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NON FICTIONAL PROSE

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COURSE INTRODUCTION

Writing, whether fiction, poetry, essay or drama, provides a window into society and, as such, is a useful tool in the analysis of sociological, political and anthropological facets of culture and civilization, apart from its intrinsic worth as literature. And when the writing is done by a marginalized section of the world's populace – women - its significance increases a hundredfold. In this course, we will read some works by women from different countries of the world and see whether their experiences are similar in certain ways. Does being a woman mean being discriminated against in certain ways? What does this entail in terms of physical and psychological trauma? By the end of this course, you would be more aware of the position of women who are often not considered to be part of the mainstream and the courage it takes to pen down their thoughts, feelings and experiences. Not all the experiences and feelings expressed are negative, of course. But they do reveal the workings of a woman's mind in great depth and variety.

Concepts of creativity, literary history or literary interpretation were, for a long time, and still, in some measure continue to be, based entirely on male experience and put forward as universal. Women writers are often taken less seriously than their male counterparts. As students of literature, you must ponder over these issues and try to form an opinion of your own, based on what you have read.

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BLOCK INTRODUCTION

In this Block, we will first introduce you to the idea of women's writing and the various stages of its journey through society and literature. You will read some prose writing by women which is out of the realm of fiction and is concerned with criticism and issues related to women and society. The writers' views on various matters will help you to understand what women feel and what they have expressed in different ways.



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UNIT 1 INTRODUCTION TO WOMEN'S WRITING

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 The Waves of Feminism: An Overview
- 1.3 Women's Writing: Trends and Development
 - 1.3.1 Women's Writing: Locating the Genre
 - 1.3.2 Perspectives in Feminist Thought
- 1.4 Women's Writing: The Indian Context
- 1.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.6 Aids to Activities
- 1.7 Glossary
- 1.8 Unit-End Questions
- 1.9 References and Suggested Readings

1.0 OBJECTIVES

By the end of this Unit, you will be able to:

- understand the different aspects of, and the conflicts within, the concept of feminism over time.
- trace women's writing throughout history, and across cultural and geographical boundaries.
- get acquainted with the literary figures associated with the struggle for the acknowledgement and acceptance of women's writing.

Words in **bold** are explained in the Glossary.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Feminist literary criticism, in reading cultural artefacts from a feminist standpoint, has transformed the study of literary texts. When employed in the context of literature, feminist criticism assesses a text by a female or a male author for its literary value as well as for its representation of women characters.

Across the centuries, women have been the subject of innumerable reconfigurations and with every reinscription comes the necessity of rereading. In the space of the text, woman can be both defamed and defended, and it is here that the most persuasive possibilities can be found for imagining the future of the female subject. (Plain & Sellers 2)

Feminist literary criticism helps reassess existing literary **canons** for the patriarchal ideologies, political beliefs and value systems that they perpetuate,

which more often than not, belong to the European, White man. It has simultaneously also influenced the concomitant aspects of publishing and critical reception with particular focus on the analysis of how the literary techniques employed by women writers are different from the prescriptions of the male canon. The blossoming of feminist theory in the past few years has also led to new developments in the field of Women's Writing.

Activity 1: Rereading of canonical works is also followed by retellings of such texts. Do you think they justify the representation of women characters?

The roots of the earliest feminist discourse have to be traced in the eighteenth century when Mary Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, a work she was vilified by many fellow writers for endeavouring. Inspired by the notions of equality and liberty that the French Revolution emblemized, the work was one of the world's first sustained feminist arguments and challenged many of the conventional notions of femininity of her time. Wollstonecraft's emphasis on female education—the kind which enforces solid virtues as against artificial graces—made her one of the earliest proponents of gender equality. However, unlike latter-day feminists, she did not seek freedom for women from the domestic sphere. Wollstonecraft's efforts were paralleled by Margaret Fuller in the US for she too emphasized on the need to educate women. Unlike Wollstonecraft, however, she did not subscribe to the notion of specific gender roles and sought solidarity between African-Americans and women.

Another founding figure of feminism as we know it today is Virginia Woolf whose ideas continue to influence feminist theorists even today. She was an early proponent of the notion of the '**androgynous**' creative mind (Fuller too had talked about androgyny but her notion of it was rooted in mysticism unlike Woolf's). The best artists, believed Woolf, were always a blend of masculine and feminine qualities, or 'man-womanly', and 'woman-manly', as she called it (Woolf 103). She was also the first theorist who argued in favour of a reading practice that was woman-centric—the kind which would allow women to read as women without having to employ patriarchal yardsticks of aesthetics and values.

1.2 THE WAVES OF FEMINISM: AN OVERVIEW

The history of feminism, which usually begins with the writings of Wollstonecraft, followed by Fuller and Woolf, has usually been divided into three waves. The first wave, which lasted from the 1830s to the 1920s, was characterized by the **suffragette movement** dedicated to achieving equality for women in the West. The women activists of the time also expressed their concern for such issues as property rights and the opposition to **chattel marriage**. An important strand of first-wave feminism was Evangelical Feminism, which sought to uplift those who were considered morally 'fallen'. Significant feminist works of literature written during the first-wave included Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, and Henrik Ibsen's *The Doll's House*, each of which deal with the restrictive and oppressive roles of women in Victorian society. The second wave of feminism roughly began in the year 1963 with the arrival of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. The mantra of this wave was that 'the personal is the political', i.e., the issues that women were dealing with on the personal front were actually political and systemic. Authors like Doris

Lessing, Iris Murdoch, Margaret Drabble, Angela Carter and Muriel Spark appeared on the literary scene, rendering the private and social lives of women in vivid detail. They depicted liberated women in their works, who could carve their own niche both in their personal and professional lives. Third-wave feminism began in the 1990s and continues to the present times. This wave was rooted in the works of such theorists as Luce Irigaray, Kimberlé Crenshaw and Judith Butler. Largely influenced by a post-structuralist view of both gender and sexuality, third wave feminism also challenges what it perceives as the failures of the previous wave. Gender was no longer a rigid or stable category, but a shifting, contingent, negotiable and fluid entity.

Various analytical categories such as class, caste, race, ethnicity, were added to the study of feminism. In a paradigmatic shift in feminist criticism, third-wave feminism also responds to the breakdown of the category of 'women' by emphasizing on individual narratives of different women rather than the canonical narratives of the middle-class, White women. Authors such as Margaret Atwood, Jeanette Winterson, Joyce Carol Oates, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Zadie Smith became the popular women writers of the third wave. Recent women's writing has attempted to theorize the act of narration too. Whose voice narrates a story, whose voice is paid attention to, who holds authority over a narrative, who represents himself/herself and who is represented by another person, have all become significant points of entry into works of literature. Likewise, researchers who study feminism have also made sure that one of their major concerns is their own position in relation to the population they are studying.

Many twenty-first century critics, however, have levelled their criticism against the emphasis on individuality by post-feminists stating that if the personal is truly the political, then a focus only on the individual, defeats what is actually a collective program. For these critics, an over-emphasis on difference impedes the development of the feminist movement. In emphasizing difference, feminists also run the risk of focussing on certain differences (such as race, caste) more than others (such as workplace).

Activity 2: 'Anti-essentialism' is a major force in driving the different waves of feminism. What are some of the problems concerning women in the current times? Are they different from those faced by women of previous generations?

1.3 WOMEN'S WRITING: TRENDS AND DEVELOPMENT

As a social constructionist view of gender began to take shape—the seeds of which were sown in the first wave, and **sex** and **gender** were distinguished between, feminists began to look at and identify the psychological, socio-cultural and political implications of gender norms. Gerda Lerner aptly summarizes this when she says: "Women writers, as women, negotiate with divided loyalties and doubled consciousnesses, both within and without a social and cultural agreement" (Duplessis 40). The tendency to look at certain behaviours and actions as being typical to a particular gender resulted in women writers being in a double bind—they were expected to limit their writings to those areas of which they had first-

hand experience (i.e. the domestic sphere) but in a rather clever distortion of reason, when they would stick to conventionally 'feminine' topics, they were accused of being self-serving and parochial. As the prolific author Margaret Atwood had said "when a man writes about things like doing the dishes, it's realism; when a woman does, it's an unfortunate feminine genetic limitation" (Nischik 176). To their nineteenth-century peers, women writers were women before and writers later. A woman writer had to often resort to using a male *nom de plume* if they wished to be assessed solely for the uniqueness of their writing and not for writing well only when compared to the women writers of her time. The awareness that their literary brilliance would be neglected, owing to the many stereotypes that are attached to their gender, served as a perpetual source of vexation to women writers.

Women writers had a strong role to play in undoing these implications. In fact, the uptake of women's writing as a distinctive literary culture, since the last few decades, has been manifold. This trend has given rise to a whole set of literary studies which specifically cater to women's texts. However, there are certain critics who oppose the employment of the term 'women's writing' stating that it privileges an author's gender over her literary productions, almost suggesting that the privilege is a compensation for the wrongs they have suffered. Nevertheless, traditionally marginalized by men, women, in their capacity as writers, have challenged not only the conventional structures of power and dominance, but also the notions of what comprises literature. Their employment of unconventional literary modes, narrative techniques, diction and style has led to the creation of the separate genre of 'women's writing' that occupies a unique position when compared to men's writings. The written word inevitably then, became a means to empower women. One of the most popular themes of women's writing is its avowal to express and value women's own views about themselves as well as the world around them. Over the years, women's writing has bravely progressed towards an exploration of a woman's identity. In the women writers' refutation of a masculine literary tradition, they have steadily moved towards a literature that is anchored within the 'inner space,' and 'a room of one's own' was a significant symbol of the same.

1.3.1 Women's Writing: Locating the Genre

If we examine the major writers of nineteenth century England, we see that a host of women writers like Mary Shelley, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Kate Chopin, Elizabeth Gaskell, Emily Brontë and Maria Edgeworth, among others have written works which were groundbreaking for the age in which they were written. These works, for the past few decades, are being looked at as presaging the issues and themes of latter-day feminist enquiry. Even more revolutionary were the works of the American novelists of about the same time such as Louisa May Allcot, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Rebecca Harding Davis and Winifred Holtby. In their seminal study on nineteenth century women novelists, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar state that the major thematic concern of the nineteenth century was "the woman's quest for self-definition" (76).

At the turn of the twentieth century, women writers who wrote novels and prose pieces adopted new literary approaches and experimented with narrative techniques and styles. Disjointed, non-linear narratives marked by **analepsis**

and **prolepsis**, explicitly addressed those issues which were earlier swept under the carpet such as women's sexual desires, sexual violence, same-sex desire and the woman's psychology. Writers began to explore how unfulfilling the traditional roles of a daughter, wife and mother can be and how romantic engagements and marriage cannot be a woman's only dream. According to Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, modern women writers have been "especially interested in the woman alone. The lovers and husbands of their heroines clearly play a secondary role, not in the trivialized mode of narcissistic fantasies or underdeveloped characters (to the contrary, these men are finely delineated) but as particular figures among many in the difficult lives of struggling women" (272). Women poets of the time, like their prosodic counterparts, also embraced a new literary mode, charging their works with unique stylistic and structural characteristics, using the poem's physical structure as a means to challenge the traditional literary forms. Poets like Carol Rumens and Anna Wickham in England and Marianne Moore and Hilda Doolittle in America have posed a veritable challenge to mainstream literary traditions. Even so, they were treading on thin ice here because while writing in as distinct a manner as they could, they also had to carefully avoid being 'personal' rather than universal because they had to rely on mainstream literary circles for getting published and being held in esteem. However, as the times progressed, women writers, who were financially independent, started their own printing presses, journals and magazines.

The twentieth century also witnessed a massive output of African-American literature. African-American writers' texts were characterized by different issues than those of the White writers of the period. Authors like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, and Zora Neale Hurston produced works that focussed on issues of racial injustice, rigid standards of beauty, desire, motherhood, interpersonal relationships, misogyny, gender roles, violence, incest, community and society and God. These stalwarts of Black women's writing inspired a whole generation of young novelists such as Toni Cade Bambara and Gloria Naylor. Black Feminism insisted on the need to include the analytical category of race in feminist arguments. Thinkers like Patricia Hill Collins, Hortense Spillers and Hazel Carby were the pioneers of Black feminist thought. Postcolonial feminism, which emerged soon after, went a step forward and extended the concerns of Black feminists to the issues faced by the Chicano and Asian American women as well as the women of other cultures and nations.

Activity 3: Women writers in the nineteenth century often resorted to using pseudonyms or anonymity to avoid the label of a "woman writer" and to have a wider readership. Do you think the emergence of Women's Writing as a distinct genre hinders its reception in the zone of 'mainstream' literature and renders women's writings as belonging to the 'other'?

1.3.2 Perspectives in Feminist Thought

Since the 1970s and 1980s there has been seen a surge of critical works that analyze women's writings in terms of the growing body of feminist thought. French feminism, in particular, which evolved during the 1970s, with the works of Julia Kristeva, Helene Cixous, and Luce Irigaray, has extensively explored female subjectivity. Drawing upon psychoanalysis, Cixous challenged the tendency towards '**phallogocentrism**' in literature and instead suggested how

the only way forward was to overthrow the hierarchies of language prevalent in an androcentric society. She conceptualized men and women as A and B, or as independent entities, rather than as A and A-. Women, would no longer be the 'other' of men. Kristeva, likewise, suggested that since women could not become an active part of the 'symbolic order', their writings expressed themselves in the form of poetic language which she referred to as 'genotexts' (McCance 148), for they evade the norms of language. The realization that language is an instrument of oppression in the hands of patriarchy was one of the major developments in feminist thought in the 1980s.

Language has been credited by many feminists as possessing a power which allows it to control social relations in ways we are not privy to, disguising patriarchal ideologies in misleading rhetoric. Dale Spender in her work *Man Made Language* meditated at length on how unlike the declarative and assertive manner of men's writing, women's writing was almost always deferential and apologetic in its tone. Since then, language has been credited by many feminists as possessing a power which allows it to control social relations in ways we are not privy to. Spender goes on to also highlight how the connotations of masculine forms of words tend to be more positive when compared with their feminine counterparts and she states the example of the master-mistress word pair to emphasize the same. (Kate McKluskie 51)

With language inevitably skewed in the favour of men, the obvious task before women writers was to develop a language that was "their own". Writers of the last three decades of the twentieth century like Jeanette Winterson, Angela Carter, Fay Weldon and Kathy Acker, among others, reflect what Helene Cixous described as the "écriture féminine" in *The Laugh of the Medusa*. Their writings reflect a female consciousness which bring into being styles, themes, diction and tropes intrinsically distinct from male writers. Use of mystic language, puns, word play, and even visual alterations such as hyphens and parentheses became common. Their characters were more fluid and difficult to categorize. Jeanette Winterson, for example, created characters marked by a certain gender fluidity; Angela Carter tried to subvert patriarchy through the use of magical realism and through showing absent father figures and focussing on mother-daughter relationships. In fact, the emphasis on gender fluidity in the works of these writers and critics set the stage for the gender-queer theories of the twenty-first century.

Activity 4: Can you think of some other ways of using language, employed by women writers, to portray the oppression and trauma of women characters?

Another seminal work of the 1970s was *A Literature of Their Own* by Elaine Showalter. Showalter effectively divided the literary culture of the feminist movement into three phases, that is, the feminine, the feminist, and the female apart from charting the repetitive issues, tropes, symbols and style in women's writing. She also coined the term 'gynocriticism' to underline the employment of a feminist framework for the analysis of women's writing. Certain other works like Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* have influenced literature written by women across the world. The task of feminist literary criticism is then to call

into question the legitimacy of masculine literary aesthetics and values that have been assimilated by both male and female writers. In the words of Annette Kolodny's, it pays "attentiveness to the ways in which primarily male structures of power are inscribed (or encoded) within our literary inheritance: the consequences of that encoding for women—as characters, as readers, and as writers" (Cho 19) Most feminists would agree with the fact that literature serves as an important instrument for the perpetuation of unequal power relations in a society. By popularizing and reinforcing stereotypical portraits of women which usually fall into two categories—that of the angelic mother and the predatory seductress— literary texts naturalize these roles making them acceptable and worthy for girls who are exposed to such texts.

Activity 5: Can you trace some examples of the portrayal of the power of women and the mechanisms for 'controlling' them?

Some of the most incisive criticism of feminists has been directed at the way the female body is perceived, specifically at the notions of what an ideal 'feminine' body should look like, what are fitting feminine behaviours which the body must be trained to practice and also at her reproductive biology. In fact, it is the repeated performance of certain roles prescribed by a culture-specific script that makes a body gendered— an idea explored at length by Judith Butler. Consequently, a lot of research has been done by feminist thinkers in the field of the 'ethics of **embodiment**'. Failure to embody a certain gender, class, race or other social constructs is thus seen in most cases as a transgression which ultimately leads to them being marked for oppression and/or ostracism. One such philosopher, Gail Weiss points to specific feminist philosophers, critical race scholars, and disability theorists who ... illustrate, and ultimately combat, the insidious ways in which sexism, racism, and "compulsory able-bodiedness" (McRuer 2006), impoverish the lived experience of both oppressors and the oppressed, largely by predetermining the meaning of their bodily interactions in accordance with institutionalized cultural expectations and norms. (77)

1.4 WOMEN'S WRITING: THE INDIAN CONTEXT

With cultural norms becoming an important concern within feminist enquiry, the need for feminist and cultural theories, that could cater to the needs of specific groups of women (intersectional feminism) such as Blacks, Indians, lower-class women etc., was deeply felt. To steer clear of essentialism, and of the oversimplification of the experiences of women, became the major focus. The influence of Western feminist philosophy has been unmissable in the way Indian feminism has taken shape but the critical theories of the first-world countries are absolutely divorced from the circumstances of women who are operating at the grassroots. The whole idea behind 'feminism without borders' is to widen the scope of feminism and to not privilege feminist theories about and by White, middle class women. It thus emphasizes on the need to maintain cultural-specificity when talking about women's experiences.

To state an example, in nineteenth century Britain and America, the problems addressed by feminists included the right to vote, to be free from wearing corsets, to be allowed to hold meaningful occupations outside of the home etc. At about

the same time in India, feminism encompassed such causes as the abolition of the practice of sati, child marriage, female infanticide, restrictions on female education, inheritance laws, etc. Even then, the reformatory efforts were largely limited to upper class, and mostly Brahminical women. It was only later that issues like women's health, domestic abuse, wage legislation, the rights of the tribal and the Dalit women were acknowledged. Such wide-spread disparity in the issues being addressed speaks volumes about the need for culture-specific feminism and women's writing. Hence, the syllabus of this paper has been designed in a manner that takes into account the various perspectives of women's writing to highlight the richness and diversity of women's voices across temporal and spatial boundaries. It brings together a spectrum of texts by and about women.

The world of literature in the Indian subcontinent was for long marked by an overpowering presence of male writers with women appearing on the scene late, and garnering popularity and critical acclaim even later. When observed under a feminist stance, the trope of having a voice and being listened to generally serves as a symbol of agency, a trait which has originally been understood as a masculine attribute. Most contemporary Indian women writers have emphasized on the woman as an individual in her own stead, attempting to give their women characters the freedom of self-definition, or in some cases, self-redefinition.

In the latter half of the twentieth century writers like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sahgal, Githa Hariharan, among others, became popular for exploring middle class women's quest for fulfilment. But there were authors like Ismat Chughtai, Amrita Pritam, Krishna Sobti, Gaura Pant, Rashid Jahan who had dealt with women's issues with unconventionality and rigour in pre-Independent India as well. The Bhakti tradition has also been an inalienable strand of India's religious and literary tapestry and the writings of women Bhakti poets like Akka Mahadevi, Andal, Jana Bai, Mira Bai, Lal Ded, and Bahina Bai can be seen as the earliest manifestations of autonomy and liberty in the face of the arbitrary and unbridled religious authority of the high-caste Brahmin male.

Active resistance, as opposed to passively accepting oppression, has become one of the major hallmarks of modern Indian women's writing. They have reiterated through their works the importance of bringing 'women' into the category of 'human'. Authors like Mahasweta Devi and Arundhati Roy have managed to bridge the gap between activism and the academy and have employed their works of fiction to voice their concerns about marginalized communities such as women, Dalits, transgenders, tribals and have also levelled their strident criticism against bureaucrats, policy makers, police officers and upper caste men.

Modern-day critic-writers like Nivedita Menon and Namita Gokhale have dealt with other issues such as the threat that caste politics pose to women empowerment, sexual harassment in the workplace, politicization within households, intersectionality and queer identities. Activist-writers like Laxmi Narayan Tripathi (the first transgender to represent his/her community at the United Nations Organization) and Aka Revathi (the first transgender person to write an autobiography) have also contributed to the amelioration of the circumstances and status of gender-queer persons in India. However, queer theory emerged in the West in the 1990s and most of what is identified as queer theory

in India today is an interpretation of the views of Western theorists rather than it being a culture-specific framework.

Feminism in India has come a long way with the setting up of centres of research devoted specially to women, women's organizations, NGOs fighting domestic violence and child abuse, and the pioneering of women's journals such as *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* and *ANTYAJAA*. Critics and scholars like Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan, Susie Tharu, Kumkum Sangari, K. Lalita, Nira Yuval-Davis and Chandra Mohanty have published politically informed and nuanced works of feminist enquiry rooted in the Indian context. Nonetheless, many critics are of the opinion that feminism in India still has a long way to go especially with respect to the intertwined areas of criticism and interpretation.

In India, the idea of the nation and the home surfaces time and again when examining issues related to gender. Critics like Partha Chatterjee and Sudipta Kaviraj have emphasized on how the "inside" was marked as the domain of women—they were responsible for maintaining the home's purity and sanctity. The "outside", on the other hand, was the man's domain and a part of their task was to shield the "inside" from the corrupting influences of the "outside", especially during the colonial regime. Likewise, the practice of looking at the nation as being synonymous with a mother figure has been a source of debate among feminist critics. Many of them have argued that it allows the man to control the woman and the country under the guise of shielding her/it from harm.

Further, even if the nation state promises certain rights to women, these rights are in conflict with the personal laws of their community and the latter often take precedence over the former. Gayatri Spivak used the term "asceticism" (Rassendren 22) in elucidating the manner in which the men of the house tried to exert as much control within the house by regulating female desire. This ascetic self-control was supposed to perpetuate a certain ideal of womanhood embodied by such mythical figures as Sita and Savitri. Nira Yuval-Davis has also suggested that "women are constructed as the symbolic bearers of the community's identity and honour, both personally and collectively" (45). Consequently any moral lapse on their part is treated more harshly. This centrality of the family and the community gives rise to an important challenge to Indian feminism—autonomy and liberty for women in India needs to be established in a manner that does not alienate them from their family, community and culture. Modern feminists have also tried to engage with issues related to sex work. While many consider it as an extension of patriarchy's crimes against women and their tendency to relegate women to the status of a mere object, others have suggested that sex work should not be treated differently than any other profession and should be seen as what it is — work. Interestingly, since these women never make it to mainstream feminism, gender violence against these women is often overlooked.

Activity 6: The collectivistic community standards in India present layers of restrictions to women writers for a true expression of their reality. Discuss.

1.5 LET US SUM UP

- Women's writing across the world and in India has, since the beginning, also seen the trend of autobiographical and semi-autobiographical

writing. This trend garnered greater vogue in the latter half of the twentieth century when ‘authentic realist’ feminist reading practices stressed on the importance of knowing about the experiences of other women through literature which would feed into their understanding of their own lives. Such intellectual engagements with the lives of other women helped women readers make sense of their own lives.

- By examining women as recipients of literary texts, we can analyze how they employ these texts to challenge the narratives imposed on them by the society. Feminist theories, therefore, concern themselves with not only women as writers or producers of texts but also as readers and consumers. Like their Western counterpart, autobiographical writings by women in India have been endowed with increasing critical and scholarly attention.
- Feminism in today’s times is a sprawling, manifold academic and political concept. It insists on being change-oriented rather than being simply a theoretical framework devoid of practical applications. Feminists argue against the creation of a distinct academic field and instead insist on integration with other fields of knowledge. To ensure this, the inclusion of feminist values in the field of research is seen as an important manoeuvre.
- The ultimate aim is to create the space and opportunity to unravel the pervasive inequality present in the society, and suggest ways of dealing with the same. Most critical works have, therefore, tried to engage with ‘materiality’ of texts, that is, with the works’ non-fictional aspects or the works’ grounding in reality.
- Latter-day materialists have actually suggested that materiality brings to the fore ‘things that matter’. Over the years, feminism has moved from its limited scope to encompass a more critical understanding of women’s experience.
- Not only are there different types of feminisms (Liberal, Marxist, Social, Ecological, Cyber etc.) but the very meaning of the term ‘feminism’ is open to debate and negotiation. From Simone de Beauvoir’s celebrated epithet “one is not born, but becomes, a woman”, to notions of gender performativity, to the acknowledgement given to subversive and ‘queer’ gender identities, feminism and gender studies have definitely come a long way and have always been in a state of flux.
- Over the last few years, a growing body of work has explored the concept of ‘doing gender’, that is, exploring how one’s gender is enacted in social situations and interactions. Theorists today have also started analyzing how body movements and gestures have also come to be recognized in terms of an abiding gendered self. Suggestions have also been made with regard to looking at feminism not as a movement about women but about how performativity discourses prevalent in a society produce the categories of man/woman and masculine/feminine.
- The largely **heteronormative** codes that have been followed for long preclude the possibility of reflecting on the experiences of certain

individuals (gays, lesbians, bisexuals, pansexuals, asexuals etc.) In the past few years, feminists have engaged with LGBTQ+ identities in their works and have examined the part that literature can play in understanding how diverse sexual relationships play out.

- Modern protagonists at once belong everywhere and nowhere. A perpetual jostling for turf is evident in most works. In disproving the myth of the heteronormative society, they bring to light a whole gamut of diverse sexual manifestations.
- Gender, therefore, still remains a topic of much contention and debate. Apart from the concerns of LGBTQ+ identities, feminists have also tried to incorporate other oppositional movements in their fight for gender equality, thereby widening their outreach. They have linked feminist movements to anti-racist, anti-casteist, anti-classist, environmentalist, and other movements.
- Thus, feminism has come to subsume many areas of knowledge and experience. In the words of Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, “The cogency of female literary culture as a whole lies in the multiplicity of its voices and its insistence upon the collective foundation of individual consciousness” (270)

1.6 AIDS TO ACTIVITIES

- Activity 1** : For example, such retellings of mythological characters as *The Penelopiad* by Margaret Atwood and *Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi* by Pratibha Ray
- Activity 2** : The emergence and relevance of the fourth wave of feminism in the era of internet and technology for addressing problems such as body-shaming, rape-threats, and sexual harassment, among others
- Activity 3** : The problem of stereotypes and generalizations with regard to women writers, their writing styles, etc.
- Activity 4** : For instance, fragmented narration and the use of silence in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* to represent racial injustice and gendered oppression
- Activity 5** : Witch-hunts/trials, hysteria, madness, turning/ pitting women against women, etc.
- Activity 6** : Indian women writers through a history of restrictions and oppression: family-honour, rules and norms of the social space/ public domain, threats and trolling in cyberspace

1.7 GLOSSARY

- **Analepsis** - a literary device, where a past event is narrated at a chronologically later point of time.

- **Androgynous** - having both masculine and feminine qualities
- **Canons** - Literary works considered to be the most important, influential and of the highest merit.
- **Chattel Marriage** - A form of marriage where the wife becomes a possession of her husband, devoid of all her rights and property which too then belong to the husband.
- **Embodiment** - concrete representation of an abstract idea; here, according to the normative and socially constructed ideas of categories like gender and race.
- **Gender** - Social manifestation of sex as a social and cultural identity.
- **Heteronormative** - the concept of the gender binary and heterosexual relationships as the only normal.
- **Phallogocentrism** - A term used in Critical Theory to refer to the privileging of the masculine in understanding meaning.
- **Prolepsis** - a literary device, where a future event is narrated to have occurred already before its turn.
- **Sex** - usually assigned at birth, based on the biological and anatomical characteristics of a person.
- **Suffragette Movement** - 19th and early 20th century movement demanding women's right to vote in elections in the West.

1.8 UNIT-END QUESTIONS

1. Examine the categorization of Women's Writing as a distinct literary area. How is it approached in two ways: as a space for encouraging writing, representation, and criticism by women; and, as a means of rendering them the 'other', outside the zone of 'mainstream' literature?
2. What has the public response to Women's Writing been like: from ignorance and ostracization to trolling?
3. How do you see the rise of the new 'New Woman'?
4. Comment on the role of Women's Writing in representing the Nation.

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UNIT 2 MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT'S *A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN: WITH STRICTURES ON POLITICAL AND MORAL SUBJECTS*

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Life and Works of Mary Wollstonecraft
 - 2.2.1 Her Literary Career
- 2.3 Summary
- 2.4 Critical Analysis I
 - 2.4.1 Why was *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* Written?
 - 2.4.2 Critical Assessment
- 2.5 Critical Analysis II
 - 2.5.1 Inadequate Education System
 - 2.5.2 Marriage and Beauty
 - 2.5.3 Reason and Rationality
- 2.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.7 Answers to Check Your Progress: Possible Answers
- 2.8 Suggested Readings

2.0 OBJECTIVES

After studying this unit, you should be able to:

- be acquainted with the life and works, and literary career of Mary Wollstonecraft
- develop a critical understanding and thematic considerations of Mary Wollstonecraft's essay *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Published in 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is an essay which deals with the rights of humankind, particularly of women. Of all her writings *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is known as her best work given the fact that in this essay, she sets out to establish her distinct voice in the form of a postulation that all things were not equal, particularly a woman's place in society when compared to that of a man's. She emphatically argues that women are not naturally inferior to men but appear to be as such only due to lack of education. Imagining a social order fundamentally based on reason, she suggests that both men and women should be treated as rational beings (Wollstonecraft, 1792). Sulkin (Sulkin, 1990), argues that the essay was her stand against the injustices not only of women, although that is the major thrust, but also of men.

She wished to become through her writing the “voice” that would generate participation of the natural rights of mankind. Her essay thus creates an alternative discursive opening for women voices by questioning and displacing the locations of power within discursive spaces. This essay emerges discursively as a powerful visible form of protest literature, becoming an entry point to explore the emancipatory potential of dialogue.

2.2 LIFE AND WORKS OF MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

William Godwin, her husband, who wrote a Memoir of her life in 1798, described her in the following words: “Lovely in her person, and in the best and most engaging sense feminine in her manners”. Her contemporary noted Wollstonecraft’s provocative presence—thin, medium height, brown hair, haunting brown eyes, and a soft voice. Jim Powell writes that she was ‘without being a dazzling beauty, ... of a charming grace’. Jim Powell further adds that her face, so full of expression, presented a style of beauty beyond that of merely regular features. There was enchantment in her glance, her voice, and her movements. (Jim Powell, 1996) Writer, teacher and champion of Women’s rights, Mary Wollstonecraft was born in a struggling family in April 1759 in London. She was the second child and eldest daughter of Elizabeth Dixon, who hailed from Bally Shannon, Ireland. Mary’s father, Edward John Wollstonecraft, was a handkerchief weaver. The family moved seven times in ten years as their finances deteriorated. Her father Edward drank heavily, and Mary often had to protect her mother from his violent outbursts. She had rocky relations with her siblings. She did not have access to formal schooling, which was limited, but she got tremendous help from one of her friends in Hoxton, outside London, who had a respectable library, and Mary used to spend a considerable time exploring it. Through these friends, she met Fanny Blood, two years older and skilled at sewing, drawing, watercolors, and the piano. She inspired Mary to take an initiative in cultivating her mind. (Jim Powell, 1996)

Owing to her family financial problems, Mary resolved to somehow make her own way. At 19, she got a job as live in helper for a wealthy widow who proved to be a difficult taskmaster. In 1781, Mary tried and failed to establish a school at Islington, North London. Mary, with the help of Fanny, and Mary’s sisters, Eliza and Everina, started a school nearby at Newington Green. However, that school too after initial success, failed. She then worked as a governess for an Irish family and saw firsthand the idleness of landed aristocrats. These discouraging experiences were compounded by the death of Fanny Blood from tuberculosis. After Mary’s mother died in 1782, she—not her oldest brother—assumed primary responsibility for taking care of her volatile father. (Jim Powell, 1996)

As far as her personal life is concerned, she became infatuated with the eccentric genius Henry Fuseli, but he was married and brushed her off after extended flirtation. While still in France, she fell in love with an American adventurer named Gilbert Imlay, who was always looking for a scheme to strike it rich. They had a daughter, Fanny, but he lost interest in both of them and walked out. Wollstonecraft attempted suicide twice. While recovering from despair

over Imlay, she took a three month break with Fanny in Scandinavia and produced one of her most poignant works, *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark*. The letters were addressed to the unnamed American father of her child. They provide a travelogue laced with commentary on politics, philosophy, and her personal life. After witnessing the French Terror, she tempered her hopes for social change. Throughout the book, Wollstonecraft struggled to cope with her grief about Imlay, and she conveyed an immediacy and tenderness that touches the heart. William Godwin said that if ever there was a book calculated to make a man in love with its author, this appears to me to be the book.

Wollstonecraft decided to pursue her acquaintance with Godwin. He had a large head, deep set eyes, and a thin voice. "He seems to have had some charm which his enemies could not detect, or his friends define, but which had a real influence on those who attained his close friendship," reported Godwin biographer George Woodcock. Like Wollstonecraft, he had started a school, but his ideas were too radical, and the effort failed. His literary career had begun with a dull political biography, a book of sermons and some potboiler novels. Then London publisher George Robinson offered to pay Godwin enough of an advance that he could work out his philosophy.

Critics are of the view that at the time Wollstonecraft called, Godwin was a 42 year old bachelor courting Amelia Alderson, a doctor's daughter. But he was intrigued with Wollstonecraft, despite his initial impression that she talked too much. He invited her to a dinner party the following week. Included were James Mackintosh and Dr. Samuel Parr, both of whom had written rebuttals to Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. After Alderson rejected Godwin, he became more responsive to Wollstonecraft, and her passion overwhelmed him. "It was friendship melting into love," he recalled. But Wollstonecraft was haunted by fear of another betrayal. Godwin reassured her that he longed for a relationship between equals. Her passion surged again. "It is a sublime tranquility," she wrote him, "I have felt it in your arms." By December, she was pregnant. Both Wollstonecraft and Godwin had criticized marriage as a vehicle for exploitation, but they tied the knot on March 29, 1797. She rejoiced that she had found true love at last.

It is said that she went into labor during the early morning of Wednesday, August 30, 1797. She was attended by one Mrs. Blenkinsop, an experienced midwife. After 11 o'clock that night, a daughter was born—Mary, who grew up to be Mary Shelley, author of *Frankenstein*. For a while, it appeared things were fine, but three hours later, Mrs. Blenkinsop notified Godwin that the placenta still hadn't come out of the womb. The longer the placenta remained, the greater the risk of infection. Godwin called a Dr. Poignand who succeeded in removing much of the placenta. Wollstonecraft reported that the procedure was the most excruciatingly painful experience of her life. That Sunday, she began suffering chills, an ominous sign of infection. Doctors offered wine to help ease the pain and tried other measures to stimulate her body to eject the remains of the placenta. Wollstonecraft continued to decline. She died Sunday morning, September 10, 1797. Godwin was so overcome that he didn't attend the funeral, held at St. Pancras church where they had been married just five months before. She was buried in the churchyard.

Check Your Progress I

Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*

1. Write a short note on the life and works of Mary Wollstonecraft.

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2.2.1 Her Literary Career

Wollstonecraft's literary career began with the publication of a pamphlet. Hewlett encouraged Wollstonecraft to write a pamphlet on education and submit it to Joseph Johnson, the radical publisher and bookseller with a shop at St. Paul's Churchyard. He was known as a visionary entrepreneur who backed a number of unknowns including the poet printmaker William Blake. Johnson published works by Joseph Priestley and poets William Cowper and William Wordsworth, too. He distributed materials for Unitarians.

Literary critics are of the view that most of Wollstonecraft's early productions are about education. She published an anthology of literary extracts "for the improvement of young women", which was entitled *The Female Reader* and she translated two children's works, Maria Geertruida van de Werken de Cambon's *Young Grandison* and Christian Gotthilf Salzmann's *Elements of Morality*. She deals with the same topic in her own writings. In her books entitled *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787) and her children's book *Original Stories from Real Life* (1788), she promotes the idea of educating children into the emerging middle-class ethos: self-discipline, honesty, frugality, and social contentment. Moreover, both these books also lay emphasis on the importance of teaching children to reason, revealing Wollstonecraft's intellectual debt to the educational views of seventeenth-century philosopher John Locke. However, the prominence she affords religious faith and innate feelings, which very distinctly distinguishes her work from his, links it to the discourse of sensibility popular at the end of the eighteenth century. It is a fact that both texts also advocate the education of women, a controversial topic at the time and one which she would return to throughout her career, most notably in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Wollstonecraft maintains that well-educated women will be good wives and mothers and ultimately contribute positively to the nation.

Some of her prominent works include *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters: With Reflections on Female Conduct, in the More Important Duties of Life*. London: Joseph Johnson, 1787; *Mary: A Fiction*. London: Joseph Johnson, 1788; *Original Stories from Real Life: With Conversations Calculated to Regulate the Affections and Form the Mind to Truth and Goodness*. London: Joseph Johnson, 1788; *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, in a Letter to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke. London: Joseph Johnson, 1790; *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman with Strictures on Moral and Political Subjects*. London: Joseph Johnson,

1792; *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*. London: Joseph Johnson, 1796.

Mary Wollstonecraft's biographer Claire Tomalin maintains that Mary was homeless again, without a job or a reference; she had nothing to live on, and she was in debt to several people. She had no marriage prospects. She was 28, with a face that looked as though it had settled permanently into lines of severity and depression around the fierce eyes ... her most remarkable trait was still that she had refused to learn the techniques whereby women in her situation usually attempted to make life tolerable for themselves: flattery, docility, resignation to the will of man, or God, or their social superiors, or all three. Johnson explained it to Wollstonecraft that she had talent and could succeed if she worked hard. He published her pamphlet in 1786 as *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters, with Reflections on Female Conduct, in the More Important Duties of Life*. Sales were negligible, but the work launched Wollstonecraft's literary career. She sent her author's fee to the impoverished Blood family and redoubled her efforts. It is believed that by 1788, Johnson offered her steady work. She translated books from French and German into English. She served as an assistant editor and writer for his new journal, *The Analytical Review*. She contributed to it until her death, perhaps as many as 200 articles on fiction, education, sermons, travelogues, and children's books. Johnson was a good man. It was he who helped Wollstonecraft find lodgings. It was he who advanced her money when needed. And it was he who dealt with her creditors, helping her cope with her father's chaotic situation.

Check Your Progress II

1. Write 50 words about the literary career of Mary Wollstonecraft.

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2.3 SUMMARY

In this essay Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–97) argues against both Burke and Rousseau, defending the notion of natural rights, particularly rights for women, such as equal education. She insisted that women could not become virtuous, even as mothers, unless they won the right to participate in economic and political life on an equal basis with men. Although she did not specifically demand the right to vote for women, her emphasis on women's rights made her an object of ridicule for some, heroism for others. Contending for the rights of woman, her main argument is built on the simple principle that if she is not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of

knowledge and virtue; for truth must be common to all, or it will be inefficacious with respect to its influence on general practice. She raises a few questions such as: how can woman be expected to co-operate unless she knows why she ought to be virtuous, unless freedom strengthens her reason till she comprehends her duty, and sees in what manner it is connected with her real good? If children are to be educated to understand the true principle of patriotism, their mother must be a patriot; and the love of mankind, from which an orderly strain of virtues spring, can only be produced by considering the moral and civil interest of mankind; but the education and situation of woman, at present, shuts her out from such investigations. (Wollstonecraft, 1792)

In this work she has produced many arguments, which to her were conclusive, to prove that the prevailing notion respecting a sexual character was subversive of morality, and she has contended that to render the human body and mind more perfect, chastity must more universally prevail, and that chastity will never be respected in the male world till the person of a woman is not, as it were, idolized, when little virtue or sense embellish it with the grand traces of mental beauty, or the interesting simplicity of affection.

2.4 CRITICAL ANALYSIS I

Now let us go on to a critical analysis of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

2.4.1 Why was *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* Written?

On September 10, 1791, Talleyrand, former Bishop of Autun, advocated government schools which would end at eighth grade for girls but continue for boys. This made clear to Wollstonecraft that despite all the talk about equal rights, the French Revolution wasn't intended to help women much. As a reply to Talleyrand's document on education, she began planning her most famous work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. She wrote for more than three months and was finished on January 3, 1792. Johnson published it in three volumes.

2.4.2 Critical Assessment

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman is, more often than not, regarded as a purely political treatise. However, like Plato's *Republic* and Rousseau's *Emile*, it can be seen as both a political and an educational treatise. It is, above all, a celebration of the rationality of women. It constitutes an attack on the view of female education put forward by Talleyrand, former Bishop of Autun, Rousseau and countless others who regarded women as weak and artificial and not capable of reasoning effectively. Mary Wollstonecraft rejected the education in dependency that Rousseau advocated for them in *Emile*.

For Mary Wollstonecraft, rationality or reason formed the basis of our human rights as she argues that it was our ability to grasp the truth and, therefore, acquire knowledge of right and wrong that separated us, as human beings, from the animal world. She maintains that through the exercise of reason we became moral and political agents. This worldview was acknowledged by all progressive thinkers of the time. However, it was essentially a man's world, and the work of Rousseau was typical of this. What Mary Wollstonecraft did was to extend the basic ideas

of Enlightenment philosophy to women and Rousseau's educational ideas of how to educate boys to girls.

She develops an exclusive discourse arguing against the assumption that women were not rational creatures and were simply slaves to their passions. Mary Wollstonecraft argued that it was up to those who thought like this to prove it. She described the process by which parents brought their daughters up to be docile and domesticated. She maintained that if girls were encouraged from an early age to develop their minds, it would be seen that they were rational creatures and there was no reason whatsoever for them not to be given the same opportunities as boys with regard to education and training. Women could enter the professions and have careers just the same as men. In proposing the same type of education for girls as that proposed for boys, Mary Wollstonecraft also went a step further and proposed that they be educated together which was even more radical than anything proposed before. The idea of co-educational schooling was simply regarded as nonsense by many educational thinkers of the time. It was fashionable to contend that if women were educated and not docile creatures, they would lose any power they had over their husbands. Mary Wollstonecraft was furious about this and maintained that 'This is the very point I aim at. I do not wish them to have power over men but over themselves'. (Burke, 2004).

Wollstonecraft believed education could be the salvation of women. She asserts that the exercise of their understanding is necessary, there is no other foundation for independence of character. She strongly is of the view that they must bow only to the authority of reason, instead of being the modest slaves of opinion. She insisted women should be taught serious subjects like reading, writing, arithmetic, botany, natural history, and moral philosophy. She recommended vigorous physical exercise to help stimulate the mind. Mary had a nife faith that the same governments which restricted women could inexplicably be trusted to run schools uplifting women. Twentieth century government schools have been catastrophes for women as well as men, graduating large numbers at high cost without the most fundamental skills.

That men prefer emotion and common sense for women over reason and common sense is well contested by Mary Wollstonecraft very emphatically in a critical manner, demonstrating the dominance of patriarchal mindset. She demonstrates how men have created a separate realm for women, particularly girls, who are inculcated such a culture where they are taught to be concerned with persons only not virtue. This practice creates such a trend which becomes very problematic for mothers who either don't care for their children or are not able to mould their children's future in a positive direction. She argues that both husband and wife must treat each other like friends or companions then only their marriage would be a successful one.

Commenting about modesty, she claims that there is a huge difference between modesty and humility and both are not the same. Linking modesty with reason, she explains that those women who make use of their reason the most, are the most modest ones, and this can happen only when such women are strengthened in both their body and mind, making them reasonably strong. Further, Mary Wollstonecraft advocates for women's economic independence, expressing the demands for women's more active participation in the public sphere, asking them

to go for various other responsibilities on their shoulders so that they become good citizens and good mothers.

There is no denying the fact that with *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft emerged in a class by herself, going beyond her contemporaries who had written passionately about educating women, by postulating her own ideas for education reform, suggesting opening up of more public and private co-educational schools which would promote more democratic and more participatory educational structures. Finally, she concludes by claiming that women's weaknesses are not resulting from any natural deficiency but from their lower status in the society and inefficient education system being regulated by the patriarchal framework of thought and structure.

Check Your Progress III

1. Write a short critical assessment of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

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2.5 CRITICAL ANALYSIS II: THEMES IN *A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN*

2.5.1 Inadequate Education System

This essay's major concern is to present a strong critique of Talleyrand's document on education and female education model advanced by Rousseau and other contemporaries who considered women to be weak and artificial and not capable enough of reasoning effectively. It can be observed that Mary Wollstonecraft outrightly rejected the education in dependency model that Rousseau advocated for women in *Emile*. She was of an understanding that a woman is and should be intelligent in every manner.

Mary Wollstonecraft strongly argues that women of the eighteenth century were not considered the same as their male counterparts. This situation did not happen due to the weakness of the women but due to the inadequate system of education as women of the eighteenth century did not have full access to education. They were assumed to be essentially housewives meant to please their husbands. As we have already seen earlier how the roles of the women were circumscribed by the powerfully regulatory mechanism of patriarchal thoughts and women were in effect confined to domestic works only. Women were expected to be characteristically virtuous and submissive. Girls were taught to keep their beauty

intact by grooming themselves, maintaining their beauty and tenderness in order to woo their husbands. Their upbringing was done in such a way that they maintain their external beauty. These treatments of women demonstrated that women were not free in their minds, not having a very healthy mindset at all. Mary Wollstonecraft calls such nurturing as 'barren blooming' which was a product of a false system of education. She expresses her concern for women by stating that it was sad to learn that women of that period were only anxious to inspire their love whereas they should have had nobler ambitions and high spirits of a broad mindset.

She is of the view that women tend to stagnate due to lack of an adequate education system without which women would always remain to be immature, behaving like a child who even after marriage would not be able to take care of their household in a proper responsible manner. This would lead to women's infantilizing situation. She suggests that the only solution to this problem is giving women full and complete access to education, developing higher goals for women's education which would enlighten their minds, empowering them with rights.

2.5.2 Marriage and Beauty

Mary Wollstonecraft puts a lot of emphasis on the practice of marriage in her essay, rather criticizing it for the way it was being customized in the eighteenth-century society. She relates marriage and beauty together arguing that girls were brought up and taught to maintain their beauty intact so that they could be able to win suitors or husbands. Girls were nurtured with such principles in their lives which would eventually lead them to marrying immoral husbands because of their youthful passion.

Mary argues very strongly that women were taught to develop their weakness as virtue, using it as a power play to woo men, clearly giving an indication that it was going to make their lives a living hell. She asserts that women were moulded like this since childhood in order to make themselves more appealing to suitors. This kind of practice, she argues, was going to create a lifelong negative effect on the society as a whole and was going to lead to elevating gratification and romantic conquest over a relationship which should have been based on mutual respect. This clearly demonstrates the fact that the marriage of that time did not give any value to compatibility which happens to be the crucial factor for any marriage. Rather the marriage of that period was based on the concept of the transaction of a business. She is of the view that the inadequate education system is to be blamed for these which sets women up for the unhappiness of their marriages, making their lives vulnerable.

She suggests that women should learn to be the lifelong strong companions of their husbands to protect themselves from potentially weak, unhappy and even disastrous and unsuccessful marriages. Women should learn to strengthen their body and be mentally strong so that they become not only good wives but also very good contributors to the welfare of the society.

2.5.3 Reason and Rationality

For Mary Wollstonecraft, 'Reason' happens to be one of the key concerns. She believed that it was the reasoning power which formed the very basis of human

thoughts giving us an understanding to distinguish between what is right and what is wrong, making a human being a rational being, distinguishing him/her from an animal. Animals don't have reasoning power. Reason makes human beings to be progressive. That is the reason why Mary Wollstonecraft, again and again, advises women to use their reason. Moreover, Mary Wollstonecraft wanted to extend the basic ideas of Enlightenment philosophy to women. She argues that women need to develop their reasoning power very strongly if they want to have control over their emotions and also in order to become virtuous.

Mary Wollstonecraft points out that education and reasoning cannot be separated from each other. Education helps people to elevate themselves as human beings. Reason, on the other hand, helps human beings to elevate themselves over animals. Therefore, both entities are intricately related with each other, and both, consequently, are essential for the human being to be an independent or free or progressive entity. She brings in here the third entity which is virtue. She argues that it is virtue by which one individual elevates him/herself over other human beings. She further maintains that it is with the help of God-given reasoning power that human beings can attain virtue.

She feels very sorry to note that women are taught to rely on their feelings and sentiments rather than developing their reason. Wollstonecraft is laying emphasis on the mind rather than on the heart and she keeps motivating women that they should be using their minds in order to keep a balance between head and heart rather than wasting time and energy on pleasing their lovers or husbands. If they don't behave in this manner, then they won't be in a position to develop their mental faculty necessary for attaining higher virtues which would prove to be very detrimental for their moral development and will lead to an unhappy life.

She comes up with a proposal that to ensure equality, girls should be given the same intellectual education and the same mental training in reason and virtue that boys are given, and the understanding of the girls should be trained in order for the girls to regulate emotions through reason.

Check Your Progress IV

1. Write briefly the various themes in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

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2.6 LET US SUM UP

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman argues that women are not naturally inferior

to men but appear to be as such only due to lack of education. Imagining a social order fundamentally based on reason, she suggests that both men and women should be treated as rational beings. The essay was her stand against the injustices not only of women, although that is the major thrust, but also of men. She wished to become, through her writing, the “voice” that would generate participation of the natural rights of mankind. Her essay thus creates an alternative discursive opening for women voices by questioning and displacing the locations of power within discursive spaces. This essay emerges discursively as a powerful visible form of protest literature, becoming an entry point to explore the emancipatory potential of dialogue.

2.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

Check Your Progress I

Refer to the section 2.2

Check Your Progress II

Refer to the section 2.2.1

Check Your Progress III

Refer to the section 2.4.2

Check Your Progress IV

Refer to the section 2.5

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UNIT 3 A WOMAN'S RETELLING OF THE RAMA-TALE: THE CHANDRABATI RAMAYANA

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Chandrabati, the Writer
- 3.3 Excerpts from Essay by Nabaneeta Deb Sen
- 3.4 Analysis
- 3.5 Narrative Techniques
- 3.6 Insights
- 3.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.8 Aids to Activities
- 3.9 Glossary
- 3.10 Unit End Questions
- 3.11 References and Suggested Readings

3.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will help you to understand the Chandrabati *Ramayana* on the basis of our reading of the essay by Nabaneeta Deb Sen. You will discover that the *Ramayana* written by Valmiki and Tulsidas, which is generally considered the standard version of *Ramayana*, has been written and re-interpreted by different writers down the ages. As such, the story line and the characters are greatly altered. Chandrabati *Ramayana* will help you appreciate the *Ramayana* from Sita's perspective. It is an imaginative and unique adaptation of *Ramayana* where you will see that when women write, their style and focus is different from a man's, and also how personal relationships are more important for a woman compared to war, politics and the public sphere. Reading some excerpts from the essay by Nabaneeta Deb Sen on the Chandrabati *Ramayana* will enable you to understand how patriarchy and patriarchal structures eventually take over women's writings because of which the original structure of the Chandrabati *Ramayana* has been greatly altered.

Words in **bold** are explained in the Glossary

3.1 INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to separate religion from everyday life. Do you agree? All of us follow an unwritten code of conduct that has been passed down to us from one generation to another. Still, every community and each person has a different and distinctive approach to religion, and feels differently about their gods and goddesses. This is more so in a country like India which has a pluralistic society and social structures that are absolutely dissimilar. You can think of some very

basic beliefs and religious practices/rituals which are alternatives to mainstream approaches. The Ramlila is a socio-religious event in India where people from various walks of life and religious communities come together to enact and re-interpret incidents from *Ramayana*. It is through such enactments and gatherings that religion continuously evolves and avoids becoming stagnant. In India, we venerate religious icons whom we consider sacred as well as intimate members of our family. Here “religion is not something separate and apart from ordinary life. It is life... lived in the fuller awareness of its human quality and spiritual significance.”

Activity 1

Does gender affect our reading and interpretation of texts?

3.2 CHANDRABATI, THE WRITER

Most of us are not familiar with Chandrabati and so, a good starting point would be getting to know her. Chandrabati holds the honour of being the first ever woman to re-write the *Ramayana*. She was born to Dij-Banshidas Bhattacharya and Shulochona Das Bhattacharya in 1550 in the village of Patuyari, on the banks of the Fulesshori River in Kishoreganj, East Bengal. Her father was a prolific writer who composed the Manasa's **ballads**.

Chandrabati wrote during an age when no one could even begin to imagine that a woman could write and render religious texts in her own way and on her own initiative. It was indeed revolutionary. Chandrabati's life was quite extraordinary. What brought her to writing was disillusionment in love: she immersed herself in the written word which helped her survive her grief. She fell in love with her childhood friend, Jayananda whom she dreamt of marrying. However, Jayananda married someone else and this broke Chandrabati's heart. She decided to never marry, and devoted her life to serving Lord Shiva on the advice of her father. She re-wrote the *Ramayana* from Sita's point of view. However, Chandrabati's *Ramayana* could not be completed. In a dramatic twist of events, Jayananda realised his folly and returned to Chandrabati who refused to accept him. Rejected and repentant, Jayananda committed suicide by jumping into the River Fulesshori.

Chandrabati also ended her life by drowning in the same river. At the time of her death in 1600, she was fifty years old. We are indebted to this lady who faced odds in personal life and still gave us a rich legacy that continues to inspire many.

It is rather sad that such an intellectual and progressive woman like Chandrabati should be written off as a ballad writer, and her contribution as an outstanding epic writer should not be recognised by critics. In patriarchy, critics found it difficult to accommodate a woman-oriented adaptation of the *Ramayana*, which was more secular than martial and jingoistic. Till recent times, Chandrabati *Ramayana* remained a 'silenced text'. It is rather stimulating to re-visit this ignored text and see for ourselves how a woman thought that Sita felt, and how the social and emotional world would be if a woman became its central subject.

Activity 2

Why do you think the *Chandrabati Ramayana* is referred to as a ‘silenced text’?

3.3 EXCERPTS FROM ESSAY ‘A WOMAN’S RETELLING OF THE RAMA-TALE: NARRATIVE STRATEGIES EMPLOYED IN THE CHANDRABATI RAMAYANA’ BY NABANEETA DEB SEN

The author of this essay, Nabaneeta Deb Sen, writer, critic and academic, was a Professor at the Department of Comparative Literature in Jadavpur University. She has many books to her credit in a variety of genres: short stories, essays, travelogues, poetry, fiction, children’s literature and verse-plays. Even her most scholarly essays are remarkable for their charming and humorous prose. She is one of the most popular authors in Bengal today. Among several honours, she has received the Padma Shree (2000), the Sahitya Akademi Award, the Kabir Samman, the Rabindra Puraskar and the Sanskriti Award. She is a Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Vice President of the Indian National Comparative Literature Association. She was the Radhakrishnan Memorial Lecturer of Oxford in 1996-7.

Excerpt:

...(All) scholars agree that what is found as *Chandrabati Ramayana* is an incomplete text, an incomplete *Ramayana*. All the collectors, the editors and the historians of Bengal literature support the view that the whole of the Rama-tale is not to be found in it. It is only a fragment.

...*Chandrabati Ramayana*... is the Rama-story retold by a Bengali Hindu village woman, a woman who had known suffering, a woman who had the courage to choose the lonely intellectual life of a poet, in sixteenth century rural East Bengal.

Sukumar Sen, when he mentions the life of *Chandrabati* in his history of literature... says – after telling us about her unrequited love – ‘she remained a virgin all her life. This is the sum total of the ballad.’ This is not the sum total of the ballad. The ballad mentions that she wrote the *Ramayana* and worshipped Shiva for the rest of her life.

Are we to note this as a silencing **tactic**? It is no wonder that this text had been silenced by the urban literate male **mediators** in the role of literary historians...

In this unusual *Ramayana*, Rama himself is gently pushed back to a corner where he is hardly visible except in relation to Sita. The narrative pattern clearly and unmistakably follows the story line of Sita’s life and the tale as it stands is **unabashedly** a Sita-tale under the traditional **guise** of a Rama-tale. The only episodes of the *Ramayana* depicted here are the episodes of Sita’s life, beginning with the supernatural birth of Sita, going through her tales of woe, ‘Sita’s **Baromasi**’ (which mentions her childhood, her marriage, her life as an **abducted** woman), describing her pregnancy, exile and her entry into mother earth. In a *Ramayana* you would expect the ‘**janmalila**’ section to treat the birth of Rama... The supernatural birth scene is supposed to tell us about Rama’s birth and the

purpose of his appearance on earth to destroy the evil Ravana... 'According to rule, Rama's birth story should come first and Sita should come next.'

Chandrabati breaks the accepted pattern by beginning her epic with Sita's birth story... the first six long sections are devoted to describing the complex tale of conception and birth of Sita. Sita is born out of a sorrow – the blood of tortured **ascetics** and the death wish of a neglected Mandodari **mingle** to create a Sita and she comes to destroy Ravana and his **clan**. The evil Ravana, strengthened by the boon of Brahma, was **tyrannizing** all three worlds and collected the blood of the ascetics, in a box as a poison to destroy the immortality of gods... Mandodari felt neglected and heart broken. So she decided to take the poison that was strong enough to kill the deathless tribe. She took the poison... Instead of dying she gives birth. Sita is born in the form of an egg. **Soothsayers** in Lanka predict that this egg would produce a dangerous daughter who would cause the total destruction of the demon dynasty. Hearing that Ravana wants to destroy the egg... She manages to make him throw the egg into the ocean, protected in a golden **casket**. It flows across the Bay of Bengal and a very poor but honest fisherman, Madhab Jalia finds it. He brings it home to his very poor but honest wife, Sata, who has nothing to eat, nothing to wear and nothing to complain about. She performs various **auspicious** rituals and receives the egg reverentially.

Hence, Laksmi, the goddess hiding in the egg as Sita, showers her with riches. The poor fisherman becomes wealthy. In the meantime, his wife Sata gets a dream message that Laksmi wants her to deliver the egg to the wife of King Janak. She immediately follows the divine instructions. The only reward she wants from the queen is that the daughter when born, should be named Sita, after her own name Sata... So with the name of a poor fishwife, Sita was born out of an egg in Chandrabati's text, not found by the king while tilling the soil as in the classical **legend**. King Janaka, in fact, has no role to play here. It is his wife who takes care of the egg which produces Sita. This is the supernatural birth of the heroine, to destroy evil. Sita is born to bring about the total destruction of Ravana and his clan... Ravana desires Sita without knowing she is Mandodari's child (she is not Ravana's child, only Mandodari's). The story also reminds us of Krishna and Kansa, and also of the Prahlad legend... Call it **intertextuality** if you like.

Chandrabati devotes only two comparatively shorter, later sections to the birth of Rama, his three brothers and one sister, the evil Kukuya who has the Bengali (and Sanskrit) term for evil (ku) pronounced twice in her name. In the next section, Book II, Sita herself is now the narrator. She sits in the inner apartment of Rama's palace, talking to her girlfriends, who ask her all kinds of questions about her personal experiences. Having returned from Lanka, Sita is now at ease and talks freely about her childhood, her marriage, her life with Rama as a bride, and in the exile, and her life in Lanka as an abducted woman.

Rama's achievements – the breaking of Haradhan and the entire epic battle are only summarily referred to (not described) through Sita's 'Baromasi' (the song of twelve months, relating the incidents of one's life to the seasonal changes).

The heroic code is thus gently broken. There are no **gory** battle scenes, no details of heroic achievement given at all. Most of the epic actions are referred to through the conceit of dream, as dream messages.

This section is most interesting because in an epic the epic battle is of central importance. But in Chandrabati *Ramayana*, twice mediated through feminine sensibility, once by Chandrabati's as the composer, and once by Sita's as the narrator, the epic battle loses all its glory and gets only a few lines to itself. Maximum colour and space are spent on the interludes of Sita and Rama in the forest...

After her return from Lanka, there are four more important events in Sita's life:

(1) pregnancy (2) exile (3) childbirth and (4) voluntary death or entry into Mother Earth.

All these experiences are described in great detail. Mother Nature seems to appear in the form of Mother Earth to put an end to the human injustice that Sita was being subjected to.

The Chandrabati *Ramayana* most logically ends here with the death of Sita, and it is here that our third narrative begins. It is our story, yours and mine. The reader's story... We could... call it a heroic epic – if heroism is taken to signify man's superhuman ability to stand and overcome human suffering. Because this is what Sita displays here. It is not an epic battle with visible special weapons, but with weapons of moral values. And this is where we hear the clashing voices of Chandrabati I and Chandrabati II. Her Sita wins the battle by fighting with the traditional weapons of value supplied by the dominant **ideology** of Chandrabati's time, whereas Chandrabati herself, as the narrator-composer is challenging the same values in the very structure of the narrative.

We have here a narrative about a woman, narrated by a woman (by two women, in fact) meant for female audience. Yes, the text was originally intended for a female audience as the **recurring** formula here is 'shuno skhijana' (listen girlfriends), not 'shuno sabhajana' (listen, members of the court) nor 'shunu sarbajana' (listen one and all) as the regular formulae go. Hence the producer of the text is a woman, the product depicts a woman's life and the intended consumers are women.

In Book III the narrator changes once again. Chandrabati returns as the narrator but a male character finds his way in too, Lakshmana. He strongly voices the general patriarchal values, even... of Rama's superhuman quality once (of which there are no visible signs in the text – it is in that sense a secular *Ramayana*).

...In the first edition of the epic... this section is absent. But... in the second version this portion is found. Clearly, the poem had become a property of the bards of East Bengal long ago and was sung to a mixed audience... we also find that the regular form of the earlier address 'shuno sakhijana' becomes 'shuno sabhajana' or 'shuno sarbajana' from time to time. The intended audience remains female in Sita's own narrative about Rama where she is privately conversing with her girlfriends... in her inner chambers.

The patriarchal voice is clearly audible in the last section of the second version, where Lava, Kush and Hanuman interact heroically and the ascetics Vashistha and Valmiki appear in their full Brahminical splendour.

Hence, we can read it today as a silenced text of yesterday. *Ramayana* is a misnomer for our narrative. It should have been called 'Sitayana', the route of

Sita, Sita's journey. Rama is not at the centre of the narrative...Chandrabati often intrudes into the text and directly addresses the characters herself.

The Chandrabati *Ramayana* does not tell us about the route of Rama, but it tells us all about the life journey of a woman – a complete biological life-cycle – her birth, her marriage, her pregnancy, childbirth, maturity and death. It is a woman's text, for the selection of episodes, for the highlighting and detailing of intimate feminine experiences (like the pregnant woman's craving for chewing burnt clay), like pregnancy, childbirth (Mandodari's description), maternal feelings... the woman's desolation and desperation at being neglected, worship of local goddesses... and the performance of religious rituals. Chandrabati even uses bratakatha-style formulaic language when describing Sita's ritualistic

performances...

As narrators, Sita and Chandrabati differ in that one is a character, the other is an outsider... Sita is an ideal representation of the dominant ideology but Chandrabati is a **dissenter**. She openly questions, challenges and punctures the ideology of her time in her personal intrusions, and also in her selection of episodes, depth of detail and silences. But, she does not criticize Sita for acting according to the dominant ideology.

... In Indian epics the epic battle is between good and evil, and in a patriarchal system (which produces the epic) both are represented by male characters. In Chandrabati *Ramayana* also, there is this war of good and evil – but both are represented by women, Lakshmi and Alakshmi, Sita and Kukulya.

... Chandrabati *Ramayana*... is what we call a silenced text... a poor literary work because it was a *Ramayana* that did not sing of Rama... Today, a re-reading of the narrative exposes an obvious failure: to recognize Chandrabati *Ramayana* as a personal interpretation of the Rama-tale, seen specifically from the woman's point of view.

Activity 3

In what way does Chandrabati make her own thoughts and feelings known in her narrative?

3.4 ANALYSIS

You have had a glimpse into Chandrabati's personal life and you must be quite eager now, after reading Nabaneeta Deb Sen's essay, to know about the text itself. Some of you who are real enthusiasts could visit the library of the University of Calcutta where Chandrabati's manuscript is kept. Just scanning through it would in itself be really exciting! We will group our analysis of this text under three heads –

- i) Text
- ii) Narrative techniques
- iii) Insights

Once we have completed our analysis, you will be able to understand the importance of woman-speak and how a woman approaches and interprets her

life and its problems differently. We have with us a text that deals with and narrates Sita's entire life span – her Baromasi (a Hindi term which literally translates into barah mahina, i.e. twelve months – which represents a life cycle, each season representing a stage of life) – telling us about her happiness, sorrows and her eventual tragic death. You will find it interesting to see that war, and public appearance and affairs, which matter enormously in a male-centric society are treated very casually here. Even the people who are addressed and the way they are spoken to is remarkably different from the regular forms of social intercourse one finds in Valmiki's *Ramayana*.

Valmiki's *Ramayana* begins with janmalila – an entire section devoted to Rama's birth. Chandrabati departs from this tradition to begin her epic by devoting its first six sections to describing Sita's birth. Sita is born as an incarnation of Goddess Laxmi to fulfil a divine prophecy. She comes into this world to bring Ravana's end. She thus becomes the protagonist. In Valmiki, Sita is found abandoned in the fields by Raja Janak. However, in Chandrabati, Sita is Mandodari's offspring and has no father. Chandrabati *Ramayana* paints for us a Ravana who is dissolute, tyrannical, and over-ambitious because of Brahma's boon.

Activity 4

How does Sita gain a prominent place in the Chandrabati *Ramayana*?

Ravana murders sages and collects their blood in a box as poison with which to end the immortality of the gods. He abducts beautiful women and spends time with them, completely neglecting his wife, Mandodari. Out of extreme sorrow, Mandodari drinks this potent potion to end her life and miseries. But in a dramatic twist, instead of dying, she gives birth to Sita in the form of an egg. Sita is thus conceived out of the blood of ascetics who had been brutally murdered and the agony of a much neglected and suffering Mandodari. When Mandodari gets to know that Ravana is out to destroy the egg, she puts it into a golden casket and makes Ravana throw it out of her castle window into the ocean. The egg floats across the Bay of Bengal. Ravana's threatening an innocent life seals his damnation. What happens to the egg? Does it get broken? No. It is found by Madhab Jalia, a poor and honest fisherman. His religious wife, Sata performs holy rites and receives the egg worshipfully, which pleases Goddess Lakshmi, who blesses the couple with wealth and prosperity. Lakshmi visits Sata in a dream and asks her to deliver the egg to King Janak's wife. Sata goes to the Queen and gives her the egg, requesting the Queen to name the child, Sita, as her namesake. Her wish is granted and the new born is named Sita – a derivative of Sata. Her conception and birth are as befitting a traditional male hero.

Chandrabati's Sita's miraculous and divinely ordained birth without a male authoritative figure makes her one of the earliest radical feminists.

Activity 5

What is the importance of the character Madhab Jalia in Chandrabati *Ramayana*?

Chandrabati devotes only two comparatively shorter, later sections to the birth of Rama, his three brothers and one sister, the evil Kukuya who has the Bengali (and Sanskrit) term for evil (ku) pronounced twice in her name. The heroic code

is subtly defied and re-written in Chandrabati *Ramayana*. Traditionally, epics are regulated by a heroic code which demands that the central character should be a man who is virtuous and masculine, and has martial prowess. He should uphold the dominant patriarchal social code of conduct. Chandrabati speaks up in her own person to denounce patriarchal ideology: Sita takes the centre stage with a supernatural birth generally reserved for heroes.

In Book II, we find that Sita has returned from her exile and subsequent abduction by Ravana, and is in her married home. In a flashback sequence, she recalls her entire life from her childhood to her life during her exile accompanied by her husband, and her loneliness in Lanka. It is very interesting that the thrust of this book is not on Rama's heroic **exploits** but Sita's emotions. Rama's achievements – the breaking of Haradhan and the entire epic battle are mentioned briefly while the epic actions are referred to through dream sequences. Sita, however, has much to say about her relationship with Rama. Sita's pregnancy and her abandonment, her giving birth to their children, her and death or entry into Mother Earth to end her experience of injustice are described in detail. We have descriptions of exclusively feminine experiences like Sita's yearning to chew burnt clay during her pregnancy.

Activity 6

How does shifting the focus from Rama to Sita in Chandrabati *Ramayana* alter the storyline?

Apparently, the original edition of Chandrabati ends here. However, we have a second edition which is in all probability an interpolation by male writers. We have the entry of Lakshmana, a representative patriarchal figure in Book III. He praises Rama's heroism on which Chandrabati *Ramayana* had remained silent so far. The text gets a patriarchal slant. Male characters take centre stage: we have the heroism of Lava, Kush and Hanuman; the ascetics Vashistha and Valmiki appear in their full Brahminical splendour.

3.5 NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES

Chandrabati *Ramayana* has a narrative sequence in which the speakers change from book to book, as does the mode of address to its audience and readers. The narrator of Book I is Chandrabati while the narrator of Book II is Sita herself.

These two books are women-centric – they are written by women and articulated by women to an audience comprising women. The form of address is overwhelmingly, 'shuno skhijana' (listen girlfriends). Sita's confidantes are her close women friends with whom she shares her experiences. Typical women-centric ways, like bratakatha-style language, i.e. narratives of fasting are used here.

In later editions and in Book III, patriarchal authoritative voices take over. In all probability, the poem had become a property of the bards of East Bengal long ago and was sung to a mixed audience. The modes of address change: 'shuno skhijana' is replaced by 'shuno sabhajana' (listen, members of the court) and 'shunu sarbajana'. The tone shifts from intimate and emotional to public and celebratory.

It is interesting to note that Chandrabati remains critical of the dominant male ideology. At times she directly addresses the characters and shows her annoyance at their behaviour which brings sorrow into Sita's life. However, Chandrabati does not criticize her heroine, Sita for acting in accordance to the very same dominant ideology; Sita is celebrated because she follows this ideology unquestioningly.

3.6 INSIGHTS

Chandrabati *Ramayana* is undeniably an exciting text which helps readers to relate to the pain of women, and understand that every text has an authoritative voice against which many dissenting voices rise. These dissenting voices create alternative text(s) which help maintain an ongoing discourse on ethics and value-systems. In a society which is patriarchal, it is the man and his supporters who call the shots. Here, literary works do not provide any space for woman-speak. It does not surprise us that it was only as recently as the sixteenth century that a woman-oriented *Ramayana* was written.

Chandrabati *Ramayana* is beyond doubt about Sita – her life, her problems and her personal experiences. Rama is a character in the margins. Chandrabati *Ramayana* is a 'Sitayana' – telling us about the journey of Sita's life; to call it *Ramayana* is misleading. This *Ramayana* is a heroic epic with a difference.

Traditionally, heroism translates into masculine valour and a fight between the forces of good and evil which are generally violent, even virulent. However, here evil and good are represented by inner conflict, as ethical and moral forces. There are no visible weapons, and signs of traditional warfare are absent.

Chandrabati *Ramayana* is of great importance as it provides us with an alternative woman-centric point of view to understand, analyse and interpret religion. In this *Ramayana* we meet an anguished and stricken Sita who suffers despite being innocent and blameless. Here, the focus is not on Rama's martial prowess or his kingly attributes but the emotional aspects of Sita's life and her very limited happiness. We are made to feel the helplessness of women who are victimized because their morality is suspect and which has to rely on the judgement of male authority that sentences and punishes. Such mindless harshness destroys a woman's peace of mind and existence forever. Chandrabati paints for us a pregnant and lonely Sita who yearns to be pampered by her husband. Through Chandrabati, we re-visit a vulnerable Sita who tells us that she has always felt lonely and without a real home since she never knew her real parentage. Unlike Valmiki's Sita eclipsed by her husband, Lord Rama, Chandrabati's Sita comes out of the margins and shares the centre stage with her friends.

Activity 7

Can the Chandrabati *Ramayana* be referred to as a *Ramayana*?

3.7 LET US SUM UP

Chandrabati *Ramayana* is a text that was penned by a woman who was well read and critical of her times. Through her *Ramayana*, she gives us the woman's

point of view. This piece of writing was generally neglected and overlooked by critics as trivial since it did not follow the typical patriarchal pattern of narration or writing. It remained a “silenced text” for long and was only rediscovered in the 1920s. What has intrigued the critics by and large is its creative intertextuality.

Chandrabati *Ramayana* borrows across various mythologies like those of Krishna, Prahlad and Shakuntala. The concepts of a biological mother, a foster mother, fisherman and a cruel male-relative are not part of the original *Ramayana*.

Chandrabati has encouraged fresh perspectives on *Ramayana*. Above all, it is extremely significant that Chandrabati's Sita is named after a fisherwoman, Sata – a deliberate strategy to underscore women and defy their secondary status in society.

Undeniably, Chandrabati *Ramayana* is and will continue to be a text which will continue to engage our intellect and force us to re-assess our moral yardstick.

3.8 AIDS TO ACTIVITIES

- Activity 1** : Gender affects our reading and interpretation to a certain extent in the process of identification with the thoughts and feelings of the characters.
- Activity 2** : It is called as such as it has been largely ignored within a system of patriarchy.
- Activity 3** : Chandrabati often intrudes into the text and directly addresses the characters herself.
- Activity 4** : Sita, not Rama, is the central character who brings an end to Ravana's evil rule. She is Lakshmi's incarnation who is destined to defeat Ravana and the first sections of the book are devoted to her.
- Activity 5** : Madhab Jalia in Chandrabati *Ramayana* rescues the egg which contains Sita's life after it is thrown into the sea by Mandodari. Sata chooses the name, Sita as a derivative of her own name.
- Activity 6** : Valmiki's *Ramayana* is built around Rama and his public and political image as a ruler and a brave warrior. In sharp contrast, Chandrabati *Ramayana* is written from Sita's point-of-view with hardly any mention of war and kingship.
- Activity 7** : The central character of Chandrabati *Ramayana* is Sita, not Rama. Therefore, it would perhaps be more appropriate to call it a Sitayana, not *Ramayana* since it narrates the life of Sita and expresses her point-of-view.

3.9 GLOSSARY

- abducted : kidnapped
- ascetic : a holy man/sage who has given up worldly pleasures

auspicious	: holy
ballad	: a folk song that tells a story
Baromasi	: covering a period of twelve months
casket	: basket/ case
clan	: a group of closely knit families
dissenter	: a person who disagrees
exploits	: brave acts
gory	: bloody
guise	: a fake appearance
ideology	: a set of beliefs and ideas
intertextuality	: borrowings across texts
janmalila	: story about birth
legend	: famous person or story
mediator	: a person who helps bring in an agreement between two parties
mingle	: mix
recurring	: happening again and again
soothsayer	: a person who tells the future
tactic	: method/ strategy
tyrannizing	: behaving like a cruel and heartless ruler
unabashedly	: frankly

3.10 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Who was Chandrabati? What is so special about her *Ramayana*?
- 2) Who are the narrators in Book I, Book II and Book III of Chandrabati *Ramayana*? How does it impact our reading of the text?
- 3) What do you understand by 'heroic code'? To what extent is it found in Chandrabati *Ramayana*?
- 4) How is Rama in Chandrabati *Ramayana* different from in Valmiki's *Ramayana*?
- 5) Why is Sita named after Sata in Chandrabati *Ramayana*? Why is this significant?
- 6) Which Book is written from a patriarchal viewpoint? Why?
- 7) Why is the Chandrabati *Ramayana* considered a 'silenced text'?

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UNIT 4 *A TESTIMONY OF OUR INEXHAUSTIBLE TREASURE* BY PANDITA RAMABAI

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 About the Author, Pandita Ramabai
- 4.3 Excerpts from *A Testimony of Our Inexhaustible Treasure*
- 4.4 Analysis
- 4.5 Narrative Technique
- 4.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.7 Aids to Activities
- 4.8 Glossary
- 4.9 Unit End Questions
- 4.10 References and Suggested Readings

4.0 OBJECTIVES

On the basis of reading the text, this unit will enable you to understand *A Testimony of Our Inexhaustible Treasure* by Pandita Ramabai as an autobiographical reflection of a person whose life extends over different and distant cultural spaces, times and practices.

You would also be able to infer that the book is not only about the spiritual path of her life but also about the space and context for self-scrutiny at the secular level as well.

While reading and analyzing the text the readers will agree that it is almost impossible to appropriate a single genre to Pandita Ramabai.

Taking into account the numerous challenging issues she chose to take up, it is difficult to restrict her to a single field. To name a few, she deserves to be called a feminist, a diasporic writer, an educationist, a social reformer, a spiritual leader, an empowered woman and, most importantly, a humanitarian.

As students of English literature, your objective is primarily to analyze her contribution to the variety of literary compositions that go to her credit, namely, books, essays, pamphlets, letters, translations and autobiography.

In this section our focus is on her autobiography titled *A Testimony of Our Inexhaustible Treasure*.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

An autobiography has always been considered as an authentic and important source of knowledge about the complex, intricate and ambivalent character of an individual. Pandita Ramabai's autobiography, written in March 1907 (14 years before her death), stands apart by the fact that while a typical autobiography

usually depicts a person's life simply as a journey along a linear passage that eventually finds its goals and aims of life. *A Testimony of Our Inexhaustible Treasure* deviates from the normal because there is neither a chronology nor a history. Probably because it is the story of a person whose life was not like a road, a career, an advancement or a history or a simple passage from birth to death. It was dictated, impacted, channelized and moulded by familial, cultural, social and political events of her time. The roadblocks that she encountered and overcame in her life are startling and compel the readers to keenly observe and evaluate the sensitive sociological, cultural, religious and historical issues that shaped Ramabai's persona, including her conversion from a high-caste Hindu to a Christian.

She was fortunate that she had access to education. This was indeed a privilege that she had over her contemporaries. The translation of the Bible, from Greek and Hebrew into her mother tongue Marathi, was her magnum opus and marked the apogee of her religious divergence from her orthodox Brahmin origins, via a series of intermediate stages landmarked by her earlier writings. Meera Kosambi calls her writing as "militant feminist rhetoric of Pandita Ramabai."

Therefore, reading of autobiographies allows us to deduce that a simple, personal history of an individual is actually a collective reality. This book is a prism through which the readers view the myriad shades of Ramabai's life: her growth from being an offspring of her time to succeeding and becoming so important, so relevant and inspiring as to influence and shape creatively and meaningfully the prevalent social doctrines by her active role.

As Ramabai's spiritual autobiography, it also testifies to key moments in her life and conversion and explains how she "felt bound to tell as many women as possible that Christ Jesus came to save sinners like me."

4.2 ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

In spite of her privileged background and her conversion to Christianity, Pandita Ramabai is very much a heroine of our times. She was a pivotal social reformer and women's rights activist of India in the late 19th century. She was born on April 23, 1858 to Lakshmi Bai and Anant Shastri Dongre – an enlightened and orthodox Chitpavan Brahmin couple. Though orthodox, Anant Shastri Dongre advocated education for women. A Sanskrit scholar and a *Puranika* himself, he educated his wife and children in Sanskrit texts even at the cost of ostracization.

Ramabai had a rather unusual childhood. While she was still very young, her parents fell into poverty and left their home and became religious vagrants, travelling the length and breadth of the Indian subcontinent and learning many of its languages. Growing up as the children of a wandering couple, Ramabai and her siblings escaped being tied down by the conventional demands of a social group. Learning and progressive ideas were at the center of this family whose strength was nobility of character and it enabled her and her elder sister Krishnabai to escape the rigid gender code as well. But the famines of 1874-77 proved disastrous for the Dongre family because it resulted in the demise of Ramabai's father, mother and sister within a few months of each other. Left to fend for themselves and true to their religious commitments, she and her brother, Srinivas, continued with their peregrination.

Her inclination for reading enabled her to become, at the age of twenty, the first woman in India to earn the titles of *pandita* and *saraswati*, after examination by the faculty of the University of Calcutta. It is here that she lost her only surviving sibling, Srinivas, to cholera. She then married a shudra in a civil court and drew the ire of high caste echelons. Combined with her scholarly achievements, this decision represents a remarkable commitment to the questioning of tradition. Though happy, the marriage was brief. Her husband died within two years leaving her with a daughter. It was undoubtedly the worst fate that could befall a woman in a society which never considered a woman as an individual but an appendage to her husband. She talks vividly about this plight in her book *The High Caste Hindu Woman*.

Within first year of her widowhood, she founded the *Arya Mahila Samaj*, a society of high-caste Hindu women working for the education of girls and against child marriage. She published her first book, *Morals for Women*, or in the original Marathi *Stri Dharma Niti*. She also testified before the Hunter Commission on education in India, an enquiry set up by the British Government. She presented an impassioned case saying that “it is evident that women, being the half of the people of this country, are oppressed and cruelly treated by their other half.” This testimony was later printed and is said to have influenced the thinking of Queen Victoria.

Next year, she sailed to England with the intention to study medicine so that in the end she could return to India as a doctor. This plan could not materialize because she was diagnosed with incurable deafness. She, now, used her time in England to study Christianity which she had started in India. If we analyze this move objectively, we can infer that the person travelling to England was an anxious mother-widow, determined to draw more from life than was offered her, with an honest heart to genuinely help women and also a person in quest of answers to her existential and religious quest.

Her faith in Hinduism had been shaken after reading the Vedas and Upanishads—books actually forbidden for women. A thorough study of these texts opened her eyes to the position accorded in them to women and *shudras*. She was puzzled by the variety of religious options these texts offered but found the thread of commonality in each of them about their unanimity on the deprived status of women and *shudras* in India’s social fabric. It turned her into a sceptic.

She says “My eyes are being gradually opened, I was waking up to my own hopeless condition as a woman, and it was becoming clearer and clearer to me that I had no place anywhere as far as religious consolation was concerned. I became quite dissatisfied with myself; I wanted something more than the *shastras* could give me, but I did not know what it was that I wanted.”

She and her young daughter were baptized as Anglican Christians. Many aspects of English life appealed to her, but having rejected the caste-system in her own country she was not at ease with hierarchy of social classes in England. Having given up her dreams of a medical degree, she travelled on to the USA in 1886 and, in the active world of nineteenth century American feminism, she succeeded in capturing the limelight through the series of lectures as a zealous and ardent advocate of the cause of Indian women’s education and status in society. Simultaneously, she learned very quickly how to write a book that would

correspond to western criteria resulting in the publication of her bestseller, *The High Caste Hindu Woman* (1887). It was also her fund-raising tract. She was by now full of plans for reforms in India. She took up American causes too, supporting in print the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and speaking at the first meeting of the International Council of Women in 1888 (a body which brought together activists from the US, Britain and Canada).

She observed the American educational system very closely and also took a course in kindergarten teaching and later on introduced it in India. In America she found the kind of democracy and the kind of women's education she was looking for. It is here that she conceived the idea of 'home' for the high caste Hindu widows in India. Her keenness towards her goal and role as a social reformer led her to appreciate the liberating democratic nature of American society as opposed to the stifling orthodoxy of Indian society. She compiled and published these observations in Marathi in 1889 as *The Peoples of the United States*. She wrote, "The national might of the United States does not lie in its standing army, cannons and swords; it lies in the educational advancement and diligence of the nation's inhabitants." She was, perhaps, contrasting Britain with America.

After travelling and encountering the Western countries for six years, Ramabai returned to India in 1888 and began realizing her dream project by opening a widows' home *ShardaSadan* immediately and later expanded it into the *Mukti Mission*. The move was greatly applauded and enthusiastically approved by the nationalists and social reformers. But problems crept up when she shifted it to Pune in 1890, a bastion of conservative Marathi Brahmin culture, which would not allow the intrusion of Christian religion and through the medium of newspapers Ramabai was accused of proselytizing upper caste widows and women of lower castes on the pretext of social welfare. This criticism and marginalization made her turn towards Christian religion more actively. Initially she considered religion as an option but in the aftermath of these attacks from all quarters, she openly praised Christianity and even invited women to convert if they wished so. When famine and plague struck the central Indian provinces in the late 1890s, she turned her attention to the housing and education of famine victims, creating a new organization for this purpose.

She also set up the *Kripa Sadan*, a rescue home for the sexually abused women. *Mukti Sadan* was renamed as Pandita Ramabai Mukti Sadan in 1969 and has been a beacon of light in the lives of many women till today. This place developed as an exemplary 'female' microcosm because Ramabai's focus was on empowering women not only through knowledge of reading and writing but also in training them in various vocations like teaching, nursing, tailoring and helping them to become financially independent.

As far as her writing goes, she published in Hindi and Sanskrit as well as in Marathi and English. Her travel books about England and America interestingly reverse the conventions of the western travel writers in the East. The epistolary exchange she had with her spiritual mother, her daughter and others form a considerable part of her literary corpus. Her last, posthumous work was a translation of the entire Bible into Marathi from Greek and Hebrew. Indian society, as it is today, certainly owes an immeasurable debt to the educationist, feminist, social thinker and reformer Pandita Ramabai.

4.3 EXCERPTS FROM THE TEXT

The book opens with the lines:

“....Jesus...said....Go home to thy friends, and tell them what great things the Lord has done for you”

And these lines encapsulate Pandita Ramabai ‘s intention for writing this book which also happens to be her spiritual Odyssey which discloses her retrospective perspective on her own life.

She derives pride in her upbringing and captions this chapter as *An Honourable Heritage*. Speaking of her father she minces no words and says:

“My father, though a very orthodox Hindu and strictly adhering to caste and other religious rules, was yet a reformer in his own way. He could not see why women and people of the Shudra caste should not learn to read and write the Sanskrit language and learn sacred literature other than the Vedas.”

So he tried the experiment at home by teaching his wife and tutored her into a Sanskrit scholar who passed the knowledge on to her children. The move outraged the entire Brahmin community which tried to dissuade him from this “heretical course” but he was adamant and succeeded in convincing the assembly of Pandits that he was not going against the law of the scriptures.

“Some people honoured him for what he was doing, and some despised him. He cared little for what people said, and did what he thought was right. He taught and educated my mother, brother, sister, and others.”

Speaking about her education she says:

I did not know of any schools for girls and women existing then, where higher education was to be obtained. Moreover, ...my parents....wanted us to be strictly religious and adhere to their old faith. Learning any other language was out of question. Secular education of any kind was looked upon as leading people to worldliness which would prevent them from getting into the way of Moksha, or liberation from everlasting trouble of reincarnation.... To learn the English language and to come in contact with the Mlenchchas, as the non-Hindus are called....”

Dwelling on her parents’ vocation she says:

“Ever since I remember anything, my father and mother were always travelling from one sacred place to another, staying in each place for some months, bathing in the sacred river or tank, visiting temples, worshipping household gods and the images of gods in the temples, or reading *Puranas* in the temples or in some convenient places.....The readers of *Puranas*, *Puranikasas* they are called, are the popular and public preachers of religion of the Hindus.”

The audience revered them and out of gratitude offered money, flowers, fruits, sweetmeats, garments and other things to them and therefore “.... We never had to beg, or work to earn our livelihood.”

But when Pandita introduces the readers to the next chapter called *Famine, Death and Doubts*, she is candid about the flaws of her family’s vocation. Specially during the famines when crops failed and people starved.

According to her,

“We were not fit to do any other work to earn our livelihood, as we had grown up in perfect ignorance of anything outside the sacred literature of the Hindus.

We could not do menial work, nor could we beg to get the necessities of life.... We suffered from famine which we had brought upon ourselves.... My father, mother and sister all died of starvation within a few months of each other.” This was in the year 1870.

She and her brother survived and travelled through India for many years.

“We had walked more than four thousand miles on foot without any sort of comfort, sometimes eating what kind people gave us, and sometimes going without food, with poor coarse clothing, and finding but little shelter except in Dharma Shalas;.... We wandered from the south to the north as far as Kashmir, and then to the east and west to Calcutta in 1878.....

We stayed in Calcutta for about a year and became acquainted with the learned Brahmans. We did not know what it was, for we had never come in social contact with either the Hindu Reformers, nor with Christians before that time.”

It was during this time her disenchantment with the Indian religions begins. She realized together with her brother that religion did not hold its promises; their prayers and ritual acts were not effective.

So, Calcutta played a decisive role in Pandita Ramabai's life, both for her recognition as a profound scholar and her stepping into the world of social reformation. She sums up the gist of all the Hindu religious books, Dharma Shastras and Vedic literature, as follows:

“The woman has no right to study the Vedas and the Vedanta, and without knowing them, no one can know the Brahma; without knowing Brahma no one can get liberation, therefore no woman as woman can get liberation; that is Moksha.

The same rules are applicable to the Shudras.....

.....I stayed in Bengal and Assam for four years in all and studied the Bengali language. While living with my husband at Silchar, Assam, I had found a little pamphlet in my library. I do not know how it came there but I picked it up and began to read it with great interest. It was St. Luke's Gospel in the Bengali language.....”

Gradually her interest in Christian religion deepens and she confesses,

“Having lost all faith in my former religion, and with my heart hungering after something better, I eagerly learned every-thing which I could about the Christian religion, and declared my intention to become a Christian, if I were perfectly satisfied with this new religion.”

“I had at this time begun to study the English language, but did not know how to write or speak it.”

“I realized, after reading the 4th Chapter of John's Gospel, that Christ was truly the divine Saviour He claimed to be, and no one but He could transform and uplift the downtrodden womanhood of India, and of every land. Thus my heart

was drawn to the religion of Christ. I was intellectually convinced of its truth on reading a book written by Father Goreh, and was baptized in the Church of England in the latter part of 1883, while living with the Sisters at Wantage.”

For some years after my baptism, I was comparatively happy to think that I had found a religion which gave its privileges equally to men and women; there was no distinction of caste, color, or sex made in it.....

I can give only a faint idea of what I felt when my mental eyes were opened, and when I, who was “sitting in darkness saw Great Light,” and when I felt sure that to me, who but a few moments ago “sat in the region and shadow of death, Light *had* sprung up.”

Pandita Ramabai could see the difference between the teachings of the two religions. “The Brahman priests have tried to deceive the women and the Shudras and other low caste people into the belief that they have some hope. But when we study for ourselves the books of the religious law and enquire from the higher authority we find that there is nothing, not anything whatever, for us.....”

Her ecstasy is visible in the following lines:

“.....How good, how indescribably good! What good news for me a woman, a woman born in India, among Brahmans who hold out no hope for me and the likes of me! The Bible declares that Christ did not reserve this great salvation for a particular caste or sex.

The Holy Spirit made it clear to me from the Word of God, that the salvation which God gives through Christ is present, and not something future. I believed it, I received it, and I was filled with joy.”

My readers will not, therefore, find fault with me for making this subject so very personal. The heart experiences of an individual are too sacred to be exposed to the public gaze. Why then should I give them to the public in this way? Because a “...necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel!” (1 Corinthians 9:16.) I am bound to tell as many men and women as possible, that Christ Jesus came to save sinners like me. He has saved me, praise the Lord! I know “...He is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by Him, seeing He ever lives to make intercession for them.” (Hebrews 7:25).

“For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Mark 8:36-37.) we have nothing to fear from anybody, nothing to lose, and nothing to regret. The Lord is our *Inexhaustible Treasure*.

My work, in the beginning, was a purely educational one, and religious liberty was to be given to the inmates of my school, and all plans were made to start the Home for Widows as soon as I should land in Bombay. If I were to write all that the Lord has done for me, even as much as it lies in my power to do so, the book would be too large for a person to read, so I have made the account of my spiritual experience as short as possible. I am very glad and very thankful to the Lord for making it possible for me to give this testimony of the Lord’s goodness to me.

4.4 ANALYSIS

“At every step, her writing reflects her biography.”

A Testimony of Our Inexhaustible Treasure was written by Ramabai in 1907 and she named it as an “account of my spiritual experience...” Through this book she expresses her gratitude to God for bestowing on her the privilege to give this testimony of the Lord’s goodness.

The book has also been acclaimed as Ramabai’s spiritual autobiography since it testifies to key moments of her life. The unfolding of events is almost dramatic in which tragedy is slowly built up to culminate in her silence and exit from social life. Apart from being an illustrative throwback, the book forces the readers to observe the interplay between her personal and creative ventures and the contextual barriers.

Pandita Ramabai wrote her autobiography in English and probably intended it for both the Indian as well as the Western Christians. The book reveals how she sees her own history and how she wants the reader to understand it. It is a passionate outpouring of a heart full of devotion. She had already spent twenty-four years practising Christianity and she, therefore, reads her life not merely as an ‘outer’ convert but as one who had realized Christ within herself. And yet her life was not as simple as that – we cannot ignore the complex issues that the book addresses. The readers have the advantage of uncovering the widely misunderstood plans of Ramabai for national revival. She dwells on a variety of diverse issues of the eighteenth century India, like religion, culture, gender and, most importantly, nationalism. Noticeably, all these were predominantly male prerogative and commanded by strict orthodoxy of a patriarchal tradition. But Ramabai’s unwavering determination for nation-building enabled her to overcome strategic exclusion at various levels. In *A Testimony of Our Inexhaustible Treasure*, she views her whole life from a perspective enriched by her religious faith. It is a candid account of the trials and tribulations refracted through a religious lens. She does not hesitate to confess her dissatisfaction with the Hindu religious tenets and the skepticism that disturbed her through the trying times during and after the famine. She was bewildered by the variety of opinions these tenets contained. But they all had one thing in common and that is the acceptance of the deprived status of women and *shudras* and the conviction that they cannot access salvation or liberation from the bondage of life cycles. This was unacceptable to her. She was in “search of something better”. In Christian religion she was promised salvation which she appreciated but was not “intellectually convinced”. Her fascination with the Christian religion was mainly because it did away with all the man-made barriers of discrimination and exclusion as opposed to the rigid and crippling caste-system and gender-biases professed by Hindu religion. For her, Christianity was not merely a religion but it held the vision of an egalitarian society – almost a Utopia

She believed that Indian society lacked the capacity to regenerate and, therefore, adoption of the new religion and social order was the only solution to this crisis. Her visit to the Rescue Home in England which sheltered “the so-called fallen women” further strengthened her belief in Christianity because her own ancestral faith did not offer such provisions for its victims. The compassionate nature of Christianity convinced her that “no one but He (Christ) could transform and uplift the downtrodden womanhood of India and of every land”.

Her conversion to Christianity led to scathing attacks on her from all corners, accusing her vis-à-vis her gender for fickleness and betrayal – also seen endemic to her sex. On the issue of her supervision of home for widows, she was accused of proselytizing. She, in return, drew on the nationalists demand for ‘independence’ and ‘equality’ and insisted that women were also entitled for the same. She brought to fore the inherent contradictions in the nationalists’ vision.

Although Ramabai’s tract clearly delineates her trajectory to the broad Anglican tradition, it is equally honest about her critical attitude to religion. She did not blindly accept any religion but embraced only certain aspects of her new faith in the light of personal, social and cultural circumstances and considerations. She clearly states that, “I want to find out the truth about everything including religion by experiment”. Her initiation into Christianity found her grappling for this truth because she was encountered by the different denominations and their contradictory teaching-”a Babel of religion in Christian countries”. (308) She accepts that she had to “labour under great intellectual difficulties” for “something better which I had not found.”

The autobiography reflects her objectivity and she had subjected her ancestral faith (Hinduism) to a similar scrutiny. She was equally critical of the *Puranikas* who were indifferent towards their audience as of the dogmatic beliefs of orthodox followers like her parents who did not advocate ‘secular education’ as practical investment. Readers of her autobiography can easily analyze her individualistic take on religion when she says that she had been reading ‘about’ the Bible and not the text itself as she should have done. Her intellectual soundness does not allow her to accept everything that the new faith offers and professes. There were many points of contentions with her own spiritual mentor. In fact, her personal interpretations of Christian tenets were termed as instances of the native’s proverbial pride and ignorance. Her tours to the western countries made her confront the truth about West’s evaluation of the Orient.

She objected to Hindus being called as ‘heathens’ by the Europeans. Her experience in America needs to be dwelt upon because while on one side she praises the status of women in that society but on other she is critical of the barbaric custom of slavery practiced in this temple of democracy.

Ramabai faced one more allegation forced upon her by the Christians. This was her position with reference to the colonial regime because, despite her conversion, she never failed to interrogate the imperial enterprise. Her religious and political orientation left her isolated at times but she was not deterred. Her outrage at the segregation camp at Pune during the Plague of 1897 and especially the treatment of women there, which made her write that Lord Sandhurst, the governor of Bombay, was answerable to the British Parliament. While the governor dismissed the charges and described them as highly exaggerated and hence deceptive, Ramabai quickly responded by labeling the accusations as baseless and deceitful a ‘vice’ which the west would usually associate with the Orient. She did not allow the issues to die down easily and invoked the Christian community to condemn the incident as a betrayal of the Christian values of truthfulness and impartiality. She confesses and apologises in the book for being ‘so very personal,’ yet she admits that the new faith had put a responsibility on her to offer her life as concrete illustration of its wonders.

4.5 NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE:

Susie Tharu and K Lalita draw attention to the features of the modern autobiography claiming that it “exhibits certain ambivalence” where often “the accent is personal... the preoccupation with intimate (and) even the confessional.” Emphasis on the personal often obscures the fact that “the autobiography always draws on the repertoire ...(that) cultures provide at particular junctures in their history.” This almost seems true of Ramabai-although she is careful in chronicling the social, cultural and historical anxieties of her times, she does it in relation to the issue that affects her mission. Meera Kosambi also comments on this aspect and points to the “efforts to plot her entire past on the meridian of Christianity”, especially in her later writings. Undoubtedly, her autobiography can also be seen as revolutionary because it explores uncharted territories of experience. She is definitely aware of being the ‘site’ on which ideologies of caste, class and nation, all coloured by dictates of patriarchy, fight themselves out. From this marginalized space her voice that emerges also deviates from the usual trajectory of the traditional ‘male’ autobiography as she set about constructing herself as an exemplary figure who does not merely recount and retell her accomplishments and experiences. Rather it is a touching portrayal of the growth of her feminist consciousness along with her trust on specific areas of social reforms and also her choice and practice of religion. The message of her autobiography must not be confined or mistaken for proselytization. Christianity assured Ramabai of a space where liberty was the foundation of a society and any divorce between these two would result in a collapse of the latter. The ideas of equality and justice inspired Ramabai’s enterprise for socio-cultural and religious change as well as her mission for women’s reforms. In this moving personal account the readers can clearly visualize how Ramabai is way ahead of her father, the “orthodox reformer” in her objective of social reform. And much like him, she dismantled the patriarchal bastion and “stood the persecution with... characteristic manliness” and also “cared little for what people said and did what (S)he thought was right.”

Reviled and glorified widely, read and silenced, evoked in historical narratives and erased from them, Pandita Ramabai remains an allusive personality, difficult to appropriate and to ignore.

Activity 1 : Trace the influence of different cultures and religions in the life of Pandita Ramabai.

Activity 2 : Mention a few incidents that had a decisive influence in shaping Ramabai’s personality.

Activity 3 : State the purpose for which Ramabai wrote her autobiography.

Activity 4 : List the different types of autobiographies that are written.

4.6 LET US SUM UP

Pandita Ramabai Saraswati was a feminist, women’s rights activist and an educationist. She was not only a pioneer of women empowerment and liberation but also a social reformer who led from the front.

Her proficiency, initially in Sanskrit language, later on expanded to other Indian languages and ultimately culminated in her authority over the language of the

ruling masters-English. Other than being a Puranika she was a versatile writer and a poet. During her stay abroad-when she even accepted Christianity as her religion- she developed a penchant for reading the textbooks subscribed in the schools of the US, and translated and even introduced them in schools back in India. She became the first educationist to introduce the Kindergarten system in India. She transcribed the Bible into her mother tongue Marathi.

In recognition of her service to the human community she was honoured with the highest award Kaisar-i-Hind by the British Colonial Government of India in 1919.

For her unrelenting contribution to the advancement of Indian women the government of India issued a commemorative stamp in 1989 in her honour.

Such was the contribution of Pandita Ramabai Saraswati— a woman ahead of her time.

4.7 AIDS TO ACTIVITIES

Activity 1

The life of a person can often provide for a study of transcultural influences. In case of Pandita Ramabai it also included the mingling of religions.

Activity 2

Every phase in a person's life has bearing on his/her personality. Some incidents have a very decisive influence.

Activity 3

Purpose for writing an autobiography can be different. Sometimes the writer decides to remain quiet on certain issues which have actually been contentious.

Activity 4

Some autobiographies are linear in proceedings and some are like just a name of a person to which bits and pieces are attached. Some autobiographies gain meaning when studied against historical and cultural events.

4.8 GLOSSARY

Ashram	: Residential school which imparted religious instruction.
Chitpavan Brahmin	: A Brahmin community from the Konkan, the coastal region of western India.
Pandita	: Eminent female scholar and teacher.
Proselytization	: Converting someone from one religion to another.
Puranas	: Collection of ancient tales used to convey Vedic teachings to women and lower-caste men.
Puranika	: A male or female Purana reciter.

Saraswati	: The goddess of learning.
Shastri	: A scholar or theologian.
Shudra	: The lowest of the four castes.
Hunter Commission	: Also known as the First Indian Education Commission and was appointed by Lord Ripon, the then Governor-General of India, under the chairmanship of Sir William Hunter. The Commission mainly focused on the state of primary education in the country.

4.9 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1. Define autobiography. Bring out Pandita Ramabai's contribution to this genre.
2. How does Pandita Ramabai qualify as an educationist, social reformer and a crusader of women's rights?
3. What role did education play in making Pandita Ramabai an exceptional person?
4. Since her life extends over different and distant cultural spaces, times and practices can her testimony be called transcultural?

4.10 SUGGESTED READINGS AND REFERENCES

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