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Course Material

Department of English and Modern European Languages

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B.A. (Hons.) English Semester-IV

Paper IV: Literary Criticism (B) (Code: Eng- 404)

Unit-I: Michele Barrett : ‘Ideology and the Cultural Production of Gender’*

Unit-II: Frantz Fanon : Excerpts from *Black Skin, White Masks*

Gauri Viswanathan : ‘The Beginnings of English Literary Study in British India’ *Oxford Literary Study*.*

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Unit-II: Frantz Fanon : Excerpts from *Black Skin, White Masks*

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All the best!

Michele Barrett: ‘Ideology and the Cultural Production of Gender’*

Bionote

Michèle Barrett is Professor of Modern Literary and Cultural Theory in the School of English and Drama, Queen Mary, University of London. She is the author, among other works, of *Women’s Oppression Today*, *The Anti-Social Family*, and *Politics of Diversity* (co-authored with Roberta Hamilton).

Professor Michèle Barrett is a noted social theorist, a distinguished Virginia Woolf scholar and an expert on aspects of the social and cultural history of the First World War.

Michèle subsequently edited and introduced the collection *Virginia Woolf: Women and Writing* in 1979, the publication of which is widely recognized as a pivotal moment in the development of feminist Woolf criticism. Michèle was a member of the 'Marxist Feminist Literature Collective' and co-authored their ground breaking paper, 'Women's Writing: Charlotte Bronte and Elizabeth Barrett Browning', which was collectively presented at the Essex Conference on the Sociology of Literature in 1977.

Her 1980 study *Women's Oppression Today: Problems in Marxist Feminist Analysis* has had many UK printings and was published with a new foreword in 1985 and republished in 1988. The essay 'Ideology and the Cultural Production of Gender' forms a part of this book.

Publication

**'Ideology and the Cultural Production of Gender' was included in *Women's Oppression Today: Problems in Marxist Feminist Analysis*, which was published with a new foreword in 1985 and republished in 1988. **

Overview

Women's Oppression Today is now a classic text in the debate about Marxism and feminism, exploring how gender, sexuality and the "family-household system" operate in relation to contemporary capitalism.

In 'Ideology and the Cultural Production of Gender' Michele Barrett explores the concepts of gender, ideology and the cultural production of gender. As it is written within the framework of cultural studies, Barrett carries out a cultural analysis of 'gender' by examining its relationship with ideology, class structures, ethnicity, and cultural hegemony.

Background

Marxist Feminist Approach

-The Marxist feminist theories examine the changes in the family and in women's position in relation to the general economic transformation of society.

- Frederic Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* offers the basic Marxist explanations for the oppression of women. His central argument is based on the Marxist premises that social life is shaped by the forces and relations of production. These relations also determine the division of labour between man and woman.

Since implicit in Barrett's argument is the Althusarian model of 'ideology', it is important to understand it before studying Barrett's essay.

-Louis Althusser was a major French Neo-Marxist who analyzed the material Dimensions of ideological practices. At the heart of his theory are the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) by which he means the institutions such as the family, education system, law, political systems and so on.

-These apparatuses produce in people the tendency to behave and think in socially acceptable ways.

-These socially acceptable ways or social norms are, of course, neither neutral nor objective. They are developed in the interests of those who hold the social power.

-They work to maintain their sites of power by presenting them as common sense.

-Social norms are in favour of a particular class or group of classes and accepted as natural by other classes even when the interests of other classes are different.

-Althusser describes ideology as infallible, omnipotent and ever successful.

-Ideologies are functioning machines which can always be relied upon to reproduce subjects.

-This subject reproduced is imbued with all the habits and thought patterns required by the dominant mode of production.

-According to Althusser, ideology is a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.

-He says that ideology does not represent the real

world *per se*, but human beings' relation to that real world, to their perception of the real conditions of existence.

-Ideology then is the imaginary version. So the real world becomes not something that is objectively out there, but something that is the production of our relations to it.

-Althusser's concept of ideology is defined as the themes, concepts and representations through which men and women 'live' in an imaginary way, their relation to their real conditions of existence.

-Ideologies are the unconscious categories through which people give meaning to experience.

-They constitute the taken-for-granted ways in which we come to see the everyday world as natural..

-We are each constituted as a subject in and subject to ideology. The subject, therefore, is a social construction and not a natural one.

- Ideology serves as a cultural apparatus for controlling and constructing individuals in the interest of hegemonic power relation.

-Thus, a biological female makes sense of the world and of her place in that world through patriarchal ideologies.

-Althusser argues that these ideological structures are not static sets of ideas imposed upon the subordinate classes by the dominant classes, but rather a dynamic process that is reconstituted and reproduced in practice, | that is, in the way people think, act and understand themselves and their ^ relationship to society.

-Thus patriarchal ideology plays a role in the subordination and exploitation of women. Patriarchy is an ideological phenomenon that underpins the cultural construction of masculinity and femininity.

Notes and Analysis

Gender ; either of the two sexes (male and female), especially when considered with reference to social and cultural differences rather than biological ones.

-Sexologist John Money introduced the terminological distinction between biological sex and gender as a role in 1955.

-The **distinction between sex and gender** differentiates a person's biological sex (the anatomy of an individual's reproductive system, and secondary sex characteristics) from that person's gender, which can refer to either social roles based on the sex of the person (gender role) or personal identification of one's own gender based on an internal awareness (gender identity).

In her essay, "Ideology and the Cultural Production of Gender," Michele Barrett suggests new methods for studying relations between culture, gender ideology, and social change.

- Defining ideology as "the process of producing meaning," Barrett isolates several processes by which literary texts reproduce gender ideology within a given social formation.'

-Two of these processes, "compensation" and "recuperation," seem particularly useful in providing the basis for a materialist feminist analysis of gender formation.

- Barrett ends her essay thus:

Nonetheless the struggle over the meaning of gender is crucial. It is vital for our purposes to establish its meaning in contemporary capitalism as *not* simply 'difference', but as division, oppression, inequality, internalized inferiority for women. **Cultural practice is an essential site of this struggle.** It can play an incalculable role in the raising of consciousness and the transformation of our subjectivity.

- Compensation refers to the presentation of imagery and ideas that tend to elevate the "moral value" of femininity and recuperation refers to the process of negating and defusing challenges to the historically dominant meaning of gender in particular periods.

-Remember: Cultural practice is an essential site of this struggle.

- Nineteenth-century middle-class ideology constructed an image of Woman as a morally superior being especially suited for protecting her (female) domestic sphere from the corruption of society or the (male) work place.

- Accepting this conventional belief which, on the one hand, relegated women and men to separate spheres but, on the other, gave females special sanctifying powers, women reformers of the Progressive era successfully argued for a logical extension of those powers from the private sphere of the home into the wider public sphere of society.

- The process of compensation is at work here because women are presented as moral leaders.

- The process of recuperation happens as women are portrayed as intelligent, independent, and modern striking a blow against the double standard.

- The representation of the morally superior female projects a powerful figure in literature and culture, but this same representation serves to reinforce dominant gender ideology. The process of recuperation is also at work because while cultural work appears to champion "the female cause," it is also reinforcing dominant gender ideology.

- Gender in fact provides a perfect illustration of ideology at work since 'feminine' or 'masculine' behavior usually appears to be a natural-and thus fixed and unalterable-extension of biological sex.

- **An example:** In theatre experience there is an inevitable intersection of gender and ideology. Gender refers to the words, gestures, appearances, ideas and behavior that dominant culture understands as indices of feminine or masculine identity. When spectators 'see' gender, they are seeing (and reproducing) the cultural signs of gender and by implication, the gender ideology of a culture.

- Barrett pursues the materialist feminist project to reveal the complicity of the representational apparatus in maintaining sexual difference.

- Culture is therefore a site of struggle over the meaning of gender during every period of social development and changes.

-However, Barrett writes :

ideology — as the work of constructing meaning — cannot be divorced from its material conditions in a given historical period. Hence we cannot look to culture alone to liberate us — it cannot plausibly be assigned such transcendental powers.

-The allocation of gender roles is a purely cultural phenomenon.

-Does gender 'stuff' occur primarily on the material/economic level (classically, 'the base'), or primarily in ideology - and what kinds of autonomy might that ideology possess?

- The term 'cultural production' mentioned in the title is closely related to the concept of 'cultural capital' propagated by Pierre Bourdieu and Jean Claude Passeron in their essay, Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction.

- Cultural Capital, according to them, refers to a set of beliefs and practices which are assets of society which help the members of society to increase their social mobility.

Read and consider the following passages from *Ideology and the Cultural Production of Gender that explain the main argument of her essay:**

- In arguing for a more systematic approach to the ideology of gender, we can isolate three specific elements in the process. These I shall refer to by the shorthand terms of production, consumption and representation,

- *Production*

It is immediately clear that the conditions under which men and women produce literature are materially different. This important question has been curiously neglected by recent feminist work, and the most systematic exploration of this issue is still, fifty years after its publication, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*.²⁵ Naive as this essay undoubtedly is in some respects, it nonetheless provides us with a very useful starting-point. Woolf bases her arguments in this book and in related essays on materialist propositions.²⁶ Writing, she argues, is not 'spun in mid-air by incorporeal creatures': it is based on material things (health, money, the houses we live in). These material conditions must govern the writer's 'angle of vision', his or her perception of society. They must influence the art-form chosen, the genre chosen within the form, the style, the tone, the implied reader, the representation of character.

Woolf argues that a crucial difference between men and women has lain historically in the restricted access of the latter to the means of literary production. Their education was frequently sacrificed to that of their brothers; they lacked access to publishers and the distribution of their work; they could not earn a living by writing as men did, since (before the Married Women's Property Acts) they could not even retain their earnings if they were married. Relative poverty and lack of access to an artistic training meant that the bourgeois woman encountered specific constraints on her creative work: Woolf suggests that one reason why women have been so prolific in literary production and almost absent from forms such as musical composition and visual art is that the latter require greater financial resources than 'the scratching of a pen' ('For ten and sixpence one can buy paper enough to write all the plays of Shakespeare ...'). Less plausibly and more controversially, she argues that even the choice of literary form was affected by women's social position: they opted for the new form of the novel rather than for poetry or drama, since it required less concentration and was therefore more compatible with the inevitable interruptions of household obligations.

A strength of Woolf's analysis is that her discussion of representation is located in an analysis of both the historical production and distribution of literature and its social consumption and reception. She argues that accepted social and literary-critical attitudes that denigrated women's writing played an important part in influencing the production of literature by women. They did this not only by forcing women writers to adopt male pseudonyms in order to get their work published and neutrally assessed, but by engendering an over-aggressive or over-defensive tone in women's writing. She refers here to what the Marxist-Feminist Literature Collective now call

‘gender criticism’: the approach that ‘subsumes the text into the sexually-defined personality of its author, and thereby obliterates its literarity’.

Consumption

Although Woolf’s account is more systematic than most, we still await a substantial account of *consumption* and reception of texts from the point of view of the ideology of gender (or from any other point of view, one could add). There has been a failure to develop a theory of reading. This is largely, I suspect, because any such analysis would have to confront directly one of the most difficult problems of a materialist aesthetics: the problem of value. Virginia Woolf, it might be noted, simply ignored this problem. Although challenging much of what constituted ‘the canon’ of great literature of her period, she slides quite unremorsefully into the worst kind of aesthetic league-tabling in much of her criticism. Preoccupation with the question of value (‘quality’, ‘standards’) has been detrimental for feminist criticism and appears to have been posed as a choice between two limited options. On the one hand, we have the view exemplified by Virginia Woolf: that women have not reached the achievements of male writers, but that this is to be attributed to the constraints historically inherent in the conditions in which their work was produced and consumed. On the other hand, there is the view that women *have* achieved equally in respect of aesthetic value and we only think otherwise because of the warped and prejudiced response of a predominantly male, and sexist, critical and academic establishment.

This debate is fruitless (although admittedly seductive) in that it reproduces the assumption that aesthetic judgment is independent of social and historical context. Simply to pose the question at this level is to deny what we do already know: that not only are refined details of aesthetic ranking highly culturally specific, but that there is not even any consensus across classes, let alone across cultures, as to which cultural products can legitimately be subjected to such judgments. I am not contending that these observations obviate the problem of aesthetic value, since I believe it to be an urgent task of feminist criticism to take it on in the context of the female literary tradition, but merely that it should not be posed in simplistic terms.

In respect of literary production and distribution, consumption and reception, we should attend to the different ways in which men and women have historically been situated as authors.

Representation

In spite of all these reservations we can usefully isolate some of the processes by which the work of reproducing gender ideology is done. In a rough and preliminary way we can identify processes of stereotyping, compensation, collusion and recuperation, across a range of cultural practices.

The notion of a ‘stereotype’ has become so over-used that it may be thought to lack sufficient clarity, but it is I think of use in looking at the way gender difference is rigidly represented in, for instance, the mass media. Recent work has shown the pervasive operation of gender stereotypes in advertising and in children’s books. Trevor Millum has described the extremely limited

images of women presented in a sample of advertisements: they relate almost exclusively to women's role in the home, oscillating between the glamorous and efficient hostess and the dutiful, caring mother.³⁰ With regard to children's books, Nightingale and others have commented on the extent to which they represent a sexual division of labour far more rigid than even the sharp differentiation we know to exist.³¹ Many children whose mothers are in regular employment must be surprised to find that the mothers in their early school reading books are invariably and exclusively engaged in housework. This process of stereotyping is probably the one best-documented documented in feminist studies, and the existence of such rigid formulations in many different cultural practices clearly indicates a degree of hard work being put into their maintenance. We could, perhaps, be forgiven for regarding this imagery as the 'wish-fulfilment of patriarchy'.

The category of 'compensation' refers to the presentation of imagery and ideas that tend to elevate the 'moral value' of femininity. One could take examples from the plethora of practices which, in the context of systematic denial of opportunities for women, attempt to 'compensate' for this by a corresponding ideology of moral worth. The dichotomous view of woman embodied in the ideology of the Catholic Church, Rosemary Ruether argues, does precisely this: juxtaposing madonna and whore, mariolatry and an oppressive and contemptuous attitude to its female members.³² An important element of such compensatory work is the romanticism of woman that it generates. This romanticism may well be 'genuinely' felt by both men and women and I do not use the term 'compensation' to imply that these processes are necessarily conscious or intentional. An interesting example of this process is given in a study by Hilary Graham of the literature handed out to pregnant women.³³ Graham's analysis of the romantic photography of this genre (softly focused shots of idyllic mother-and-child scenes) compares rather ill with the patronizing and curt clinical treatment they get when they leave the waiting room and enter the examination cubicle. Finally we should note the importance of an historical account of this process. As Catherine Hall's and Leonore Davidoff's work in different ways demonstrates,³⁴ the 'ideology of domesticity', with its intense moral and sentimental elevation of the family home was developed in the stultifying ethos of Victorian restrictions on female activity.

The notion of 'collusion' may be taken to refer to two processes that it is useful to distinguish. On the one hand, we can note the attempts made to manipulate and parade women's 'consent' to their subordination and objectification. The classic example here is provided in John Berger's discussion of the female-nude painting tradition. Having stressed the blatant voyeurism of much of this genre he comments on the practice of portraying a female nude surveying herself in a mirror: 'you painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, you put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting *Vanity*, thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure. The real function of the mirror was otherwise. It was to make the woman connive in treating herself as, first and foremost, a sight'.³⁵ This connivance, or collusion, does not always take the form Berger outlines. The second process to which the notion of collusion refers is crucially important: that of women's willing consent and their

internalization of oppression. This point has already been touched on in connection with the question of sexuality, and indeed one reason why psychoanalytic theory has acquired its present credence among feminists is precisely that it does offer an explanation of consent and collusion. An analysis of gender ideology in which women are always innocent, always passive victims of patriarchal power, is patently not satisfactory. Simone de Beauvoir's solution to the problem was to suggest a general inclination towards 'bad faith': if women are offered the chance of relinquishing the existential burden of subjective responsibility, men may expect them to show 'complicity'.³⁶

Acceptance of the importance of collusion need not necessarily lead either to a crude formulation of women's consciousness as simply 'false consciousness', or to a denial of objective conditions of oppression. It is important to remember the extent to which our consciousness is formed in conditions of subordination and oppression. We cannot, by the simple act of will, wish away politically 'incorrect' elements of our consciousness or 'reactionary' sources of pleasure. I am not suggesting that collusion should be regarded with complacency, for clearly it should be contested, but we need to develop further our understanding of the means by which it is constructed and of what the conditions of its amelioration would be.

Finally I want to mention the process of 'recuperation'. I refer here to the ideological effort that goes into negating and defusing challenges to the historically dominant meaning of gender in particular periods. Anyone disputing the work involved in ideological reproduction could profitably consider the 'hard labour' that has been put into accommodating women's liberation in the media. It is, of course, particularly apparent in advertising. Although I cited Trevor Millum's account of stereotyping in advertisements, this picture should be modified by looking at the ways in which the advertising media have sought to recapture lost ground on the question of women's independence. Although clearly some advertisements that play with the notion of an independent woman are aimed at a market of female purchasers (such as the ambiguous 'Every Woman Needs Her Daily Mail'), many others are explicitly addressed to redressing the effects of women's liberation. An obvious example of this might be the advertisement of tights 'for women who don't want to wear the trousers'.

By way of example:

The question of recuperation is perhaps one of the most interesting in the study of ideology. Elizabeth Cowie's detailed interpretation of the film *Coma* provides a suggestive discussion of this phenomenon.³⁷ The film, although ostensibly constructed around a female character who plays an intelligent and courageous role of detection, takes away with one hand what it has given with the other: our heroine cracks the riddle but finally has to be saved by her boyfriend. This type of scenario is not solely a response to the activity of the present women's liberation movement, although clearly we may look forward to more of it as the movement gains ground. It is a response, to changes in the position of women, which may be generated at other times..

What implications does the approach outlined in this chapter have for ‘cultural revolution’ and for political art? I want to recapitulate two significant points: the first, that ideology — as the work of constructing meaning — cannot be divorced from its material conditions in a given historical period. Hence we cannot look to culture alone to liberate us — it cannot plausibly be assigned such transcendental powers.

Second, since there is no one-to-one relationship between an author’s intentions and the way in which a text will be received, the feminist artist cannot predict or control in any ultimate sense the effects of her work. These two points constitute an important limitation for the practice of politicized art, and in addition we have to consider the material resources (of production and distribution) which limit, often cruelly, the effectiveness of such work.

Nonetheless the struggle over the *meaning* of gender is crucial. It is vital for our purposes to establish its meaning in contemporary capitalism as *not* simply ‘difference’, but as division, oppression, inequality, internalized inferiority for women. Cultural practice is an essential site of this struggle. It can play an incalculable role in the raising of consciousness and the transformation of our subjectivity.
