Lecture 31

Feminism and Literature III: Gynocriticism, Écriture Feminine, Judith Butler

Welcome back, all of you, to our ongoing series of lectures on Literary Theory. As you know, for the past few lectures we have been discussing feminism and its impact on literary studies. We have traced our way down from the late eighteenth century writings of Mary Wollstonecraft through the early twentieth century works of Virginia Woolf to the landmark 1949 publication of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. Now, it is important to remember here that this history of feminism that we have traced through the life and works of Wollstonecraft, Woolf, and de Beauvoir was accompanied by sustained political campaigns to win more rights for women within the society. Indeed, by the time de Beauvoir's book was published, feminist movements across the Western world had wrested for women the important political right to vote. The developing economic scenario in the decades immediately following the Second World War further aided the cause of women's liberation in the Western world, and it did so in two distinct ways. On the one hand there was now a growing consumer base purchasing things like refrigerator, vacuum cleaner, and washing machine, and these household technologies freed up a significant amount of labour time required by women, who were expected to perform domestic chores. On the other hand, complementing this freeing up of labour time, was the development of the service sector which employed women in ever greater numbers. So in a lot of ways, the condition of women within the Western society had developed much between the time of Mary Wollstonecraft and the Second World War. And all these changes are regarded as part of the first-wave of feminism.

De Beauvoir acknowledges these positive changes in *The Second Sex*. But she also considers this to be only a partial revolution because women still remained unequal to men within the

patriarchal society. The second-wave of feminism that gained momentum during the 1960s and that took its inspiration from texts like de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* or Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) therefore sought to address this inequality through foregrounding issues like reproductive rights, conditions faced by women in work place, and domestic violence.

In today's lecture however, our focus would not be so much on the political and social impact that the post-second world war feminism had. Rather our focus would be on the changes in the field of literary studies affected by this new feminist momentum. And towards that end, I would be discussing the concepts of gynocriticism and écriture feminine. And after elaborating these two concepts which represent some of the major ways in which feminist thoughts have influenced literary studies we will move on to explore the works of Judith Butler and see how it complicates the basic notions of gender identity.

Gynocriticism

So, to start with gynocriticism, as we know, one of the preoccupations of feminist theorists whom we have studied so far was with pointing out the discriminatory representation of women in literature produced by men. This we noticed most particularly while discussing *The Second Sex*, where de Beauvoir speaks about how celebrated male writers like D.H. Lawrence, Paul Claudel, or André Breton mythologise women in their works and reinforce their status as the Other. The main thrust of this kind of literary criticism is to explore and expose the workings of patriarchal conventions and discriminatory bias that informs texts written by males. But there is also another side to feminist literary criticism which we observed while discussing Virginia Woolf. That is the desire to formulate a history and a canon of texts written by female authors. With the story of the fictional Judith Shakespeare we have seen how the very possibility of women authors was systematically denied within the patriarchal society. And even if women

authors were able to write, by overcoming the difficulties of neither having a room of their own nor usually a disposable income of £500 that Woolf talks about, they would remain forgotten, marginalised and outside the pale of the literary canons. In fact, it is this systematic exclusion of women writers from the canon that makes all "great" literature appear to be written by men.

By the 1970s, feminist literary critics were trying to address this gap by focusing on what is referred to as "gynotexts" or women's texts. This term gynotext and the associated concept of gynocriticism were first proposed by Elaine Showalter, a professor of English at the University of Princeton. So, what is gynocriticism? Well, first and foremost gynocriticism is a mode of criticism which seeks to build a framework of literary analysis that is pivoted on the female identity. This would mean at the most basic level, foregrounding the texts written by female authors which are usually kept out of the category of "great" literature. Gynocritics would use these texts to identify subjects that most prominently concern female authors – subjects like domesticity, child rearing etc. Apart from this, the gynocritics would also focus on the specific language uses that might be peculiar to the female authors and that might be seen as distinguishing them from male authors. Through exploring all of this, the gynocritic would try to lay bare, in the words of Showalter, "the psychodynamics of female creativity; the trajectory of the individual or collective female career; and the evolution or laws of a female literary tradition".

Gynocritics during the late twentieth century produced a number of texts including Patricia Meyer Spacks's *The Female Imagination* (1975), Ellen Moers's *Literary Women* (1976), and Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* (1977). But the most iconic text of gynocriticism was Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's 1979 publication *The Madwoman in the Attic*. The madwoman in the title is a reference to the Jamaican character of Bertha Mason in Charlotte

Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*. In the novel, Mason is kept locked away by her husband Edward Rochester in an attic room in his country house in England claiming that she is mad. The central argument that Gilbert and Gubar puts forward by referring to the figure of Bertha Mason is that within the patriarchal society, where writing literature is seen as a masculine activity, female writers suffer from a strong sense of anxiety. This anxiety of somehow transgressing the domain of femininity and trespassing into a male domain gets reflected in the fiction of nineteenth century female fiction writers in English through the dual depiction of women as angels of the house and women as mad, frenzied and uncontrollable. In Brontë's novel this duality is represented on the one side by Jane Eyre who represents the angelic side of femininity and on the other side by Bertha Mason who is the madwoman in the attic. According to Gilbert and Gubar, the angelic figures are attempts made by the woman authors to depict female figures in accordance to the expectations of the patriarchy. But the figures of the madwoman like Mason for instance are representations of the anxiety of the women writers stemming from their transgressive roles as authors.

Écriture Feminine

Now, one of the major criticism that is usually levied against the gynocritics is that they essentialise gender identity. What does that mean? Well it means that according to the gynocritics certain perspectives, certain literary subjects and certain ways of styling the language are unique to women. In other words, if you are a female author, gynocritics would expect your literary work to be of a certain kind that would be imprinted with the essence of your womanly identity which would distinguish it from texts written by male authors. This charge of essentialism is also levied against the concept of écriture feminine which was proposed by the French feminist critic Hélène Cixous in her famous essay “The Laugh of Medusa” published in

1975. This French term, écriture feminine, translates literally into feminine writing or woman's writing. The idea of écriture feminine stresses that language within a patriarchal society is phallocentric or centred around the phallus. This assertion of language being phallocentric traces back to a Lacanian theory about the language, symbolic order, and oedipal complex. The Lacanian theory is complex and we will not be going into that here. But if we try to understand it in simple terms, what Cixous is saying is that language use as a norm foregrounds the male. A slightly overused but good example through which this can be understood with reference to English language is to see how the gendered word "man" is used to stand in for the general category of human being. In other words, "man" in the English language as it is usually written or spoken represents the human norm. Now Cixous points out that a woman when writing in languages which normally prioritises the male and the masculine have to constantly struggle to manipulate and even break down the language in order to make it a suitable vehicle for her own thoughts and experiences. Écriture feminine is therefore marked by syntactical chaos, disruptive gaps, unusual images, and puns all of which attempt to break the sense of "normality" of how language is otherwise used within patriarchy. Now, here again you can see that there is a degree of gender essentialism that is involved. The very fact of being a female author gets connected here with forms of language use that would be imprinted by a womanly essence.

Judith Butler

To understand why essentialising the womanly identity might be a problem let us now turn to the work of Judith Butler, who argues that gender identity is not an inherent essence that we possess but rather a performative construct. According to Butler, we do not simply belong to a gender, but rather we *do* our gender. Now I understand that these sentences are sounding rather cryptic to you. But before I elaborate on them let me first introduce you to Judith Butler. Butler was born in

1956 in Cleveland, Ohio in a Jewish family and she received her Bachelors, Masters, and doctoral degree from the Yale University. And right now she is a chair professor in the department of comparative literature at the University of California, Berkley. Apart from her academic work, she is also known for her activism for the lesbian and gay rights, and also for her anti-Zionist stand. She has authored a number of very important books, among which the most celebrated is her 1990 publication titled *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. It is on this book that we are going to focus today and as you will see during our discussion that with Butler we start moving beyond the boundaries of feminism.

So now let's come back to the statement that gender is a performative construct and that we "do" gender rather than simply belong to one gender category or the other. This is in fact the main thesis of *Gender Trouble*. So what does Butler mean when she says gender is performative? Well, before we start discussing the concept of performativity, let's start with the more common sense understanding of gender. Most of us live within heteronormative patriarchal societies, which is to say that we live within patriarchal societies that consider heterosexuality to be the norm. Within such a social framework, the understanding of gender is usually seen to be integrally connected to two other terms – one is the body and the other is sexuality. So the assumption goes something like this: if I have a female body, then it is expected that I would naturally be sexually attracted towards men and would naturally represent feminine traits like being gentle, caring, soft-spoken etc. Similarly, if I have a male body, then it is expected that I would naturally be sexually attracted towards women and naturally show masculine traits like courage, strength, assertiveness etc. In all of these assumptions, the stress is on the word "naturally", which signifies both a sense of obviousness in the connection established between body, sexuality and gender and also its naturalness. What Butler does in *Gender Trouble* is that

she undermines this notion of a natural cause-and-effect chain connection body, sexuality, and gender and argues that each of them is socially constructed. So how do body, sexuality, and gender get socially constructed and how do body and sexuality affect the notion of gender? To get an answer to this question we will have to understand the interesting way in which Butler appropriates Sigmund Freud's theory of melancholia and makes it the core idea of her radical gender theory.

Melancholia

In his 1917 essay "Mourning and Melancholia" Freud discusses two different ways in which we react to any sense of loss. Let us assume that we have lost a person who was very dear to us. Now according to Freud, such a loss usually leads to a phase of mourning in which we deeply miss the person that we have lost and we react to it in various ways including psychologically denying the absence of the lost person. Often we desperately try to get back in touch with that person and feel their presence around us. We may even see that person in our dreams. But this mourning gradually gets healed. Slowly but surely we come back to the reality and accept the fact that that person is no more.

However, Freud mentions, that at times the reaction to loss might take a more pathological form which he refers to as melancholia. In melancholia the sense of loss is so profound that we feel we have not only lost a person who was close to us but indeed we have lost a part of our own self. In Freud's own words: "In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself". One peculiarity of the psychological response that melancholia elicits is identification with the lost object. In other words, the melancholic person tries to make up for the loss by himself or herself assuming various characteristic traits of the lost person. So,

melancholic identification involves a process of becoming like the object of loss to compensate for it.

This theory of melancholic identification is appropriated by Butler to come with a new understanding of a child's sexual development which deviates from the mainstream Freudian explanation. Again, this might appear to be slightly tricky to understand so I will go over it slowly and step by step. Now from our previous discussions on psychoanalysis you would remember that for Freud a child, which primarily meant a male child, was normally heterosexual. This was because his sexual urges are developed through his engagement with his mother who is his primary care giver and also the main object of desire. It is only when the oedipal complex sets in and the taboo against incest is realised that the child starts shifting his desire from his mother to other females who appear as substitutes for the original object of sexual desire. The process in which a girl child's sexual desire emerges and manifests, as it is described by Freud, is much more complex. The female child like the male child initially desires the mother but soon passes on that desire to the father. But realizing that such incestuous desire is taboo, she then transfers it to other men who become for her the substitute for the father as the object of sexual desire.

According to Butler, this taboo of incest which forces both the male and the female child to project their heterosexual desires beyond their parents actually represents a later part of the child's sexual development. As per Butler, this taboo of incest is preceded for both the male and the female child by what she calls the taboo of homosexuality. Butler claims that the earlier form of sexual desire in both the male child and the female child is homosexual. In other words, for the girl child the earliest object of sexual desire is the mother and for the boy child it is the father. This is presented by Butler as an innate human disposition. Now this original form of

sexuality within a heteronormative society is prohibited through what Butler calls the taboo of homosexuality. It is only in response to this taboo of homosexuality that the little boy and the little girl flip their object of sexual desire which they now direct at parents belonging to the opposite sex. For the boy the object of desire becomes the mother and for the girl it becomes the father. But this too is a problematic phase of sexual development because it soon meets with another social prohibition in the form of taboo against incest. This then results in the growing adolescent projecting his or her sexual desires beyond the confines of the family.

Now this is a radical revision of Freud's theory because here homosexual desires are established as more fundamental than heterosexual desires. And in doing so it undermines in a major way the central assumption of a heteronormative society.

But then what does melancholic identification has to do with all of this? Well, Butler points out that the taboo of homosexuality which forces the child to shift its desire from the same-sex parent results in a deep sense of loss which evokes reaction similar to melancholia. To make up for this loss, each child identifies with the parent of the same sex even while projecting the sexual desire on to the parent of the opposite sex. Thus, a boy child copes with the loss of the father as the primary object of desire by trying to emulate his characteristic features and becoming more and more like him. Similar thing happens with the girl child as well who copes with the loss of the mother as the primary object of desire by trying to become more and more like her. This process of identification with the same-sex parents through incorporation of their characteristic traits results in the girl child becoming "feminine" and the boy child "masculine" which forms their gender identity.

Indeed, this gender identity formed through melancholic identification with the same-sex parent extends to what Butler refers to as the stylization of the body. In other words, one of the many

ways in which a girl child tries to become like her mother and the boy child tries to become like his father is by fashioning his or her body. And here by fashioning the body I mean marking it, piercing it, dressing it, moulding it through certain postures etc.; which means that within a society, a female body appears to be very different from a male body not so much because it is naturally so but because it is fashioned to be so. And the way we fashion our body and our gender is informed by the way we are guided by the society to repress our homosexual desires. Now, there are two important things that I want you to note about Butler's revision of Freud's theory of sexual development. The first thing, which I have already mentioned a few moments ago, is that it ceases to regard homosexuality as a perversion of our "normal" heterosexuality. Rather it establishes homosexuality as a central phenomenon of our psycho-sexual life. The second important point to note here is that our gender, which according to Butler incorporates not only our femininity or masculinity but also our sexuality and our stylized bodies, is socially constructed rather than being natural. In other words, gender, along with the two related terms body and sexuality, are understood by Butler as responses to the ways in which social prohibition shapes our desires. And this constructed nature of gender identity now leads us to the notion of performativity.

Gender Performativity

Now as I have mentioned that according to Butler, gender has to do with fashioning or enacting. This means that our gender depends on our moulding ourselves in accordance to the social taboos and prohibitions and actively incorporating different characteristic traits from our same-sex parents to form our identity. So gender is a process of doing or becoming rather than simply being. A girl child gradually becomes like her mother by doing what she does and by incorporating her characteristic traits. The same is also true for the boy child who gradually tries

and becomes a man just like his father. It is this process of doing or becoming through incorporating the characteristic traits of the same-sex parent that Butler calls gender performativity.

But why use this slightly unusual word "performativity" rather than the more mundane word "performance? Are performance and performativity distinct terms? Well according to Butler they are. Performance, as far as Butler is concerned, is the enactment of a certain role by a subject who precedes that role and who is otherwise independent of it. So what do I mean by this? Now let's take the example of a film…let's say Francis Ford Coppola's *Godfather* Part I. In that movie, the actor Marlon Brando enacts the role of an Italian-American mafia boss. Now Marlon Brando, the actor, precedes this role as a subject and we can easily draw a distinction between this Marlon Brando as a subject and the role of Vito Corleone that he plays in the movie. This is what Butler would identify as a performance. Gender performativity, on the other hand, is different from such kind of performance because there is no separate subject before or behind the gender role. When we enact our gender identities we do not do that with a sense of our identity as a subject that is distinct and separate from this gender role. Indeed, we are socially obliged to appear as gendered objects right from the moment of our birth. Announcements like "It's a girl" or "It's a boy" right after a child is born, already calls upon us to occupy a particular gender identity. So there is no subject standing beyond or behind the enactment of gender role as our sense of identity is always already informed by the process of enacting gender. Butler identifies this peculiar form of enactment where there is no distinct sense of subjectivity beyond the process of enactment as performative. Now I do agree that this is a difficult concept but I think if you go over this section of the lecture for maybe a couple of times you will be able to understand it quite clearly.

Frida Kahlo and Cross-dressing

I would like to end this lecture today by briefly referring to the phenomenon of cross-dressing. Now if, following Butler, we agree that gender is constructed and not natural then it might be possible to construct gender differently. In other words, it would be possible to play around with the characteristic traits that we incorporate to present ourselves either as men or women. Now it is important to note here that going beyond gender altogether is impossible as far as Butler's theoretical framework is concerned because we are incorporated within the gendered social framework from the very moment of our birth. And therefore we do not have access to a non-gendered subjectivity that can just stop being a man or a woman. The most we can do is to perform gender differently. And one of the starkly visible ways in which we can perform our gender differently is by working on the ways in which we stylize our body including the way we dress. This brings us to the notion of cross-dressing, where a man might dress up in clothes that are usually associated with the feminine gender within a particular socio-cultural milieu or a woman might dress up in what is usually regarded as a man's attire. Such cross-dressings can potentially serve two very important functions. The first is that it can reveal gender identity as an artifice….as a mode of self-fashioning which can be done differently. The second is that cross-dressing can help articulate one's resistance against the social norms and prohibitions that shape our gender identity.

A good example of this is a self-portrait made by the remarkable Mexican painter Frida Kahlo. Now though Kahlo is today known as one of the greatest painters of the modern era, during her own lifetime she was often portrayed primarily as the wife of the well-known muralist Diego Rivera. Indeed, a 1933 newspaper article, seeking to introduce to its readers Kahlo as a talented

painter, could not think of a better heading than this one: “Wife of the Master Mural Painter Gleefully Dabbles in Works of Art”. The reason why Kahlo could only be portrayed as a “dabbler in art” even as her husband is described as a “master mural painter” is because of the way in which conventional gender stereotypes work within the patriarchal society – stereotypes in which the man is always the master and the woman is at best a dilettante.

Frida Kahlo’s painting which is known as “Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair” that she completed in the 1940 presents a strong resistance to this stereotyped gender identity through cross-dressing. In this self-portrait produced shortly after her divorce with her husband Diego Rivera we can see Kahlo stylizing her body in ways that deeply problematize the usual notions of femininity within the patriarchal society. In this painting Kahlo sits with a scissor in hand which she has apparently used to crop her hair short, much like a man, and her long “feminine” traces are scattered all around her. The line of music on the top part of the painting is part of a Mexican folk-song which, when translated, reads “Look, if I loved you it was because of your hair. Now that you are bald, I do not love you anymore.” So the cropping of her hair comes across as a rebellion against the patriarchal gender norm where women are identified and loved as women for their long hairs.

But what is more important for our purpose is the way in which Kahlo dresses in this painting. Usually her self-portraits present her in traditional Mexican dresses but here we see her wearing an oversized suit, baggy pants and a crimson shirt all of which represents the way her husband Diego Rivera used to dress. So here Kahlo not only dresses like a man but more specifically like her ex-husband. At one level this signifies an attempt to assert her own agency by going beyond the limiting category of a woman who lives in the shadow of her husband and dabbles in art. But at another level it also represents melancholic identification where the object of loss, which in

this case is Diego Rivera, is incorporated as part of Kahlo's own gender identity. In this portrait we therefore see Kahlo literally becoming the man, Diego Rivera.

With this I end today's lecture as well as the section on feminism and literature. In the next lecture we will take up Modernism and Postmodernism. Thank you for listening.