

Introduction to Literary Theory
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Lecture – 31

Feminism and Literature III: Gynocriticism, Ecriture Feminine, Judith Butler

Hello and welcome back to our lecture series on Literary Theory. As you know for the past few lectures we have been discussing feminism and its impact on literary studies. We have creased our way down from the late 18th century writings of Mary Wollstonecraft, through the early 20th century works of Virginia Woolf to the landmark 1949 publication of Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*.

Now, it is important to remember here that this history of feminism that we have traced through the life and works of Wollstonecraft Woolf and de Beauvoir was accompanied by sustained political campaigns to win more rights for women in society. Indeed, by the time the Beauvoir book was published, feminist movements across the western world had rested for women the very important political right to vote. The developing economic scenario in the decades immediately following the Second World War, further aided the cause of women's liberation in the western world, and it did so in 2 distinct ways.

So, on the one hand there was now a growing consumer base purchasing things like refrigerator, vacuum cleaner, washing machine and these household technologies freed up a significant amount of labour time required by women, who were expected within the patriarchal society to perform domestic chores. This was happening on one hand. On the other hand, complementing this freeing up of labour time was the development of the service sector, which employed women in ever greater numbers.

So, in a lot of ways the condition of women within the western society had developed much between the time of Mary Wollstonecraft and the decades following the Second World War. And all of these changes are regarded as part of the first wave of feminism. The Beauvoir work *The Second Sex* acknowledges these positive changes, but the Beauvoir also considers this to be only a partial revolution.

Because when she was writing women still remained unequal to men within the patriarchal society. The second wave of feminism that gained momentum during the 1960's and that took its inspiration from texts like Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* or Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* which was published in 1963; sought to address these inequalities, and it sought to address these inequalities by foregrounding issues of reproductive rights, issues of conditions faced by women in work place that made it difficult for them to work more difficult than their male counterparts, and they also raised the issue of domestic violence.

So, these were various issues that were brought forward by the second wave of feminism which emerged during the 1960's. In today's lecture; however, we are not going to focus so much on the political and social impact that the post second world war feminism had; rather our focus today would be on the changes in the field of literary studies affected by this new wave of feminism, this new feminist momentum.

And towards that end I would be discussing 2 very important concepts. One is gynocriticism and the other is *écriture* of feminine. And after elaborating these 2 concepts which represent some of the major reasons which feminist thoughts have influenced literary studies, we will then move on to explore the works of Judith Butler.

And see how the work of Judith Butler complicates some of the very basic notions of gender identity; which forms the basis not only of the patriarchal society, but which was also at the core of the various feminist movements. But let us start with gynocriticism. As we know one of the fundamental preoccupations of feminist theorists whom we have studied so far was the discriminatory representation of women in literature produced by men.

This we have noticed most particularly while discussing *The Second Sex*, where Beauvoir speaks about how celebrated male authors; like D H Lawrence, Paul Claudel or Andre Breton mythologize women in their works and reinforced the status of the woman as the other. The main thrust of this kind of literary criticism was to explore and expose the workings of patriarchal conventions and discriminatory bias that informs texts written by men.

But there is also another side to feminist literary criticism which we observed while discussing Virginia Woolf. That side deals with the desire to formulate a history, and a

canon of texts written by female authors. But the story of Judith Shakespeare, we have seen how the very possibility of women writer's women authors are systematically denied within patriarchal society.

And even if women authors are able to write by overcoming difficulties of neither having a room of their own or usually a disposable income of 500 pounds that Woolf talks about they remain forgotten. They remain marginalized and outside the peel of literary canons. And in fact, it is this systematic exclusion of women writers from the canon that makes all cotton quote great literature appear to be written by men.

By the 1970's feminist literary critics were trying to address this particular gap, and they were trying to do so by focusing on what is referred to as gyno texts or women's texts.

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Elaine Showalter
(Born. 1941)

• gynocriticism



Source: [Simon & Schuster](#)

This term gyno text and the associated concept of gynocriticism was first proposed by Elaine Showalter a professor of English at the University of Princeton.

So, what is gynocriticism? Well, first and foremost gynocriticism is a mode of criticism which seeks to build a framework of literary analysis; that is, peverted on female identity. This would mean at the most basic level for foregrounding texts written by female authors; which are usually kept out of the category of great literature which is usually not studied as part of the canon.

Gynocritics would use these texts written by female authors to identify subjects that most prominently concern the female authors subjects like domesticity child rearing etcetera. And apart from this the gynocritics would all specific language users that might be peculiar to the female authors and that might be seen as distinguishing them from their male counterparts.

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The gynocritic would try to lay bare, in the words of Showalter, "the psychodynamics of female creativity; the trajectory of the individual or collective female career; and the evolution or laws of a female literary tradition"

Through exploring all of this, the gynocritic would try to lay bare in the words of Elaine Showalter and I am quoting her; the psychodynamics of female creativity the trajectory of the individual or collective female carrier and the evolution or laws of a female literary tradition.

Gynocritics during the late 20th century produced a number of texts including Patricia Meyer-Spackss the female imagination which was published in 1975; Ellen was very important text literary women published in 1976.

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- Patricia Meyer Spacks's *The Female Imagination* (1975)
- Ellen Moers's *Literary Women* (1976)
- Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* (1977)

The female imagination was published in 1975, this one is published in 1976 and then we have Elaine Showalter's a literature of their own published in 1977.

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Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979)

But the most iconic text of gynocriticism was Sandra Gilbert and Susan Goobers 1979 publication, the mad woman in the attic.

The mad woman in the title is a reference to the Jamaican character of Bertha Mason, who appears in Charlotte Brontës very famous. Novel Jane Eyre in the novel Mason is

kept locked away by her husband Edward Rochester in an attic room in his country house in England, and she is locked away because her husband claims that she is mad.

The central argument that Gilbert and Gubar puts forward by referring to this figure of Bertha Mason is that within the patriarchal society; where writing literature is seen as a masculine activity. Female writers suffer from a very strong sense of anxiety. This anxiety of somehow transgressing the domain of femininity and trespassing into a male domain gets reflected in the fiction of 19th century female authors who were writing in English; through the dual depiction of women as angels of the house and women as mad frenzied and uncontrollable.

In Brontë's novel this duality of female identity is represented on the one side by Jane Eyre who represents the angelic side of femininity and on the other side by Bertha Mason who is the mad woman in the attic. According to Gilbert and Gubar the angelic figure that we find in these texts are attempts made by the woman author to depict female figures in accordance to the expectations of the patriarchy. Whereas, the figures of the mad woman like Bertha Mason for instance, they represent the anxiety of women writers stemming from their transgressive roles as authors.

Now, one of the media criticism that is usually levied against gynocritics is that they essentialize gender identity. So, what does that mean? Well it means that according to the gynocritics certain perspectives, certain literary subjects, certain ways of styling the language are unique to women. In other words, if you are a female author gynocritics would expect your literary work to be of a certain kind that would be imprinted with the essence of your womanly identity, which would distinguish it from texts written by male authors.

This charge of essentialism is also levied against the concept of *écriture féminine*, which was proposed by the French feminist critique a Helene Cixous.

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Hélène Cixous
(Born. 1937)

“The Laugh of
Medusa” (1975)



Source: Alchetron

And she proposed this concept in her very famous essay titled the laugh of medusa which was published in 1975.

Now, this French term *écriture féminine* translates literally into feminine writing or woman's writing. And the idea of *écriture féminine* stresses that language within a patriarchal society is phallogentric or centered around the phallus. This assertion of language being phallogentric traces back to a Lacanian theory about language about the symbolic order and about oedipal complex. And the Lacanian theory in itself is rather complex and therefore, we will not be going into that.

But if we try to understand it in simple terms, what she is saying is that language uses as a norm foregrounds the male. Slightly overused, but good example of this through which we can try and understand the concept of foregrounding of the male is the use of the word man in English language; where the word man is used to stand in for the general category of human being. In other words, man in English language as it is usually written and spoken represents the human norm, right.

So, there is a sliding of the notion of man masculinity etcetera, and what is normal as human being, one slides over the other one becomes the other. Now she points out that a woman when writing in a language, which normally prioritizes the male and the masculine have to constantly struggle to manipulate and even break down the language in order to make it a suitable vehicle for her own thoughts and experiences.

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Écriture feminine is marked by syntactical chaos, disruptive gaps, unusual images and puns all of which attempt to break the sense of "normality" of how language is otherwise used within patriarchy.

Écriture feminine is therefore, marked by according to sexual syntactical chaos, disruptive gaps, unusual images, puns and all of this are basically attempts to break the sense of normality of how language is otherwise used within patriarchy.

Now, here again you can see that there is a degree of general sensualism that is involved, the very fact of being a female author gets connected here with forms of language use that would be imprinted by a womanly essence. Now to understand why such essentializing of the woman identity might be problematic, let us turn to the work of Judith Butler, who argues that gender identity is not an inherent essence that we possess, but rather a performative construct. According to Butler we do not simply belong to a gender, but rather we do our gender.

Now, I do understand that these sentences are somewhat cryptic, but before I elaborate on them, let me first introduce you to Judith Butler.

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Judith Butler
(Born. 1956)



Source: Wikipedia

Butler was born in 1956 in Cleveland Ohio; she was born in a Jewish family. And she received her bachelors, masters as well as her doctoral degree from the Yale University. And right now she is a chair professor in the department of comparative literature at the University of California Berkeley.

Apart from her academic work Judith Butler is also known for her activism for the lesbian and gay rights, and also for her anti-zionist stand. She has authored a number of very important books, among which the most celebrated is her 1990 publication titled gender trouble, feminism and the subversion of identity.

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*Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of
Identity (1990)*

And it is on this book that we are going to focus today and as you will see during our discussion that with Butler we actually start moving beyond the boundaries of feminism the kind of feminism that we have discussed so far.

So now let us come back to the statement that gender is performative, gender is a performative construct we do gender we do not belong to one gender category or the other. So, there is a distinction that is being drawn between doing gender associated with the notion of performativity and just being one particular gender or the other. And this is in fact, the main thesis of gender trouble that we do gender.

So, what does Butler mean when she says gender is performative, gender is something that we do? Well, before we start discussing the concept of performativity, let us start with the more common sense understanding of gender. And by common sense I mean the mundane the quotidian. Most of us live within what can be called heteronormative patriarchal societies. And by this I mean we live within patriarchal societies that consider heterosexuality to be the norm.

Now, within such a social framework the understanding of gender is usually seen to be integrally connected with 2 other terms. One is the body and the other is sexuality. So, the assumption is something like this. If I have a female body, then it is expected that I would be naturally sexually attracted towards men, and would naturally represent feminine traits; like being gentle, being caring, being soft spoken, etcetera.

If I have a male body, then it is expected that I would naturally be sexually attracted towards women, and naturally show masculine traits; like courage, strength, physical strength, assertiveness, etcetera. In all of these assumptions the stress is on the word naturally, which signifies both a sense of obviousness in the connection established between body sexuality and gender.

And also it is naturalus; what Butler does in gender trouble is that she undermines this notion of a natural cause and effect chain connecting body sexuality and gender, and argues that each of these terms body sexuality gender are socially constructed.

So, how does body sexuality and gender get socially constructed? And how do body and sexuality affect the notion of gender? Well, to get an answer to this question, we will have to understand the interesting way in which Butler appropriates Sigmund Freud's theory of melancholia, and makes it the core idea of our gender theory.

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"Mourning and Melancholia" (1917)

In his 1917 essay titled mourning and melancholia, Freud discusses 2 different ways in which we react to any major sense of loss. Let us assume that I have lost a person who was very dear to me.

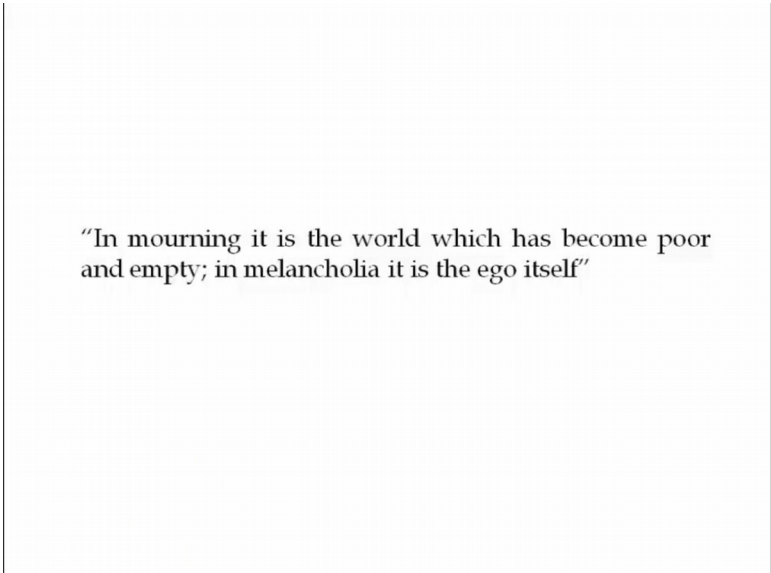
Now, according to Freud such a loss usually leads to a phase of mourning in which I will deeply miss the person that I have lost, and I react to it in various ways including psychologically denying the absence of the lost person. So, if someone is dead I simply

deny the fact that that person is no longer there. And often one can also desperately try to get back in touch with that person, that lost person, and feel their presence around oneself.

So, we may even see that person for instance in our dreams, that is one of the ways in which we try and get back in touch with that person. And this is the usual form of mourning and some of the usual reactions. But Freud says that this mourning gradually gets healed. And slowly, but surely we come back to the reality, and we accept the fact that that person is no more.

However, Freud mentions that at times the reaction to loss might take a more pathological form which he refers to as melancholia, and which he distinguishes from the usual mourning. Now in melancholia the sense of loss is so profound that we feel we have not only lost a person who was close to us, but indeed we have lost a part of our own self. In Freud's own words and I quote, in mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself.

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A quote by Freud about mourning and melancholia, enclosed in a rectangular box with a thin black border. The text is centered within the box.

"In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself"

One peculiarity of the psychological response that melancholia elicits is what Freud calls identification with the lost object.

So, in other words the melancholic person tries to make up for the loss that that person has suffered by himself or herself assuming characteristic traits of the lost person. So,

melancholic identification involves a process of becoming like the object of loss to compensate that loss. This theory of melancholic identification is appropriated by Butler to come up with a new understanding of a child's sexual development which deviates from the mainstream Freudian explanation.

I should not say deviate; I should say which reinterprets the Freudian concept of a child's sexual development. Again, this might appear to be slightly tricky to understand, this theory that Butler comes up with. So, I will go over it slowly and step by step.

Now, from our previous discussions on psychoanalysis you would remember that for Freud a child which in Freud's writing is primarily a male child is normally heterosexual. This is because his sexual urges are developed through his engagement with his mother who is his primary caregiver and also the main object of his desire. It is only when the oedipal complex sets in and the taboo against incest is realized and internalized by the child that he starts shifting his desire from his mother to other females who appear as substitutes for the original object of sexual desire.

The process in which a girl child's sexual desire emerges and manifests as it is described by Freud is much more complex. So, the female child according to Freud like the male child initially desires the mother, but soon passes on that desire to the father. But realizing that such incestuous desire is taboo, she then transfers it to other men who become for her the substitute for the father as the object of sexual desire.

Now, according to Butler, this taboo of incest which forces both the male and the female child to project their heterosexual desires beyond their parents actually represent a later part of the child's sexual development. As per Butler this taboo of incest is preceded for both the male and the female child by what she calls the taboo of homosexuality. Butler claims that the earlier form of sexual desire, rather I should say the earliest form of sexual desire, in both the male child and the female child is homosexual desire.

So, in other words for the girl child the earliest object of sexual desire is the mother and for the boy child it is the father. This is presented by Butler as an innate human disposition. Now this original form of sexuality within a heteronormative society is prohibited through what Butler calls the taboo of homosexuality.

It is only in response to this taboo of homosexuality that the little boy and the little girl slips their object of sexual desire, which they now direct at parents belonging to the opposite sex. So, they initially start with desiring parents belonging to their own sex, and then after they encounter the taboo of homosexuality, they flip their desire and project their desire onto their parents belonging to the opposite sex.

So, for the boy the object of desire becomes the mother and for the girl it becomes the father. But this too is a problematic phase of sexual development, because it soon meets with another social prohibition which is the taboo against incest. This then results in the growing adolescent, projecting his or her sexual desires beyond the confines of the family, and the usual thing that happens in the Freudian narrative of how a child sexuality is developed.

Now, this is a radical revision of Freud's theory, because here homosexual desires are established as more fundamental than heterosexual desires. And in doing so it undermines in a major way the central assumption of a heteronormative society; which regards heterosexuality to be the norm.

But then what does melancholic identification has to do with all of this. Well, Butler points out that the taboo of homosexuality which forces the child to shift it is desire from the same sex parent results in a deep sense of loss, which evokes reactions similar to melancholia. So, to make up for this loss each child identifies with the parent of the same sex even while projecting a sexual desire onto the parent of the opposite sex.

Thus a boy child copes with the loss of the father as a primary object of desire by trying to emulate his characteristic features and becoming more and more like him. Something very similar also happens with the girl child, who also in her attempt to cope with the loss of the mother as a primary object of desire tries to become more and more like her; this is melancholic identification and this process of identification with the same sex parent through incorporation of their characteristic traits results in the girl child becoming quote unquote feminine, and the boy child becoming quote unquote masculine which forms their gender identity.

And indeed this gender identity formed through melancholic identification with the same sex parent extends to what Butler refers to as the stylization of the body. In other words, one of the many ways in which a girl child tries to become like her mother and the boy

child tries to become like his father is by fashioning his or her body, stylizing his or her body. And by fashioning or stylizing the body what I mean here is marking the body, piercing the body, dressing the body, molding the body through certain postures, how you sit, how you stand, how you walk, how you lie down.

Which means that, within a society a female body appears to be very different from a male body not so much because it is naturally so, but rather because it is fashioned or stylized to be so. And the way we fashion our body and our gender is informed by the way we are guided by the society to repress our homosexual desires.

Now, there are 2 very important things that I want you to note here about Butler's revision of Freud's theory of sexual development. The first thing which I have already mentioned a few moments ago is that it ceases to regard homosexuality as a perversion of our quote unquote normal heterosexuality. In fact, homosexuality is established as more fundamental as preceding heterosexuality.

And the second important point that I want you to note here is that, our gender which according to Butler incorporates not only our femininity or our masculinity, but also our sexuality and our stylized bodies is socially constructed, rather than being natural. So, in other words gender along with the 2 other related terms body and sexuality are understood by Butler as responses to the ways in which social prohibition shapes our identities. And this constructed nature of gender identity now leads us to the important notion of performativity.

Now, as I have mentioned that according to Butler, gender has to do with fashioning, stylizing in acting and things like that. And this means that our gender depends on our molding ourselves in accordance to the social taboos and prohibitions and actively incorporating different characteristic traits from our same sex parents to form our identity.

So, gender is a process of doing or becoming rather than simply being. A girl child gradually becomes like her mother by doing what she does and by incorporating her characteristic traits. The same is also true for the boy child, who gradually tries and becomes a man just like his father. It is this process of doing or becoming through incorporating the characteristic traits of the same sex parent that Butler calls gender performativity.

But why does Butler use this slightly unusual term performativity? And why does she not use the more mundane term performance, is performance different from performativity? Well according to Butler they are different. Performance as far as Butler is concerned is the enactment of a certain rule by a subject who precedes that rule and who is otherwise independent of it.

So, what do I mean by this? Let us try and understand this with the help of an example. Example of a film, the example that I have in mind is Francis Ford Coppola's film *Godfather part. One* now in that movie the actor Marlon Brando enacts the role of an Italian American mafia boss. Now Marlon Brando the actor precedes this role as a subject, and we can easily draw a distinction between this Marlon Brando as a subject and the role of Vito Corleone that he plays in the movie.

This is what Butler would identify as a performance. Gender performativity on the other hand is different from such kind of a performance because there is no separate subject before or behind the gender role. When we enact our gender identities, we do not do that with a sense of our identity as a subject that is distinct and separate from this gender role that we are enacting. Indeed, we are socially obliged to appear as gendered individuals right from the moment of our birth.

So, announcements like it is a girl or it is a boy right after a child is born already interpolates us, already calls upon us to occupy a particular gender identity. So, there is no subject standing beyond or behind the enactment of gender role as our sense of identity is always already informed by the process of enacting gender.

So, this is very important, let me repeat it. There is no subject standing beyond or behind the enactment of our gender rules, why because our sense of identity is always from the very beginning already informed by the process of enacting gender. Social expectations are already projected on us which expects us to belong to one particular gender, or other, which expects us to act out to perform gender in particular ways. Butler identifies this peculiar form of enactment where there is no distinct sense of subjectivity beyond the process of enactment as performativity.

Now, I do agree that this is a slightly difficult concept, but I think if you go over the section of the lecture for maybe a couple of times, you will be able to understand it quite clearly. I would like to end this lecture today by briefly referring to the phenomenon of

cross dressing. Now if following Butler, we agree that gender is constructed and not natural, then it might be possible to construct gender differently. In other words, it would be possible to play around with the characteristic traits that we incorporate to present ourselves as either men or women.

Now, it is important to note here that going beyond gender altogether is impossible as far as Butler's theoretical framework is concerned, because we are incorporated within the gendered social framework from the very moment of our birth. And therefore, we do not have access to a non-gendered subjectivity that can just stop being a man or a woman.

The most we can do is to perform gender differently. And one of the starkly visible ways in which we can perform our gender differently is by working on the ways in which we stylize our body, including the way we dress. This brings us to the notion of cross dressing; where a man might dress up in clothes that are usually associated with the feminine gender, within a particular socio cultural milieu, or a woman might dress up in what is usually regarded as a man's attire.

Such cross dressings can potentially serve 2 very important functions. The first is that it can reveal gender identity as an artifice, as a mode of self-fashioning; which can be done differently. So, it is not natural, it is not essential. The second thing that this cross dressing can bring to the foreground is that it can help articulate one's resistance against the social norms and prohibitions that shape our gender identity. A good example of this is a self-portrait made by the remarkable Mexican painter Frida Kahlo.

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Now, though Kahlo is today known as one of the greatest painters of our time. During her own lifetime she was often portrayed primarily as the wife of the well-known muralist Diego Rivera. Indeed, a 1933 newspaper article seeking to introduce to its reader Kahlo as a talented painter could not think of a better heading than this one.

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Wife of the Master Mural Painter Gleefully Doubles in Works of Art.

Now, the reason why Kahlo could only be portrayed as a quote unquote dabbler in art even as her husband is described as a master mural painter is, because of the ways in

which conventional gender stereotypes work within patriarchal society; stereotypes in which the man is always the master and the woman is at best a dilettante.

Now, Frida Kahlo has a painting.

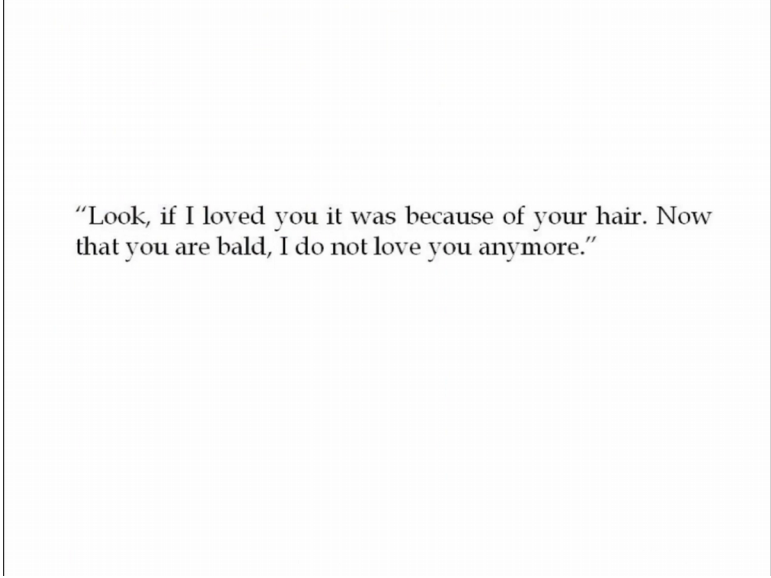
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This is painting that is usually known as self-portrait with cropped hair, and this is a painting that she completed in 1940. And this painting presents a strong resistance against this stereotyped gender identity, and it does that through using cross dressing. So, in this self-portrait produced shortly after her divorce with her husband Diego Rivera, we can see Kahlo stylizing her body in ways that deeply problematized the usual notions of femininity within the patriarchal society.

So, in this painting, you can see Kahlo sitting with a scissor in her hand, which she has apparently used to crop her hair short much like a man, and her long quote unquote feminine traces are scattered all around her. The line of music that you can see on the top part of the painting is part of a Mexican folk song, which if you translate it in English it reads something like this.

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“Look, if I loved you it was because of your hair. Now that you are bald, I do not love you anymore.”

Look, if I loved you it was because of your hair. Now that you are bald, I do not love you anymore.

So, the cropping of her hair comes across as a rebellion against the patriarchal gender norm where women are both identified and loved as women for the long hairs, for ways in which they stylized their body, and hair is a very important part. But what is more important for our purpose is the way in which Kahlo dresses herself in this painting. Usually herself portraits present her in traditional Mexican dresses. But here we see her wearing an oversized suit baggy pants and a crimson shirt. All of which represents the way her husband Diego Rivera used to dress.

So, here Kahlo not only dresses like a man, but more specifically she dresses like her ex-husband. And at one level this signifies an attempt to assert her own identity, her own agency by going beyond the limiting category of a woman who lives in the shadow of her husband and only doubles in art.

But on another level, it also represents what we have discussed as melancholic identification; where the object of loss which in this case is Diego Rivera is incorporated as part of Kahlo’s own gender identity. In this portrait we therefore, see Kahlo literally becoming the man Diego Rivera. With this I end today’s lecture, as well as a section on feminism and literature. In the next lecture we will take up modernism and post modernism.

Thank you for listening.