

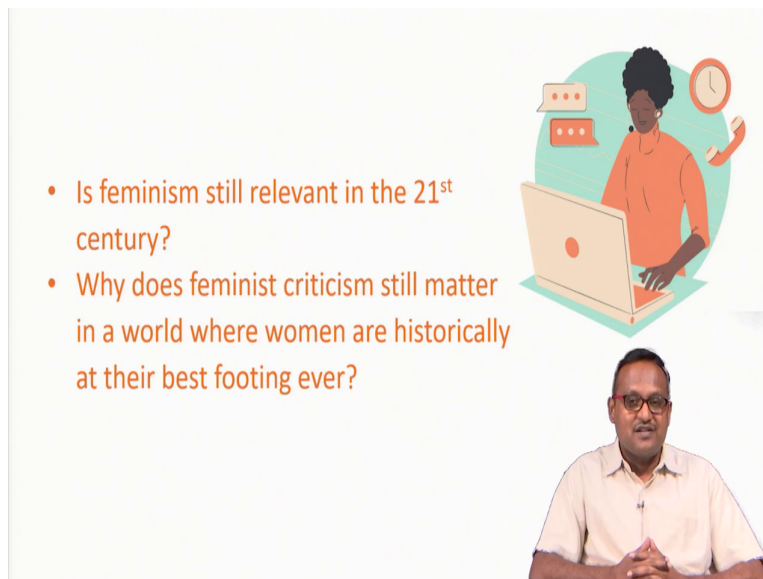
Elements of Literature and Creative Communication
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Lecture - 08
Feminist Literary Criticism

Hello, hope all of you are doing well today. This week we have been discussing different ways of reading and how the iterations of literature, the interactions of literature with language, society, culture, shape the sensibilities of individuals. So, as part of that, we are discussing an important critical concept an important theoretical concept that is the intersection of feminism in or with literature.

We have already understood what feminism is very briefly. So, in this class, we are going to develop our understanding of feminism as well as the intersections of feminism in literature.

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- Is feminism still relevant in the 21st century?
- Why does feminist criticism still matter in a world where women are historically at their best footing ever?

So, now the question comes, is feminism still relevant in the 21st century? Whenever we read news items where the government announces some kind of reservation for women in higher education or some policies concerning women some cynics or some short-sighted minds keep quipping do we still need feminism do we still need all these reservations in the 21st century.

Extending that question we can even go further and ask if feminist criticism is still relevant in this stage of history where the position of women is comparatively better, where women

historically are at their best footing, do we still need feminism at all. Before we answer this question I have a couple of very startling statistical pieces I want you to just take a look at them probably the answers to these questions would be evident when you go through these figures.

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- October 2019: Less than **25%** of all national parliamentarians are women
- Less than 5 % of all presidential posts (most of the nations have never had a female leader on the top!)
- Less than **20%** of girls have access to higher education in premier institutes
- Less than **10%** of women in top positions in industries across sectors
- 2021: a new record of female CEOs at Fortune 500 companies. As of June, there were 41 female CEOs employed at America's 500 highest-grossing companies. Yet, the new high still only translates to around 8 percent female representation at the top of the country's biggest public businesses!

These figures are as recent as that of 2019-2020. So, if you look at the global statistics of the representation of women in the national parliaments all over the world, we realize that less than 25 per cent of women are there representing 50 per cent of the population. Less than 5 per cent of the presidential posts or prime ministerial posts have ever been occupied by women. Now, if you look at the percentage of girls in higher education, especially in the premier national institutes either in India or even outside India, it is less than 20 per cent. The so-called industry that cries time and again to champion the causes of women, even there this glaring omission is present. Less than 10 per cent of the top positions in industries across the globe in all the sectors put together are occupied by women; that means, out of 14500 companies, hardly 40 companies have women's CEOs or women at the top positions; that means, less than 10 per cent. Now, statistically, women are about 50 per cent of the population give or take 1 or 2 per cent here and there. So, if there is an equal representation of both the sexes then why is it that such kind of glaring representation of women in these posts? I am sure by now you must have got answers to the initial questions is feminism still relevant today. Now, let's move on from the world of reality to the world of imagination.

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Think about these!


from classics

Francois Rabelais (16th c)

"When I say woman, I mean a sex so weak, so fickle, so variable, so changeable, so imperfect, that Nature — speaking with all due reverence and respect — seems to me, when she made woman, to have strayed from that good sense with which she had created and fashioned all things."

Saul Bellow in *Herzog*

"It would not be practical for her to hate herself. Luckily, God sends a substitute, a husband."



Let me take you through a couple of extraordinary literary pieces from writers who have achieved extraordinary fame. So, these excerpts are taken from their writings. These are classics, and look at how women are represented in classics. The first one is by Francois Rabelais a very well known influential French writer who wrote in the 16 century during the early Renaissance.

“When I say woman I mean a sex so, weak, so, fickle, so, variable, so, changeable, so, imperfect that nature speaking with all due reverence and respect seems to me when she made woman to have strayed from that good sense with which she had created and fashioned all things.”

He is commenting about the Nature of women, and while commenting on the Nature with capital N he says probably while creating women all the standards must have gone down.

So, this is the great French writer Francois Rabelais. We have another extraordinary literary figure Saul Bellow, a Canadian American writer who has to his credit even Nobel Prize in literature and this is from his well-known work *Herzog* look at this statement.

“It would not be practical for her to hate herself. luckily, god sends a substitute a husband.”

Of course, we must proceed with a caveat here because we are taking some fragments of quotations or fragments of their writing and quoting it, but more or less this is representative. So, even with that caveat, these opinions hold good. They are fragments we need to consider

the entire work and I am not taking away the literary merit of these writers, the cultural importance of these writers keeping all those things intact we still need to consider these kinds of so-called highly objectionable sexist remarks.

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Half a species otherized!

Freud and his phallocentric world!

Thus spake Nietzsche, the philosopher of great insight

"Everything in woman is a riddle, and everything in woman hath one solution - it is called pregnancy."

Even Oscar Wilde wrote

"Women are decorative. They never have anything to say, but they say it charmingly."

George Bernard Shaw:

"Women upset everything. When you let them into your life, you find that the woman is driving at one thing and you're driving at another."

Going ahead we have Sigmund Freud, an extraordinarily influential name in psychoanalytic criticism in psychoanalysis especially, in fact, his writings have paved the way for psychoanalytic criticism. So, here he goes to the extent of othering an entire species because he constructs the human world according to the male anatomy. The male anatomy becomes the normal and anything other than that becomes a kind of deviation that is why it is a 'phallocentric world'. It is a phallocentric world where the male sex organ becomes the normative and anything different from that becomes the other. Even Nietzsche we keep referring to Nietzsche an extraordinary philosopher of remarkable insights. So, look at what he has got to say-

"Everything in a woman is a riddle and everything in woman has one solution it is called pregnancy."

Yes, this is by Nietzsche. We have George Bernard Shaw and even Oscar Wilde, very well-known writers. Look at their comments, their portrayal of women.


"Women upset everything when you let them into your life you find that the woman is driving at one thing and you are driving at another."

Unable to accommodate the interests of even the so-called 'other' because we think of literature as being inclusive, we think of literature as being comprehensive something that should develop a holistic perspective. So, if this is the perspective we glean from the so-called classics, then what kind of trends are we setting?

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Questions... to reflect on!

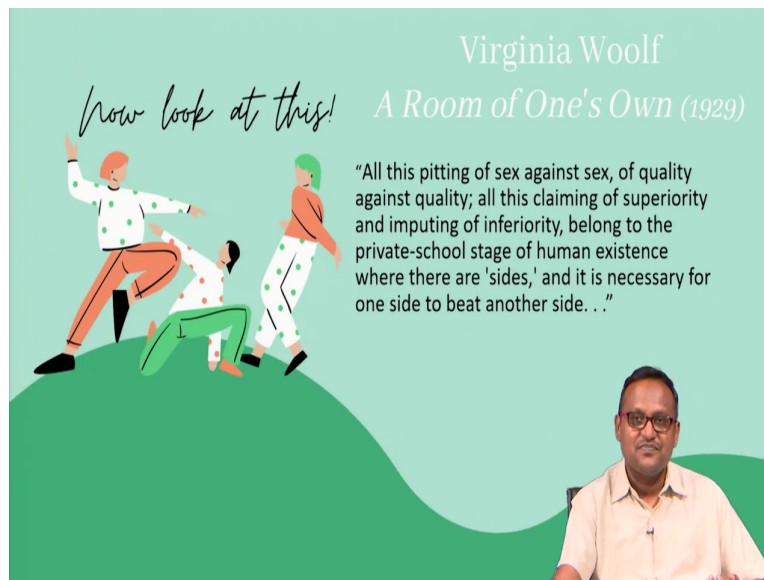
- Is there something wrong with these male writers particularly or is it systemic misogyny?
- If it is systemic, how to sensitize human beings on the issues of patriarchal subversion and sexism?
- Male Gaze and Objectification of female body
- How important is the use of language and literature to carry forward that dialogue?



I am sure by now you must have got answers to one of the initial questions we raised - is it still relevant, is feminism still relevant? When we look at these excerpts we are truly puzzled, since any sensible mind would revolt at such kind of reductivist portrayal and pejorative portrayal of women. So, what is wrong with them? Is it the fault of these writers or is it systemic misogyny? Misogyny is hatred of women. So, is this hatred of women, or is it systemic, or is it just confined to those writers? So, if it is systemic if the entire system likes that and they are just the tip of the iceberg as they call it, how do we sensitize our fellow human beings towards this kind of oppressive patriarchal construction of women? So, we have something called the 'male gaze' and objectification of the female body. In fact, in feminist literary criticism male gaze refers to the concept in which the entire world is looked at from the perspective of the heterosexual male .who looks at women from the perspective of pleasure, she is reduced to an object of pleasure. So, an entire other half or one half of the population is reduced to a kind of a commodity therefore, the objectives of feminism, and thereby an extension of feminism, feminist literary criticism is to sensitize individuals towards all these things and to analyze ways and modes through which language and

literature can be sanitized so that we can carry forward meaningful dialogues related to women and their interests.

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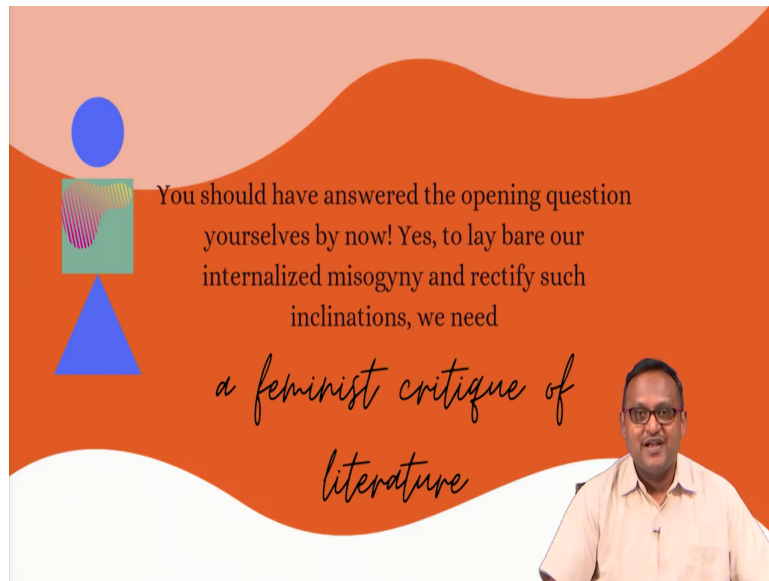


Here is Virginia Woolf, a major 20th-century writer, a modernist writer, in fact, her writing is credited to have initiated the feminist literary movement. So, it is a quotation from her remarkable work called *A Room Of One's Own*.

"All this pitting of sex against sex of quality against quality all this claiming of superiority and imputing of inferiority belong to the private school stage of human existence where there are sides and when there are sides its necessary for one side to beat another side."

So, the entire logic of pitting one sex against the other is a kind of dwarfed logic. It is a kind of contorted imagination because it is neither beneficial for the man nor for the woman. So, it is a kind of contorted logic.

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To lay bare our internalized misogyny and rectify such inclinations we need a feminist critique of literature even today and we need feminism even today. Because feminism is that extraordinary philosophical tool and practical tool that is essential to create equity and equality in this world.

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And now is a time for a little bit of history, the history of feminist literary movements. It was in the late 18 century that Mary Wollstonecraft writes 'A Vindication of the Rights of Woman' a seminal work that later paves the way for the creation of a feministic school of

thought, i.e feminism. So, in a sense, this becomes the bible of feminism, the first and original work. Feminism has different schools of thought and since the 18 century it has evolved considerably in size, in its influence, in its gamut, in its representation, in its causes, and objectives it has grown only from strength to strength. So, here we are going to take a quick look at what has happened since then. We have some important texts in the twentieth century, of course, Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* and Elaine Showalter's *Towards the Feminist Poetics*. So, we are going to take a closer look at these feminist critics and their feminist theories, and analyze what some of their concerns and objections are as far as literature, in general, is concerned.

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In the words of Millett and Showalter

Sexual Politics, Kate Millett

“Sexual politics obtains consent through the “socialization” of both sexes to basic patriarchal politics with regard to temperament, role, and status.”

“Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness”, Elaine Showalter

“Women's literature is still haunted by the ghosts of repressed language, and until we have exorcised those ghosts, it ought not to be in language that we base our theory of difference.”

“Patriarchy, reformed or unreformed, is patriarchy still: its worst abuses purged or foresworn, it might actually be more stable and secure than before.”



These are taken from their seminal works, sexual politics written by Kate Millett. Sexual politics obtains consent through the socialization of both sexes to basic patriarchal politics with regard to temperament, role, and status. How literature becomes an agent through which such kinds of sexual differences is normalized or socialized. So, as a feminist intervening in literature your focus is to show on those modes of writing that further the so, called divide that already exists, that reinforces the gender divide and also furthers the patriarchal supremacy in the world.

“Patriarchy whether it is reformed or unreformed is patriarchy still.”

Patriarchy is again a kind of a keyword, when you are reading feminism you need to understand it as a system of governance, it is a system wherein male domination is ensured in

every sphere of life be it social, cultural, political. Therefore, Elaine Showalter goes ahead and says that even

“Women’s literature is still haunted by the ghosts of repressed language and until we have exorcised those ghosts, it ought not to be in language that we base our theory of difference.”

Here is a very important notion she proposes that language per se is a patriarchal construct, the language that you and I keep using even now is a patriarchal construct.

So, as long as we use this patriarchal construct to fight against patriarchy, it would not be effective therefore, we need to devise a plan we need to devise a kind of a strategy wherein we fight patriarchy using a system that is not a construct of patriarchy and unfortunately language is still to this day a patriarchal construct. How is language a patriarchal construct? We are going to discuss this in a very short while.

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The slide has a light beige background. At the top left, the names 'And Helene Cixous' and '& Simone de Beauvoir...' are written in a black cursive script. To the right of this text are two small, square, black-and-white portrait photographs: the top one is of Helene Cixous, and the bottom one is of Simone de Beauvoir. Below the portraits, there are three blocks of text. The first block, under the heading 'Ecriture Feminine:', contains a quote about women writing about themselves. The second block, under the heading 'The Second Sex:', contains a quote about the world being a work of men. The third block, on the right, contains a quote about oppression creating a state of war. At the bottom right of the slide is a small, square, color photograph of a man with glasses, wearing a light-colored shirt, who appears to be the speaker.

And Helene Cixous
& Simone de Beauvoir...

Ecriture Feminine: "woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies"

The Second Sex: "Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth."

"All oppression creates a state of war. And this is no exception."

Before that two more influential names in feminism, Helene Cixous and Simone De Beauvoir. Please remember the objective of the class is not to give you a history of feminism but to give you an outline of the objectives of feminism and its intersections in literature so that we know how to read literature from a feminist angle. So, this is by Helene Cixous. She proposes the concept of 'Ecriture feminine' writing.

“Woman must write herself must write about women and bring women to writing from which they have been driven away as violently as away from their bodies”

Like through the male gaze and commodification of the female body as women have been driven away from their own bodies. So, have they been driven away from writings? So, in order to overcome that women must write whatever it is be it a diary entry - it's only when you start writing, only when you consciously bring to fore all those oppressive forces that have kept you within the confines of home, only then would there be a kind of a solution to the problem of inequality. So, here is a very interesting representation from the 'second sex'.

“Representation of the world like the world itself is the work of men they describe it from their own point of view which they confuse with absolute truth”

Again we are talking about the male gaze using language to promote patriarchal values, and since oppression happens only in a state of war we need to fight, and this oppression is no different from any other oppression in history therefore, it calls for a kind of war.

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Feminist criticism draw our attention towards...

- The masculine-feminine binary (Apollonian and Dionysian modes) and the problem of constructing primal opposition between the two
- Male gaze and objectification of the female body
- Neurosexism and biological determinism (
 - Cordelia Fine- a cognitive bias fostering gender stereotypes)
- Myriad shades of paternalistic behaviour
- Language – 'a male construct'?!)
- Unequal division of Labour: 'The Double Shift' and unpaid female labour
- The anti-women bias of positivist scientific methodologies
- Feminist epistemology: intuition as a mode of knowing| standpoint theory|| Sisterhood



So, keeping these things in mind we go ahead and discuss some of the other important concepts here. So, especially the concept of neurosexism. It is a term coined by Cordelia Fine, a well-known academic psychologist and philosopher. So, she draws our attention towards a cognitive bias that exists in all of us and this cognitive bias is so inherent that it only furthers the gender stereotypes.

Biological determinism is a concept is a social theory in which it is said that whatever position both men or women enjoy, whether it is in society or in politics or in culture, they

enjoy it because of their inherent capacities. So, the inverted logic of this is that if there is a poorer representation of women in society in politics in cultural fields that is because there must be something wrong with women this kind of biological determinism. Earlier we were discussing how language is a male construct. Now, look at it whenever we want to curse somebody whenever we want to curse whenever we want to almost use foul language all these things are centred around a female body in some way or the other. And look at some of our concepts, we use them almost very blindly. 'Chairman' to indicate somebody who heads an organization. Why not a chairwoman? - or any other gender-neutral term. For instance, in order to call the president of a nation, we use the term Rashtrapati - again a highly gendered term. Even though we have had a female president we have not been able to bring out a gender-neutral term to designate to that post of president. So, feminist criticism draws our attention towards all these things including how there is an unequal division of labour. So, what is what do we mean by the double shift? Supposing it is a working couple where both husband and wife are working it is a working couple; now obviously, the woman has to do the household chores, take care of family and only after that is she allowed or will she generally go to the workplace. So, how there is a kind of a double shift, apart from the household chores she is also an earning member. Whereas men enjoy or share the benefit of their earnings, they do not share the responsibility of the household chores, and you can see how it creates a kind of a double burden. So, through all these things feminist criticism draws our attention towards how gender stereotypes are promoted through literature, how language is highly sexed, how there is a kind of a disparity between men and women in their work conditions all these things.

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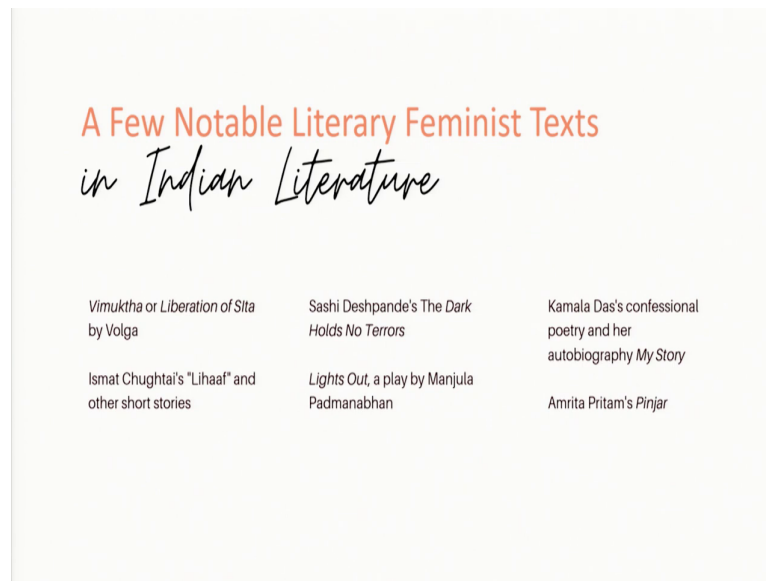
Feminist criticism draws our attention towards...

- How gendered our language and popular culture are. [It is rife with sexist slurs, expletives and sexual innuendos that denigrate womanhood]
- Gender Spectrum: constructing gender not as a binary but as a spectrum
- Inadequate and offensive gender stereotypes that are culturally propagated
- Masked or benevolent sexism [Women are great as long as they amuse the learned and powerful men during their leisure without complaining]
- How a male supremacist society is detrimental even to men by creating undue expectations and coercing gender performativity
- Sex and Gender: the biological (male/female...) and the sociological (man/woman...)



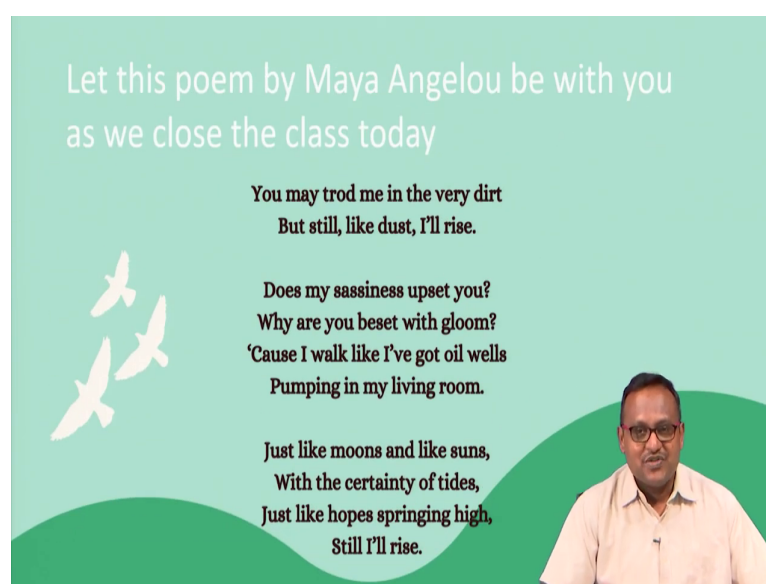
So, that is the reason why we need to study literature from a feministic angle because at the end of the day it is a debatable question. We have already taken up this question of whether to look at a comprehensive structure called literature, is there any profit in looking at it from a particular point of view or not we have already discussed that it is an open-ended question or it is a debatable question. But the weight of the interventions of feminism to examine literature from feministic angles is highly heavy we cannot ignore and simply shirk that and say literature is comprehensive. We would like to look at it holistically, we do not want to raise these uncomfortable questions which we cannot answer.

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We are going to end this session by invoking some of the well-known feminist texts that are going to sensitize us towards all these broader issues. One is by Volga, a well-known work called *Vimuktha or Liberation of Sita*, Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaaf*, and other short stories by Sashi Deshpande, Manjula Padmanaban, Kamala Das, Amritha Pritam et al. They are extraordinary writers who explore these concepts and further the theoretical concerns and objectives of feminism in a highly creative way. So, please take a look at their works.

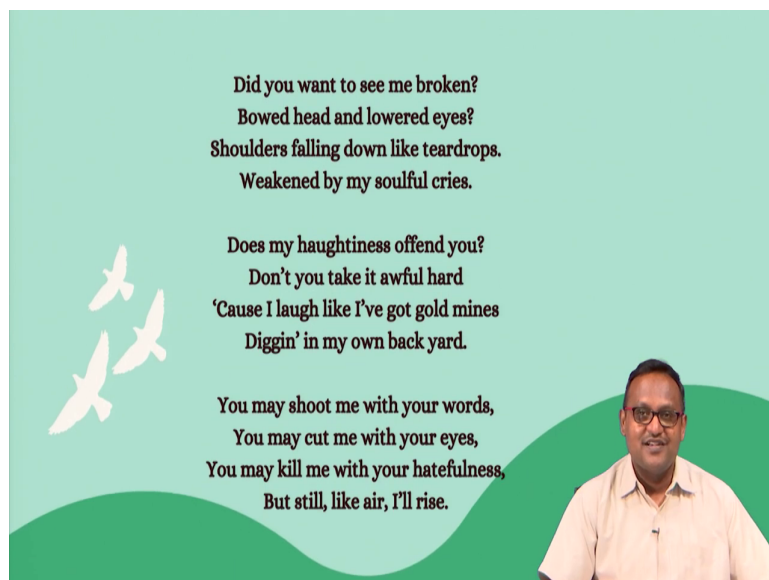
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I am going to end this session with an extraordinary poem by Maya Angelou, it is like a clarion call. How despite the centuries of oppression, despite continuous discrimination, how women should not give up their cause and continue to fight. A clarion call for all oppressed people, beautiful lines by Maya Angelou.

“You may trod me in the very dirt,
but still like dust I will rise
does my sassiness upset you?
why are you beset with gloom?
Because I walk like I have got oil wells
pumping in my living room.
Just like moons and like suns,
with the certainty of tides,
just like hope springing high,
Still I will rise.

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Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like tear drops.

Weakened by my soulful cries.

Does my haughtiness offend you?

Do not you take it awful hard

because I laugh like I have got gold mines

digging in my own backyard.

You may shoot me with your words,

you may cut me with your eyes,

you may kill me with your hatefulness,

but still, like air, like phoenix, I will rise I will rise.”

Thank you.