
UNIT 1 CANON-MAKING IN THE ERA OF GANDHI, NEHRU, SOCIALISM

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Role of Gandhi in the Making of A New Canon
- 1.3 Concrete Evolution of the Canon
- 1.4 Gandhi and the Idea of Mobilising Ordinary People
- 1.5 The Dialectics of Canon and Society
- 1.6 Nehru and Socialism
- 1.7 Linking Gandhi and Nehru
- 1.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.9 Questions

1.0 OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this unit is to make you realise that literary canons are formed in specific historical conditions and that ideas prevalent at a time play a significant role in canon making. This purpose will be linked up in this unit with a brief analysis of the ideas of Gandhi, Nehru and socialism in the first half of the twentieth century.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and **Jawaharlal Nehru** can be rightly termed the makers of modern India. It is through the political and intellectual leadership provided by them that India achieved its aim of winning freedom from the British yoke. The Indian National Movement in the first half of the twentieth century left no one in the country untouched and in fact inspired the workers, the peasants, middle class youth as well as the bourgeoisie to forge a meaningful unity against British imperialism. The energy generated by this movement was indeed immense. Perhaps for the first time in Indian writing, concerns of freedom, national identity, social equality and democracy came to be asserted in a strong way. Indian English writing, too, chose for itself the path of relevance and general appeal and gradually embraced the cause of the larger masses. In the process, the abstractions associated with nature, myth and tradition disappeared as Indian English writing came closer to the issues faced by rural, semi-urban and urban India. Becoming a part of the larger nationalist process, this writing also clearly grasped the significance of socialism that was sweeping the whole world at that time.

1.2 ROLE OF GANDHI IN THE MAKING OF A NEW CANON

What does **Gandhi** stand for in the Indian National Movement? In my opinion, he stands for an ever-growing involvement of the masses in the fight against British imperialism. Remember that before **Gandhi** came to India from South Africa in the second decade of the twentieth century, our resistance to the British was confined broadly to idealists, visionaries and thinkers who talked in terms of brain drain, unequal trade, atrocities and cruelties perpetrated by the British regime on the peaceful masses and the issue of exploitation. These thinkers felt a kind of moral

indignation that the imperialist rulers were not doing their job of managing a colony properly and that pressure had to be built on them to treat Indians humanely. The indignation erupted many a time in the form of social anger that identified its enemy as the alien political system, administration and the state. There is no doubt that this was an important development at the time and inspired a large number of people to seriously engage themselves with these issues. We have to keep in mind the sacrifices of revolutionaries of early twentieth century India many of whom had to leave their country of birth to organise an appropriate resistance to the forces of oppression back home. However, the resistance lacked a clear understanding of the reality of Indian life. **Gandhi's** major contribution was in this area where he saw a great amount of obsolete ideas, norms and principles of tradition at work.

What is implied in this comment on the pre-Gandhian era in Modern India's history is that the National Movement at that time had only an ideological perspective. Only the enlightened and sensitive individuals in our midst, driven as they were by idealism of an extremely good kind, felt suffocated by the reality of imperialism in our country. As a consequence of that suffocation, they thought, they analysed and wrote. Their true purpose was to wake up others like themselves and induce them to feel one with what they considered to be the cause of the country. In their lives, at the place where they were active, at the meetings that they organised and which others like them attended, these individuals exhorted fellow citizens to join in the common struggle against imperialism. **Gandhi** sought to take such an attitude closer to the actual struggle needed to weld together one and all against the British. This according to **Gandhi** was not possible unless Indians looked towards themselves for weaknesses and faults that existed in their life and decided to remove them.

To this end, **Gandhi** applied in his political practice some of the methods of social work and mobilisation that he had evolved in the course of his short stay in South Africa. For **Gandhi**, equality and commonality started from nearer home and made appeal only when they were seen as the real part of the active individual's behaviour. That is how identifying oneself with the others in society became such an important canon of political life. Apparently, this was just an ethical principle. The Congress activist was soon able to merge himself with the cause of the humble folk. We have to bear in mind, however, that in the political movement unfolding itself, this ethical principle soon became an important instrument to establish rapport with the ordinary Indian. Such an orientation given by **Gandhi** to the Congress Party immediately attracted the poor lower middle class individuals and others lower down in the ladder. Thus, the Congress Party came to represent under **Gandhi** not just the ideology of the Colony but, the very human dignity of each individual in the country. How did the canons actually come to be evolved? The next section shall examine the evolution of an Indian canon in the first half of the twentieth century.

1.3 CONCRETE EVOLUTION OF THE CANON

It was also important at this stage to identify a social group that typified the ethos of the country. For **Gandhi**, such a social group was the Indian peasantry. This was no abstract principle but the reality of the country, since the sustenance of the country and its people depended entirely on the labour of the peasant. **Gandhi's** famous saying that India lived in its villages signified this central truth. Secondly, the peasants in India constituted an economic group and were the warp and woof of the imperialist-feudal structure. It is they who provided an economic base to the imperialist machine and the indigenous bureaucratic hierarchy active in the villages. The Indian peasantry groaned under the weight of imperialist-feudal oppression and saw no future in their life since there was none who thought to articulate their pains, sufferings and grievances. **Gandhi's** call to the peasants to join in the struggle against British imperialism gave them a hope and vision that in days to come, such a vision would reflect soon enough the growth and appeal of the Indian National Congress in

India's politics. In this way, the canon of honest identification with the masses received a concrete form by becoming the voice of the toughest segment of the Indian society. **Bipan Chandra** has correctly underlined in his book *India's Struggle for Independence* the truth of a social struggle by pointing out its linkage with the ordinary masses and which **Gandhiji** understood to the core. Thus, **Gandhiji's** job at the time was to genuinely broaden the contemporary anti-British struggle. In the words of **Bipan Chandra**:

Canon Making in
the Era of Gandhi,
Nehru, Socialism

The goal of Congress was changed from the attainment of self-government by constitutional and legal means to the attainment of Swaraj by peaceful and legitimate means. The new constitution of the Congress, the handiwork of Gandhiji, introduced other important changes.... Gandhiji ... knew that the Congress could not guide a sustained movement unless it had a compact body that worked round the year. Provincial Congress Committees were now to be organised on a linguistic basis, so that they could keep in touch with people by using the local language. The Congress organisation was to reach down to the village and the mohalla level by the formation of village and mohalla or ward committees. The membership fee was reduced to four annas per year to enable the poor to become members. Mass involvement would also enable the Congress to have a regular source of income. In other ways, too, the organisation structure was both streamlined and democratised. The Congress was to use Hindi as far as possible (Penguin, 1989, 186-7).

Let us examine **Gandhiji's** role in mobilising the masses in the next section.

1.4 GANDHI AND THE IDEA OF MOBILISING ORDINARY PEOPLE

Gandhiji's perspective of mass mobilisation was indeed fraught with many and diverse possibilities. Involvement of the ordinary people in the struggle meant taking a position on important issues of the day. One such issue was the *Reform Act* on which opinion seemed to be vertically divided. Being a great strategist, **Gandhiji** knew that real political power rested in popular support for which the Congress had to work steadily and resolutely. This was no mean task in view of the fact that a sort of militant voice had begun emerging in the country. According to **Gandhiji**, the years following World War I did not occasion such a radical stand. He defined the question clearly and firmly by stating in *Young India* that:

*The Reform Act coupled with the Proclamation is an earnest intention of the British people to do justice to India and it ought to remove suspicion on that score.... Our duty therefore is not to subject the Reforms to carping criticism, but to settle down quietly to work so as to make them a success" (1919, quoted in *Palme Dutt's India Today*, Manisha, 1970, 336-7).*

The stand has been critiqued by many a radical historian but **Gandhiji's** use of words such as "settle down quietly to work" that points towards the specific policy shift we have emphasised above. The new visionaries of India had to define their stand keeping in view the new requirements of the struggle that was fast changing in the direction of protest. Was the time ripe for a nation-wide protest in the after years of the World War I? Still more important was the question of practicality in the given circumstances on which differences among the leaders of the Freedom Movement persisted. The choice was therefore either to "settle down quietly to work" or jump into the fray.

The other two projections of **Gandhi's** thought – the cause of the untouchable and that of women – emanated from this concern for the peasant's condition. It is difficult to see the link between peasants on one side and untouchables as well as women on the other except that the three were at the receiving end of all social oppression. Still, one has to look at the vast multitude of untouchables at the time

under question to realise that they worked closest to the peasant in India in the field of agricultural production. Economically more deprived than the peasants and socially segregated, the so-called untouchables were in daily economic contact with the peasantry on the fields. Still more, they had seen suppression as *shudras* since times immemorial for no fault of theirs except that they suffered the accident of being born in a *shudra* family.

Gandhi had an extremely modern mind in that he had truly imbibed the principles of European social struggles fought to emancipate the common masses from the evil of inequality ever since the seventeenth century. The Cromwellian Revolution in England in the seventeenth century, the American War of Independence and French Revolution in the eighteenth century come to mind. During his time of study in England in the last decades of the nineteenth century, **Gandhi** had come in close association with the prevailing radical ideas that swore by equality and justice. This perhaps was the major reason behind **Gandhi**'s choice of the 'untouchables' and women as the two other sections in Indian society whom he would draw into the National struggle. In the next section we shall attempt an analysis of the dialectics of a canon and the society at large.

1.5 THE DIALECTICS OF CANON AND SOCIETY

When **Gandhi** became active in the Indian National Congress, the ideological perspective we have mentioned above took a back seat while the real task of involving the masses in the political process became the major emphasis. Added to this was the fact that **Gandhi** had chosen the three most oppressed sections of Indian society for involvement in the struggle against imperialism, which became a profound manifestation of the modern rationalist thought. Apart from becoming a political force to reckon with, it set in motion the process of self-questioning in Indian society itself. **Gandhi**'s rationalist attitude and humanist vision became as much a threat to the forces of obscurantism and blind tradition within India as to British imperialism. Thus, the true unity of spirit in the political arena came not from an ideology or theory propounded by a select band of committed individuals but from a vision that sought to combine modern thought and indigenous protest. The nationalism of the Indian National Congress was based on modern rationalist thought and not on any adherence to the Colony's psyche *per se*. People inspired by **Gandhi** would fight as much against the British as they would against the local interests of caste, privilege and creed. The social churning witnessed in the wake of this new and modern kind of struggle was proof that India would engage British imperialism in a different kind of fight.

Let me repeat that **Gandhi** performed during the freedom struggle in India the significant task of politicalising the masses and working through them in such a manner that the British were prevented from pursuing their colonialist agenda. This according to **Gandhi** would be possible only when the Indians adopted modern rational thought and developed the capability of questioning their own orthodoxy, stunted value system as well as belief patterns. We perceive that **Gandhi**'s ideas in the freedom struggle soon radicalised the social atmosphere. His attack on casteism and untouchability caused the latent forces of protest, idealism and change to emerge strongly in the country. Realisation seems to have dawned on the Indian masses as early as the nineteen twenties that the working of the imperialist state structure accompanied by policies of relentless exploitation could be critically examined and questioned. The interesting question we have to ask ourselves is: Who in our society would actually do the said examining and questioning? **Gandhi** found an answer to this question in the radical potentiality of the middle class intelligentsia who would fan out across the length and breadth of the country and let people know how they had to comprehend the world reality of the twentieth century unfolding itself before them. Soon enough, the middle class intelligentsia attracted towards them the youth

among the Indian peasantry and the landless agricultural labour hitherto known as 'untouchables' or *Harijans*. Link it up with the educational network in which colleges and schools became in the nineteen twenties true centres of change-oriented thought. Thus, **Gandhi** saw to it that peasants and labour in India under the broad guidance of the middle classes would offer a united challenge to British imperialism. From here, the emergence of socialist thought was not far behind. In the next section we shall look at **Jawaharlal Nehru**'s role in the evolution of the canon.

1.6 NEHRU AND SOCIALISM

Whereas **Gandhi** represented a consciousness characterised by mobilisation of the masses, **Jawaharlal Nehru** emerged as a visionary in his own right. He had a cogent view of history that placed the present in the larger perspective of human life across boundaries of both space and time. One discerned a combination of secularism, modernity and mysticism in **Gandhi**. On the other hand, **Nehru** believed in approaching the rationale behind a phenomenon and had the propensity to analyse and investigate trends. Also, society for **Nehru** was an entity that moved in history along progress to the extent it adhered to the creed of equality and justice. This made **Nehru** a role model for the emerging intelligentsia across the country. One could call it individualism of a kind. Yet, for **Nehru** the socialist, individualism merged with the radical consciousness of an epoch. Around the mid-nineteen twenties, such an epoch had arrived. The new epoch made possible the rise of sharp and pointed response, ably represented by **Nehru** and **Subhash Chandra Bose**, to contemporary power structures. It immediately caught the attention of urban and semi-urban India that seethed with discontent because the post-War regime became increasingly intolerant of dissent. Freedom of speech became the new war cry of the middle class educated youth. This is amply borne out by representations of the educated rung in **Forster**'s *A Passage to India*, a novel written around the time the Indian masses began articulating their disenchantment and anger.

Jawaharlal Nehru gave a new orientation to the national movement led by **Gandhi** and brought it still closer to the hearts and minds of people. This particularly occurred in the early thirties. In the preceding period, the educated Indian youth had a great deal inspiring about Socialist Russia where a great historical experiment was under way. Socialism was a new humanist doctrine that swore by equality, freedom and social justice. According to socialism, birth had nothing to do with superiority or inferiority, merit or lack of it in an individual. Similarly, it did not matter whether the colour of the skin of a person was black, white or brown. Thirdly and most importantly, socialism stood for classness and fight against economic exploitation. Translated in the Indian context, socialism meant that the British enjoyed no superiority to the Indians and that their so-called superiority lay in their control over economic resources. Divested of it, the British would be as strong or weak as their Indian counterparts.

Socialism also let it be known to India's enlightened youth that the idea of control of economic resources applied equally to the Indians themselves. This was problematic. Whereas Indians would happily oppose the British interests as alien, they would think twice before examining social inequality within themselves. Socialism brought the sharp awareness that Indian industrialists and the landed classes could not be expected to adopt classness, since it entailed equality between them and the poor exploited masses. It is indeed painful to part with economic and social power. Isn't it? On their side, the weak and underprivileged in India found socialism to be a highly inspiring ideal. It was interesting thus to watch the new phenomenon of increased fervour among the common deprived masses and a rising uncertainty regarding social change. Can the idealism of **Gandhi** and the socialism of **Nehru** be linked together? Let us examine whether a link can be forged between the ideologies of the Father of the Nation and the first Prime Minister of independent India in the next section.

1.7 LINKING GANDHI AND NEHRU

What were the links between **Gandhi's** ideal of non-violent protest against the British regime and **Nehru's** concept of socialist rejection of imperialism? We can understand the question only when we refer to the changes taking place in the Indian political spectrum in the post-World War I years. **Gandhi** and **Nehru**, were the pivot of Indian National Movement during these years when they constantly rallied against the British on the political plane as a result of which they went in and came out of the jails at regular intervals. Political activism brought these two great leaders of India in conflict with the mighty administrative machine. In consequence, there was little scope for the freedom movement to remain non-violent and peaceful. Whereas **Gandhi** wished to stick to his beloved doctrine of peace and harmony, **Nehru** looked ahead and saw the future of the country in the socialist ideal of equality. Both were driven by the urge to protect the dignity and integrity of the country and see that India moved in the direction of peace. The question was whether this was possible. It is at this point where **Gandhi** and **Nehru** parted company ideologically, their sticking together and remaining active in the Indian National Congress till the very end notwithstanding.

As suggested above, the ideas of both **Gandhi** and **Nehru** reflected the political situation in India at the grass root level in the sense that they emerged in response to the issues and problems the country faced at the time. The factors of imperialism, Indian nationalism, socialism in Russia that inspired the youth in our country to adopt the perspective of social change, modern consciousness in the third world countries and a threat of change in a number of societies across the globe had combined in the nineteen thirties to really create a situation of crisis. This was in fact the crisis of modern capitalism out to contain contradictions within and outside itself. One of the important manifestations of this crisis was the Great American Depression. India around this time became a kind of cauldron in which different ideas, attitudes and perspectives clashed and vied with each other to emerge stronger than others. Since the country could not be managed in the old traditional way any longer, the British regime was forced to give some democratic rights to the Indians. It became increasingly clear that the situation in the country could get out of hand any moment.

The point disturbing the minds of political leaders and the middle class intelligentsia was: which of the available attitudes – nationalism, harmonious existence with an alien ruling power, induction of political reforms or socialism could fit the bill satisfactorily? An important idea of the time was Gandhian socialism that envisaged the Indian owners of property looking after the interests of the indigenous masses in such a manner that problems of bread, shelter, education and freedom could be adequately addressed. This according to **Gandhi** was possible since the Indian capitalist class would behave as a trustee of national wealth and resources and be driven by the ideals of ethics, philanthropy and morality. **Gandhi** argued that the Indian propertied sections could be prevailed upon to play the role of reformers since they were capable of having a 'change of heart' that would make them responsible economic patrons.

This view of **Gandhi** did not find favour with the Indian youth in the new situation. They were witness to the ambiguous ways of property owners in India many of whom had begun to appreciate and imbibe the liberalism of a section of the English regime. The idea of liberalism in the nineteen thirties in India combined with modernity, new education and a kind of social role that adhered to the principle of reform. According to a section of the new elite who had roots in privilege, one was expected to emulate the western example of living meaningfully, pursuing refinement and culture, amidst inequality, injustice and poverty. For them, rights had to be earned by the multitude of people through a long and peaceful struggle for elegance and dignity. Needless to say that the majority of the educated middle classes of India did not buy this argument and were ever curious to find new answers to the problems

posed by imperialism. **Jawaharlal Nehru** interpreted the phenomenon of imperialism in the nineteen thirties thus:

**Canon Making in
the Era of Gandhi,
Nehru, Socialism**

The British government has long claimed that its rule in India was based on justice and the good of the people of India, and there is no doubt that in the past many of our countrymen believed that there was some little truth in this claim. But now that this rule is seriously challenged by a great popular movement, its real character appears in all its crudity and nakedness, and any one can see the reality of this imperialist exploitation resting on the bayonet. All the covering of gilded forms and soft words has been removed. Special ordinances and the suppression of the most ordinary rights of speech, meeting, the Press, become the ordinary laws and procedure of the country. The greater the challenge to existing authority, the more will this happen. So also when one class seriously threatens another. We can see this happening in our country today in the savage sentences given to the peasants and workers and those who work for them.

(Glimpses of World History, OUP, 547)

A lucid description of the phenomenon meant for his daughter, this passage by **Jawaharlal Nehru** brings out the character of the British regime (crude, naked and exploitative) in realistic terms. Here, our attention gets drawn to the practices of suppression of ordinary civic rights such as speech, meeting, etc. Let us not forget that **Nehru** refers here to the treatment meted out by the British rulers to the peaceful law-abiding citizens. Words such as 'bayonet' and 'savage sentences' only indicate the intolerance those who took upon themselves the responsibility of enlightening and modernising India.

However, such a 'practice' in the political arena needed theorisation. By 'theorisation' we mean a theoretical explanation of actual happenings and events, one that would give an insight into the workings of the prevailing system. Well-read in Marxism and socialist discussions of the period, **Nehru** linked the problem of imperialism and social inequality with what he called a 'system.' The following explanation by **Nehru** of the tangled aspects of social life makes good sense of the scene unfolding at the world level in the nineteen thirties:

If a person belonged to the dominant class, and as such exploited others, this was not a terrible sin for him. He was a part of a system, and it was absurd to call him unkind names. We are much too apt to forget this distinction between individuals and systems. India is under British imperialism, and we fight this imperialism with all our might. But the Englishmen who happen to support this system in India are not to blame. They are just little cogs in a huge machine, powerless to make any difference to its movement. In the same way, some of us may consider the zamindari system out of date and most harmful to the tenantry which is exploited terribly under it. But that again does not mean that the individual zamindar is to blame; so also the capitalists who are often blamed as exploiters. The fault always lies with the system, not with individuals.

(Glimpses, 546-7)

This passage lays stress on the role of a social system in human life and presents capitalism as the main culprit of the travails in the modern world, irrespective of where it is in operation. Thus, it is not the *zamindar* and capitalist who is to blame but the *zamindari* system and capitalism. This is no doubt different from the humanism we associate with the sensitive individual in the modern world. Think of the projected humanism of writers such as **E M Forster** who draw no distinction between people of one country and another but who swear by the virtues and accomplishments of an individual alone. We come across a sort of closed and inaccessible consciousness in **Forster** who maintains a clear distance between him and the rest of humanity. That is not how society and the individual were visualised in the first half of the twentieth century in India. In fact, we notice that according to **Nehru** in the above passage, both *zamindari* system and capitalism are characterised by injustice, both being inimical to the men and women who work within them. Trapped in the logic of a system, people become sufferers and victims. **Nehru's** socialism sought to separate

the structure from those who were mere 'cogs' in the big machine. This is what the earlier phase of the Indian National Movement could not adequately comprehend, when harmony and forbearance received undue emphasis. In this sense, **Nehru's** idea of socialism at once showed the social system in India and that prevailing in England as exploitative and therefore detrimental to our socio-economic and cultural needs. Intellectually, this was a leap forward that entirely changed the perspective of struggle against the British. It also made India's clash with the alien rule truly decisive.

1.8 LET US SUM UP

The Indian National Movement spearheaded by **Gandhi** and **Nehru** since the end of World War I had generated a great deal of excitement among the youth of India who craved for freedom and justice. This section of our society developed great reading habits and a curiosity to know about events and happenings in India and the world. They were inspired by the ideals of honesty, simplicity, courageous behaviour and self-respect. More than all these, they became committed to the change at the grass root level, taking their endeavour as close to the masses as possible. There is no wonder that the era of **Gandhi** and **Nehru** in the twentieth century changed the very concepts of morality, ethics and meaningful life and inspired people to interpret their existence in genuine secular terms. Whereas western life and thought were marked by despondency and stagnation in the first half of the twentieth century (phrases such as 'there is no water,' 'lack of certitude' and 'nothing to be done' come to mind), Indian masses in the corresponding period moved towards a future expected to meet their truly humanist aspirations. An unprecedented surge in literatures of the Indian languages bears ample testimony to this. This literature took off from where the realistic secular writing of England, France and America had left in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Even the English Writing in India did not remain untouched by this phenomenon in which projections of life such as witnessed in **Mulk Raj Anand's** novels vied for honours with their counterparts in Indian languages. Old definitions (orthodox, sectarian and irrational) of life and literature were discarded to give place to a number of new and challenging ideas that would excite and enthuse citizens of an independent country. This became possible because collective thought and practice in India increasingly assumed the nature of secular humanist protest against the forces of exploitation.

1.9 QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the role of Mahatma Gandhi in the formation of a new canon in India.
2. Comment on the direction Jawaharlal Nehru gave to the idea of change in India's freedom struggle.
3. Bring out the specific emphases Gandhiji introduced in India's political life.
4. What is the relevance of socialism to a colony engaged in struggle against an imperial power? Discuss.

UNIT 2 TAGORE, PREMCHAND, MULK RAJ ANAND AND RAJA RAO

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Tagore and the Formulation of a New Canon
 - 2.2.1 Tagore's Radicalism in Literature
 - 2.2.2 A Closer Look at Ghore Bahire / The House and The World
 - 2.2.3 Ghore Bahire / The House and The World: The Country and its Politics
- 2.3 Contextualising Premchand
 - 2.3.1 Why did Premchand Write in Hindi
 - 2.3.2 Premchand and Cultural Activism
- 2.4 Mulk Raj Anand
 - 2.4.1 Mulk Raj Anand and His Choice of Language
 - 2.4.2 Mulk Raj Anand's Coolie
- 2.5 Raja Rao
 - 2.5.1 Raja Rao's Kanthapura
- 2.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.7 Questions

2.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we take up the issue of an Indian canon that evolved in the midst of the Indian National Movement in the early twentieth century. India-centered, this canon had little to do with what was happening in the European cultural-literary world at the time. At the same time, this canon was not English-centered either in the way Indian English writing was in the nineteenth century or it has been in the closing decades of the twentieth century in the hands of writers such as **Amitav Ghosh** and **Vikram Seth**. India was struggling at the time of early National movement to find its own distinct voice that would resist the British imperialist ways and carve a path entirely its own. Later, this canon would become the bedrock upon which entire edifice of what is known as Indian literature would rest. We shall take a few significant examples from Indian writing to show the highly inspiring and challenging nature of this canon.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, we shall focus upon the literary perspectives of **Tagore**, **Premchand**, **Mulk Raj Anand** and **Raja Rao** to examine the way in which a distinct canon emerged in their works in the intricate process of the unfolding of the writer-society dialectic. In the beginning, let us have a look at the contribution of **Tagore** towards the forging of a new radical canon in Indian writing.

2.2 TAGORE AND THE FORMULATION OF A NEW CANON

Tagore is one of the very first modern writers in India. In fact, we can see modernity defining itself in **Tagore's** works. In the eighteen eighties, for instance, it would have been rather difficult to think of such a thing as modernity, a concept helpful from then on to positively interpret situations in which people found themselves trapped. It

is in the case of **Tagore's** writings alone that we come across a vision equally linked with the questions of the late nineteenth century India and the urge on the part of Indians to find answers to them. The trend started by **Tagore** immediately caught the imagination of writers in different Indian languages. In the preceding unit, we have seen how the social situation in India necessitated an attitude totally critical of tradition on the one side and the oppressive British regime on the other. Let us begin by examining **Tagore's** Radicalism.

2.2.1 Tagore's Radicalism in Literature

Tagore is known for making a radical departure from the traditional ways of expression in literature and exploring new areas of life and culture in it. Most of the Indian writing before **Tagore's** arrival on the scene devoted itself to depicting mythical aspects of love, morality and faith and fought shy of tackling secular issues such as marriage, social deprivation and misery. Little attention was paid at the time to the specific conditions the people of a colony faced. Add to this the fact that Indian writing in English in the nineteenth century had also concerned itself with nature, romanticism and abstract ethics rather than with the crisis faced by the Indian people. **Tagore** freed Indian writing from myth, legend and vague notions of heroism or valour of the kings and princes in India. He brought to centre-stage those men and women who had their roots in the ordinary ways of life – in villages, small towns and cities. To these men and women, he accorded the pride of place of decision-making, initiative and courage. This indeed was a big leap from the tales of mystery and wonder happenings in medieval forts and palaces that filled the pages of contemporary fiction in the Indian languages. **Tagore** showed the new way of coming to terms with a reality that stared in the face of each thinking individual in India and demanded from him / her a concrete resolution of problems. Of course, the resolution was seldom articulated in fiction or poetry since it required a specific working out on the cultural-political plane. In the next section we shall try and concretise this aspect with illustrations from **Tagore's** novel, *Ghore Bahire / The Home and the World*.

2.2.2 A Closer Look At *Ghore Bahire / The Home and the World*

This novel has three characters, Bimala, Nikhil and Sandip, at the centre of it, each having a distinct opinion and voice. They constitute a triangle and interact with one another in a variety of ways. No romantic or love-triangle this. In fact, **Tagore** has introduced Bimala as an ordinary-looking woman, married to Nikhil and accustomed to what was called 'home' at the time. Happy in her situation and faithfully pursuing her homely ideals of loyalty to husband and family (it is a traditional landlord family with a well-charted code of conduct), Bimala sees her environs to be the world she is born to inhabit. The position in which **Tagore** has placed Bimala carries the reader right in the beginning of the novel into the heart of the matter – is it enough for a woman in India to be in the confines of the home or to look beyond it at the larger world for a different and bigger role. Imagine the scene of a family with the woman at the centre of it. Does it not appear in India to be the case after almost a century of when the novel was composed? **Tagore** raises the question of the role of the woman and her attitude towards the family structure in a manner that would have shocked the orthodox and the traditionalists in a big way in the early twentieth century India. In *The Home and the World*, **Tagore** seeks to redefine the woman, the husband-wife relationship and the family (the joint family structure) in such a way that the woman could be visualised as entering the political world, a male bastion. This brings us to the next important question of the country and its politics.

2.2.3 *Ghore Bahire / The Home and The World*: The Country and its Politics

In *The Home and the World*, the 'world,' or 'country' to be more precise, signifies the larger Indian space and society across ethnic, regional, cultural and linguistic

boundaries. In the early twentieth century, the multitude of the masses in India saw the country in regional terms. **Tagore** has the imaginative sweep to raise the country at the level of entire subcontinent called India engaged in a political battle with the British. This again is a new idea. Here, **Tagore**'s attitude is marked by not merely curiosity about a newly emerged phenomenon but the urge to explore the scope of what can be called a 'country.' Being a poet at heart and a visionary, **Tagore** had embraced the inspiring ideal of indivisible humanism that did not distinguish between societies and races. Also, **Tagore** looked at the individual in all societies to be the centre of interest – it was the 'individual' who carried within him the seeds of all-pervasive humanity. In **Tagore**'s writing, we come across the creative-experimenting individual innately endowed with the capacity to relate with humanity as a collective expression of his / her own aspirations. This notion of the creative individual is fully investigated in *The Home and the World* and found concretised in the character of Nikhil. A deeply understanding soul, Nikhil urges his wife Bimala to study and understand the contemporary world from a new angle. Bimala is homebound, secure and contented to begin with but has the longing to comprehend the phenomenon surrounding her. This brings her in contention with the idea of the 'country' or the 'nation.' The two mean more or less the same thing to **Tagore**. Isn't this a genuine issue facing India at the time **Tagore** composed *The Home and the World*?

In my opinion, **Tagore** found the issue of the country genuine but its grasp and comprehension by the thinkers of his age did not adequately match the genuineness. We see a creative strategy at work in *The Home and the World*. **Tagore** the writer and Nikhil the 'spokesperson' of the author place Bimala on the 'border' that separate, the home and the world. Sandip is the character that symbolises the sharp and unmistakable nationalism. Sandip is a nationalist to the core. The question is – to what extent is Sandip's nationalism marked by the requirements of the times in which he lives? For Sandip, the glory of India lives in its long heritage and tradition where the soul of the country thrives. He connects the concept of Shakti with Bimala. The latter according to him is capable of evolving into an idol that others in the country would look up to and worship.

Under the perspective of nationalism, Sandip designs for himself in *The Home and the World* the role of a dynamic and inspiring leader. He would lead India upfront and mould the masses as it were into an energy, a fire that would extinguish the enemy. He seethes with anger that an alien power has settled here to not merely exploit India's rich resources but to weaken its psyche and demoralise its people. As he wishes to put a stop to this, he would collect an army of ardent activists and make them fan around the length and breadth of the country. To further give an edge to his nationalist efforts, he has plans to introduce women's power in the struggle against imperialism. For the representation of Sandip in *The Home and the World*, **Tagore** uses rhetoric. The question is, why? In my opinion, the reason is that **Tagore** wishes to highlight through Sandip's behaviour a whole rational and humanist critique of the contemporary nationalism. What, is meant by this is that as far as **Tagore** is concerned, nationalism of an uncompromising kind would not do. Instead, Indians at the time had to understand their own ideological parameters and see whether those met the standards of modernity. In Sandip's self-assurance and vehemence lies couched arrogance and blind faith.

What does Bimala stand for in *The Home and the World* as well as India at the time? So far as her innocence goes, she represents the Indian masses. It was indeed true that ordinary Indians around the turn of the century stood more or less detached from the current political happenings. Not able to follow the implications of the nationalist effort aimed to throw out the British, Indians looked at the scene around them with mere wonder. When the same effort, however, plans to involve and connect the masses with it, problem of explaining and interpreting nationalism emerges. This is the crux. The times required not individual martyrdom but the act of the whole country rising in revolt against the foreign rule. Connected with this was the second issue of which we have talked above at some length – the role of the family with the woman at the centre of it. In the context, **Tagore** critiques the family, too which he sees, at one level at least, as inseparable from the woman in India. The interesting

thing, however, is that **Tagore's** mouthpiece **Nikhil** in *The Home and the World* does not think so. There is the experiment of breaking the family and throwing in the woman into the national movement as the essential point on which *The Home and the World* is intellectually as well as artistically woven.

Let us draw a few inferences from this discussion of **Tagore's** *The Home and the World*. The writer in the early twentieth century India, remember that the country was a colony and its writer was thus placed in a different position than his/her western counterpart, was forced to come to terms with socio-political as well as cultural issues. The writer of the time placed in a colony could not stand apart from one's environment and weave tales of magic and romance. This the nineteenth century Indian writer largely tended to do but as the century drew to a close, a social movement of distrust and disaffection had started gathering momentum. This transformed the very ideas and emphases that the cultural voices would take note of and articulate. The ideas we have mentioned include identity, women's role in society, nationalism, modernity and the nature of political struggle against the alien rule. We have also seen the process in which new ideas and questions take shape in a context different from the one existing previously. **Tagore** symbolises at the turn of the century a cultural temperament daring enough to investigate contentious issues at the same time evolving itself towards an enriched understanding of complex social scenario unfolding itself in various ways. In the next section let us examine the contribution of a great Hindi writer who was **Tagore's** contemporary.

2.3 CONTEXTUALISING PREMCHAND

The Hindi writer **Premchand** was a young contemporary of **Tagore**. Junior to **Tagore** by more than two decades, **Premchand** appears to have looked at the Indian scene in the early twentieth century radically differently. Sharing the concern for India and the National Movement with his illustrious predecessor, **Premchand** visualised the change in his larger surroundings in the slow process of an evolving consciousness. **Premchand** was not an 'artist' at heart the way **Tagore** was. He scarcely thought of appreciating nature, the culture of the region he belonged to or glories of the human heart. His bent of mind derived from the late nineteenth century emergence of the *Arya Samaj* movement in north India, a movement given to reforming the rigid Hindu thought. *Arya Samaj* swore by education, modernity, rational discourse and difference of opinion. Its biggest and most profound protest was against *Sanatan Dharma* and idol worship. For *Arya Samaj*, the intervening centuries between the early rise of knowledge in ancient India and the ethos of enlightenment in the nineteenth century were marked by blind faith, rituals and strict moral codes. The movement exhorted people to think for themselves, and have the courage to discard all that were obsolete and useless. As a movement, *Arya Samaj* believed in propaganda, discussion and debate. It sought to bring to the door of the masses its message of change in attitude and reforming the Hindu society. *Arya Samaj* also preferred to learn from any quarter irrespective of the place or direction from where knowledge emanated. The acronym *DAV* in the educational programme in the *Arya Samaj* movement stood for *Dayanand Anglo Vedic* that signified a meaningful merging of the western with the Indian. There is no wonder that the movement caught the imagination of the whole of north India giving it an orientation unprecedented in Indian thought.

In 1900, **Premchand** was all of nineteen years, a young man fired by the idealism of questioning, rejection and change. He had also evolved in himself around this time the capacity to correlate social reform with politics. He saw not only a close connection between the two but, an integration that was profoundly significant. Social reform by itself demanded that an individual think of playing a role in his environment moving around and engaging people in discussion. Politics required of the individual to grasp the nature of the ruling regime in its many ways, the strategies

the regime adopted to implement its policies at various levels. Combine this with the fact that **Premchand** knew Urdu, English and the main dialect of his region (eastern Uttar Pradesh) quite well. All these pointed towards an activist propensity in the socio-cultural world. These made **Premchand** a writer.

**Tagore, Premchand,
Mulk Raj Anand and
Raja Rao**

2.3.1 Why Did Premchand Write in Hindi?

Premchand is placed in Indian literature at a time when there was very little in the name of modern literary forms. Barring a few examples, fiction was nonexistent. Realising that religious myths and folk tales would not do in an era marked by upheavals, **Premchand** turned to dealing with secular issues in literary writing. Why did **Premchand** choose fiction to be the dominant mode of writing in his case? The answer is simple. He knew that fiction is by nature interesting. It absorbs the reader in its world of fantasy and puts him/her in touch with reality at a level different from that encountered in poetry. Still more precisely, fiction provides scope to the writer to explain, elaborate and dramatise important events of life. It also enabled the writer to share his/her perspective in a subtle imaginative way. Subtle and simple at the same time – subtle since the reader seldom realised that s/he was face to face with actual happenings and simple since the issues depicted in fiction were always ‘actual.’

For **Premchand**, the choice of language also became an important aspect of cultural-social-political practice. Broadly speaking (not in the sense we use the term today) language was merely a ‘vehicle’ of expression to reach the wide variety of readers. Initially, **Premchand** thought of Urdu as the language through which he would confront his reader. This worked as far as it went. But **Premchand** realised in the course of his writing that one could reach the common reader better through Hindi. This was at a time when Hindi was struggling to come into its own, a medium capable of meeting the changing requirements of the unfolding cultural scenario. **Premchand**’s creativity was of a peculiar kind. It was seldom individual-centered or self-reflexive. At the same time, it was ever prepared to learn, understand and experiment. Communication being the central concern of **Premchand** in literature, it became soon clear to him that the kind of Hindi the contemporaneity needed did not exist and that, therefore, it had to be forged anew. **Premchand** retained the Urdu sentence structure and brought into it an increasing number of words from spoken Hindi. What is ‘spoken Hindi’ if not an amalgam of ordinary dialect and an established sentence structure. Still further, the best Hindi for which **Premchand** is known as a stylist is found in the dialogues he gives to his characters. It is here that **Premchand** captures the true speech rhythms and cadences of the language he adopted for his writing.

To repeat, **Premchand** found his true vocation in ‘communicating to his reader a point of view and a perspective at once Indian, radical and political’. He derived his strength solely from the commitment he had to the needs and requirements of his reader who would read literature to make sense of what s/he came across in contemporary life. In his writing, **Premchand** presented the dynamics, the process of growth through the clash of existing forces, of his time in such a manner that the potential and the actual appeared parts of an indivisible reality. Yet, he put across the feeling for the benefit of the reader that the India of the existing period awaited an interventionist attitude from the mass of ordinary people, the collectivity that bore the brunt of British imperialism and Indian orthodoxy simultaneously.

To be with **Premchand** is to be with a mind that enlightens all the vital aspects of early twentieth century Indian life, aspects such as dignity, moral strength and heroism of the ordinary masses. One has only to think of **Premchand**’s famous short story *Panch Parmeshwar* published in 1916 showing an old helpless widow taking cudgels against an ungrateful nephew and the village community structure of which he is a part. Here, **Premchand** comes down heavily on the relatively more influential sections in a village community and extends sympathy to a woman supported by none initially. At the same time, **Premchand** shows in the same environment the potentiality of humanist conduct, honesty and fair play. It is reported that both **Gandhiji** and **Tagore** found this short story to be of immense humanist value and

cultural significance. **Gandhiji** recommended this short story as a kind of model for the upcoming writers of the day. **Gandhiji** had noticed that most writers in Indian languages showed the inclination to adhere to a preconceived notion of desirability in writing or they kept entirely kept away from the demands of the times with respect to the issues meant to be raised in writing.

2.3.2 Premchand and Cultural Activism

Cultural activism is what I associate with **Premchand**. However, it is interesting to note that **Premchand** appealed tremendously to those who demanded literature to be realistic and humanistic. **Premchand**'s characters, for instance, would be clearly identified as representing typical tendencies of the age to which they belonged. These characters in **Premchand**'s action stood for the same entrapment by social structures in the world they inhabited that existed in the actual world outside. One example would make it amply clear. In *Goddaan* (*The Gift of the Cow*), the protagonist Hori is ruthlessly exploited by the prevailing economic and social structure. Firstly, he stands on the wrong side of the caste-ridden society around him. Secondly, he has internalised the value of his masters who on their part cynically take advantage of his innocence and simple-mindedness. Does he have a way out of the situation in which he finds himself placed? The question is indeed significant since a situation seemingly innocuous (that is how Hori views it) is oppressive rooted as it is in a class system benefiting only the rulers. That **Premchand** conceived *Godaan* primarily as tragic novel reflects his realistic as well as clearly political attitude.

Godaan belongs to the nineteen thirties, a period witnessing the Gandhian thought enter a phase of crisis. The Indian National Movement at the time had gone closer to the interests of what can be called the bourgeois class, a class realising gradually that their future was not secure in the hands of a radical India. On the other side, the Indian masses comprising the huge chunk of the peasantry and the other poor would forge ahead only if the National Movement evolved in the direction of egalitarianism and ownership of land. But if the ownership of land went to the peasantry, the landlords would lose all their economic power and social privileges. As the decisive phase of the movement approached, landlords in India began looking towards the Indian National Congress as their possible saviour. The Congress, too, on its part became wary of the emerging socialist trend that **Jawaharlal Nehru** of the thirties represented and became increasingly suspicious of the doctrine of change it had so strongly espoused in the preceding period. The crisis I talk of in the context of **Premchand**'s *Godaan*. *Godaan* is bound to be thus a novel of the tragedy of the Indian peasant.

What we learn from the example of **Premchand** is that the writer in the Gandhian phase of the Indian National Movement had finally hit a road-block, so to say, beyond which the terrain of change was difficult. This phase in the last stages of its movement compelled the writer to rethink his/her role in a society struggling to break free from the shackles of imperialism. All of a sudden, as it were, **Premchand** finds the peasant in India to be helpless and tragic, a state from which it is not easy to move out. **Premchand** also realises that Gandhian idealism is not sufficient to tackle the socio-economic problems of the country since it leans too heavily on the active individual out to mobilise the masses and infuse in them the need to radicalise society. What is required perhaps is an entirely different perspective where the labouring masses themselves begin to grasp their condition and 'fate.' There are no examples in British or American fiction of this kind of concern in literature. The reason is that whereas European and American societies were to struggle against the 'enemy' forces from within, the colony called India had to contend with the social environment much more complex and daunting. Add to this the fact that the Indian writer found himself/herself tied to the reality of illiteracy, caste, orthodoxy, faith-based religion (a paradox indeed!) and other beliefs-systems – all unfriendly and impervious to rational analysis. In one sentence, **Premchand** stood for a writing committed to change in society at all levels that he perceived through his life with a

2.4 MULK RAJ ANAND

Mulk Raj Anand's writing in English, particularly in the pre-Independence period, marks an important phase in English writing in India. It is an important chapter in the phenomenon of English writing in our country in that it broke totally free from the conventional mode in that writing. Rather than being an attempt to formulate individual responses, **Anand's** writing in fact goes somewhat further than that of both of his predecessors – **Tagore** and **Premchand**. As we know, **Tagore** and **Premchand** shunned English for the purpose of literary writing. We have briefly considered in this unit why they did so and the use to which they put the particular Indian language they chose for expressing themselves. **Anand** chose to write in English. But he wrote as an Indian writer, a writer who merged his voice with that of the masses in India. This aspect is significant since it shows for the first time in India's history that English, the language of a few in the country, could be used for reform and change not merely in the realm of thought and politics but also literature.

2.4.1 Mulk Raj Anand and His Choice of Language

In the case of **Mulk Raj Anand**, it was clear from the beginning that he had decided to devote himself to the cause of India's independence and project a socio-political message for the benefit of the English-knowing in the country. From the point of view of perspective, **Anand** is not just 'committed,' but shows inclination to propagate an opinion. **Anand** would let it be known, for instance, that he was a 'socialist,' that, he adhered to the doctrine of humanism realising its goals in a man-made society. To repeat, society or the human world with its rules and principles was not a Godly creation but a phenomenon in the making of which people themselves had an important part to play. I call this the dominant perspective of the nineteenth century. In the previous unit of this block, we have dealt with this aspect in some detail. Let us now look at **Mulk Raj Anand's** novel *Coolie* in the next section to illustrate what we have been talking about.

2.4.2 Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie*

Anand's commitment to the Indian masses reflected itself in the selection of social groups he depicted and the issues he projected in his writing. In novel after novel, **Anand** took note of the plight of the ordinary people, be it coolies, 'untouchables,' poor peasants or workers. In his novel *Coolie*, for instance, **Anand** represented the life of the meanest of labourers in the country, a person who used his bare body to make a living, who had no shelter, no protection, no security. These were the people who had roots in India's villages but were forced to shift to the cities in view of hunger and deprivation rampant in their rural surroundings. In *Coolie*, **Anand** does not sentimentalise. Instead, he uses long descriptions as well as dialogues where he shows the manner in which people live and think and the manner in which they express their feelings as important responses to the prevailing circumstances.

Anand's characters are close to the earth – simple, straightforward and honest. They relate to the rest of their kind with ease and spontaneously form a group. This itself becomes a comment on the social structure existing at the time. It is interesting to see that a detailed account of the miseries of the labourers in the city starts pointing towards the behaviour of the upper echelons who indeed are callous and insensitive.

Anand's method is clinical – detached and concerned about the plight of the masses at the same time. There is also a sort of humour that reflects sympathy for the downtrodden. But the ending of the novel is tragic since the author sees no hope in the circumstances he has depicted. But there is indeed hope hidden in the authorial attitude. **Anand's** sense of detachment, humour and indulgence towards the characters of the deprived sections reveals that the collectivity of the deprived in

India is to be recognised as a impressive potentiality for meaningful change. In another novel, *Untouchable*, written around the same time, **Anand** shows an anger assuming larger dimensions. The scavengers of the town deciding to strike against the comfort-loving upper classes is an indication in the novel that the Indian society of the nineteen thirties is anything but static. Deliberately perhaps, **Anand** in this novel extends the scope of Gandhian vision to encompass the possibility of revolt. According to the author, harmony and mutuality exist in society only when space is given to all as fellow human beings. Since that is not the case, it is imperative that a current of unease and anger would sooner or later flow through the atmosphere. So far we have discussed **Tagore**, **Premchand** and **Anand** in the light of their contributions to the establishment of new canons in Indian English Writing. Let us now look at yet another writer of the same period- **Raja Rao** in the next section.

2.5 RAJA RAO

Whereas **Mulk Raj Anand's** writing preferred simple though sharply political aspects of life for representation, **Raja Rao** showed a penchant for ideological and philosophical issues in his fictional pieces. Yet around the time of Independence, he grappled with such important trends of thought as Gandhianism. The choice of the issue of Gandhianism necessitated that he move closer to the mundane reality of the time. His well-known novel *Kanthapura* is a case in point. Here, **Rao's** concern is for the small happenings of a village caught in the process of the unfolding nationalist movement in India. The question that the ordinary people of the village confront is whether **Gandhi** is a human figure in flesh and blood or a political phenomenon. The village is face to face with a follower of **Gandhi**, a political activist and a member of the Congress Party. First looked at with awe and wonder, this figure is gradually accepted in the village as one of its own. People come forward to seek guidance from him as they find his presence in the village truly inspiring. The final outcome and result of the activities of this figure is that the village gets transformed into a hub of dynamic political struggle and becomes a symbol of protest against the workings of an alien rule.

What catches our attention in *Kanthapura* is its emphasis on the human urge to participate in collective life. This is what we clearly discern in the novel where individualities merge into a larger consciousness. The myths of humanity and country combine in the novel to assume gigantic proportions of a revolutionary struggle. The reader enters a trance-like state in which distinctions between ordinary human beings and epic heroes get blurred. In the novel, the language, too, becomes unusual with constant repetitions of phrase and expression as well as sentence patterns evoking the idea of a transcendental happening.

2.5.1 Tagore, Premchand, Anand and Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*

To what extent is *Kanthapura* a continuation of **Tagore**, **Premchand** and **Mulk Raj Anand** in Indian fiction? Further, do we see similarities between literary responses represented in the writing in Indigenous languages and English, a language of the colonial masters? In answer to the first question, one can say that all these writers are bound by the concern they have for their surroundings. They address actual issues of a colonial society irrespective of the language chosen by them to hold a dialogue with their readers. Yes, the spirit of writing of all these authors is of conversing, debating and discussing with their readers. This to a certain extent answers the second question also. The only difference is that when we consider the use of a specific language in a colony, problems crop up concerning the audience selected by the author. Both **Anand** and **Rao** wrote consciously for the English-knowing Indians as also for those sensitive souls among the British who looked at the phenomenon of confrontation between the ruling and subject nations in an objective and unprejudiced manner. On their part, the English-knowing Indians did not relate as closely with the surroundings

as those deeply rooted in an Indian ethos and a language. As a result of this, one notices a sort of abstraction in **Anand** and **Rao** who seem to be driven more by the 'purpose' of writing than the urge to narrate things in a normal realistic manner. This may partly be ascribed to the expectations of the English-knowing reader who may look for 'developed' techniques in the books s/he selects to read. The same can influence the overall outlook of an author engaged in depicting a reality from an avowedly cultural/ political position. Needless to say, the writer-reader relationship is anything but simple and straightforward.

**Tagore, Premchand,
Mulk Raj Anand and
Raja Rao**

In this unit so far, we have dealt with the question of difference between literature written in a native language and that in the language of the colonial master, in our case English. This question has profound significance in the Indian context since we can see in the comparison between the two kinds of writing a number of variations emanating from the language chosen. We have also noticed that the historical context has an overarching presence and thus leaves a strong impact on literary writing. It is indeed interesting to examine particular literary trends in a colonial context, more so when antagonisms between the colonial power and the colony have a decisive phase.

2.6 LET US SUM UP

This unit, has discussed four major literary voices of India. **Tagore, Premchand, Mulk Raj Anand** and **Raja Rao** who evolved as writers in the process of participation at the socio-cultural level. They learnt a great deal from the political environment they lived in. At the same time, they articulated in their own individual ways the perspectives that emerged in the different phases of the freedom struggle. They produced their own literary canons and redefined boundaries of ideological and creative worlds. The thread of intellectual growth seen in their writing reflects a movement from the humanist-rational to genuinely nationalistic and finally to committed socialist attitude. The human-centered segment of post-Independence writing in India owes immensely to these writers whose standards of literary expression are remarkably high. The canon developed by these writers is capable of fundamentally exposing the drawbacks and limitations of both modernist writing in the Indian languages and in English. The newly-emerged diaspora-oriented writing in Indian English where we notice a strong individualistic as well as anarchist streak has to look back at the genuinely humanist concerns in **Tagore, Premchand, Mulk Raj Anand** and **Raja Rao** for enriching itself in appeal and relevance.

2.7 QUESTIONS

- 1) Write a critical note on Tagore's role as a writer in the early twentieth century Indian context.
- 2) How did Premchand meet the cultural demands made on him by the society of his time? In what respect does his fiction differ from that of his contemporaries?
- 3) Compare Premchand's writing with that of Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao and investigate the way in which they come to terms with the problem of language and reader from their respective positions.

UNIT 3 FEMINISM: INDIAN ENGLISH WRITERS

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 The Feminist Movement and Feminist Literary Criticism
- 3.3 The Women's Movement in the Indian Context
- 3.4 Evolving the Canon: Issues and Problems
- 3.5 A Sample of Women's Writing
- 3.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.7 Questions

3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, we shall look at the literary agenda of Feminism in order to determine what would qualify as a feminist canon of Indian writers in English. We will begin by looking at Feminism as a political movement in the western world and the role of feminist literary theory and practice that grew around it. We will raise the question whether there is an Indian feminist literary theory around which there may be a body of writers and what is the scope and limitations of Indian feminist literary theory in the context of Indian writing in English. We will go on to discuss the problematic nature of evolving a feminist canon in India in the absence of a female aesthetic theory. As a first step towards evolving a canon, we will then undertake a brief survey of women writers who may qualify as feminist writers.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Feminism, like all social positions is highly self-conscious and works with an agenda. Thus it is important to say at first that feminism in literature should not be considered ahistorically. Clearly, we have to familiarise ourselves with the central tenets of Feminism. We need to see at what point in history it was born and why. The issue of process is also important. We have to understand how feminism becomes a movement, what particular tendencies it shows and how it is constantly evolving itself. In particular we need to see how feminism manifests itself in India and in Indian writing in English. In this attempt we will restrict ourselves to women and women's writing 1980 onwards. We will see if there is a feminist theory of literature in Indian English writing or whether Indian writers in English move towards a feminist agenda by virtue of their choice of subject and/or mode of expression. We have to point out here that mere cataloguing of women's lives and woes is not feminism. There is a tendency to lump all women's writing as feminist writing just as it is often mistakenly assumed that only women are feminists. It is important to emphasise here that it is not enough to be a woman writer to be a feminist writer. Though, most of you are already familiar with Feminist Studies and Feminist Criticism, having done it in the **MEG 05 Course: Literary Theory and Criticism**, we shall none the less look at the feminist agenda in some detail in the next few sections of this unit.

In the next sections, we will examine feminism as a social movement and also consider it at the level of theory before we come to scrutinise Indian writing in English. In this scrutiny we will not consider male writers at all, or women writing before 1980 or the writing of the Indian 'diaspora'. Also we will only look at the genre of the novel and the short story.

3.2 THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT AND FEMINIST LITERARY CRITICISM

Feminism is a cultural- intellectual movement that recognises the fact of oppression of women and seeks ways to emancipate them. For centuries now, there has been a tradition of writing about the problem of women's unequal position in society and some of these have proposed solutions. Historically, there have been contributions from both men and women. As early as 1792, **Mary Wollstonecraft** wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, which discusses writers like **Milton**, **Pope** and **Rousseau**. **John Stuart Mill** carried on the tradition with *On the Subjection of Women* (1869) and *The Origin of the Family* (1884). **Olive Schreiner** wrote *Women and Labor* (1911) and **Virginia Woolf** in her essay, *A Room of One's Own* (1929), writes movingly about the unequal access to education and the lack of alternatives available to women who sought options other than marriage and motherhood. In 1949, **Simone De Beauvoir** writes the landmark treatise, *The Second Sex* that discusses among other things the representations of women in literary works and male attitudes towards them. She includes a significant discussion of women in the novels of **D H Lawrence**.

Thus we see that women have been writing about their experiences in a male - dominated society but it is in the 1960s in America that the feminist movement takes a concrete shape and widens its scope. Feminist thought thereafter, impacts not only the social sciences and humanities, but, every branch of academic study, including the study of the sciences. The feminist trend recognised very early that literature provides the role models that indicate to men and women, especially literate, educated and therefore, cultured men and women, of what is approved and acceptable as 'feminine' modes of conduct, feminine goals and aspirations. The 'literariness' of the Feminist Movement of the 1960s was a given, an achieved fact from the start because of its concern with the following:

- It examined the representations of women in literature and questioned the mode and manner of the construction of those representations
- It saw as crucial the necessity to question the circumstances and authority and purpose of the constructions
- It positioned itself to combat the ideology that existing images of women propagated in society
- It realised the importance of working through books, literature and other mass media circulation of images of women as the most pragmatic way of influencing everyday conduct and attitudes.

Let us find some connections within this complex of concerns. Patriarchy means the structures through which male domination over women is achieved. The central focus of feminist writing and thinking in the 1970s is the investigation and elaboration of patriarchal systems. Feminist writing seeks to expose the mindset in men and women that perpetuates gender inequality. Particular attention is paid to male writers constructing typical and influential images of women. Feminist criticism of the period is necessarily abrasive, polemical and combative. Add to this the fact that in the 1980s, feminist criticism began to be influenced by the development of other branches of literary theory. It also veered away from the critique of a male version of the world. It recognised that the history of civilisation has been constructed as the history of men, and women have been rendered invisible in that narrative. Feminism then seeks to recuperate women from the margins of history and make women's experience visible. In other words, it explores the nature of women's experiences and seeks to restore the lost or suppressed narratives of women's experience.

It is in this phase of the 1980s that the Anglo-American literary world goes about constructing the canon of women's writing. To do this it has to rewrite the history of the novel (the preferred and popular genre), and poetry to highlight the achievements of women writers who had been neglected. Radical Feminist literary theory qualifies

its agenda as moral and political criticism. It takes a stand, is ideological and revolutionary in that it brings in change. It is *praxis* and will effect genuine social improvement. The feminist critic identifies both a text's absences, its gaps and silences, and also its liberating tendencies, its ability to project a utopian vision where equality of gender is possible, as is resistance to patriarchy.

What then is Feminist literature? Because of its origin in the women's movement feminist criticism values literature that can serve the cause of the movement, that is, the emancipation of women. Viewed this way literature must in the words of **Cherie Register**, do one or more of the following:

*It must serve as a forum for women; help to achieve cultural androgyny;
provide role models; promote sisterhood and augment consciousness-raising.*

3.3 THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

There are a number of problems in defining the canon here. Firstly, the women's movement in India was a social movement that had to factor in the highly stratified nature of Indian society. Thus it dealt with variables not only of gender and class but also caste, region and religion. In India there is not one patriarchy. "Patriarchies" emerge because of their overlapping with feudalism, caste and with rural and urban experiences.

Secondly, the earliest feminists were men who had set out to introduce reforms in upper caste Hindu society addressing social evils like child marriage, dowry, female illiteracy and the practice of *sati*. This necessarily limited their goals and vision since they did not question patriarchy or its unequal distribution of property rights. Many latter day feminist scholars felt that this agenda overlapped or intersected the agenda of the National movement which was an upper caste, Hindu, male-dominated one, and that women had been used to further the nationalist agenda without any redressal of their true positions in society as unequal and oppressed beings on the basis of gender.

Thirdly, feminist readings of literature and society came out of the works of historians, sociologists, social workers, political theorists and not out of departments of English Literature. In fact, feminist writing in English in India is largely in the nature of critical responses to literature, history and society. In other words, literary production in English lacked a feminist perspective or a feminist literary theory that was culture - specific. It is clear that when we come to the Indian context, in order to evolve a feminist canon of Indian English writing, we need to depend on the definitions and perspectives provided by the Anglo- American tradition.

Finally and most importantly, all significant feminist writing by men and women, and there is a large corpus of it, was in the regional literatures as it continues to be even today. Though Indian writing in English has been singularly lacking in a feminist perspective. However, the female voice or figure or concern or world has registered to a considerable extent in Indian English Writing. But in evolving the canon of feminist Indian English Writing, we first need to evolve the theory of a female aesthetic. In the absence of any authoritative definition of a female aesthetic we need to consider very carefully, the many ways in which writing can be feminist. Let us see in what ways we can talk about a canon of Feminism among Indian English Writers. We can approach the evolution of a Feminist canon by asking in what ways a writer may be considered a feminist. We shall next discuss the issues involved in evolving such a canon.

3.4 EVOLVING THE CANON: ISSUES AND PROBLEMS

The first issue that must be addressed in writing about Feminism in Indian English writers is, whether it exists at all. Many writers have stated that their gender is incidental and that they write, as sensitive human beings and that their subjects or the forms they choose are not dictated by their being female. Yet there are areas of experience that are available only to women or which are ignored by men or described by them in their male-centred terms. Women writers have considered such experiences worthy of exploration and female patterns of living and dealing with the world have produced a female perspective.

The female perspective is often problematised by the fact that patriarchy or male norms are so deeply embedded in the female consciousness that often the literature of revolt or protest uses the male voice and formulations to express ideas that are rooted in male experience. Patriarchy and its norms constitute the common cultural background of both men and women. Indian writing in English has produced successful women writers by masculine standards. We do not find either the innovations of form, a narrative technique that reproduces women's patterns of thought and speech, or selection of subjects that are decidedly feminist. Women writers in English have continued the tradition of social realism apparent in the vernacular works of their regions or others that they can access. However, the very issue of finding a narrative technique which will embody the patterns of thought and speech of women is fraught with problems in the choice of English as a medium of writing about women, unless of course, the social class or location of the women subjects are all adapted to the choice of English as the idiom of speech.

An important problem facing Indian feminism is that Indian English women writers have rarely reflected on their craft. Indeed there is little consciousness of either initiating or being part of a movement that develops its aesthetic. This leads us to assume that though women's experiences are important to these writers, there is no centrality of those experiences in a political way. They are not there because the writer wishes to bring about change in the ways in which women are thought about or perceived or treated, but to indicate how women perceive the world around them. The writer does not think of herself as an agent of change actively intervening to improve the lives of women, but as one *describing* the condition of women. There is no C S Lakshmi or Mahasveta Devi in Indian English writing.

Any survey of feminism in Indian English writing will be to some extent, subjective. As yet we have no particularly evolved canon or standards to judge this writing. Readers may disagree and supplement the writers discussed. But we can move towards evolving a canon and this is a first step. The women writers under consideration in the following section are those who have treated women's experience from *within* and have been successful in conveying their vision of that experience. The experience they describe and judge may be diverse and individual but is intrinsically the product of women's lives and not of masculine principles and values. We have deliberately avoided writers who have not written more than one book. We have also side-stepped the writing of the so-called 'diaspora'. Similarly, in keeping with the emergence of new identities of Indian womanhood, we have emphasised the writing of the last three decades with 1980 as a watershed. That is not to say that writers like **Kamala Markandaya**, **Anita Desai** and **Nayantara Sehgal** are dated, but that it is time to move on and foreground the new and exciting work of another generation of women. Here, we would also mention the excellent effort of **Eunice de Souza** and **Lindsay Pereira** to recuperate for us women's writings from nineteenth and early twentieth century in their anthology *Women's Voices* (2002). This is a truly feminist event in Indian Writing in English. In the next section we shall take a look at the writings of a new generation of women.

3.5 A SAMPLE OF WOMEN'S WRITING

The difficulty in evolving a feminist canon lies primarily in the absence of a theory of feminist literature and the absence of a female aesthetic in Indian English writing. Also no writer has claimed the feminist tag for their writing except **Suniti Namjoshi** who now resides in the UK and writes from there. Yet there are many women writers who have in their writing carried the markers of feminist literature. Undoubtedly **Namita Gokhale** is one of them. One of the finest writers in the genre of fiction, she writes as a woman with a profound understanding of love and loss but also of the network of relationships that females form to share memory and pass it on as a legacy. Her first book *Paro: Dreams of Passion* (1982) was also the first to foreground the celebration of sexuality of the middle-class Indian woman. Unembarrassed and uninhibited expression of female desire ran through the book making it a milestone. Female sexual desire and women's awareness of it are issues that Indian society does not discuss. **Namita Gokhale** broke the silence. Her maturity as a writer, a woman writer, was evident with every book she wrote. Her milieu is her own beloved Kumaon, a place she is intimately familiar with and one whose whims and fancies, grandmothers, aunts and ghosts she knows at first hand. But it is also Delhi, equally her home and place of work, whose anonymity, grotesque balance of power and battle of survival all come together in *Gods, Graves and Grandmother* (1994). Whether it is these or *Sojourn* or *A Himalayan Love Story* (1996), or *Mountain Echoes*, (1998) **Gokhale** successfully etches for us the dilemma, the anxieties, the violence of a female existence that walks the tightrope between the traditional and modern in our societies.

Love, bordering on lust, pain, actual physical pain and loss in death marks her complex novel, *The Book of Shadows* (1999), where every nuance of the disfigured woman protagonist's consciousness has found expression in a narrative style as distinct as the subject. The canvas is vast and densely peopled. The novel is conceived in *chiaroscuro*, a technique of the visual arts where the complex interplay of light and shade lend depth to the characters and situations. There are in the novel moments of intense lucidity that are suddenly obscured by mysterious shadows. The suicide of Rachita's fiancée over her infidelity and subsequent revenge by his sister, who throws acid on Rachita's face, suddenly transform Rachita from a complacent and self-assured teacher of English Literature into a confused and disfigured recluse. She moves into her childhood home in the Himalayas and retreats into her self, moving among several levels of reality, now a participant, now a voyeur, lurking in the nooks and crannies of the house. Lohaniju, the mysterious caretaker, is the anchor of Rachita's vulnerable sanity and the continuity of the past and present is maintained through a dog's name. *The Book of Shadows*, whose title is reminiscent of epic journeys to the underworld contained in 'The Book of the Dead', in the Greek epics, and echoes **Isabel Allende's** *The House of the Spirits* (1985), is a journey for the mutilated woman's sensibility where she learns to remember and forget, conscious that time is not structured or contained in a lifetime.

Anees Jung should be considered an important feminist writer for two reasons. One, that she enters into the world of ordinary Indian women in *Unveiling India: A Woman's Journey* in 1987, to document the reality of their lives and metaphorically, unveils a world of deprivation, oppression, hope and faith and a sense of community and at the same time, recuperates new images of women. Secondly, she transforms what would be an ethnographic study of a social group located in time and space, into a poetic account of the lives of these women. She thus actually discovers a mode of narration that by the operations of the genre of fiction lends an epic quality to her subjects. Epic is probably an apt word for her efforts. In *Beyond the Courtyard: A Sequel to Unveiling India*, (2003), written almost two decades after the first, she retraces her steps into the very same households to find out what became of the daughters of the women of the earlier book. It is a fascinating account of

powerlessness and hopelessness as she finds that though India has moved into the 21st century, the lives of women have been largely untouched.

In the telling of the stories of other women, **Anees Jung**'s book becomes a sort of literary consciousness-raising. She literally gives the women a voice. In *Unveiling India*, she says:

Not long ago a woman who spoke about herself was considered a loose woman. To voice a pain, to divulge a secret, was considered sacrilege, a breach of family trust. Today, voices are raised without fear, and are heard outside the walls of homes that once kept a woman protected, also isolated. Some of the women who speak here have stepped out. Other's who have not, are beginning to be aware, eager to find expression. But let them speak for themselves [109].

And saying this she lets loose the narrative while readers listen to unheard and half-remembered voices. The use of the form is original and masterly and facilitates what **Jung** sets out to do: to make those voices heard, angry, resentful and hopeful. Her own self overlaps those of the women she portrays or 'interviews' as she feels the 'connectedness' of empathy, arising from her own experience of growing up in the seclusion of the *purdah*, yet with her aspirations and independence realised in her own life.

In the book, **Jung** attempts to formulate a distinct view. She says about herself:

My reality no longer has one face. I have stepped out of an enclosed reality into one that is larger, more diverse, and mobile. . . . I continue to live out an experience for which I have yet to find a name [18].

She presents her book, which begins with her own story and slowly blends into the story of other women as a "journey":

In the macrocosm of a vast land I find the microcosm of my own experience repeated and reaffirmed. . . . Coiled within the lives of these women I find myself transformed. The effort here is to probe the mystery of this experience and look beyond to another that is beginning to spell change and is centered in change. . . . It is the story of women who understand what survival is -- a story with grace [20].

The most important contribution that **Anees Jung**'s vision of survival and grace makes to developing literary tradition is the refusal to take recourse to suffering and tolerating as the 'womanly' way of confronting life. This is how a 'voice' starts taking a shape.

In the sequel, **Jung** returns to investigate what, has altered for the daughters of the women of *Unveiling India*. Have the dramatic changes in society in the wake of liberalisation, cable TV and a general exposure to a larger scenario made a fundamental difference to their lives? Did these daughters possess the indomitable spirit of their mothers, or was this a generation of women so characteristically, trapped between two worlds, reined in by tradition, struggling to break free and yet lacking the wherewithal to do so. Again **Jung** finds stories of suffering and resilience, despair and hope:

Journeying across forgotten landscapes, both human and geographic, Anees Jung paints yet another unforgettable and, at times, harrowing portrait of women in India at the dawn of the new millennium. (jacket)

Shashi Deshpande is another important writer to contribute to the corpus of feminist writing. The question that may be asked is: Is she conscious of the role she is performing as a trend-setter? **Deshpande** has declared that she is not a feminist, and that she writes of human experience. But again and again we find that human

experience moves around the figures of women and are most resonating in the silences that surround them:

I did not start writing as a feminist: I was a writer first. I wasn't very familiar even with the word feminism, this was in the 60s, I don't think it was very common in India as it is now. But I was writing about what I saw, what I felt, what I had begun thinking, and I was very uneasy about my own roles as wife and mother, which was all that I was supposed to be, and I knew I was not that. And so I think my writing came out of this, and that out of this articulation of ideas and thoughts that my feminism emerges.

Indeed **Deshpande's** stories are about conflicts in middle-class domestic situations that arise as a conflict between societal and traditional expectations of women, especially in their roles of wife and mother and her own aspirations, emotions and sensibilities. What has the practice of writing on **Deshpande's** part meant for the evolution of a feminist angle?

Shashi Deshpande has written prolifically, both short stories and novels but her short story, *The Intrusion* (1997) can be read as a representative of her concerns as a woman writing. It is about marital rape. The young bride whose marriage is arranged by her family without a reference to her own wishes is the central figure of the story. Brought up like most women she internalises her roles as assigned to her by a male dominated society. Like most women she is often unaware of the ways in which she is exploited and equally often consents in her own oppression. In *The Intrusion*, the sexually un-awakened young bride is not mentally prepared for a sexual encounter with her husband. She wants to wait but her husband asserts his conjugal rights and takes her even as she sleeps. It is a violence done to her that she cannot find in herself to forgive. She feels violated, used and contaminated, as is the case after rape. But there would be none to recognise her plight as a victim of rape. As the wife she is bound by her role. **Shashi Deshpande** portrays the feeling of outrage that a sexually assaulted woman feels and asserts that marriage does not mitigate that feeling if she is not in possession of her body. This is something to which the community of males has remained insensitive.

Consciously or unconsciously concerned with the situation in which women find themselves placed, **Shashi Deshpande** feels that she has been able to touch the lives of many women. They write to her to tell her that they have found their feeling echoed in her stories that are graphic accounts of the site of the woman's body as possession and territory. Lifting the silence on rape as violence that threatens the women's integrity in unimaginable ways, she goes on to speak about marital rape, an event that does not exist for all practical purposes in Indian society. The very concept is alien, as the law would tell us. Yet it is through the violation of the unprepared, unwilling self of the woman by the male sexual act that **Deshpande** at once points to the general and the specific nature of the violence that is perpetrated on women. Whether this finally translates to theorising is the question.

Taking another example **Manju Kapur** is an important addition to the canon because she is one of the few women writers in English who writes on the theme of partition from the woman's point of view. Partition remains one of the most profound and disturbing events in modern India and a theme in much of contemporary literature written in the regional languages, particularly of the north of India and Bengal.

With **Bapsi Sidhwa's** (Pakistani), *The Ice-Candy Man* (1988) and **Urvashi Butalia's** recordings of the voices of Partition women entitled *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from The Partition of India* (2000), **Manju Kapur's** *Difficult Daughters* (1998), relives the trauma and dislocation of the Partition. Equally, it evokes the indomitable spirit of women in love. **Manju Kapur** narrates the story of Virmati, the trials and tribulations of that age, the bloody battle waged between her loyalties to her family and her love. Amidst the unrest and upheaval which forms the backdrop of the novel, Virmati's tale is one of growing up caught in a vicious circle of longing, hate,

hesitant hopes and innocent aspirations. In love with a married professor with children, hers is a saga of revolt against deep-rooted family tradition, self-doubt, resolution and acceptance.

Manju Kapur's book is partly autobiographical, and is about laying ghosts to rest. It ends on a note of resolution:

This book weaves a connection between my mother and me, each word a brick in a mansion I made with my head and my heart. Now live in it, Mama, and leave me be. Do not haunt me any more.

But in the context of the experience of partition, the ghosts are yet to be laid to rest and the echoes are still haunting us from that past. Thus, the book is about difficult times, about difficult daughters, about difficult mothers. The book is also about difficult mothers who are alienated from their daughters, about daughters who are resentful and want to assert themselves. It begins with a daughter embarking on a quest to understand her mother, after the mother has died and becomes a novel of recuperation. The motif of the freedom movement assumes specific overtones when applied to the oppressive social arrangements in which *Virmati* finds herself. Her body, like that of the country is the site of conflict and India's fractured freedom is also *Virmati's* conditional liberation from sexual oppression.

Manju Kapur's second novel, *Married Women*, (2002), too is about the sense of displacement often felt by women in the traditional institution of marriage and the family. But it is perhaps more significant for the complexity of the communal situation of December 1992, the *Ayodhya Movement* which culminated in the destruction of the *Babri Masjid*, and riots that followed, which forms the background of the novel and on which we get a woman's perspective. The involvement of Astha and Aijaz which after the latter's death becomes a communion between Astha and Aijaz's wife Peepilika, opens possibilities which have not been examined in Indian writing in English, perhaps with the exception of **Suniti Naamjoshi's** work. The novel thus works at several planes. The intimacy and comfort she receives from this affair, contrasts strongly with the distance she feels in her rigidly defined role as wife and mother. She ultimately must make a decision to either choose the radical, liberating option of following her lesbian lover or stay within the safe, strong bonds of her family. The time-honoured, celebrated, even feminist, practice of passing on the legacy from mother to daughter is treated with exquisite irony. Astha passes on the same self-limiting values that her mother had passed on to her:

Thus teaching her daughter how to devalue her work and passing on the tradition from woman to woman.

Looking still further into the region of specificity of women's experience, we reach **Shobha De** who has used the epistolary form to continue this tradition and take it a step further in *Speed Post: Letters to my Children*, (1991), by adding the responsible upbringing of sons to the Indian feminist agenda. Again partly autobiographical, the letters from a mother of six children to her daughters and sons, encapsulate the challenges that contemporary society poses particularly for young men and women growing up in it. It also articulates the anxieties of a mother not only for the well-being of her children but also of casting herself as a role-model for them. It is in the cultural inversion of values that marks the rethinking on women and their roles that make the letters interesting. Here is no mother who preaches suffering silence to her daughters, or that the 'honor' of the family means her own annihilation or that a daughter must abnegate her self to uphold the interest of the males of the family and all the other stereotypical advice that is culturally acceptable. Instead, there is the instilling of a strong sense of values grounded in independence, mutual respect, integrity, love and trust.

We would include **Shobha De** in the canon. Many of **Shobha De's** novels have annoyed and shocked the conservative domain of Indian literary criticism because they highlighted women in a milieu that was privileged by class. However, **Shobha De** still happens to be among the first women writing about the urban housewife/

aspiring career woman, her sexuality and sexual exploitation, her sexual frustration and her predatory instincts and how she has learnt to use her body in the struggle for upward mobility. Female sexuality, its awareness and its use as a weapon may disappoint a society that is wont to pay lip service to the *devi* in woman, but the fact remains that **De** writes about erotic experiences non-judgementally and from the inside as it were, if we remember that she has been the first female editor of *Stardust* and *Society* and a woman who moves in and is familiar with the upper echelons of society. Her writing were for a while discussed as 'popular fiction' in universities in India and the west, and she is a woman who lives life on her own terms. What we realise in this discussion of contemporary fiction of women in India is that a distinct feminist trend is in the process of evolution today. We have to see the direction it might take.

3.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have tried to familiarise ourselves with the Feminist movement in the west and understand the concept of Feminism. We then saw how literature with its myth making and iconographic function became an area of special interest for the feminist movement and the feminist literary theories that came out of it. We learnt that a feminist literature would need a female aesthetic and that this was still in the process of becoming, even in the west. Evolving a feminist canon in Indian English writing would be a formidable task in the absence of both a defined aesthetic and avowedly feminist writing. However, concentrating on fiction we found no dearth of women writers engaging with a female universe, its specific issues, its special modes of perception, its silences and its speech. As a first step towards evolving a canon we discussed some of the milestones in the domain of women's writing in English, in India.

3.7 QUESTIONS

1. What is the function of a feminist literary critic?
2. What kind of literature may be called feminist?
3. What are the issues and problems in the construction of a feminist canon of Indian English writing?
4. Using the works of any two writers discussed above say how they contribute to the body of women's literature in India.

UNIT 4 THE DALIT CANON

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Defining a Dalit Canon
- 4.3 Who Writes Dalit Literature?
- 4.4 What Is Dalit Literature?
- 4.5 Dalit Literature and the Dalit Movement
- 4.6 Evaluation of Dalit Literature by Mainstream and Dalit Critics
- 4.7 Towards Dalit Aesthetics
- 4.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.9 Questions

4.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we shall define the concept of Dalit Literature, and address crucial questions on who are the Dalits, who writes Dalit Literature, what is Dalit Literature and then examine the Dalit Movement in some detail. We shall also attempt an aesthetics of Dalit Literature.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Dalit literature is literature written by Dalits with the consciousness of being Dalit and that which deals with the experience of life as a Dalit. The term was first used in 1958 at the first ever conference of Dalit literature in Bombay. Its identity lies in its intrinsic 'dalitness' and its aim is clearly to make Dalit society aware of its servitude and to speak of its pain and anguish to the society ordered on the *varna system* (caste system actually based on the division of labour in ancient times). How does one begin to speak of a Dalit canon? For, in speaking of a canon we are in the presence of an authoritative corpus of work and writers who are valued. The question that emerges immediately is: The Dalit Canon - valued by whom and for what? Perhaps, it is possible for the moment to answer only the latter. Let us begin with a working definition of Dalit Literature.

4.2 DEFINING A DALIT CANON

The definition of a Dalit canon must wait for some time till we grasp a few general things. The reason is less to do with the literary value of Dalit writing than with the nature of the impulses that produce Dalit literature in the first place. It has also to do with the fact that this literature shows enough regional variation depending on the shape that the Dalit movement has taken in various regions to merit a region-by-region discussion about evaluation and canonisation. Further, as some scholars and critics have pointed out, the Dalit canon cannot claim to represent a single Dalit consciousness because many Dalit sub-groups and women's voices are missing from it. The task of evolving a canon is a mammoth one especially in a new strain of literature like this and certainly lies beyond the scope of this unit. As students of MA English, we face fundamental difficulties in accessing Dalit literature because very little of it is translated into English. Students who read regional languages will not necessarily be accessing the same works in the original and different linguistic abilities will offer different selections.

This unit shall for this reason deal with broad and general contours of Dalit writing without dwelling on the specific writers. It shall however, attempt to bring in the productions in English wherever required. Along with different anthologies of translations in English, the Dalits have produced a tremendous amount of literature in Hindi, Marathi, Telugu, Punjabi and Gujarati. Having said that, it must be emphasised that these limitations should not deter us from taking the first steps to understand the fundamental qualities for which this still nascent but powerful and convulsive literature is valued.

In order to understand the above, we shall take you through the following steps: Firstly, who writes Dalit literature, or how is a Dalit writer defined? Second, what are the impulses that produce this movement in literature? In addition, does it have intellectual roots in traditional literature? Third, how has Dalit literature been evaluated by mainstream literary critics and Dalit critics? Fourth, what is the Dalit literary theory and aesthetic standards? Fifth, can we talk of authoritative voices within the literary and critical production of Dalit literature? Finally, is a "canon" possible or desirable at all? Dalit writers question the nature of any canon that does not apply Dalit aesthetics as the standard of evaluation of their writing. A canon is necessarily exclusionist by nature, evolved by a selected group of people who are entrusted with the selection for a host of reasons that are 'literary' but often political, social and historical. It is intrinsically reactionary, by virtue of the authority it seeks to impose, in order to encourage or contain cultural production. It is thus hegemonic in nature. It would indeed be ironical to organise a body of literature like that of the Dalits who defies every laid canon and indeed turns it upside down.

4.3 WHO WRITES DALIT LITERATURE?

It is important to ask this question and know how it has been answered because of the polemics that it has generated. Here I begin by referring to the now famous and oft-quoted anecdote, a proceeding in one of the various literary conferences on Dalit literature. The mainstream Hindi writer **Kashiram Singh** arguing against a Dalit identity for literary production says, "You don't have to be a horse to write about a horse!" To this, the Dalit writer **Omprakash Valmiki** replies:

Yes, you can write about the horse, his external contours, his canter and neighs but when at the end of the day the same horse, having done his share of laboring, exhausted and hungry, stands tied to a post in the stable, what can you write about how he feels or what emotions he harbours towards his master or about his inner pain.

The issue here as you may see is not only one of authenticity but, indeed the articulation of a different order of experience and perception. That is why attention has often been drawn to the meaning of the word, 'dalit'. "Dalit" means crushed, ground, split, etc. and describes the living conditions for centuries of a large group of people in India. Metaphorically, it extends to the meaning of oppressed, exploited, hated, rejected, tortured, dejected, deprived and so on, and has been accepted and assimilated into the modern Dalit vocabulary in preference to the *Gandhian Harijan*.

The rejection of the *Gandhian Harijan* is indeed the beginning of our understanding of a Dalit identity. Gandhi thought of the untouchables as an intrinsic part of the Hindu community. The appellation of *Harijan* or people of *Hari*, gave them in his eyes, a special place as god's chosen people. He made several statements about how he himself was a *Harijan* by choice and opposed the demand for separate electorates for the Dalits with a fast unto death till the English and **Ambedkar** catapulted in the **Poona Pact of 1932**. The Dalits resent **Gandhi's** pressure and the consequent denial of separate electorates for them that kept them out of political power for decades. They reject the Hindu pantheon and its exploitative and discriminating icons. The

appellation *Harijan* is an acknowledgement of a position and status that is meaningless to them and they want nothing to do with it since they cannot turn to the Hindu religion for solace or comfort or claim an ancient Hindu past with pride. The word Dalit became popular as a marker of identity in 1972 when the *Dalit Panthers of Bombay*, a group of young Dalit activists, popularised its use.

In this context the meaning of being a Dalit assumes special overtones and significance. The Dalit is one whose untouchability has been made a law; one who is forced to do hard and dirty tasks; whose education and entrepreneurship is prohibited by the law-givers; who has been pronounced socially unsuitable by the *savarnas*. The meaning has also been extended to include the Marxist meaning of dispossessed. Thus the meaning expands beyond untouchables, backward castes and classes, Buddhists, converts to include even women and all those who are situated in the bottommost rungs of society. Some Dalit writers have taken the definition of Dalit to include all those who are mentioned in the list in the **Indian Constitution, of Scheduled Castes and Tribes**, including nomadic peoples. People who have been notified criminals because they belong to a particular tribe, the **Adivasi**, who is exploited and forced to remain in the forest, the nomads who have no space to call their own, are all Dalits. The struggle, the indignities they suffer, the continual and continuing oppression even after 'independence' are all things that a *savarna* writer can never understand. So only a Dalit can articulate that experience, voice that pain and anguish, make his protest and explore the avenues of transcending that situation.

In the anecdote of the horse mentioned earlier, we can see literary opinion clearly divided into two categories regarding the definition of a Dalit writer. The first, coming from established canonical positions, traditional, *savarna* (a term we need to familiarise ourselves with) is that one does not need to be a Dalit to write about the Dalit experience. Sensitive and sensitised writers in the mainstream for decades have written about the oppressed and down-trodden untouchables. Indeed, they must be a presence in pastoral writing, in *grameen sahitya* as Dalits form a part of the village. So there is no need for a separate category of writing called Dalit literature.

Dalits overturn these assumptions. They assert that the untouchable is beyond the pale of *savarna* society in practice as well as in theory. Their living space is outside the village. Their humiliation, deprivation and degradation are sanctioned, indeed prescribed by the Hindu religion, its holy books and lawgivers. Thus, even while forging intellectual links with downtrodden peoples all over the world, (the Blacks, for instance), Dalits emphasise the space for social mobility that is available to those *Others*. Even the black slave has the possibility of buying his freedom and is not considered untouchable. The untouchables have never been allowed to know freedom nor given the opportunity to transcend their situation, a situation that is defined by the accident of birth. Even this latter is sought to be justified by the Hindu doctrine of *Karma* which says that people who have performed evil deeds in past lives are born as untouchables and condemned to a life of servitude, humiliation and deprivation. Only one who has lived that experience, one who has felt the physical and emotional violence of the daily torture of the Dalit can write Dalit literature.

4.4 WHAT IS DALIT LITERATURE?

Many critics have attempted to define Dalit Literature and a spectrum of opinion has emerged. Dalit literature is one in which the Dalit himself expresses his own anguish and depicts the essence of living life as one. It is not art for art's sake but the literature of lived experience. It has variously been called *Mass Literature* and *Literature of Action*.

It foregrounds human values and depicts resentment and the struggle born out of it against structures of power. It raises questions about the status and situation of the Dalits. Dalit literature is also considered to be a scientific, meaningful and sensitive intervention in the world of letters. One critic goes as far as to say that all that is

scientific, polemical and free of the givens of tradition may be called Dalit literature. It has been seen as the face of revolution, because it believes that one who has been, on counts of religion or other causes, economically, socially and culturally exploited is the only one who can bring about revolution. We see that regardless of how it has been defined, Dalit literature puts a human at its centre, registers a strong protest against the frames of caste, race and tribe and believes in human liberty.

There are many critics who trace a long history of Dalit literature. They see the seeds of a Dalit consciousness in the poetry and songs of saints and devotional poets. The poem of **Hira Dom**, the first Dalit piece of writing and **Swami Achyutanand's** social movement and writings are considered revealing a given oppressive social structure. After independence too, many Dalit poets wrote sensitively under the influence of **Gandhi**. **Harit, Mataprasad, Mansharam Vidrohi** among them, deserve special mention. Thinking traditionally of the intellectual roots of Dalit Literature, we can logically come up with the names of **Raidas** (a cobbler), **Kabir** (a weaver) and **Tukaram** (a tanner), among others. Appropriated by the regional canons, these names are associated with the *Bhakti Movement* that allowed for reforms at least in thought if not in social organisation. Further, these poets sought personal redemption in devotion to what are primarily Hindu gods and spirituality. The contemporary Dalit position towards these figures is however ambivalent. On the one hand they are acknowledged as the first recorded voices of the lower castes, and on the other, they are seen to have been co-opted into the dominant -hegemonic vision of the prevailing religion that embrace Hindu deities.

It is really **Dr B R Ambedkar, Jotirao Phule** and others who have shaped modern Dalit consciousness. The realm of the social and political in the case of Dalit literature is inextricably linked with its aesthetics, and by extension works towards the construction of a canon. Once the source of inspiration of Dalit literature is located in the vision of **Ambedkar**, its essence becomes self-explanatory. On 14 October 1956, **Dr B R Ambedkar** renounced the Hindu religion and converted to Buddhism. He took twenty-two vows on the occasion that has become the credo and cultural belief of Dalit literature today. Dalit consciousness derives its energy from **Dr Ambedkar's** world-view and philosophy. Dalit writers agree that their literature must reflect:

- *Acceptance of **Ambedkar's** philosophy on the issues of freedom and liberty*
- *Belief in the **Buddha's** atheism and non-belief in the soul, his rationalism and his opposition of hollow ritualism*
- *Opposition to the Varna system, Casteism and Communalism*
- *Support for Brotherhood and not Separatism*
- *Commitment to Freedom and Social Justice*
- *Commitment to Social Transformation*
- *Opposition to Capitalism*
- *Opposition to Feudalism and Brahmanism*
- *Opposition to Hegemony and Domination*
- *Disagreement with **Ramachandra Shukla's** definition of the epic*
- *Rejection of Traditional Aesthetic Standards*
- *Partisanship for a Varnaless and Classless Society*
- *Opposition to Linguistic Chauvinism and Sexism.*

4.5 DALIT LITERATURE AND THE DALIT MOVEMENT

Once we understand that Dalit literature is born out of a context, the description of the Dalit writer above ceases to be a wish fulfilment or a figment of Dalit fantasy. We understand that a discussion of Dalit literature is not possible unless we grasp the

broad parameters of the Dalit movement. This is so because the Dalit movement is not only a social movement but also a political one, with its sights set on revolution. Dalit issues in literature are thus not merely descriptive or reformatory but revolutionary. The Dalit movement seeks a transformation of the structure of society and moves towards egalitarian existence, social justice and dignity, fraternity and economic progress for the Dalits. It produces a literature that reflects these aims. It must be stated here that the Dalit movement begins at different times in different parts of the country and shapes itself differently, depending on the leadership and historical and sociological parameters of the region. I would like to draw your attention to two regions here – Maharashtra and the Hindi belt. Marathi records the first movement in Dalit literature in the 1950s, and the Dalit movement begins as a revolutionary phenomenon in Maharashtra. The Hindi belt saw a relatively late Dalit awakening and its movement remained reformatory in nature. A brief detailed study would demonstrate why it is not possible to make a 'one size fits all' evaluation of Dalit literature

The progressive ideas of **Jotirao Phule** and the intellectual leadership of **B R Ambedkar** inspired Dalit writing in Marathi. It was born out of a grassroots movement which touched the life of the village and was used as an instrument of transformation through folk tales, folk art, theatre, meetings and so on. The activist poet **Daya Pawar**, aware that the Dalits were illiterate, would take songs to the community to awaken it. The reality was that the Dalit leadership here sought systemic transformation and not merely social reforms. There are substantial reasons why the Dalit movement first took roots in Bombay. It is a fact that the education of the Dalits began with the British. Bombay then was the great prosperous, commercial centre. It was natural for it to become a hub of cultural exchange and crossovers of the ancient and the modern. The Dalit Literary Movement in Maharashtra made two historical contributions; Firstly, it fulfilled the cultural needs and aspirations of the Dalits by providing them with poems, folk songs and musical instruments, in other words, a cultural tradition. Then, it created a radical context for the workings of the emancipation movement under the leadership of **Baba Ambedkar** and those after him. The few literate and educated among the Dalits, under **Ambedkar's** leadership took to writing and literature. Thus, the movement for Dalit consciousness in Maharashtra struck at the grassroots, and forged ahead with dignity to demand political participation. It did so on the strength of education, struggle, organisation and its literature.

In comparison with Maharashtra and Marathi literature, the Hindi belt was slow to develop a Dalit consciousness even though the Dalit here has been embedded in the most wretched conditions and exploitative machinery for centuries. Dalit consciousness was still caught in the process of reform. The voices in literature were few and far between, silenced often by fear and weak at other times by threats from the powers that be. In the hurry to establish a leader of the stature of **Ambedkar**, petty leaders from the Dalit communities, tied to the caste system emerged. Even their own communities did not support them. In fact, Dalits had internalised the caste system, in spite of the reformist movements in northern Uttar Pradesh of **Swami Dayanad Saraswati** and the 19th Century reformer, **Swami Achyutanand**. The latter had met **Ambedkar** in 1928 and acknowledged him as his leader and the representative of the entire community of Dalits. **Achyutanand** in 1927 had announced the demand for complete freedom for Dalits in India. He wrote volumes but his writings were prevented by the prevalent system from being either disseminated or published.

The lacuna in the movements in the Hindi belt was their reformist nature with roots in religion. They did not challenge the *varna system* itself but sought to end discrimination on the basis of caste, keeping the caste hierarchy intact. Thus it did not become a liberation movement. The Maharashtra experience was on the contrary, a revolutionary one. There, **Ambedkar** had hit out at *Manuvaad* and had consigned the *Manusmriti* to flames. His approach was scientific and transformational, using education, struggle and organisation as arms instead of religion. This made the crucial difference to literary production, and indeed to the movement in the two

regions. The Hindi belt remained terrorised under the shadow of feudal and religious power structures. Reform movements had only a limited success in a few areas. Others were untouched. But in the region of Agra as early as 1950 and through 1960, **Ambedkar's** writings were translated and disseminated and they influenced literary production. Significant works were published and there have been many names, in spite of the fact that the literary establishment of Hindi largely ignored them. Creators of the Hindi canon, like **Ramchandra Shukla**, an undying fan of **Tulsidas**, would not touch them. There was no leadership or strong movement to force attention on Dalit literature.

Thus, we see that there is a connection between the Dalit Movement and Dalit literature. We see further, that the movement does not take shape in the same way in every region. We also see that it was **Ambedkar's** writings, movement and life that made the modern Dalit consciousness and, consequently, its literature possible.

4.6 EVALUATION OF DALIT LITERATURE BY MAINSTREAM AND DALIT CRITICS

The act of evaluation of literature is central to the construction of a canon. Yet we have seen how evaluation of Dalit literature cannot be an objective appraisal based on an established theory of aesthetics, in a situation that varies from literature to literature and region to region. We can begin to understand how culturally and politically loaded is the act of evaluation, especially, in the case of the cultural production of marginalised peoples. We have learnt that Dalit Literature is a highly self-conscious literature, written with specific aims and goals. Can it be evaluated with the touchstone of classical aesthetics? Are different yardsticks necessary? Is it in the interest of Art to have them? Dalit literature has proclaimed its benchmarks. Would it be fair not to admit those into the process of evaluation? And finally, who decides what to write and how to review? This last problematises the act of evaluation and creation of canons as nothing else does.

Let us see the ways in which Dalit literature has been received and consider its relationship to the dominant canons. The attempt to club Dalit literary production with '*gramieen sahitya*' and reform literature of the *Bhakti Movement* has already been mentioned above. Thus the need of a separate identity for Dalit literature has been questioned. Having reluctantly granted the category of Dalit Literature, however, other kinds of challenges to it have emerged.

Ever since Dalit literature found acceptance in the 1950s it has been repeatedly attacked for using the mundane to produce pain. Dalit critics have argued that if pleasure can be the end of literature, why can pain not be so? As far as the mundaneness is concerned Dalit critics have raised the question of what is more important – form or content? If the content can cause pain then it must be said that the form becomes secondary, or that content itself is the literary value of that work of art. The locales of Dalit Literature have provoked critics to say that the life in the hovels of the untouchables or the lower castes cannot be worked into the grand narrative of novels. Dalit critics have demonstrated otherwise from works of both Dalits and non-dalit writers.

Some critics have stated that since Dalits have been deprived of all cultural development they lack both the language and the skills required to produce works of art. Dalits have replied that the corollary to that is that all non-Dalits produce works of art. Mainstream non-Dalit Critics have found the anger and resentment of Dalit Literature to be false and their laments grotesque and ridiculous. **Limbale** quotes **Ambedkar** to refute their impatience with Dalit anger and expression of resentment. He had said that the Dalits for centuries have been the most meek and humble of creatures and did not need lessons in humility. It's only when all else has failed that

they have been forced to struggle because they have not been permitted their basic human rights. Dalit writers have been advised to go beyond negativity, resentment and revenge.

How must Dalit Literature be evaluated? Opinion is divided even among non-Dalit critics. One group insists on applying canonical critical tools and rules of criticism arguing that Art must be evaluated as Art, and that everything else that is brought to bear upon it is extraneous and false. It is said that the values enshrined in Art are eternal and immutable. Dalit Literature too must be judged by the independent and autonomous touchstones of artistic evaluation. Further, the charge against Dalit literature from the dominant canons has been that it is propagandist in content, univocal in expression, resentful in tone and obscene and unformed in language. Also, that it concentrates on the autobiographical form as its mainstay. It is argued that an autobiography cannot be taken to be the voice of a people, or a shared experience.

Another group questions the judging of Dalit literature by so-called eternal values. This raises uncomfortable questions regarding the eternal nature of values. Who decides them to be so? How are literary benchmarks constituted? Are these indigenous to Indian literary traditions or an application of western, particularly English critical canons? Do these benchmarks change with cultural changes? If they do, then under what circumstances do changes occur? Is it possible for critics to have a prototype, a standard measure of values?

Dalit writers agree with the second voice. They find the dominant canon outdated and inadequately equipped to evaluate Dalit writing. They believe that the role of criticism is to analyse, differentiate, point out lacunae and indicate the trajectory of the work under consideration. Not one but many yardsticks must be applied to consider the work holistically and sensitively. Dalit writing is sociological and the perspectives and methodology of sociology must be applied in an appraisal of Dalit writing. Dalit writers feel that their writing has not been formally and correctly evaluated. To do so it would be necessary for critics to analyse the import of the social picture, the language, the idiom and oral and cultural traditions. Critics evaluate an ignorance of these factors and criticism is discussion around plot summaries, characters and consideration of the work as Art according to orthodox canons. There is no recognition of the fact that literature as a product of the Imagination is different from experiential writing.

Dalit critics also attack other successful Dalit writers who are ready to review for publishers, who attend seminars, chair discussions and speak in conferences about the works of upcoming writers, but are silent when their own fraternity produces a new book. They too have not contributed to the serious work of evaluation. Dalit writers must be wary of both, unqualified hostility and unqualified appreciation. Some Dalit writers and critics have objected to the baring of the Dalit soul and exposure in full public view of the daily indignities of a Dalit's life in Dalit writings. They have expressed apprehension that such revelations will further demean them in the eyes of society. They look for ways of co-option into the mainstream. This objection has been met with a sustained resistance from both Dalit and non-Dalit writers and critics.

In this scenario it is not surprising that the idea of a Dalit canon remains obscure and uncertain. What has evolved however, is an idea of Dalit aesthetics and a literary theory which articulates the central concerns and the destiny of Dalit Literature.

4.7 TOWARDS DALIT AESTHETICS

Dalit writers and critics have felt the need to educate their readership about the difference of Dalit writing and the definitive and decisive nature of its departure from traditional and mainstream literary concerns. Along with this is also the desire to

provide the benchmarks of Dalit writing to aspiring writers in the community. No one recognises better than the Dalit writer the complete absence of a written tradition of Dalit values. Serious critics like **Limble** and **Valmiki** have helped to evolve what may be called a Dalit literary theory. In doing so, they have addressed the various ways in which Dalit literature has been denigrated by canonical criticism and only half understood by sympathetic readers. Dalit aesthetics articulates the ideological position of the Dalit writer, draws up the aims and goals of Dalit literature and defines its basic credo. Dalit theoreticians are aware that Dalit aesthetics will evolve only over a period of time as Dalit life and consciousness take stock of the realities of existence in time and space. The Dalit aesthetic is imbued with Dalit consciousness and a specific value system forms its basis. These values are reflected in Dalit literature. **Valmiki** catalogues them as:

- Equality, liberty, fraternity, the feeling of justice lived, the content rooted in feeling and given meaningful expression
- Negation of the efforts to cloak reality in the garb of religion and culture
- Rejection of imaginary allusions, for example *amrit*, as a symbol of a sweet drink which no one has tasted
- To recognise that the values of life are subject to the flux of time
- A free expression of authentic feelings anchored in empirical experience
- To see words as medium. Unable to construct pretentious rituals of words
- Privileging content. Expression and skilful construction are secondary. The content must be serious and meaningful and should be made so by basing it on the philosophy of **Dr Ambedkar**.

It is clear from the stated world-view and aesthetic position of Dalit writers, believing as they do in the changing nature of values in an ever-shifting reality, that they do not and cannot believe in canons. But there is awareness that Dalit aesthetics must grapple with some problems before it can evolve into a credo. **Limble** examines these. He insists on the need to find ways to instrumentalise Dalit aesthetics, and use it as a weapon against reactionary and Brahmanical criticism. Where traditional aesthetics sees the end of aesthetic experience to be pleasure, in Dalit literature it is pain and anguish. Its effect on the reader is to make him restless and angry. How is the revolutionary consciousness of Dalit literature and aesthetic experience to be reconciled? Traditional aesthetics based on the *Rasa Theory* does not admit into its corpus the *Rasa* of Dalit Literature and thus remains inadequate to judge it. Can there be an expansion of the ambit of the *Rasas*? Dalit Literature is not artistic or entertaining, so its art cannot be judged by the standards of traditional criticism. Dalit aesthetics must debate what is beautiful and valuable in its literature. How can Beauty and Ugliness be differentiated?

First, Beauty has to be defined. Not through the imagination and rules which put Beauty in the realm of the mystical and spiritual but by a consideration of the materiality of the work of art. The excellence of a Dalit literary product will depend on how profoundly it impacts the reader, through a consideration of how well is **Ambedkar**'s vision woven into the content. In this context, **Limble** insists that important as it is to understand that the reader is a protagonist of the text and has expectations from it which are fulfilled or disrupted, so is the creator. And Dalit literature cannot be understood or appreciated without some knowledge of the context in which the work is produced. The Dalit writer gives precedence to issues of his/her society over his/her readership. S/he does not create with the casual reader in mind. S/he wants to make the aesthete travel with him/ her into the depths of his/her experience. Freedom is a greater virtue than pleasure and Beauty for the Dalit writer.

Limble states that writers must be proved by their authenticity of feeling. These must be universalised. They should have the power to transcend local boundaries. The experience of the author must seem fresh and urgent across time. The 1990s onwards, there has been a widespread acknowledgement that Dalit Literature is a force to reckon with. The reticence and hostility that had prevailed in the early years

4.8 LET US SUM UP

Dalit literature can be assessed only in the context of a complex web of social, political and economic relationships. Dalit literature as a corpus grows out of the Dalit movement and that is an ongoing process that influences the contours of literary production. The writer has to be a Dalit for the work to qualify as Dalit literature. Only then can the Dalit consciousness be reflected authentically. **Ambedkar's** world-view, philosophy and life has shaped the modern Dalit consciousness and consequently, made its literature possible. Dalit literature is a highly self-conscious literature, written with specific aims and goals. Dalit writers question the nature of assessment that does not apply Dalit aesthetics as the standard of evaluation of their writing. The realm of the social and political, in the case of Dalit literature is inextricably linked with its aesthetics. Critics like **Limbale** and **Valmiki** have helped to proclaim what may be called a theory of Dalit aesthetics. Dalit aesthetics articulates the ideological position of the Dalit writer, draws up the aims and goals of Dalit literature and defines its basic credo. There is an acute awareness that Dalit aesthetics can be elaborated only over a period of time. It is premature to talk in terms of a Dalit canon. Dalit writers resist the notion of a canon in their belief that values are not immutable and eternal and are subject to social and cultural changes in time, all of which must be reflected in the work of art. Mention also needs to be made of some of the key figures in Dalit Literature. However, it is difficult to talk about key figures in Dalit literature because most writers in different regions are still writing path-breaking texts. Only a tentative list is presented below, it should be noted that this list is not an exhaustive one.

Dr B R Ambedkar
Jotiraos Phule
Daya Pawar
Kancha Ilaiah
D R Nagaraj
Dr Sharankumar Limbale
Omprakash Valmiki

4.9 QUESTIONS

1. How has the traditional mainstream critic evaluated Dalit literature? How have Dalit writers resisted this evaluation?
2. What are the salient features of Dalit writing? Do you agree that only a Dalit-born can write Dalit literature?
3. Dalit literature is a revolutionary movement that looks at social transformation. Examine this statement with reference to the text mentioned in the unit.
4. What is the importance of a 'Dalit consciousness' in the consideration of Dalit aesthetics?
5. Describe the Dalit literary theory as elaborated by Limbale and Valmiki.

SUGGESTED READINGS

Unit 1

1. Chandra, Bipan., (1988), *India's Struggle for Independence*, (Penguin: New Delhi)
2. Chandra, Bipan., (1990), *Modern India*, (NCERT: New Delhi)
3. Dutt, R Palms., (1940), (Manisha: Calcutta)
4. Habib, Irfan., (1988), (et.al), *Indian People in the Struggle for Freedom*, (Sahmat: New Delhi)
5. Nehru, Jawaharlal., (1934-35), *Glimpses of World History*, (Oxford University Press: New Delhi)

Unit 2

1. Desai, Anita., (1919), *Introduction*, Tagore, Rabindrabath, *The Home and the World*, (Penguin: New Delhi, 1985)
2. Dalmia Vasudha., *Introduction*. Roadarmel, Gordon, c., (1968), *The Gift of A Cow: A translation of the Classic Hindi Novel Godaan*, (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002)
3. Panja, Sharmistha., *Critical Theory: Textual Application*, (Delhi: Worldview, 202)
4. Sharma, Ramvilas., (1995), *Premchand Aur Unka Yug*, rpt, (New Delhi: Rajkamal)

Unit 3

1. De, Shobha., (1999), *Speed Post. Letters to my Children*, (Penguin: New Delhi)
2. Deshpande, Shashi., (1997), *The Intrusion and Other Stories*, (Penguin: New Delhi)
3. D'Souza, Eunice, & Lindsay Pereira., (Ed). (2002), *Women's Voices*, (Oxford University Press: New Delhi)
4. Gokhale, Namita., (1982), *Paro: Dreams of Passion*, (Chatto and Windus: London)
5. Gokhale, Namita., (1999), *The Book of Shadows*, (Reprint, Penguin: New Delhi)
6. Gokhale, Namita., (2001), *Gods, Graves and Grandmother*, (Penguin Books: New Delhi)
7. Jung, Anees., (1987), *Unveiling India: A Woman's Journey*, (Penguin: New Delhi)
8. Kapur, Manju., (1998), *Difficult Daughters*, (Penguin: New Delhi)
9. Kapur, Manju., 922002), *A Married Woman*, (India Ink: New Delhi)

Unit 4

1. Ambedkar, B R., (1969), 'The Great Conversion: Speech on the Eve of the Great Conversion Held on 15 October 1956.' In *Thus Spoke Ambedkar, Selected Speeches*, Vol.2: 140-65; Bhagwan Das, (Ed) , (Bheem Patrika Publications: Jullunder)
2. *Dalit Sahitya Ka Soundaryashastra*, Translated by Ramnika Gupta, (Vani Prakashan: Delhi)
3. Dangle, Arjun., (Ed), (1992), 'Introduction', In *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature*, (Orient Longman: Bombay)
4. Ilaiah, Kancha., (1996), *Why I Am Not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy*, (Samya: Calcutta), (Limbale, Sharankumar, 2000)
5. *Jhoothan: A Dalit's Life*, Translated by Arun Prabha Mukherjee, (Samya: Kolkata)
6. Mukherjee, Arun., Prabha. 2003. 'Introduction', In *Jhoothan: A Dalit's Life*, translated by Arun Prabha Mukherjee, (Samya: Kolkata)
7. Valmiki, Omprakash., (2001), *Dalit Sahitya Ka Soundaryashashtra*, (Radhakrishna: Delhi), (2003)