

Feminist Writings
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Feminist Writings and Feminism Today

Avishek Parui: So, hello and welcome to this course entitled Feminist Writings, in what is the concluding session of this particular course. I am very happy to have with me today, Prof. Bharti Harishankar from the department of Women Studies, Madras University and Dr. Merian Simigarch from our very own department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Madras. We also have the two TA's who have been very helpful with the running of the course - Mohit Sharma and Sukriti Sanyal. And we have research scholars who will introduce themselves in due course of time.

So what we'll do in this course, we'll have a generic discussion in terms of the relevancy of this course, the content of this course, and we will attempt to connect it with the cultural [00:00:50] which are experienced in the contemporary times and also historically. But, you know, we talk about issues such as reification, radicalization etc. So it's going to be a free interaction and hopefully it will trigger conversation and dialogues for the participants as well as interlocutors such as yourselves.

So let's start with the basics, which is the very key question - why a course like this in the first place. So why do Feminist Writings? What is the purpose and the utility of a course in the world we live in today? - Which is apparently globalized, apparently liberalized and it's the quality as a big banner everywhere. So I'll start Professor Harishankar in terms of the very basic question about the relevance of a course on feminism and feminist writings today. So where do you see this course to be situated in the context of our times?

Prof. Bharti Harishankar: For answering this question and the relevance of Feminist Writing, I think we also need to go back and revisit the question of what constitutes feminist writing. Because that has changed over the years. So depending on what we look at as feminist writing today, we can talk about whether or not they are relevant. So in particular, I'm in fact looking at what began as foregrounding the voices of women is now moving towards capturing the gender spectrum. And there again, adding we say LGBT, (0)(2:19). So, given that, we are expanding the spectrum. What seems to me the basic relevance of a course on feminist writing is to see that there are other voices, and those voices are not being captured. And if they have been captured, have they been foregrounded? So going right back to the

question of 'where is the agency', 'where is the voice' and which of those voices (1) are audible, and (2) which of those voices are making a change. And I would certainly think that making a change is a very crucial aspect of what we mean by feminist writing.

Avishek Parui: Yes, I agree completely. I think agency and articulation are two of the chief categories. And like you said, this reconfiguration of agency and the agentic voices and we can figure out what is marginalized, and what isn't marginalized. These categories are very fluid in quality and very context sensitive as well. So that's a really rich response I think. We can just take it off from the air. But you know, Merin, do you have a response to that, in terms of the...

Dr. Merian Simigarch: Yes. I would entirely agree with what Professor Harishankar just articulated. And there was a time when in terms of genealogy, in terms of critical tradition, in terms of writings, it was an 'all men' kind of space kind of literature or cultural articulation. So whatever you take, it was an 'all men' space. And we all know there were a series of historical events which were responsible for including men, including women and then there were lots of debates and discussions about it. I think it is all the more relevant in the contemporary to have a course like this, which talks about feminist writings.

Because now we live in a... space in terms of literature, in terms of culture. There are women everywhere. There's an increase in visibility which almost leads literary culture and critics to even delude themselves into believing that the problem has been solved. Women are everywhere, there is a great deal of visibility, there are women writers, there are women protesting, there are women activists, there are women occupying every slot in terms of literature, culture and everything that concerns human living.

So it's all the more relevant today to talk about what is feminism and what is feminist writing because it is important to understand that. It's not just about the visibility, it's also about where and in what context these visibilities are framed. If I may quickly recall, in one of the essays by, Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana it's a post-mandal essay which appeared. There she talked about the problems for the contemporary theory of gender.

So one of our arguments is that. Just because there are women out there, protesting mandal commission, it does not mean that the problem ends there. And it becomes all the more difficult. It's a very problematic position when you find women out there, protesting something like reservation where caste also intervenes. And suddenly you realize you cannot

take the (5:25) position of being with women. Because that could also put you in a very problematic horrid.

The another contemporary thing that I can think of is the recent events in Kerala - Sabrimala issue; where again you find women taking a political position and they are out on the streets and they are expressing themselves. But again, the politics of that is very problematic. So I think a course like this and similar courses are very important to understand the crux of feminism and also, not to lose the same (5:50), this is an on-going articulation against various forms of patriarchy. There's no standard model. So just because women are visible out there, it does not mean that the problem hasn't been dealt with.

Avishek Parui: Yes. That's a really interesting point because, you know, we often delude ourselves like you said, and to believe in it is a linear equation between visibility and agency, which isn't quite the case at all. And sometimes, it works the opposite way and in case of the Sabrimala incident, for instance, is spectacularly visible.

Dr. Merian Simigarch: Yes.

Avishek Parui: Right? It was a spectacle; it was a hyperreal thing. If you think about the agency in question, that becomes a very fragile point. So that's a classic case in point. So thank you both for very rich responses, holding it up for the TAs and the discussions in terms of the responses.

Speaker 4: Like Merian said that despite the visibility, the structures of power are still the same, and this is something that we see in a text like *Tickets Please*, which is situated in...

Avishek Parui: By D.H. Lawrence.

Speaker 4: Yes, which is situated in a post world war scene and in that story, we see that how the harassment happens at the work place and the imbalance of power is utilized to coerce, it is like a forced constraint is being extracted from women which they have to pay for with their own jobs, their own employment and which leads to their dependency. And this is something that you find resonance in the current issues happening both in India and worldwide; issues which result in the #MeToo movement, the harassment which has been going through, for a long time.

Those cases which have come out now have been there since decades and those cases have been swept under the rug and those things have been carried on. And just like in Tickets Please, it erupted at a certain moment and despite the visibility, despite a much wider spectrum of employment options available now than they were in 1919. A similar thing is happening, a similar exploitation of power is taking place. Even older texts can us a perspective into current issues which are still relevant.

Avishek Parui: Right. Great, thanks for that Mohit. Any other responses? In terms of seeing the texts that we have covered in this course - the question of visibility and agency. Because I think, what it comes down to is the question of embodiment, extended embodiment in a social space and how that becomes problematic and how the key question of agency actually becomes more fragile with visibility.

So that is a very easy question with which we delude ourselves, something, we moved on from patriarchy because women are seemingly in positions of power. But then that becomes very very problematic as you said. So moving on from that, in terms of looking at feminism today, like you said at the very beginning, these are historical trajectories and our students of this particular course will be very mindful of the historical evolution of feminism as it was. So how do you see feminism situated today apripos of the textbook understanding of feminism as we read from (8:59) century onwards.

Prf. Bharti Harishankar: Yes, one word I can think of is rhizomic.

Avishek Parui: Yes.

Prf. Bharti Harishankar: That's the only feminism that is going but somewhere along for any particular interpretation, we seem to be isolating strands of feminism. So I would put feminism in approval today certainly, feminisms. But at the same time, I would also say there are multiple angles that feminism offers. So, I'm not only talking about the intersectional aspects of feminism where we are looking at the concerns of caste, class, gender, religion, region, language. But I'm also looking at the kind of theoretical interventions that we see in feminism today.

Certainly taking a very multi-disciplinary projection there. But the bottom line seems to be - whether you are a practicing academic or an activist in feminism, the concern seems to be - how to negotiate the three A's - Advocacy, Activism and Academics - how do we bring them

together? And do we need to bring them together at all? So that would be an open question. But certainly, I don't think we can avoid asking that question anymore.

Avishek Parui: Yes. What is interesting is the word 'rhizomatic'. We wouldn't ascribe a positive attribute to that structure. Do you think that makes feminism more plural...?

Prf. Bharti Harishankar: Absolutely. Because, I think, at every point in time, historically, people, but I would in fact say women, themselves have said - 'okay, we have come to this stage and probably feminism is done.' So we have been waiting to write the obituary of feminism for a really long time. And the fact that we have continued and more importantly the fact that certain things have been added as we moved, makes feminism have that resonating structure. And, we can also look at it the other way and see, its precise because it is rhizomic, that it has moved into a different direction and caught those different perceptions.

Avishek Parui: Right. That's really interesting. Merian, how do you situate yourself in terms of academic, in response to this question in feminism today?

Dr. Merian Simigarch: I would again like to take off from one of the points Professor Harishankar made about the binary - feminist activism and the literary kind of feminism - that we are more comfortable in dealing with. So in an ideal situation, perhaps, this binary should not exist. But the truth remains that - when you practice literary feminism, within a theoretical framework, there's a way in which we begin with the historical conditions and there is a lot of activism.

And the political situation which comes in, but when it comes to really reading a text, it seems to be entirely divorced from the historical backdrop and from that trajectory, the chronological, political, historical trajectory through which feminism also came from. Since, you are also familiar with one of the texts that you did as part of this course. Githa Hariharan's *The Remains of the Feast*, if you take that text as a case in point.

I would say that, one way you can read the text is, as a perfect articulation of feminist politics where certain kinds of taboos are being overcome through various measures. If you are familiar with the text, you would know the details as well. But I'm also thinking that, if one is also conscious and really familiar with certain ground realities about caste, for instance, which is there, loud and clear in the text, but if you go deeper into the text and also analyze the different structures that the text is apparently subverting about brahmanists, about gender,

you would also know that there's a certain way in which the text plays within a comfort space.

So I think this comfort is something that, as academics, we are also comfortable to deal with it. But yes, you look at the text and do not look at what really constitutes the outside of it. And we find this is very very liberating. Again, coming back to the text, if you look at it, and if you see the figure of the grandmother, who is positioned as the radical one, you would also see that there is hardly anything at stake.

The family knows that she cannot threaten any of the structures. They continue to do the rituals in the same way that had been doing. There is no unsettlement that happens over there, except that the grandmother... and in fact, on the contrary, it appears as an act of benevolence. There is there is secular model family who allows the grandmother to eat laddoos from a Muslim vendor who is allowing the untouchable things, to enter their household - there is an act of benevolence. And it's very loud and clear - the act of benevolence as well.

And I think, one should be able to cross over with binary in this fashion by engaging with the text and also looking at the structures within which the text is situated. I think that would us to... I do not have a formula in mind even when I say this. Perhaps we do not have the appropriate theoretical frameworks to deal with. But the problem with feminism, something like feminism is that, like many other theories that we deal with, this is not entirely literary, it emerged from a lot of historical struggles. So that needs to be taken into account even when we are doing theory, even when we are doing criticism.

Avishek Parui: That's a really interesting response because I think we may sometimes, in the risk of doing a disservice to feminism, in terms of how we deal it really textually in a classroom and this could be a reification that happens there - which is one of the points I wanted to culminate on but I'm glad it came up right now - the relationship between radicalism and reification. So how can a radical become reified quickly, so get caught in a new liberal narrative in terms of the benevolent narrative which he just mentioned.

I think that particular text isn't really a strong case in point in terms of appearing to be radical but we know that nothing actually changes, where we sort of end up being in this liberal space where brahminism and the rituals are discontinued. There is this little ripple somewhere which is very comfortable to be within a domestic space because it doesn't go out in the real world. So in that sense, it's a really interesting text in terms of looking at the ontology of

radicalism and what is actually radical at all and the culture in which it is situated. Any responses from the scholars and TA's especially in relationship to that text - Gita Hariharan's *The Remains of The Feast*.

Speaker 4: Sir, just adding on to what you said, I think the hyper connected nature of today's reality and the fascistic nature of the medium makes it all the more easier to reify the radical. So, initially, now that the social media and everything that we see, that makes it all the more easier.

Prf. Bharti Harishankar: But, you know, I would like to just raise a query there. So, this entire fascisization that you are talking about, is that a fashionable tone of stereotyping? Are we coming right back stereotyping but we are doing it in such a hyperconnected way that it feels like a reality that you are projecting, benevolent or otherwise. But are we going back to a good old construction - deconstruction stereotypes?

Speaker 4: I think, ma'am, it's a two-way sword kind of a situation where both things are happening simultaneously on the same medium and it's sometimes difficult to discern between which way a certain course is going.

Prf. Bharti Harishankar: See, I was looking at the larger picture here. See, here we are talking about feminist writing. I am, in general, concerned about what we do as part of gender studies. Because we have the theories, Indian and outside, but when we look at the material to connect, and I am talking of text in a very general sense of very post-modern text where anything is a text under discourse.

So when we are looking at that situation, where are our texts? And I certainly believe it comes from the groundwork that is being done by activists and people who are advocating feminism at that level. How do we make that connect from what happens at the ground level and bring it into our classrooms? And that always is one proving to which, consoles me a lot because I feel that we need to give illustrations in class which also goes back to reality.

I'm not saying it should all the time go back to reality, but it should also back to reality. And where are our instances for our readings? So do we look at writings literary otherwise, but do we also open up these writings to what happens. So these oral narratives, the archives, where are we? And where are they going to come into our courses, our writings?

Dr. Merian Simigarch: I think in this context; we also need to ask the larger question of Canin. So when we talk about feminist writings, we are essentially bringing up a set of texts which have already been decided by Canin. Canin if you look at, you know, the traditional understanding, there is a certain kind of a patriarchy which is woven into it. So maybe there should be a way in which we can bring out of those boxes as well. And bringing in texts which are non-canonical but again as pointed out, there's again a risk over here - about these non-canonical things becoming the canon in a different way. So this should be a system by which, you know, there is some kind of flexibility. It should always be built in, not allowing the canon to solidify in some way or the other.

Prf. Bharti Harishankar: I think the risk of normalizing... Every time there is a canon, you feel it will mobilize.

Avishek Parui: And normativize as well.

Prf. Bharti Harishankar: Yes, and normativize. So how do we overcome that?

Avishek Parui: That's a really interesting question because I think that connects with some of the key things about policies in any situation in terms of discretion and content creation. And I think that's a really valid question in terms of the dialogue between what happens in the world out there, what happens in the classroom. And I think, we as academics, you know, are very responsible to a certain extent, we should be held accountable to a certain extent for this insularity that is there in the classroom. So while you see the way out this in terms of making it more dialogic, so you think it can happen through seminars and conventional processes or do you think there should be a path breaking thing which should be done in terms of making it more inclusive, it can make activists, collaborating, so how do you think that could...

Prf. Bharti Harishankar: Yes, so collaboration is a way forward, the way I would look at it. But I, as an academic, it seems to me more, that aspect better, I would say, let's start from there - the kind of rigor we bring into research and I think the charm of doing feminist research is to have that self-reflective subjectivity. And can we formalize it? Can we theorize that? And breathing that theorization into our interpretations into our teachings. So I think, feminist research methodology would differ from say, any social science research. (1) It

would insist on the subjectivity, but it will also put a caveat they have say, let it be subjective but let it be self-reflective first.

So that, in the name of subjectivity, we are not bringing in biases and prejudices but we are actually making ourselves aware of those biases and prejudices and I would say that one aspect, if we can bring it into our classrooms, especially on feminist writings and studies, we will do a really good work there. Because for every theory or concept that we read in this course, there is a reality out there which as created that concept in the first place. But for us to grasp the concept better, we need to go back to that reality as well. So, I look at it as a very continuous to and fro movement. And the tone for movement maybe important not only in the teaching-learning but also in interpretation.

Avishek Parui: Absolutely. So I suppose what we are hoping in the not recent future is the more healthy balance of theory and praxis in terms of having not just a collaborative but a more symbiotic relationship; what happens in the field in the real world and what happens in the classroom and not necessarily compartmentalize those as water tight categories. Any responses from the TA's and scholars?

Speaker 6: Hello, I am Shiji, I am a research scholar in this department. Ma'am I would like to add on to what you have said. Talking about feminism in today's perspective, today's world, it should be like going back to the roots because these texts - whatever we are learning, it came because of a kind of activism which emerged at that point of time and then, this text came back. So adapting these texts in this particular real life scenario and interpretation of it in this today's world matches a lot.

Avishek Parui: So, some of the TA's, you would be able to throw some light on it in terms of some of the text that we have covered in this course which potentially, let's say something like Judith Butler, even de Beauvoir for instance, so how do you situate them in terms of the discussion we are having. Because, in one hand, they are superstar academics and their content is always ontologized and universalized across the world. But how important is it to take them out of the textbook and situate them in a way, for concerning the gender politics happening in the world out there? So what would be your take?

Speaker 6: Sir, I think when we are talking about, say Beauvoir, what is very interesting that she has done is open up the position of women as a construct, right? So it's looking at different aspects of it, so be it the sociological perspective, political, cultural, medical - so she critiques it from all the historical and all the angles and sees it - how a woman, as we say, know it that it's not born and how one becomes a woman. So, during the time of the second wave movement, I think it is a very seminal work, because again, it throws a very constructionist perspective to the category of women which is not biological or sex based.

And when we, obviously come to the third wave which Butler represents and she carries forward what Beauvoir is saying but she puts a very different and interesting notion, a very third world approach to it and questions the category of the woman itself - which problematized everything. Again. speaking from a very hardcore point of theory because, when we talk about activism probably, this question doesn't come because we know who the women are and the second wave has consolidated that category, that it is the feminine consciousness that is there; they are the women.

But when we come to the third wave and we have distinguished between sex and gender and asking questions - as in who can speak in the name of a woman. And then we know that, as ma'am said that there are many feminisms now; it is not only one category. And every identity is fluid, even if we are aspiring for subjectivity, it is subjectivities. So how can a person, or how can we take a stand? Like how identity politics has been heavily criticized before, especially in the third wave and it does not, because again, we speak from a particular position that is singular and that is monolithic and has to be, everything has to be plural, so that we are inclusive and it does not really have to be, I mean that is what we need. That is what feminism is for, as a theory.

So I think Beauvoir, if we bring her... Butler, if you talk about Judith Butler, then for the complicated issues of who is the woman and who's name are we talking about? But then, I think Butler also says that even if we understand that 'woman' is not a singular category, it is plural, but we also recognize that there is a need to speak from a position. Otherwise, how do you negotiate the different discourses around you and how do you channelize yourself through them. So I think that is a very important thing - to recognize that the woman is not just a woman born with a biological sex of being a woman, it can be, the definition can be expanded and it is multiple and fluid and changing, evolving all the time. But even when we

need to speak about it, just like there is disability studies, perspective or a class perspective, race perspective and different other perspectives.

Avishek Parui: That's very interesting because what that does is, it brings us to one of the most heated debates that we keep having; not just in feminism but I suppose in all -isms. So the relationship between essentialism and constructionism. Suppose when you say something that disrupts and we sort of deconstruct it, there is a degree of liberation about it. Then when it comes to owning a certain identity, a certain degree of essentialism is probably helpful as well, to a certain extent. So how do you see, as an academic, this very fine tuning between essentialism constructionism?

Prf. Bharti Harishankar: Yes, it is in relation to feminist studies and it is the balance that we need, all of us strive to strike between and positioning and performing. So, to what extent do we position ourselves, vis-a-vis an idea, a construct and to what extent do we perform the construct. And in my opinion, I think till we position ourselves, we are rather clear about where we are coming from. With the minute we start the performative aspect, I think, inevitably, signs of essentialism, which in the initial stages, we try to position. But somewhere along, we seem to you know, somehow let go of that grasp. I'm not saying that it is necessarily wrong, in fact in my opinion that gives the variety that we bring into feminist texts today; it is precisely because of that. You know, we can alternate and we can very consciously alternate between one and the other.

Avishek Parui: Merian, what would be your response to this?

Dr. Merian Simigarch: Yes, I think Harishankar is, to very loosely put it, to be in it to understand where we are coming from, I think that could be one of the starting points which can help us be originally the regression of canon itself. For instance, we all would agree that there would be certain feminist discourses, discourses which are predominantly considered as feminist, that can come across as alienating and even threatening to a certain communities and even other women. I think we must discuss this text - *The Yellow Wallpaper*, as part of the course, and it is seen as this embodiment of feminist, the feminist text - one of the pioneering texts that is very very wide and that is the critique - the whiteness of it and the social structures within which the text situated - that can come across as very very alienating and even threatening to somehow who does not inhabit those social spaces.

So I think, in our context, in the Indian context, that would make more sense, the kind of feminism that we feel it together, we come across every day. Some examples from the contemporary social media - #Meetoo movement. Much as we all completely support the need for it and the way it is radically changing the ways in which the social spaces, deconstructed, we must also pay attention to the fact that this is the space which only certain kinds of women can access.

The language of it, is very very alienating to someone who does not inhabit this urban, metropolitan centers, who does not have access to that kind of language and the frameworks within which the movement itself works. So, unless one has attended to these things as well, I think there is a real danger of feminist discourse itself - becoming another kind of patriarchal framework within which some kind of licensed patriarchy works within academics. And it is something, as academics, we should pay attention to.

Avishek Parui: Yes. I suppose what is interesting to see how patriarchy can operate overtly in discourses while seemingly seeming to be liberating and liberal and the rest of it. But it's actually embedded in a very overt patriarchal discourse which is always a danger and it reification as well. But it's really interesting in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, I think it is one of the most problematic texts which we have covered in this course so far.

The rightness of it just stares at your face and despite all that female agency and the medical trauma and the masculinity and medical, so the collusion that happens as a result of which the specialty of the female subject. But then, of course, rightness is something which is very much a part of the discourse and that is a very covert patriarchy which is operated with that seemingly radical text. So this will connect that to what the TA's have covered it quite extensively. How do you situate that particular text in the modern narrative of feminism in *The Yellow Wallpaper*?

Speaker 7: So before answering your question, I had a question just when you mentioned *The Yellow Wallpaper* and why we were doing it. And we were talking about female agency and the talks about hysteria and a woman that is hysteric. And when she actually, the narrator tears down the wallpaper, it is some kind of agency as she has saved herself from the medical imprisonment and she comes out. But, so I would like to question this position of the hysteric.

So when we talk about... so certain theorists or feminists are seeing this as a very liberating position, where women can go out of the discourse of the patriarchal discourse and setup and construct and talk about, express her feelings in a more empathetic or, you know, giving a way to her emotions. Whereas some different school of feminist are seeing this as a very limiting position which again brings a woman to that same binary of irrationality and confines her within it. So I would like to ask - what do you think about it? What is the way around it? Would you like to see the position of the hysteric as agentic position or one that again confines the woman within the same binaries.

Prf. Bharti Harishankar: First of all, I would like to look at the position as one way or the other. More than a position, it is a space. So this space of being hysterical, that offers upon (())(33:33) for negotiation, I think is welcome. Because it doesn't compromise with the sense of agency. But at the same time, if the legal of a hysteric put on them from outside, that is where I think we need to be a little careful. Because, who is authorized to define a person as hysteric? I'm of course not talking about medical credentials here, but in general, who is authorized to label another person? I'm moving right back to this politics of naming.

So when one shouts, does it become hysterical? When you go and ask what happens when a man shouts, what happens? So I think two related aspects need to be looked at in this. One, there are certain things we cannot look at as positions. So here, I think, the act or fact of being a hysteric can provide the much needed space to negotiate and articulate. That is all. On the other hand, it also raises a question of who is authorized to name someone, call someone hysteric. Or is it a perception on the part of the individual herself.

Avishek Parui: I agree with you completely on that because this space becomes a big deal in terms of gender performances and each form of involvement as a general is very spatial in quality. That deeply informs the different degrees of involvement. But I was intrigued with what you said about the whole politics of naming and classifications medically done. Because, I was thinking of the First World War - when soldiers came back from the war and they were hysterics, they exhibited all symptoms of hysteria. But of course, because they were big guys, they couldn't be named hysterics.

So they coined a term for Shell Shock and no one thought what that meant. And this entire medical confusion around Shell Shock was a classification; they couldn't come up with a classification quickly enough at that point of time. Which is why, where and when

interestingly, Freud became very handy. Because he just comes in at the perfect moment when the British neurologists are struggling to understand what's happening with these big guys, who are shivering like children and women - I think the term that is used is malingering and hysterical [not sure of 2 words 00:35:59], but it was very quickly reclassified.

So hysteria moved from being a disease of the womb to something that can affect even muscular guys coming back from the trenches or traumatized by the horrors of the war. Which brings us to the broader question of classification which I think we've been discussing so extensively already. The whole idea of classifying or labeling groups which can sometimes appear to be liberating in quality, appear to be radical in quality.

But that can again quickly, sort of, feed into the whole idea of reification - the moment you classify someone as a group as LGBT or gay or lesbian - there's a degree or danger of reification even in that classification as well. Because you stop saying that - that subject is compromised and constricted in terms of being just that and nothing else.

Prof. Bharti Harishankar: Absolutely. I think we can go right back to this Indian construction of the image of Kali, for instance. So on the one hand, we are very quick to differentiate Kali from the more benign (00:37:06) of goddesses. Whereas at the same time, look at the colonial construction of the Bengali babu as an effeminate - because he worships Kali. So that is where I see the danger of labeling. You label a thing or a person in relation to a very specific moment and context. But be very quick to take it away from that context and extrapolate.

And that extrapolation is in my opinion, very dangerous because we do, two very related mischiefs there. One is that we take out what we originally intend and provide an intent where it was not meant. And, as an extension of that, we also take it as a point of contestation. And, not all times do you have a contestation there. So in fact, I surprisingly, when I was dealing, reading up on the perception on Kali in Indian (00:38:21), it's surprising that Sister Nivedita had a perception, coming from outside, which should have technically speaking emerged from within India.

Speaker: Right. That is very interesting because I was thinking of Mrunal [author name 00:38:36] work and the whole idea of the effeminate or [one word 00:38:44], you know the masculine British. And what's also interesting is that how that masculine British got informed by the (00:38:46) movements which in turn borrowed by heavily, from Indian military forces.

The Tipu Sultan regiment, you know, that was what [00:38:39], the mustache of Tipu Sultan, that informed the Baden-Powell masculinity which gets very, effectively the face and no one talks about that at all.

And that seems to be a British convention at the top, completely. So this sartorial marques, this sort of embodied marques, I think they are, like you said, they are sometimes very effectively and strategically faced away in terms of a complete diverse in the context and making some kind of a timeless universal (())(39:23) of the femininity or masculinity, which then get very co opted into broader narratives as terrorism, colonialism etc. Marien, how would you like to respond to this value of classification and the dangers of classification as it were?

Dr. Merian Simigarch: I think it is all about, who gets to lead here and who gets to categorize. And that also, essentially brings in this bit of power, the structure is within the topic. If I may go back to the example that Sukriti used when she asked this question - the category of hysteria and the text being *The Yellow Wallpaper*. So taking the ending of the text, it's a very powerful ending. While there is also a sense in which we get that there are certain images, there are certain labels which can be used only to talk about women.

We find the man fainting at the end. The man faints at the end but that becomes you know, it is almost like telling us that it became too big for him handle it. But there is no term to talk about it. The story, it is a very powerful story, especially at the ending when Ravin told that - yes, the woman emerges as the stronger one in this entire discourse and at the end of it, we realize that the weaker man does not get labeled. On the other hand, from conventional leaders, a lot of publishers as you know during that time, who sympathized with the man, because this was not something that she was supposed to encounter, and also that, the man in the story, the moment he encounters something which he has never encountered before, he just cannot take it, he collapses.

But there is no term to categorize that, it's just an aberration. If we extrapolate that into any of the circumstances, any of the situations that we deal with the contemporary, the spaces within the discourses or within the other kinds of articulations that we find in the culture, the politics; there was a way in which a certain set of people, always get a name, always get a label, they always get categorized and they always circumvent those things which are inconvenient. And I believe that in terms of feminist discourse, in terms of engaging with

feminist writings, unless one begins to engage with those inconveniences, we may not be able to push past these boundaries and these delimiting categories.

So, it's always easy to deal with categories and labels, so instead of adopting the labels and the categories which have been handed over to us, as (())(42:01) that, we just discussed too. So I think it is about to step back and who had labeled a particular thing as X,Y or Z in the first place. And look at those conditions wherein which the labeling and the categorization happened. So that is perhaps one of the steps that we need to take. This also ties up very neatly with the question of 'can make the best of agency.'

Avishek Parui: Yes, completely. Because you know, one needs to be mindful of the materiality of labeling. I mean it's not an abstract activity, there's a very material activity which has solid economic underpinnings, political biases, ideological biases as a result of which certain labeling happen. So the materiality which informs the process of labeling is something, obviously, it's the (())(42:48) effectively, you know, people don't get to know the material nominations which took place to inform that directly.

But once that is dug up and studied and examined as textual categories, then it becomes easier to understand the little politics of labeling. But this, sort of brings me, because I was thinking of, you know, a self-reflexivity and I sort of thought that it's a really important point because, one of the things that fascinates me about feminism as a student the way it allies itself to so many other movements around that time. I'm thinking particularly about French feminism, the movement and the degree it borrows or it sort of lends itself in a very dialogic way to post positivism. Right?

So how do you think this aligns it's work in feminism, already the first thing we know that how (())(43:36) work. But looking at today, how do you see feminism connecting itself symbiotically and sort of dialogically to some of the movements around the world? Let's say the whole refugee crisis movement to immigration policy movement. So do you think feminism has, sort of potentially, a dialogue in these things in terms of connecting, maybe (()) (43:58), drawing all these movements?

Prf. Bharti Harishankar: The answer to that is actually - Yes and No. Because, yes, it is dialoging, so we too have had a lot of these intersections and these interactions happening which is, you know, whether it is with Marxism or psychoanalysis and post modernism or post colonialism. So this list is fairly endless. The types of feminisms captured, the kind of

interactions that have been there. And I see the value of those interactions in two ways - one is certainly, all these theories - have had an impact on the way feminism has shifted as a theory. But I found, find even more interesting is - the way feminism answers back to them.

And I think if we study the dynamics of that answering back, the dynamics itself is amazing. Because each covers most of the points that we raised in our discussion today. Just by going back and asking - yes, this will be useful for many things but is it useful for this particular idea too - is gender included in this? You know, that one idea seems like a very simple question but - even when you do your Foucault (())(45:29) for instance, or Foucault's sense of discipline and power or micro politics of power, time and again, you feel like asking the question - by the way, is gender included in this?

You don't know. See, we kind of adopt and adapt it to look at feminist text. Whereas, I don't think these theories by themselves would have lead to anything. But I think that we, all of the engagement between feminism and these theories, that have actually come up with some really interesting questions asked. I don't think we have answers. But certainly, these are very important questions to raise.

Avishek Parui: Right, interesting. So this is for all the scholars. Because I am aware that you come from different research clusters. So how do you see feminist connects to some of the clusters you are more aware of - let's say post-modernism or post-structuralism or post-colonialism. As you have seen as researchers, how do you see the connection operate at a textual level or even an experiential level?

Speaker 8: Hello, my name is Swati Shrivatav and I am a research scholar at IIM Madras. Now, since we are talking about *The Yellow Wallpaper* - there is another text that comes to my mind - *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin - American edition which was also criticized for being very white in terms of its feminist approaches. So that brings me to a question. Aren't we using feminism according to our conveniences? Right? Because in that text, we see, there is a white woman who is cornered by her own problems.

And then there is a maid; a working woman, who is not taken into consideration of feminism, right? And that brings me to the idea of sisterhood which I think we are not using as effectively as it has been projected in theories. When we practice sisterhood in texts, in literature, but not in reality; be it family, be it work place. Because, we must have heard women beings agents of patriarchy, right? And that is what I would like to question.

Prf. Bharti Harishankar: Okay. When you mention Kate Chopin, I was in fact thinking of this entire literary debate that came up when Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* came, and how it centers the (48:02) and the attic. But the (48:07) responses to *Wide Sargasso Sea*, interestingly focused on the characters of Tia and Christophine and said - when the cream like entity come in and how do we deal with them.

So my response, I don't know if it is an acceptable response, my response is that - all of these things have a ripple effect and there (48:39) who far and white, but I think in at any given point in time, we actually disrupt the ripple itself and assume that this is very good. Right? And that is why, I think, in this, as you rightly questioned - why is that we are not able to look at the sisterhood, which is such a lovely theoretical concept.

Why is it not getting practiced? I would say, we are holding too many handles. And we don't know which handle to choose at any given point in time; the handle of being a woman, the handle in terms of your caste, your class, your urban location for instance. So I think we have far too many handles there. But I would still say that it is better to have those handles because the option we have is a binary. So we certainly know about the binary even if some concepts like sisterhood cannot be applied in total.

Speaker 9: Do you think, this what you mentioned now and the idea of mischief that you mentioned previously - do you think this is a kind of an inherent danger or potential danger in the rhizomatic development of feminisms; each feminism developing from their own places and there they interact with different discourses which also resonate in a similar environment. And the way those interactions between discourses, the way they shape culture, the way they shape things around them, can have a counterproductive effect on another discourse of feminism.

Prf. Bharti Harishankar: Yes, absolutely. I mean that concern is a very valid concern. I mean when we talk about the kind (50:35) that a rhizomic structure provides you. This linear is always there. However, what I have found in all the intersections that we talk about in relation to feminism, I think the primary focus is on the feminist there and the gender construct. So, you know, we are prioritizing one over the other. I'm not looking at them as one taking away an influence that can disrupt what had happened earlier.

But I look at it as a perspective that is added. And in my opinion, we already had a lot of rhizomic expansion with feminism. And this is what disrupted the core with which we started in our movements. So given that, I am personally not worried because I feel that we need to raise those intervening questions. Because when the theory gets formulated, I think in the earlier years it doesn't have to worry because it's coming out of one ideology, it's coming out of one context and we are all aware of the context.

But when it moves beyond the context historically, that is when I think, we need to be worried whether, you know, whether, as Merian rightly pointed out - do we move right back and create a canon around of this so called periphery or margin. And I think, precisely the question which you raised, will they be counter-productive. If they are counterproductive, do we extend the equations? That kind of of canon formation, in fact I could even add the word 'unthinking canon formation', I think it's doing its job. And we need it. So I do not necessarily see it as a problem.

Avishek Parui: There is thin line between reality and problem, right? On one hand, we sort of separate, we obviously open up the Pandora's box as it was, which could be an inconvenience. But I take as Merian pointed out, as we look at feminism today, we need to not just accept but also celebrate inconvenience in a way. Because, in a way that cuts, sort of cuts off the complete seamless narrative which gets very easy co opted to patriarchy and the other forms of (())(52:59) such as nationalism, consumerism, capitalism etc.

So that inconvenience becomes, I think, in a sense a discursive phenomenon which must be accepted and celebrated and articulated over and over again. And that interruption, inconvenience - and these are also very post-modern categories in a way, right? Because that adds on to the new idea of self-reflexivity where the use of self critique yourself all the time. And therein lies the resistance, if I can use the word resistance against any danger of reification because it is breaking itself all the time - discursively, thematically, ontologically.

And if you accept and articulate inconveniences and interruptions, then I think that itself becomes resistance against any meta narrative which will be ascribed onto you as a category. So just to, sort of, answer the question again, so in terms of looking at inconveniences, Merian, would you situate feminism as a movement which is sort of dialogic with inconveniences, as Mohit was mentioning in the question, that is very common sensical

question in terms of whether or not that undercuts some of the motivations of feminism. But do you think that's a risk worth taking in terms of being more inclusive?

Dr. Merian Simigarch: Of course, lots of debates on how we engage with gender and feminism, example, our context - if we try to make gender and caste sit together, it would be like plenty of inconvenience which will suddenly emerge. But there is a certain kind of feminism, certain brand of feminism which uppercuts feminist (54:29) and that is something that other feminists find very very problematic. So the moment caste comes in, what would have been seen as progressive, as modern, begins to look very (54:42), to say the least.

And that is something which becomes visible only when you look at gender and caste together. If you only look at gender and look at feminism as a very ideal state, then it's a perfect thing to have. But when you bring in, when you inject caste to it, and for instance, if you bring in a certain Dalitness to it, which is like in arrest, you're bringing a blackness to it. You begin to see that this is really not perfect, this is a convenient thing, yes?

A convenient thing which will ensure that patriarchy does not affect me and at the same time, I will not get categorized with the other. So it will ensure that I will be not be categorized as 'the other' in terms of the patriarchal system. But it will also make me stay immune against the other kinds of things which could be lower caste, which could be lower class. So I think that is something which we still do not have a correct framework for it. So which is why perhaps this relies on theory, also becomes a very problematic thing.

Avishek Parui: Not at least because of the neurocentric biases in these theories. Right?

Dr. Merian Simigarch: Yes.

Avishek Parui: Because that's where most of these theories come from and it's a sort of, blindly mapping those theories into the reality under certain situations. It becomes a wonderful textual experience, it reads wonderfully as a text and it is very attractive in the classroom. But the question is that - is it actually viable or helpful in the reality out there. That becomes a very key question. So I think as academics we need to be careful about how we use theory as well, in terms of how we map theory and in certain (56:27) realities. So where we base, and that's a very generic question, I know, but would you sort of, caution

through this, against this by mapping of interactive theories such as deconstruction and post-structuralism on to let's say feminism? What will be your voice of caution in this?

Prf. Bharti Harishankar: Okay, one is, of course, as I think Diana (())(56:50) puts it, this was the olden days with post-colonialism which says - let's not put the entire bandage to heal things up. So we are not very really looking at theory as a quick fix to read a text. I think that's one danger that all of us, I mean there's a lot of temptation out there in terms of theory. So it is very easy to find a theory. And there are theories that we don't find a text to back. So I think that certainly one caution that we take. And I can also tell you from practice that it's maybe a good idea to look at the underlying philosophy to a theory.

Because, very often when we use just a few concepts out of those theories, (())(57:39), but if you go right back and then, you know, see for instance, even Simone de Beauvoir, you realize that it's coming from a major existential (())(57:50), how do you look at the whole concept of 'the other'. So I think that to me is certainly one caution, I mean, let's not jump into the theory bandwagon because the theory is there. That is one. Second is, at what point in the text do we bring that? So do we read the text, let the text open out and then you say - okay, this connects up, this particular idea can be better explained through a theory. That's one way of doing it.

But having said this, I must also say that theory certainly gives a structure to the way we interpret the text. So we cannot really say - no theory from today. Because the theoretical structure to your interpretation actually makes that interpretation, at least articulated in a way where people can take it or leave it. See, otherwise we would just end up talking thematically and (())(58:53) to a reality that is certainly a very confined reality. So we certainly don't want that.

So that opening out certainly happens with theory. So that is where I feel both theory and text is a balancing act. But the minute we say that one is more important than the other, I think we run a problem. But I also agree with you about at neurocentric baggage that we have. Some of those are (())(59:31) that we are able to apply. So somewhere around, I think, Foucault seems pretty versatile to me. (())(59:42) for quite a long time. So certainly, again you know, Derrida, while the philosophy is (())(59:51) the chapter of deconstruction.

So I think somewhere around, it is also fashionable to sight and forego a few theories. But I don't think if we forego this notion of - let's look at the theory, let's adopt it, yes, but let's adapted as well. So I really think all aspects of a theory has to fit in your scheme of

interpretation, not needed at all. But we somehow feel forced to just stick to one theorist. So then we are, I think, upfront whether it's our research papers or our dissertations and thesis we are quick to say - a psychoanalytic approach or a post-modernist approach or deconstructionist approach or, you know, a feminist approach or an intersectional feminist.

So I think we don't have to rush to that choice of theory that quickly and I think we haven't even forced to make a combination and I think more than in any other field, feminist writing allows you that opportunity. You wouldn't say - I want to look at this particular idea of this theory where I want to combine it to offer a better interpretation, a new insight into my text, into the text that I am dealing with. So I think that option is there and we are probably not exercising the option very well till now.

Avishek Parui: I completely agree because there is a danger of some degree of hyper intellectual presumption that, where I consume certain theories and just blindly replicate it in textbooks. And as you said, this very frozen mathematical models where you can apply psychoanalysis to (())(01:01:53) theory to a wonderful (())(01:01:56) side of it but that obviously is very limiting and reifying.

So I think we can end on that really interesting note because it's very sensitively liberating to (())(01:02:05) theory, as Merian put it and more accommodating to inconveniences and I suppose that connects back to the fundamental question with which we open the relevance of feminism today; that in a way that would probably equip us better to negotiate better with inconveniences and not negate inconveniences but to accept and celebrate inconveniences as a way to move forward in the world we live in today, in a world where we internalize today.

And perhaps that acceptance and celebration of inconvenience would make us more self-reflexive as you pointed. And therein lies the political possibilities of feminism; not just the classroom textbooks or as a movement with which we can internalize and contest the actions that we do as thinking human beings in the world we live in today. So with that we end this particular session. Thank you very much again to Professor Harishankar Dr. Merian. And also the two TA's of this course - Sukriti Sanyal and Mohit Sharma. And thank you to all the research scholars who attended the session. Thank you very much. With that we conclude this session of Feminist Writings, the NPTEL course that we ran from January 2019, thank you.