Contextualizing Gender
Prof. Rashmi Gaur
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Roorkee

Lecture – 11
Gender-Blurring in Toni Morrison's Novels I

Good morning, dear friends. In this week, we would begin our discussion with the concept of Gender-Blurring and after explaining the concept, we would move to a discussion of Toni Morrison's work from this perspective. Our understanding of gender has started to change over a passage of time. It is not what it used to be, as we find that conventional categories have started to collapse.

What was considered to be deviant a couple of decades earlier has become a norm now and it is a result of various socio-cultural shifts. What used to exist only on the fringes of the society even two decades back has now become a part of our mainstream culture, media and educational and public policies are also being redesigned accordingly.

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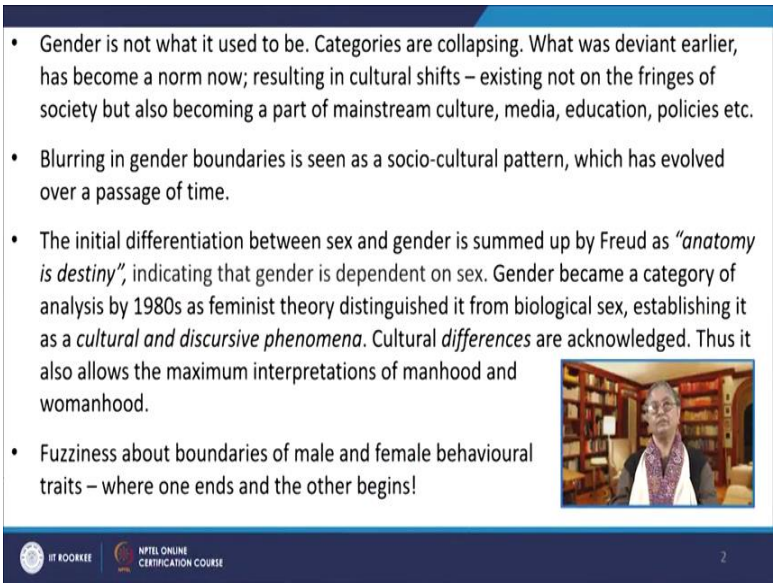

The initial differentiation between sex and gender; in the beginning of the 20th century has been summed up by Freud very appropriately. Freud had used the phrase "anatomy is destiny", indicating that gender is dependent on sex. This was the perspective which was taken up by the first wave of feminist theories.

Later on, we find that by 1980's gender became a category of analysis. It was distinguished from biological sex, and was established as a cultural and discursive phenomena. It acknowledged the cultural differences and thus, it also allows maximum interpretations of what it means to be a man or a woman.

So, there is a fuzziness about boundaries of male and female behavioral traits. We do not know where one ends exactly and where the other begins. I would base my discussion on this understanding of the 1980's feminist theory which distinguishes gender from biological sex; but takes it as a cultural and discursive phenomena.

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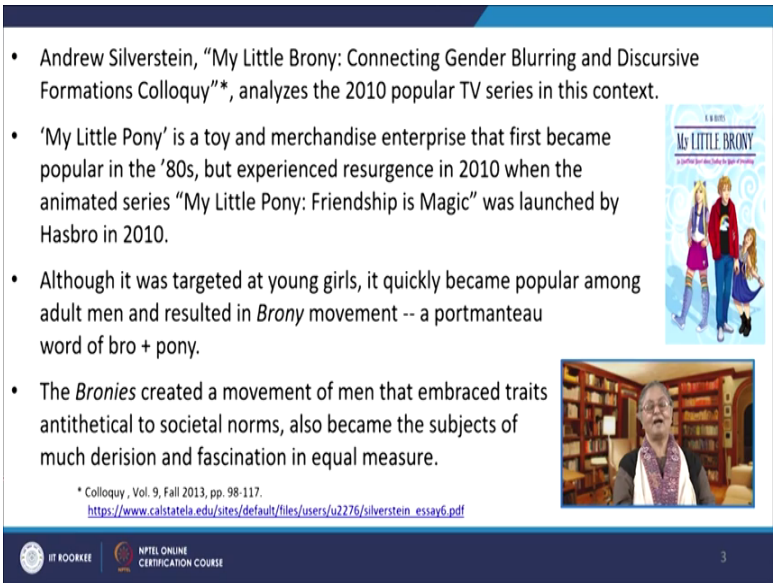

I would refer to a very interesting article "My Little Brony, Connecting Gender Blurring and Discursive Formations Colloquy" in which Andrew Silverstein analyzes the 2010 popular TV series in this context. 'My Little Pony' is basically a toy as well as a merchandise enterprise which became popular in 1980's. But it experienced resurgence and a better popularity, when the animated series "My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic" was launched by Hasbro in 2010.

Though the series had targeted the young girls only, it quickly somehow became popular among adult men and this popularity resulted in what is known as the Brony movement. Brony is a portmanteau word of bro that is brother and pony.

So, the Bronies created a movement of men which enable them to embrace traits, which were antithetical to the societal understand of masculinity and they also became the subject of much derision as well as fascination in equal measures.

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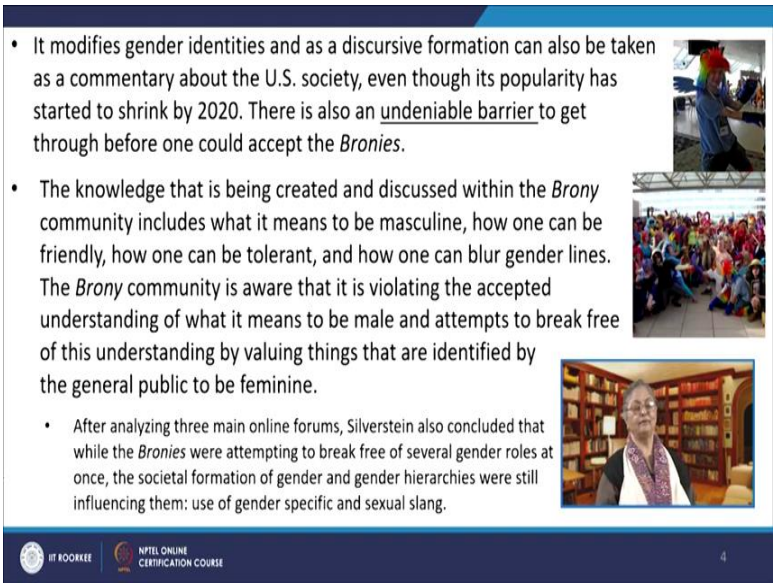

This movement modified gender identities and as a discursive formation, it can also be taken as a commentary about the U.S. society, even though off late its popularity has started to shrink, still we find that it showcases a particular facet of contemporary American society. At the same time, we have to understand that there exists an undeniable barrier before one could accept the Brony movement.

The knowledge that is being created and also discussed within the Brony community includes what it means to be masculine, how one can be friendly and masculine simultaneously, how one can be tolerant, and how one can blur the gender lines. The Brony community is aware that it is violating the accepted understanding of what it means to be male and attempts to break free of this understanding by valuing things that are identified by the general public to be feminine.

Women are also a part of this movement, but it largely focuses on the participation of men. Silverstein has analyzed three main online forums which have discussed this particular movement over a passage of time. Interestingly, he concludes that though the Bronies have attempted to break free of several gender roles at once, the societal formation of gender as well as the accepted gender hierarchies were still influencing

them in an unconscious manner. And this is reflected in their use of sexual slang and gender specific language.

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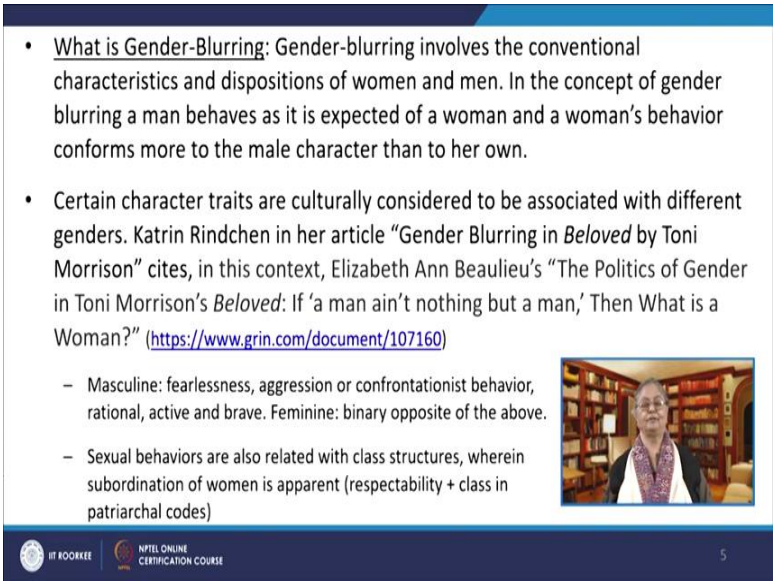

So, what is Gender-blurring? Gender-blurring involves the conventional characteristics and dispositions of women and men. In the concept of gender blurring a man behaves as it is expected of a woman as per the conventional social norm and a woman's behavior confirms more to the male character than to her own.

Now, what exactly are the specific characteristics of a man or a woman? I would refer to Katrin Rindchen, who in her article, "Gender Blurring in Beloved by Toni Morrison" has given the example from another article by Elizabeth Beaulieu, "The Politics of Gender in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* :if 'a man ain't nothing but a man,' Then what is a woman?" And these writers have listed certain characteristics as being masculine and certain characteristics as being feminist.

If we look at their listing, we find that the listing is not exactly new; but they have tried to understand this listing at its significance in the context of Toni Morrison's writing. We understand that fearlessness, aggression or a confrontationist behavior is related with masculinity. A man is also expected to be rational, active as well as brave, a provider for one's family; a person who should be able to take care of one's family.

The feminine characteristics are the binary opposites. If a man is expected to be fearless, a woman is expected to be rather timid. She should value relationships and should not be aggressive; she should be emotional, passive etc. These sexual binaries are related not only with our culture, but also they are a part of our class structures.

But still, we find that within the class structures in these characteristics, the subordination of women is apparent. We also understand that the definitions of certain terms also changes according to the changes within the class structures. For example, the idea of respectability among women is defined in various ways depending on the class to which a woman belongs.

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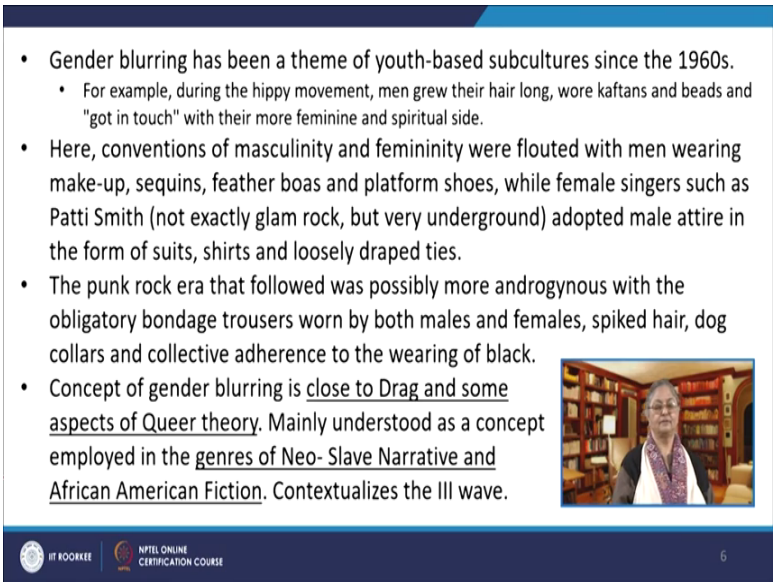

We find that in the modern times gender blurring has been a theme of several youth-based subcultures. For example, the hippy movement during the 1960s, where the conventions of masculinity and femininity were flouted by cross dressing. The punk rock era that followed was perhaps more androgynous with the obligatory bondage trousers and closeness in their apparel choices.

Concept of gender blurring is close to the idea of the Drag and certain aspects of Queer theory. Even though it is mainly understood as a concept which has been employed to look at the genres of Neo-Slave Narrative and African American Fiction. We also find that this concept of gender blurring contextualizes the third wave of feminist from where we find that more contemporary understandings of the term gender have arisen. In order

to understand the idea of gender blurring in a more detailed way, let us look at the concept of Drag and those aspects of Queer theory which are close to it.

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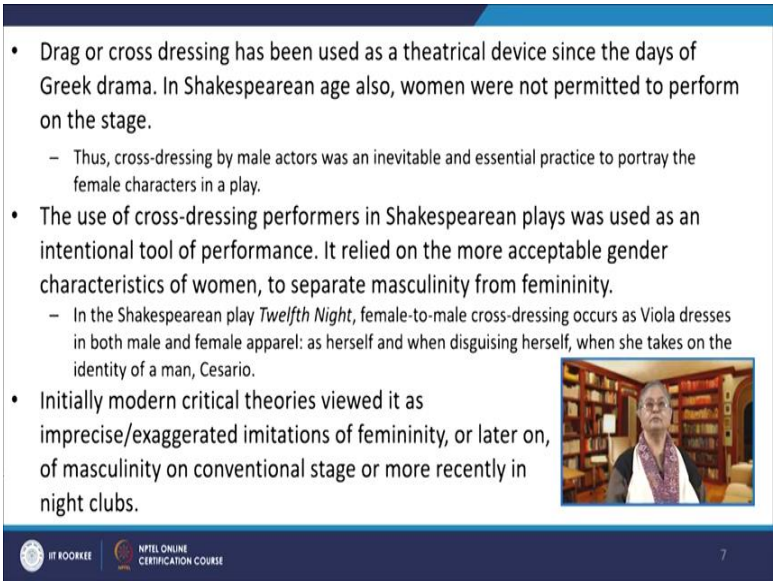

Drag or cross dressing is not a new phenomenon. It has been used as a theatrical device since the days of Greek drama. During the medieval times also women were not permitted to perform on the stage and in Shakespearean drama, we find that the characters of women were played on stage by men.

So, cross dressing in theater by male actors was inevitable and it became an essential practice to portray the female characters in a play. It was used thus as an intentional tool of performance and this performance relied on the more acceptable and visible gender characteristics of women so that the characteristics of women or the portrayal of women characters is separated from the portrayal of men character.

There is also an example of cross dressing by a woman. For example, Viola in *Twelfth Night*, when she takes up the identity of a man Cesario through cross dressing. Initially, modern literary critical theories viewed drag as an imprecise or exaggerated imitation of femininity or later on, of masculinity either on conventional stage only or more recently in the nightclub performances.

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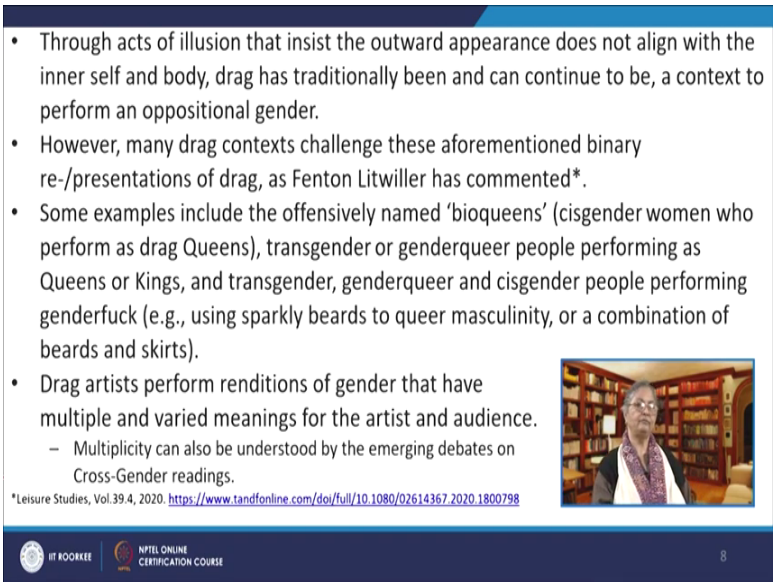

However, we find that now the drag is studied as a critical theoretical stance also. Through acts of illusion that insist the outward appearances does not align with the inner self and body, drag has traditionally been and can also continue to be a context to perform an oppositional gender. Many drag context challenge these aforementioned binary representations of drag as Fenton Litwiller has commented in his article.

Some examples include the offensively named ‘bioqueens’ who are cisgender women who perform as drag Queens, transgender or gender queer people performing as Queens or Kings and transgender genderqueer and cisgender people performing genderfuck that is using sparkly beards to queer masculinity or a combination of beards and skirts.

Drag artists perform renditions of gender that have multiple and varied meanings for the artist as well as for the audience and this multiplicity can be understood by the emerging debates on cross gender readings within the academia.

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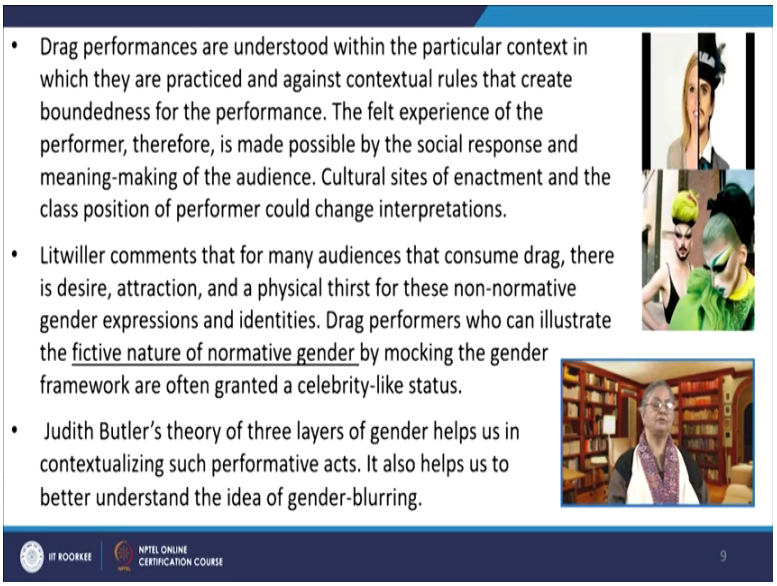

Interpretation of drag performance is related with the particular context in which it is practiced and also, against contextual rules that create boundedness for the performance so that we cannot dissociate the cultural site of enactment from the performance because the site of enactment and the class position of performer would also change the interpretations. The felt experience of the performer is made possible by the social response as well as by the meaning making capability of the audience.

For many audiences as Litwiller has commented, the drag is desire; it is an attraction as well as a physical thirst for the non-normative gender expressions and identities. Drag performers, who can illustrate the fictive nature of normative gender by mocking the gender framework are often given a celebrity like status in contemporary cultural norms. Judith Butler's theory of three layers of gender also helps us in contextualizing such performative acts.

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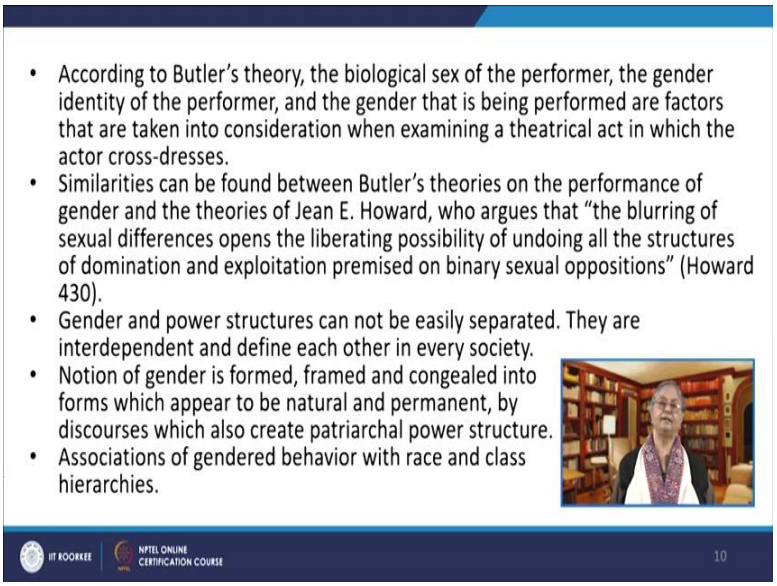

We would discuss Judith Butler in detail in some other modules; but at this point, Judith Butler's theory is important for understanding the interpretations of the drag performance. According to her, the biological sex of the performer, the gender identity of the performer and the gender that is being performed are factors that are taken into consideration when examining a theatrical act in which the actor cross dresses.

Similarities between Butler's theory on the performance of gender and the theories of Jean Howard can also be pointed out. Jean Howard has suggested that the blurring of sexual differences opens the liberating possibility of undoing the structures of domination and exploitation which are premised on binary sexual opposition. It can also be pointed out that gender and power structures cannot be separated. They are interdependent and define each other in every society.

Notion of gender is formed, framed and congealed into forms which appear to be natural and permanent by discourses which are also responsible for generating and perpetuating patriarchal power structures. At the same time, we find that associations of gendered behavior with race and class hierarchies also exist.

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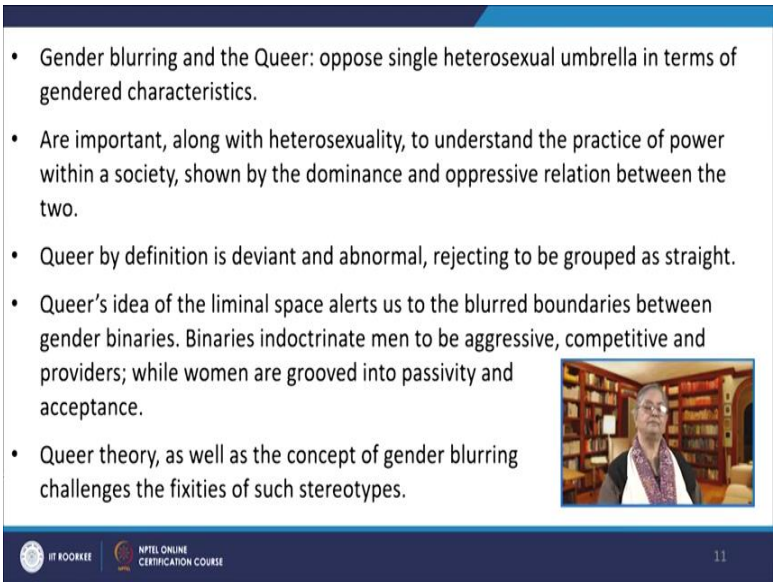

The notion of gender-blurring is also very close to certain aspects of the Queer. It opposes single heterosexual umbrella in terms of gendered characteristics. An understanding of gendered characteristics is significant to understand the contemporary notion of gender philosophy. Along with heterosexuality, they help us in understanding the practice of power within a society which is shown by the dominance and oppressive relationship between the binaries. Queer by definition is deviant and abnormal. It is considered to be a deviation and therefore, it is rejected to be grouped as straight.

Queer's idea of the liminal space alerts us to the blurred boundaries between the conventional gender binaries. Binaries indoctrinate men to be aggressive, competitive and provider for example; while women are grooved into passivity and acceptance. Queer theory as well as the concept of gender-blurring challenges the fixities of such stereotypes in practice.

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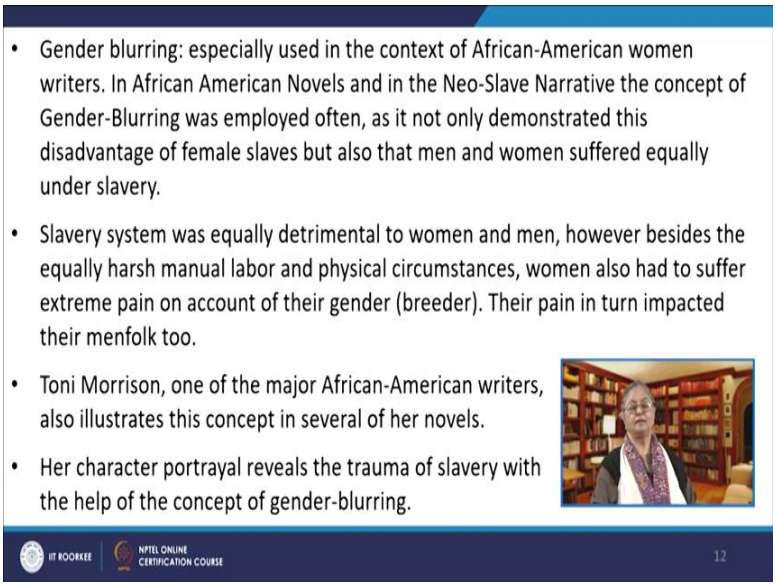

Gender blurring is especially used in the context of African-American women writers. In African American novels as well as in the Neo-Slave Narratives, the concept of gender-blurring was often employed. It was employed not only to demonstrate the disadvantages of female slaves, but also to illustrate the point that men as well as women suffered equally under slavery.

Slavery system was detrimental to women and men and as we know besides sharing the equally harsh manual labor and other physical circumstances, women also had to suffer extreme pain on account of their own gender. They were treated as breeder. But the pain of the women folk in turn impacted their menfolk too. Toni Morrison, one of the major African-American writers, has illustrated this concept in several of her novels. Her character portrayals reveal the trauma of slavery with the help of the concept of gender-blurring and how it has impacted the psyche of men as well as women.

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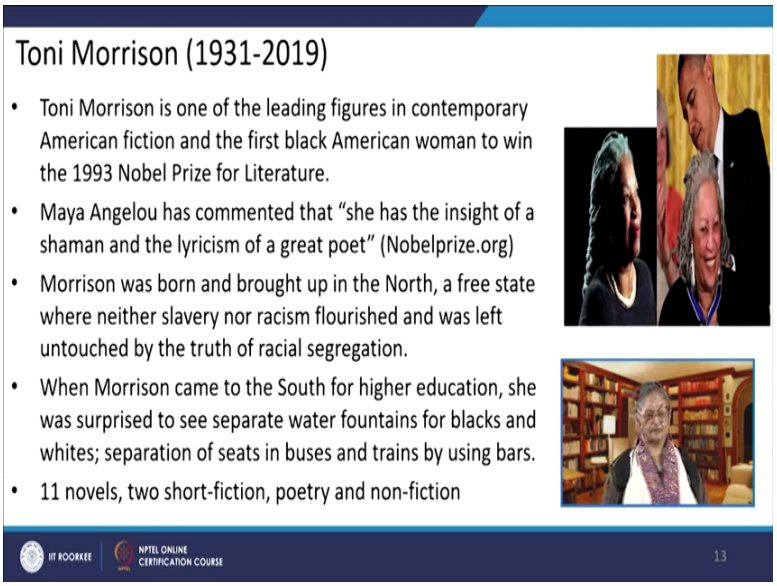

Toni Morrison is a prolific writer. She has written 11 novels, two short-fiction, poetry as well as non-fiction also. Toni Morrison is one of the leading figures in contemporary American fiction and the first black American woman to win the Nobel Prize for literature. She was awarded it in 1993. Maya Angelou has commented that "she has the insight of a shaman and the lyricism of a great poet".

In her growing up years, Morrison had never faced the ill effects of slavery herself. However, when she came to South for higher education, she was surprised to see the separation in practice between the two races. These experiences are recorded in her writings.

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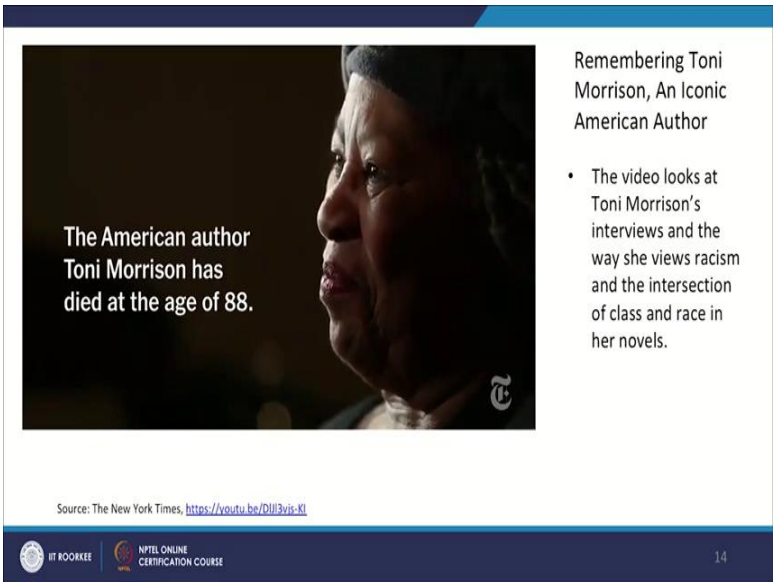

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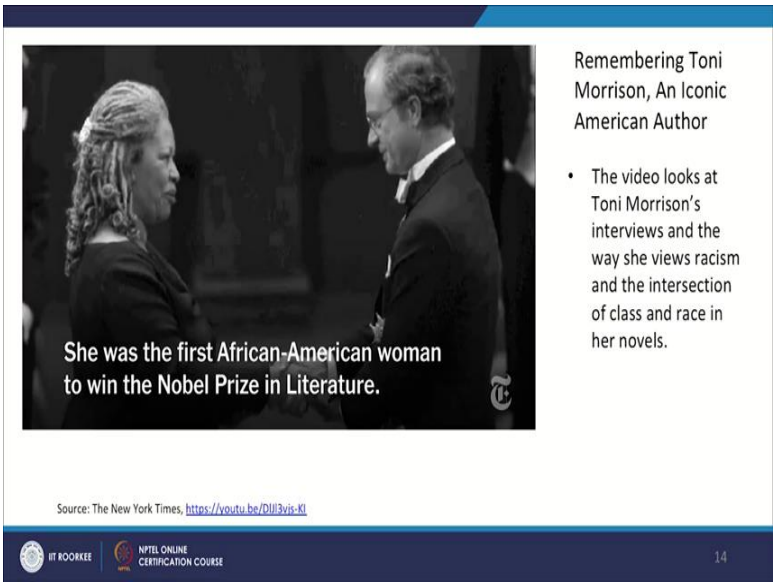

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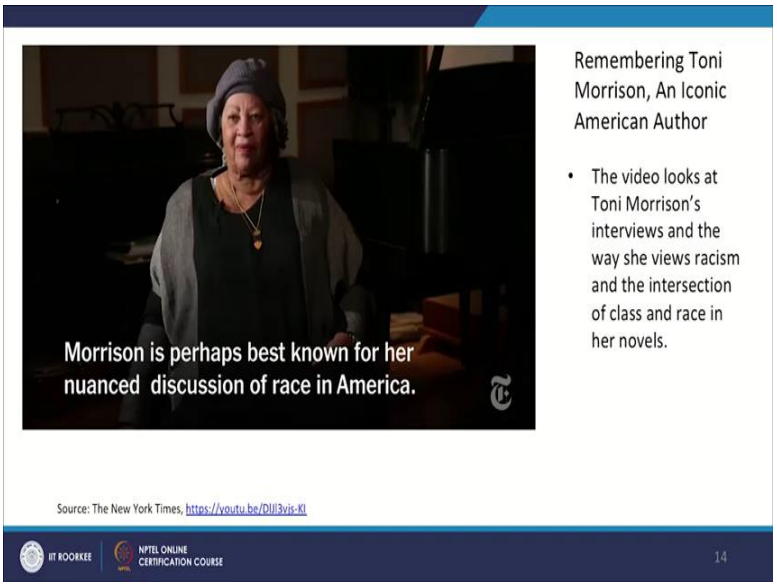

Toni Morrison is an iconic American writer. The video looks at several of her interviews and the way she views racism and the intersection of class, race and gender in her novels.

I did not discover why I wrote really until later at the very beginning, when I wrote the first book *The Bluest Eye*. I came at it as not a writer, but a reader and such a story did not exist. Every little homely black girl was a joke or did not exist in literature and I was eager to read about a story, where racism really hurts and can destroy you.

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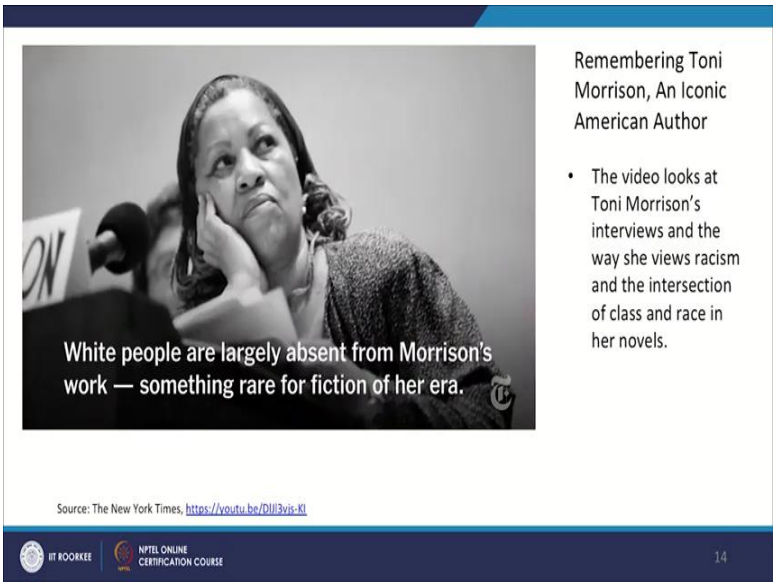

You do not think you will ever change and write books that incorporate white, white lives into them substantially?

I have done.

Hm, in a substantial way?

You cannot understand how powerfully racist that question is in you because you could never ask a white author, when are you going to write about black people.

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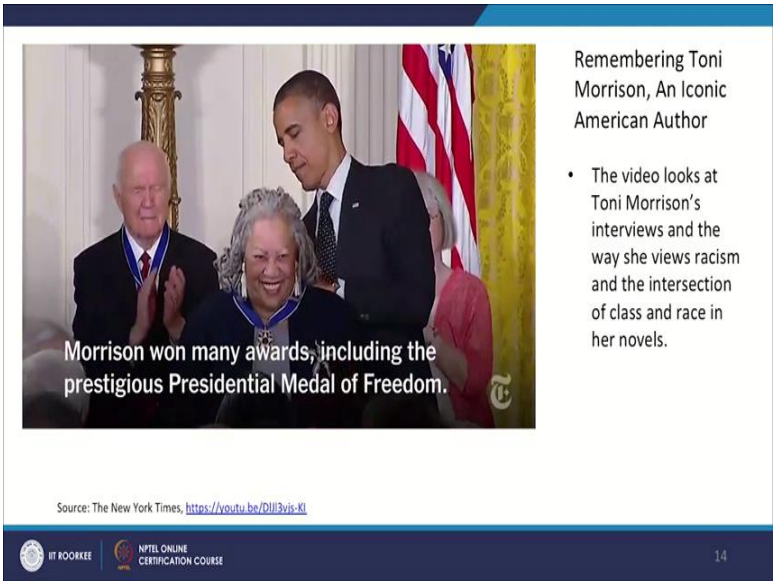

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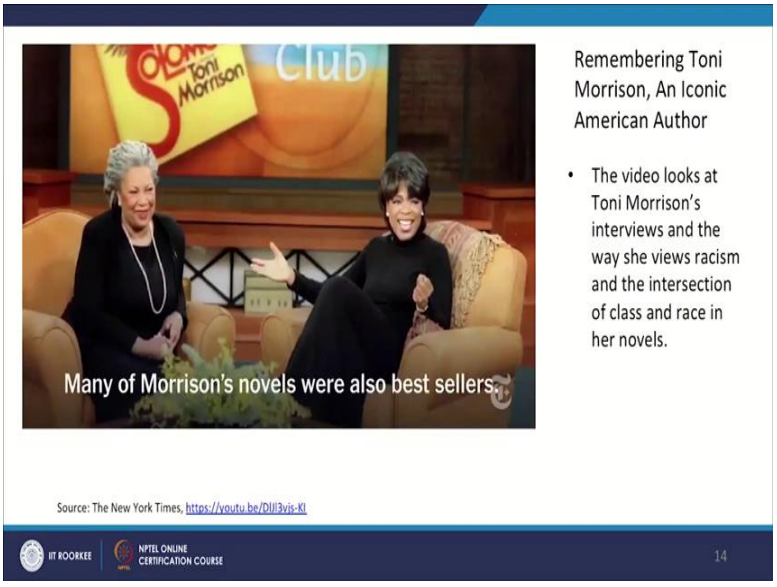

Toni Morrison's prose brings us that kind of moral and emotional intensity that few writers ever attempt. From *Song of Solomon* to *Beloved*, Toni reaches us deeply using a tone that is lyrical, precise, distinct and inclusive.

There would never have been a book club had there not been you as an author.

Really?

No.

So, I thank you.

Oh.

Miss Morrison, I thank you.

This is fabulous.

Yeah.

Never would have been one without you.

Yes.

Never would have been.

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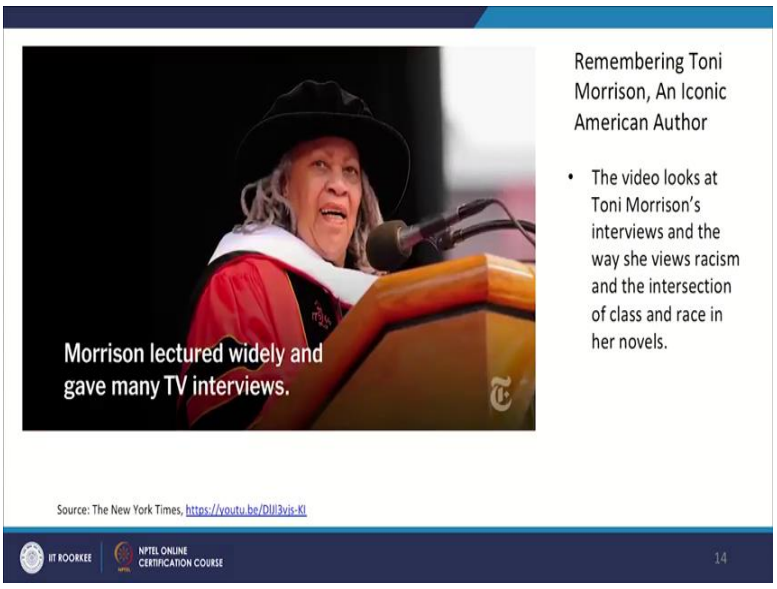

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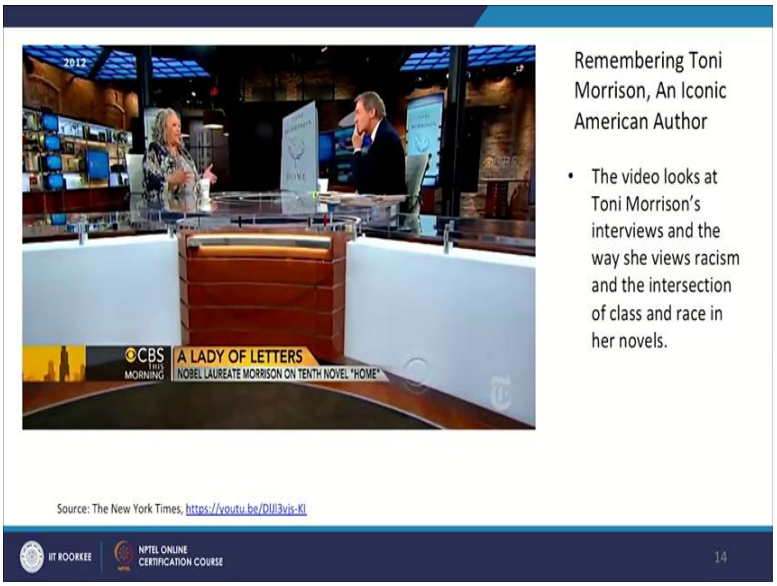

Well, you know I am trying not to write just because I can or just write more; I am trying to write less, that means more; that says more. For me, it is extremely important for the clarification, not only of the past, but of who we are as human beings.

Hm.

In this country.

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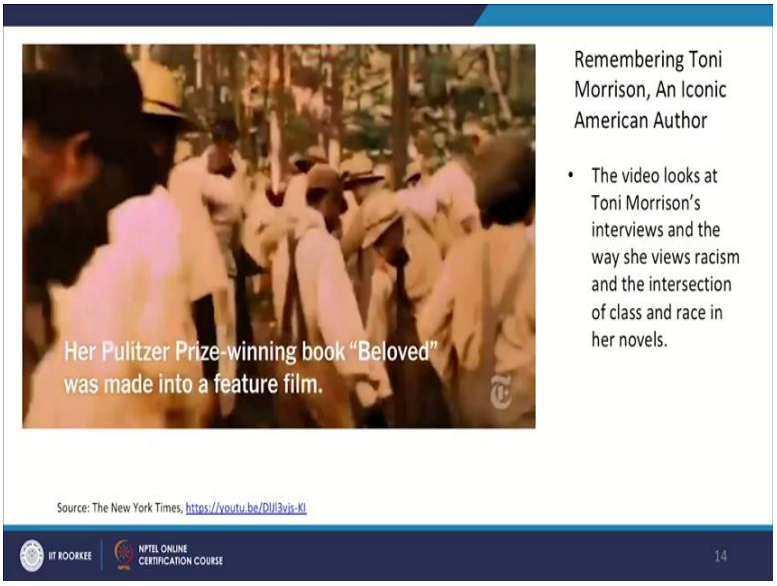

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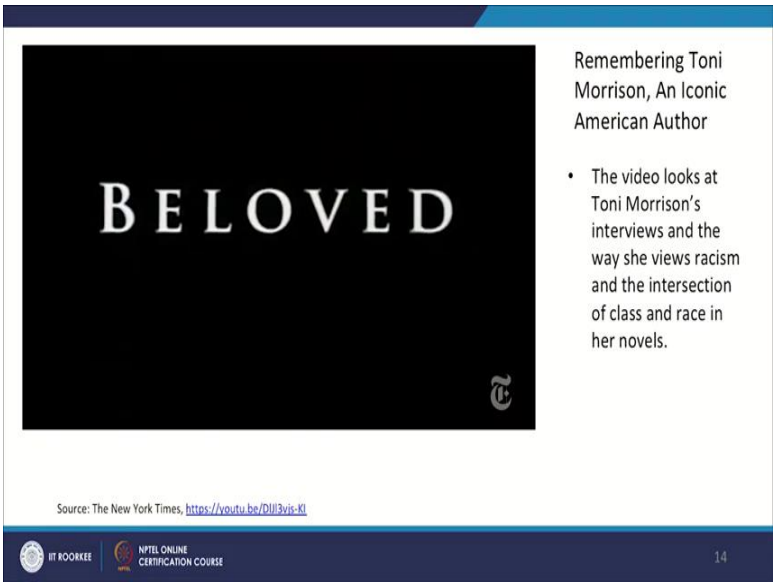

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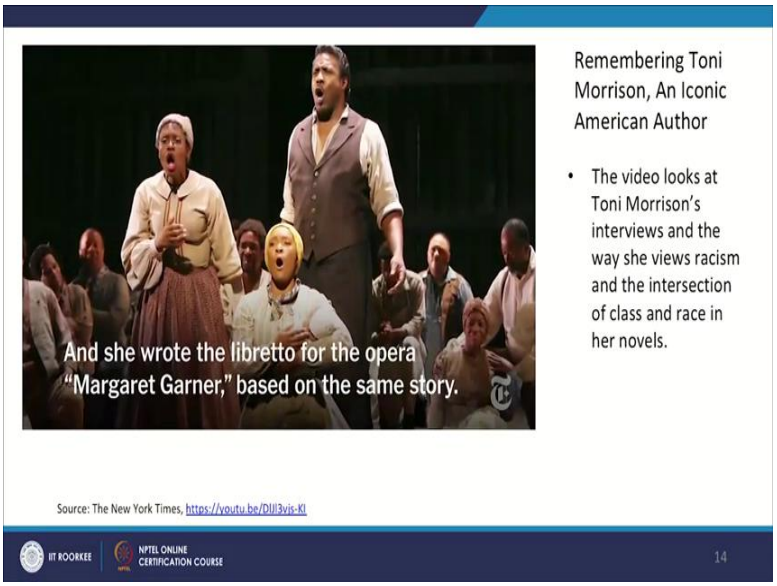

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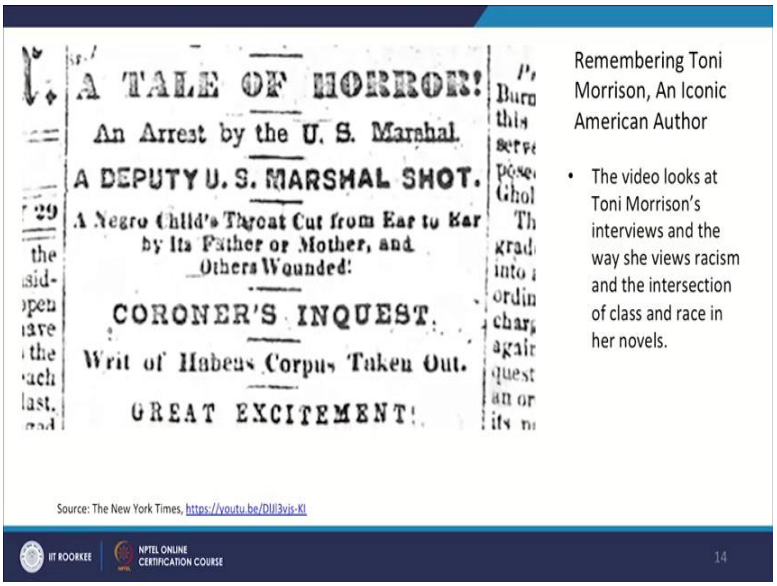

I was editing a book at random house and it was a kind of scrapbook, all sorts of things that emanated from African American culture and I came across this woman Margaret Garner and the story was that a slave woman had killed her children or tried to kill them all. What struck me was the theme was that she was not crazy and they were stunned to find her a) articulate b) sane and three interested in doing it again.

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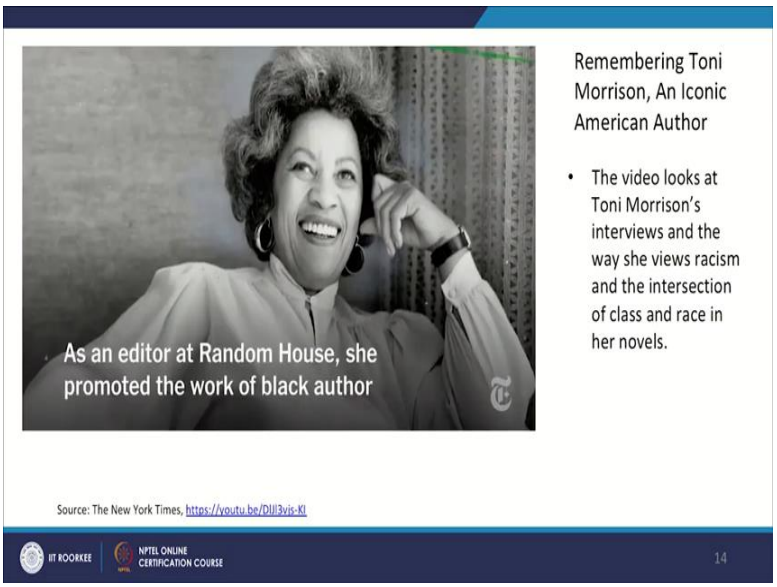

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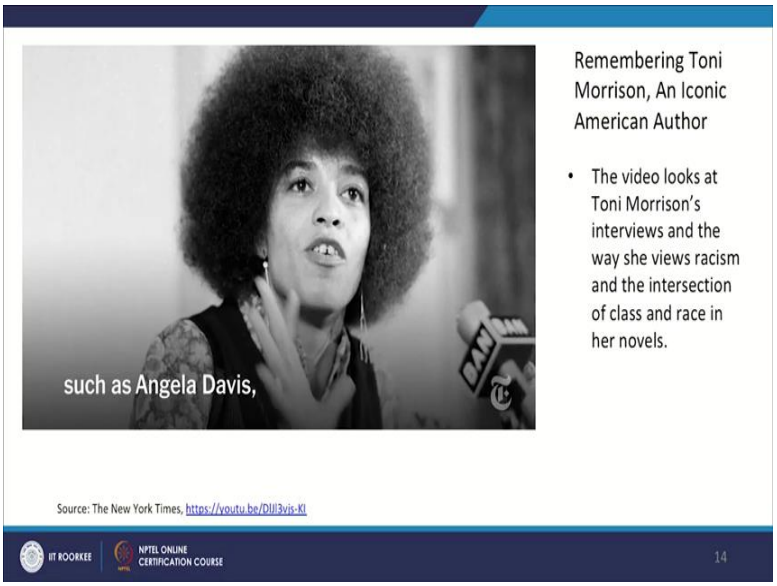

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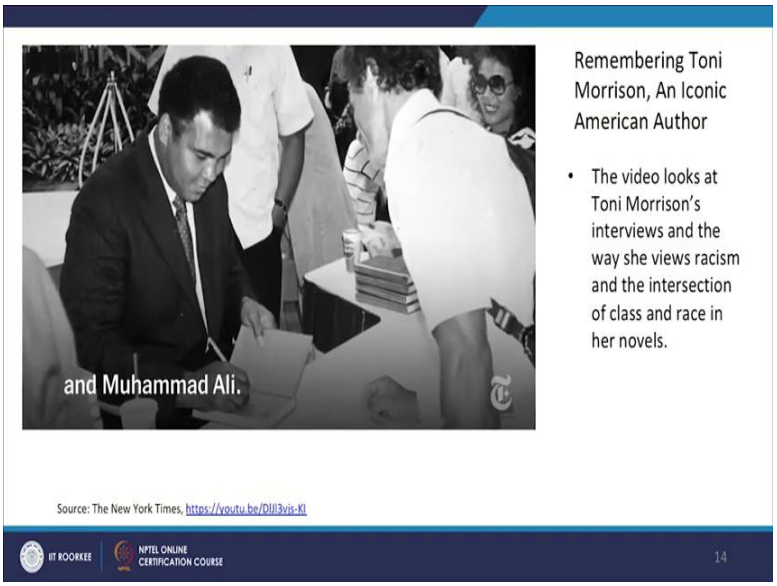

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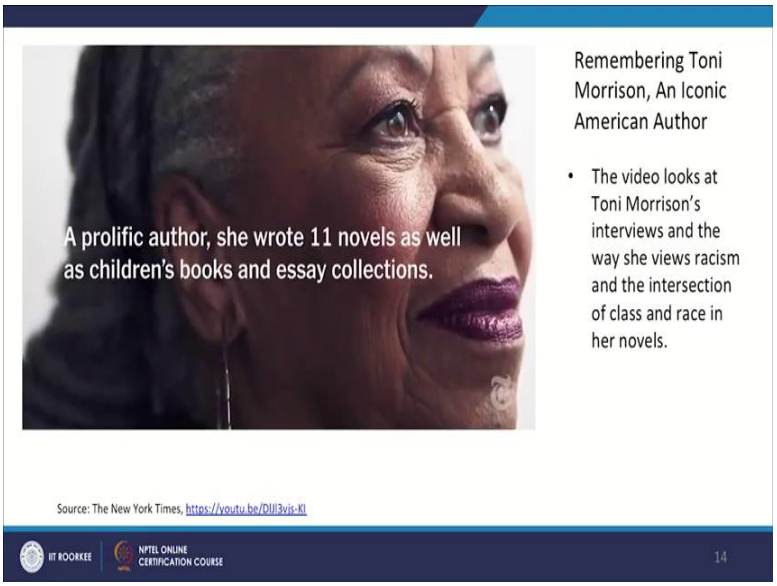

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Morrison has written 11 novels. In our discussion, we would be focusing on those novels in which the concept of gender-blurring is more dominant. I would discuss first of all *The Bluest Eye* which was published in 1970. *The Bluest Eye* is a tragic story of child abuse with race, gender and class mixed in and the novel is also concerned with racial self-loathing, loss of identity and a sense of deep shame.

The myth of childhood innocence is deconstructed through the protagonist of the novel Pecola. In terms of its structure, *The Bluest Eye* is a very rich novel. Morrison has used

trans-generational past inner narrative which has allowed her to re-chronicle and reconstruct the past. The title itself draws our attention to it. There is the superlative degree of color as well as the singular form of the noun which is rather unusual and it results into a pun.

The singular noun here may refer to the damaging white gaze, which is critical; the omitted plural to the object of desire, an epitome of beauty according to mainstream societal norms.

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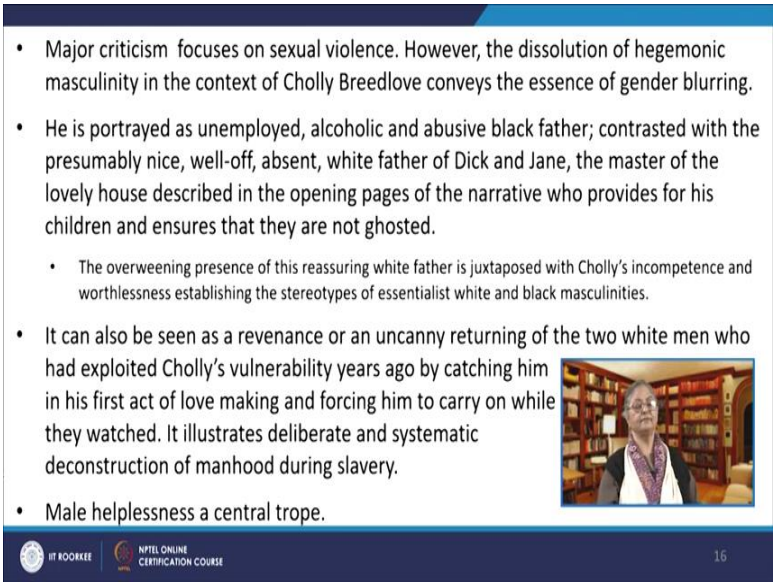

Major criticism of the novel has focused on sexual violence as well as racial abuse. However, the dissolution of hegemonic masculinity in the character portrayal of Cholly Breedlove also conveys the essence of gender blurring. He is portrayed as an unemployed, alcoholic and abusive black father, who rapes his own daughter. His portrayal is contrasted with the white father of Dick and Jane, a presumably nice, well-off, absent father, who is the master of the lovely house which is described in the opening pages of the novel. He provides for his children and ensures that they are not ghosted.

There is an overweening presence of this reassuring white father and it is juxtaposed with Cholly's incompetence and worthlessness establishing the stereotypes of essentialist white and black masculinities. This description and juxtaposition can also be seen as a revenance or an uncanny returning of the two white men, who had exploited Cholly's

vulnerability years ago. They had caught him in his first act of lovemaking and when he tried to withdraw and run from the scene, he was forced by them to carry on, while they watched at gunpoint. It illustrates deliberate and systematic deconstruction of manhood during slavery. Helplessness of a black man in a dominantly white America is a central trope in the novel.

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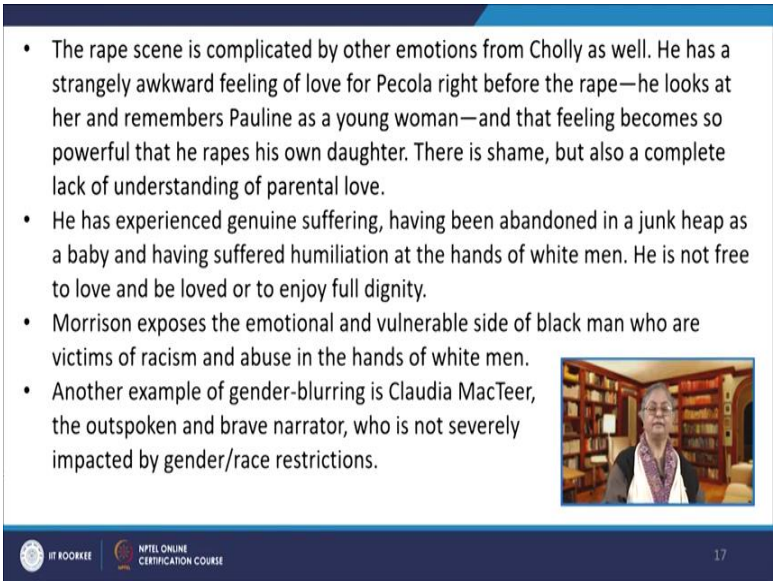

The rape scene itself is complicated by several emotions on the part of Cholly also. He has a strangely awkward feeling of love for Pecola right before the rape. He looks at her and remembers his girlfriend Pauline as a young woman, and that feeling becomes so powerful that it pushes him to rape his own daughter. There is shame, but also a complete lack of understanding of parental love.

At the same time, we find that he has experienced genuine suffering. Abandoned as a child in a junk heap and having suffered humiliation continuously, he is not free to develop his feelings of love or his capability to be loved. Through his portrayal, Morrison has exposed the emotional and vulnerable side of black men, who are victims of racism and abuse. In his portrayal, we find that timidity and cowardice which are normally associated with the conventional characteristics of a woman are displayed.

Another example of gender blurring is Claudia MacTeer, the outspoken and brave narrator, who is not severely impacted by gender or race restrictions. In a society which values bravery in men, we find that a male character, Cholly is depicted as being a timid

and a person who does not value his family. On the other hand, in the portrayal of Claudia, a woman we are shown a remarkable bravery and outspokenness.

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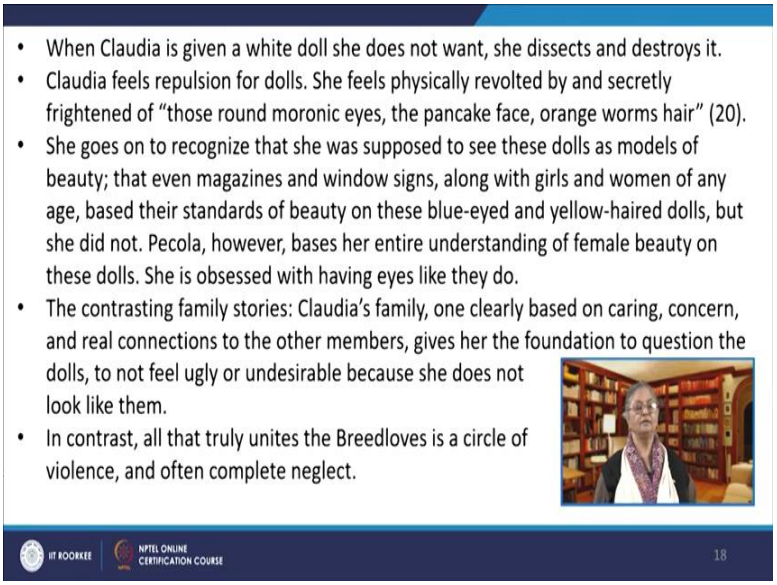

When Claudia is given a white doll, she does not want, she destroys this doll and dissects it. She feels repulsive. She is revolted physically and also at the same time, she is frightened of the white racial features of this doll. She goes on to recognize that she was expected to appreciate this doll as a model of beauty. This was the same model of beauty which was upheld by magazines, by window signs along with girls and women of every age. However, she could never accept the doll as being beautiful.

She also did not conform to the conventional beauty standards proposed by the dominant race of the society. We can also say that the two families, the two matriarchal families have contrasting family stories. Claudia belongs to a caring family in which members have deep real connection. On the other hand, Breedloves follow a circle of violence, and complete neglect often.

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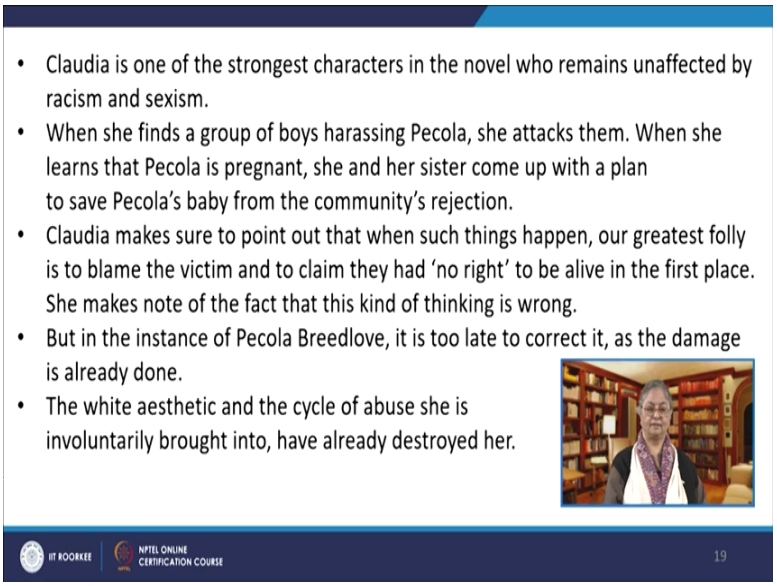

Even though Claudia is a girl, contrary to our conventional understandings, she is the strongest character in the novel, who is always unaffected by racial or sexual prejudices of other people. When she finds a group of boys harassing Pecola, she attacks them fearlessly. When she learns that Pecola is pregnant, she and her sister come up with a plan to save her baby, even though the community has rejected her.

Claudia makes sure to point out that when such things happen, our greatest folly is to blame the victim and to suggest that the victim has no right to be alive in the first place. In the instance of Pecola, however, it is already too late to correct it, the white aesthetics and the cycle of abuse she has been involuntarily dragged into have already destroyed her mental strength.

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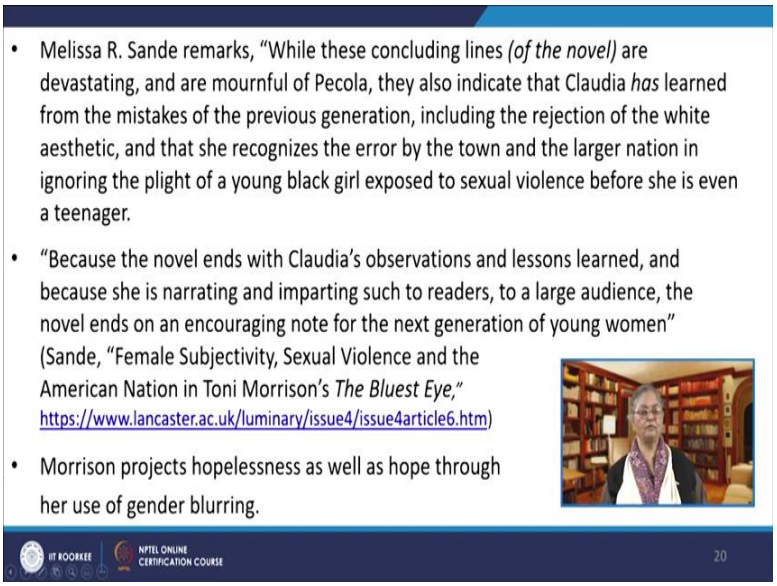

The novel ends with Claudia's observations and she also records the lessons she has learnt. But because she is a narrator and is passing on certain information to readers to a large audience, critics like Melissa Sande conclude that the novel ends on an encouraging note for the next generation of young women. So, Morrison has projected hopelessness as well as hope through her use of gender blurring.

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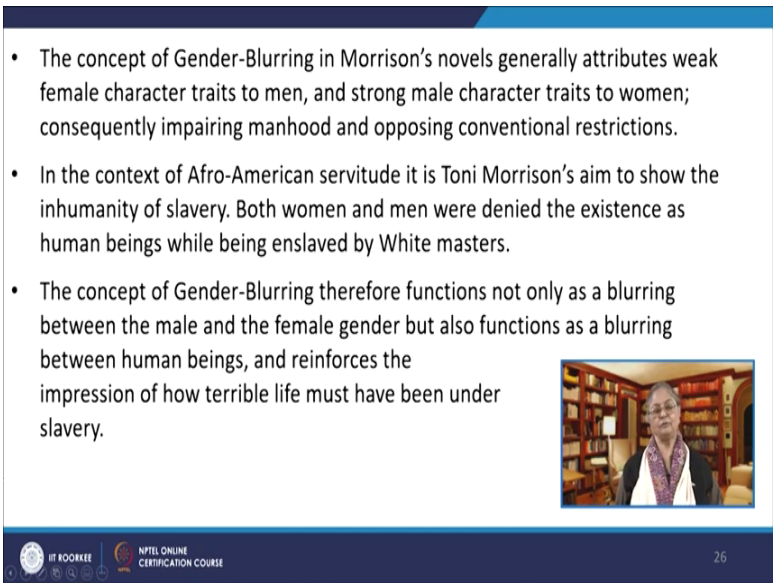
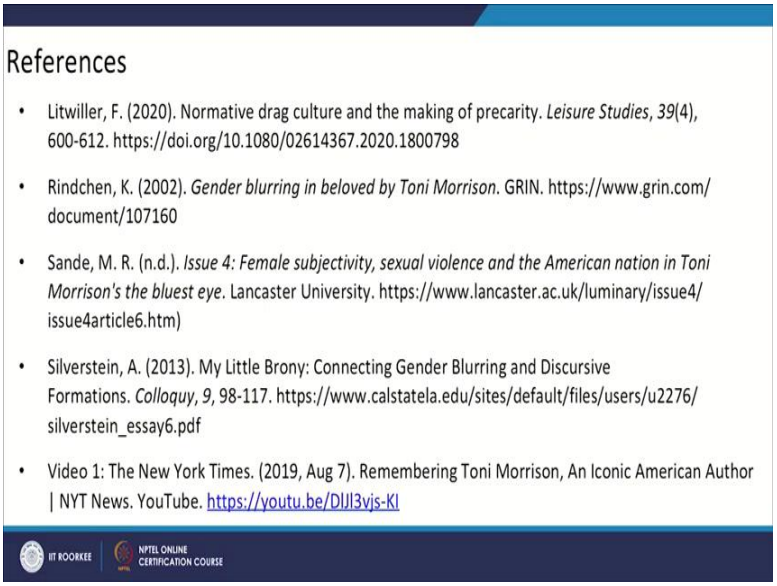


If you look at Morrison's novels in the perspective of the concept of gender blurring, we find that she has attributed weak female characteristics to men and a strong male

characteristics to women. Consequently, impairing the conventional understanding of manhood and thereby, opposing conventional restrictions on women.

In the context of Afro-American servitude, it has been her aim to show the inhumanity of slavery. Both women and men were denied the existence as human beings while they were enslaved.

The concept of gender blurring functions not only as a blurring between the male and the female gender; but also functions as a blurring between human beings and reinforces the impression of how terrible life must have been under slavery.

We would continue our discussion of general-blurring in some other novels of Toni Morrison in the next module, looking particularly at this description in her famous novel *Beloved*. Thank you.

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