towards women that is making her angry as well. She realizes her reaction would have been different if he had written about women 'dispassionately.' She returns the books since she finds them useless. When her anger dissipates she is left wondering as to why these men are all angry towards women.

During lunch while reading the newspaper she is struck with the realization that every news item and opinion in the paper underlines the fact that England is a patriarchal society. She realizes that men hold all the power and money in their hands. They are in the position to make decisions and the decisions they make are those that are in their interests. She wonders as to why men are angry when they hold so much power in their hands. One reason that she can think of is that they are fearful that their power may be snatched from them and this fear causes anger in them. She qualifies her statement when she realizes that men are angry only in their interactions with women. This leads her to the realization that when men claim women to be inferior to them, they are in effect laying claim to their own superiority. The narrator acknowledges that both the genders find life difficult. She believes that the only way to make some sense of the disappointments of life is to live it with a modicum of self-confidence. It is easier to generate this self-confidence if one considers the other to be inferior. Her belief is that male self-confidence comes from their belief that women are inferior. Such a formulation immediately raises questions about the supposed innate inferiority of women and proves it false. The narrator states that throughout history, women have served as models of inferiority that enlarge the superiority of men: 'Looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size.' She extrapolates her argument to suggest that men become angry and violent with women whenever the latter criticizes them because such a criticism directly challenges their inferior status when compared to men.

At this point the narrator is grateful for her inheritance of 500 pounds a year which she receives from her aunt. She recalls that before she received this largesse she had to rely on menial degrading work to earn money. This work made her feel like a slave with no soul. Her inheritance serves as an antidote to this feeling of powerlessness. She further goes on to say that her money has changed the tenor of her relationship with men: since she does not rely on them for her well-being she does not fear or resent them anymore. She also goes on to point out a basic difference between men and women. She suggests that while she was happy and satisfied to be able to feel free and was happy to be able to 'think of things in themselves,' men do not respond to money and power in a similar way. They are never satisfied with the power or money they have and are constantly looking for ways to enhance it. On her way back home, she witnesses men working on the street. She ends the day's journey in the hope and anticipation that a day will soon come when women will no longer be considered the weaker sex in need of 'protection' and will have access to the same jobs and opportunities as men.

Chapter 3

This part of the essay begins with the narrator expressing her disappointment at failing to draw any conclusion as to why women are poorer than men. While she was

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wondering about this question her attention is drawn to the relative lack of female writers in the most fertile period of literary creation in British history. She suspects that this disjunction exists because there is a connection between living conditions and creative works: it is difficult to be creative if one is living in difficult and strained conditions. When she studies the history of the age she realizes that even though there were strong women during the age they did not have many occasions to express this strength of character simply because they did not have any rights. However she cannot arrive at any firm answer and her query remains incomplete.

At this point she recalls the bishop's statement that Shakespeare is the greatest creative genius of his age. His recognition leads her to conjecture as to what would have been the fate of his equally talented sister, if he had had one. This leads her to comparing the lives of Shakespeare and his mythical sister Judith. She realizes that while Shakespeare would have gone to school, married, gone to work in the theatre where he would have met interesting people and made a name for himself; his sister's life would have been radically different. Despite possessing an equal talent not only would it not have been acknowledged, in fact steps would have been taken to actively stifle it. She would not have been allowed to go to school and would have been forced to marry before she was willing to do so. Instead she would have been forced to become pregnant. The narrator conjectures that these disappointments in life would have so broken her spirit that she would have committed suicide. In other words there was no place for a female Shakespeare in the time. Despite this she agrees with the bishop's statement that no woman of the time could have been a comparable genius simply because a genius like Shakespeare's is not born among laboring, uneducated, servile people. Another point she makes that the age must have witnessed female talent of some sort, even if it was not of the caliber of Shakespeare. The tragedy is that even if this creative voice succeeded in surmounting obstacles and was successful in creating a literary work it would have survived as an anonymous piece.

This leads her to explore the question of what is the desirable state for the mind to reach the optimum creative level. She realizes that creativity is a very difficult process. The artist has to face a perpetual scarcity of privacy and money; at the same time the world is indifferent to the writer's ability or inability to write. The situation is even direr for women since the indulgence granted to male authors is denied to them. The world is indifferent to the female writers' creative desires and impulses which in time are subdued if not totally killed by an unsympathetic public. She believes that the male gaze is unsympathetic to the female desire for creativity simply because it gives him another item to express his superiority. However, she believes that the truly creative mind rises above such mundane matters and is 'incandescent.' It filters out personal 'grudges and spites and antipathies' to present the distilled essential human experience. Her argument here is that for all its supposed superiority a lot of the work the male mind produces is worthless since it is inspired by a desire to prove superiority over women. Such a work is not 'free and unimpeded' like Shakespeare's is.

Chapter 4

The narrator continues her search for an unimpeded creative mind during the Elizabethan Age. She fails to find any creative female voice. The only candidate she can find is Lady Winchilsea. However she discounts her because according to the narrator her writing is marred by fear and hatred. She believes that if she had not been consumed by these negative emotions she had the potential of writing brilliant verse. She finds the same drawback in the writings of Duchess Margaret of Newcastle. She

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believes that Margaret too would have been a better poet had she lived in the modern age. She finds that the letters of Dorothy Osborne another Elizabethan to reveal a similar insecurity. Though brilliant she was an insecure writer since looked for affirmation not within herself but from the patriarchal society. As long as women do this they will never succeed in creating a viable creative piece.

She considers Aphra Behn a milestone in the history of women's literature. She is the first middle class female voice who was forced to enter the public realm to earn money after the death of her husband. The narrator considers the first female writer who successfully achieved 'freedom of the mind' and surpasses even her own innate skill as an artist in her work. She further goes on to present Behn as a model younger women can use in their literary journeys. Though she did not influence her immediate descendents since being recognized as an author was considered nearly sacrilegious, nevertheless she did influence women writers from the 18th century onwards. Another importance of Aphra Behn lies in the fact that she was living proof that monetary stability made one immune to snide comments and unflattering statements which anyway decreased as a writer became financially successful.

The fact that nineteenth century women writing primarily produced novels, in spite of the fact that women began with poetry writing, confuses the narrator of the essay. She wonders why all women writers of the nineteenth century chose to write novels. She thinks about the four famous novelist of the said period — George Eliot, Emily and Charlotte Bronte, and Jane Austen — and concludes that they had little in common apart from the fact that they all were childless. The narrator tries to speculate regarding their choice of novel form. All the four mentioned novelists belonged to the middle class, which meant the lack of privacy. Perhaps, it was this lack of privacy that prompted them to choose novel form, for they might have seen it as harder form than poetry or plays in the climate of middle class distraction. For example, it is a known fact that once when Austen was distracted in her family's sitting room whilst writing, she hid the manuscript. Another reason could have been that these writers might have found the novel form an absolute fit for her talents, given the customary training of nineteenth century women in the art of social observation.

The narrator does not find any sign in the work of Austen that might suggest that her work was affected due to her lack of privacy or her personal hatred or fear. She writes: her novels are 'without hate, without bitterness, without fear, without protest, without preaching'. The narrator suggests that Charlotte Bronte might have had more genius than Austen but the reason that she is not able to write with the same incandescence is that her works bear the shadows of her own personal hatred and wounds. The narrator thinks that amongst the four mentioned novelist, Charlotte Bronte could have gained most from some travel, experience, and a better financial situation.

While talking about diverse effects of a novel on different readers, the narrator comes to talk about the integrity of a novel, which she thinks is the quality that makes a novel universal in nature. She defines integrity as 'the conviction that' a novelist 'gives one that this is the truth'. According to the narrator, integrity not only holds the entire novel together, but also makes the novel exciting and interesting. She then comes to the question of whether the sex of the writer affects the artistic integrity.

Considering the works of Bronte, the narrator thinks it certainly did. She writes: 'She left her story, to which her entire devotion was due, to attend to some personal grievance. She remembered that she had been starved of her proper due of experience

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...Her imagination swerved from indignation and we felt it swerve.' In Bronte's case, the gender residue leads not only anger, but also to fear, pain and ignorance. She asserts that Bronte was not the only novelist whose work was affected by her own personal grievances: 'One has only to skim those old forgotten novels and listen to the tone of voice in which they are written to divine that the writer was meeting criticism; she was saying this by way of aggression, or that by way of conciliation. ...She was thinking of something other than the thing itself.' The only two female novelists, according to her, who successfully maintained their artistic integrity in the face of misunderstanding, criticism, and opposition are Austen and Emily Bronte.

The narrator argues that tradition had masculine values, such as war, as the subject of novels and other forms of literature, instead of more feminine ones, like character studies in a drawing room setting. And because of such tradition the women writers of nineteenth century had to adapt by adjustments and compromises in order to escape the inevitable criticism of their works being insubstantial. The compromises affected their works, for they had to deviate from their original ideas to suit the critical and traditional demands. The narrator thinks that it is no less than a miracle that in such an uncongenial climate, writers like Austen and Emily Bronte were able to survive and thrive as a writer.

The greatest impediment for the women writers of the nineteenth century was the nonexistence of any literary tradition to follow, for they could not possibly have followed the existing male literary tradition. They might have had a little help from the male writers, but the narrator says that 'the weight, the pace, the stride of a man's mind are too unlike her own for her to lift anything substantial from him successfully'. 'There was no common sentence' for these women writers to follow. The masculine sentence of male writers like Johnson could not have done much to help her. .'

According to the narrator, Austen successfully created her own 'natural, shapely sentence' which enabled her to articulate her deeper expressions, unlike Charlotte Bronte and Eliot, who could not successfully deal with the lack of feminine sentences. The narrator thinks that this could have been another reason for their inclination towards the novel form, for it was the only literary form 'young enough to be soft in their hands'. She predicts that in future women writers will move onto other forms of literature, for they have poetry inside them that is still unexpressed. This does not mean that women will begin writing poems. They may find some 'new vehicle' to express what resides within them still unexpressed.

Chapter 5

The narrator shifts her focus on the book shelves which contain books by her contemporary male and female writer on wide variety of topics. The number of books produced by women is nearly as much as men, and interestingly they are not only novels; they cover all sorts of subjects. She feels that women could not possibly have touched these subjects a generation ago. The narrator feels that women have grown past novels to express themselves. In order to assess the development in the contemporary women's writing, she picks a novel called 'Life's Adventure or some such title', by Mary Carmichael. This is the first novel of Carmichael. The narrator sees this young writer as a direct descendent of other female writers like Lady Winchilsea and Aphra Behn. She goes on to assess her novel to see that how this young female writer has inherited from the women writers of the past, both their 'characteristics and restrictions'.

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The narrator finds the prose uneven and not as good as Austen's. She writes: 'The smooth gliding of sentence after sentence was interrupted. Something tore, something scratched.' She then corrects her previous remark and says that Carmichael is attempting something very different from that of Austen and that there is nothing common between the two writers. She then says that perhaps the unevenness of her prose style is a break away from the 'flowery' writing style that is so characteristic of women's writing. But she cautions that the breaking is good if it is done for the purpose of creating: 'First she broke the sentence; now she has broken the sequence. Very well, she has every right to do both these things if she does them not for the sake of breaking, but for the sake of creating.'

As the narrator continues her reading, she comes across a simple sentence - 'Chloe liked Olivia'. The narrator is surprised. She considers this to be a critical moment in the Carmichael's innovation as a writer. How rarely, she realizes, has literature viewed women in relation to other women. For centuries women in literature have been seen only in relation to other men, and that is why the narrator finds the idea of friendship between two women as something very innovating and groundbreaking. The romance, says the narrator, in the life of a woman has a role to play, but a minor one.

The problem arises when the writers have their fictional women characters concern excessively about it, for it is this excessive concern with romance that results in their portrayals as either beautiful and good or depraved and horrific: 'Hence, perhaps, the peculiar nature of woman in fiction; the astonishing extremes of her beauty and horror; her alternations between heavenly goodness and hellish depravity - for so a lover would see her as his love rose or sank, was prosperous or unhappy.' Such an attitude towards the women characters in fiction changed by the nineteenth century, and the women characters grew more complex in novels and other forms of literature, but the narrator still holds that both men and women are limited in their knowledge about the opposite sex.

The narrator continues to read Carmichael's novel to find that the women characters in the novel are not confined in the limitation of their house, and that they have interests and pursuit outside the home. Both Chloe and Olivia have work in a laboratory. This little fact greatly changes the dynamics of their friendship. The narrator speculates about the significance of this detail and how important a transition this little detail could bring about, 'for if Chloe likes Olivia and Mary Carmichael knows how to express it she will light a torch in that vast chamber where nobody has yet been'.

The narrator contemplates on the destituteness of literature if men were perceived only in relation to the women. She firmly believes that a little more genius in her work, and Carmichael's book will have a significant place in the history of women's literature. She continues reading the novel and come to a scene that has both the women in it. The narrator reflects that it is a 'sight that has never been seen since the world began.' She has grown very fond and hopeful for the Carmichael's descriptions of the complexities and female mind, and it is this hope that makes her realize that she has betrayed her original aim, i.e. not to praise her own sex. She acknowledges that in spite of whatever genius or greatness they may possess, women have not yet made much of mark in the world when compared to the achievements of men. But still, the narrator thinks that all the great men in history received 'some stimulus, some renewal or creative power' from the women, something that they could not possibly have

received from other men. She asserts that there is a vast difference in the creativity of men and women, and 'It would be a thousand pities if women wrote like men for if two sexes are quite inadequate, considering the vastness and variety of the world, how we should manage with one only?'

The narrator is of the opinion that 'merely as an observer', Carmichael has much to do. She will have to explore the lives of 'courtesan' and 'harlot' who, for a long time, have been stereotyped by the male writers. The narrator, however, expresses her fear that while writing about these subjects controversial in nature, Carmichael will be self-conscious. While writing about the countless women, whose lives are still not recorded, Carmichael will have to resist the anger against men. As the narrator continues to read her novel, she feels that even though Carmichael's writing bears no traces of anger or fear, she is 'no more than a clever girl'. The narrator feels in a century or so, with a room of her own and a little money, Carmichael will evolve as a better writer than she is now.

Chapter 6

In the last chapter the narrator is left wondering if her thoughts regarding the differences between men and women have had a negative impact on her view of the two sexes. She sees a young couple get into a taxi and their unity soothes her. Their unity forces her to question as what 'unity of the mind' actually means especially since it keeps changing. Remembering the couple in the taxi, she concludes that this unity could also mean that the two are in 'complete satisfaction and happiness' and are living in harmony. This leads her to the conclusion that what Coleridge meant by a creative mind being 'androgynous' is that it does not think as male or female. His belief was that the androgynous mind does not think in terms of gender. The narrator explains this when she says that the 'androgynous mind transmits emotion without impediment it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided.' She considers Shakespeare to be the perfect example of such an androgynous mind and rues the fact that such minds are not found in the present age.

She believes the Suffrage campaign for the women's vote provoked men's defensiveness over their own sex. To prove this point she reads a novel by a respected male writer. She notes that though the writing is strong and clear it betrays a bias against women. She notes that he protests 'against the equality of the other sex by asserting his own superiority.' This is destructive since it prevents the representation of women as viable creatures capable of expression in their own right. She uses his argument to state that only a truly androgynous mind can foster 'perpetual life' in its reader's mind. She finds both male and female writers at fault in this and posits the idea that as long as a sexual identity and a sexual bias permeates a text the writer and the writing is not free and will not be 'fertilized.' In other words there is a dire need in both sexes to rise above the self-consciousness of gender in their works.

The narrator says that women's suffrage campaign to gain the right to vote incited the men to be more defensive against their own sex. To illustrate further, she chooses a respected male author's novel to read. She points out the novel betrays a sense of bias against women, though she acknowledges that the writing is strong and clear. She highlights that in order to protest 'against the equality of the other sex,' he asserts the superiority of his own sex. According to the narrator, such an attitude is destructive, for it does not allow women to be represented as capable of expressing in their own right. She takes his own argument back to him in order to assert that it takes

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a true androgynous mind to further 'perpetual life' in the minds of the readers. She argues that both male and female writers should be blamed for this, and continues with the idea that there is no possibility for the writer and the writing to be free and 'fertilized' as long as the sexual identity and sexual bias continues to influence a text.

At this point in the text, Virginia Woolf takes over the narrative voice. She anticipates and responds to the two possible criticism of the narrator's voice. First, she points that it was not a mistake that's he did not express any opinions regarding the relative merits of the two genders, it was a deliberate decision, for such a judgment is neither possible nor desirable. Second objection that may come from the reader is that she excessively emphasized the importance of thing material in nature, while underplaying the role of mind, which is perfectly capable of overcoming poverty and lack of privacy. To respond to this objection she cites an argument of a professor claiming that only three amongst the best poets of the last century were well educated, and all but Keats was fairly well off. She asserts that without material freedom one cannot possibly imagine to have intellectual freedom, and without that creation of great poetry is impossible. Women who have been less fortunate as far as the material things are concerned, have not yet produced anything to be called as great. She writes:

Intellectual freedom depends upon material things. Poetry depends upon intellectual freedom. And women have always been poor, not for two hundred years merely, but from the beginning of time. . . . Women, then, have not had a dog's chance of writing poetry. That is why I have laid so much stress on money and a room of one's own.

She then talks about her position on women's writing, and explains why she consider it to be important. She says that she is an avid reader, and of lately she has been disappointed by the writings that are masculine in nature. Besides, she believes that a good writer are good human beings, who are more close to reality than anyone else, and through their writings they can communicate this sense of reality to the readers of their works. She asks her readers to 'Think of things in themselves,' and write not only in the genre of fiction but in all kinds of genre. She urges her readers to remember what men have thought of women. She acknowledges that in spite of the various opportunities that presented themselves to the young women in the audience, they have taken but few steps ahead. But she is not disappointed, and asserts that Judith Shakespeare still lives in all women, and with little financial freedom and privacy, she will soon be reborn.

3.3.1 Critical Appreciation

A Room of One's Own (1929) is an extended essay by Woolf. In the essay she employs a fictional narrator and narrative to explore women in their role as writers of fiction and as characters in it. The title of the essay focuses on the author's need to create art and her need for poetic license. She also examines the question as to whether women can actually produce a viable piece of art. The central premise of the essay, which the title further exemplifies, is that 'a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction'. In other words, it is the lack of independent financial resources and not an inability to create viable art that prevents women from creating it. It is not a woman's limitations but the limitations imposed on her from outside that prevent her from creating art. Here it should be pointed out that while Woolf never received a formal education, here audience was getting precisely such an education. So her purpose in the essay becomes manifold: on the one hand she wants her audience to understand the significance of the education they are receiving and not waste it; she

also wants them to be conscious of the burden they carry vis a vis other women who are not present in the university with them; and she also wants them to realize that their education and freedom can easily be taken from them and so wants them to work to prevent such a thing from happening.

The essay is a partly fictionalized narrative that led her to the belief that 'a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.' The dramatic setting of the essay is that Woolf has been invited to speak on the topic of Women and Fiction. She creates a fictional narrator; the four Mary's who dramatize the process she took before she arrived at this conclusion.

The fictional narrator starts her exploration by delineating the different educational and material experiences of both men and women. She then talks of her experiences researching the British Library only to find that it is the male voice that presents the authoritative female experience. She also shares another discovery: most of these experiences are written in anger with an aim to control if not silence the subversive female voice. Another discovery she makes is that the female voice and persona is absent from history: it is almost as if women do not exist in the history. She uses this absence to justify her project of creating her own female history of the world. When she tries to do so she realizes that history is unforgiving to women. She uses the fictional character of Judith Shakespeare to prove this point. The intelligent woman faces a tragic future simply because she cannot reconcile her limited constraining reality to her unrealized potential. The fictional narrator then travels further into time to re-create a feminine canon which any aspiring authoress can draw inspiration from. When she does this she realizes that very few writers are expounding a truly female voice and experience and an only these need to be emulated. Then the narrator goes on to survey her contemporaries and finds them wanting. The essay concludes with the fictional narrator expounding her audience to build on the tradition they have been bequeathed and to enrich it further.

In the essay Woolf argues that women be granted a literal and figurative space as legitimate writers within a male dominated literary tradition. In other words she stakes claim for the acknowledgement of female writers and their creative endeavors. The ideas propounded by the essay were revolutionary for their time, especially if we consider the fact that while men were encouraged to forge their own path in life, women were expected to do nothing more than support their men in this effort. The essay verbalizes the dissatisfaction and resistance to this discriminatory patriarchal system. In the essay she states: 'Lock up your libraries if you like; but there is no gate, no lock, and no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind.'

In the essay she insists the only way to ensure independence was having access to one's own money, i.e. money for which one did not have to give explanations to anybody. Since she spent her life on the 500 pounds per annum she received as inheritance from an aunt; she postulated that this was the amount necessary to achieve financial freedom. In the essay she asks the question 'What effect has poverty on fiction?' Her answer is that 'Intellectual freedom depends on material things. Poetry depends on intellectual freedom. And women have always been poor, not for two hundred years merely, but from the beginning of time.' Her argument is that women are intellectually poor and unable to express themselves, not because they don't know how to do so but because they are not allowed to do so. She further states that if one's survival depends on the approval of the other, creativity will be stifled. To ensure creativity therefore material freedom is a must.

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In the essay Woolf presents George Eliot, Emily Bronte, Jane Austen and Charlotte Bronte as the 'four great novelists' to be studied, emulated and appreciated. Through these writers she attempts to create a female canon that can rival the patriarchal canon. She considers this attempt important also because she believes that only female writers can express female experience in all its shades. She considers them to be worthy of study and presents them as proofs that if allowed to be themselves women of any age can produce literary works which will not just stand the test of time but will also rival the literary creations of the best male writers. She also uses their example to point out the fact that it is only when women write of women that the true depth and complexity of the female mind and soul is revealed in the character they create. She further adds that when masculine writers present female characters in their works they project flat characters devoid of any richness of emotion and feeling. In fact these female characters serve as foils to the male protagonists. Instead of standing on their own they gain their identity and legitimacy within the text only in relation to their role with respect to the male protagonist. Therefore not only is the presentation of female characters flawed, such a representation detracts from the value and role of literature in society. In the essays she posits this idea when she says: 'Suppose, for instance, that men were only represented in literature as the lovers of women, and were never the friends of men, soldiers, thinkers, dreams; how few parts in the plays of Shakespeare could be allotted to them; how literature would suffer.'

Another argument she makes is that the writings of earlier women novelists can be attributed to either one of two reasons: either they wrote in defiance of masculine standards or in deference to them. In most of these authors we rarely find the true female voice. She argues that George Eliot and the Bronte sisters wrote as per the prevailing notions of a masculine idea of the novel. Hence their works are inferior. By contrast she considers Jane Austen's novels to be reflective of the female voice and experience. Virginia Woolf goes on to criticize her contemporary novelists of being sex-inhibited. She goes on to argue that though one's sex is important the effective artist is androgynous. By this she means that the artist is harmoniously bisexual in comprehension (which affects a creative fusion). This argument links with her statement regarding lesbianism in the sense that the artists' sexual orientation is irrelevant while considering the efficacy of his/her work.

Therefore she conjectures that a great deal of literary wealth has been lost since women are unable to write as they deem fit. As proof of this she points out the fact that even Jane Austen a recognized canonical author was forced to hide her work because she feared that she not only would not be accepted but instead she would be ridiculed. In the essay she writes: 'Imaginatively [a woman] is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant.' This bold statement highlights the wealth of fiction and poetry written about women and the lack of it actually written by them. She highlights the difficulties women face in their effort to create art through Judith, Shakespeare's fictional sister. She argues that while Shakespeare is encouraged to go to school and learn new ideas and thoughts, Judith is confined to the life of performing household chores. Though she wishes to learn, she is scolded by her parents whenever they find her holding a book: they believe that any time she spends reading detracts her from completing her household tasks. As they grow up she is forcibly betrothed to a man she does not love. When she resists she is beaten into submission. After marriage she is condemned to a life of drudgery and more household work. In contrast Shakespeare is encouraged to go out in the world and make a name for himself. He succeeds spectacularly and his name is synonymous with literature.

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In contrast Judith's talents are not just lost; tragically they are never even given an opportunity to be realized. She highlights the tragedy of Judith's life when she says that 'She was as adventurous, as imaginative, as agog to see the world as he was. But she was not sent to school.' The 'but' makes it clear that her desires do not matter and that she is considered valuable only in the degree to which she fulfills social roles assigned to her. Woolf's argument here is that it is a woman's gender and not her lack of presence of skills that closes doors for her. This is the reason she wants her listeners to be conscious of their role in history: they are the privileged few who have the opportunity to have an education and make intelligent choices. They should ensure that they do so that others may find it easier to follow. At the same time she does not deny the fact that the way will not be easy for them. Nevertheless, it is the one which has to be travelled to ensure that women receive their due not just in the field of art and literature but in other areas as well. The argument she makes here was used by later feminists to work against the glass ceiling in various professions and to demand for more inclusive policies in various fields of public life.

In addition to the four novelists she also refers to the feminist scholar Jane Ellen Harrison and also to Rebecca West. She presents them as proof of a woman's ability to think critically. At the same time she uses their example to present the extent to which the patriarchal set up is uncomfortable with decisive feminist voices and the extent to which it will go to discredit them. To support this claim she refers to Desmond MacCarthy's (referred to as 'Z') claim that West a mere 'arrant feminist' and need not be taken seriously. She also refers to F. E. Smith, 1st Earl of Birkenhead and his retrogressive attitude to women; especially his resistance in granting them suffrage. Through these examples she shows that women will only be indulged if they expect men to treat them seriously and with respect. These will have to be snatched from them and only the financially independent woman will be able to do this. She refers to the term Oxbridge, a not too subtle amalgam of the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge to suggest that such regressive ideas are shared by the intellectuals residing in these hallowed walls as well. The idea she wishes to put across is that the dice is laden against women since they can expect no support from either the intellectual or the political front. They will have to fight their battles on their own. Moreover, in this way they can rely only on their fellow sisters for support. In this too the essay lays a central argument of the feminist movement: the essential universality of the female experience and its discriminatory nature across class and social barriers.

To argue her viewpoint Woolf creates a fictional narrator. At several points in the text she is identified as 'Mary Beaton, Mary Seton, or Mary Carmichael.' This line refers to the 16th century ballad of Mary Hamilton, a woman who was hanged since she refused to don the socially accepted roles of wife and mother. This made her a subversive figure which needed to be silenced. It needs to be remembered that Judith too commits suicide when she becomes pregnant and is expecting an actor's child. Her death is the only way available to her to register her protest at the life imposed on her. Through all these examples Woolf is trying to underline the point that the imposition of socially sanctioned role on women while reprehensible will continue until women develop strategies to resist them. Art therefore becomes not just an expression of the essential female experience; it is also a tool of resistance.

The reference to the four Mary's is important on many levels. On a personal level it draws attention to Woolf's own position as someone who is not a mother, and so by extension someone who is not nurturing and can, therefore, be destructive. On

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another level this reference draws attention to the fact that the narrator's demand that her female audience chart their own path of freedom and redefine art and create the same according to a feminine sensibility is not without danger. It can have severe repercussions on the physical well being of the individual since the exercise is a direct challenge to held patriarchal beliefs. The reprisal can take many forms ranging from being indulged as a child to being dismissed as being unimportant. To support this argument she gives the example of female critics and the reaction of the establishment to them.

Woolf acknowledges that fact that in her essay she offers no opinion and puts a lot of importance on material things. She justifies this by suggesting that creative output is possible only when one is financially secure. She also states the purpose of the essay is not so much to create an artifact for her; it is instead a clarion call to her sisters around the world to realize that the creative instinct lives in them as well and needs to be given voice. She justifies the right of women to create a literature about themselves and for themselves and says in the essay that even though Shakespeare's sister never wrote a word she 'lives in you and in me... For great poets do not die; they are continuing presences; they need only the opportunity to walk among us in the flesh.'

Woolf lays claim that women's attraction towards each other is a legitimate emotion. In other words she brings lesbianism to the fore both as a sexual choice and as a political statement. She suggests that any sexual attraction women feel for each other is legitimate emotion since only they can truly understand each other. As a political statement it implies that women can only find comfort and a sense of self only in the community of other women. It is this idea that is later used to justify the creation of a purely female literature. Since only women can understand the deeper emotions of each other, therefore it is only in the literature of women that the true female experience will be reflected. The reference to lesbianism needs to be considered in the backdrop of the obscenity trial and public uproar resulting from the publishing of Radclyffe Hall's lesbian-themed novel, *The Well of Loneliness* (1928). Jane Marcus believe that in her talk of lesbianism and the way she approached it, Woolf was showing the way on how to treat this issue in public: 'Woolf was offering her besieged fellow writer a lesson in how to give a lesbian talk and write a lesbian work and get away with it.'

Woolf's central premise and the justification of her call for a feminist fiction that presents the true female character and the true female experience is evident in the following extract from the tract. The tract also highlights her fundamental objection to the canon: it deifies the woman and in doing so do defamiliarizes her experiences from herself. A female fiction is the only solution to this: 'Women have burnt like beacons in all the works of all the poets from the beginning of time. Indeed if woman had no existence save in the fiction written by men, one would imagine her a person of the utmost importance; very various; heroic and mean; splendid and sordid; beautiful and hideous in the extreme; as great as a man, some would say greater. But this is woman in fiction. In fact, as Professor Trevelyan points out, she was locked up, beaten and flung about the room. A very queer, composite being thus emerges. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history. She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction; in fact she was the slave of any boy whose parents forced a ring upon her finger. Some of the most inspired words and profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read; scarcely spell; and was the property of her husband.'

Alice Walker criticized Woolf on the grounds that in her assertion that a woman needed her own room and money in order to create art she was referring to a purely white female Anglo-Saxon identity. Her charge is that Woolf's conception of a primarily female art form excludes women of colour and so is reductive and discriminatory in its own way. Nevertheless Woolf's argument was an improvement on the current debates regarding women's issues and their capabilities and skills and paved the way for opening doors for them.

3.4 MRS. DALLOWAY

Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* was published in 1925. It soon generated interest among readers both in Britain and the United States regardless of the experimental approach to storytelling. Mrs. Dalloway and Woolf's later works like *To the Lighthouse*, have generated the most interest from the academic critic's point of view and are the most talked of works among all of Woolf's novels.

The events in *Mrs. Dalloway* are played out in a span of a single day sometime in June 1923, London. This seemingly unorganized narrative poses an exceptional difficulty for the novelist: how to create interesting and well-rounded characters and convey all the underlying complexity while describing just one day in the life of each character. Woolf addressed this difficulty by incorporating what she calls a 'tunneling' method. By this she meant the way her fictional characters recall their pasts that very day the author is describing. In experiencing these characters' as they are revealed through their memories, readers draw for themselves a backdrop and time frame for each individual character that, under normal schema of writing would have been provided by a narrator.

In a certain way, *Mrs. Dalloway* is a fiction without a plot. Instead of conceiving of actions for each of the characters to build up situations in order carry forward the story, Woolf shifted her narrative by highlighting each progressing hour of the day. The story progresses by tracing the psychological movement of each character.

Mrs. Dalloway chronicles a particular day in the month of June sometime in the 1920s. Geographically the whole novel moves in and around London, although the readers get to see London, France, Burton and India through their interactions with the various mindscapes the novel offers. Let us first look at the characters in the novel.

Characters

- **Clarissa Dalloway:** She is Mrs. Dalloway. She is a middle aged, shallow and sensitive upper class British woman.
- **Richard Dalloway:** Clarissa's husband. A Member of Parliament, who aspires to get into the Cabinet but is yet to succeed. Neither a perfect husband or nor a perfect father.
- **Elizabeth Dalloway:** Single child of Clarissa and Richard. She is beautiful and intelligent. Loathes superfluous social civilities like parties, nurtures a soft corner for Miss Kilman the history tutor.
- **Miss Kilman:** Middle aged history teacher of Elizabeth. Deprived of physical beauty and economic affluence and molded by socialistic ideas. Loves Elizabeth and tries to mould her in the best essence of socialism and religion, totally different to the external vanity that Clarissa's life revolves around.

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Check Your Progress

6. What does Virginia Woolf's dinner at Fernham College comprise?
7. How does Chapter 3 of the essay begin?
8. Why does the narrator mark down the literary work of Lady Winchelsea?

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- **Septimus Warren Smith:** A victim of World War I who suffers from post war trauma and exhibits streaks of schizophrenia.
- **Lucrezia Smith:** Also referred to as Rezia Septimus' wife. Loves her husband dearly but is helpless in trying to single handedly attend her ill husband. Moreover, her inability to understand his problems or help him overcome it makes her feel handicapped about her life in general.
- **Evans:** Septimus' friend and the commanding officer during war.
- **Sir William Bradshaw:** Septimus' doctor, an acquaintance of Dalloway family.
- **Mrs. Filmer:** The kind-hearted cook of Lucrezia and Septimus' family who is unable to comprehend the doctor's insistence on separating the young couple.
- **Dr. Holmes:** General physician, who finds Septimus to be normal after examining him.
- **Peter Walsh:** Currently involved with Daisy, shared a romantic relationship with Clarissa during their young days.
- **Daisy:** Has affair with Peter but is married to someone else and is a mother to two children.
- **Lady Burton:** Rich socialite, famous for her exquisite lunch parties. Clarissa had once been invited with Richard to Burton's place.
- **Sally Seton:** Clarissa's companion in her youth. Clarissa's love for Sally matured because of her wild ways because this was what Clarissa admired but could never imitate herself. Now she is mother of five boys and married to rich Lord Rosseter.
- **Hugh Whitebread:** Common friend to both Peter and Clarissa from the olden days, and unpopular due to his arrogance.

Commentary

The novel opens with Mrs. Dalloway, that is, Clarissa Dalloway, deciding to buy flowers for the party she is hosting at her house, that very evening. As she is buying the flowers, the narrative transports the readers into her mind which reveals thoughts of her past lover, Peter Walsh, and Clarissa's decision to accept Richard Dalloway as her husband instead of Peter. Simultaneously, the readers are introduced to Septimus Warren Smith and his Italian wife Lucrezia Warren Smith. Septimus is presented to the readers as a shell-shocked victim still bearing the burden of World War I. In his 'insane' state he is shown to be carrying out an imaginary conversation with his friend Evan, who has died in the war.

In the meanwhile, we are informed that Clarissa is back at home, mending her dress for the evening. However, unexpectedly Peter Walsh drops by. Both Clarissa and Peter awkwardly continue a social conversation. However, a peep into their mind shows that they are daunted by the memories of their intertwined past. As Elizabeth, Clarissa's daughter, arrives Peter excuses himself and goes to the park. Sitting on the park bench, fiddling with his pocket knife, Peter recollects his association with Clarissa, her reasons to select Richard as her husband, his own eventual journey to India and his unsuccessful marriage.

Returning back to Septimus and Lucrezia, the narrative shows them to be still in the park where Septimus almost reasonably advocates on the usefulness of suicide, much to Lucrezia's dismay. When Peter sees them he thinks that the couple is engaged

in an amorous tiff which is nothing out of the usual. Soon enough, readers are admitted into Septimus' thoughts that reveal his sensitivity and are admiration for Shakespeare and his dream of being a poet one day. But with the War breaking out everything changed – he joined the War, witnessed many deaths including Evans' and now finds his world to be very different from the world of others who surround him, like his wife Lucrezia. From the park, Lucrezia takes Septimus to meet Sir William Bradshaw, a doctor who prescribes him isolation in the countryside.

Richard Dalloway returns home with flowers for his wife with the intention of telling her how much he loves her, but could not do so. His inability to communicate his feelings leaves Clarissa feeling left out. She feels men are unable to appreciate her. We are shown that Mrs. Dalloway does not like Miss Kilman, Elizabeth's history teacher. The focus shifts to the Smith household where Septimus unexpectedly jumps out of the window to meet his own death. Peter hears the calls of the ambulance as they pass by carrying Septimus' body.

Sir Bradshaw and his wife arrive late to the Dalloways' party and Mrs. Bradshaw excuses themselves for their delay informing them about the unexpected news of the death of one of Bradshaw's patients – a war veteran (Septimus). On hearing this Clarissa concludes that the patient must have found people like Bradshaw insufferable so must have gave up his life. As the party approaches its end and guests start leaving Clarissa is shown approaching Richard who feels excited.

3.4.1 City: A Symbol of Trajectories

Often, the autobiographical aspects of an author do not translate into the fictional elements of his/ her work. In case of Virginia Woolf all her creativity – the non-fictional essays, letters, diaries as well as the fictions are uncannily intertwined with her personal life so much, that it becomes difficult to isolate the writer from her work and pay attention to only the words that the author has written for the readers. Those who have read Woolf's other works, and understand her philosophy can understand *Mrs. Dalloway* better.

In the novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*, the city emerges as a symbol for trajectories of the narrative itself. In the text, the modern city appears as an amalgamation of almost surreal and nearly shocking antithesis and it functions within its own polarities of extreme poverty and opulence, aesthetics and grotesque all of which exist parallel.

In the literature of the city, the city, more often than not, takes the center stage and becomes the protagonist to be understood and interpreted. Woolf, through her narrative technique, vividly describes the city through a word portrait which resembles cinematic visual qualities peppered with the new cinematic approaches – flashback, montage, track shots, etc.

Woolf describes three long city scenes strategically inserted in the narrative at the beginning, middle and end. These scenes are pivotal aspects of the novel, embellishing it with a polyphonic quality and providing it with a multiline perspective. Woolf's perambulation and locomotion around the city gives her ample scope to explore the dynamics that rule an ordinary individual's regular day about which she mentions in her essay 'modern fiction'.

In the opening section of the novel, the life of the city gets celebrated (in parts) through Mrs. Dalloway's consciousness. The relationship between the apparently chaotic appearance of the city and the cutting short of the urban rhythms, bears not

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only on the ways in which art gives formal order to the flux and welter of perception and mental impression, but is linked to the relationship between individuals and group consciousness and motion which Virginia Woolf explores in *Mrs. Dalloway*.

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In parts *Mrs. Dalloway* is divided between memories of Clarissa Dalloway's country house where she spent her youth, Burton and London of June 1923 (i.e. five years after the end of First World War). In contrast to the streets of London city, the parks of London play a pivotal role in the narrative as they help in creating a space for country living in the city, thereby simultaneously establishing and transgressing the country-city divide.

Woolf in one of her diary entries relates her 'scene making' ability (one of the prominent features of her art) to the walks that she regularly took which helped her weave stories. In another essay of hers 'Street Haunting: A London Adventure' (1927) Woolf explains her pleasure of wandering through the London streets in winter. This essay, is one of the most striking accounts of the 'flâneur', the female counterpart of male version of 'flâneur' (stroller). The significant role associated with a flâneur in a modern day urban scape is discussed by both Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin in their works. The essay explores the pleasures of the purely spectatorial aestheticizing 'eye' which replaces the singular 'I' of identity.

Woolf's earlier novels are also to some extent about urban experiences. In *Night and Day* the movement of the story takes place against the backdrop of London. Again, in *Jacob's Room*, the mapping of the city becomes analogous for the exploration of human character. In both *Flush* and *Orlando* London is of crucial importance. In one of her diary entries dated January 1919 Woolf has written:

I drove on top of a bus from Oxford station to Victoria station and observed how the passengers were watching the spectacle.

The view from the top of omnibus recurs throughout Woolf's novel often as a contrast or counter point to the sensations and impressions of the walker in the city. Woolf is fascinated by the relationship between consciousness or states of mind and the city.

The concept of the 'uncanny' as put forward by Freud is applicable to the nature of urban experiences as well as in the form of homelessness resulting from the rise of the great cities in which human beings are strangers to each other and to themselves. With this kind of experience, Woolf practices her art of scene making which she herself terms as 'fabricating a lifetime from a word in painting.'

3.4.2 The Narrative

The narrative vehicle that Woolf uses to explore the heterogeneous aspect of modern life is the symbol of modernity itself—the motor car and aeroplane travel. This form of transport opens up the fragmental nature of the individual. The car and the airplane represent the state and commerce, respectively. They are forms of social organization which bring together and also disturb social consciousness and collective life.

Through her narrative structure Woolf lets her readers follow Clarissa Dalloway in her walk and then lets the readers access Clarissa's consciousness and brings them out of it as well. Moving away from Clarissa, the narrative immediately focuses on the car on its way to Buckingham Palace. The car is replaced by the aeroplane as narrative object, which in turn, acts as a linking agent. As the plane passes over Regent's Park it grabs the attention of Lucrezia Warren Smith who points it out to Septimus

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and as readers we again gain access to both Lucrezia and Septimus' thoughts. As readers keep alternating between the consciousness of the Smith and the Dalloway couples, they are made more aware of the glaring dissimilarity and gap between their respective thoughts and existence. The readers gain some sporadic knowledge about a few incidental figures who appear in the park and whose relation to the central characters is only a matter of chance encounter, which is a prominent feature of a modern city. These incidental figures are not elaborated upon, and the novel does not pursue their lives further, rather it shifts its focus to a woman who is looking at the sky following the movement of the plane, thus exporting back the readers to the flight of the plane. The omniscience of its aerial view makes it a parodic version of the omniscient narrator, finally liberated from any semblance of this narrative task, it is released into ecstatic emissions of 'pure delight' before it and Woolf finally abandons the scene.

The vehicle of state and monarchy that had drawn all the attention is abruptly disrobed of its awe as the attention of the spectators is suddenly and abruptly taken over by another spectacle: the sky writing of an aeroplane. The collective consciousness of the crowd is now focussed by the workings of advertising and commerce. The phenomenon of skywriting is presented in such a manner that it takes on a transcendental hue. Merging of the smoke letters and clouds blurs the distinction between cultural and natural order. The use of the sky as a medium to advertise a product signifies the importance that advertisements have gained in the fast emerging bourgeois culture establishing itself in the post World War Europe. But the irony of the situation is that the advertisement which is meant to target the general public (to fulfill their private dream) is read by Septimus Smith as a personal message for him alone. By just opposing the strange worlds of 'sane' and 'insane' Woolf attempts to explore the deeper levels of absurdities involved in both 'sane' and 'insane' world views.

The Socio-political background

Through almost the whole of the nineteenth century the British Empire was seen as unconquerable. It kept conquering and bringing distant lands under its control, including India, Nigeria, and South Africa. It naturally became the biggest Empire ever known to human civilization. However, World War I came as a rude shock. For the first time in almost a hundred years, the English were left susceptible within their own territory. The Allies definitely defeated the Axis Powers, but the extent of damage that England endured during the war made it a cruel victory. Young men were most affected since they were part of the army so they were either left hurt or killed. In 1916, after the Battle of the Somme, it was revealed that England had 60,000 casualties—the biggest scale of human tragedy in England's history. Needless to say, the English people lost much of their belief in the powers of the Empire. England could no longer call themselves invincible. Soon citizens began to critically view the social hierarchy of England and realized that it protected just a chosen few.

The disgust associated with the War still remained an unanswered trauma for the citizens, even as England attempted to move on towards modernization, past this devastation, matching its footsteps with the rest of the world. For some, it was a period of opportunities. London slowly saw a deluge of airplanes, motorcars and businesses. Youngsters were no longer pondering over the past but preferred to explore the present and visualize a bright future. Various forms of commerce were expanding; the elite were still wealthy. But there was a slight improvement in the situation of a

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certain segment of the employed class that were enjoying better salaries and better living standards than they did before the War. Women enjoyed more privileges and liberty; it was feasible for a young lady like Elizabeth Dalloway to envisage a vocation in the government for herself. Numerous experimentations and developments were taking place in the arena of art, music, and literature: Cubism, Jazz, Modernism, and other movements had made their presence felt and were already making the traditional English world, which was yet to fully recover from the shock of the war, uncomfortable with their presence. Literature too had its share of innovators (Woolf's innovative work would be one). New areas of interest were being explored in psychology, anthropology, physics, and other areas. In short, a revolutionizing change was taking place in the world in general.

The story of *Mrs. Dalloway* takes place in the year 1923. During this time the old world with its oppressive standards was coming close to a natural death. English people, like Clarissa, Peter, and Septimus, seem to be identified with the malfunction of the state as clearly as they are able to understand their own individual failures. Those people who continued to be the flag bearers of English custom, like Aunt Helena and Lady Burton, are already feeble. Aunt Helena is shown to be wearing a glass eye (perhaps symbolic of her inability to see or her unwillingness to view the crumbling of the Empire's disintegration due to its incompetency). Foreseeing the inevitable end of the Conservative Party's reign, Richard makes up his mind to chronicle the annals of the large British family involved in the military, the Burtons, who in any case are memories of the past. The traditional world comes to an end, and the sudden collapse of the socio-political order exposes the English citizen at a crucial juncture.

War and Masculinity

All the characters establish different points of consciousness. They are independent world views. Peter Walsh defines himself by his relationship with women in his life. The co-related idea of war and masculinity that existed in the late Victorian period became somewhat fragmented after the end of World War I. *Mrs. Dalloway* presents how the lives of the people are in turmoil in the post-War England. In the depiction of post-War Britain, certain issues are constantly dealt with in this novel related to the newly emergent discourse of a 'modern' Britain. These were issues like:

- Greater prevalence of women in public sphere
- Relationship between war and masculinity
- Defining of national identity
- Shifting nature of family
- Politics of the urban environment
- Rise of consumer oriented society
- Increasingly bourgeois nature of the upper class
- Questioning the patriarchy

Peter Walsh's notion of an imagined, conservative upper-class England despite his own reservations about what he is invoking is fore-grounded in the city scene. He himself is not English but the product of an Anglo-Indian family that has served the British Empire for three generations. The precariousness of his English identity is compounded by his dislike of India, Empire and the army.

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Through Walsh's musings, as readers, we are confronted with the actual contradiction in post-war British life, anxiety of war and the Empire on one hand and Englishness and masculinity on the other. Woolf explores the importance of fantasy in the principal discursive formations of Englishness, empire, masculinity and sexuality. In Walsh's case the fantasies that he has defined his 'self' with his relation to women. With the help of the episode of the fleeting encounter between Peter Walsh and an unknown lady, Woolf shows how the modern consciousness emerges in city life; consciousness developed within the 'hard city' of buildings and concrete structures as well as in the realm of the 'soft city' of experience and imagination, of illusions, aspirations and nightmares.

The text shares a problematic relationship with the concept of female emancipation. Female emancipation is highlighted by showing women taking part in public sphere and as emerging sexually. Peter Walsh is the patriarchal figure who destroys Clarissa and Sally's relationship like a father destroys a mother and daughter relationship. The relationship is on an equal basis. But in Doris and Elizabeth's case Doris is the 'male' partner of this lesbian relationship she dictates Elizabeth's life.

Both consumerism and imperialism are represented as patriarchal in nature. They both use women as objects. In pre-war discourse the text represents overt masculinity of imperial England. Clarissa appears as the alter ego of Septimus and Septimus is the feminine tendency of post war English society. In both the cases, the attributes of humanity are taken away.

Stream of Consciousness

Stream-of-consciousness is a narrative technique that is used mostly in fictional prose works with the intension of acquainting readers with the thought process that is going on inside the mind of a character. The subconscious mind of the character appears in the narration is presented to the reader along with the character's rational and coherent awareness of the environment he is part of. This is done in such a way that the author does not have to use any narrative space to elaborate on the character separately. Psychologist William James in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) had first used the term 'stream-of-consciousness'. As the psychological novel germinated in the twentieth century writers experimented with various techniques. They used the stream-of-consciousness mode to present the sublimity of the mind and the innumerable associations that an ordinary mind under normal circumstances gets absorbed in. This process also helped the writers to put across perspectives of those minds which were considered to be deviant, insane or abnormal for the 'normal' people.

The seemingly structured narrative of *Mrs. Dalloway* covering a time span of twenty four hours and situated in the city of London gives the illusion of adhering to the classical unities of time and place. But the actual narrative covers a wide gamut of almost eighteen years traversing across India, London, Burton and France (during the World War I). A cursory glance at the novel will give the impression that it is probably about two characters Mrs. Dalloway and Septimus Warren Smith – but a close reading would suggest that there are at least a dozen characters whose lives are intricately interwoven in the course of the narrative. The floating structure of the narrative gives the reader the power to penetrate into the minds of the various characters that the author creates. The reader can then understand and interpret them as she (author/narrator) perceives them.

The unity of time is achieved in the novel by constantly referring back to the hourly notifications that the Big Ben produces just the way light house was the unifying device in *To the Light house*.

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In the Regent's Park we come across a number of characters and hear a cacophony of their voices. There are the Smiths' who are stuck in their own complicated world. Septimus' strong inward confrontations and Lucrezia's doubts and apprehensions are misunderstood as sweet nothings of lovers by Peter. Peter Walsh in turn is lost in his own memories of past and the twists and turns in his life. Maisie Johnson's point of view provides another aspect of the fragmented existence. She considers the Smiths to be strange. Readers are allowed to gaze at Maisie through Mrs. Dempster's eyes. We come across the old Mr. Bently. The narrator's perception keeps blurring. Life seems to have gone astray for most of the persons we have come across since Clarissa Dalloway decided to get out of her house that day with the intention to buy flowers.

The scene finishes off with the gimmick of sky-writing taking place with airplanes silently drawing distorted words in the sky. What the words read is not important. They always remain incomplete. As they etch out one word the other starts blurring. We can understand its meaning in any way we prefer, just as Clarissa, Septimus, Lucrezia, Maisie, Mrs. Dempster and Mr. Bently each conclude distinctly about London, people and about life in general. Each human being perceives the truth differently. In this scene we glimpse life through the consciousness of the normal, the lunatic, the foreigner, the newcomer, and the elderly. By successfully using the trope of stream-of-consciousness Virginia Woolf is able to create multiple perspectives of strangers and people who have met each other through chance encounter in a city.

Communication

As the novel *Mrs. Dalloway* progresses the readers realize that almost every character including Clarissa, Septimus and Peter, struggle to put across their personal feelings. Their inability to communicate coupled with their desire for privacy makes it difficult for them to lead a life of satisfaction. Clarissa in a desperate attempt to camouflage her real feelings tries to hide behind the crowd at her place as she organizes parties. She feels claustrophobic with her surroundings and her life. She cannot communicate either with her daughter or husband. She leads a life which is surrounded with memories. Clarissa is in awe of the old woman who resides on her own in her flat which is right across Clarissa's house. Even though Clarissa longs for the solitary life the old woman leads along with her independence, she is simultaneously aware of the loneliness that the old lady suffers. Peter tries to analyze this strange desire to be both part of a world where communication is possible, at the same time yearning for a space of his own by giving the analogy of a fish that swims through the muddy water and then rises for a few second to the surface so that it can enjoy the waves. This inability to connect and communicate can be seen as a *repercussion* of the post war scenario where life is fragmented and trying to communicate becomes not only difficult but also at times futile. As Clarissa analyses Septimus' desire to kill himself seems to be a desperate but legitimate way to get into the process of communication.

Richard's communication with Clarissa is almost negligible. At one point when Richard tries hard to leave behind his usual formal mask and have a heart-to-heart discussion with Clarissa he is unable to do so. He is so caught up in his stiffness and shyness that he is unable to express his love for Clarissa. He decides to repress his

words and not utter it out to Clarissa because he does not know what to say and secondly because the last time he had uttered his feelings was long back and so now he is not sure if it would be appropriate to say.

This inability to communicate is also reflected in the lives of Lucrezia and Septimus. The young bride Lucrezia, away from home in near unfamiliar surroundings, is not sure how to survive. She is unable to understand her husband. Despite her best efforts to reach her husband's thoughts and her desire to help him out in any possible way she is not able to do anything. She finds herself to be completely helpless. She does not share his imagination or his memories. On the other hand, her husband Septimus Smith is portrayed as a very sensitive person. He is a shell-shocked victim who is now labelled as insane by the world.

As we see him, we realize that the post-war Septimus is cocooned within his own private world. When the sudden unexpected noise of car backfiring is heard Clarissa's reflex action suggests that she might have heard a gunshot. Clarissa's reaction is viewed as rational. There is nothing unnatural for her to have considered the noise as gunshot, any 'sane' man in that context would have thought so. The period of insane death and violence was just declared to be over. Yet the English mind was still lurking under the fear of the just concluded devastation. Septimus Smith too hears the noise. Being a soldier it was expected of him to first perceive the noise as gunshot. But it was not so, because ironically, it is the noise of the gunshots which once ruled the life of Septimus. It is the main culprit responsible for Septimus Smith's inability to communicate with reality. For Septimus, the noise appears to him as the sound of the cracking of whip. He says 'The world has raised its whip; where will it descend?' A noise that surprised everybody scares Septimus.

The doctors in *Mrs. Dalloway* are shown to be unable to understand their patients. For example, Holmes does not believe in any illness that might trouble the mind. He simply considers it as 'funk'. On the other hand, Septimus – the person with expertise to deal with mentally troubled patients belongs to the other end of the spectrum. For him any aberration to sanity is a matter of grave concern as it means some form of social radicalism and hence a form of danger. While talking with Septimus, Sir William realizes that he repeatedly used the word 'war' which the doctor identifies as something serious. The character of Sir William has reflections of Woolf's own doctor who had insisted that she should be cut off from all human contact until she has recovered fully. Sir William also prescribes sanatorium for Septimus because there he will not come across any human, which will mean he will not be able to weave any fancy ideas. Septimus' strong inward confrontations and Lucrezia's doubts and apprehensions are shown to be submerged within their own selves as they are unable to share it with anybody.

Another character who finds herself cut off is Maisie Johnson. Just like Lucrezia, she is unfamiliar with London. She has a Scottish origin. Very recently she has arrived from Edinburgh. The exuberant English people and the 'prim' blossoms of London everything that excited Clarissa appeared strange to Maisie. She was unable to relate herself to her new surroundings.

Septimus' final words before he jumped off the window were 'I'll give it you'. The words are ironic because Holmes wanted to take away Septimus. Instead Septimus volunteers to hand over his corporeal body to the doctor. But Septimus' soul had not surrendered. He jumps out to keep safe, even through death, the privacy of his entity.

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Holmes labels Septimus as a coward. He cannot comprehend why Septimus had to kill himself, but for the first time Rezia was able to realise Septimus' thought process.

Death and Oppression

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Ideas of death constantly permeate the everyday life in *Mrs. Dalloway*. This is especially true for Clarissa, Septimus and Peter. But what makes this thought threatening is the awareness that troubles the characters making even the most trivial incident and interactions appear meaningful. Early in the novel when Clarissa starts off her day with the intention of going to the market to buy flowers for the party (scheduled for the evening) she is unexpectedly reminded of a moment during her adolescent phase when she had anticipated the occurrence of an unpleasant event. As Big Ben reminds one of the passing hours, Clarissa keeps reiterating a line to herself which appears in Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*: 'Fear no more the heat o' the sun / Nor the furious winter's rages.' The line is quoted from a funeral song which appears in the play. The song speaks of death as celebration because it arrives as a state of comfort after a living out the hardships of life. Clarissa, within her lifetime has lived death in various forms - the death of her father, the death of her mother, and the death of her sister. She has experienced the devastating effects of the war. These experiences have firmly made her believe that living itself is a dangerous affair. Death keeps her thoughts occupied and the quote from *Cymbeline*, as well as Septimus' voluntary acceptance of death, finally helps Clarissa to come into terms with her own life. Peter Walsh, on the other hand is so apprehensive of his own identity that he grows scared with the idea of death and starts randomly following a young woman whom he does not know to keep his mind out of the thought of death. Septimus voluntarily welcomes death. He feared it the most. But he opts for it over the other unbearable option that was available to him—surviving another day.

Clarissa and Septimus as Alter Egos

Septimus' feeling of being distanced from his lived reality is similar to Clarissa's feeling as she goes around the London city. Septimus' 'Fear no more' induces comfort in her. From what Septimus has narrated to Rezia, he seemed to have found his way to deal with death, a subject that keeps haunting Clarissa's mind. Septimus' belief that 'there is no death' echoes in Clarissa's belief that some amount of her will be left behind even after she has left this mortal world in the form of trees, water, air, and people. The glimpses of the neurotic tendencies in Clarissa and at times in the psyche of other characters finds a resonance and culminates in the form of insanity in Septimus. Yet Septimus is a victim of cruel treatment but he is not inhuman. People who nurture the idea to dominate and oppress are ruthless — be it within the politics of war or in the hierarchy of relations. In Septimus' instance he was harassed by society as well as his supposed well wishers. The war took its toll on him and then the doctors were unsympathetic about him.

Oppression is a feeling that both Clarissa and Septimus experience in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Septimus at the end of the novel commits suicide in order to release himself from the oppressive demands of the society or to conform himself to its codes of conduct. The demands to subscribe to the societal norms come in variety of guises. Miss Kilman and Sir William Bradshaw are two characters who are presented in the role of oppressors in the novel: Miss Kilman tries to exert her superiority over Clarissa through her beliefs, and Sir William took it displeasingly when anyone dared to contradict his sense of the world. Both wished to see a world which followed in their

footsteps and adhered to their belief systems. This thought filled them with a sense of power and a sadistic feeling to dominate others. Their sense of rigidity affected everyone who had the misfortune of coming in contact with them. Kilman and Bradshaw loved to oppress all. But people like Clarissa, despite their power to raise their voice against such repressive social structure, chose to remain silent. Though Clarissa is very much a part and parcel of the social system and she often feels suffocated but she does not revolt. She rather accepts it. She and people like her are partly responsible for the death of Septimus. After hearing the news, she ponders over on Septimus' suicide and thinks "Somehow it was her disaster—her disgrace."

Time

Time provides alignment to the fluid ideas, recollections, and meetings that form the narrative of *Mrs. Dalloway*. Big Ben, an emblem of England and its power, makes itself heard every hour unfailingly, making sure that the fleeting of time and the perception of over looming death, is in conjugation. Clarissa, Septimus, Peter, and other individual characteristics are shown to be in the confines. Clarissa, specifically, senses the route of time, through the appearance of Sally and Peter Walsh, her close associates from the past, and wonders what amount of time has gone by since she herself was a small girl. As the hour clock strikes, although the sound evaporates—it becomes "leaden circles dissolved in the air..." This sign recurs numerous times all through the narrative, showing how ephemeral time is, regardless of the strike of Big Ben and regardless of people's concern with it. Rezia informs Septimus, 'It is time,' as they sit idle in the park waiting for the time to approach when they can meet the doctor on Harley Street. The old woman whom we come across at the Regent's Park Tube opines that man understands no boundaries of time, since she prolongs to vocalize the identical recital for what appears like eternity. She realises that human existence is circular and not uni-dimensional or linear. But this kind of time is what Big Ben tracks. Time is so significant to the topics, structure, and individual characteristics of this creative piece that Woolf nearly entitled her book *The Hours* after which she renamed it as *Mrs. Dalloway*.

ACTIVITY

Write a review on the story, *Mrs. Dalloway*.

DID YOU KNOW

Virginia Woolf could be famously mean and snobby. Her first reaction upon meeting the writer Katherine Mansfield—a gifted writer whom admired Woolf tremendously—was 'that she stinks like a—well civet cat that had taken to street walking. In truth, I'm a little shocked by her commonness at first sight; lines so hard & cheap.'

3.5 SUMMARY

In this unit, you have learnt that:

- The theatrical background of *A Room of One's Own* is that Woolf has been given an invitation to deliver a lecture on the theme of 'Women and Fiction'.

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Check Your Progress

9. Who is Miss Kilman?
10. What does the novel *Mrs. Dalloway* chronicle?
11. Which place does Lucrezia Warren Smith hail from?
12. What is the full name of Mrs. Dalloway?
13. What was Peter doing as he sat in the park recollecting his memories of Clarissa?

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She puts forward the theory that it is a must for a woman to have money and her own room for her to become a writer of fiction.

- Her essay is built on a pattern of partially-fictional account of the mindset that guided her to take up this thesis.
- According to her dramatization, the mental processes in the character of an imaginary storyteller, who is in the same position as she, struggle with the same topic.
- The storyteller starts her quest at Oxbridge College, where she reminisces about various educational experiences of men and women, in addition to the material disparities in their lives.
- She then runs through the British Library for an entire day, scrutinizing the scholarship on women, all of which men have wrote and specifically, that which has not been written amiably.
- Shifting her focus to history, she finds that information on the lives of women is very insufficient, and so she decides to use her imagination to recreate their existence.
- The character of Judith Shakespeare is created as an instance of the unfortunate fate that a woman of extreme intelligence would have met with in those circumstances.
- Pertaining to these circumstances, she focuses on the accomplishments of prominent women authors of the 19th century and indicates the significance of customs for an aspiring writer.
- This is followed by an assessment of the existing state of literature, carried out by reading the first novel of one of the narrator's contemporaries.
- Woolf brings the essay to an end by urging her women audience to adopt the customary practice that has barely been bestowed on them and to increase the endowment for their own daughters.
- *Mrs. Dalloway* has its roots in two short stories that Woolf had written previously, *Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street* and the incomplete *The Prime Minister*.
- *Mrs. Dalloway* is a book about Clarissa Dalloway and her life as an aristocratic politician's wife. The story starts in mid-June. Clarissa Dalloway is a woman who lives in the Westminster section of London. She is enjoying the beautiful weather and missing her friends, who are not there at that time. Clarissa is thinking that the War is over, the King and Queen are cozy in their palace and though there are a large number of things one may not be happy about, the fact is that the people there loved life.
- *Mrs. Dalloway* is not a characteristic mundane routine story, but it is a routine story of an innovative kind. It deals with one day for Clarissa Dalloway (with some other significant characters, also) as she gets ready for a big party that will occur that evening.
- With the interior progression of the characters in the novel, the story proceeds forward and moves back to comment on the post World War social structure.
- The novel throws light on many sensitive issues including focusing towards the homosexual bonding that the characters treasure in their memories.

- Even thirty-four years later, Clarissa Dalloway remembers the passionate kiss that she and Sally had exchanged at Burton and considers it to be the happiest moment of her life.
- Clarissa is arranging a party that will comprise all prominent people in London from the Prime Minister to people in eminent social circles. Clarissa worries about the party and endeavors to make it perfect.
- Septimus is unable to get rid of the memories of his close friend Evans.
- Evans, whom Septimus met during the war, is described as 'undemonstrative in the company of women' and the two were like 'two dogs playing on a hearth-rug'.
- Dutch film director Marleen Gorris had translated *Mrs. Dalloway* novel into celluloid in the year 1997.

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3.6 KEY TERMS

- **Conjectures:** It is an opinion or conclusion formed on the basis of incomplete information.
- **Ambivalence:** It is the state of having mixed feelings or contradictory ideas about something or someone.
- **Schizophrenia:** It is a severe mental disorder where the patient shows signs of hallucinations, delusions, social isolation, disoriented speech, etc.
- **Stream-of-consciousness:** It is a narrative technique that is used mostly in fictional prose works which intends to introduce the readers with the thought process going on inside the mind of the characters.

3.7 ANSWERS TO 'CHECK YOUR PROGRESS'

1. Virginia Woolf's suicide was brought upon by many things; she was depressed by the lukewarm reception of her biography of Roger Fry. The destruction of her home during the Blitz and the onset of the Second World War only worsened her malady. Her completing the manuscript of her last novel she realized that she could not write any more; hence there was no incentive left to live anymore and she committed suicide.
2. Woolf's first professional piece was a journalistic piece on Haworth, the home of the Bronte family, published in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1900.
3. *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938) delineate the difficulties female writers face because the reins of legal and economic power in the hands of men.
4. *The Voyage Out* was published in 1918.
5. The Woolf couple founded the Hogarth Press.
6. Her dinner at Fernham College is starkly different from that served in Oxbridge: it comprises of plain soup, mediocre beef, vegetables, potatoes, bad custard, prunes, biscuits cheese and water.
7. This part of the essay begins with the narrator expressing her disappointment at failing to draw any conclusion as to why women are poorer than men.

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8. The narrator marks down the literary work of Lady Winchilsea because according to the narrator, her writing is marred by fear and hatred. She believes that if she had not been consumed by these negative emotions she had the potential of writing brilliant verse.
9. Miss Kilman is a poor middle aged lady who taught history to Elizabeth. She was influenced by socialistic ideas. She appears to be in love with Elizabeth whom she tries to mould in the best essence of socialism and religion.
10. Mrs. Dalloway chronicles a particular day in the month of June in the 1920s.
11. Lucrezia Warren Smith hails from Italy.
12. Mrs. Dalloway's full name is Clarissa Dalloway.
13. Peter was fiddling with his pocket knife as he sat on the bench in the park recollecting his memories of Clarissa.

3.8 QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

Short-Answer Questions

1. What are the characteristics of Woolf's work?
2. What makes Woolf decide that England is a patriarchal society?
3. Why does Woolf consider Shakespeare as the greatest creative genius of his age?
4. What is the importance of time in *Mrs. Dalloway*?
5. Write a note on depiction of women in the *Mrs. Dalloway*.
6. List some of the novels written by Virginia Woolf.
7. Write a note on the narrative structure of the novel *Mrs. Dalloway*.
8. Write a short note on stream-of-consciousness technique used in literature.

Long-Answer Questions

1. Give a biographical overview of Virginia Woolf's life.
2. What types of conflicts (physical, moral, intellectual, or emotional) can be seen in *A Room of One's Own*?
3. Why is *A Room of One's Own* usually considered a piece of feminist literature?
4. What is the role of women in the text? How are mothers represented? What about single/independent women? What is important about women—in the historical context?
5. What is the importance of city in *Mrs. Dalloway*?
6. *Mrs. Dalloway* is a social commentary. Do you agree?
7. Show how communication is a major issue in *Mrs. Dalloway*.
8. How do death and oppression manifest themselves in the novel?

3.9 FURTHER READING

Zwerdling, Alex; *Virginia Woolf and the Real World*, University of California Press, California, 1986.

Nicolson, Nigel; *Virginia Woolf*, Viking, New York, 2000.

Albee, Edward; *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*; Scribner Classic, New York, 2003.

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Structure

- 2.0 Introduction
- 2.1 Unit Objectives
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2.0 INTRODUCTION

One of the major contributions of Anglo-American feminist criticism, which spread its wing in the 1980s, lay in its ability to figure out and carry out a gendered literary criticism encompassing a multitude of perspective. For the first time, it was realized that literature was not just an amalgamation of major books and texts. It was characterized by various political discourses steeped in structured patterns of social as well as sexual ideologies. Moreover, the writings of women, it was proven conclusively, carry a few social nomenclatures, which are constructed and defined within the space they are created in. Needless to say there still exists hidden politics within this umbrella term of 'pluralism'.

Annette Kolodny's essay, *Dancing through the Minefield* (1980), angered various groups like the working class and lesbian organizations for shadowing the pluralistic aspect by working through heterosexuality and racial dimension. Yet, this was also a period where innovation was visible in the writings of authors such as Alice Walker and Adrienne Rich.

Feminist criticism was not limited to a mere critical approach. It also moved into the broader aspect of literature taking into consideration the creative productions in the form of biographies, autobiographies, fiction and histories. This movement towards a multi perspective approach led to the birth of a few poststructuralist and postmodernist criticisms in the form of Catherine Clement's *The Newly Born Woman* (1987). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar dealt with the theme of authorship in relation to woman writer and the anxiety hidden underneath. This approach found its concrete critical form in Toril Moi's *Sexual/Textual Politics* (1985). *Sexual/Textual Politics* is considered to be the first feminist text which adopted a deconstructive approach to analyse the existing body of female works. Although Moi's work takes a critical view of the Anglo-American and French criticism, it does not consider the entire gamut of Black writing.

This unit will try to understand the meaning of Anglo-American feminist criticism as interpreted by various writers. The unit will also look into the works of Toril Moi and her views on authors writing on Anglo-American feminist criticism. The emphasis will be on Moi's *Sexual/Textual Politics*.

2.1 UNIT OBJECTIVES

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After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Recognize the concept of the Anglo-American feminist criticism and appreciate Toril Moi's role in it
- Explain the significance of the *Sexual/Textual Politics* in the study of feminist criticism
- Summarize the *Sexual/Textual Politics*

2.2 ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Toril Moi was born in 1953 in Norway. Currently she holds the position of James B. Duke Professor of Literature and Romance Studies and Professor of English, Philosophy and Theatre Studies at Duke University. Previously she taught French at the University of Oxford and worked as Director of the Center for Feminist Research at the University of Bergen, Norway. Her academic areas of interest are feminist theory and women's writing; intersection of literature, philosophy and aesthetics, and 'finding ways of reading literature with philosophy and philosophy with literature without reducing the one to the other'.



Fig. 2.1 Toril Moi

It was her lectures at the University Oxford which took the shape of *Sexual/Textual Politics*. She edited *The Kristeva Reader* (1986) and *French Feminist Thought* (1987). The 1990s saw Moi coming out with her most impressive work which identified French critic, de Beauvoir, as one of the most prominent feminist of the twentieth century. Eventually, Moi brought out her ideas in print in *Feminist Theory and Simone de Beauvoir* (1990) and *Simone de Beauvoir*. Her seminal work, *What Is a Woman?*, earned Moi the Guggenheim Fellowship (2001) and a fellowship at Harvard University (2002-03). At Harvard she got herself busy in studying Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen.

2.3 'ANGLO-AMERICAN FEMINIST CRITICISM' FROM *SEXUAL/TEXTUAL POLITICS*

Toril Moi's *Sexual/Textual Politics* (1985) is neatly divided in to two prominent sections. One section deals with 'Anglo-American Feminist Criticism' and the other one deals with 'French Feminist Theory'. This book throws a clear light on the seminal aspects of the present day feminist criticism and also brings in new prospective.

Moi discusses about 'Anglo-American Feminist criticism' in the first segment of her book. In this segment of her book, in this section Moi deals with the works of theorists like Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, Kate Millet and Annette Kolodny and also discusses some major feminists from African-American and lesbian sections of the society.

Toril Moi, in her discussion asserts that Anglo-American feminism deals with the quintessential form of female self and represents itself through liberal humanism. But she also argues that since Anglo-American feminism mostly revolves around the parameter set by western theories therefore it is unable to properly address the culture set by patriarchal society.

Anglo-American feminist criticism is more of an attempt to understand the sociological dimensions of literature written for women or construction of gender roles (especially female) through various existing social boundaries. These branch of study intended, in its early phase, to include itself in the educational canons where female literary figures and critics would appear more often and make themselves more prominent in the world of intellect. Initially this field of study was very avert to the idea of theorizing itself. But with the inclusion of French feminist theories into Anglo-American criticism a major change was noticed where Anglo-American feminist were found to be becoming theoretically more equipped.

Moi tries to bring into light the politics of canonizing certain texts over the others. She feels that the canonical texts are always selected by 'male bourgeois critics' who select male writings and pass it on to future generations. They do not take into account the various non-confirmist approaches and experiences that are recorded in the various 'ethnic and working class' writings of women. Anglo-American criticism has indeed raised a voice against these self-assured canonization process initiated by the middle class values of the male dominant society. But Moi is critical of the fact that Anglo-American critics have 'rarely challenged the very notion of canon'.

The main 'Anglo-Americans' considered for discussion in *The Sexual/Textual Politics* are mostly American. Some of the early attempts at studying women's criticism reflects in the works of Cell Man and Millett and Susan Cornillon's edited *Images of*

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Check Your Progress

1. Name the books Toril Moi edited.
2. Who wrote *What is a Woman?*

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Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives (1972). But the Cellen Moers's *Literary women* published in 1976 is considered as more of a bench mark effort as it makes a conscious effort to trace the alternative tradition of writing which is regulated by women that over shadows the dominant male culture of writing. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Mad woman in the Attic* (1979) claims that the female authors of post Jane Austen scenario have managed to create a very distinct female voice for themselves the notions of 'angel' and 'monster' are both accepted and rejected simultaneously. Here, Moi's contribution lies in highlighting the reiteration of female victimization by the patriarchal society. Moi links at taking a recourse to the 'psychoanalytic' perspectives for a way out.

Moi is more inclined towards French feminism in their effort to theorise matters. But her investigation of Anglo-American feminist body of work identifies it to be following a Lukacsian approach to present various social realities though deeply steeped within the circumscribed space of patriarchal ideology. Moi puts forward that the prominent American feminist literary critics such as Annette Kolodny, Myra Jehlen, Susan Guber et al are engrossed politicizing creative works by reading them from a sexual perspective. But they are completely obliterating the problematic that are posed by the patriarchal aesthetics. Though Moi gives credit to the Anglo-American feminist critics for taking an assertive political approach to things, they are at the same time not considered a coherent approach by Moi because she considers just the dealings of sexual politics is not sufficient enough. Moi says, '... new impact of feminist criticism is to be found not at the level of theory or methodology, but at the level of politics. Feminists have *politicized* existing critical methods and approaches. If feminist criticism has subverted established critical judgments it is because of its radically new emphasis on *sexual politics*...' (*Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, page 86). She further argues that the main problem with Anglo-American feminist lies in its ambivalent core. Moi argues, '... despite its often strong, explicit political engagement, it fails to go *far* enough along the political spectrum, but in the sense that its radical analysis of sexual politics still remains entangled with depoliticizing theoretical paradigms' (*Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, page 86).

2.3.1 Feminist Literary Criticism

Feminist literary criticism is cannot be united under one umbrella. Its beauty lies in its difference and its variety. It represents various approaches of understanding. Feminist literary criticism is full of ideas belonging to oppositional school of thoughts. Somewhere in midst of all one can place Moi's critique. Moi analyses the exaggerated concern of feminist criticism on sexual politics by assimilating sexual with textual politics. She creates a new term 'sexual/textual politics'. She does this to highlight how a text becomes a branch of differences. She argues that any text dealing with sexual politics has to be a part of both male and female politics. Under no circumstances can it be segregated as meant for any specific gender. Moi prefers to place her sexual-political agenda within the domain of deconstruction studies. She argues that a feminist literary text falls short of propaganda because of its variety that embedded in the text itself. This does not imply that it is silently regarding its political aspect, but the political part is explained in an aesthetical manner. As Moi sums it up, 'As a political approach to criticism, feminism must be aware of the politics of aesthetic categories as well as of the implied aesthetics of political approaches to art.'

Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literature Theory is known for its critical commentary on mainly of Anglo-American feminist criticism, particularly of its radical

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politics developed at the cost of the aesthetics of politics. Before embarking on her analysis about the lacunas of Anglo-American feminist criticism, Moi brings into the forefront important feminist critics, such as, Virginia Woolf, so that she can bring her out of the debris of darkness where radical feminists like Showalter had decided to leave her. In her introduction to *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literature Theory* titled 'Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? Feminist Readings of Woolf', Moi argues that many feminist are scared of Woolf.

Though it is not amusing to see many male critics considering Woolf as 'a frivolous Bohemian and a negligible Bloomsbury aesthete', yet Moi intends to explore deeper to understand why many female Anglo-American feminist rejected Woolf, the 'great feminist writer', as Moi puts it. Both male and female critics sidelined Woolf because she neither conformed to the radical feminist's ways nor to the male chauvinists with her ideas.

Moi points out that Showalter distances herself from Woolf, yet adhered to her (Woolf) unconsciously. The name of Showalter's work, *A Literature of their Own*, unintentionally echoes the name of Woolf's seminal work *A Room of One's Own*. Moi argues that Showalter's understanding of Woolf is definitely skewed because of her repeated presumptions which are sometimes theoretical and sometimes political in nature. Moi makes an honest effort to save Woolf from the wrong accusations Showalter's has hurled on her and then goes on to offer an alternate persuasive argument of Woolf which is brighter in note.

Showalter puts in an effort to analyse Woolf in the first chapter of her work, where she invests a significant amount of space discussing Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. The title of the chapter is called 'Virginia Woolf and the Flight into Androgyny'. This title reveals Showalter's idea that Woolf denied exclusivity to women, this perception serves to fulfil Showalter's political agenda. This stance is further justified when Showalter's defines androgyny as 'full balance and command of an emotional range that includes male and female elements'. Moi considers this to be a myth used by Showalter to hide her own troublesome feminine existence and helps he suppress and eliminate aim and anger. Showalter, registering her disagreement, suggests that Woolf as a feminist failed 'even in the moment of expressing feminist conflict. Woolf wanted to transcend it. Her wish for experience was really a wish to forget experience'.

Showalter, while discussing Woolf's concept of androgyny, i.e. possessing both masculine and feminine characteristics, is very critical of her. She writes it off as 'a flight away from a troubled feminism'. It is a familiar literary mistake whose wrath is subjected to many works where the contemporary criticism is made by the critic keeping in mind his/her current positioning and not by trying to place himself/herself in the context of the original writer.

Moi takes a different route. She argues that the book deals with sexual politics and views it in harmony of both the sexes. Woolf indeed is aware of the plight of women and the pain they have lived with for ages. In fact, she is extremely wounded on coming across women who are tortured to death by the male-dominated society. For example, since Mrs. Ramsay could not express that she indeed loved Mr. Ramsay, Mrs. Ramsay paved her way towards death. Men consider women as subordinate. Women were projected inferior because men believed themselves to be superior. Woolf tries to raise some valid question like why were men allowed to take wine whereas women survived on water? Why was there social disequilibrium between both the sexes? How many books have women managed to author in comparison to

those authored by men? She tries to come with some valid argument regarding this established social codes. Women were thought to be dim witted. Yet there were handful men who respected woman like Goethe. Yet on the other hand there were people like Mussolini who hated them.

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Moi on Woolf's vision of androgyny

Woolf's concept of women is subtle and deals with their psychological aspect. Unlike radical feminists who give only one-sided perspective. If someone like Mr. Ramsay vouched upon the inferiority of women, it was to prove his own superiority. He was desperately trying to protect under the grab of anger and unnecessary exaggeration, because that was all that he could have for himself. Life, according to Woolf, for male and female were equally difficult and a gruesome struggle. Both desperately need confidence to survive. In the struggle to keep surviving one tries to belittle the other. Patriarchy justifies its superiority through various means- wealth, or rank, or sex. It proves itself to be better and wiser then rest by indulging in vulgar display of various means it adheres to. Either of these are one of the reasons for his rise to power.

If a woman challenges or wounds a man's vanity, she is labeled as a hot-headed feminist. Woolf opines that for ages women have led the life of looking-glasses where they possess the extra ordinary power of making a man appear twice his usual size. This has added the much required fuel to a man's ego, which helped him build his own concrete world. Woolf insists that apart from its social function, a mirror always results in bringing out violent and heroic activities. It was because of this that both Napoleon and Mussolini championed the idea of inferiority of women, for if women did not remain inferior than men cannot grow.

According to Woolf, demoting women from their rightly justified position helps men psychologically conquer themselves and elevate their sense of self.

Woolf goes on to say, 'For if she begins to tell the truth, the figure in the looking-glass shrinks.' Showalter calls Woolf's ironical statement as 'wimsy'. She does not consider it a serious statement to label Woolf as a feminist. Yet, Woolf indeed is serious when she claims women are abused by men because it is their instincts which make them brutal and cannot control it. Directed by these over-powering instincts men have chosen to torment women, abuse them and chosen life partners for them (in extension being the creator of women's destinies).

But ironically women always were the perfect subject for poetry. This brings before us the paradox of a woman's life — her poetic transformation and her prosaic reality, her life in everyday space and the fiction that she becomes in creativities. A woman is denied the power to hone her creative prowess yet she remains the fundamental inspiration of poetry and music.

Woolf says in her book:

A very queer, composite being thus emerges. Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover. She is all but absent from history. She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction; in fact, she was the slave of any boy whose parents forced a ring upon her finger.

... Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband.

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But on a positive note, Woolf says there is nothing for women to feel bad about. She suggests laughing out will help woman to come out of this, but this laugh should be devoid of bitterness. Her laugh should be like George Eliot's who had the audacity to make fun of man's vanities. The other way to get over this repression is to try being comic, because comedy brings out the truth as was done by Jane Austen.

What Samuel Taylor Coleridge meant by his statement and Shakespeare, earlier showed in his plays, was that an androgynous mind is less apt to make these distinctions than that a single-sexed mind. For Coleridge, there is no distinction between men, birds and beasts; or between great or small. In Shakespeare, daughters are viewed at par with sons. What Coleridge perhaps meant was that an androgynous mind is resonant and porous; it transmits emotion without impediment; that it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided. It is a mind – semitransparent. In fact, as Woolf also says, one goes back to Shakespeare's mind as a type of the androgynous, of the man-womanly or woman-manly mind, though it is impossible to say what Shakespeare thought of women. In essence, one should not seek to know what Shakespeare thought of either women or men. He was an integrated mind, not sharply conscious of either sex.

Woolf's vision of androgyny does not bring any call for any sacrifices in man-woman relationship, rather it proposes for a more balanced approach to life and relations. This is way different from Showalter's feminism that tries to segregate the two sexes. It creates a clash and not an accord between the sexes. Woolf reads the problem of the women in her aesthetic way. An exceptionally talented creative genius, someone resembling the quality of Shakespeare, cannot segregate sex exclusively from other aspects of existence. Though it is not easy to become one more Shakespeare in the present day. Even during Woolf's period, the society was as concerned about sex as our own times. Woolf opines that the more women draw attention towards feminine issues, the men become more assertive in their desire to express themselves. Which makes Woolf say that men are 'now writing only with the male side of their brains'.

Works created by Galsworthy and Kipling cannot be appreciated by women because these creations are devoid of suggestive power and without any such power, a book, however effective it might be, otherwise cannot create an impact on mind.

The idea of Woolf has made many feminists consider her to be outdated in approach. Moi is someone who follows Woolf's legacy. Moi is definitely impressed by Woolf's liberal attitude. Showalter points out about the 'impersonal' aspect of *A Room of One's Own*. She accuses Woolf of using multiple narrative voice but Moi counter argues saying it is a positive trait because it provides the readers to have a multiplicity of perspectives. But this attitude of impersonality that Woolf adopts leaves Showalter puzzled and creates confusion in her mind regarding over Woolf's things. The whole text takes a different meaning for Showalter.

Moi speaks about the theoretical premise which conveys the idea that in real life the relationships are existential in nature. She opines that any text is a conglomeration of ideas as experienced by the writer, yet it is successful only when most of the readers are able to relate with it and also the text adds value to its own positioning.

Moi considers Showalter's stance to be wrong, for she (Showalter) demands for a radically different view of women just like Marcia Holly (who was an admirer of

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Showalter's ideas), which is detached from their original humanism. Holly's recreation of a new-age woman appears in the image of a strong and blissful tractor driver. But as Moi points out, feminists like Showalter and Holly don't realise that the new image they are creating (deviating away from the traditional image) is to a certain extent affected by patriarchal ideology. Moi further adds that in the centre of this patriarchal ideology 'man' is situated.

Moi opines, that Showalter's idea to remain distanced from the narrative tropes of a piece of work is like not going through a text at all. For example, to believe that the humans, the masculine half and the feminine half as simple independent entity is to overlook the entire concept of the complete being. This also means to erase away the process of the unconscious that help define our conscious being.

Moi as well as her contemporary Julia Kristeva both are appreciative of Woolf's free spirit. Julia Kristeva says that modern poetry is revolutionary in its ability to use symbolic language to challenge the existing orthodox social structure. These writings are subversive just like sexual or political revolution is for any society.

In her seminal work *Toward Androgyny* published in 1973, Carolyn Heilbrun gave her own understanding of the term androgyny by referring it as a concept of an 'unbounded and hence fundamentally undefinable nature.' Seen from this perspective, Woolf is not a feminist, because under no circumstance a feminist will long for androgyny, because androgyny eliminates the difference between both the sexes. But Moi was a complete and definite deconstructionist. She argued along with Kristeva that any line of thought that asks for the deconstruction of sexual identity is definitely a feminist approach.

Considering the very specific instance of Woolf, Moi opines that probably Woolf's understanding of feminism stopped her from being a part of political activism related to feminist agendas. Moi points out that Woolf in *Three Guineas* exhibits remarkable precision in reflecting upon the problems of liberal as well as radical feminism. The biggest problem lies in the forced segregation of male and the female entity.

After extending her tribute to the deserving Virginia Woolf in her 'Introduction' of *Sexual/Textual Politics*, Moi investigates the complete range of Anglo-American feminist criticism to figure out why it failed. She starts off her analysis by surveying the scenario of feminism in the 1960's. The 1960s was the time when women gained the right to vote. This emancipation in the political sphere armed feminism with a political perspective which was still absent in the Western world.

Betty Friedan came out with her *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963. American women became more visible in the public sphere with extending their participation in the civil right movement and registering their protest against the Vietnam War. This coming back of feminism with such a force had its political reasons. History suggests that people like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Antony worked hard to abolish slavery. The twentieth century marked many movements which were political in nature. Anti-war movement made women realize there is a gap between masculine egalitarian promise and their discrimination towards female counterparts.

It is important to mention here that these literary studies were never considered to be of much significance during the early phase of this new movement started by women. This movement was marked by its concern towards the social and political cause and change that followed it.

Gilbert and Gubar argue that the real identity of the text rests on the anger projected by the novelist which also is their (Gilbert and Gubar) idea of adopting a non-conformist attitude towards patriarchal bias generating a hierarchical divide between text and author. But they fall in their own loopholes as they end up bringing in Edward Said to prove their point.

Moi rightly claims that Anglo-American feminist critics have stayed out of the circle of theory, something that might give the impression of being a masculine territory. Moi points out that this is not as it was since the 1980's. To highlight the phase of change Moi speaks about three writers whom she considers to be the precursors to the Anglo-American feminist criticism if located from the theoretical perspective.

Annette Kolodny

Moi considers Annette Kolodny as the foremost author to associate with theoretical world among the feminist critics. Moi studies Kolodny's essay 'Some Notes of Defining a "Feminist Literary Criticism"' which came out in print for the first time in *Critical Inquiry* in 1975. Kolodny mentioning about her contribution in the 'notes' section said she took the initiative to bridge the gap between both the worlds and claimed her definition as 'exacting'. She clearly mentions that the study of women's writing is a different segment of study. She initiated a new kind of women comparative study aspect where the uniqueness of women writings were compared and contrasted against male writing. This kind of analysis method is similar to the one that was adopted by Jehlen almost six years after Kolodny came out with her work.

Kolodny goes on to explain that feminist politics is the foundation of feminist critics, but she also agrees that it is difficult to explain the exact components of feminist politics and theory. Moi is skeptic about adhering to such a view because she feels that the plurality that Kolodny is referring to will ultimately produce no result. Moi is definitely not against the politics that the feminist adopt because she knows that without it feminism cannot progress. She definitely supports the debate that run within the feminist politics. But she cannot agree with excess of pluralism that haunts the feminist criticism because she fears this will reduce the impact of feminist criticism.

Kolodny's input to the theoretical debate as per Moi provides negligible attention to the significance of politics in the theoretical scenario. It is not as if Kolodny is blind to the flaws of adopting a neutral approach when it comes to discussing criticism yet she ignores that even criticism carry with them their own political agenda.

Elaine Showalter

Kolodny in her work tries to initiate the process to understand feminism criticism. Showalter takes the process further and delves into deeper aspects of the criticism in her essays 'Towards a Feminist Poetics' (1979) and 'Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness' (1981). In the first essay, she expresses her views on woman, women as reader and women as author. Showalter distinguishes female as reader under the category of 'feminist critique'. She calls women as author as 'gynocritics'. Feminist critiques deal with texts produced by male writers and investigates it. In gynocritics, Showalter analyses general aspects of literary women which cover areas such as past, genres, psychoanalytic aspect of female authorship etc. Both the ideas can be used to understanding of existing criticism of literature.

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Showalter opines that if we create a new feminist poetics and then we study the way women were represented by women we will end up understanding what male point of view and not realize what women went through.

This lack of information about women makes Showalter ask for developing gynocriticism which would mean a specific branch for the study of women's writing so that women experience can be understood. Despite her genuine urge Moi points out that Showalter's traditional humanism approach will not bring out the ideal experience that she is trying to investigate, rather it is going to reinstall the patriarchal values that she is opposing.

In the second 'Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness', Showalter progresses in the similar territory as her previous essay. Here she analyses the familiar topic employing four different parameters — biological, linguistic, psychoanalysis and cultural criticism. At the starting of her essay she begins to wonder if feminist criticism at all should deal with theory. Though she seems to be slightly daunted with the idea of theorizing at that is a male domain she nonetheless thinks it to be a good idea to theorise. Though, as Moi points out Showalter definitely maintains a distinction between 'feminist critique' or feminist reading and 'gynocriticism'.

This, Moi feels, acts as a hindrance for gynocriticism. Showalter seems to be caught up in the battle of theory. She says 'too much theoretical study prevents us from achieving a close and extensive knowledge of women's texts' yet at the same time despite her efforts she is unable to prevent male influence of academics. It is also true that her aim was to create a distinct discipline for women and not to eliminate all the existing disciplines. By reading women's text in absence of theory would be like imposing another form of rule which would be dictated by women and not men.

2.4 SUMMARY

In this unit, you have learnt that:

- One of the major contributions of Anglo-American feminist criticism, which spread its wing in the 1980s, lay in its ability to figure out and carry out a gendered literary criticism encompassing a multitude of perspective.
- Feminist criticism was not limited to a mere critical approach. It also moved into the broader aspect of literature taking into consideration the creative productions in the form of biographies, autobiographies, fiction and histories.
- It was Toril Moi lectures at the University Oxford which took the shape of *Sexual/Textual Politics*.
- Toril Moi's *Sexual/Textual Politics* (1985) is neatly divided in to two prominent sections. One section deals with 'Anglo-American Feminist Criticism' and the other one deals with 'French Feminist Theory'.
- Anglo-American feminist criticism is more of an attempt to understand the sociological dimensions of literature written for women or construction of gender roles (especially female) through various existing social boundaries.
- Moi tries to bring into light the politics of canonizing certain texts over the others. She feels that the canonical texts are always selected by 'male bourgeois critics' who select male writings and pass it on to future generations.

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Check Your Progress

3. Why is *Sexual/Textual Politics* important?
4. What is Moi's contribution to theoretical world?
5. Why is Moi interested in French feminism?
6. Who does Moi give credit for taking an assertive political approach to things?
7. What is *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literature Theory* known for?
8. Does Woolf's vision of androgyny call for any sacrifices?
9. What in Showalter impresses Moi?
10. What does Woolf do with words?
1. Kolodny's input to the theoretical debate as per Moi is flawed. Why?

- Moi is more inclined towards French feminism in their effort to theories matters. But her investigation of Anglo-American feminist body of work identifies it to be following a Lukacsian approach to present various social realities though deeply steeped within the circumscribed space of patriarchal ideology.
- Feminist literary criticism is cannot be united under one umbrella. Its beauty lies in its difference and its variety.
- Though it is not amusing to see many male critics considering Woolf as 'a frivolous Bohemian and a negligible Bloomsbury aesthete', yet Moi intends to explore deeper to understand why many female Anglo-American feminist rejected Woolf, the 'great feminist writer', as Moi puts it.
- Showalter puts in an effort to analyse Woolf in the first chapter of her work, where she invests a significant amount of space discussing Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*.
- Showalter, while discussing Woolf's concept of androgyny, i.e. possessing both masculine and feminine characteristics, is very critical of her. She writes it off as 'a flight away from a troubled feminism'.
- Woolf's concept of women is subtle and deals with their psychological aspect. Unlike radical feminists who give only one-sided perspective.
- Woolf's vision of androgyny does not bring any call for any sacrifices in man-woman relationship, rather it proposes for a more balanced approach to life and relations.
- Moi speaks about the theoretical premise which conveys the idea that in real life the relationships are existential in nature. She opines that any text is a conglomeration of ideas as experienced by the writer, yet it is successful only when most of the readers are able to relate with it and also the text adds value to its own positioning.
- Moi considers Annette Kolodny as the foremost author to associate with theoretical world among the feminist critics.
- In gynocritics, Showalter analyses general aspects of literary women which cover areas such as past, genres, psychoanalytic aspect of female authorship etc. Both the ideas can be used to understanding of existing criticism of literature.
- Moi feels Showalter seems to be caught up in the battle of theory.

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2.5 KEY TERMS

- **Sexual politics:** It is the process whereby the ruling sex seeks to maintain and extend its power over the subordinate sex.
- **Gynocriticism:** It is the historical study of women writers as a distinct literary tradition.
- **Anglo-American feminist criticism:** It is an attempt to understand the sociological dimensions of literature written for women or construction of gender roles through various existing social boundaries.
- **Modernist poems:** It is a form of writing in which the rhythms of the body and the unconscious have managed to break through the strict rational defenses of conventional meaning.

- **Deconstructive form of writing:** It engages with and thereby exposes the two-faced nature of a discourse.

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2.6 ANSWERS TO 'CHECK YOUR PROGRESS'

1. Toril Moi edited *The Kristeva Reader* in 1986 and *French Feminist Thought* in 1987.
2. Moi wrote *What is a Woman?* It was her seminal work which earned her the Guggenheim Fellowship (2001) and a fellowship at Harvard University (2002-03).
3. The book *Sexual/Textual Politics* throws a clear light on the seminal aspects of the present day feminist criticism and gives a new prospective.
4. Moi's contribution lies in highlighting the reiteration of female victimization by the patriarchal society through their writing.
5. Moi is more inclined towards French feminism in their effort to theorize matters.
6. Moi gives credit to Anglo-American feminist critics for taking an assertive political approach to things.
7. *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literature Theory* is known for its critical commentary on mainly of Anglo-American feminist criticism, particularly of its radical politics developed at the cost of the aesthetics of politics.
8. Woolf's vision of androgyny does not bring any call for any sacrifices in man-woman relationship, rather it proposes for a more balanced approach to life and relations.
9. Moi is impressed by Woolf's liberal attitude.
10. Woolf's does not pretend to erase differences, but uses her words to bring them together to form a coherent unity.
11. Kolodny's input to the theoretical debate as per Moi provides negligible attention to the significance of politics in the theoretical scenario.

2.7 QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

Short-Answer Questions

1. Write a brief note on concept of androgyny.
2. What is Moi opinion on Showalter's idea to remain distanced from the narrative tropes?
3. What is Moi's opinion of Woolf in *Three Guineas*?
4. What is Carolyn Heilbrun's notion of feminism?
5. What is Moi's opinion on Annette Kolodny's work?
6. Write a note on 'Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness' by Showalter.
7. What does Toril Moi assert in her discussions?
8. Who are the main people considered for discussion in the *Sexual/Textual Politics*?

Long-Answer Questions

Toril Moi

1. What are the positive aspects of Showalter's work?
2. What does Moi criticize in Showalter's work?
3. Write a detailed answer on various aspect of Showalter's work.
4. What is so significant about Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own*?
5. Describe the Anglo-American feminist criticism.
6. Elucidate the main themes of Moi's *Sexual/Textual Politics*.
7. Summarize the feminist struggle, as reflected by Julia Kristeva.
8. Briefly compare Showalter and Woolf.
9. Describe Woolf's opinion about women.

NOTES

2.8 FURTHER READING

- Moi, Toril: *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, New York, 2002.
- Bedient, Calvin. 'How I Slugged it Out with Toril Moi and Stayed Awake.' *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 3 (Spring 1991): 644-49.
- Fallaize, Elizabeth. 'De Beauvoir Embodied.' *Times Literary Supplement*, No. 5069 (26 May 2000): 31.

UNIT 4 ALICE WALKER

Alice Walker

Structure

- 4.0 Introduction
- 4.1 Unit Objectives
- 4.2 About the Author
- 4.3 *The Color Purple*
 - 4.3.1 Critical Commentary
- 4.4 Summary
- 4.5 Key Terms
- 4.6 Answers to 'Check Your Progress'
- 4.7 Questions and Exercises
- 4.8 Further Reading

NOTES

4.0 INTRODUCTION

Alice Walker is an eminent Afro-American writer and social activist. She has won several international awards for her acclaimed novel *The Color Purple*. Born in radically divided South America, Walker's writings reflect her roots in economic hardship, racial terrorism and folk wisdom of African American life and culture. Her work transgresses the relationship and understanding shared by women. Her works began to be published during the latter years of the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s. As an activist, she has supported anti-nuclear causes and other environmental issues along with oppressive rituals of female circumcision in Africa and the Middle East. Today, she is a strong voice in the Black feminist movement.

This unit will give an understanding of the writings by Alice Walker, with emphasis on the novel *The Color Purple*.

4.1 UNIT OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Understand the Alice Walker as a writer and a social activist
- Discuss the important aspects of Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple*
- Explain the significance of *The Color Purple*
- Critically appreciate *The Color Purple*

4.2 ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alice Walker (born 1944) is a prominent American novelist, short story writer, essayist, biographer and poet, who won the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for her work, *The Color Purple* (1982).

Walker hailed from a family of sharecroppers. Her first published work was a book of poems, *Once* (1968). This collection narrates her journey to Africa and her experiences of civil rights movements. Her next publication, *Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems* (1973), was also a collection of poems. It was Walker's mouthpiece for identifying the plight of those who struggle against racism and oppression.

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Fig. 4.1 Alice Walker

Walker's first novel appeared in 1970, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. The narrative of this novel revolves from 1900 to 1960s. It tells the story of three successive generations of farmers belonging to the coloured community. In 1973 came her short story collection, *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black women*. This collection recounts the legacy of black women and their sufferings. Even her next story collection, *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* (1981) wanders along the similar territory as the previous collection.

Walker bagged the Pulitzer Prize for her novel *The Color Purple*. This novel is about the life a coloured woman, Celie who is overburdened with sufferings and finds a mean of expression when she starts writing her despairing situation to God through her letters addressed to Him. This novel revolves around Celie's letters to God and Nettie, her sister and also Nettie's communication with Celie through letters.

Her work *Langston Hughes: American Poet* (1974) is a biography of the American poet Langston Hughes. In her next novel *Meridian* (1976), Walker focuses on civil right workers of the 1960s. Walker published the two poetry collections *Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning* and *Horses Make A Landscape Look More Beautiful* in 1979 and 1984, respectively. In 1983 came out her essay collection *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*.

Works

Novels

- *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, 1970
- *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women*, 1973
- *Meridian*, 1976
- *The Color Purple*, 1982

- *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down: Stories*, 1982
- *To Hell With Dying*, 1988
- *The Temple of My Familiar*, 1989
- *Finding the Green Stone*, 1991
- *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, 1992
- *The Complete Stories*, 1994
- *By The Light of My Father's Smile*, 1998
- *The Way Forward Is with a Broken Heart*, 2000
- *Now Is The Time to Open Your Heart*, 2005
- *Devil's My Enemy*, 2008
- *Everyday Use*, 1973

Poetry

- *Once*, 1968
- *Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems*, 1973
- *Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning*, 1979
- *Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful*, 1985
- *Her Blue Body Everything We Know: Earthling Poems*, 1991
- *Absolute Trust in the Goodness of the Earth*, 2003
- *A Poem Traveled Down My Arm: Poems And Drawings*, 2003
- *Collected Poems*, 2005
- *Hard Times Require Furious Dancing: New Poems*

Non-fiction books

- *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, 1983
- *Living by the Word*, 1988
- *Warrior Marks*, 1993
- *The Same River Twice: Honoring the Difficult*, 1996
- *Anything We Love Can Be Saved: A Writer's Activism*, 1997
- *Go Girl!: The Black Woman's Book of Travel and Adventure*, 1997
- *Pema Chodron and Alice Walker in Conversation*, 1999
- *Sent By Earth: A Message from the Grandmother Spirit After the Bombing of the World Trade Center and Pentagon*, 2001
- *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For*, 2006
- *Overcoming Speechlessness*, 2010
- *Chicken Chronicles, A Memoir*, 2011

Honours

- Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for *The Color Purple*, 1983
- National Book Award, 1983
- O. Henry Award for 'Kindred Spirits', 1985

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Check Your Progress

1. Which was Alice Walker's first published book?
2. What is the significance of the collection *Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems* (1973)?
3. Name the biography that Walker composed.
4. Which were the honours Alice Walker was awarded with as the first black woman?
5. Which award did Walker receive for *Kindred Spirits*?

4.3 THE COLOR PURPLE

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The Color Purple was Alice Walker's third novel. It was published in the year 1982. The novel was not just a financial success but also a critical one. It came to be considered a milestone in Walker's creative journey. In addition to praise, the novel invited a lot of criticism for dealing with controversial and unorthodox themes. Many critics were opposed to her manner of portraying black men, which was thought to be negative. The novel was made into a film in 1985 directed by Steven Spielberg. While the movie brought more fame, Walker was criticized for improper portrayal of men in her novel.

On the other hand, she was appreciated for her real depiction of black women. The use of the epistolary technique was welcomed by critics. Walker's ability to incorporate the language of the black folks also caught the attention of the critics. Walker's involvement during her early days in the civil rights activities that took place during the 1960s, finds resonance in the novel.

In *The Color Purple*, as also found in her other works, Walker focuses on the issue of dual repression faced by black women in the American context. Walker argues that black women are marginalized by the white community, and also face discrimination from black males. The civil rights movement affected Walker's critical perception regarding racial problems at home, simultaneously drawing her attention towards the African continent. During the 1960s, an extraordinary interest in ethnic and racial tradition brought many African Americans to investigate their origins in Africa. The central theme of *The Color Purple* identifies Walker's desire to reflect a positive side of life, even when faced with harsh conditions. Her central character emerges as a winner by fighting adverse situations and characters. Even the other significant theme of the good overpowering evil is undoubtedly another reason for the book's great success.

Characters

- **Celie** – The poor, illiterate black woman and also the protagonist and narrator of the novel
- **Nettie** – Celie's younger sister who is prettier than her. She moves to Africa to preach and faithfully writes letters to Celie for decades
- **Alphonso** – He is Celie and Nettie's stepfather, who the sisters think is their real father. He remains an abuser till the end
- **Mr. Johnson/ Albert** – Celie's husband who abuses her for years but gets transformed at the end and seeks friendship
- **Shug Avery** – A beautiful blues singer who becomes Celie's friend and then her lover. She nurtures Celie physically, emotionally and spiritually.
- **Eleanor Jane** – The mayor's daughter who develops a strong attachment to Sofia who works as a maid in their house.
- **Germaine** – The younger man who manages to win Shug's heart
- **Harpo** – Celie's oldest stepson who owns the local juke joint
- **Miss Millie** – The mayor's racist wife

- **Kate** – Mr. Johnson's sister who insists that Celie should stand up for herself
- **Olivia** – Celie's daughter
- **Adam** – Celie's son
- **Sofia** – Harpo's wife. She is headstrong and independent
- **Squeak** – The nickname of Mary Agnes, Harpo's girlfriend
- **Tashi** – The girl from Olinka village who finally marries Adam, Celie's son

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4.3.1 Critical Commentary

Letters 1-10

The letter-writing structure of *The Color Purple* gives the impression of a daily diary, since Celie tells her narrative through confidential messages drafted to God. Therefore, Celie narrates her life's experiences with honesty. As a financially backward African-American woman of the countryside of Georgia and being a sufferer of domestic violence, Celie is voiceless and left alone in society. However, Celie's messages empower her to shatter confidentially the voicelessness that is usually inflicted upon her.

Celie's confessional narrative reminds one of the African-American slave narratives which took shape during the nineteenth century. These former slave narratives, which took the form of a piece of music or a rhythmical motion, a form of storytelling or other artistic creations, ruptured the muteness inflicted on the black community. Though dissimilar from Celie's messages, these slave narratives were engaged in symbols, icons, comedy, and other techniques to obscure their accurate intent. Slaves took these steps to stop the masters from understanding the slaves' skills to convey, articulate, and consider their discontent, but Celie takes no such defensive measures. Celie's messages, though absolutely candid and confessional, are at times difficult to interpret because Celie's skills to narrate her life experiences are highly limited. When Celie's cursing mother requests who fathered Celie's baby, Celie recollecting Alphonso's order to remain silent, declares the baby is God's because she has no clue what other explanation could be given. Similarly, Celie does not know what to narrate about her mother's death, or about her violent life, or her stolen babies. Celie understands how to state the issues plainly, but often she does not understand how to interpret them. Despite the mishandlings she endures, Celie has little knowledge of injustice and expresses little or no anger.

Walker's use of Celie's own voice, even though underdeveloped, allows Walker to narrate the past lives of black women in the countryside of the South in a sensitive and practical way. Unlike a historian's consideration, which can be protecting and overly analytical, Celie's messages offer a strong first-person narrative of the tales of racism and sexism. Celie's lucid narrative introduces us to her isolated world with expression that uncovers both painful and detached numbness: 'My momma dead. She died screaming and cussing. She screamed at me. She cussed at me.'

Like her voice, Celie's trust is significant but underdeveloped. Celie relies thoroughly on God as her listener and source of empowerment, but she at times forgets the distinction between God's agency and that of Alphonso. She confides that God, and not Alphonso, murdered her baby, and she does not make any association with the injustice she is familiar with in her life, and the power of God to overturn or stop this injustice.

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In this part, Walker starts to evolve the concept that a person can attain power by reinforcing his/her own voice. The Celie we have seen so far is absolutely devoid of power. She is vitally an object for others. She is very passive in her interactions, particularly those with men. However, Celie displays she understands that others perceive her as a powerless object when she confides to Sofia that she is envious of her aggressive, self-defensive personality. When Kate tells Mr. Johnson that Celie desires a new apparel, Celie is shown to know that Mr. Johnson conceives of her as hardly anything more than dirt, saying that when he examines her, it's like he's looking at the soil, seeking to work out if it desires anything.

Initially, Celie's recommendations that Harpo should abuse Sofia appears to be unlike her, but we soon realize that it is an outcome of the cyclical environment of misuse and oppression she has been exposed to. When Harpo inquires Celie for recommendations, Celie is granted an uncommon exercise to take part in the command and misuse of a woman other than herself. In her flaw and agony, Celie seizes this scope, but she rapidly recognizes that it comprises a 'sin against Sofia's spirit'. Celie explains her own behaviour with astonishing sophistication, revealing and confessing to Sofia that she gave those recommendations because she is envious of the way Sofia battles back when confronted with abuse.

Sofia's observation that Celie has tight-knit connections with her five powerful sisters suggests that deep bonding amidst women can prove mighty weapons to battle sexism and abuse. Celie first observes Sofia's assertiveness and autonomy when Sofia encounters Mr. Johnson and withstands his endeavours to command her. Sofia refutes Mr. Johnson's allegation that she has problems and thus will land up on the streets. Sofia denies despairing at her own pregnancy and rejects Mr. Johnson's acts to make her miserable. Likewise, Sofia's denial to stop communicating when Mr. Johnson or Harpo go into the room illustrates that she does not consider her persona as a woman to be taken lightly just because of her dependence on men. Sofia's defiance of the culture of patriarchy astonishes Celie.

Walker contends that mastering one's own tale and finding somebody to hear and reply to it are vital steps in the direction of self-empowerment and autonomy. Celie's need for voice becomes more evident in this part, as Nettie observes that viewing Celie with Mr. Johnson and his young children is like 'seeing [Celie] buried'. Nettie is the first woman who insists Celie to retaliate. Celie's interpretation to Kate that she does not desire to battle because it is too perilous appears laid-back and self-defeating, but Celie is right—there are important, probably even mortal hazards inherent in resistance. Walker discovers this tug and pulls between security and hazard all through the novel.

Celie is furthermore reluctant to oppose because she needs the devices she desires to battle back successfully—namely, an essence of self and a proficiency to conceive and articulate her own story. Nettie endeavours to assist, involved constructing Celie's sense of self by conveying to Celie Mr. Johnson's praises, which Celie admits boost her self-image. Soon after, Celie starts her first efforts at self-expression when she intends to express gratitude to Kate for buying her a new dress. She becomes discouraged and flushed, incapable to find the words. Celie's struggled advances to assert her own sentiments and her admission that she feels she warrants more than she has are significant first steps in Celie's method of empowerment. Yet

simultaneously, Celie's incompetence to express her sentiments of thankfulness to Kate, illustrates the deepness of Celie's need of self-understanding.

Alice Walker

Celie has problem characterizing, understanding and talking about herself because, as she confesses to God, she has fallen completely numb in the face of adversity. She confesses that to get over, she imagines she is a tree. Rather than cope strongly with adversity, Celie has discovered it simpler and less troublesome to become wooden—to stay stone-faced and unthinking instead of trying to contemplate, understand, or narrate.

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Letters 22-33

Here, as in the earlier segment, Celie is not able to correspond what she feels with what she says. When Shug comes and wants care, Celie feels ecstatic, but she expresses nothing because she is not aware of anything and because she feels she is not in a position to speak. Celie has been voiceless for so long that she has adapted herself to believe of having no voice of her own. Her natural response is to declare nothing.

However, Celie soon realizes that her awareness of herself varies from the way other people suppose her to be. Reacting on the way she is and on people like her, Celie expresses, 'I might as well be under the table, for all they care. I hate the way I look, I hate the way I'm dress.' These reflections of self-awareness represent the baby step that Celie takes as she progresses towards empowerment.

As her understanding of self resurfaces, Celie gradually understands the inherent gaps and shortcomings in the men who try to dominate her. She also learns to counter her oppressors in an assertive manner. Analysing Mr. Johnson, Celie critically points out that he has a frail chin and wears unwashed clothes. Losing her temper at Mr. Johnson's father for his heartless remarks about Shug, Celie retaliates secretly but assertively. She plans spitting in the aged man's drinking water and menaces to put Shug's urine in his cup whenever he pays them a visit next. Celie in addition, displays her confident self when Harpo requires her suggestions regarding Sofia. Surprisingly here, Celie finds exact remarks to verbalize her accurate emotions, and advises Harpo that causing pain to Sofia is not the right way to approach things.

Walker's thought of the mixed, multilayered natural world of closeness between women arises through Celie and Shug's relationship. Alice Walker proposes sexuality and sexual preference as a parameter of possibilities and not just an alternative to two contradictory choices. Thus, like competition, sexuality can be difficult to explain, and may turn out to be more multifaceted than a conservative understanding of just heterosexuality or homosexuality. Celie's emotions for Shug have sexual undertones, but it also has its foundation on fellowship, gratefulness, solidarity, and liking. Celie does feel sexually excited on seeing Shug unclothed. But it is as sacred as her emotions of maternal tenderness that she nurtured for Shug as Celie had confessed to God when explaining how she interns Shug to bring her back to health.

Letters 34-43

Continuing with the tendency glimpsed in her preceding notes, Celie starts to take more serious approach in understanding herself and the environment she is part of. When Celie informs Shug that Mr. Johnson abuses her for 'being me and not you,' she illustrates that her self-analysis is progressively turning intense and critical.

One motivation that can be a cause for Celie's critical self-assessment is the sexual awareness that she gathers as she gets familiar with Shug's education. Shug

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affirms Celie is still innocent and rechristens her as Miss Celie, providing Celie a new persona both metaphorically and literally. Shug's identification that Celie is a virgin and the new title Shug bestows on Celie are significant steps towards Celie's empowerment. And in her process of narrating her story, it gives a boost to her self-esteem.

Shug's rechristening of Celie defies the traditional concept of the issue of virginity. Shug reconstructs the notion of virginity in her own way. According to her, virginity is not lost when a man and woman develops a physical relation rather it is lost when a woman decides to indulge in pleasure of sex and finds it emotionally and physically appealing. By reconstructing the definition of virginity, Shug boosts Celie to glimpse life from a different perspective where she should be in command of events. The sudden change of perspective provided by Shug to a woman with two kids and a virgin, points out to a certain desire to unravel the hidden aspects of Celie's life. Shug makes Celie understand that there are alternative ways to live a life than to surrender to the existing social norms. Identification with these thoughts plays a major role in Celie's movement towards liberation.

Yet Sofia's penalty underlines that rebelling against and questioning existing perspectives often demands a lot of sacrifice. Sofia, who is physically sound, has an adoring family and a comfortable life, does not conform to the white society's stereotypical notion of the suppressed coloured woman. Sofia asserts her disinterest to fall prey to the expected stereotypical role by responding to Miss Millie's job prospect with a definite 'Hell no'. However, this refusal leads to Sofia having a cleft skull, broken ribs, a body marked with bruises, and twelve years of servitude. Similarly, when Squeak opposes the action taking place by attempting to free Sofia from jail, she is raped. It is clear from the narration that whereas Walker views challenging the irrational orthodox outlooks as vital, she does not unnecessarily desire to romanticise the pains and paint a rosy picture as if it is devoid of agony or consequences.

Fortunately, Sofia and Squeak are not defeated by misfortunes. For Walker, the most important aspect of triumph is the power to narrate one's own life, and both Sofia and Squeak retain their voices. Sofia continues with her opposition even when she is made to serve Miss Millie's maid. Similarly, when Harpo endeavours to inform others of the incident of Squeak's rape, Squeak cuts off him, nudging him to keep the knowledge to himself because she intends to tell her story her own way. Just as Celie's new name endows her with the power to reinterpret her surroundings, Squeak's renaming unleashes her talent that was long buried within her. She starts singing.

Letters 44-60

After hearing Celie's narration, Shug makes Celie express herself emotionally. When Celie eventually articulates the difficult times she has survived, she does not respond like 'wood,' rather she sheds tears when she understands the unhappiness of her own history. Even though Celie's latest life is a miserable one, it is way better than her previous life because of her increasing sexual and emotional connection with Shug. Celie's self-esteem evolved as an outcome of her observation and discovery through Shug. Shug represents everything that Celie is not. Through Shug's perspective, Celie sees the likeness of her own suffering. Gradually, Celie's and Shug's influence on each other soon turns reciprocal. They start imitating each other. Celie's nurturing qualities are adopted by Shug while Celie becomes assertive.

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This connection between Celie and Shug is centralized around the concept of storytelling. Innumerable times Celie informs how much she and Shug converse with each other. Their strong connection is a significant step which is radically different from Celie's previous silence. Nettie's communications furthermore foreground a narrative that was buried by silence. In discovering the notes, Celie revives Nettie's interred voice and starts to feel liberated. However, only with Shug's assistance Celie could decipher the meaning and the disconnected aspects of her life that she was unable to understand so far. The news of Nettie being alive has a positive impact on Celie. She gets exposed to the oppression and suppression that exists outside her life, in the continent of Africa.

Nettie's notes furthermore informs Celie of the larger world one is part of. As of now *The Color Purple* was limited to exploring the lives of a few people residing in a little village in country of Georgia. Nettie's notes not only brings Celie out of her closed world but also relates her personal grief with the general suppression and exploitation that one comes across in rest of the African countries.

Another significant component of Nettie's exposure was her meeting with the liberated blacks who are economically well placed in the Harlem district of New York. The concept of economically prosperous and free blacks is mostly unheard of in the southern world, especially for coloured women like Nettie and Celie, who are used only to living a doubly colonized life both with their white masters as well as their coloured male counterparts. We realize that Nettie's knowledge of liberated blacks has made her more confident. Even though initially Celie does not understand this but the Harlem empowerment news too has a positive impact on her individuality and her subconscious mind.

Letters 61-69

Every now and then in *The Color Purple*, Walker reminds the readers that storytelling and communicating are vital to the understanding of self. We have glimpsed difficulties in the novel due to improper/lack of communication arising between Celie and Alphonso; between Celie and Mr. Johnson; amidst Nettie, Samuel, and Corrine; and between Celie and Nettie. As the story progresses, we see some of these distances are mended as narrative of some kind or the other takes place. One comes across communication in various forms. Celie discovers Nettie's notes, Samuel informs about his young children to Nettie, and Celie exchanges this narrative with Alphonso, discovering in the process the reality of her own life and the history of her family. Apart from highlighting these unsuccessful communications which was central to the above mentioned relationships, Walker points out towards larger communication difficulties in the world which nearly remains unaddressed. She points to the more serious problems of unsuccessful association between men and women; between Americans of black and white origin, between coloured people in America and Africans, and between Africans and European colonizers.

Celie seems to grow more independent with the revelation of her family history. She stops depending on God for emotional and moral support. In her last letter, she tells God 'You must be asleep'. Instead she starts addressing letters to Nettie. Nettie also has turned into a different being. She has become more articulate. She has developed a strong intellectual faculty which her life as missionary has bestowed on her. Nettie is assertive in her dissatisfaction over native Africans self-centeredness and sexist attitude. By addressing the plights of women in Olinka community Walker

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highlights a more serious problem. Though the people of Olinka community are suppressed by the white masters (the rubber industry), the community itself is segregated between the oppressor and the oppressed. The internal domination along with Olinka's cold attitude towards the culture of African-American slavery makes the whole notion of oppressor and oppressed very complicated.

Letters 70-82

In this part, Walker presents individual religious conviction as a significant constituent to develop a powerful self. Celie has until now visualized God as someone who is placed in a distance and is probably unconcerned towards her pleadings. For her, God transforms into a white man who is no different from the other men that she has come across and who does not bother to hear the 'poor coloured women.' This concept of God visualized by Celie—and, ironically, by Nettie, Corrine, and Samuel during their missionary philanthropy—is not an exact view. In imagining God as a white man who is not concerned about her, Celie indirectly acknowledges white and male suppression and presumes that her voice can never be heard.

A significant aspect of Celie's empowerment is her new acquired financial independence. Celie's apparel design is a mode of creativity which helps one to express herself. But it also turns into entrepreneurship and paves the way towards self-sufficiency. Celie has taken stitching, conventionally a household chore, and transformed it into an equipment of independence. Walker suggests that such financial self-reliance is vital for women to liberate themselves from dominance. When she gets her family's ancestral house, Celie's life comes to full circle, her self-reliance evolving into a completely independent woman, with her own finance, enterprise, article, and group of friends.

Letters 83-90

Celie's final letter gives us a glimpse of the maturity and growth her character has undergone. By introducing the aspect of writing as a key component in the process of Celie's evolution, Alice Walker underscores the significance of literacy and makes an indirect allusion to African-American slaves who are not allowed to study, to read or compose. They were marginalized by keeping them away from knowledge. Celie and Nettie wield the power of literacy to battle oppression. They managed to survive over the years by writing to each other which was the only way to fight oppression. Even though Celie is comparatively inferior in terms of imagination to her sister, she too learns a lot from her act of writing. In this way, Walker propounds that knowledge and awareness is vital and redeeming for every individual and should not be seen as a barricade creating a hierarchy between the educated and the uneducated.

Though Walker celebrates heterogeneity and individuality in *The Color Purple*, the work finishes with the acknowledgement that not all dissimilarities can be assimilated. Along with the novel's significant conciliation, for example between Celie and Mr. Johnson some issues remain unanswered at the end of the novel. Problems continue to remain between the Olinka community and the rubber company and between Nettie and the traditional Africans. Similarly, Sofia has her doubts that she and Eleanor Jane can truly accept each other. Even Eleanor Jane's gradual sympathy with Sofia's anger is not sufficient to change the cruel past that Sofia has endured.

Walker's wants to highlight that certain differences are really unbridgeable. Though at the outset Walker's outlook may appear rather pessimistic, yet it is significant

to understand that *The Color Purple* is a narrative about successful changes. Though certain issues remain unanswered as the novel comes to an end, we came across the metamorphosis of a deprived, despised woman of colour into an economically successful entrepreneur who takes pleasure in her own sexuality and is surrounded by a supportive and like-minded community.

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The Society and *The Color Purple*

Alice Walker, through her epistolary novel, *The Color Purple*, intends to educate readers on various aspects of the societal problems. This approach to creativity reminds one of the novelist Ishmael Reed. Reed is a coloured American. Reed's works mostly satires, throw light on the existing racial problems and social issues. *The Color Purple* underlines the fact that men are not aware of the requirement and the realities of women. It also deals with the theme of women helping and supporting each other to overcome and survive the problems of life. The kind of female bonding that one comes across in *The Color Purple* is also reflected in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970), the autobiography of Maya Angelou. In her work Angelou celebrates the mother-daughter relationship.

Although no concrete dates/years are provided, we can still identify that the novel is set sometimes in the early part of the twentieth century, sometime between 1910 and 1940. African Americans underwent a lot of economical constraints. But with the emergence of twentieth century, many opportunities were available them to reach the path of success. Many got education, and a lot many migrated from the rural South of America to the developing industrial North. Those who migrated carried their cultural heritage along with them, especially their songs and their stories. By the 1920s the Jazz Age had started taking shape. In this emergent culture, African-American culture and tradition came together to constitute what we call 'The Harlem Renaissance'.

In *The Color Purple* such changes are subtly expressed. The entrepreneurial abilities of Harpo finds shape as he sets up his own juke joint. Moreover, here he employs the already famous blues singer Shug to popularize his shop. Shug's achievement is a reflection of the age in which Celie is composing her letters for we are told she hums Bessie Smith, and wants to wipe off anxiety about the bygone times or the impending years. As we reach towards the end of the novel, the movement of opportunity is unexpected; Celie starts her own business. Celie initiates her business from the same place where her father survived and earned. Thirty years prior to Celie starting up her business, her father's was brought to an abrupt halt by white rivals who were keen to keep him out of race. In this new era, Walker tells us there is no reason to be concerned about Celie's opportunities, and we as readers are sure that Celie will continue to be prosperous.

When Walker's novel came out in 1982, one of the most significant and talked about aspect of the book was the way language was used. Mel Watkins of *The New York Book Review* had written that the novel 'assumes a lyrical cadence of its own... The cumulative effect is a novel that is convincing because of the authenticity of its folk voice.' The language was seminal to Walker's novel. She once recounted that after she finished her novel she sent it to a prominent women's magazine concerned about black women but they rejected the novel explaining that 'black people don't talk like that' (Garrett & McCue, 1990, p. 229). The later success of the novel identifies such statement to be unfounded, because it is Celie's specific voice that identifies her difficult situation and echoes the lives of many African Americans of her time.

Women Bonding

Throughout *The Color Purple*, Walker depicts female bonding as an alternative way for women to build the courage to narrate stories to each other. As a result of this storytelling, the session becomes their weapon to resist suppression and dominance. Bonding between women translates into a form of shelter which is filled with nurturing and caring concerns and helps to recover from aggressive male dominance.

Female relationships are multilayered: sometimes they are motherly, sometimes sisterly. Sometimes they also represented in the form of teacher and pupil. Some of them have strong sexual undertones, and some reflect happy friendships. Sofia asserts that her ability to stand against the wrong doers comes from the support she gains from her sisters. Nettie's closeness with Celie helps her survive her years in the strange and unaccustomed culture of Africa. Samuel highlights the strong bonding that Olinka women share with each other that helps them survive through the polygamous world. Most importantly, Celie's bonding with Shug helps Celie emerge into a stronger being who is self-reliant and independent.

Tradition and Change

The Color Purple presents many characters that come out of the traditionally sanctioned gender defined roles. Sofia is full of strength, Shug never shies away from displaying her sexual desires, and Harpo almost throughout comes up as an insecure person. Under a traditional parameter a man is always expected to be secured, a woman is expected to be weak and less demonstrative of her sexual desires. But these characters bring out those aspects of their gender sanctioned roles which are not stereotypical. This display of gender deviant traits also at times throws light on other aspects of gender roles. For example, we see a strong sexual attraction developing between Celie and Shug despite the fact that they have had men in their lives and are opposite in nature.

Deviation from sanctioned gender roles sometimes creates unexpected situations. Harpo's insecurity regarding his masculine abilities has bearing on his marital life and leads him to make efforts to abuse his wife Sofia in a desperate attempt to prove his manliness. Similarly, Shug's uninhibited display of her sexual powers and her constant challenge to male social world earns her names like being called a tramp. In her novel, Alice Walker tries to underline the multifaceted meaning that is associated with gender and sexuality. They are neither mere words nor do they have a unilinear approach to certain social functions. They are more complicated than they seem on the surface. Walker's novel calls for our attentions to understand the dynamics of male-female, female-female and male-male relation.

In *The Color Purple* sewing plays an important role. It is emblematic of the creative powers of women. If they are capable of channelizing their creative power effectively they can become powerful. Sewing is a traditional form of creativity which women indulge in within their domestic confines. Sofia and Celie reach through a process of peace after their difference of opinion is expressed over Harpo episode, by preparing a quilt. The quilt symbolizes unity within diversity. A quilt is created by putting together various patterns and it is mostly a collaborative effort. It is a process which helps people to be bound together. Like the patchwork one finds in a quilt, as the novel progresses Celie finds herself being surrounded by people who are diverse

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in their approach and thoughts but are closely bound by their family and love for each other.

Alice Walker

Another significant function of sewing is revealed in the novel when Celie starts her own pants-sewing enterprise. With the support from Shug, Celie challenges the perception that sewing is an unimportant aspect of women's labour. She turns this art into a promising, and powerful medium of gaining economic access.

Communication

Alice Walker uses the epistolary mode of narration to highlight her idea of importance of communication. Celie pours out her heart in the letters she addresses to God. Celie perceives God as her audience and supporter even though she is not sure who God is. Her impression of Him as a white man 'don't seem quite right' even to her, yet she continues with the image until Shug insists Celie to visualize God as a different entity—Not just as 'he' but as 'it' a neutral person. But soon her communication with God ceases as she emerges as an independent woman, one with a mind of her own.

Nettie describes her experiences through letters to Celie. For both the sisters, letters are symbolis of power and the act of letter writing empowers them. But their real redemption takes place only when their letters are reciprocated. Though speaking out (through the act of writing) provides a sense of power, it cannot achieve its full potential unless there is someone to share it or listen to it or there is an audience. When Celie fails to reply to Nettie she feels caught up in the maze of life. Celie is the only person she could share her life with and if Celie does not answer then she is completely at loss. Nettie is torn between the disinterested imperialist and the self-centered Olinka villagers. Nettie feels liberated only after she is able to narrate her experience to Celie.

Yet when Shug and Celie are told of the world outside, they feel odd. The information they got from Nettie sounded 'crazy' to them. Communication broadens their scope of knowledge and paves a way for imagining an oppression free future. But what is important here is that the story being set in a small closed community finds itself cut off from the world outside. There is no communication with the world beyond the enclosed confines of the small town. Once the people come across the larger world their ideas change and they are willing to take risks and chances for a better life. Walker universalizes the theme of need to exchange ideas by broadening the location of the events taking place and exposing her characters to the world which exists beyond their cocooned selves.

ACTIVITY

Do you agree that Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* is an example of a woman's novel. Give your views.

DID YOU KNOW

Alice Walker is active in environmental, feminist, and animal rights causes, and has campaigned against female genital mutilation.

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Check Your Progress

- From which village does Tashi hail?
- Who is also addressed as 'Pa'?
- What kind of singer is Shug Avery?
- What does Celie's confessional narrative remind one of?
- Why does Celie recommend Harpo to abuse Sophia?
- What had Celie started to believe in the early part of the narrative?
- Why is Shug's renaming of Celie important?
- Whose notes inform Celie of the world outside?
- Which community did Nettie interact with?
- Why is Celie's final letter important?
- Which tradition does *The Color Purple* have its origin in?
- What does Harpo's insecurity leads to?

4.4 SUMMARY

In this unit, you have learnt that:

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- *The Color Purple* is often seen as a 'woman's novel'. For Walker, women-oriented writings concentrate on African-American women living in twentieth-century America. In such novels, more often than not we encounter women who fight all odds to justify their own and their families' survival.
- In their fragmented communities, these women tend to be motherly characters who wish to protect and secure their families for the sake of their posterity.
- Other prominent authors apart from Toni Morrison who have dealt in this tradition of writing include Zora Neale Hurston and Maya Angelou.
- Their female characters always tend to be subjugated for a long while before they manage to retaliate, fight and learn to survive.
- These characters are often found to be safeguarding the present, so that a healthy future can be ensured, especially while negotiating with the past. For instance, it has often been said that *The Color Purple* deals with the genre of the slave narrative.
- The tradition of slave narratives came into existence when slaves started narrating the stories of their experiences.
- It is believed that around six thousand former slaves narrated their experience during the period of eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.
- One of the often mentioned slave narratives is Frederick Douglass's *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845).
- As in Walker's novel and as apparent in slave narratives, the subjugated position of the speaker is of utmost importance, revealing heart wrenching treatment that had previously been ignored.
- *The Color Purple* like the slave narratives emerges from the rich African oral traditions which include the methods of storytelling and song composing.
- The Africans transported to America nearly always as slaves were barred from communicating in their own mother tongues (just the way Celie's speech was suppressed), so they invented alternative means of conveying themselves, especially through acting and singing.
- Their narratives were believed in the plantation and narratives of their native Africa. These stories continued from generation to generation and soon turned out to form the core of most of African-American storytelling tradition.
- In her process of storytelling, Celie made sure that her life as a black woman living in early twentieth-century America is conveyed and documented for future generations.

4.5 KEY TERMS

- **Slave narrative:** It is a literary form which grew out of the experience of enslaved Africans.

- **Womanism:** A form of feminism focused on the conditions and concerns of black women

4.6 ANSWERS TO 'CHECK YOUR PROGRESS'

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1. Alice Walker's first published work was a book of poems, *Once* (1968).
2. *Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems* was Walker's mouthpiece for identifying the plight of those who struggle against racism and oppression.
3. *Langston Hughes: American Poet* published in 1974, was the biography Walker had composed.
4. Walker was the first black woman to be awarded with Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and National Book Award.
5. Walker received O. Henry Award for 'Kindred Spirits'.
6. Tashi is the girl from Olinka village.
7. Alphonso is also addressed as 'Pa'.
8. Shug Avery is a blues singer.
9. Celie's confessional narrative reminds one of the African-American slave narratives which took shape during the nineteenth century.
10. Celie's recommendation to Harpo to abuse Sophia is an outcome of the cyclical environment of misuse and oppression she has been exposed to.
11. Celie has been voiceless for so long that she has adapted herself to believe of having no voice of her own.
12. Shug's rechristening of Celie is important because it defies the traditional concept of the issue of virginity.
13. Nettie's notes inform Celie's of the larger world, one is part of.
14. Nettie interacted with the Olinka community.
15. Celie's final letter gives us a glimpse of the maturity and growth her character has undergone.
16. *The Color Purple* emerges from the rich African oral traditions which include the methods of storytelling and song composing.
17. Harpo's insecurity regarding his masculine abilities has bearing on his marital life and leads him to make efforts to abuse his wife Sofia in a desperate attempt to prove his manliness.

4.7 QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

Short-Answer Questions

1. How do Nettie's letters differ from those of Celie?
2. Why Sofia was imprisoned?
3. Do you think Celie's letters are like prayers? Why?
4. How does Celie succeed in overcoming her low self-esteem?

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5. How does the death of Celie's mother change Celie's relationship with her family, with herself and with God?
6. The main sub-plot revolves around Nettie in Africa. How does this relate to and impact the main plot of Celie?
7. What is the significance of the act of communication?

Long-Answer Questions

1. In what ways are Nettie and Celie different? In what ways are they similar?
2. What impact does Celie's revelation of her past have on her?
3. Trace the development of Albert's character. How does he change and why?
4. Narrate some instances of racism in the novel.
5. Why is *The Color Purple* a feminist novel?
6. List, analyze and evaluate the various gender crossings in the novel.
7. Write a note on the female bonding as it appears in the novel.
8. Write a note on the representation of society as it appears in *The Color Purple*.

4.8 FURTHER READING

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UNIT 6 SAROJINI NAIDU

Sarojini Naidu

Structure

- 6.0 Introduction
- 6.1 Unit Objectives
- 6.2 Works of Sarojini Naidu
- 6.3 Characteristics and Themes in her Poetry
- 6.4 *Pardah Nashin*
 - 6.4.1 Summary of *Pardah Nashin*
 - 6.4.2 Critical Assessment
 - 6.4.3 Naidu's View on the *Pardah* System in India
- 6.5 *Song of Radha, the Milkmaid*
 - 6.5.1 Summary of the *Song of Radha, the Milkmaid*
 - 6.5.2 Critical Assessment
- 6.6 Summary
- 6.7 Key Terms
- 6.8 Answers to 'Check Your Progress'
- 6.9 Questions and Exercises
- 6.10 Further Reading

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6.0 INTRODUCTION

Sarojini Naidu was born in Hyderabad on 13 February 1879. Her father, Aghornath Chattopadhyay, was a doctor of science from Edinburgh University. He settled in Hyderabad, where he founded the Ahmedabad College. It was later called the Nizam's College. Her mother, Barada Sundari Devi, was a Bengali poetess. After completing her matriculation from the University of Madras, Naidu continued her education in England, first at King's College London and later at Girton College, Cambridge. It was while studying here that she met Edmund Gosse, who convinced her to stick to Indian themes in her poetry. She followed this advice and depicted contemporary Indian life and events in her poetry. She was proficient in Urdu, Telugu, English, Bengali and Persian.

While in England, she met her future husband Govindarajulu Naidu, who was a non-Brahmin doctor. They married, when she was 19 years old. Even though it was an intercaste marriage, they did not face any opposition; her father approved of the match and it was a happy marriage. They had five children Jayasurya, Padmaja, Randheer, Nilawar and Leelamani.

The partition of Bengal in 1905 inspired her to join the Indian National movement. Her interaction with luminaries like Tagore, Gokhale, Jinnah, Gandhi and Nehru, honed her political beliefs and increased her political activism. She traversed the length and breadth of the country, talking about social welfare, women empowerment and nationalism. In fact, the years from 1915 to 1918 can be seen as her activist years. During these years, she successfully garnered the support of Indian women and was instrumental in bringing them out of their homes to participate in the freedom movement in any capacity that they could. She also helped to establish the Women's Indian Association (WIA) in 1917. Her work was recognized by the British government, which awarded her the *hind kesari* medal for her work. She also went to jail along with other leaders like Gandhi and Nehru during the Civil Disobedience and the Quit India Movement.

Sarojini Naidu's accomplishments are legendary. She was one of the framers of the Indian Constitution. She was also the first Indian woman to become the President of the Indian National Congress, as well as the first female governor of Uttar Pradesh. She died in her sleep on 2 March 1949.

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Sarojini Naidu plays an important role in the history of Indian literatures in English. When she first began writing poetry, there were many poets in India, who were imitating their British idols. As a result, the late 19th and early 20th century is replete with an imitation of the romantic poetry, in both form and matter. The situation was so dire that the British despaired of ever encountering a native voice that elaborated the Indian experience in an Indian lingo using native symbols and images. Toru Dutt was the first one to do this. She was influenced by the Puranas and the culture of ancient India. She interpreted Indian life in front of the Western world by recapturing the legendary past of India in her verses.

Sarojini Naidu followed her footsteps. Her poems are rooted in India myth, legends and folklore. Her poetry can be regarded as a mirror of India. She portrays the customs, traditions, festivals, myths and legends, men and women, flora and fauna, landscape and skyline of India through her poems. It was this aspect of her poetry that prompted Edmund Gosse to praise her poetry in the introduction to *The Bird of Time*. In it he wrote: 'What we wished to receive was not a rechauffe of Anglo-Saxon sentiment in an Anglo-Saxon setting, but some revelation of the heart of India, some sincere penetrating analysis of native passion, of the principles of antique religion and of such mysterious intimations as stirred the soul of the East long before the West had begun to dream that it had a soul.' The fact that this is the case with Sarojini Naidu's poetry is further borne by A. A. Ansari's praise. According to him, the most characteristic feature of Sarojini Naidu's poetry is its lyrical wealth and the preponderance of a purely Indian character.

This unit will, hence, look at the works of Naidu with special emphasis on *Pardah Nashin* and *Song of Radha*.

6.1 UNIT OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- List the works of Sarojini Naidu
- Summarize the characteristics and themes in her poetry
- Interpret the theme of *Pardah Nashin*
- Interpret the theme of the *Song of Radha*

6.2 WORKS OF SAROJINI NAIDU

She was a child prodigy and began writing at the age of 12. *Maher Muneer*, her first play impressed the Nawab of Hyderabad. It was written in Persian and is indicative of the wide influences that can be seen in her work. She was given the sobriquet 'The Nightingale of India' for her poetic work. In recognition of her work on women's issues her birthday is celebrated as Women's Day in India. Her contribution to the field of Indian poetry cannot be doubted. This reputation was cemented when *The Golden Threshold* was published in 1905 and earned her the title 'Bul Bule Hind.'



Fig. 6.1 Sarojini Naidu

She was a virtuoso of English metrical forms and her poetry is replete with romantic imagery. A look at her work reveals her growth as a poetess. She began writing poetry influenced by the British models. In her early work she used English metrical forms and Western themes and images. It was Edmund Gosse who read her work, realized her potential and advised her to incorporate Indian subjects and themes into her work. *The Golden Threshold*, her first collection of poems was published in 1905. The book combines traditional poetic forms with images of Indian life. This book was extremely successful and readers adored her deft handling of English as well as her representation of Indian life. Her second volume *The Bird of Time* (1912), deals with the issues of death and grief. Some poems in this volume also give voice to her patriotic and religious beliefs. Gosse, in the foreword of the volume praised Naidu for her skill in exploring complex issues in a delicate romantic language. The dominant note in *The Broken Wing* (1917) is patriotic and she focuses exclusively on the description of Indian culture. This volume contains some of her best poems and was the last volume published in her lifetime. These three volumes occupy a place of eminence in the history of Indo-Anglian poetry. In 1918 *Feast of Youth* was published. Later, *The Magic Tree*, *The Wizard Mask* and *A Treasury of Poems* also came out. *The Sceptered Flute: Songs of India* (1937) was a collection of the first three volumes of her poetry. *The Feather of the Dawn* (1961) published posthumously, contained poems written in 1927 by Naidu.

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Works

- *The Golden Threshold*, 1905
- *The Bird of Time: Songs of Life, Death & the Spring*, 1912
- *The Broken Wing: Songs of Love, Death and the Spring*, 1917
- *Muhammad Jinnah: An Ambassador of Unity*, 1916
- *The Sceptred Flute: Songs of India*, 1943
- *The Feather of the Dawn*, 1961
- *The Indian Weavers*, 1971

Famous Poems

- *Damayante to Nala in the Hour of Exile*
- *Ecstasy*
- *Indian Dancers*
- *The Indian*
- *Indian Love-Song*
- *Indian Weavers*
- *In Salutation to the Eternal Peace*
- *In the Forest*
- *In the Bazaars of Hyderabad*
- *Leili*
- *Nightfall in the City of Hyderabad*
- *Palanquin Bearers*
- *The Pardah Nashin*
- *Past and Future*
- *The Queen's Rival*
- *The Royal Tombs of Golconda*
- *The Snake-Charmer*
- *Song of a Dream*
- *Song of Radha, the milkmaid*
- *The Soul's Prayer*
- *Suttee*
- *To a Buddha Seated on a Lotus*
- *To the God of Pain*
- *Wandering Singers*
- *Street Cries*
- *Alabaster*
- *Autumn Song*
- *Bangle Sellers*
- *The Coromandel Fishers*
- *To youth*
- *The Festival of Memory*

While Sarojini Naidu worked for the overall uplift of Indian women, her approach was not confrontational. She was not working along the lines of Western feminists when they campaigned for 'emancipation.' Instead her aim was to generate a sense of harmony between the two sexes so that they would co-operate and work together for freedom and progress. She worked on the need for education for women and also protested against social practices that led to discrimination against women. She argued that it was imperative to equip women with skills and to free them from the burden of outmoded thoughts. In the Calcutta Session of the Indian, National Congress in 1917, she declared: 'Womanhood of India stands by you today. When your hour strikes, when you need torchbearers in the darkness, standard bearers to uphold your honour... the womanhood of India will be with you as holders of your banner, sustainers of your strength.' She linked the woman's movement with the national struggle.

It was under her initiative that the Patna session of the Women's Conference campaigned against *pardah*. Gandhi inaugurated the campaign and exhorted the women of India to discard the veil. Her poem '*Pardah Nashin*' can be seen in this light. While critics have seen the poem as a glorification of the sheltered life led by women of the royal family in Hyderabad, this is a misreading of the poem. The poem is, in fact, an indictment of the *pardah* system.

Sarojini Naidu gave a systematic and organized form to the women's movement in India. She also helped Indian women realize the intimate connection between their own progress and the nation's progress towards political and economic freedom. She stressed that women had an important role in the national life through their patient service and their aptitude for reconciling divergent interests and attitudes. She also encouraged women of the higher classes to go out of their comfort zones and take the women's movement to the villages and the masses. She dealt with various issues concerning women's issues: franchise, seclusion, economic security, political representation, right to divorces, and the importance of women in the country's cultural progress. She was convinced that instead of looking to the West for inspiration Indian women should look at their own heritage for inspiration. She praised the ancient Indian concept of ideal woman in the Asian Relations Conference in 1947. *The Statesman* took her to task for it in an editorial. It charged the poetess for ignoring the ugly side of the picture and presenting a highly idealized and romantic image of women in ancient India. However, this is a misreading since through the poem she is trying to suggest the detrimental effect of preventing women from interacting with the world around them.

Before we make assessment of her poetry, especially with regard to the representation of women it is important to remember that her images are steeped in Indian ethos. Therefore, the women in her poetry are quintessentially Indian in their beliefs and behaviour. This does not mean that Sarojini Naidu thinks that there is no room for improvement. Instead even as she shows the 'Indian' experience she steadfastly refuses to romanticize it. She looks at the experiences of women across class and religious lines and realizes that all of them suffer from the same limitations and constrictions. Her poetry can, therefore, be seen as the manifesto of the direction she wants the women's movement in India to take. She wants it to address specific Indian problems in a very Indian way. The fact that such an approach is necessary is evident from the women represented through the poems '*Song of Radha*' and '*Pardha Nashin*.' In the former women can find a place of their own only in the throes of a religious ecstasy. And even then this has to be forced from a begrudging society. The

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argument coming from patriarchal society is that women's actions and roles are controlled in all spheres. This idea is repeated again in the second poem. Women's minds need to be freed. The comfort their physical bodies are in becomes irrelevant in the face of mental slavery. Considering the fact that at the time these poems were written the nation was involved in the freedom struggle her agenda becomes even more important. It will be impossible to create a truly free and independent India if its women continue to be enslaved by outdated ideologies. Therefore, we can see these poems as her clarion call for the intellectual and spiritual freedom for Indian women.

6.3 CHARACTERISTICS AND THEMES IN HER POETRY

Sarojini Naidu earned the sobriquet 'Nightingale of India' (Bharat Kokila). This was not without merit. Her poems were praised for having an 'Indian soul' even though she used the English language to pen her thoughts. A characteristic feature of her poetry is that even though the words are English the soul of her poems is very Indian. They project an Indian ethos in the imagery, sound, rhythm and ideology. She was a gifted poetess whose work reflects her keen sensibility and rich imagination. Her poetry is replete with metaphors and similes which are drawn primarily from the natural world around her. At the same time these similes and metaphors are also drawn from the rhythms of life in the Indian landscape and reveal her familiarity and appreciation for the same. She also draws her images from folklore, myth and legend. Her images are unquestionably delicate, sensuous and romantic.

However, it must be remembered that she is not blind to the faults and drawbacks of her country and its culture. Her poetry reflects her involvement with Indian life. She said about herself:

The lyric child had grown into the lyric woman. All the instincts of her awakening womanhood for the intoxication of love and the joy of life were deeply interfused with the more urgent need of the poet's soul. For a perfect sympathy with its incommunicable vision its subtle and inexpressible thoughts.

There is a psychological element in her poetry. Sarojini Naidu explores the deeper recesses of the mind in her poems. A look at her work reveals the poetess's acknowledgement of the fact that sometimes the subconscious mind overrules the conscious.

The poetess uses symbols to convey a sense of irony and a sensuousness that is very unique to her and is indicative of her ability to tap into the 'Indianness' of her readers. She also uses symbols and allegory to present her thoughts, feelings and mystical visions. For example, the figure of Radha is indicative of the poetess's scorn of people who consider faith a matter of following customs and going through the motions. At the same time her joy at the world around her and the physical pleasure her friends take in the dance are indicative of her understanding and appreciation of the basic sensuousness of her countrymen. In fact, she uses words to create sensuous images in her poetry.

There is a pictorial quality to her poetry and she greatly resembles D. G. Rossetti in this. She focuses on all senses—sight, sound, smell, taste and touch—in her poetry and in doing so brings India and her very Indian scenes to life on the page.

Lyricism is another marked characteristic of her poetry. Her lyrics are full of music, charm and fascination. Though there is an undercurrent of melancholy and

Check Your Progress

1. Which was the first play written by Sarojini Naidu?
2. Which was her first collection of poems and when was it published?
3. What is the dominant note in her poem, *The Broken Wing*?

pessimism in her work, the poems are nevertheless forward-looking and anticipate the soul's union with the eternal and the infinite. S. Z. H. Abidi remarks:

A study of Sarojini Naidu's poetry is a delightful affair. She is a poet of colour and melody and beauty while her poems, one is bound to be deeply involved in her aesthetic response to things.

Her poetry reveals the influence of Persian poetry with its dominant theme of love. Hafiz, Khayyam and Rumi influenced her greatly.

She was influenced by romantic poets Shelley and Keats. Others like Masfield, Yeats and Tagore were also influential figures for her art. Persian artists like Omar Khayyam also influenced her. Since her early years were spent in the Hyderabad it is not surprising that Muslim influences can be seen in her poetry. Another reason is the fact that a large part of her adult life was spent in espousing the cause of Hindu-Muslim unity since she believed that the country could progress only when the two communities shed their suspicions and worked together.

A salient feature of her poetry is the freshness of the imagination which transforms common objects from the world of nature as well as the human world into highly suggestive and imaginative images. It is the sensuous nature of her imagery that has prompted people to compare her to Keats. Naidu's poetry is exceptional also because these sensual images are extremely picturesque. Her descriptive prowess is so remarkable that she succeeds in painting pictures through her words. Her most memorable lines are those wherein she presents beautiful and graphic pictures by fusing together several visual impressions. She combines concrete and abstract images in her poetry to create a composite of meanings. However these images are evocative only for those readers who still have some feelings for aspects of Indian life and are connected to their roots.

Naidu uses folk tales and themes in her poetry. She invests these with allegory and symbolism. Her images are pictorial, visual, vivid and graphic. Her command over the English language is reflected in her metrical dexterity. The central tone of her poems is joyful and optimistic. It would not be wrong to say that despite the sadness and sorrow she refers to, in the poems, she is not a poetess of sorrow or pessimism. This is so because she believes that a life fully lived is one where the individual has experienced a wide gamut of emotions; and these include the sorrowful and tragic. For her life and death are not adversarial but are instead two aspects of a single reality. Her poetry leads us out of the murky atmosphere of doubt and gloom into the clear fresh area of life's elemental experience and perennial youthfulness. Life for her is not an obsession but possession, not an experiment but an adventure. Life for her is both a mystery to be adored and a glory to be celebrated. Death to her is not an extinction of life but a gateway to new life.

Naidu was a poetess of great technical skill, sensibility and imagination. Her imagery is impressive, impressionistic, varied and sublime. She draws from a variety of sources; her experiences as a woman, life in India around her, her Western influences, the world of nature, folklore and other sources like Persian and other literatures. Since her formative years were spent in Hyderabad her work also reveals an understanding of Muslim life, culture and the Islamic world in general. Later in life when she became involved in women's issues and the freedom movement, this knowledge stood her in good stead. It sensitized her to the cultural and emotional beliefs of the Muslims in India and at the same time helped her understand how some of these beliefs were hindering the development of the community, especially its

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women. Seen in the backdrop of Naidu's personal belief that it was important that women be educated and free to create an open and liberal nation, her poems dealing with the experiences of Muslim women in India can be seen in a new light. A salient feature of her poetry is its freshness of imagination which transforms even the commonest of experiences into profound ones. Moreover, she expresses these incidents in an extremely sensuous imagery which is reflective of the Indian ethos. This sensuousness of imagery coupled with her ability to create vivid graphic images has sealed her place as one of the premium poetess in Indian literature. It is in the combination of the sensuality and vividness of imagery that she succeeds in projecting aspects of India. She invests the folk theme with richness of allegory and symbolism.

Themes

An aversion to tyranny, overthrow of the tyrant and a love of liberty and the regeneration of India through independence are the major themes of her poems. Sarojini Naidu believed that the Supreme Being is reflected in all creatures. Therefore, she tries to find ameliorative characteristics in the most reprehensible of them. Her poetry was purely Indian in themes and background. She sang in full-throated ease about the festivals, occupations and life of the people of India. Lyricism, symbolism, imagery, mysticism and native fervor are the remarkable qualities of her poetry. Naidu dealt with themes of nature, folk life, love, life and death and mysticism.

Patriotism

Gopal Krishna Gokhale was among the first to realize Naidu's talent and skill. He encouraged her to compose patriotic songs. He convinced her that through her representation of images of the typical Indian life and beliefs she could give immediacy to the cause of independence in the minds of the populace. Naidu was successful in doing so and a theme of belief in the nation and a confidence that it will one day be free to decide and govern its own destiny runs through her poems. There is a faith in the motherland and a desire to serve, protect and help her prosper in the poems. Poems addressed to Gandhi and his vision of the freedom movement and a free India fall under this category.

A salient feature of these poems is her ardent wish that her countrymen rise above the narrow concern of caste and creed to work in a united manner to achieve freedom. She was an idealist and her poems are full of idealistic notes and visions.

States of being

Her poems also deal with the various stages of human existence from childhood, youth to old age and death. Her poems point to the inevitability of the passage of time and death. In her poems based around these theme, she explores the various ways one can live one's life and comes to the conclusion that since death, sorrow and decay are certain all one can do is do one's duty. In these poems she also highlights the fact that change is the law of existence to which we are all subject irrespective of the class, caste or religion we may belong to. In other words these poems also highlight the essential similarity underneath surface difference. This aspect of her poetry is important if we consider the fact that as the nation neared Independence dissonance in the political discourse became prominent and almost threatened the freedom movement.

Religious faith

Her poetry is replete with figures associated with matters of faith. The figure of Radha figures prominently in her poetry. She also uses the figure of Gautam Buddha to suggest the need for meditation to attain eternal peace of mind. Meditation helps the individual in the search for truth. It enables the individual to rise above the evils and ills of a worldly existence and achieve true transcendence. The image of Radha also implies a state of existence wherein the individual rises above the travails of mere existence to attain a true knowledge of himself and the world around him. Since these characters figure prominently in the cultural, historical, philosophical and mental landscape of the country and its people; through their use she taps into a latent desire of her countrymen to accept the inevitability of facing both joys and sorrows in their life and yet to remain unaffected by them. In her poems dealing with these themes she reflects desire for love, truth and spiritual gain. She has no interest in worldly delights. It is her sublime nature that she wishes to see all satisfied.

Love

Naidu views love more than just a physical state; for her it is a sublime and spiritual state as well. According to her true love may begin from the awareness of the physical but it quickly transcends this when the lovers attempt to achieve a spiritual state of union. Her love poems also reveal her mysticism. They reveal the love of the human soul for the divine. In her poetry women are projected as sacred beloveds who are willing to surrender before their lovers.

The lover and the beloved are the two persons with one soul. She does not undermine the importance of the physical between lovers since it is the physical which leads to spiritual and intellectual fulfillment. The passionate mutual love breaks down the hard walls of the ego and produces a new being composed of two-in-one.

Women

They form a major element of her poetry. Even when she talks of the common man and woman she is sensitive to the loneliness and hopelessness that women face in the country. In her poetry she presents the woman's point of view and demands freedom for woman. In her poems she represents women from different sects dancing, enjoying and involved in the thoughts of their lovers. The aim is to universalize the female experience across class, caste and religious lines. Sarojini's poems breathe an Indian air with particular light on women and their glory. They are mellifluous and catching and disclose an image of ideal woman of Ancient times.

She wants to give proper importance to woman as a human being instead of being treated like an animal. In view of the reprehensible conditions women are forced to live in her love poetry becomes even more important. True love liberates and is the antidote to loneliness and sorrow. Therefore her representation of the union of physical and spiritual desire can also be seen as a desire to renegotiate gender relations in the new country that was being born during the struggle for independence.

Mysticism

The tone of mysticism is very strong in her poetry. This mysticism is more of a mood rather than a systemized philosophy of life. It is a tendency of religious feeling marked by an effort to attain to direct and immediate communion with God. Commenting on

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this aspect of her poetry Rajyalakshmi observed: 'She is goaded by a hunger for the eternal, the unknown and the infinite and seeks, poetically rather than metaphysically, to relate herself to the universe.' In Sarojini Naidu's mystical poems one finds an ardent quest of the poetess to unite with the Infinite. In 'Song of Radha' the poetess described herself as a devotee in search of the Infinite leaving all worldly pleasures.

Her mystical poetry reflects her faith in the language of the Hindu mystic poets and the Sufi mystic poets, it also conveys the romantic aspect for 'The essence of Romantic poetry is that in catching the fleeting moments of joy it opens the doors to an eternal world.' The mystic bent in her poetry bears the seal of Vedic concept. She blended mysticism with the Indian mythology giving it a unique character.

6.4 PARDAH NASHIN

*Her life is a revolving dream
Of languid and sequestered ease;
Her girdles and her fillets gleam
Like changing fires on sunset seas;
Her raiment is like morning mist,
Shot opal, gold and amethyst.*

*From thieving light of eyes impure,
From coveting sun or wind's caress,
Her days are guarded and secure
Behind her carven lattices,
Like jewels in a turbaned crest,
Like secrets in a lover's breast.*

*But though no hand unsanctioned dares
Unveil the mysteries of her grace,
Time lifts the curtain unawares,
And Sorrow looks into her face . . .
Who shall prevent the subtle years,
Or shield a woman's eyes from tears?*

This poem is taken from her collection *The Golden Threshold* (1916). It reflects a powerful female sensibility. The sense of anguish at being confined and denied freedom strikes a very personal note. This poem can be seen as a confession with its frank, candid and realistic attitude to women. Commenting on the feminine sensibility in Indian English poetry, Murli Das Melwani suggests that such poems deal with a very limited theme: thwarted desire, the frustration of living in a male-dominated world, sex and love. In addition these poems have a distinctly feminine viewpoint, a distinctive tone and deploy an imagery that suggests personal reactions.

Before we discuss the poem it is worthwhile to note that the venerated figures of antiquity are mostly Hindu in origin: Sita, Anusuya and the like. Such representations of women perform multiple roles. On the one hand they are indicative of repressive, orthodox beliefs and on the other they are also used to posit ideas of righteousness, love and peace. At the same time they also give Sarojini Naidu an opportunity to explore and reveal the mysterious feminine nature. This is one which braves danger to reclaim her husband (as Savitri does for her husband). *Pardah Nashin* is important

Check Your Progress

4. What is the psychological element in Naidu's poetry?
5. Who were the romantic poets who influenced Sarojini Naidu?
6. Which themes did Naidu deal with in her poetry?

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because in this poem she jumps the religious divide and universalizes the female experience. Although the poem deals with the *pardah* system as practiced by Muslims and its negative impact on the spiritual and mental well-being of Muslim women. Her argument seems to be that the suppression of women occurs across class and religious lines. This needs to be condemned and resolved before a vibrant free India can take shape. The poem highlights the fact that Indian women have been imprisoned within a whirlpool of pain and suffering by orthodox society. Although reformist efforts are going on they are few and far between: more needs to be done. The poem further points out that tradition-bound society is yet to liberate the Indian women fully.

6.4.1 Summary of *Pardah Nashin*

The poem literally means one who sits or lives behind the veil. The opening lines of the poem show the poetess's fascination with the life of the harem she witnessed in the palaces and mansions of Hyderabad. According to Naidu, the women in the harems were cloistered in a life of luxury. They were surrounded by beautiful and hedonistic things, dressed luxuriously in rich and colourful clothes, and covered in diamonds and other jewels. Her contention is that at first glance it appeared as if these women enjoyed a life of perpetual relaxation. They were sheltered from all obstructions and unwanted attention. Sarojini Naidu acknowledges that this is a world within a world. She does not deny that this primarily female world was not without its charms. It allowed the women to relax and enjoy the calmer pleasures of life. Nevertheless she is aware that such an existence is not totally desirable. Though the harem is a world of courtesy and charm, she is clear that this way of life is already obsolete. According to Naidu women were to play an important role in the freedom movement. For this it was important that they came out from their closeted existence and questioned all prevailing norms of social behaviour.

In the poem, Naidu refers to Muslim ladies whose faces are always covered by a veil. She comments on the clothes and jewels these women of the harem are wearing. The poetess notices that these women enjoy a life of unending ease and comfort. They do not want for anything; instead they enjoy all imaginable comforts: they have good, exotic food to consume; they are covered in dazzling jewels and luxurious clothes of the brightest colours. These bright and shining jewels and clothes only heighten their beauty. At the same time they make these women appear magical creatures who do not belong to this world.

In a sense these women do not belong to this world: their fathers and husbands believe that they are fragile creatures who need to be protected from the hurly burly of life. To this end these women are sequestered behind the *pardah*. The irony is that while the *pardah* protects the women from lascivious eyes it also stifles them. The *pardah* protects the women from undue attention of undesirable people; it also denies them access to free air. All their experiences good and bad are filtered through the gaze of their male protectors. In other words they define who and what these women are. The poem makes it clear that these efforts to protect the women are only partially successful because they cannot protect them from the vagaries of existence and the passage of time. Behind the lattice of their residence these women are not immune to loss and sorrow which is an inevitable part of living. Also all their wealth and luxury cannot defend them from ageing. What is worse, having all their actions censured by the men in their family ensures that these women have no opportunity whatsoever to explore their capabilities and try new things in life. The *pardah* becomes a gilded cage which needs to be rejected.

The last stanza of the poem makes it clear that the poetess realized that a life of mere beauty, splendor and ease would lead to a world of inner frustration and pain.

6.4.2 Critical Assessment

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In this poem, Naidu depicts the world of inner frustration and pain of Indian Muslim women under the rigid *pardah* system. She points out that the feudal society sees the '*pardah*' as a marker of high status respectability. It is so prevalent that its absence is seen as proof of shamelessness and the woman is considered outside of decent society. But the reality of the *pardah* is different: for all its claims of being a means of protecting the fragile woman and giving her a safe haven, the *pardah* hides the pathetic condition of Indian women. For all its claims of grace, beauty and colour the *pardah* covers the despair and hopelessness that women feel for having been divorced from all life affirming experiences. The poem is important because it gives voice to the silent despair of women. The *pardah* becomes even more stifling because for all its efforts to protect the woman the veil cannot stop the march of time as it casts its shadow on the face: the veiled face becomes lined and the eyes are tearful. Sarojini Naidu seems to suggest that no amount of protection can shield the woman from the vagaries of time and age. An effort to protect her only serves to deny her the opportunity to experience life in all its glory and pain. In other words it prevents the woman from living her life and only adds to her sorrow. Tears are said to be the true companion of her untold sorrows and unexpressed emotions. The poem highlights a point that the poetess makes in her work: Indian women have suffered at the hands of men from antiquity to the modern age. The fact that the women in *pardah* are Muslim and not Hindu only universalizes this suffering as the fate of all Indian women. This in turn makes the project of ameliorating this suffering even more desirable and urgent. This poem can also be seen as proof of Naidu's skill in handling all stages of a woman's life from girlhood to womanhood, from innocence to courageous nature, and from joyous spirit to pathetic condition.

At one level it may seem that she is romanticizing the *pardah* system and the life of women in ancient times. But a realization that the life the poem depicts is incomplete, runs through the poem. This is evident from the conclusion of the poem when it is stated that all the luxuries of the *pardah* cannot prevent the women from experiencing old age and suffering. Since Naidu was not confrontational by nature this poem is indicative of her strategy. Instead of chastising Muslim men for stifling their women, she is sanitizing them to the fact that the lives these women are leading are incomplete. To give their lives a sense of purpose it is important to introduce them to the issues of the day. Considering the fact that at the time Naidu believed that a prosperous India was possible only if the women were liberated this comparison becomes important. The poem is also important because though she focuses on the experiences of Muslim women in the houses of the Muslim aristocracy, nevertheless she extrapolates these experiences to include all women and universalizes the emotion and experiences of these women. All women in India, irrespective of caste and creed, are exploited and stifled. The poem, therefore, can also be seen as a clarion call by the poetess to reform Indian society and to recognize its women as individuals and not just as possessions to be bartered from father to husband.

6.4.3 Naidu's View on the *Pardah* System in India

In the poem Sarojini Naidu penetrates the very heart of those women who are tormented by the dictates of male dominated society. In the poem she does not rally against the

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pardah. Instead she asks a rhetorical question which is more in the nature of a protest against apparent social prejudice: 'Who shall prevent the subtle years, / Or shield a woman's eyes from tears?' It is clear from the poem that here, as elsewhere in her work, Naidu presents the discrimination against women in a sensitive manner to suggest that this behaviour runs counter to the glorious culture of the past. The *pardah* then is the physical *pardah*, but it also refers to the *pardah* of the mind and soul. In other words it is indicative of a state of mind, which according to Naidu, was instrumental in hindering the development of Muslim women. In Naidu's larger vision of the country, women were to play an important role in the progress of the nation. Therefore, if the women were regressive in their thinking it would lead to a regressive nation. The poem, *Pardah Nashin*, then can be seen as her dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs.

In her speech 'Indian Women and the Franchise' given at the Bombay Special Congress Naidu said:

Man ought to share with woman all his rights. He should remember the immutable principle that woman has equal rights with man...

We ask for franchise, ... vote, not that we might interfere with you in your official functions, your civic duties, your public place and power, but rather that we may lay the foundation of national character in the souls of the children that we hold upon our laps and instill them with the ideas of nationality. We want the franchise to wield that power that says our sons will not be denationalized. We want the franchise to say that our education shall not be an imitation so unsuitable and alien things but rather that our nationality shall be for enlightening our national traditions and that our national characteristics shall be the outcome of our own needs and capacities....

How shall my country take her predestined place worthily in the noble world federations of liberated people, until the women of India are themselves free and enfranchised, and stand as guardians of her national honour and the symbols of her national righteousness?

Naidu campaigned for women's issues all her life. Yet this poem seems to be a praise of an antiquated past: it seems to praise *pardah*, the veiling and the seclusion of women. However, as the extract above proves such a reading of the poem is incorrect.

In her life Naidu championed two causes: women's issues and Hindu-Muslim unity. Her representation of Indian customs and traditions need to be seen within this framework. She recognized the stubborn persistence of tradition and the security it gave the people. They followed these traditions not because they were just but because they were familiar. Therefore, when she presents the prevailing *pardah* system and seems to romanticize it, the reader has to be careful with his reactions. Sarojini Naidu does this to highlight the historical record of the past even as preserves the culture of India. More importantly she does this to portray the fact that these practices belong to a bygone era and need to be abandoned.

Highlights of the Poem

While negotiating with Naidu's work it is important to remember that even though she deals with Indian issues, life and images; she does not look at these through tinted eyes. She is not blind to the faults and drawbacks of her country and its culture. This is best reflected in the poem *Pardah Nashin*. At one level the poem reflects an intimate knowledge of the *pardah* system and the life behind it. This knowledge would be

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impossible for someone to possess if they had not been a part of it from a very early age. The fact that the poetess was brought up in Hyderabad means that she had absorbed the ethos and idea behind the *pardah* system at a very young age. Moreover she was intimately familiar with the life behind the lattice windows, having seen it as a child. This intimate knowledge is responsible for the two strains that we see in the poem. On the one hand there is a sense of nostalgia for a world that has gone, for the glory days that can never return. At the same time, the poem is also tinged with a very adult knowledge that the lifestyle depicted is extremely decadent and is more of a cheap imitation of life rather than life itself. It smacks of a life missed rather than a life fully lived. This idea is further exemplified in the poem when the speaker asserts that even as the *pardah* protects the women from the unwanted gaze it does not protect her from the passing of seasons and approaching old age. In other words life with its mixture of happiness and sorrow will happen. What matters is how you face them. In this manner this poem, even as it is nostalgic, is very revolutionary: it demands that women not be cloistered and mollycoddled anymore. It demands that women be allowed access to a greater world than just the confine of their homes. His idea is in synchronization with her demand that women be given education and given a greater role in nation building.

6.5 SONG OF RADHA, THE MILKMAID

*Where'er thy subtle flute I hear
Beloved I must go!
No peril of the deep or height
Shall daunt my winged foot; ...
Impede my heart that pants to drain
The nectar of thy flute!*

*The Jamuna's waters rush by so quickly,
The shadows of evening gather so thickly,
Like black birds in the sky...*

*But my heart was so lost in your worship, Beloved,
They were wroth when I cried without knowing:
Govinda! Govinda!
Govinda! Govinda! ...
How brightly the river was flowing!*

*Couldst thou not find upon my sheltering breast
Thy rapture and thy rest?
Whose are the fingers that like amorous flocks
Raid the ambrosial thickets of thy locks?
Ah, whose the lips that smite with sudden drouth
The garden of thy mouth?*

*What shall it profit to revile or hate
Thy fickleness, her beauty or my fate,
Or strive to tear with black and bitter art
Thine image from my heart?*

*O like a leaf doth my shy heart shiver,
O like a wave do my faint limbs quiver.*

Check Your Progress

- From which collection is the poem *Pardah Nashin* taken from?
- What was Murlidhar Das Melwani's comment about feminine sensibility in Indian English poetry?
- What does *Pardah Nashin* literally mean?

*Softly, softly, Jamuna river,
Sing thou our bridal song.*

Sarojini Naidu

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This poem is taken from her collection *The Bird of Time* (1912). The poem is a folk-song based on Radha's love for her lover Govinda. The milkmaid Radha goes to Mathura to sell her milk-products. Since she is engrossed in the thought of Govinda she fails to sell anything. The poem is an ironical representation of the fact that most of religious people have no sense of true religion. In the poem Naidu resembles Mirabai, a devotee who had written many prayerful songs (*bhajans*) in her devotion to Krishna, the divine lover. In the last stanza of the poem Radha stands in the sanctum with folded hands, seeking shelter and surrendering her soul with a contrite heart. Radha offers gift of her soul to her divine lover. The devotee is completely lost in devotion and is not concerned about the world around. She gains spiritual awareness of the highest order when love as personal desire is transformed to divine love. Radha attains a transcendental experience by identifying herself completely with her divine love.

Mulk Raj Anand was highly impressed by the poem and commented: 'Here the poetry of romanticism, of ornate epithets and delicate similes, has become infused with transcendental experience. Sarojini has transferred love as personal desire into divine love, and given it a sense of eternity, of the Universal. Similarly, when James H. Cousins read the poem, the chanting, 'Govinda! Govinda!', impressed him.

6.5.1 Summary of the *Song of Radha, the Milkmaid*

This poem deals with Radha's love for Krishna. The poem opens with Radha's journey to Mathura where she hopes to sell her curd. The scene when she begins her journey is pastoral and one can hear the calves lowing in the background. This image reminds the reader of Krishna, the cow herder. However, when Radha reaches the city of Mathura she finds that she is unable to focus on selling the curd. The curd is as soft as the creamy white clouds that dot the sky. This image is interesting since the poem centers around the Shraavan season when the sky is overcast with dark rain laden clouds. The contrast between the white clouds of Radha's imagination and the dark clouds that are overhead suggest two things: they bring into sharp focus Radha's complete disconnect with the world around her: she is totally absorbed in her transcendental love for Krishna; it also suggests that her emotions are as pure as the white clouds. Interestingly, Radha is not perturbed by the fact that she can't sell any curd. She is so completely involved in her worship of Krishna that she chants his name instead of shouting and attracting the attention of prospective customers. The reaction of the people of Mathura is revealing: they find her state of entrancement hilarious and laugh at her. The river Yamuna that gurgles nearby seems to echo Radha's enchantment with Krishna to the exclusion of all else.

The poem then shifts to the rowers who had helped move her pots of curd to the city of Mathura. Radha notes that these rowers are jovial. Her own friends and companions are feeling the same joy. In fact, a general sense of well-being pervades the atmosphere. Everyone is celebrating the advent of spring as it associated images of rebirth and life. Radha is detached from this celebratory mood and finds that she cannot divorce her thoughts from Krishna. Her love for her lord finds expression when she utters his name with same sense of abandonment and joy as the people around her show in their singing and dancing. Paradoxically this marks her reaction to be blatantly different from the norm. The reaction of her compatriots is swift: they

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do not find her response funny anymore. Instead of indulging her eccentricities (as they see it), they become more aggressive and mock her for her divergent behaviour. This does not faze Radha who continues in her feelings of love and devotion for Krishna. This idea is expressed in the repetition of the line: 'How gaily the river was flowing!' Her feelings are eternal and unchangeable as the flowing of the Yamuna: it does what it must; in fact, what it is fated to do without question or pause. Similarly, Radha does what she knows to do: love Krishna without pause or question.

Radha's withdrawal from the world is complete in the third section of the poem. Not only does she not wish to sell the curd anymore, she now deems it fit only as offerings to her lord and beloved Krishna. She carries the curd to the gaily lit temple of Krishna. If one considers the fact that it was in the *shravan* (monsoon) month that Krishna was born, Radha's personalized worship becomes important. The dancing and the general tone of merriment of the earlier passage carry into the temple. The devotees inside the temple are praying to the deity. Their worship and wishes are extremely personal. They wish for their own personal well-being. In contrast, Radha has transcended the merely physical. For her, Krishna is not just her beloved but also the protector of the world. Her wishes, therefore, are not personal: she wants that all of creation be happy and safe from harm. Her heart is lost in the vision of her Beloved Lord and she starts chanting his name again. The response of the people around her is enlightening: instead of simply mocking her they become aggressive and are not averse to causing her harm. Radha is unaware of the increasing hostility of her comrades. She is engrossed in her love for Krishna. This idea is strengthened by the last line of the poem: 'How bright the river was flowing!' Just as the river is lit by the reflected lights of the torches in the temple; similarly the love of Krishna has lit all corners of Radha's spirit and soul making her incapable of feeling any ill will for her fellows. Just as the river reflects the light of the temple, similarly Radha is a repository of the best feelings Krishna's love and worship invokes in an individual.

6.5.2 Critical Assessment

The poem revolves around the *shravan* season. It is a time of fertility and new beginnings. Through the season the poem transports the reader to an environment of fertility and abundance. The white curd reflects the white clouds that dot the sky. This mirroring of the colour all around symbolizes affection and nurturing of life. Radha carries the curd to Mathura. She, therefore, is the medium that brings life and growth to all living beings. In other words she is the creative principle of all life. In the Bhakti tradition the deity and the devotee share a symbiotic relationship: both derive sustenance and a reason for living from the other. In other words Radha is more than just a woman selling curd: she is the harbinger of creativity and fertility to mankind. Without her mankind would be barren and lifeless. This is evident from the fact that while her friends and compatriots make fun of her and reject her at every turn they are unaware of the fact that it is her worship of Krishna and her presence amongst them that gives them a world that they can inhabit and also an opportunity to celebrate this world. At the same time the creative principle she embodies would be meaningless if not for the deity giving it a certain direction and shape. The white clouds in themselves are useless. It is only when they transform into the dark clouds of the *shravan* season and are churned by the winds that there is life giving rain. It is when the wind blows and the clouds are present that it rains. In other words it is the creative power of the deity that works through the devotee to give birth to new thoughts and ideas.

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It is interesting to note here that Radha as mother earth brings to mind another figure in Indian culture which embodies the same idea: Sita. Sita is the archetypal mother earth for two reasons. She was raised from the earth in a pot and was finally subsumed by the earth and is, therefore, the original daughter of the Earth. She is the archetypal mother because she gave birth to raise two sons who could imbibe and carry forward the legacy of their illustrious father Ram. In other words, she is the 'true' mother in so much that she helped in perpetrating the patriarchal order from father to son. Similarly, Radha is the creative principle because she carries the 'essence' or 'meaning' of life from the divine to the common man. Radha's characterization is more subversive than Sita's. This is so because while Sita was never reviled even while she was in exile, Radha is the butt of jokes and snide comments even as she tries to enrich the lives of those around her. The fact that this rejection does not faze her is interesting: she is a woman who is willing to define what the divine means to her on her own terms and also one who is willing to encourage others to do the same. In other words in the poem Radha is positing a very personal relationship between the devotee and the divine, between the self and the other and between the female form and the external social expectations from it. This reflects Sarojini Naidu's unhappiness with the status of women not just in her contemporary world but also her fight for giving them a larger role in the freedom struggle.

In the poem Radha yearns for a union with the divine in all its glory and manifestations. This desire for union changes form from a purely carnal desire of the flesh to a metaphysical merging of the selves till all sense of individuality is gone. In the poem Mathura is more than just the residence of Krishna. It is the center of the created world. When Radha travels to Mathura with the curd it is a potent image symbolizing her desire for a union with the mystical as embodied by the divine. At the same time this image also symbolizes her subconscious desire to attain a union with the mystical within herself, i.e. a union with her carnal and metaphysical nature.

Highlights of the Poem

Radha

In her Radha poems Naidu uses Radha's love for Krishna in both his divine and human manifestations to delineate and critique the traditional Indian concepts of love and woman's destiny. In these poems Radha is not the passive, submissive subject. Instead she is vocal in expressing her feelings for Krishna in both his divine and human guises. When she presents Radha doing this, Sarojini Naidu transfers agency to the woman and projects her as a rational being capable of making informed choices. This representation is central to her belief that women would play an important role in independent India. In other words, her Radha is very forward looking and modern. At the same time she is deeply rooted in the cultural mythology and folklore of the country. At heart she remains a country girl who enjoys the simple pleasures of life. It would do to remember that Radha in this form is celebrated in the Bhakti tradition. Where Sarojini Naidu charts a new course is in presenting Radha as being unapologetic in her demand for reciprocity of feelings from her beloved.

In the Bhakti tradition the devotee and the divine derive sustenance from each other. The existence of one justifies the existence of the other. In other words there is an egalitarianism and democracy with respect to hierarchy in the Bhakti tradition. Neither party is more important than the other. Therefore, when Radha takes on an active role in determining the parameters governing her relationship with her beloved

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in both his divine and human form she is running against held patriarchal beliefs which view the woman as the passive, silent, asexual 'eternal feminine'. Instead of waiting for Krishna to turn his gaze toward her, Radha is unapologetic both about her passion for Krishna and in her expression of it. In other words in her poetry, through the figure of Radha, the poetess legitimizes the project of Indian women to circumvent the repressed roles assigned to them and to chart a new spiritual, political and sexual identity for themselves. This is reflected in her speeches where she demands greater roles for women in the freedom movement and voting rights for them among other things.

In her Radha poems the persona of Radha takes various forms. Sometimes she is the archetypal Indian woman who risks all for love. In this she reminds the reader of Savitri who challenged Yama for her husband's right to live. When the poetess draws this parallel she suggests that social strictures have become meaningless to Radha and that only Krishna's love matters. In fact, this love is liberatory since it has freed her from the shackles of life and the need to submit to social strictures in silence. This is evident in the poem when Radha is unperturbed by the mocking laughter and outright anger that her actions evince. She is willing to face all condemnation if it will ensure the fulfillment of her deepest desire. In other words, even as Radha is the figure of myth Sarojini Naidu redraws her as a rebel who justifies actions founded on personal belief. Through the figure of Radha the passion of the female persona is given immediacy. It also gives agency to her arrested life as she chooses to follow her beloved.

Sometimes the persona of Radha wishes to sublimate herself in complete surrender to her divine beloved. In the Bhakti tradition this union between the devotee and the deity is the desired state of existence. In her usage of this tradition the poetess seems to be giving legitimacy to the sexual desires of her female protagonist. If one were to consider Radha the prototype of Indian womanhood then such a representation can be seen as the poetesses desire to deconstruct the asexual image of Indian women as mere mothers, sisters and daughters. In other words through the image of Radha, the poetess is attempting to create a more complete version of what it means to be a woman in India. In the backdrop of her belief that women were critical to the formation of a strong, prosperous nation capable of fulfilling its destiny in the world; such a representation of Radha can be seen as her desire to project strong female role models for future generations to emulate. Another aspect of the desire of Radha to sublimate herself with the divine is the fact that she equates herself with the divine. Radha does not consider herself inferior to the deity in any way. Interestingly, the bhakti tradition operates under the same premise. But its ramifications are far reaching. If Radha is at par with the divine, it implies there is nothing implicitly 'divine' about the deity. This in turn implies that no external agency is required to negotiate a relationship with or to understand the divine. This is a body blow to all religions, especially in their efforts to subjugate women. If one doesn't need an external agency to negotiate with the deity then not only are these agencies (in the garb of religious figures and institutions) superfluous, but more importantly any image of the deity the individual creates is legitimate. This personalizing of the deity, its democratization and unification with it hints at a spiritual/sexual amalgamation.

In the *Song of Radha*, Radha's persona charts a journey from the material to the mystic, from the physical to the spiritual. Her all-consuming love for her beloved

makes her impervious to social strictures and expected forms of behaviour. She obliterates all memories of her own mundane self, trapped within the confines of society and customs and gains mystic consciousness—the pure Light of Divinity itself. When she openly defies conventional norms she upholds only the supreme independence of the spirit which allows no barriers to corrupt its self-awareness, converting the temporality of the body into a momentary phase in the search for the self. She stakes claim to being equal to all of creation purely on her ability to forge a direct and immediate communion with the divine. At this point she regains her autonomy and independence.

The persona of Radha in Naidu's poems breaks out of stereotypes; radically rejects the existing social structure, its norms and values and behavioral modes and transcends the accepted codes of womanhood, the tradition and the orthodoxy that seek to control and shape the lives of women in a patriarchal culture.

Curd

The curd can be seen as the sign of fertility and has life giving powers in the poem. The fact that it was Krishna's favourite food gives it mystical powers. Further, the fact that Radha goes to Mathura, Krishna's place of residence is also significant. It suggests that she is imperative to Krishna's existence both as ruler and as God. In the bhakti tradition, from which this poem draws inspiration, the figure of the creator or 'God' gains significance only when there is a supplicant or a worshipper. Just as the divine gives the human significance and helps him create a sense of the world around him; similarly it is the faithful who in the act of worship give, the deity any cause or justification for existence. It is a very symbiotic existence where both are incomplete without the other. Seen in this light the curd becomes important. It is an acknowledgement of the fact by the deity that Radha is crucial to his continuation as the omniscient, omnipresent God.

The curd is produced from the milk that is produced by the cows mentioned in the poem. It therefore is also indicative of the cycle of birth and abundance in nature. Just as Radha carries the curd in pots to Mathura to sell to its residents; similarly the energy and power from the natural world around us orders all existence. The curd becomes symptomatic of Mother Earth in all her creative prowess. Radha, in her garb as the one who brings this life giving force to all human then is Mother Earth incarnate in human form. This further highlights the role of women as life givers and nurturers, a theme that is prevalent in Sarojini Naidu's poetry.

One can note the adjectives used for the river Yamuna: it flows 'softly,' 'gaily' and 'brightly.' Since the river is an extension of Radha who embodies the life affirming powers of the deity, it implies that the closer the relationship of the devotee to the divine the closer he is to achieving a transcendental state of existence.

ACTIVITY

Write a review on any poem of Sarojini Naidu, which we have not read in this unit. Write like a critic, focusing on both, the positive and the negative factors of the respective poem.

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Check Your Progress

10. What is the theme of *The Song of Radha*?
11. In the poem, *The Song of Radha*, what does the contrast between white and dark clouds suggest?
12. Why is Sita considered the archetypal mother earth?

DID YOU KNOW

Sarojini Naidu was the first female President of the India National Congress. She was also the first woman to become the governor of a state in India.

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6.6 SUMMARY

In this unit, you have learnt that:

- Saroji Naidu, also known as 'The Nightingale of India' was a child prodigy, an activist of Indian independence and a poet.
- Naidu was the first Indian woman to be elected as the President of the Indian National Congress and the first woman to become the Governor of Uttar Pradesh.
- She was a renowned poet. Her poems were so beautiful that they were also sung. She was given the title *Bul Bule Hind*, when her poems got published in 1905 under the title *Golden Threshold*.
- Later on, two other collections of her poems were also published—*The Bird of Time* and *The Broken Wings*.
- *Feast of Youth* was published in 1918. It was followed by *The Magic Tree*, *The Wizard Mask* and many more.
- Mahashree Arvind, Rabindranath Tagore and Jawaharlal Nehru were among the prominent personalities who admired her work. Though her poems were in English, the soul in them was Indian.
- The poem, *Pardah Nashin* was written for Muslim women, who veiled their faces. She did not like the idea of these women covering their faces as she considered it a restriction of their freedom.
- Song of Radha refers to Radha's love for Krishna. She always thinks about him.
- Her friends call her to dance and sing with them but she refuses to go as she is always thinking about lord Krishna and she does not realize that her friends are making fun of her.

6.7 KEY TERMS

- **Prodigy:** It is a person, especially a young one, endowed with exceptional qualities or abilities.
- **Virtuoso:** A person highly skilled in music or another artistic pursuit is called virtuoso.
- **Foreword:** It is a short introduction to a book, typically by a person other than the author.
- **Religious ecstasy:** It is an altered state of consciousness characterized by greatly reduced external awareness and expanded interior mental and spiritual awareness
- **Folklore:** The traditional beliefs, customs, and stories of a community, passed through the generations by word of mouth is called folklore.

6.8 ANSWERS TO 'CHECK YOUR PROGRESS'

1. The first play written by Sarojini Naidu was *Maher Muneer*.
2. *The Golden Threshold* was her first collection of poems and it was published in 1905.
3. The dominant note in *The Broken Wing* (1917) is patriotic and she focuses exclusively on the description of Indian culture.
4. Sarojini Naidu explores the deeper recesses of the mind in her poems. A look at her work reveals the poetesses acknowledgement of the fact that sometimes the subconscious mind overrules the conscious.
5. Sarojini Naidu was influenced by romantic poets Shelley and Keats.
6. Naidu dealt with themes of Nature, Folk Life, Love, Life and Death and Mysticism.
7. This poem is taken from Naidu's collection called *The Golden Threshold* (1916).
8. Murli Das Melwani suggests that such poems deal with a very limited theme: thwarted desire, the frustration of living in a male dominated world, sex and live.
9. *Pardah Nashin* means a woman in veil.
10. The poem is a folk-song based on Radha's love for her lover Govinda.
11. The contrast between the white clouds of Radha's imagination and the dark clouds that are overhead suggest two things: they bring into sharp focus Radha's complete disconnect with the world around her: she is totally absorbed in her transcendental love for Krishna; it also suggests that her emotions are as pure as the white clouds.
12. Sita is the archetypal mother earth for two reasons. She was raised from the earth in a pot and was finally subsumed by the earth and is, therefore, the original daughter of the earth.

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6.9 QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

Short-Answer Questions

1. Why did Sarojini Naidu write poems in English?
2. What were her views on Indian women?
3. How does Sarojini Naidu describe herself?
4. What were the influences that affected Naidu's poems?
5. How would you define Naidu's patriotic instinct?

Long-Answer Questions

1. Give a detailed account of the works of Sarojini Naidu.
2. Write a note on the characteristics and themes in her poetry.
3. Give a gist of the poem, *Pardah Nashin*.
4. How did Sarojini Naidu view the *Pardah* system in India?
5. Write a detailed summary of the *Song of Radha*, the Milkmaid.

6.10 FURTHER READING

NOTES

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UNIT 7 EMILY DICKINSON

Structure

- 7.0 Introduction
- 7.1 Unit Objectives
- 7.2 About the Author
 - 7.2.1 Her Style
 - 7.2.2 Themes
- 7.3 *I felt a Funeral, in my Brain*
 - 7.3.1 Themes
 - 7.3.2 Analysis
 - 7.3.3 Style of the Poem
- 7.4 *Because I could not stop for Death*
 - 7.4.1 Synopsis
 - 7.4.2 Analysis
 - 7.4.3 Images and Metaphors in the Poem
- 7.5 Summary
- 7.6 Key Terms
- 7.7 Answers to 'Check Your Progress'
- 7.8 Questions and Exercises
- 7.9 Further Reading

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7.0 INTRODUCTION

Emily Dickinson was never short of ideas and creativity pertaining to her writing skills. 1862 was a very important year for her because in the midst of the Civil War, she wrote 366 poems. This mathematically indicates more than one poem per day. These were not mundane poems, but were some of the most eminent ones that an American had ever written.

Scholars were curious to find out what was the source that propelled Dickinson to churn out such extraordinary output, but she was very discreet about her personal life. Most of her time was spent at her home in Amherst, Massachusetts, where she interacted with her family and close friends. She was a very intense person, by nature. Thomas Higginson, who was one of the few admirers of her poetry, wrote after he paid Dickinson a visit: 'I never was with anyone who drained my nerve power so much. Without touching her, she drew from me. I am glad not to live near her (source).' Considering this, Dickinson has one of the most absorbing and mystifying biographies among all literary people that are known to us.

Dickinson had an incredible collection of her own poetries. Although, she had written more than a thousand poems in her lifetime, very few of them were published. Those published were edited thoroughly to project Dickinson like an ordinary person. Most of her poems were often hand stitched in small volumes and kept in a drawer in her room. The poem *I felt a Funeral, in my Brain* is from this collection of booklet. It was published only after 1896, which was almost ten years after her death.

However, people were not mentally ready for Dickinson's literature till the middle of the 20th century, when her remarkable fashion and unconventional symbolism could be appreciated, separately from the norms of conventional poetry. *I felt a Funeral, in my Brain* is one of her most renowned and also one of her most

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mysterious poems. Just like most of her other poems, no one very well knows what it is all about. Obviously, the feeling of a funeral in one's brain is not a positive aspect. Nevertheless, in addition to that, it may be a poem about despair, or the process of overlooking some distressing feeling. Whatever the inspiration, this poem is one of the most impacting poetic trips one would ever come across.

Moving on, *Because I could not stop for Death*, which was initially published in 1862, belongs to the list of Dickinson's poems infatuated with the idea of death. In this specific poem, though the speaker stumbles upon death, yet the story is conveyed quite serenely. Consequently, the poem gives rise to many questions such as: Is the speaker happy to embrace death? Is this actually a poem about death, or does the concept of death imply something else? Is this a poem about belief? There is ample scope for interpretation.

There is none among us who has not thought about life after death. This unit delves into that inquisitiveness by generating a death scene that is very commonly imagined by the living, whether they like it or not. The unit also makes a critical assessment of her another poem *Because I could not stop for Death* and her style of writing.

7.1 UNIT OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Summarize the biography and style of writing of Emily Dickinson
 - Interpret the basic message in the poem *I felt a Funeral, in my Brain*
 - Explain the theme of the poem *Because I could not Stop for Death*
-

7.2 ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emily Dickinson was born on 10 December 1830 in the farming town of Amherst, Massachusetts. She was the middle child and had two other siblings, Austin and Lavinia. It seems she had a distant relationship with her mother but shared warmer ties with her father, Edward Dickinson. Nevertheless her relationship with him often turned sour. Her father was a Congressman. He was also the treasurer of Amherst College. The family had deep ties with New England history: the Dickinson's came to America with John Winthrop in 1630 in the Great Puritan Migration. By the time Emily was born the family had been living in the Connecticut River Valley region for nearly two hundred years. She was a regular church goer. Here her eccentric nature was revealed even as a child when she refused to join the church officially or even to call herself a Christian. However, she was not a recluse. As a young woman she was fairly social and witty. She attended parties and sparkled in them. What turned this vivacious, funny, intelligent woman is one of the greatest mysteries of her life.

She attended Amherst Academy from 1840 to 1847 and later went to Mount Holyoke Female Seminary from 1847 to 1848. She was a good student, but she had to leave Mount Holyoke after a year due to ill health.

Not much is known of her personal life since she turned into an extremely reclusive woman. She stayed cloistered in her room, writing poetry and refused to have visitors. Her father was liberal in his beliefs. He was aware of the fact that she

was writing poetry in the confines of her room even as she shunned society unnerving. For this reason she kept her collection of poems hidden from him in her room. These poems were discovered only after her death when her sister Lavinia went through her stuff. The poems were published in volumes from 1890 onwards.

Emily Dickinson

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Fig. 7.1 Emily Dickinson

She was aware of the happenings around her but surprisingly they did not reflect in her poetry. America saw great social and political upheavals during these years. The Great Revival was one such movement. It was a socio-religious movement aimed at renewing the religious faith and fervor amongst the people. She suffered from Bight's disease and died in 1886 in Amherst.

7.2.1 Her Style

Dickinson wrote nearly 1800 poems in her lifetime, most of which were published posthumously. She is considered an iconic poet in the history of American literature. Her poetry deals with the themes of death, grief, faith, truth and fame. She never named her poems and the titles were assigned to them by later editors of her work. Some of her poems are unfinished and many exist only in the form of rough drafts. An interesting feature of her poems is that since she included many of her poems in her letters, she often changed them to her subject matter or her correspondent. Therefore, multiple versions exist and editors have to decide on the final version. Her idiosyncratic spelling, punctuation, word choice and word order also make it difficult for readers to

comprehend what she is saying. Again editors have had to change her text to conform to modern usage.

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She considered poetry as an exalted calling and dedicated her life to poetry. According to her only that verse which moved the reader profoundly could be called poetry: 'If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way?' She considered poetry as a balm; it helped her to cope with the vagaries of life and to escape the pain of life caused by the deaths of loved ones and also by her inability to resolve her doubts about God. In her poetry she is concerned with the dichotomy between the transitory and the permanent, especially that between mortality and immortality.

She adopts a variety of poetic personas in her poems ranging from a young girl, to a queen to a bride and a bridegroom etc. In nearly 150 poems she presents herself as the fictional 'I.' It is important that these poems should not be read as autobiographical accounts they are indicative of issues that she considered important. In fact, she insisted on the distinction between her poetry and her life: 'When I state myself, as the representative of the verse, it does not mean me but a supposed person.'

Her language is relatively simple but it is a set of off-rhymes and an unconventional punctuation that marks her poetry as different from her contemporaries. She wrote short poems which subvert the traditional forms of poetry prevalent in her day. These poems are difficult to paraphrase as they are complex in theme, form and execution. Her poetry is written in the customary four line stanza and rhymes ABCB. She uses a variety of meters and alternates between the tetrameter and the trimeter while using the iambic meter. She derives these forms from Psalms and Protestant hymns. She appropriates these styles completely – she does this by introducing long, rhythmic dashes (her favourite technique in poetry) – to interrupt the meter and to indicate pauses. Most of her rhymes are exact rhymes. However, she also uses near rhymes with similar vowels, consonantal, identical, visual and suspended rhymes in her poetry. It should be pointed out that a salient feature of her poetry is her violation of poetic norms: she uses rough, irregular rhythms, imperfect rhymes and faulty grammar, spelling and punctuation.

Her poetry is a random record of her emotion and experiences in a life devoted to reflection and creativity. Despite this she does not posit her 'philosophy' of poetry in the sense that she does not present any idea of what her poetry means and how to approach it. There is no preconceived philosophical system behind her work. Her sentimentality and coyness are characteristic features of her poetry. In addition to this her poetry reveals a tendency to look both inwards and also beyond the actual. She writes aphoristically and compresses a large amount of emotion and meaning into a small number of words. Often in her poetry she leaves out verbs and other connecting words; she often drops endings from verbs and nouns. It is not always clear what her pronouns refer to; sometimes a pronoun refers to a word which does not appear in the poem. This gives her language a diamond-hard quality and makes them difficult to comprehend. She uses the dash very often in her poetry. She uses it to emphasize, to indicate a missing word(s), or to replace a comma or period.

At the same time her poetry is often descriptive and reveals her power of observation. Her broken meter, unusual rhythmic pattern, unusual imagery and metaphors struck a note of assonance and discomfited her contemporary publishers

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and readers alike. However, many of her innovations are central to the development of modern poetry. She is now regarded as an innovative pre-modernist poet. Her poetry is also characterized by a balance between abstract and concrete words. The abstract words are generally Latinate in origin. In addition to this she also uses irony, metaphors and personification to present her varying moods (ranging from joy to grief to despair) in her poetry.

7.2.2 Themes

Her poetry is extremely self-referential in the sense that she explores her own feelings and emotions in them. It is interesting to note that the events in the America of her time find no mention in her poetry. However, even as she analyses her own emotions, she universalizes them and therein lies her importance as a poet. Her themes can vary from bizarre death fantasies to descriptions of domestic and natural scenes. Her poems are her 'letters to the world' and record her life, its tiny ecstasies and her responses to the mysteries of life and death. They are also candid insights into her state of consciousness.

Broadly her poetry deals with the themes of love and the joy and danger it brings and death personified as a monarch or a kindly but irresistible lover. Her poetry also reflects the tension between faith and doubt as well as a sense of loss. Finally nature as both a threat and a source of joy is present in her poetry. She views life as something difficult, painful and as one full of loss were gains, if any, are temporary and fleeting. Her poetry also reveals her Calvinistic beliefs intermingling with a kind of Transcendentalism. For example, a belief in the 'inevitability of the spiritual struggle' is accompanied by a sense of delight in nature. She also saw physical, everyday things as symbols of spiritual things.

Quotes by Emily Dickinson

Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul - and sings the tunes without the words - and never stops at all.

Saying nothing... sometimes says the most.

They might not need me; but they might. I'll let my head be just in sight; a smile as small as mine might be precisely their necessity.

If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry.

Truth is so rare that it is delightful to tell it.

Find ecstasy in life; the mere sense of living is joy enough.

People need hard times and oppression to develop psychic muscles.

A wounded deer leaps the highest.

The soul should always stand ajar, ready to welcome the ecstatic experience.

My friends are my estate.

For love is immortality.

I dwell in possibility

Forever is composed of nows.

If I can stop one heart from breaking, I shall not live in vain.

Dogs are better than human beings because they know but do not tell.

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Beauty is not caused. It is.
 Behavior is what a man does, not what he thinks, feels, or believes.
 Because I could not stop for death, He kindly stopped for me; The carriage
 held but just ourselves and immortality.
 Morning without you is a dwindled dawn.
 Love is anterior to life, posterior to death, initial of creation, and the exposure
 of breath.
 A word is dead when it is said, some say. I say it just begins to live that day.
 To love is so startling it leaves little time for anything else.
 Not knowing when the dawn will come I open every door.
 If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is
 poetry.
 The brain is wider than the sky.

7.3 I FELT A FUNERAL, IN MY BRAIN

*I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
 And Mourners to and fro
 Kept treading - treading - till it seemed
 That Sense was breaking through -*

*And when they all were seated,
 A Service, like a Drum -
 Kept beating - beating - till I thought
 My Mind was going numb -*

*And then I heard them lift a Box
 And creak across my Soul
 With those same Boots of Lead, again,
 Then Space - began to toll,*

*As all the Heavens were a Bell,
 And Being, but an Ear,
 And I, and Silence, some strange Race
 Wrecked, solitary, here -*

*And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
 And I dropped down, and down -
 And hit a World, at every plunge,
 And Finished knowing - then -*

Check Your Progress

1. How was Emily Dickinson's relationship with her parents?
2. Why did Emily have to leave Mount Holyoke after a year of joining?
3. How many poems did Emily Dickinson write in her lifetime?
4. How was Emily different from her contemporaries?

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The poem begins by describing the death of the speaker's mind. In the first stanza she describes the slow process which marks the beginning of this death. At this point of time the mourners seem to be the speaker's passing thoughts and their increasingly chaotic nature which signaled the advent of a loss of reason. The second stanza continues this process. In fact the beating drums here seem to suggest the inevitable march of the destructive process which continues to dismantle all remaining rational thought. In the next stanza as the pall bearers lift and carry the coffin for the final burial the speaker makes a last fateful attempt to stem the loss of reason and fails. The image seems to suggest that soon her mind too will be buried and she will be left with nothing except unmitigated silence. The last stanza describes the actual burial. In a sense it points to the point in time when the speaker's precarious hold on reason and rationality is lost and she tumbles into an unreasoning not-knowing insanity.

In the poem '*Tie the Strings to my Life, My Lord*' death is presented a joyful journey done on the Day of Judgment in the company of Christ. The poem '*I felt a Funeral, in my Brain*' however carries the emotion to the other extreme. According to Richard Sewall, 'She seems as close to touching bottom here as she ever got.' This poem deals with the anguish of death and all that it entails. The poem never clearly tells us why the speaker feels such sorrow but it does describe the emotions she feels at her demise. In the beginning of the poem she describes her funeral surrounded by mourners, as she can imagine it in her mind. This does not disturb her very much. The horror increases when she is left alone and all the mourners have departed. It is then that she realizes that she is, 'wrecked, solitary,' possessing Being but in Silence. It is when this happens that her reason snaps. This image is given by the plank of the coffin breaking. When this happens she plummets past worlds, knowing nothing and realizing that there is nothing left to know. The last word of the poem 'then' followed by a dash seems to suggest that there may be something more and her loneliness and lack of knowledge may not be a permanent state.

7.3.1 Themes

Funeral

The death of the individual whose funeral people are attending emblemizes the death of the speaker's sanity. She feels bogged down by the mourners who surround her at the funeral and feels claustrophobic. The funeral rituals are metaphors for the unconscious working of the mind. It is interesting to note that the speaker occupies two roles: she participates in the funeral and is separate from it as well. This feeling is heightened when the box is lifted and it creaks. She feels the creak carry into the depths of her soul and is perturbed. The mourners are the faceless masses who go about their actions with no regard to what the speaker feels. At the same time they are also representative of the speaker's inner emotions. As the funeral proceeds and her emotions became more volatile and difficult to pin down the mourners become more disjointed. In a sense they reflect her emotions even as they signal her essential separation from the events happening around her. If the mourners had any conception of the feelings she was experiencing they would have shown some emotion which they do not. This lack of emotion is indicative of the speaker's loneliness which is cemented further when she is lowered in to the world of madness. Seen in this light the mourners can also be seen as all the people who inhabit the speakers' physical space. They are representative of the people she knows. Since the funeral is symbolical of her own impending death through madness they are representative of her

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acquaintances. Their reactions in this funeral then can be taken to be indicative of their reaction at her metaphorical and physical funeral. Their total lack of emotion therefore terrorizes the speaker since it brings to her notice her complete divorce from the world around her. In other words though they live their lives connected to hers in some way, they and she are essentially divorced from each other. Therefore they are in no position to help her in matters that are crucial to her survival and will be unable to help her when her end comes.

Sound and sense

The breakdown of language occurs in the latter half of the poem and indicates the deterioration of the speaker's mind. For instance instead of saying 'Heavens were a Hell' she uses the word 'bell' indicating that her inner turmoil drowns all other voices in her mind and is the dominant emotion that she feels. The only sense perception that she is capable of is her ability to hear and that too has been reduced to cacophony.

The loss of rational thinking

The more the poem proceeds that more acute is the loss of the speaker's rational self. It also serves to underline her essential loneliness and underlines her distance from her fellow mourners. The word 'race' implies that she is now involved in a journey which has no possible destination and finds it terrifying. At the same time the word also serves to remind the reader that the speaker's mind has taken her far from the community of men and her fellow mourner. She is now alone in more ways than one: not only is she emotionally and intellectually disconnected from her fellow mourners, but now a metaphorical distance exists between them as well. She is alone and 'solitary' and her reason hangs by a mere plank. This image serves to highlight the speaker's precarious position which may become dire at any moment. This implies that the slender control that she has on her reason may soon be lost as well heralding her descent into darkness and madness. Even as she falls into her metaphorical death ever greater depths of her psyche are revealed to her. This happens because the human mind is infinite. However every realization is a temporary halt for her. The poem ends in a disjointed sentence revealing total discord. The poem ends with the speaker's acceptance of the fact that just as a physical death is the ultimate reality; for her this ultimate reality will be her impending madness. The burial at the end of the poem marks the burial of all rational thinking by the speaker and marks a total death of a sense of self.

7.3.2 Analysis

In the poem the speaker delineates the loss of her mind. The poem is an allegory and compares the death of an individual and the consequent cessation of the person to the cessation of the poetic persona when the speaker's mind ceases to function. In other words the funeral is an attempt to externalize the internal emotions of the speaker. The 'funeral in her brain' then is a metaphorical death of the mind. The funeral is a commonplace occurrence and allows the speaker to create a distance between herself and her emotions. This in turn enables her to express these emotions without having to acknowledge the emotional and psychological turmoil they cause. At the same time the projection of the funeral creates a distance between the reader and the speaker and allows the latter to maintain a modicum of privacy even as she bares her deepest fears and paranoia to the public gaze. This strategy proves useful in the latter half of the poem when the speaker makes it clear that the funeral the reader was witnessing

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was a mirage and never really occurred. According to Cynthia Griffin Wolf, the funeral plays a critical role in the poem and without it the reader would be at a loss to comprehend the experience the speaker was presenting. It is only the funeral and the familiar funeral rites that Dickinson uses in the poem that enable the reader in a position to comprehend what the speaker is saying. Therefore it is the funeral rites that give a coherence and unity to the poem. It is the familiar funeral rites that help the reader to negotiate the unfamiliar terrain of the speaker's mind as they are revealed in the poem.

Through the funeral therefore the speaker dramatizes her mind's descent into madness, a kind of death. Since the funeral rites reconcile the death of a beloved to the individual; similarly they serve to familiarize the horrifying process of losing one's mind and being aware of it happening to the reader. The sense of sorrow and loss that the former event entails is easily transferred to the latter event. This emotion is further strengthened when the speaker uses the image of breaking the coffin open. It reminds the reader of the unnaturalness of the dead coming alive and connects to the horror of realizing that one is losing one's mind even as the process is occurring.

It is interesting to note that the funeral is recounted in the past tense. It is an event that has already occurred and lends a sense of finality and inevitability both to the death and the descent into madness it refers to. At the same time it evinces a sense of resignation in the speaker: it is an event that cannot be prevented. The difference between the speaker and the people attending the funeral is that the latter do not know when they will die or what their end will be. Therefore the speaker who could monitor her impending madness is rendered lonely and divorced from the world of the living people around her. This sense of loneliness is further heightened by the closed casket. The poem seems to suggest that the madness is death because it implies an erasure of self. Therefore even though the physical body per se lives, the spirit and soul of the speaker is dead and needs to be mourned. Another point of departure between the speaker and the mourners is the fact that while the mourners are physically present at the funeral service the speaker does not 'attend' the funeral. In other words while she describes her 'funeral,' i.e. her descent into madness there is no record of how she actually felt while this was happening. In this way she succeeds in separating herself from the other mourners. One needs to ask why this separation between the two occurs. One reason could be that even as the speaker describes her death she finds it an unpalatable event.

A salient feature of the poem is the complete lack of emotions the mourners display. Not only are they a faceless mass, they also do not express any sorrow at the funeral and death they are witness to. In fact they are a silent almost detached presence at the funeral. Their response echoes the speaker's response: she feels nothing for the mourners and is totally alone in her suffering. The idea seems to be that while others may sympathize with her for her diminishing control on her faculties they cannot help her at all. This implies that the speaker is alone in her experiences and faces her emotions alone. The silent mourners underline this sense of loneliness and distance her from the real world. This is also an example of the extreme interiority that we find in Dickinson's works.

As the poem progresses there is a marching cadence to the poem which serves two purposes. On the one hand it places the reader along with the mourners at the funeral service and on the other it hints at the impending loss of rationality. This feeling is given credence by the word 'treading' that recurs in the poem. The idea is

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that as the mourners move so are her thoughts chasing each other in her mind till it becomes a mass of confused thoughts. At this point in the poem the speaker feels that she is as nameless and faceless as the mourners who surround her. This image hints at her ever unraveling sense of control. The term 'race' used here further separates her from the mass of mourners. Her sense of loss of control is further heightened by the words

Kept treading-treading-till it seemed

That Sense was breaking through-

These words give the impression that only is the speaker isolated from the world around her, but also she feels unhappy at any effort they make, however unconsciously, to burst into her inner self. The lines make it clear that the mourners moving around her, are not making any attempt to forge any connection or relationship with her. Their unfeeling behaviour serves to unravel her mind even more. The mourners do not seem to realize that while they are going through the motions of expressing their sorrow their actions hurt her deeply. The poem has a dirge like tone that gives it a tone of a funeral procession. However, while the mourners go through the rituals a funeral entails these create a parallel world where the speaker realizes she is all alone. The loss of life the death implies reminds the speaker of the loss of the mind. This similarity traps the speaker in a world all her own from which there is no escape. After this the poem can only move in one direction: the burial of the dead body and the total loss of all rational thoughts on the part of the speaker.

The repeated motion of the 'treading' and the 'beating' batters in her mind until the speaker can bear no more. The poem makes it clear that even as these noises increase around her she tries to make one last effort to control the rising madness and fails. She endures as long as she can until she goes numb. The word 'beating' is significant in more ways than one: it reminds the readers of the beating drums that herald approaching madness; and it also refers to the slow but steady erosion of the speaker's confidence and sense of self until nothing remains. The word in conjunction with 'treading' is indicative of the psychological torture she underwent even as the funeral went on. If the funeral is representative of the loss of reason, the speaker has been tortured over a substantial period of time by a perceptible loss of reason and approaching insanity. The use of the word 'bell' here reminds the reader of the tolling bells in the church when death occurs. This image accompanied as it is by the 'beating' drums further heightens the sense of tragedy at the inevitable conclusion of the poem. The word 'bell' also leads the speaker to the inevitable conclusion of the funeral ceremony: the lowering of the casket into the grave. It is at this point that the speaker's mind balks and it makes a final effort to cling to its remaining glimpses of reality and rational thought.

The speaker realizes that though the mourners are present at the service they are disconnected from the events happening there. Similarly, though they are present around her they are both unaware and unconcerned about her rising panic and terror at her approaching death. Just as she has created a distance between them so have they. This technique serves to depersonalize her tragedy as far as the mourners are concerned and absolves them of any role in her death and tragedy. It was the collective 'they' that were responsible for her demise. Beyond when they were directly treading on her, to when they were seated is perhaps a reference to when she secluded herself from people and she still could not escape what was going on inside her head. Clearly she holds the people in her life, and not herself, responsible for her own mental demise.

They were unaware of what was happening, contributing to her demise without knowing that they were doing it.

The fact that the mourners don't care for the destruction they wreck is further exemplified in the lines
And then I heard them lift a Box
And creak across my Soul

As they move the coffin for the final burial they wreck even more suffering on her soul almost as if the death of her mind was not enough. At this point they strip her mind of any remaining sense and hasten its descent into madness. The creak implies that the mourners did not intend to make a decisive strike; instead they wanted to erase any remaining sense through a series of deft strokes which were fatal in their softness. The phrase 'same boots of lead' implies that the trauma the mourners caused as they walked about is being repeated. The difference is that while earlier she could feel her emotions and thoughts running around trying to make sense of what was happening and trying to prevent a total descent into anarchy, now her faculties are so completely decimated that she can do nothing more than watch and follow tamely as she is led to her death and destruction.

There is a change in tone in the last two stanzas of the poem. The jagged meter highlights the stress and the chaos the speaker is undergoing and feeling. The regular meter of the earlier part of the poem indicated the presence of the familiar and the known. It reminded the speaker that she was in a world she was familiar with. Although she had withdrawn from it, it was not alien to her and a return was still a possibility. The jagged meter, however, heralds the complete deterioration of the speaker's mental landscape. It also underlines the fact that all that was familiar and known no longer exists and so she can never go back. All that she can do is go forward and embrace the madness that this experience has brought with it. The separation marked by the words 'race' and 'ears' is so complete that she can never revert to the earlier state of not knowing. She had separated herself from the other people around her stating they were a different race: i.e. had different sensibilities from her. Her argument was that since they could not understand her there was no reason in interacting with them. It is interesting to note that as her death approaches this idea is repeated. At this point of time she uses the idea of difference to suggest that the mourners and others like them are incapable of understanding her emotions and therefore she finds herself alone. More than that the image implies that she would not be able to connect with them and forge a human bond which could sustain her even if she tried.

At this point there is a change in the tone of the poem and the focus shifts from the funeral per se to discuss the reason for her personal tragedy. When this discussion ensues the speaker is unable to come to a viable answer. The only answer that she can come up with is that she is facing this tragedy simply because she is broken and alone. The 'Silence' can also be another reference to her isolation with its implication of separation from the rest of the world.

When in the last stanza:

And I dropped down, and down-

And hit a world at every plunge (19)

The idea behind the portrayal of death in different worlds is to make an attempt to find the right one and also herself. This reflects the poet's attempt to seize every opportunity to save herself.

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The final stanza uses 'and' at the beginning of every sentence. This recitative use of 'and' has a dual function. Apart from offering a rhythmic support to the poet's fall, it also heightens the sense of fall and her subsequent 'hit'. The repetition highlights the action. Her fall into abyss is not merely a description of her being dropped into the grave, but a statement of her suffering and misery. The poet is trying to imply that she suffered pain with every attempt she made, as she 'hit a world at every plunge.' On her way down, she did not just pass the world, but hit each one of them.

According to Paula Benet this plunge has a religious significance. She writes: 'There is neither a sustaining God nor a sustaining scaffold of meaning to support her. Like the trapdoor on a gallows or like the planks supporting a coffin until it is dropped into the grave, the 'bottom' drops out of reality.'

This illustrates her view regarding the existence of God or at least the role he plays in her life. It also works toward emphasizing her loneliness and shows that her suffering is even beyond the help of God.

The image presented in the line - 'And then a plank in reason, broke,' offers a frightening vision of a coffin waiting to be taken down into the grave, but instead when the plank breaks, it is plunged into the hole in the ground. The image that materializes here is one of a pain and disrespect, the final indignity that strips away the hope of a respectable departure from the world. Perhaps, it implies a social injustice and disregard of human dignity, even till the end of life. It also emphasizes the duration of the fall, making it clear that the drop, instead of having taken place in an instant, was a long process that allowed her to go 'down and down'.

The poet also highlights her frenzied efforts for her own survival, as she 'hit a world at every plunge'. In order to illustrate and emphasize her will and efforts to survive, she dramatizes her pain until the very final moment.

As her fall ends, she is finished knowing, but then the poet indicates that the possibility of an end is still far away, for the poem ends in a dash, suggesting that this could not possibly be the end. It could also imply a possibility of an eternal life, life after death.

7.3.3 Style of the Poem

The poem is written in the ballad meter and rhymes ABCB. The tone is similar to a funeral dirge and adds to the somber atmosphere of the poem. The rhyme scheme is relieved by the slant rhyme of the last stanza:

And I dropped down, and down-
 And hit a World at every plunge,
 And Finished knowing-then- (20)

The poem is written in five quatrains. There is a preponderance of visual imagery, a characteristic feature of Dickinson's poetry and the reader can picture a funeral service as he reads the text. The poem is replete with alliterations: 'felt' & 'funeral,' 'treading', 'treading' & 'till' and 'being' & 'but.'

The cadence of the poem reminds one of a marching contingent and echoes throughout the poem. The alliteration in the poem creates an auditory image wherein the mourners are 'trading' the drums are 'beating' and the speaker is going 'down, down.' These negative images heighten the tragic deathlike mood of the poem, creating a spiral like movement that hastens the poem to its inevitable conclusion: the speaker's insanity. There is kinesthesia in the descriptions of 'Kept treading-treading-till it

seemed' (3) as well as in 'Kept beating-beating-till I thought' (7) and 'And I dropped down, and down-(18), with each double use of the word appealing to the kinesthetic sense of motion, so that we could almost feel the rhythm of the action.

Emily Dickinson

7.4 BECAUSE I COULD NOT STOP FOR DEATH

*Because I could not stop for Death –
He kindly stopped for me –
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
And Immortality.*

*We slowly drove – He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility –*

*We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess – in the Ring –
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain –
We passed the Setting Sun –*

*Or rather – He passed us –
The Dews drew quivering and chill –
For only Gossamer, my Gown –
My Tippet – only Tulle –*

*We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground –
The Roof was scarcely visible –
The Cornice – in the Ground –*

*Since then – 'tis Centuries – and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses' Heads
Were toward Eternity –*

In this poem Dickinson personifies death as a gentleman caller who takes a leisurely carriage ride with the poet to her grave. In the poem she also personifies immortality. The poem is written in six quatrains with the iambic meter alternating between the tetrameter and the trimeter. Dickinson uses end rhyme in the poem. She also uses a variety of literary devices like alliteration, anaphora, paradox, and personification in the poem. The poem provokes controversy because it presents a complex and multi-dimensional view of death, a concept too mysterious to be fully expressed simplistically.

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Check Your Progress

5. How is the poem *I felt a Funeral, in my Brain* different from *Tie the Strings to my Life, My Lord*?
6. What does the latter half of the poem indicate?
7. What does Cynthia Griffin Wolf say about *I felt a Funeral, in my Brain*?

At the same time the poem forces the reader to take an unvarnished look at his exertions in life and ask the question as to why he or she is trying as hard as they are.

7.4.1 Synopsis

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Death calls on the speaker in the garb of a gentleman caller. He takes her for a ride in his horse drawn carriage. On the way she sees a variety of scenes. She sees the peaceful scenes of children playing, fields of grain and the setting sun. With the approaching dusk the speaker feels cold. She is clothed in thin silk shawl for coat. In the journey they stop at her grave and it is revealed that she has been dead for centuries. However, the speaker feels that she embraced death only a short time ago. The horses' heads in the poems signify the transition from life to death to afterlife.

This is one of Dickinson's most enigmatic poems. In it the speaker communicates from beyond the grave and through her words one can trace the movement from life to afterlife. In the poem death is a gentleman; he patiently waits for the speaker because she is busy and cannot spare time for him. She is impressed by his civility and willingly abandons the tasks she was involved in when he first arrived. Later the two of them embark on a carriage ride. During the ride the two observe the passing scenery and she notices evidence of life all around her. She sees the children playing in the parks and notices fields of grain spread out all around her. The changing scenery impresses upon the reader the fact that the ride is carrying the reader from an urban to a primarily rural landscape. Both death and the speaker are active agents when the ride begins; but the speaker's role changes as the ride reaches its conclusion. When the two observe the sunset the speaker is reminded of the fact that she is dead and cannot participate in the world around her. In other words, instead of creating the landscape in the act of viewing it she is a part of it. This is further underlined when the two visit her grave and her tombstone. Her transitory state is highlighted by the fact that she feels cold because she is dressed in gossamer clothes. The cold she feels is reminiscent of the cold hand of death.

Another interesting feature of the poem is the fact that the physical movement of death and the speaker mirrors their metaphorical movement. In the beginning of the poem death visits her 'home' and escorts her around town and country in a loving manner. The image reminds us of two lovers who are preparing to spend eternity together in a loving marriage. This journey is inverted at sunset. Death after escorting the speaker on a memorable trip (and nothing is more final than the final march to death) escorts her to her true home: the grave where she will live for eternity in the loving embrace of her 'true' love death. The idea that the poem seems to be positing by paralleling these two scenarios is that death is the ultimate reality. What is interesting in this formulation is that the terror of the poem 'I felt a funeral' is missing in this poem. While both poems deal with death in one the speaker faces a complete annihilation of the self while in the other the speaker embraces death as the ultimate pleasure. The poem also hints at immortality when the speaker asserts that even though she has been dead for centuries she feels that no time has passed at all. It is not just any day that she compares it to, however—it is the very day of her death, when she saw 'the Horses' Heads' that were pulling her towards this eternity.

7.4.2 Analysis

Death as a theme recurs in Dickinson's poetry and this poem is an example of that. However, instead of evoking emotions of terror and horror death invokes emotions of

civility and gentility. In the poem, death is a gentleman caller who is prepared to wait because his arrival is importunate. Interestingly, it is this civility that motivates the speaker to abandon her pursuits and join him in the carriage ride.

The scene is almost romantic: the two, the speaker and death spend a day in joyous pursuits. The day ends with the speaker accepting graciously death's mark and being happy in the graveyard. In fact, death is personified as a consummate gentleman who makes the speaker feel comfortable and gently leads her to eternity. The fact that the speaker is not frightened and goes willingly is apparent from the fact that the tone of the poem is not frantic and the speaker never panics. This is in direct contrast to the poem 'I felt a funeral.' Another salient feature of the poem is that as the poem proceeds, the speaker moves physically from the centre of the civilized world, i.e. London to the outskirts. This journey parallels the speaker's journey from a life wherein she gets her validation from external sources to life lived internally where she gets validation from within herself. This is indicative of the interiority of Emily Dickinson's poem which is a salient characteristic feature of her poetry.

After death meets the speaker he introduces her to the world around them. She in turn sees this as an act of kindness and is happy to be escorted. Moreover, death gives her personal attention. Like a true gentleman she is the focus of his attention and he does not demur in interacting with her. This individual attention is further emphasized by the fact that they are alone in the carriage (something contrary to custom and acceptable forms of behaviour) and through the use of words like 'held' and 'ourselves' in an internal rhyme in the poem. This internal rhyme serves to highlight the extreme interiority of the speaker's thoughts. She is in such a thrall of the gentleman that she does not hesitate to abandon her 'labour' and her 'leisure' to follow him. The image is used to suggest that the speaker feels no pain or sense of loss or sorrow at her death. Instead she welcomes it. This impresses the speaker even more and she enjoys the ride tremendously. The poet seems to be suggesting that while a life fully lived is desirable, death is the ultimate reality and need not be seen to be terrifying and frightening. The fact that in the poem 'I felt a funeral' it was precisely this erasure of the self-consciousness that terrified is interesting. The two poems seen in conjunction raise the question as to how to reconcile the supposed two divergent responses to death in the poet's psyche. Since Dickinson's poems are extremely personal and were never meant to be published it is very possible that they deal with her changing reactions to death over a period of time. This is borne out by the fact that such multiplicity of voice is found throughout her work and is indicative of a soul in communication with itself in an attempt to understand not just itself but also the world around it.

Another idea that the poem projects is the difficulty of the life itself. In contrast to death which marks the cessation of all endeavor life is defined by the 'labour' one does. It is interesting to note that the aristocratic almost decadent life that death in his guise as gentleman caller seems to live is in direct contrast to the activities they see being performed around them. Moreover these activities are being performed by individuals irrespective of age and gender. Through this the speaker seems to be suggesting that life is marked by incessant labour and raises the need for such labour. Interestingly none of the participants in these activities can appreciate the world that they are creating; it is only the two people sitting in the carriage who can do so. One can say that through this analogy Dickinson is raising a very pertinent question: why work hard and try to succeed if such constant activity deprives you of the chance of appreciating that you are creating. This can be seen in the case of the children: they are playing in the fields and the image seems to imply innocence and an instinctive

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enjoyment of the world. However, the children are playing during recess. The idea is that this play is not permanent and is the primary tasks that these children perform. 'Strove' emphasizes the labours of existence: the primary tasks of these children are not being just children; it is to prepare for a future and to work for it. The speaker uses the words 'we passed' repeatedly to inform all that she sees on the journey with death. The term highlights her relative disinterest at the repeating scenery. The idea is that instead of creating something new and appreciating life, man is involved in repetitive tasks that instead of giving meaning to his existence make it monotonous.

The tone of the poem here is relaxed and peaceful. However, the mood changes as night approaches. The weather is colder and the sense of calmness and oneness that the speaker felt with the world is disturbed: she feels cold and uncomfortable. This speaker feels this as night approaches. A couple of things happen simultaneously at this point in the poem: night comes and the sun sets; therefore in keeping with social conventions the gentleman death is honor bound to return the speaker home, i.e. return her where she belongs. The events in the poem at this point are revealing. The fact that the speaker feels cold can have several meanings; she could be feeling cold since the absence of the sun's warmth reminds her of the approaching cold winters. This in turn is representative of the fact that though the speaker finds the activities that make 'life' monotonous and repetitive, nevertheless she has not as yet reconciled herself completely to her mortality and death. Her feeling cold is, therefore, also her unease with her changing condition. Also, if the early ride were to be seen as the courting between two lovers under the watchful and approving eyes of society, then the cold that she feels after sun set can be regarded as the consummation of this love away from the eyes of society.

This image is further bound by the fact that death in his guise as gentleman take the speaker to her final, 'true' home – her grave. At this point all the images coalesce to remind the speaker that although death implies a change in status and scene it is the ultimate reality and the only way that the speaker can achieve immortality. Therefore, in the final analysis the cold that the speaker feels can be regarded as the final stirrings of unease she feels before she happily embraces death and immortality. Again the change in emotion here from the earlier poem 'I felt a funeral' is remarkable. Death is not an annihilation of the self instead it becomes the celebration of the self especially since it gives the self to exist on its own terms without having to concern itself with social concerns and norms.

For a young woman who refuses to meet people and spent a large part of her life in her own room, such a situation no doubt would be attractive. In other words if we were to compare the two poems it seems as if the poet is trying to come to terms with her own identity crises and trying to form an idea of how she sees other people in her life. Nonetheless at this point in the poem reconciliation seems to be happening. Also words like 'gossamer' 'gown' and 'tippet' 'tulle' bring the material trappings into focus and remind the speaker as well as the reader of the transition as it is happening. Thus even though the poem at this point seems sinister (considering that it is dark and cold and they are in a graveyard) the note of evil is completely absent. Instead the tone soon becomes celebratory and happy.

It is because of this reason that the last stanza of the poem is revealing. Here it becomes clear that the speaker has been dead for centuries. However, time has no meaning for her: she could have been dead for a day or for decades, it is irrelevant. What matters is that her new status allows her to relish her freedom. In fact the final

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stanza of the poem celebrates this moment of realization. It was in the graveyard that she realized that Death was more than just death; instead it was also immortality. This move toward immortality is emphasized by the words: 'surmised the Horses' Heads/Were toward Eternity -.' The word 'eternity' followed by the dash emphasizes this sense of the forever that death brings with it. It also implies the speaker's persona trailing out into the infinite. In the final stanza therefore time loses all meaning. The activities that the speaker has seen earlier in the day then become the endeavours of man which are completely transitory and meaningless. If we were to consider the fact that for Emily Dickinson it was the mindscape that was most important then this poem reveals an important aspect of her supposed 'withdrawal' from the world. For her, her refusal to meet new people was not a refusal to live or even a sign of madness as some have suggested; instead it marks her desire to achieve fulfillment in her mental landscape. For her a life was truly lived only if the individual had a clear, unvarnished understanding of himself and this in turn was impossible without taking a cold hard look at one's own mind and soul. Seen in this light the poem under consideration implies that for the speaker, and by extension Emily Dickinson, death is not something to be terrified of, but something to love since it provides the opportunity for self-fulfillment and self-realization.

The words 'House that seemed / A Swelling of the Ground -' suggest not just the grave but their meaning goes further. For the speaker the ultimate reality is death or the eternity that it signifies. At the same time she also says that reality is that which is created in the mind and not necessarily the one that surrounds us. In other words she is staking claim to the right of the individual to create their own reality and by extension their own formulating principles of life. This image is followed by the image of the horses: 'I first surmised the Horses' Heads/Were toward Eternity'. This seems to suggest that the soul is eternal and never dies.

In light of this, the beginning of the poem can also be seen in a new light. In the beginning it was death the ultimate reality which had come to the speaker's home to take her on a journey. However, seen from the perspective of the conclusion it is apparent that the speaker was already dead when she embarked on this journey. This implies that she had already achieved immortality, the desired objective of the end of the poem, even as the poem begins. This further highlights the fact that time is irrelevant and that there is a depth in the poem that makes it interesting. This interiority brings the idea of immortality which this poem deals with into greater focus.

7.4.3 Images and Metaphors in the Poem

Death

According to Engle, this is one of Emily Dickinson's most enigmatic poems. She uses images and metaphors to explore death in novel ways. These images, however, important are also ambiguous. The first two lines capture the poem's central theme. What these lines mean is the cause of debate. According to some critics, Dickinson here is embracing death, for others death is an equal if not a supplicant in the relationship the two share. In the poem, she personifies death as a gentleman caller who is not intimidating or frightening. Instead, death is represented as a suave, sophisticated man who is conscious of the nuances of the civilized world and gives these nuances their due. It is this civility that makes him a desirable companion so much so that the speaker abandons whatever she is doing and agrees to go with him on a carriage ride with alacrity. As the carriage ride proceeds and night approaches death is presented

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as a conscientious gentleman and one who is aware of the needs and requirements of the woman accompanying him. This transforms him from a gentleman to a desirable lover and one who will satisfy his beloved. This image is fulfilled later in the poem when it is only in death's company that the speaker can embrace and enjoy eternity.

Death is more than just a gentleman caller in the poem. Another reading of the first two lines suggests that death ceases to matter if one stops being intimidated by it. In other words when the speaker stopped obsessing about her mortality and focused instead on living her life to the fullest she became free and death ceased to matter to her. She stopped rushing into an unending list of activities performed only to give a sense of meaning to her life and to stave off any sense of her mortality. Therefore, death becomes a non-reality for her and exists only 'within the time-bound finite world' and not within 'the imaginative infinity of consciousness.' What the poet is saying here is that the activities of conventional society are ordered around the principle of giving meaning to a life whose ultimate reality is death and an erasure of the self. Thus, life is predicated upon fear of its conclusion.

This is the tone in the poem 'I felt a funeral.' The poet is attempting something different here; here she is positing a possible solution to this paralyzing fear of death and the eternal silence. She suggests that it is how one orders one's life and not what one does in it that makes life meaningful. In other words she sees death not as a 'biological death' but as an opportunity to live a creative life of seclusion. According to John Greenberg, in the poem Emily Dickinson is stating that a life spent in creative activities in seclusion from the concerns of the material world is a life well lived. He argues that this is a radical statement, especially, if we consider that it is made by a woman so unlike her contemporaries. He says that her life is 'so abnormal, so unlike the life any sane young woman (including Emily) would choose that it could be compared only to death'

The children, the fields and the setting sun

These three images are central to our understanding of the poem. They signify the various stages of life from childhood to youth to old age. The children signify a time of innocence and joy. The children are playing and are unaware of the fact that life implies state of constant toil and hard work. However, a tacit acknowledgement that hard work is an integral part of being alive when it is mentioned that the children are playing not because this is what they normally do all the time, but because they have at this point of time taken a break from their studies. The idea is that even in childhood the demands of the world start imposing on the individual and start determining the way they behave. In other words these demands encroach on the individual and his desire to do what he wishes even when he is a child. Thus, the time of childhood, a supposed time of innocence is transformed into a time when one prepares for the adult world. The fields of grain symbolize toil and the fulfillment of this toil. It must be noted that even as the speaker looks at these fields of corn there seems to be a sense of detachment from it. In other words it appears as if she is a voyeur looking inside from the outside. This tone seems inexplicable considering that the speaker is very much alive and is out on a drive, albeit with death. This congruity is clarified only in the last stanza when it become clear the she has been dead for some time and finds all these activities meaningless and transitory. Thus, even though the poem assigns some meaning to these activities in the early part, by the end these are transitory

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meaningless activities which one indulges in as one waits for death which ushers in the ultimate reality: eternity. Similarly the 'setting sun' implies old age. Within the poem this image reminds the reader that soon childhood and youth give way to old age. In conventional terms old age is a marker of a well-lived life. It also signifies wisdom and maturity. The speaker, however, rejects these formulations and suggests that all the wisdom and maturity of old age is predicated on the experiences and endeavour of childhood and youth. Since she has already classified these as meaningless activities the wisdom etc. of old age is also easily dismissed by her. Taken together these images suggest that Dickinson is questioning held norms and stating claim to the artist formulating their own reality.

Through these images and the unequivocal rejection of what they stand for she seems to be suggesting that the individual has the right to determine the course of his life and need not order it according to conventional norms. This formulation is interesting since this is precisely how she herself lived her life; she refused to meet people, stayed in her room composing poems. More importantly her poems do not reflect the political, social and ideological debates of her time. It is almost as if they did not occur and even if they did she was either unaware of them or did not appreciate their significance. In the light of this poem we can look at this exclusion in another way. Dickinson did not mention contemporary events in her poetry not because she was not aware of them but because she did not think they mattered. For her it was the individual consciousness and sensibility that were of prime consideration.

In other words all the activities the children, young men and the old indulge in, and which are also shown in the poem, are meaningless because they do not originate from the spirit's desire to create. Instead they are performed as per social expectations and are predicated on the desire to be seen as successful by one's contemporaries. In light of this the presentation of the grave as the ultimate, true home is important. If all of us are to end up in the grave with death as the eternal companion then one has to live life as per one's beliefs to give it any meaning. Thus, it is how one defines a fruitful life and strives to achieve it that is important. Eternity in light of this argument assumes significance. On one hand it signifies the immortality of the soul but it also implies the supremacy of the creative spirit over material things.

George Monterio has noted that 'the children . . . do not play (as anyone would expect them to) but strive.' Engle says that the activities of childhood are 'the thrashings of professional competition that occur in the ladder-climbing stages of one's career.' Interestingly the Children strove / at Recess - in the Ring - ' This suggests that the children are playing a game of 'Ring-a-ring-a-roses.' This game was originally played by children during the middle age and recited by them as 'a charm against the ravages of the plague' (Monterio). Thus, even as the children are playing a seeming innocent game within its ritualistic words are embedded the 'reminder of the mortal stakes.' Thus, death is an unseen presence all through our lives.

ACTIVITY

Conduct a survey of a group of students to find out what they think about any of the works of Emily Dickinson.

Check Your Progress

8. What does Dickinson personify in the poem *Because I could not stop for Death*?
9. What does the horses' head signify?
10. What role does death play in the poem?

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DID YOU KNOW

Besides her poems, Emily Dickinson also wrote hundreds of letters to family and friends. The letters have survived and have been published for all to read. The letters contain poems, cartoons, jokes, fragments, news, gossip, and biographical information about the poet, among a lot of other things.

7.5 SUMMARY

In this unit, you have learnt that:

- In Emily Dickinson's poem, *I felt a Funeral, in My Brain*, Dickinson portrays what appears to be a funeral in her mind. When one imagines a funeral; nevertheless, they generally think of it as a service for a person who has passed away.
- Even though Dickinson gives a description of the proceedings that normally take place at a funeral: people who are mourning, rituals, lifting of a box or what appears to be a coffin, there is no death of a person; there is no actual burial taking place.
- This experience of a funeral is going on in Dickinson's mind, is in fact a funeral of the death of her mind.
- In the beginning of *I felt a Funeral, in My Brain*, Dickinson starts by describing a slow death of her mind when she says, 'Mourners to and fro kept treading-treading till it seemed that sense was giving way.'
- Dickinson talks about mourners who apparently imply her thoughts and these thoughts keep coming in and going out of her mind, 'till it seemed that sense was giving way', or each and every logic was beginning to fail.
- In the next verse of *I Felt a Funeral, in My Brain*, Dickinson keeps on describing the long and drawn-out relapse of her mind when she says, 'And when they all were seated, a service like a drum-kept beating-beating till I thought my mind was going numb.' The formal procedures for the death of her mind has now started and the 'beating-beating' looks as if to stress upon this thinking that continues to devastate the remnants of her sanity.
- At the end of the funeral service, when the coffin is carried to the cemetery by the pallbearers, Dickinson's ultimate and final attempt to save her sanity is depicted in the third stanza, in the words, 'Then I heard them lift a box /And creak across my soul/With those same Boots of Lead, again,/Then space began to toll.'
- In *I felt a Funeral, in my Brain*, Dickinson indicates that her mind is about to be buried, and as her mind is being buried, she hears those last thoughts of reasoning, and suddenly all thoughts are gone and the only one left is Dickinson, 'and silence, some strange race here.'
- In the final stanza of *I felt a Funeral, in my Brain*, as the coffin is being lowered into the grave, Dickinson thinks aloud the final result of the death of her mind as she explains, 'And then a Plank in Reason broke,/And I dropped down, and down' The base of the coffin suddenly breaks, indicating that this 'Plank in Reason' is a level of understanding, thinking, knowing.

- In the poem, *Because I Could Not Stop for Death*, death, arrives as a gentleman suitor, who halts to take the speaker for a ride in his horse-drawn coach.
- They ride at a leisurely speed and the speaker appears to be very comfortable with the gentleman. Going through the town, the speaker comes across playing children, meadows of grain and the setting sun. It is a quite calm sight.
- As twilight falls, the speaker starts feeling very cold, because she is only wearing a thin silk shawl covering her. She was not dressed for her ad hoc date with death when she got dressed that day.
- The ride ends at her grave, marked with a small tombstone.
- In the final stanza of *Because I Could Not Stop for Death*, we come to know that the speaker's ride with death was a flashback (she was already dead centuries ago).
- However, all this seemed like yesterday when she initially felt that the horse heads pointed toward eternity, i.e., were an indication of the passage from life to death and then to the life after death.

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7.6 KEY TERMS

- **Frosty:** It means unfriendly, in a way that suggests that someone does not approve of something.
- **Seminary:** It is a college where priests, ministers, or rabbis are trained.
- **Psalms:** It is a song, poem, or prayer that praises God, especially one in the Bible.
- **Trimester:** It is one of the three periods in the year during which classes are held in schools and universities.
- **Calvinistic:** It is something which is connected to a church that follows the teachings of the French Protestant, John Calvin.
- **Transcendentalism:** It is the philosophy, which emphasizes the spiritual benefits to people of periods of deep thought instead of action.

7.7 ANSWERS TO 'CHECK YOUR PROGRESS'

1. Emily Dickinson had a distant relationship with her mother but shared warmer ties with her father, Edward Dickinson. Nevertheless her relationship with him often turned sour.
2. Emily was a good student, but she had to leave Mount Holyoke after a year due to ill health.
3. Emily Dickinson wrote nearly 1800 poems in her lifetime, most of which were published posthumously.
4. Dickinson's language is relatively simple but it is a set of off-rhymes and an unconventional punctuation that marks her poetry as different from her contemporaries.
5. In the poem '*Tie the Strings to my Life, My Lord*' death is presented a joyful journey done on the Day of Judgment in the company of Christ. The poem '*I*

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felt a Funeral, in my Brain carries the emotion to the other extreme. This poem deals with the anguish of death and all that it entails.

6. The breakdown of language occurs in the latter half of the poem and indicates the deterioration of the speaker's mind.
7. According to Cynthia Griffin Wolf, the funeral plays a critical role in the poem and without it the reader would be at a loss to comprehend the experience the speaker was presenting. It is only the funeral and the familiar funeral rites that Dickinson uses in the poem that enable the reader to comprehend what the speaker is saying.
8. In this poem Dickinson personifies death as a gentleman caller who takes a leisurely carriage ride with the poet to her grave. In the poem she also personifies immortality.
9. The horses' heads in the poems signify the transition from life to death to afterlife.
10. In the poem, death is a gentleman caller who is prepared to wait because his arrival is importunate.

7.8 QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

Short-Answer Questions

1. Why does Emily Dickinson's personal life receive as much attention, or even more attention, than her poetry?
2. What is the meaning of *I felt a Funeral, in my Brain*?
3. Who are the mourners in the poem *I felt a Funeral, in My Brain*?
4. Which description best applies to the poem's characterization of death in *Because I could not stop for Death*?
5. Write a brief synopsis of the poem *Because I could not stop for Death*.

Long-Answer Questions

1. Discuss some of the themes that appear in Emily Dickinson's poetry.
2. Describe some of the reasons that Dickinson did not gain fame as a poet during her lifetime.
3. Analyse the poem, *I felt a Funeral, in my Brain*?
4. Analyse the poem *Because I could not stop for Death*.
5. Give an account of the images and metaphors in *Because I could not stop for Death*.

7.9 FURTHER READING

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