

**Contextualizing Gender**  
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**Lecture - 02**  
**Introduction to Gender Studies**

Welcome dear friends. In this module, we would look at the precursors who have shaped today's field of Gender Studies. We will trace the historical expense of the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries during which many writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft and others pioneered what eventually burgeoned into gender studies as we understand it today. The thinking, writing, and living of these writers and activists challenged the tenets of patriarchal social organization and questioned the prescriptive norms of gender.

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**Gender Studies**

- Gender studies is an interdisciplinary academic field that examines gender inequality, women's lived experience, sexuality, masculinity, and the interaction of gendered social processes with race, class, and other systems of inequality. \*
- While the field of gender studies encompasses multiple points of inquiry, each takes a critical approach to examine inequality between women and men.
- Gender studies emerged from the field of women's studies, which started during the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

\*Naples, N. A. (2020). *Companion to women's and gender studies*.

Source: University of York

The slide features a world map composed of small human figures and a portrait of a woman in a library setting.

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Gender studies emerged from the field of women's studies which started during the feminist movement of the 1960s and 70s. Many women scholars writing during this time were deeply involved in women's rights activism concerned with the absence of

women's perspectives in dominant academic canon these scholars reviewed foundational texts in order to underscore the central role of gender inequality in social formations and epistemologies.

These interventions were made possible by centering the perspectives and lived experience of women within which gender inequality was much more apparent as a system of domination. Early feminist scholarship demonstrates that traditional categories used for social analysis and their accompanying interpretive approaches often reinforce gender hierarchies and inequalities.

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- Emerging from women's studies, gender studies expanded the focus to examine masculinity and the social relations/structures between women and men; as well as the LGBT identity.
  - It focuses on the complex interaction of gender with other identity categories, such as sexuality, race and class.
- While slightly different in emphasis, both women's and gender studies start with an understanding that gender inequality shapes the lives and perspectives of all individuals in society.




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Feminist scholars rigorously and methodologically constructed an academic field that focused on women's experiences of inequality and their marginalization in every field.

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### Academic Feminism

- Women's liberation movements and the participation of women in Civil Rights, Peace and radical youth movements, as well as the publication of feminist works (Mary Beard, Simone de Beauvoir, Helen Hacker, Betty Friedan etc.) gradually compelled academicians to introduce a women's studies programs. Formal study programs were launched in late 1960s by several US universities.
- Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1970) exposed the androcentrism in English literary canon to build a broader argument about patriarchy as a structure of social relations that systematically disadvantages women.




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- In anthropology, Gayle Rubin applied feminist critique to canonical psychological and social theorists, such as Freud, Marx, and Lévi-Strauss; by arguing that these approaches ignored the lived experience of women and, therefore, neglected the centrality of the sex/gender system in the organization of economy, kinships systems, and cultural norms.
- Leveraging womanhood as a valuable starting point for social inquiry, scholars of women's studies highlighted the centrality of gendered power and male dominance in common understandings of the world (Firestone 1970; Smith 1987).



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Leveraging womanhood as a valuable starting point for social inquiry, scholars of women's studies highlighted the centrality of gendered power and male dominance in common understandings of the world. The proliferation of scholarship by women academics focusing on gender inequality during the second wave feminist movement was crystallized in the institutionalization of women's studies in US universities across the country.

Through grounding theory in women's lived experiences, women's studies provided an epistemological critique that contemporary forms of knowledge and social theory were patriarchal. They were based on men's privileged perspective that disadvantage is women within all structures of power.

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- Evident in the (re)naming of many university women's studies departments to "Women's and Gender Studies" or just "Gender Studies", the debate over whether women's studies should be expanded to include inquiry into men's issues was resolved through the rise of gender studies as a field focused on the inquiry of gender as a system of inequality that affects all individuals in society (Pulkkinen 2015).
- Coincident with this shift was the growth of masculinities' studies as an area focused on the social expectations around manhood and how these meanings reproduce power relations. (Connell 1995)



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Coincident with this shift was the growth of masculinities' studies as an area focused on the social expectations around manhood and how these meanings reproduce power relations for them. Jumping off from the foundational work of feminist academicians in women's studies department, gender scholars began analyzing inequality and social relations between women and men from the early 1970s through today.

Nancy Chodorow work was transformational in the academic study of gender; by underscoring the way in which gender differences and inequality are reproduced because of our family structure. She focused on how social structure became internalized by early childhood to create feminine women and masculine men who then reproduced gender inequality themselves. We will discuss her seminal work, *The Reproduction of Mothering* which was published in 1978 in coming weeks.


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### Gender Studies and Gender Theory

- As the field developed, sociologists also entered the debate, and suggested that gender was not merely the result of internalized personality traits, but more directly the result of social context.
- Two sociological perspectives originated shortly after the feminist movement helped solidify the study of gender.
- One approach, which we label as the “structuralist” theories of gender, focused on how structural arrangements produced gender inequality.
- The other approach, “doing gender” focused on the way inequality is reproduced through patterns of interpersonal interaction.



Source:  
Willamette  
University



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The other approach, doing gender focused on the way inequality is reproduced through patterns of interpersonal interaction.


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### Structuralist Gender Theory

- Structuralist theories on gender that emerged during the 1970s and 1980s argued that gender inequality was produced through structural arrangements of society rather than psychological gender differences.
- Rosabeth Kanter (1943- ) was foundational in developing this theoretical approach to gender.
- Kanter's structuralist framework (*Men and Women of the Corporation*, 1977) developed from her study of US workplaces – a site where women were paid less and were placed in positions of less power and authority than men.



Rosabeth Moss Kanter  
Source: World Business Academy



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Kanter's work shows how gender shapes a person's experience at work and structures the distribution of roles in organizations. Her research revealed that the organization of the workplace was the primary reason for women's disadvantaged position. The doing gender approach was developed in the same time frame. It provided a different understanding by conceptualizing gender as a performance that takes place in interpersonal interaction.

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### Doing Gender

- West and Zimmerman's foundational article "Doing Gender" (1987) argued that gender is something that individuals "do" in their daily habits, behaviours, and interactions.
- They argued that individuals hold each other accountable to cultural standards during interpersonal interaction. These standards prescribe different, *culturally appropriate*, behaviour for women and men.
- They were the first to articulate an ethnomethodological perspective on the creation and affirmation of gender inequality between males and females in western society. (<http://sociology.iresearchnet.com/sociology-of-gender/doing-gender/>)



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West and Zimmerman published an article in 1987 with the title "Doing Gender". It is considered to be a foundational article it argued that gender is something that individuals do in their daily habits, behaviors, and interactions. They argued that individuals hold each other accountable to cultural standards during their interpersonal interaction.

These standards prescribe different behavior for women and men which are considered to be culturally appropriate within a particular setting, and therefore are not universal. They were the first to articulate an ethnomethodological perspective on the creation and affirmation of gender inequality between males and females in western society.


Ethnomethodology studies the socially managed accomplishments of all aspects of life that are treated as objective unchanging and tran-situational. For example, men are expected to hold doors open and women are expected to walk through these doors and offer gratitude or appreciation. As individual actors we are usually aware of these standards and act in accordance with them.

If we are unaware of the cultural standards or decide to break the rules associated with these expectations, those we interact with will usually hold us accountable. Either by scolding us or by making up an excuse, so that the interpretation of our behavior does not pose a challenge to broader structures of accountability.



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- Yet, the “doing gender” approach has certain limitations.
- By focusing only on interaction, researchers often interpret any behaviour being done by men as “doing masculinity”, and any behaviour performed by women as “doing femininity”; instead of contextually situating gender performances to determine if women and men are actively challenging gender norms and “undoing” gender.
- As a result, research has discovered a seemingly endless array of masculinities and femininities, while finding few examples of how gender is “undone”.



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As a result, research has discovered a seemingly endless array of masculinities and femininities, while finding few examples of how gender is undone. In other words, the strength of the doing gender approach is its ability to focus on the nuanced and subtle ways that gender is reproduced in interactional exchanges, but it is limited in its ability to conceptualize change.

A scholarship on gender has come a long way. We have developed several approaches to studying gender inequality each with a different emphasis. This field has also immensely benefited from intersectional and queer theory critics that brought to light the way racial and sexual inequalities are implicated in gender. Queer theory is particularly valuable for understanding the fluidity in gender and sexual identities.

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### The Current State of Gender Theory: Multidimensional Frameworks

- While gender scholarship has often debated the power of internalization versus social context; others have long focused on trying to integrate different ideas about gender inequality into multidisciplinary frameworks (Connell 1987; Lorber 1994; Martin 2004; Rubin 1975).
- Across the globe, women have poorer health, worse economic outcomes, and lower educational opportunities, and are less represented in public office compared to men (World Economic Forum 2017).
- At the same time, however, there are signs of progress and great promise for change.




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While gender scholarship has often debated the power of internalization versus social context; others have long focused on trying to integrate different ideas about gender inequality into multidisciplinary frameworks. Across the globe, women have poorer health, worse economic outcomes, and lower educational opportunities and are less represented in public office compared to men at the same time; however, there are signs of progress and great promise for change.

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- In 2017, people in nations throughout the world participated in social movements and activism to promote gender equality.
- Using the social media hashtag #MeToo, women throughout the globe shared stories of sexual harassment, exposing how widespread the problem is and prompting new regulations to address it.
- Multidimensional understandings of gender help us to make sense of the relationship between shifts in how people identify and conceptualize gender at the individual level while also highlighting how gender is embedded in social expectations, institutions, and ideologies.
- Intersectional writing has benefited gender studies by analysing the mechanisms by which gender has always intersected with other systems of power, privilege, and oppression.



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Intersectional writing has benefited gender studies by analyzing the mechanisms by which gender has always intersected with other systems of power, privilege, and oppression. Feminist works not only aided in the development of gender studies, but were also central to historical events such as women's suffrage, abolition and the second wave feminist movement.

Since its origins gender and women's studies were deeply connected with the second wave feminist movement, embodying many of the movement's values through adopting feminist perspectives in research that interrogated inequality between women and men. While powerful women have existed throughout history, it is not until the 14th and 15th centuries that we begin to observe early forms of women's literature that critiqued gender inequality.


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**Precursors to Gender Studies**

- Christine de Pizan (1364-1430) was among the first women authors to offer a perspective on gender.
  - An author at the court of King Charles VI of France, she is the first female professional writer of the Middle Ages and the first woman of letters in France. Her work was popular among French aristocratic women who sought advice on how to navigate elite life romance.
- While de Pizan's work certainly described women as noble and virtuous, she also argued for a greater value to be placed on their roles in society. \*
- In *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405), she envisioned a society where women were respected by men in society and had the same rights.



The Book of the City of Ladies  
Source: The Yorck Project



\* Napier, N. A. (2020) Companion to women's and gender studies. John Wiley & Sons.

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At this point, let us look at the precursors to gender studies. The first name we mentioned in this context is that of Christine de Pizan who was among the first women authors to offer a perspective on gender. An author at the court of King Charles VI of France, she was also the first female professional writer of the Middle Ages and the first woman of letters in France. Her work was also popular among French aristocratic women who sought advice on how to navigate elite life romances.

While her work certainly described women as noble and virtuous, she also argued for a greater value to be placed on their roles in society. In a work, *The Book of the City of Ladies* dated 1405, she envisioned a society where women were respected by men in society and they were given the same rights.

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- A more direct link to modern feminism can be seen in Jane Anger's work published during the sixteenth century.
- One of the first women English writers to publish outside of religious texts, Jane Anger's most well-known book, *Her Protection For Women* (1589) provided a stinging critique of men's treatment of women and, more specifically, of the misogynist way many male authors portrayed women.
- Anger's work constitutes one of the first published and widely read feminist critiques of society.
- She challenged dominant understandings of gender that legitimated men's power over women.

IANE ANGER  
her Protection  
for Women,  
To defend them against  
the violence of men  
and to shew them  
the way to their  
own safety  
At London  
Printed by I. B. for  
I. B. 1589

Source: UPenn Digital Library

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Her work constitutes one of the first published and widely read feminist critiques of society. She challenged the dominant understanding of gender that had legitimated men's power over women. Christine de Pizan and Anger paved the way for other women

writers. The influence of Mary Wollstonecraft on over 200 years of feminist inquiry cannot be overstated.

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The slide features a title 'Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797)' at the top left. Below it are three bullet points. The first bullet point discusses her attack on the authority of Edmund Burke, John Milton, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The second bullet point mentions her 1792 work 'Vindication of the Rights of Woman'. The third bullet point describes her model of non-gendered identity. To the right of the text are three images: a portrait of Mary Wollstonecraft, the cover of her book 'Vindication of the Rights of Woman', and a photograph of a woman speaking in a video lecture. At the bottom left are logos for IIT ROORKEE and NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE. At the bottom right is the number 15.

### Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797)

- At the heart of Wollstonecraft's work is an attack on the authority of Edmund Burke, John Milton and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'fellow authors of a fictitious femininity, and patriarchal enemies in league against female emancipation' (Manly, 49).
  - E.G., she blames Burke's theory of beauty and sublimity for the behaviour of ladies who 'have laboured to be pretty, by counterfeiting weakness' (47).
- Her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), suggests the power of textual representations of women.
- She constructs a model of non-gendered identity – one which will ultimately benefit men as well as women, since she sees both as degraded by sexualised and oppositional models of identity.

Source: John Opie

Source: Cambridge University Press

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At the heart of her work is an attack on the authority of Edmund Burke, John Milton and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. And she calls them fellow authors of a fictitious femininity and patriarchal enemies in league against female emancipation. For example, she has blamed Burke's theory of beauty and sublimity for the behavior of those ladies who have laboured to be pretty, by counterfeiting physical weaknesses.

Her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, suggests the power of textual representations of women. In this 1792 work, she has constructed a model of non-gendered identity – one which will ultimately benefit men as well as women, since she sees both as degraded by sexualized and oppositional models of identity. She has also been able to foresee almost all the early 20th century demands for women's equality.

Wollstonecraft chooses to reveal the fictionality of both femininity and masculinity. She argues that gender does not exist in the mind or the soul, but it exists only in the body. And therefore, unless we deny that women have intellect and also an immortal soul, there is no reason to maintain that gender difference is real. She also comments that it is the desire of being always women rather than human beings first and foremost that degrades the feminine sex.

Wollstonecraft does not accept that there is any essential difference between the two sexes. She points out that gender if taken as definitive of personal and social identity is a prison. The issues raised by her were taken up in the 1790s and into the 19th century by several other writers including Maria Edgeworth, Mary Robinson, Harriet Martineau, Harriet Taylor, J. S. Mill, and George Eliot. Maria Edgeworth suggested the urgency for women to have independent thought, and to participation in the public sphere.

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- Maria Edgeworth's *Letters for Literary Ladies* (1795), 'asserted more strongly the female right to literature', to independent thought, and to participation in the public sphere.
- Mary Robinson's *Letter to the Women of England, on the Injustice of Mental Subordination* (1799) emphasised using language which is 'undecorated', and denouncing the textual representation of women as 'a lovely and fascinating part of the creation'(Robinson, 1799)



				
Maria Edgeworth Source: John Downman	Harriet Martineau Source: Richard Evans	Mary Robinson Source: Thomas Gainsborough	George Eliot Source: Francois D'Albert Durade	Harriet Taylor


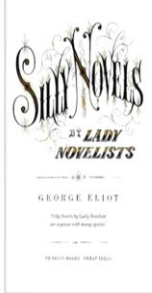


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Mary Robinson emphasized using language which is undecorated and denouncing the textual representation of women as a lovely and fascinating part of the creation.

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- George Eliot's essay, 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists', displays the influence of Wollstonecraft in its analysis of the impact of fiction on the status of women.
- She deplores the effect of 'silly novels', not only on their female readers, but also on men hostile to women's emancipation, who can point to 'lady novelists' as evidence of the folly of educating women.
- Harriet Taylor has noted that 'the literary class of women, especially in England, are ostentatious in disclaiming the desire for equality or citizenship, and proclaiming their complete satisfaction with the place that society assigns to them'. (Taylor, 1850)



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George Eliot's essay, 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists', displays the influence of Mary Wollstonecraft in its analysis of the impact of fiction on the status of women. She deplores the effect of 'silly novels', not only on their female readers, but also on men hostile to women's emancipation, who can point to lady novelists as evidence of the folly of educating women.


Harriet Taylor has noted that the literary class of women, especially in England, are ostentatious in disclaiming the desire for equality or citizenship, and proclaiming their complete satisfaction with the place that society assigns to them. A major 20th century writer who influenced gender studies is Virginia Woolf. She is rightly considered as the founder of modern feminist literary criticism. However, defining her contribution to feminist literary criticism and theory is difficult as it is so enormous and so multifaceted.

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**Virginia Woolf (1882-1941)**

- Virginia Woolf is a world renowned English author; whose novels, through their nonlinear approaches to narrative, exerted a major influence on the genre.
- Her non-fiction writing about women's autonomy and freedom challenged the cultural stereotypes of masculinity and femininity.
- Tracing the development of feminist thought, in *The Story So Far* (1997) Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore, refer to some names in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Esther Sowernam and Bathsua Makin), and to Mary Wollstonecraft at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. But they list no one else between Wollstonecraft and Woolf, no one at all alongside Woolf, and no one after Woolf until Simone de Beauvoir\*.

\*<https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/History-of-feminist-theory-and-criticism/feminist-criticism-of-virginia-woolf/790305F58B471A1275E3C70B84D54F>



Virginia Woolf  
Source: George Charles Beresford



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Known for her non-linear approaches to narrative techniques Virginia Woolf has exerted a major influence on the genre, at the same time her non-fiction writing about women's autonomy and freedom challenged the cultural stereotypes of masculinity and femininity. It would be pertinent to refer to a 1997 work by Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore with the title of in *The Story So Far*, in which they trace the development of feminist thought. They refer to some names in the 17th century.

For example, they refer to Esther Sowernam and Bathsua Makin. In the 18th century, they refer to Mary Wollstonecraft, but they list no one else between Wollstonecraft and Woolf, no one at all alongside Woolf, and no one after Woolf until Simone de Beauvoir. Woolf's declaration of the death of the author brings with it an alternative collective model of authorship, a questioning of canonicity and a revision of our metaphors of gender.

She also prompts readers to consider the nature of a literary canon that includes women authors and the nature and form of literary texts written by and about women. In doing so she attempts to forge a new feminist literary critical language, a new gender agenda. *A Room of One's Own* published in 1929 is considered to be her most significant contribution towards a contemporary understanding of gender.




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***A Room of One's Own* (1929)**

- Based on two lectures on “Women and Fiction”, delivered at Cambridge colleges, the book is an extended essay about the predicament of female writers and a stirring call for autonomy and recognition.
- It lays the foundations of a history of women's literature. The text is also a triumph of imagination, with a celebrated passage envisaging the fate of a fictional sister of Shakespeare.


The essay is written in the voice of at least one of those Mary figures, who are to be found in the Scottish ballad “The Four Marys”.

The allusion to the Scottish ballad feeds a subtext in Woolf's argument concerning the suppression of the role of motherhood – Mary Hamilton sings the ballad from the gallows where she is to be hanged for infanticide.



women have always been poor, not for two hundred years merely, but from the beginning of time... Women, then, have not had a dog's chance of writing poetry. That is why I have laid so much stress on money and a room of one's own.

— Virginia Woolf —




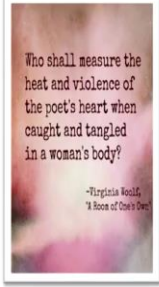
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*A Room of One's Own* is an extended essay and it is based on two lectures on Women and Fiction which she had delivered at Cambridge colleges. This book is about the predicament of female writers and a stirring call for autonomy and recognition. It lays the foundations of history of women's literature. The text is also a triumph of imagination with a celebrated passage envisaging the fate of a fictional sister of Shakespeare.

The central idea of *A Room of One's Own* is freedom, particularly the financial freedom to pursue knowledge and creativity. The narrator begins by telling of her experience of visiting an Oxbridge college where she was refused access to the library because of her gender.

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- Through the fictionalized character of 'Mary' – who visits the British Museum to find out about everything that has ever been written about women – Woolf builds the argument that literature and history are male constructs that have traditionally marginalized women.
- Using the metaphor of a fish, Woolf refutes the widely held assumption that women are inferior writers, or inferior subjects, instead she locates their silence in their material and social circumstances.
- Woolf also reviews the state of scholarship, both theoretical and historical, concerning women.


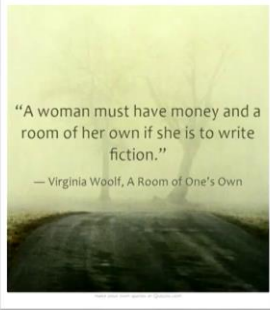


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Through the fictionalized character of Mary – who visits the British museum to find out about everything that has ever been written about women – Woolf builds the argument that literature and history are male constructs that have traditionally marginalized women. Using the metaphor of a fish, Woolf refutes the widely held assumption that women are inferior writers, or inferior subjects, instead she locates their silence in their material and social circumstances. Woolf also reviews the state of scholarship, both theoretical and historical, concerning women.

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- The main argument of *A Room of One's Own*, which was entitled 'Women and Fiction' in earlier drafts, is that 'a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction' (4).
- Woolf's metaphor of the room not only signifies the declaration of political and cultural space for women, private and public; but the *intrusion* of women into spaces previously considered as the spheres of men.



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The main argument of *A Room of One's Own*, which was entitled 'Women and Fiction' in earlier drafts, is that a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction. Her metaphor of the room not only signifies the declaration of political and cultural space for women, private and public; but the intrusion of women into spaces previously considered as the spheres of men.



Woolf writes that women have been barred from attending school and university, they have been excluded by law for inheritance or expected to marry during which their time is spent in housekeeping and child rearing. Woolf imagines what kind of life Judith Shakespeare – a brilliant talented, yet imaginary sister of Shakespeare might have lived. She concludes that she must have lost her health and also sanity certainly.

Woolf also anticipates recent theoretical concerns with the constitution of gender and subjectivity of language. She takes up the question of social and literary value in the context of gender by looking at how women's writings and the writings about women are socially perceived. It is also an issue of gendered values, Woolf insists.

Writing in the 1920s, she observes that it is the masculine values that prevail. And she says, this is an important book the critic assumes because it deals with war and this is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing room. The essay puts the case for finding a language that is gendered one appropriate for women to use when writing about women.

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- Another book-length essay by Woolf is *Three Guineas* (1938). A work of non-fiction, it was initially conceived as a "novel-essay" which would complement *A Room of One's Own*.
- Ostensibly responding to a letter by an unnamed gentleman seeking suggestion to stop the War; Woolf takes up several issues – social constrictions on women's participation in social causes, managing resources for educational institutions for women and permission for them to enter professions. She comments:  
"Behind us lies the patriarchal system; the private house, with its nullity, its immorality, its hypocrisy, its servility. Before us lies the public world, the professional system, with its possessiveness, its jealousy, its pugnacity, its greed."

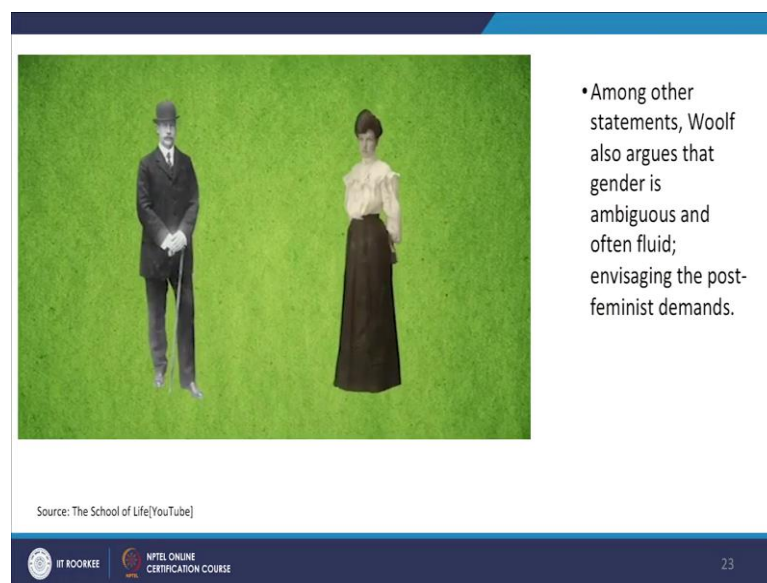


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Another book-length essay by Woolf is *Three Guineas*. A work of non-fiction, it was initially conceived as a novel-essay which would complement *A Room of One's Own*. The novel part of this initial draft was later on published as an independent novel the years ostensibly responding to a letter by an unnamed gentleman seeking her suggestions about how to stop the war; Woolf takes up several issues – social constrictions on women's participation in social causes, managing resources for educational institutions for women and permission for them to enter professions.

She comments, and I quote “Behind us lies the patriarchal system; the private house, with its nullity, its immorality, its hypocrisy, its servility. Before us lies the public world, the professional system, with its possessiveness, its jealousy, its pugnacity its greed”. In the next slide, we have a video explaining Woolf's take on sexual differences.

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- Among other statements, Woolf also argues that gender is ambiguous and often fluid; envisaging the post-feminist demands.


Source: The School of Life [YouTube]

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Among other statements, Woolf also argues that gender is ambiguous and often fluid; envisaging the post-feminist demands. Woolf was deeply aware that men and women fit themselves into rigid roles and as they do so overlook their fuller personalities. In her eyes in order to grow, we need to do some gender bending. We need to seek experiences that blur what it means to be a real man or a real woman. Woolf had a few lesbian affairs in her life. And she wrote a magnificently bold queer text *Orlando*. A portrait of her lover Vita described as a nobleman who becomes a woman. She wrote it is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple one must be woman manly or man womanly.

In her anti war tract *Three Guineas*, Woolf argued that we will only ever end war by rethinking the habit of pitting of sex against sex. All this claiming of superiority and imputing of inferiority belong to the private school stage of human existence where there are sides and it is necessary for one side to beat another side.

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- Among other statements, Woolf also argues that gender is ambiguous and often fluid; envisaging the post-feminist demands.

Source: The School of Life[YouTube]

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And of the utmost importance to walk up to a platform and receive from the hands of the headmaster, a highly ornamental pot. Woolf wished desperately to raise the status of women in her society. She recognized that the problem was largely down to money. Women did not have freedom, especially freedom of the spirit because they did not control their own income. Women have always been poor she cried not for 200 years merely, but from the beginning of time. Women have had less intellectual freedom than the sons of Athenian slaves. Women have not had a dog's chance of writing poetry. Her great feminist Rally in *Cry, A Room of One's Own* culminated in a specific political demand. In order to stand on the same intellectual footing as men, women needed not only dignity, but also equal rights to education, an income of 500 pounds a year, and a room of one's own. Woolf asserts that the traditional literature was severely limited in its ability to represent a person as a whole. Just as binary sex/gender expectations were severely limited in their ability to truly encapsulate an individual's identity.

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*Orlando: A Biography* (1928)

- A historical pseudo-biography satirizes more traditional Victorian biographies that emphasized facts and truth. It touches on important issues of gender, self-knowledge, and truth with Virginia Woolf's signature poetic style.
- Describes the adventures of a poet who changes sex from man to woman and lives for almost four centuries, meeting the key figures of English literary history.
- Inspired by the tumultuous family history of Vita Sackville-West, a member of the Bloomsbury Group, known also for its liberal views on sexuality.



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This argument brings us to a discussion of *Orlando* published in 1928. A historical pseudo-biography, *Orlando* satirizes more traditional Victorian biographies that emphasized facts and truth. It touches on important issues of gender, self-knowledge and truth with Woolf's signature poetic style. It describes the adventures of a poet who changes sex from man to woman and lives for almost four centuries, meeting the key figures of English literary history.

This work was inspired by tumultuous family history of Virginia Woolf's friend Vita Sackville-West who was also a member of the Bloomsbury Group, the group which is also known for its liberal views on sexuality. In *Orlando*, the separation between sex and gender ultimately results in Woolf's characters embracing an androgynous harmony in which characteristics and sexual attractions are individually and internally manifested as opposed to the standard, societal imposition of external expectations determined exclusively through the biological sexing of an individual.

We will discuss *Orlando* in coming weeks in detail. *Orlando* also reflects Woolf's understanding of gender that nudges us towards the queer theory. It also contains a much-cited passage on androgyny which has been influential on later deconstructive theories of gender.

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- Her narrator declares: 'it is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex' (136).
- Here Woolf touches upon the forced, subordinate complicity of women in the construction of the patriarchal subject.
- Laura Doyle insists that Woolf's interest in the body and bodies, in writing the body, and in the gender and positionality thereof, anticipates feminist investigations of the somatic, and has been understood as materialist, deconstructive and phenomenological. (Doyle, 2001)
- The essay's playful narrative strategies have divided feminist responses, most notably prompting Elaine Showalter's disapproval.



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Her narrator declares “it is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex” (136). Woolf touches upon the forced subordinated complicity of women in the construction of the patriarchal subject. Laura Doyle insists that Woolf’s interest in the body and bodies, in writing the body and in the gender and positionality thereof, anticipates feminist investigations of the somatic and has been understood as materialist, deconstructive and phenomenological. The essay’s playful narrative strategies have divided feminist responses, most notably prompting Elaine Showalter’s disapproval.

Toril Moi’s counter to Showalter’s critique forms the basis of her classic introduction to her 1985 work *Sexual/Textual Politics* in which Woolf’s textual playfulness is shown to anticipate the deconstructive and post Lacanian theories of Helene Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray.

The in between gender identity can also be studied through Woolf’s characters like Bernard and Rhoda in *The Waves*, Clarissa in *Mrs. Dalloway*, and Lily in *To The Lighthouse*. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf’s subversive use of epiphanic moments to portray female homoeroticism and desire could be considered to be an attempt to construct maternal space within the constraints of the symbolic order.

In *To The Lighthouse*, position between the maternal figure of Mrs. Ramsay and the paternal figure of Mr. Ramsay, Lily Briscoe painfully struggles to find a purely feminine

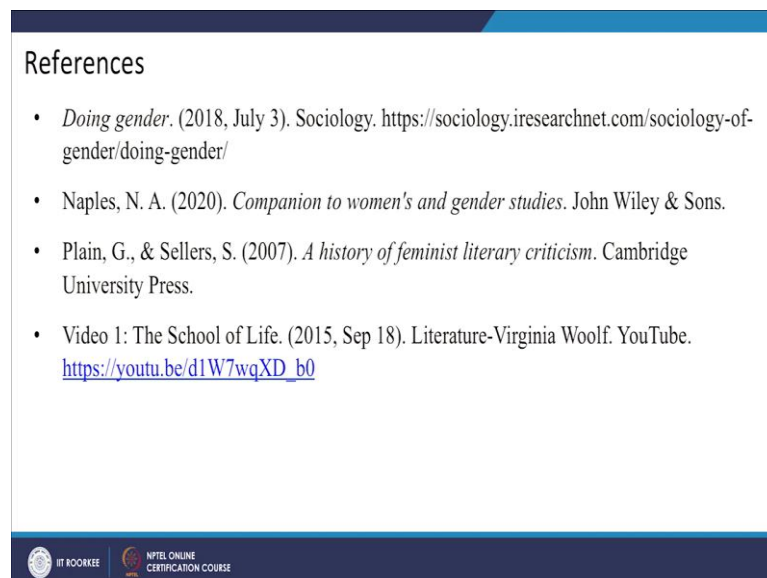
form of expression to escape patriarchal ideology and language which accommodates and values only the masculine identity.

Similarly, In *The Waves*, the desire of returning to the maternal space and subsequently moving away from rigid fellow centric language, creates a specific kind of language for characters which may be considered as an example of *écriture féminine*. In feminist history, Woolf's creative work, and more specifically her essay *A Room of One's Own* became a beacon for female independence and feminist standpoint.

The only other thinker of her stature who influenced the future of gender studies in a similar fashion is Simone de Beauvoir. Both Woolf and Beauvoir had a strong sense of personality while rebelling against patriarchal society and also had shared opinions on marriage, reproduction and homosexuality.

In the coming modules, we will discuss the works of Simone de Beauvoir in detail.

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Thank you.