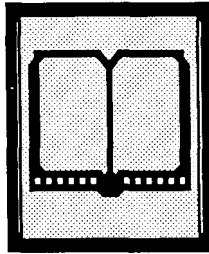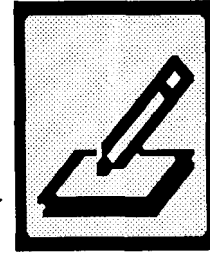# Discourses of IL/LITERACY

A LITERATURE REVIEW

In most of the literacy discourse "illiterates" are not differentiated by gender, but the reader can usually infer that "people" are actually men. In this way women become "other" in relation to men as the norm. There are many feminist critiques which argue the need, not simply to "add on" a female perspective, but for a revision of the world (Callaway, 1981). There are an increasing number of accounts that seek to enter women's experience into the account of illiteracy and to re-consider the issue of illiteracy from a feminist perspective. (e.g. Bhasin, 1984; De Coito, 1984; Ellis, 1984; Hale, 1986; Kazemak, 1988; MacKeracher, 1987; MacKeracher et al., n.d.; McCaffery, 1985; Ramdas, 1985; Rockhill, 1987a, 1987b; Thompson, 1983a, 1983b).

Much of women's writing on the subject of illiteracy is a critique of the material which leaves women invisible. It is not only the academic literature which leaves women out but, as McCaffery (1985) has observed, it is also the publicity for literacy programming which often focuses on images of illiterate men and their situations. Thompson (1983b) speaking of adult education in England generally sums up the issue:

So long as the opinion leaders and policy makers in adult education continue to describe the world as though women don't exist, or to associate women simply with domesticity and child rearing, adult education will continue to reinforce inequality between the sexes to the long term detriment of both men and women (p.151).

When women are visible as the objects of literacy programming they are portrayed as helpless and incompetent. Bhasin (1984) and Ramdas (1985) have drawn attention to the blame-the-victim problem which focuses on the "illiterate" rather than on the need for structural change. Bhasin argues that illiteracy is not a disease that needs to be eradicated, but a symptom of the disease of poverty and inequality (p. 42). She argues that many of the slogans and arguments about the "problem" of illiteracy are insulting and offensive to illiterate women. She is critical of the inclusion of women as targets of literacy programs especially when they are described in the same less than human way that men are often portrayed.

Throughout the literature, whether women are writing about the situation in

India, the Caribbean, Ethiopia or England (Bhasin, 1984; Ellis, 1984; Junge and Tegegne, 1985; Ramdas, 1985; Thompson, 1983a, 1983b), they all draw attention to the problem that when women are included and considered as participants or potential participants in programs, it is always in relation to their roles as mother, and wife that they are deemed to "need" literacy. No-one speaks of men needing literacy because they are fathers and need to be literate for the sake of the next generation, but many writers observe that this is frequently the case for women. Thompson for example (1983a) says:

When the attention of providers is directed at working-class women "in the community", in "outreach work" or in "adult basic education" schemes, a further element becomes seemingly obligatory: child development and parent craft. For those who are "isolated", "unable to cope", "bad managers" and pejoratively described as "single parents", relevance and the development of skills is regularly defined in terms of being "better mothers". So that despite claims about "individuality", "personal develop-

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ment" and "educational self-fulfillment" so beloved by adult educators, where women are concerned, it is as appendages of homes, husbands and children that they are usually assessed and catered for (pp. 84-85).

Bhasin criticizes Indian programs as preserving stereotypes which are not true to the lives of working class women. Primers depict women as wives and mothers in the household and ignore the roles women have as producers of food and labourers. They do not tell women of their rights, but seek to make them "better" wives and mothers. Junge and Tegegne (1985) speaking of the effect of a program on women's lives in Ethiopia mention that women "seemed to be conscious of taking better care of themselves and their families" (p. 612). Ellis (1984) is more critical of the problem of teaching women only roles of homemaker and mother. She suggests that women need to be taught more about their rights and given a broader understanding of the "attitudes and perceptions that determine and define the place of women in Caribbean society" (p.49).

When women are acknowledged as recipients of adult education programs, Thompson argues their "needs" are defined by men (1983a):

Women's real needs (i.e., the definition women would make about themselves and their lives if men were not around or if men were not structurally in charge) are not being recognised or met (p. 86).

Women are taught to "cope" and adapt, to carry out their traditional roles better:

The suggestion that women might see the world differently or might deny the values and standards determined by men, appears incomprehensible to those well used to "meeting individual needs" and supplying "confidence" in remarkably predictable and sexist ways (p. 85).

Solity (1986) and MacKeracher (1987) both draw attention to the need for a "women's studies" model which encourages women to look at their own personal experience and locate this in terms of a "sociological and historical framework"

(Solity, p. 4). MacKeracher states the criticism of traditional programs and demands an alternative:

Academic equivalency programs, which essentially provide for the remedial application of more basic education, may prepare women for occupational training and participation in the male-dominant world of work but do not solve the problem of "literacy for women". Programs which allow women to explore their own experience, make sense of that experience, and promote this "sense"
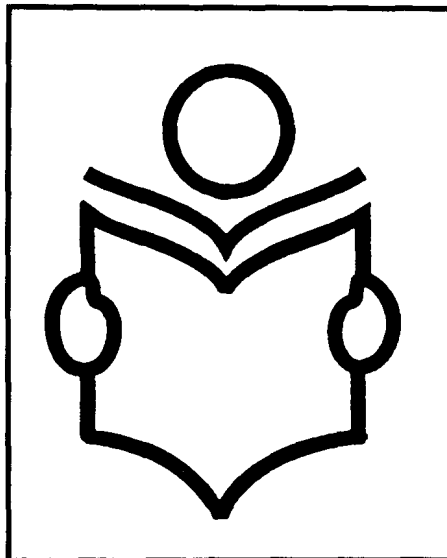
into personal concerns and public issues can be best understood, not as remedial education, but as transformative participation in better basic education (p.12).

Many writers emphasize the importance of acknowledging the social constraints on women's lives. Hale (1986) draws attention to the inappropriateness of assuming that women will be made better mothers through increased knowledge, stressing the importance of understanding the social context of women's lives. In the Indian program she was studying, it was assumed that women needed knowledge of nutritious foods. But the impact of the education program's attempts to alter eating habits, was lessened because of a variety of material factors which were ignored by the program. The program had little effect because it taught women about nutritious foods, but ignored the fact that it is men not women who usually have the power to make the decisions over what is eaten in

the household, and women's nutritional needs are traditionally accorded little importance. Its effect was also lessened because the women who actually carry out the cooking in the household had no spare time to attend classes. The material circumstances of women's lives are often ignored in this way, then women are blamed for lack of motivation when they fail to implement changes. McCaffery (1985) described the same problem in programs for women in England. She observes that as women's days are regularly scheduled round family needs and they are rarely able to spend money on their own education, they need programs offered at appropriate time, childcare provided and programs subsidized financially. De Coito (1984), from a study carried out in Canada, also identified the need for childcare to enable women to attend literacy and upgrading programs.

Thompson (1983a) sums up the invisibility of women, except as mothers, in adult education. The social conditions of being a woman in society — both material and personal relations and inequalities of power, and the control of men over establishing women's "needs" are frequently ignored:

The organization and provision of classes takes very little account of the social, economic, cultural and political conditions of being female in our society. The career structure, the responsibility for organization and control, the arbiters of the curriculum, and the opinion leaders and policymakers...are invariably men — men who operate firmly and squarely within the organizational structure, the cultural assumptions and the thinly disguised prejudices of patriarchal society. It is for reasons like these that so far as Russel was concerned, women were visible only as mothers, and totally invisible in every other respect (p. 81).

McCaffery briefly directs attention to the way literacy enters into the power dimensions between men and women in the household. She mentions male hostility to women not being at home when they return from work, and male refusal to "babysit" the children in the evenings. A recent media account also speaks of literacy as power: "Male egos take another battering in the war of the sexes. The

Southam Literacy Survey shows women are more skilled readers." The article is addressed to "all men" and ends... "say while your wife is reading that book why not hide this [article]" (Calamai, 1987b). Although the male author writes jokingly, in the assumption that it is a problem for men that women are more "skilled readers", women's literacy is shown to be a threat to their power. Rockhill (1987a, 1987b) develops these themes much further in her articles based on a study with immigrant women in the United States. She concludes that literacy is lived in women's lives as threat and desire:

Women engage in literacy practices as part of the work of the family. When it becomes associated with education, literacy poses the potential of change and is experienced as both a threat and a desire. Thus the anomaly that literacy is women's work but not women's right (1987b, p. 330).

She argues that the assumption that literacy is "neutral" causes us to miss the charged dynamic around it for women, and urges the need to look at the "personal" to understand the gendered practices which reinforce the domination of women. In this way she suggests: "perhaps we can begin to find ways to address the contradictory constructions of women's subjectivities with respect to literacy/learning/education" (1987a, p. 166).

The work by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986) studies women's ways of knowing. From their research with North American women, Belenky et al. identify five "epistemological perspectives from which women seem to know and view the world." In a recent article Kazemak (1988) argues that this work is important for literacy workers. Kazemak suggests that an understanding of these "stages" may be significant for understanding how women approach literacy and literacy instruction. She suggests that this understanding might lead to programs for women that are less "individually oriented" (Fingeret, 1984) and more in keeping with women's understanding of themselves as contextually-bound in caring relationships with others (Gilligan, 1982).

I want to draw attention to the image of "silence" that Belenky et al. chose for

their "first stage" of knowing. While the authors do *not* claim that the perspectives they describe are stages — in fact they say: "we leave it to future work to determine whether these perspectives have any stage-like qualities" — they do present them as a hierarchy, and speak of women developing from one perspective to the next. They are also cautious about the meaning of the category "silence" because in their study few women fell into that category. They speak of aiming to "share" their data rather than "prove" it.

Although they do not state that those
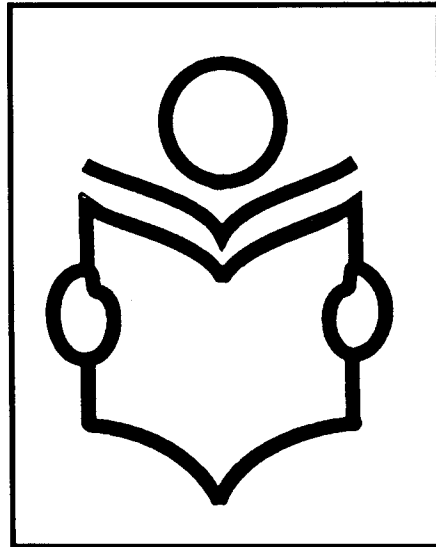
who were placed in their first category which they call "silence" were illiterate, they do say that: "the silent women...had had little formal schooling or had found school to be a place of chronic failure". They argue that:

In order for reflection to occur, the oral and written forms of language must pass back and forth between persons who both speak and listen or read and write — sharing, expanding, and reflecting on each other's experiences. Such interchanges lead to ways of knowing that enable individuals to enter into the social and intellectual life of their community. Without them, individuals remain isolated from others; and without tools for representing their experiences, people also remain isolated from the self (p. 26).

They describe the "way of knowing" of women in their first category as "silent" and see this silence as resulting from

isolation from the self. But the women they call "silent" are not silent. They *do* speak, and they explain vividly that they have become fearful of speaking because the power of others has forced them to see their voice as a danger to them. They have suffered violence when they dared to speak. Belenky et al. speak of women who "worried that they would be punished just for using words — any words," but they do not explain that this silence may have been learnt for the sake of safety because they *have* been punished for using any words. The suggestion that these women who are labelled "silent" lack voice because they are "isolated from the self" fails to convey the materiality of the unequal power dynamic within which many have lived.

One "silent" women speaks of being a "loudmouth," perhaps picking up the discourse that has told her that as a woman to speak at all, is to speak out of turn. Belenky et al. depict the "silent" women as fearful of the power of authorities:

In their experience authorities seldom tell you what they want you to do; they apparently expect you to know in advance. If authorities do tell you what is right, they never tell you why it is right. Authorities bellow but do not explain (p. 28).

But this leads them to depict the "silent" women: "like puppets moving with the jiggle of a thread. To hear is to obey." This image suggests that to see oneself as powerless in the face of authorities is to be a "puppet," an image of being less than human.

Their depiction of the "silent" women does not allow the material circumstances of the women's lives to be considered, making it possible to see them as stupid because they simply fail to know and use the power of voice:

Because the women see themselves as slated to lose, they focus their efforts on assuring their own continued existence during a losing battle. They wage their struggle for survival without an awareness of the power inherent in their own minds and voice and without expectation of cooperation from others. It is a stacked game waged against men who seem to be bigger and better, men who think they have a right to be the winner,

to be right no matter what the circumstances (p. 30).

But women do have to fight against odds to survive. It is not simply in their own minds that their voices are powerless and that they fail to receive cooperation. Men do not just "seem bigger," they often *are* and they exercise their right to a voice by physically silencing women who have been trained to believe men have that right. The type of account Belenky et al. give does not show us that the women are silenc*ed*, unheard and trained to believe that their smallest voice is too loud. Instead it leads us to blame women for their "silence" and to assume that illiterate women, particularly those who live in the face of male violence, need to be taught to speak, when what is needed is that men who silence women need to listen.

Kazemak refers to work such as this one by Belenky et al. to argue that by failing to study the relationship between women and literacy, scholars have given only a partial account of adult literacy. She says the absence of such study suggests:

> *...at the best a naivete or ignorance on our part as literacy scholars and, at the worst, a conscious or unconscious disdain for the specific literacy needs of women within a patriarchal society. This omission of information on the functions, uses, and needs of literacy among women makes any theoretical or practical discussion of adult literacy incomplete, if not suspect* (p. 23).

I want to agree with her that the omission of studies of women is crucial, but suggest that we need studies which start from the standpoint of the women who are labelled "illiterate" or "silent", not studies which continue to leave the women themselves silent and unheard.

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