

Reading and Writing Difference:
Gender and Literature

Pegasus volume on

Reading and Writing Difference:
Gender and Literature

Edited by

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CONTENTS

Introduction 7

Sanjukta Das

Media, Gender, and Popular Culture in India: new possibilities for future research 11

A review article by Sanjukta Das

The Evolution of a Black Feminist Perspective 17

Dr. Sreemati Mukherjee

Dalit Feminism and Dalit Women's Writing: Continuities, Challenges and Subversions 31

Dr Arpita Chattaraj (Mukhopadhyay)

Construction of an Alternative Masculinity in Rabindranath Tagore's *The Home and the World* 43

Aditi Sengupta

Cressida's Case 63

Uma Ray Srinivasan

A 'damned charming' 'Fiend-like Queen': Charlotte Cushman and Ellen Terry's representations of Lady Macbeth on stage 80

Piyali Gupta

Androgyny in 'Nature: Nature-imagery in *Orlando and the Passion of New Eve* 98

Pritha Kundu

"Absolute Trust in the Goodness of the Earth": An Ecofeminist Reading of Alice Walker's Poems 111

Anindita Chatterjee

At Home in the World:
Modern Indian English Poetry by Women 124
Swarupa Gomes

**No Room of their Own: Representing the
Unimagined Communities in Arundhati Roy's Writings'** 134
Anupama Maitra

**'That was my last act of love':
Sylvia Plath and *The Bell Jar*** 142
Arunima Bhattacharya

Introduction

This volume presents research in the area of Gender and Literature by scholars who are professionally engaged as teachers of English Literature, all of them but one, in colleges and Universities of West Bengal. The essays represent a range of readings deriving from the discourse on gender and literature. The collection begins with a review article of a recent book— *Media Gender and Popular Culture in India*— also written by academics in West Bengal, Calcutta University specifically, that indicates new directions for research, bringing together the traditional literary criticism approach of English Literature Studies and empirical surveys of masses of texts [film and advertisement texts] that draw from the social sciences approach to the production and consumption of texts.

Srimati Mukherjee's 'The Evolution of a Black Feminist Perspective' although a reprint of an article¹ that appeared four years ago has been included in this volume, because the imbrication of women's lives in dominant and sub-cultures is pertinent not only in terms of race as in the work of Alice Walker, Toni Morrison et al., but in India today, in terms of caste and class. This is demonstrated by Arpita Chattaraj Mukhopadhyay's 'Dalit Feminism and Dalit Women's Writing: Continuities, Challenges and Subversions', that looks to the figures of Sojourner Truth and Alice Walker to focus on the inadequacy of an 'essentialist' position for feminism in India. Mukhopadhyay's readings of a range of Dalit women's narratives reveal the distinctive configurations of difference in India, manifested through Brahmanic notions of motherhood, purity, and contamination.

The Brahmanic notions of the 'pure woman' as manifest in the nineteenth and twentieth century construction of the Hindu nation and Hindu wife, was critiqued in the works of Tagore, consequently throwing up an alternate masculinity as delineated in Aditi Sengupta's 'Construction of an Alternative Masculinity in Rabindranath Tagore's *The Home and the World*'. Sengupta's paper hints at the psycho-sexual *re*-formations of women and men at a particular historic moment of national identity formation through her analysis of Tagore's heroine, Bimala, who realized rather late, the truth of the masculinities of the firebrand nationalist Sandip and that of her gentle husband Nikhilesh, and in whose confusion and realization Tagore saw the threshold moment of gender re-formation.

From Tagore to Shakespeare—Uma Ray Srinivasan's 'Cressida's Case' examines the character of Cressida. Reviewing the range of critical opinions of Cressida as 'a coquette without a soul', as the 'first modern feminine character', and as a woman whose fidelity or infidelity is 'irrelevant', Srinivasan argues how stereotyping and the urge to break away from stereotype are equally fraught.

Piyali Gupta's close study of two nineteenth century actresses, namely Charlotte Cushman (1816-76) in the USA and Ellen Terry (1847-1928) in England, in terms of their different rendition of the character of Lady Macbeth opens up not only the gender fluidity inherent within the same dramatic character but also how role playing by actresses may dissolve personal and theatrical identities to reconfigure Shakespeare's text for us.

The issue of fluid sexual identity is explored anew in Pritha Kundu's 'Androgyny in 'Nature: Nature-imagery in *Orlando* and the *Passion of New Eve*', a comparative reading of Virginia Woolf's 1928 novel *Orlando* and Angela Carter's *The Passion of New* written half a century later in 1977. In Woolf the male retains his masculine identity despite transformations into female at different points of history. In Carter however the male becomes female for good. Kundu examines the descriptions of nature in the two authors to show how the authors' portrayals of Nature are informed by their different sense of androgyny.

Literary representations of androgyny are the other side of representations that express the repressive construct of gender. The anguish of a creative mind trapped inside a female body had been underlined by Woolf with regard to English women. The situation had a specific variation in mid-twentieth century America, as Plath's life, death and work denote. Arunima Bhattacharya looks at Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* against the canvas of Plath's times and our own, and argues how the narrative documents the painful conflict of desires that are the consequences of sexual stereotyping. Reckoning with Plath's life and the Plath phenomenon is an inescapable part of 'reading' the novel. Bhattacharya's 'That was my last act of love': Sylvia Plath and *The Bell Jar*' examines the delineation of 'others' in Plath's narrative of the 'self', and the implications for gender.

Nature has yet another implication for gender and women as is explored in the study of ecofeminism in Alice Walker's poetry, by Anindita Chatterjee. Poetry by women in India forms the subject of Swarupa Gomes's article that traces women's voices in a richly diverse cultural history.

Gomes's 'At Home in the World: Modern Indian English Poetry by Women' reviews the delineation of gender by Indian women poets writing in English— Toru Dutt to Meena Alexander, Sujata Bhatt, and Eunice de Souza in an India where Hinduism, Christianity and Islam, not to mention, Buddhism, Judaism and Zoroastrianism, have resulted in a rich tapestry of cross pollinations intersected by nationalism, modernity, post-nationalism, and migration.

In 'No Room of their Own: Representations of the Unimagined Communities in Arundhati Roy's Writings', Anupama Maitra notes how Roy's concerns with the experiences of the marginalized, not only questions the grand narrative of nationhood but also extends the borders of genres. So that a cult film from her early career and a series of conversations in her recent work both use the format of the fragmented medley of voices that question, and invite thought but do not formulate solutions.

Reading and Writing Difference represents the variety of
Reading and Writing Difference: Gender and Literature 9

ways in which the discourse on Gender continues to provide new and relevant perspectives for research in English Literature Departments.

Notes and References

1. First published in *Rabindra Bharati Journal of Women's Studies*. Volume 1, 2008. Inaugural issue. Kolkata: Women's Studies Centre, Rabindra Bharati University, 2008. 1-8.

Media, Gender, and Popular Culture in India: new possibilities for future research

A review article by Sanjukta Das

Research in Gender Studies within English Departments in India span explorations of Shakespearean delineations of gender, gender in Dalit Literature, and lives of Indian women in history, literature, and cinema. The discourse on Gender, as well as literary criticism from the perspective of Gender, is imbricated, like all postmodern discourses such as Culture Studies and Post-Colonial studies, within an interdisciplinary architecture.

Media, Gender, and Popular Culture in India: tracking change and continuity,¹ by three authors— two of them, Sanjukta Dasgupta and Sudeshna Chakravarti, Professors of English, and Dipankar Sinha, Professor of Political Science— is an impressive outcome of interdisciplinary symbiosis, using not just interdisciplinary theorizations but methodology as well. The authors state at the outset their aim to provide a holistic assessment of media, gender, and popular culture intersects, using a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches, i.e, semiotic readings of single texts and content analyses of 'a large body of sample texts in order to identify quantitative data attuned to the social science discipline'. (13) In their exploration of media and popular culture the authors have taken as their empirical field, film, television, advertising, print and broadcast media, tracking comparatively, the mediation of gender between official modes such as All India

Radio, Doordarshan, and Press Censorship Laws on the one hand, and commercial television and cinema on the other.

English Literary Studies in India today may be termed 'transnational' on counts of production, reception, and dissemination of literary and critical texts. *Media, Gender, and Popular Culture in India* augments understanding of how gender configurations are constructed, re-constructed, changed as well as maintained by modern day media in what is transnational space. English teachers in India apart from their research, and teaching of literature, also help produce workers for call centres. Dasgupta et al. cite sociologist Tina Basi's work² in this field to underline how 'Western culture, the English language, and exposure to western lifestyle norms play a transformative role' in the lives of Indian women. (11)

The readings of films based on English literary texts, *Bride and Prejudice*, *Maqbool*, and *Omkara* by Indian directors provides an interesting map for the mediatized routes English Literature in India has taken in current times and how some of these films reconfigure gender, colonialism, and transnationalism. For instance Mira Nair better known for *Monsoon Wedding* had made *Vanity Fair* based on W M Thackeray's novel. The authors mention how 'British critics sternly criticized the intrusions of Bollywood exotica in the film', and argue that considering the fact that Thackeray was born in Kolkata, 'Nair was trying to sensitize the viewers about the important role India played in 19th century Britain's socio-economic environment, when hundreds of British men made a career in India'. (87) Dasgupta et al. read Nair as 'a non-white filmmaker in the Global North' (81) Assessing Nair's *Monsoon Wedding*, *Mississippi Masala*, and *The Namesake* that deal with many aspects of diaspora, identity and transnationalism, alongside a host of films by Indian women filmmakers such as Aparna Sen, Sai Paranjape, Deepa Mehta, the authors analyse both the presentation of gender in their films as well these filmmakers' negotiations of gendered spaces within the national and global film industries.

Treating in detail representations of gender in films by Indian

filmmakers at home and abroad and concluding that the bulk of Indian cinema is androcentric notwithstanding a few directors such as Aparna Sen, the authors give us an overview of gender images in Hollywood movies too. Citing films such as *Working Girl* (1988), *Stepmom* (1998), *Monster-in-Law* (2005), and *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006) their study traces how the determined positive figure of the woman achiever is 'deconstructed, if not entirely rejected in *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006)', and notes how, 'Something has definitely changed between 1988 and 2006, as the strong woman of 1988, transforms into a she-devil in 2006'. (56)

The section on film censorship (63-65) provides interesting examples of certain films that were censored by the Censor Board of Eastern India in the early 1980s. The Board's objections to films such as *Jai Santoshi Ma* (on grounds of spreading superstition) and *Sati Anusua* (considered to be 'antiwoman') nevertheless saw the films being released with minor modifications and cuts. 'Indian mythology' is often cited by the film makers to justify the portrayal of attitudes 'at variance with modern ideas of rationalism and feminism'. The authors present a fairly detailed reading of some popular Bengali films of the 1980s and the portrayal of 'The joint family, gender and the female body'. The survey covers on the one hand, the slew of popular films 'fit to be seen by the whole family' made by directors such as Sukhen Das, catering to middle class situations of economically independent, educated, working women unwilling to submit to a joint family set up, and on the other hand, a film such as *Adalat o Ekti Meye* by Tapan Sinha where middle class mores regarding the female body are held to scrutiny.

The chapter entitled, 'Television: Images and the Imaginary' cites Gilder's observation about how digital technologies and hundreds of channels facilitating niche viewership, make the present age one of 'narrowcasting' rather than broadcasting,³ but points out nevertheless that in India, 'such refined viewing may be of interest of a select few'. In India television's reach and power have helped 'consolidate stereotyping of gendered images' through advertisements that show women as sex objects. The authors ob-

serve how women newsreaders on Doordarshan wear the national dress but private channels, even local ones 'replicate BBC and CNN channels' in their news and talk shows. They cite two Bengali channels where the women newsreaders and anchors wear executive suits. Later in the chapter this trend seems to tie up with the citation of an observation by Uma Chakraborty on how the India of the villages, of inequality 'has disappeared from the media, except to feature as disaster arenas in the news... completely erased from the consciousness of globalized India'.⁴ (105) Gender images in television soaps show women decked in expensive finery, scheming and squabbling within the extended family, but devoid of real agency. The authors point out how real changes in society— 'increase in number of professional women, shared household work, women in higher salary structures than their male partners or husbands are elided'. (110) Speaking of the popular K serials of Ekta Kapoor, the authors extend Uma Chakraborty's view when they draw attention to the absence of 'non-Hindu, non-upper caste, and non-middle class persons' in these narratives. Their comment that though these serials overtly expose cruelty towards the girl child, dowry, female infanticide, and feticide, they seem to covertly imply that these ills may only be partly compensated but not totally rejected, correctly catches the nature of popular mediations of social causes that nevertheless keep intact the status quo. The authors find regressive social processes to be legitimized by the,

...mass consumption of these family-centric traditional role-playing by women in the 21st century, where educated women, professional women, and independent women were marginalized systematically and religious nonprofessional women were foregrounded as representative of Indian culture... (113)

Commenting on advertising trends in the chapter, 'Advertising: Encoding Seduction', the authors observe how across a range of advertisements, 'Women's own medical needs are generally about pain balms that women apply in order to attend to more domestic chores', (132) and how 'Advertising slots known as "break" slots

are all screened around the same time, so channel switching does not facilitate escape from advertisements' as part of an 'aggressive strategy'. (133) In all advertisements men are shown as head of the family providing for insurance coverage, a holiday or a house for the wife and children thereby completely ignoring and erasing the increasing reality of the economically independent woman. The projection of women as caregivers or ministering angels in advertisements is part of a global trend, the authors inform us.

It is the 'little magazines' that are found to be 'agents with a difference because rather than toeing the line of dominant popular culture they seek to reinvent popular culture in their own terms'. (141) Tracing the growth of Bengali little magazines from the 1970s onwards the book lists not only feminist 'little magazines' but also general little magazines bringing out an occasional special issue devoted to feminism. There is also a detailed review of women's magazines such as *Women's Era*, *Meri Saheli* and *Femina*, along with a consideration of men's magazines such as *Maxim*, *Penthouse*, *Esquire*, *GQ* (Gentlemen's Quarterly), and *FHM* (For Him Magazine). This chapter, entitled 'Print Media and Popular Culture: Agents with a Difference' also takes stock of Indian feminist journals such as *Miloon Saryajani* (Women Together), a Marathi publication and *Manushi*, an English one. Apart from detailed analyses of these entire range of magazines, the authors also provide a survey of 19th century women's magazines such as *Bamabodhini Patrika*, and a 1930s one such as *Jayasree*. The survey takes due note of the feminist magazines that are 'attached either to small but active feminist groups or to the women's branches of political parties'. (175) The citations of articles by 19th century women in (Bengali) magazines of the time establish the presence of a tradition of feminist writing in magazines. The case of *Stree Bodh* is interesting— it is the first journal for women in India published in Gujarati continuously from January 1857 until sometime in the late 1950s.

This section of the book has a short but revealing paragraph on the two ends of the spectrum of women journalists in India today. One is the case of a woman reporter from a Surat based

newspaper being beaten up by the police along with her male colleague when they went to interview women who had been attacked. The other is the case of Barkha Dutt reporting from the shelling of the Kargil War in freezing temperature.

The section concludes with a case study of the popular women's magazine, *Sananda*, established in 1986 and running strong till date. The authors note how *Sananda* largely devoted to homemaking, advocates only an occasional half-step towards change as 'rejection of conservative parameters of culture still remains a slippery space of uncertainty'. (179)

Media, Gender, and Popular Culture in India: tracking change and continuity concludes with a survey of 'alternative media' such as the internet, community radio, and street theatre. In India internet may be termed 'alternative' as the majority do not have access to it. However given Indian demography, the segment that does have access to the net is a huge one and has been effective in combating injustice as in the Jessica Lal murder case.

For researchers in English Departments *Media, Gender, and Popular Culture in India* opens out new possibilities in future research both in terms of subject matter as well as interdisciplinary methodology and collaboration.

Notes and References

1. Dasgupta, Sanjukta, Dipankar Sinha, and Sudeshna Chakravarti, *Media, Gender, and Popular Culture in India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications India, 2012. All references to the book in this article are from this edition.

2. Basi, J.K. *Women, Identity and India's Call Centre Industry*. Oxon: Routledge, 2009.

3. Gilder, George. *Life after Television*. New York:W.W. Norton Co.Inc., 1992.

4. Cited from Bel, Bernard, Jan Brouwer, Vibodh Parthasarathi, and Guy Poitevin. *Media and Mediation*. New Delhi. SAGE Publications, 2005.

The Evolution of a Black Feminist Perspective

Sreemati Mukherjee

In her famous essay "Criticism in the Wilderness," where Showalter uses the term *gynocritics*¹ to indicate a critical theory of women's writing by women theorists, she indicates that women work with both the "dominant" and "muted"² of culture. Showalter, who basically has an Anglo-American feminist orientation, dismisses as impractical the idea of feminist utopias where the language of women's writing is understood by women only. Helene Cixous's stand in "Laugh of the Medusa" (*Le rire de la Meduse*)³ is far more radical where she talks about women writing their bodies into language, an *écriture féminine*⁴ (feminine writing) which would carry the pluralistic inscription of women's multiple sexual desires, carrying the boundaries of traditional signification to a precipitous point where woman was seen as "subversive"⁵ "volcanic"⁶ and consequently both a threat and a stranger. Thus, Anglo-American feminism and French feminism are giving us two radically different ways of reading the sign woman or reading women's writing within cultural frameworks. However, the black woman as sign is nowhere evident in any of these discursive standpoints. Even if we do not pay that much attention to the omission of factors like race and historical context in such arguments, the glaring absence of black women writers in feminist historiographies like *The Madwoman in the Attic*⁷ and Ellen Moers's *Literary Women*⁸, is significant.