

Block

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BLOCK 4 VOICES FROM THE MARGINS

Introduction

So far, we have examined life narratives from the perspective of theoretical frameworks and terminologies, specific feminist interventions, and gendered representations of the body in such works. In the final Block of this course, we will turn to the issue of marginalized voices in the context of lifewritings. We will take up the question of marginalization from the perspective of slave narratives, gendered postcoloniality, dalit writers, queer writers and narratives penned by ‘women of colour’. Each of the five Units of this Block will focus on one of these aspects so that you get a comprehensive and detailed understanding of the issues involved.

The first Unit on “Slave Narratives” will take up the issue of the intersectionality of race and gender in relationship to the genre we are studying. Using examples of narratives written by slaves, we will try to understand the relevance of such works in the context of autobiography. Differences between the narrative voices of female and male slaves will be discussed, as well as the effects of exploitation and how these get represented in literary works. We will examine how life narratives have been used as a way of seeking space and freedom by slaves, as well as the distinction between public and private space. Through all of these aspects, we will learn how slave narratives are a distinct form of life writing.

In Unit 2, “Gendered Postcolonial Identities”, we re-visit notions of the colonial and postcolonial that you would already be familiar with from previous courses. This Unit will look at how the border becomes a metaphorical site of both marginality and racial transgression, and how postcolonial life narratives help in the assertion of gendered postcolonial identities. By using specific literary examples, the Unit discusses social and class marginalization of women, examines the use of specific symbols and landscapes, and describes the struggles of working class women as recorded through life writing.

As the name suggests, the third Unit, “Dalit Life Writings” focuses on another aspect of marginalized literature - life narratives by dalit women in India. This Unit located such writings in the context of traditional autobiography to highlight the distinct character of dalit life writings, marked by specific experiences of caste and class oppression, collective identity and the formulation of a feminist perspective. Using specific examples from Marathi and Tamil literature, we can see how life writings provide a space of protest against oppression of dalit women in India.

In earlier courses, you have already come across queer perspectives within theoretical and literary frameworks. The fourth Unit of this Block, “Narrating Queer Lives” will focus on life narratives as records of the specific experiences and viewpoints of queer writers. The discussion will explore the relationship between identity and sexual orientation as represented through such narratives. It will also examine the historical trajectory of queer experiences through the genre of life writing, with the help of specific literary works.

Finally, we will turn to the question of the marginalization of ‘Women of Colour’ as represented in life narratives. The fifth and last Unit of the Block will begin with an understanding of what the term ‘women of colour’ means, and then proceed to the examination of the situation of marginalized women with the help of autobiographical works by representative authors such as bell hooks, Toni Morrison, Sally Morgan and Alice Walker. This discussion will help you distinguish between autobiographies from majority and minority communities, and analyse the representation of the ‘self’ in the latter.



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UNIT 1 SLAVE NARRATIVES

Nzanmongi Patton

Structure

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- 1.2 Objectives
- 1.3 Background: Female and Male Slave Narratives
- 1.4 Intersectionality of Race and Gender
- 1.5 Experiences: Politics of Male/Female Voices
- 1.6 Violence/Violation of Private Space
- 1.7 Language, Literacy and Empowerment
 - 1.7.1 Critical Literacy: Memoir and History
 - 1.7.2 Language, Education, Freedom
- 1.8 Religion, Spirituality and Freedom
- 1.9 Gender and Double Marginalization
- 1.10 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.11 Unit End Questions
- 1.12 References
- 1.13 Suggested Readings

1.1 INTRODUCTION

As you have seen from your reading of earlier units, there are various types of life narratives. Slave narratives form an important sub-genre within the genre of life narratives, since they provide a literary, cultural and historical record of the experiences of colonized slaves. Slave narratives have been written across countries and cultures, from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries, and delineate the forging of commonality through the stories of pain and escape. These stories have hit a raw nerve by presenting a compelling and ugly-but-true picture of deteriorating humanity. These are tales of becoming, of identity after an arduous struggle by the occupants of ignominy to be accepted as a human entity.

Since the late 1960s, around the time Civil Rights Movement was taking America by storm, slave narratives experienced a renaissance with dozens of extant stories being reprinted. Scholars have published major works on the sources, art, and development of the narratives, the people who produced them, exploring various themes, and their on-going influence on later work. Slave narratives show that slaves suffered physically, emotionally, and spiritually under slavery; that slaves yearned for freedom and resisted

slavery in every way possible way; that slavery was a pernicious system ultimately destroying masters as well as slaves; that the narrators were telling the truth about their own experiences; and that each narrator was a “reliable transcriber of the experience and character of black folk” (Andrews, 1988, p.1). However, given the pervasive impact of the social sanction of the relationship between sexes, gender did influence even the way in which bondage was experienced since men and women experienced it in different ways. These are some of the issues we will be addressing in this unit.

1.2 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- Identify the place of Slave Narratives as a distinct form of Autobiography;
- Analyse distinctive features of male and female slave narratives;
- Discuss the exploitation and oppression on female slaves; and
- Explain how slaves found a voice to appropriate space and freedom for themselves.

1.3 BACKGROUND: FEMALE AND MALE SLAVE NARRATIVES

Slave narratives are narratives, mostly autobiographies, written by slaves. This is a literary form which grew out of the many narrations of the realities of slavery, as exposed by enslaved Africans in Britain and its colonies, the United States, the Caribbean nations and Canada. The 18th and 19th centuries saw an upsurge of literature written by these slaves. It is said that at least six thousand former slaves penned down their stories, some published, and many not, during this time span. In the 1930s alone, in the United States, during the Great Depression, more than 2300 additional oral histories on life during slavery were collected by writers sponsored and published by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) of President Roosevelt’s administration. There were many questions on the authenticity of these narratives because of the lack of ‘white’ approval, but with the advent of post-modernism and notions of space and acceptance, this genre managed to make a niche of its own. Until very recently, critics treated slave narratives as mere rhetoric rather than as literature with artistic value. Considering the unpredictable political situation in the aftermath of the Civil War and the prevalent stereotypes of both slave and master, critical preoccupation with rhetoric and authenticity was perhaps not too strange. This is of course not new to literature as literature has always been engaged in debates of truth versus fiction.

The genre of slave narratives and its themes emerges from the assertion of the slaves' humanity; it recognizes slaves as a people with a voice, deserving every human right:

“Slave narratives show that slaves suffered physically, emotionally, and spiritually under slavery; that slaves yearned for freedom and resisted slavery in every way possible way; that slavery was a pernicious system ultimately destroying masters as well as slaves; that the narrators were telling the truth about their own experiences; and that each narrator was a “reliable transcriber of the experience and character of black folk.”

(Morgan, 1994, p. 73)

Many slave narratives have their roots in Puritan writings. There have been various kinds of autobiographies and narratives, namely journals, memoirs and diaries, which have talked about the Puritan experience of their walk with God. Flight is a recurring and common theme in many African narratives, what with the myth of the ‘Flying African’ and other tales. They follow traditional chronology- childhood to adulthood, this being mostly true of male narratives, rather than the episodic selectiveness of stories seen in many female narratives.

Male autobiographies documented mainly the daring escapes and heroic actions of the protagonists, focusing on individual *Kleos* (Greek concept of individual glory). Many of these slaves went on in turn to become great spokespersons or political leaders, as for instance, Frederick Douglass. Female autobiographies, on the other hand, tend to focus more on family and the inner struggles of body, mind and spirit, as seen in the works of Harriet Jacobs and Maryse Conde. Prominent themes include the outwitting of the masters with the help of trickery. There is certainly a shadow of gloom but there is also hope in the guise of the religious conditioning. Most of these narratives have been written as a plea to the readers, to incite them to renounce slave trading and slavery: “Reader, it is not to awaken sympathy for myself that I am telling you truthfully what I suffered. I do kindle a flame of compassion in your hearts for my sisters who are still in bondage” (Jacobs, 2001, p. 27).

Slave narratives are a journey towards empowerment and in fact, a social movement too. Through their narratives, both male and female fugitives and ex- slaves set out to counter the racial stereotypes. Black men have questioned the stereotype that they were all boys for the whites, while black women have protested against the role ascribed to them of either helpless victims or whores. For a male slave, public discourse gave him identity within his male peers but for a female her relationships - as a daughter, sister, wife, mother, and friend gave her her identity.

Male narrators often describe a quest for literacy towards empowerment of the slaves and freedom; they stress the importance of reading and writing. Frederick Douglass in his narrative says, “fugitive American slave narrator. . . a written document to prove that” (Douglass, 1845, p. 55), he has through language successfully appropriated the free territory he claims. Whereas women narrators have reiterated that sexual abuse and the break-up of their families are more destructive than being deprived of education. Women slaves built a network for themselves where they shared their experiences of sexual exploitation, work skills; also they helped each other in child-bearing as well as child rearing, and created a kinship which was family-like. They became interdependent on each other. Also men had more opportunities to flee, albeit unsuccessful many a time, as they were not held down by domestic work as well as slave work on the plantation. As in many other slave narratives, we see examples in Harriet Jacobs *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, when her brother and uncle flee to free states. The consequence of these different experiences were that men and women slave narrators told different stories of resistance about their enslaved conditions.

Here, we have briefly outlined some of the distinctions between female and male slave narratives. In the next section, let us look more closely at the intersectionality of race and gender in slave narratives

1.4 INTERSECTIONALITY OF RACE AND GENDER

Gender, race, and class structures can be recognized as harmonizing systems of subordination that simultaneously shape and condition the slaves’ collective experience. All the narratives had to be backed by or validated by white men in order for the stories to be accepted as authentic. “One of today’s leading theorists of ethnicity, Werner Sollors, takes issue with what he calls a “pastoralization of the in-group,” the notion that only those who speak from a privileged, “authentic” position inside any given community should be qualified to analyze or critique it” (Giles, 1997, p. 55). This was a major deterrent for African slaves in getting their right to expression. Authorship by a black man or woman was a right not easily acquired in pre-Civil War America. Almost all of these peer writers, be it Harriet Jacobs, Frederick Douglass, Henry Bibb, Solomon Northrop and Sojourner Truth, had to go through the process of white approval to be published. Proofs in the form of letters of correspondence were used as a preliminary introduction to the narrative.

Black female authors appear to be driven by different motives in recording their autobiographies, than their male counterparts:

“Written slave narratives extended that oral testimony by relating both the physical and psychological cruelty experienced by slaves. Readers encountered the individual, a fellow human being wounded by the system. Women fugitives, like men, told their stories because they believed that publication furthered the abolitionist cause. But for women, abolishing slavery meant more than achieving atomized, personal goals. Ultimately, in telling their stories, women were motivated by the need to build communities and - by extension - the commonwealth”.

(Morgan, 1994, p. 76)

Let us look at some examples of how race and gender intersect in the work of male and female slave narratives. **Frederick Douglass** is seen in a bipolar role in his *Narratives of the Life of Frederick Douglass*: one as the narrator and the other as the protagonist of the story. Slavery often transforms people. The wide gulf between Douglass’s two personas and his transformation from uneducated oppressed slave to worldly and articulate political commentator forms a very interesting backdrop. Douglass maps the transition between his older, more experienced self and his younger self through references to his relative ignorance and naivete: “My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute!” (Douglass, 1845, p. 68). Under the same theme, we see Sophia, the wife of Hugh Auld, following the trajectory of transformation on an inverse- shifting from a kind, caring woman who owns no slaves to an excessively cruel slave owner. At one level, we see Sophia Auld as more realistic and humane than other characters because we see her character in process. But on another level she comes to resemble less a character than an illustration of Douglass’s argument about slavery. Douglass uses the instance of Sophia’s transformation from kind to cruel as a message about the negative effects of slavery on slaveholders: “Slavery proved as injurious to her as it did to me. When I went there, she was a pious, warm, and tender-hearted woman. There was no sorrow or suffering for which she had not a tear. She had bread for the hungry, clothes for the naked, and comfort for every mourner that came within her reach. Slavery soon proved its ability to divest her of these heavenly qualities. Under its influence, the tender heart became stone, and the lamb-like disposition gave way to one of tiger-like fierceness” (Douglass, 1845, p. 22).

The same theme is reiterated in Harriet Jacob’s *Incidents* where she comments “... that slavery is a curse to the whites as well as the blacks” (Jacobs, 2001, p. 45). In the same chapter, she recollects the plight of a neighboring slaveholder’s wife and says, “Had it not been for slavery, he [white master] would have been a better man and his wife a happier woman” (Jacobs, 2001, p.4).

We also see how for the black slaves, death is more desirable to slavery. In fact Frederick Douglass says in Chapter X of *Narrative* “In coming to a fixed determination to run away, we did more than Patrick Henry, when he resolved upon liberty or death” (Douglass, 1845, p. 86). For the slaves, the ideal options were either freedom or death. However, the latter could not be chosen voluntarily because their Christian sensibilities would never allow them to take a direct passage to hell, despite the acknowledgement that “death is better than slavery” (Jacobs, 2001, p. 23).

1.5 EXPERIENCES: POLITICS OF MALE/FEMALE VOICES

Women narrators are more apt than men to emphasize, as Jacobs does, a desire for a home of one's own. Yet to maintain their own homes, women need a degree of economic power. Male slave fugitives might earn a living doing carpentry work or any other manual labour, or in rare cases, by lecturing on the abolitionist lecture circuit and writing slave narratives, but for female fugitives, publishing narratives frequently meant a certain amount of infamy. Even in freedom, most fugitive slave women still worked as domestics, cooks, laundresses, and seamstresses. Although most male former slaves worked as laborers, some used literacy to open up broader employment opportunities; for women, it offered little advantage. For women narrators, literacy was useful, but it only marginally advanced their “independence.” Even in a state of freedom, racism and sexism combined to keep ex-slave women's status - to alter Orlando Patterson's definition of slavery - that of people suffering permanent, violent domination, generally dishonored, as they had been from birth (Patterson, 1982, p. 13).

Harriet Jacob's story focuses on the rights of women to protect themselves and their family and a right to raise their children whereas **Frederick Douglass'** story focuses on the quest for literacy and free speech. If we compare the starting chapters of these two autobiographies, we will notice that Douglass expresses very little or no emotional attachment to his mother and has no investment with his community. He is seen to be an emotionally unfeeling storyteller concerned only with his purpose-that towards freedom. In Jacob's it is a gut-wrenching emotional journey of a woman who will not conform and give in to the wiles of the power wielder. The various tricks that she employs to keep her family out of harm's way even as she struggles to keep herself alive is what gets the readers involved within her story. Frederick Douglass identifies himself as “An American Slave” whereas Harriet Jacobs identifies herself as a “slave girl”. Douglass gave real names but Jacob's used pseudonyms to protect her loved ones. Also, she experiences a sense of guilt and hides her sexual transgressions with the ‘white’ man, Mr. Sands in battling with her Christian morality. Her decision to engage in

an illicit sexual liaison in order to escape the abuse of her master Dr. Flint asserts her liberty and autonomy as alternative values for slave women. Chastity and morality hold less importance to her in comparison with her willing exercise of choice. By narrating her experiences in the context of sexual and domestic ideologies that forgive or condemn them, Jacobs manages to articulate the limitations of those so called standards, thus redefining black womanhood and creating alternative narrative structures for describing black female experience:

“Employing well-tried sentimental forms to apologize for her sexual demise, Jacobs implicitly endorses the shared value of sexual purity as the grounds for communication with her genteel audience. Asserting illicit sexuality as an instance of her autonomy, Jacobs rejects the conventions of sexual purity altogether, defining her relationship with her audience as adversarial rather than cooperative.”
(Nudelman, 1992, p. 939).

Another example of a slave narrative is William Brown's, *The Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Written by Himself*. Like many of the stories written by former slaves, it is much more than a mere chronicle of a journey from bondage to freedom. His work reveals the ways in which the former slave author writes a sense of self, denied by the South's peculiar institution, into existence.

Songs: Envisaging New Identities/Definitions

Why do songs play such an important role in colonial slave narratives? Let us try to respond to this question in the context of gendered struggles represented in these works.

Many slave narratives suggest that, while they were trying to shed the old identity and form new identities and spaces for themselves, they were also dialoguing with the period's significant themes. These included individualism, community, sexual objectification, resisting oppression, struggles for freedom, and gendered strategies of coping and resistance. Female slaves may have a self-defined standpoint on their oppression. Because of their doubly marginalized position as coloured persons in a white-dominated society and females in a male-dominated society, they have a distinctive set of experiences and a consciousness of their oppression which influences their new identity. In a blatantly patriarchal society, within the private space at least, male slaves held positions of power. Male and female fugitives have had different modes of expressions, maybe even their models of freedom differ but they had a common goal, to live as free people in a free society.

Because most of them were illiterate, songs were often used by slaves as an outlet of expression as well as motivation for the common quest. While providing moments of hope and joy, singing songs was a way to give voice

to their struggles and sorrows, their dreams, their yearning to be heard and their vision of freedom. As aptly observed by Douglass:

“I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake. Slaves sing most when they are unhappy. The songs of the slaves represent the sorrows of the heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears. At least, such is my experience. I have often sung to drown my sorrow, but seldom to express my happiness.”

(Douglass, 1845, p. 9)

As we see in Jacobs' work too, songs provide a respite that slaves are longing for and it helps them envision a better tomorrow and a temporary new identity as free people: “The congregation struck up a hymn, and sung as though they were as free as the birds that warbled round us, - “Ole Satan thought he had a mighty aim.” Precious are such moments to the poor slaves. If you were to hear them at such times, you might think they were happy. But can that hour of singing and shouting sustain them through the dreary week, toiling without wages, under constant dread of the lash?” (Jacobs, 1865, p. 59-60).

As we can see from the above examples, in the process of recreation facilitated by songs, new identities are forged and this also helps them to understand themselves and the directions their lives can take. In the next section, we will examine the theme of freedom in the light of the notion of the violation of private space.

Check Your Progress:

What are some differences between slave narratives written by women and men? Why do you think these differences exist?

1.6 VIOLENCE/VIOLATION OF PRIVATE SPACE

The laws of the Southern states of America ensured that slaves and their offspring were kept shackled to the chains of slavery. The master becomes their 'owner' and their suffering multiplied by the day. The slaves had no scope of giving themselves any independence. Once born into slavery, they would always be slaves. This has a huge bearing on the notion of private space, since imprisonment - both literal and symbolic - becomes a defining trope of private space for slaves kept in some kind of compulsory confinement.

Space- mental, emotional, intellectual, physical- was a huge luxury for the black slaves. All their time and space was devoted to serving their masters faithfully. Rights and choices were alien to them. These stories, as unreal as it may seem to modern readers, are stories of real people who have fought hard to be considered as one. Through our readings we are getting to see different sides to what the world knew as the 'single story' or the accepted version/history, which is told by the one who is politically and economically endowed and empowered. The bodies of the slaves were completely at the mercy of the higher-ups, males as well as females, but for the females the extent of violence and violation marred them psychologically forever. As Maryse Conde records in her narrative *I, Tituba*: "Abena, my mother, was raped by an English sailor on the deck of "Christ the King" one day in the year 16** while the ship was sailing for Barbados" (Conde, 2009, p. 3). Her body was violated against her will at the nubile, young age of about 16. Among other narratives, violence becomes the shadow that looms over Maryse Conde's fictionalized narrative of Tituba. In many of the slave recollections, we see how violence has become an everyday thing for them. That was the way the masters chose to subjugate them and keep them 'tame'.

In the work of Harriet Jacobs, we see a literal confinement of space which was abetted by the ceaseless lascivious overtures of Dr. Flint. For 7 years, she lived in a shed in her grandmother's house: "It was a pent roof, covered with nothing but shingles... the garret was only 9 feet long and seven wide. The highest was three feet... there was neither admission for light or air" (Jacobs, 1861. p. 91-92).

Linda or Harriet Jacobs, escapes from larger, limited space to a confined space where although she is physically imprisoned, she feels 'psychologically free'. Such was the violation of her mental and emotional space by Dr. Flint that she found it preferable to live in a small hole than to face his disgusting ownership of her body. Male slaves faced physical torment and brutality while female slaves suffered sexual ravaging and were used as 'breeders' for more slaves by the owners.

1.7 LANGUAGE, LITERACY AND EMPOWERMENT

How does language, whether oral or written, influence empowerment? Is language a tool of oppression or of liberation? Is education and literacy essential for the procurement of freedom? In this section, let us look at some of these questions in the context of slave narratives. In order to do this, we will begin with the notion of ‘critical literacy’, before examining the role of language and education in the experiences of black slaves.

1.7.1 Critical Literacy: Memoir and History

What is ‘Critical Literacy’? What makes it different from knowing how to read and write? The term ‘critical literacy’ was coined by educational theorists Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo. According to Macedo and Freire, individuals who are critically literate can begin “transforming the social and political structures that imprison them in their ‘culture of silence’” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 59). Literacy, in this sense, is not simply reading the word, but reading the world. And literacy also involves transforming the world, literacy “becomes a vehicle by which the oppressed are equipped with the necessary tools to reappropriate their history, culture, and language practices” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 59).

We see such a critical literacy operating in the narratives of many black slaves. For instance, as observed by Cutter, “Jacobs thus uses her critical literacy to demythologize false texts on slavery, race, and religion. Moreover, Jacobs’ narrative stance acknowledges that there is both truth and falsehood in language, yet still holds her own language game up to a standard of veracity. This violates the language games of her culture, at least as they are practiced by Flint and others” (Cutter, 1996, p. 221).

Knowledge of this literacy has helped the centuries-oppressed slaves to find their own courage and be heard in the din of development. Jacobs also uses this to her advantage and through a narration of her true history, she offers a counter-history to the spread of the many false histories created about the slaves. What seems like a personal memoir thus transcends set boundaries and becomes another version of history. For Jacobs, there is the realization that language can be used as a tool of power over others, and this may sometimes even involve veiling, or not always revealing the whole truth: “Jacobs ‘critical literacy’ thus involves not only an attempt to use language, but an attempt to transform language and in so doing to transform reality, to make herself and her race present in history” (Cutter, 1996, p. 221).

Let us now turn to a broader perspective on the role played by language and education in the empowerment of slaves.

1.7.2 Language, Education, Freedom

Male slave narrators' use of printed discourse to connect with others differs considerably from the relationship-building found in the work of women writers like Jacobs. Female slave narrators as well as males desired literacy although for the males, it was of utmost importance. It is another thing entirely that being literate never saved women fugitives from the burdens of slavery, racism, or sexism. Women narrators do not give central significance to the acquisition of literacy. Perhaps they were cynical about its ability to confront the racist and sexist tendencies of society. For the female slaves, the most significant realities in their lives usually derived from their personal relationships. Nineteenth-century social definitions of femininity and spaces for women marginalized white women but even worse, entirely excluded black women.

'I was born', the connotation of these three words seem appropriate for the beginning of a narrative/autobiography but very few people have realized that the manner of introducing their origin on the earth is indicative of how matter-of-fact and usual it was for slaves to be born with no remembrances of their birth date. They existed and that was all. Also, it helps us recognize the power of language which transforms a story into a personal narrative. These slave narrators through vocalizing their experiences were creating new selves by rejecting their status as 'property.' Through the process of a metaphorical re-birth they are able to view themselves as unique human beings who have the power to influence and assert their destinies.

Writing frees them and gives them self-expression but it is important to note that writing is also a form of resistance. The problem that, for instance, Harriet Jacobs faces in her narrative, then, is how to use language as a way of achieving liberation, when it is language which forms a major portion of her oppression. How can Jacobs use her literacy in a way which liberates her from the dominant discursive practices of her society? To speak in the white "master's" language implies voluntary entrapment intra a system of discourse which denies her subjectivity. But if she does not use this language, how does her voice reach the audience that she wants because the audience is familiar only with the dominant language of the powerful? Thus language which can be a victimizer, can also be used to empower the victim.

As historical documents, slave narratives chronicle the evolution of white supremacy in the South from eighteenth-century slavery through early twentieth-century segregation and disfranchisement. As autobiography, these narratives give voice to generations of black people who, despite being written off by white southern literature, still found a way to bequeath a literary legacy of enormous collective significance to the South and the United States.

What, then, we may ask is the role played by published slave narratives in the ongoing struggle of African-Americans for equality and for a 'civilized status'? We may turn to the work of Mary Church Terrell as one example. Though today she is little known, Mary Church Terrell (1863-1954) was one of the most remarkable women of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Active in both the civil rights movement and the campaign for women's suffrage, Terrell was a leading spokesperson for the National American Woman Suffrage Association, the first president of the National Association of Colored Women, and the first black woman.

appointed to the District of Columbia Board of Education and the American Association of University Women. It is clear that the roots of the Civil Rights movement had been around for many decades longer than acknowledged. Despite the Civil War, conditions of slaves did not improve greatly. The Civil rights Movement which reached its peak in America around 1950's saw blacks fighting for suffrage rights, education rights, land rights, occupation rights, and transportation rights, among others. We can see the initial stirrings of these struggles in the narrations of Harriet Jacobs, William W Brown and Frederick Douglass. For African Americans, the end of slavery brought hope for unprecedented control of their own lives and economic prospects. Slave narratives played a critical role in recording the struggles of enslaved black women and men in the form of printed discourse which would inspire the movement towards freedom and equality in centuries to come.

Check Your Progress:

- i) *What is 'critical literacy'?*

ii) *How is it different from literacy in the conventional sense?*

iii) *To what extent is formal education important in the struggle against slavery*

1.8 RELIGION, SPIRITUALITY & FREEDOM

Racist attitudes have been historically used to justify why a certain race and color of people, namely, Africans, were deemed as slaves. This credo, which often interpreted religion in a slanted and biased way, seems to have been the cornerstone of the white masters. This helped create and validate the stereotype of the colored slave who is expected to faithfully and wholeheartedly served his/her master's family without resistance. It also empowered and defined the responsibility of the master:

“Christian intellectuals taught that God had predestined the African to servitude and the European to lordship; the Black to simplemindedness and the European to intellectual prowess; the slave woman to bur-den bearing, domestic servitude, and libidinous self-absorption and the European to Christian rectitude.”

(Simms, 2001, p. 885)

One of Douglass’s most vehement arguments against Christianity as practiced in the South was that it misinterpreted and perverted the Word of God- the Bible. In his Narrative, he describes an overseer, Mr. Severe who is known for his swearing as well as for his sadism, “his fiendish barbarity” (Douglass, 1845, p 55). It is also because of these instances that Douglass emphasizes the knowledge of written word so that they can access and interpret for their own selves. He clearly sees religion as one that re-instates the enslaved status of a slave:

“From my earliest recollection, I date the entertainment of a deep conviction that slavery would not always be able to hold me within its foul embrace; and in the darkest hours of my career in slavery, this living word of faith and spirit of hope departed not from me, but remained like ministering angels to cheer me through the gloom. This good spirit was from God, and to him I offer thanksgiving and praise.”

(Douglass, 1845, p. 75)

The religion which the whites set as a forced imprint on them was indeed providing them tender threads of respite and hope, yet it was this same religion that taught them to ‘bear’ and forgive. It taught them to tolerate all that the whites perpetrated on them as if it were an edict from God himself. It stopped the battered slaves from taking lives, their as well as the oppressors. Was religion in fact the push that gave the shove to the white masters to continue the layers of injustice and cruelties? “I assert most unhesitatingly, that the religion of the south is a mere covering for the most horrid crimes - a justifier of the most appalling barbarity, – a sanctifier of the most hateful frauds, – and a dark shelter under which the darkest, foulest, grossest, and most infernal deeds of slaveholders find the strongest protection” (Douglass, 1845, p. 67).

Douglass in his *Narratives of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) depicted slavery as a superimposition on selfhood, restricting and killing the individual’s space. He drew focus on the conflicts and tensions of the slave becoming an individual in his own right. He also talks about how religion which was meant to act as the strengthener of the slaves actually strengthened the noose made by the white masters for the slaves. The *Narrative* resists the demand on realist literature to be objective and dispassionate. The author

deliberately uses the language of rhetoric and states that he is its sole author, and it contains two prefaces from William Lloyd Garrison and another abolitionist, Wendell Phillips, to attest to the fact that it is genuinely his work. Douglass uses true names of people to establish the truthfulness of his story and validate his life story, that of a former slave. Additionally, the *Narrative* undertook to be not only a personal account of Douglass's experiences as a slave, but also an eloquent antislavery treatise. With the *Narrative*, Douglass demonstrated his ability as a black writer and relayed the fact that he was not only the teller of his story, but its interpreter as well.

Alternately, Maryse Conde's *I Tituba Black Witch of Salem*, explores female spirituality in its purest form. *I, Tituba* is a fictionalized portrait made in a first person 'autobiographical' account of a historical figure who was a main participant in the notorious Salem witch trials of 1692. She speaks as a voice from the margins. Many Caribbean novels are frequently written from the Other's perspective: oral stories being written down, the stories of the oppressed being written with their infant victories. Maryse Conde takes race, gender, religion, and the notion of America as land of prosperity, guilt, revenge and sexuality, and weaves them together in *Tituba*. *Tituba* never accepts silence, even when it is counseled to her by those she loves and respects the most.

Characters like *Tituba* and *Mama Ya Ya* use their spirituality to overcome the trials and tribulations of slavery. Spirituality becomes here a shield of comfort. In this narrative, the protagonist, *Tituba*, at a very young age, is stripped of the people that meant the most to her. From then on her family appear to her only in 'spirit' and offer spiritual support. *Tituba* would call on her mother, her father, and *Mama Ya Ya* and they would each appear to her. The perspective of Afro-diasporan spirituality sharply contrasted with Christianity, particularly Puritanism. *Tituba's* connections to the spiritual world helped her heal others. On the other hand, the Puritans' religion was portrayed with brutality. Samuel Parris, although a minister, was an extremely non-affable man, disliked and feared by his family and community. This overt religious behaviour throughout the Puritan community actually causes its citizens to act brutally, hanging many people suspected of witchcraft. *Tituba* unlike many female characters of slave narratives, resists conforming to the new world's standards. She refuses to let the thought of her homeland go, refuses to become a Christian and truly accept Christian values, continues her sexual encounters, and also refuses to stop her work of healing and helping. *Tituba* is battered and beaten but not broken, exploited but not trampled. Her spirituality was not socially approved but was redefined by her.

It is Tituba's spiritual strength that allows her to remain calm and strong in the face of dire situations. Despite being made to feel 'invisible' by the white people who have enslaved her, she manages to cling on to her own sense of 'reality':

"You would have said I wasn't there, standing right there on the threshold of the room. They were talking about me, but at the same time they were ignoring me. They were scratching me off the map of human beings. I was a non-being. An invisible. More invisible than the invisibles, because they at least have a power that everyone fears. I, Tituba had no more reality than these women wanted to concede to her. It was atrocious".

(Conde, 2009, p. 57)

Check Your Progress:

i) *What, according to you, is the difference between religion and spirituality.*

ii) *Why is this distinction important in the context of the slave narratives we have discussed above?*

1.9 GENDER AND DOUBLE MARGINALIZATION

Langston Hughes' narrative *Mother to Son* (1994) is written in the voice of a black woman who has been uprooted, enslaved, discriminated, disadvantaged and exploited by the black man as well as the white man. Black women have over the ages been at the margins of both race and gender. In his work, the vicious power hierarchies and layers of exploitation have been played out in an inter-connected weave - the white master at the top, followed by the white mistress commanding race subservience, then the black male and finally, last on the rung, the black woman. The black woman is seen at the furthest margin of the margins: "Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, they have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own" (Jacobs. 2001, p. 64).

These experiences have been recounted and observed in the female slave narratives where we are introduced to the lowly status of the woman as the recipient of various forms of violence and exploitation. For instance Maryse Conde notes in her work: "It seemed to [Abena] that a woman's fate was even more painful than a man's. In order to free themselves from their condition, didn't they have to submit to the will of those very men who kept them in bondage and to sleep with them?" (Conde, 2009, p. 6). The black woman slave has no ownership of her body or her mind as everything is dictated and etched by the white superior: "When he told me that I was made for his use, made to obey his command in every thing; that I was nothing but a slave, whose will must and should surrender to his, never before had my puny arm felt half so strong" (Jacobs, 2001, p. 18). Similarly, Mama Yaya in *I, Tituba, Witch of Salem* states, "Men do not love. They possess. They subjugate" (Conde, 2009, p.14). The narratives are formal and melodramatic, not too different from the style employed by 19th century romantic novels albeit with jarringly inappropriate subject matters like the sexual abuse of the enslaved black women.

Most of the narratives of women unravel their chattel status, since they are very often seen as 'breeders', fates they are resigned to. Tituba watches as her mother was hanged for daring to wound a plantation owner who tried to rape her. Since she was 'black' she was not supposed to resist or challenge the authority of the 'White' master. Women seemed to have no say whatsoever in any aspect of their own lives. Their children automatically become slaves and are thrust into slavery the moment they are able to use their hands and feet: "Seeing their children touched and seared and wounded by race prejudice is one of the heaviest crosses which colored women have to bear" (Terrell, 1940, p. 11).

The plight of female slaves was really pitiable because in addition to domestic duties and other manual labour on the plantations, they are forced to satisfy the lust of their lascivious masters, or in some cases like Tituba's, their husbands. Their identities as women seem to arise from the appreciation or control by the male as a voyeur: "What is more beautiful than a woman's body! Especially when it is glorified by a man's desire!" (Conde, 2009, p. 43). Their bodies become the playground of doom.

1.10 LET US SUM UP

Gendered autobiographies work towards creating consciousness-raising, which precedes explicit reflection. Over the years, social beliefs and customs have created fragmented of societies divided into 'mainstream' and 'marginalized' groups. In this unit on Slave Narratives, we have tried to present the views of the one such unrepresented and marginalized group. Literary discourse, more specifically slave narratives in this case, have given voice and visibility to the horrors of slavery. Through our discussions of several such narratives, we have been able to look at the intersectionality of gender, race and marginality. Narratives written by female and male slaves reveal differences in gender perspectives which are important to our understanding of engendered societies. Finally, our discussion has enabled us to see the crucial role played by language and literacy in the struggle for freedom against slavery.

1.11 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) How are Slave Narratives different from other forms of narratives/ autobiographies? Discuss.
- 2) What is 'Double Marginalization' and how are women double victims? Discuss in the context of slave narratives with the help of specific examples.
- 3) Analyse the relationships between religion, spirituality, slavery and freedom with the help of examples.
- 4) What distinguishes male slave narratives and female slave narratives? Explain various facets of such differences.
- 5) What role do literacy and education play in liberating an individual physically, mentally and emotionally? Can education aid the 'flight' towards self-ownership? Justify.

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UNIT 2 GENDERED POSTCOLONIAL IDENTITIES

Naina Dey

Structure

- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Objectives
- 2.3 Background: From Colonial to Gendered Postcolonial
- 2.4 Identity Through Autobiographical Narratives
- 2.5 Baby Halder: *A Life Less Ordinary*
- 2.6 Nayantara Sahgal: *Prison and Chocolate Cake*
- 2.7 Gloria Anzaldua: *La Frontera*
 - 2.7.1 The Border
 - 2.7.2 Anzaldua's Life in Brief
 - 2.7.3 What is the 'Mestiza'?
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 - 2.7.5 History of the Chicanos in Anzaldua's Narrative
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 - 2.8.1 *Meatless Days*
 - 2.8.2 A Short Study of Suleri's Friend Mustakor
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- 2.9 Rigoberta Menchu's Autobiography
 - 2.9.1 Rigoberta Menchu: *A Life of Pain and Horror*
 - 2.9.2 *I, Rigoberta Menchu*
- 2.10 Myth and Gendered Postcolonial Histories
- 2.11 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.12 Unit End Questions
- 2.13 References
- 2.14 Suggested Readings

2.1 INTRODUCTION

You have already been introduced to the terms postcolonialism and postcolonial feminism in previous courses (see, for instance, MWG 001, Block 5, Unit 3 & MWG 007, Block 3, Unit 2). In this course, we will discuss postcolonial life narratives in the context of the journey from the colonial to the postcolonial. We will study the autobiographical narratives of five diverse women separated by nationality, geographical location and social class, namely Baby Haldar, Nayantara Sahgal, Sara Suleri, Gloria Anzaldua

and Rigoberta Menchu. The metaphor of the 'border' plays a significant role in the work of some of these postcolonial authors. In the course of our discussions, we will examine similarities as well as dissimilarities in these works.

2.2 OBJECTIVES

After completing this unit, you will be able to:

- Describe the journey from the colonial to post-colonial;
- Discuss 'the border' as a metaphorical site of marginality and racial transgression;
- Explain the assertion of identity through women's life narratives;
- Examine the use of the female body as a metaphor for a text/nation/history;
- Critically analyse narrative and landscape from a feminist perspective in the works of Sahgal, Suleri, Anzaldua and Menchu; and
- Discuss the struggles of the working class through the narratives of Baby Haldar and Rigoberta Menchu.

2.3 BACKGROUND: FROM COLONIAL TO GENDERED POSTCOLONIAL

Defining Postcolonialism

Let us begin by reviewing the definition of the term 'postcolonialism' in the context of literature. (You would find it useful to review our earlier definitions in MWG 001, Block 5, Unit 3; MWG 007, Block 3, Unit 2). Postcolonialism deals with the effects of colonization on cultures and societies and was first used by historians after the Second World War to denote 'the post-colonial state'. Thus, the term 'postcolonial' had a clear chronological meaning to designate the post-independence period. Though the study of colonialist discourse theory began in the late 1970s through the works of Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi K. Bhabha, the term 'postcolonial' was not used in those early studies. The term was first employed in the literary circles to refer to cultural interaction with colonial societies. Subsequently, postcolonialism became a major subject for study in Commonwealth Literature and New Literatures and is now used to signify the political, linguistic and cultural experience of societies that were former European colonies. In this context, let us read **Bill Ashcroft's** description of postcolonialism as stated in his *Key Concepts in Post-colonial Studies*:

'Post-colonialism/postcolonialism' is now used in wide and diverse ways to include the study and analysis of European territorial conquests, the various institutions of European colonialisms, the discursive operation of empire, the subtleties of subject constructions in colonial discourse and the resistance of those subjects, and, most importantly perhaps, the differing responses to such incursions and their contemporary colonial legacies in both pre- and post-independence nations and communities. While its use has tended to focus on the cultural production of such communities, it is becoming widely used in historical, political, sociological and economic analyses, as these disciplines continue to engage with the impact of European imperialism upon world societies.

(Ashcroft, 1998, p. 187)

Postcolonialism thus deals with the literature of **two temporal dimensions**:

- first, the literature written in previously or currently colonized countries;
- second, the literature written in colonizing countries which deals with the colonization or colonized peoples.

Postcolonialism focuses on the way in which literature by the colonizing culture distorts the experience and realities, and inscribes the inferiority of the colonized people. It also focuses on literature by the colonized people which attempts to articulate their identity and reclaim their past in the face of that past's inevitable otherness.

Postcolonial writings are attempts at reviving the ethnic cultures, traditions, beliefs and languages. Postcolonial literature inculcates pride in one's own ancient culture and traditions. It often abounds in patriotic feelings. Postcolonialism aims at developing the national identity in the wake of colonial rule. It deals with the colonized people's response to the colonial legacy by writing back to the centre. The indigenous peoples start to write their own histories, legacies, using often the coloniser's language.

From 'Colonial' to a 'Gendered Postcolonial'

Genuine historicity, as Linda Hutcheon observes, "openly acknowledges its own discursive contingent identity". 'It teaches and enacts the recognition of the fact that the social, historical and existential "reality" of the past is discursive reality' (Hutcheon, 1998, p. 24). When the past is inextricably incipient in the existential present and looks ahead to a more complex future, the discursive nature of such reality is inexhaustible and inexplicably contradictory. In this context therefore, it will be easier for you to understand the true nature of "gendered postcolonial identities".

When colonial powers considered their subject peoples, they often employed what could be called the “colonial gaze”: that is, they saw the colonies through eyes that were blurred by misinformation, misconceptions, and stereotypes. Since the 1970s, scholars such as **Edward Said** have cast this in terms of the imperialist viewing the “Other”, arguing that colonial powers construct conceptualizations of subject peoples that serve the interests of those who rule. But the use of the “Other” to refer to women pre-dates Said’s work, and women’s studies scholars have used the term ever since **Simone de Beauvoir** set forth her theory of “Woman, the Other” in *The Second Sex* in 1949.

Tamara L. Hunt however, argues that there is a distinct difference between these two views of the “Other”, while suggesting that imperialism and gender were closely linked in a number of ways. Because imperialistic notions typically have patriarchal social structures, the fact that women in subject lands often did not conform to the gender constructs of the dominant imperial culture was used to explain the “uncivilized” nature of their society. Similarly, conquering countries often attributed “feminine” characteristics to all subject peoples as a means of explaining characteristics that from the colonial point of view were unfamiliar and undesirable. This tends to throw into high relief the notion that the “masculine” characteristics of the conquering nation are naturally dominant, thereby legitimizing colonial rule as a reflection of male superiority which was seen as “natural” in society. Women in this context, were doubly colonized - by nationality and by gender - in other colonial contexts.

Therefore, **Anne McClintock** in her book *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (1995), argues that the masculinity of empire was articulated, in the first instance, through the feminization of conquered geographies, and in the erotic economy of colonial ‘discovery’ narratives. Vespucci’s mythic disclosure of the virginal American landscape is a case in point: “Invested with the male prerogative of naming, Vespucci renders America’s identity a dependent extension of his, and stakes male Europe’s territorial rights to her body and, by extension, the fruits of her land” (Mc Clintock, 1995, p. 26).

In the earlier blocks/units you have already become acquainted with life-narratives/autobiographies as a way of asserting identity and as a means of countering repression. The significance of self-narratives in association with ‘postcolonialism’ cannot be overstated. In the next section, we will discuss the role of autobiography in the context of the assertion of postcolonial identity.

Check Your Progress:

What do you understand by the term 'postcolonialism' in the context of literature? Explain briefly in your own words.

2.4 IDENTITY THROUGH AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVES

With the post-modern implosion (because outworn) of the canonical and the generic, the way has been cleared for many marginal and hitherto invisible 'multinarratives' emanating from the non-Occidental, the colonized, the dispossessed, the feminine, the ethnic and the diasporic. Thus, marginal literature has excavated some of the apparently exhausted motifs of modernism - selfhood and the need to reclaim identity, history, and the need to inscribe it through art and myth, language and the need to explore its truth-value.

The subaltern (see definition of the term in "Class", MWG 007, Block 3, Unit 2, Section 2.7) shares the excruciating fate of this universe of simulacra. S/he is a created image interpreted by a host of prejudicial constructions and is continually assailed by the fluidity, the instability even the illegitimacy of claims to social and personal space. Nor can s/he articulate his anguish

through permissible social-political channels because s/he has been denied a voice, which is equivalent to being rendered historically inarticulate, or even invisible. Writing their history, their experiences, is one way for these marginalized people to contest their absence within the monologic master narrative of (Western) imperialist patriarchy. Writing thus functions at the extreme reaches of authorial mediation. The created text stands as an etiological (causal) construct or an originating fiction, in terms of which the peripheral consciousness performs an act of retrospective relocation, reconstrues private and public space and reconstructs the unified subject.

This cathartic and therefore ultimately self-expressive act is performed by the marginal writer as much as for the self as community. Thus, Homi Bhaba writes that the role of memory and “remembering” “is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-membling, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present” (Bhaba, 1994, p. 63).

Keeping in view some of these theoretical underpinnings, let us turn to a closer examination of a few specific postcolonial life narratives, starting with Baby Halder’s work from India.

2.5 BABY HALDER: A LIFE LESS ORDINARY

About Baby Halder

Born in Kashmir, Baby Halder was abandoned by her mother when only four. Raised by an abusive father, an ex-serviceman and driver and her step-mother, with whom she travelled from Kashmir to Murshidabad and finally to Durgapur, West Bengal, she went to school intermittently, and dropped off after sixth standard, when at the age of 12, her father married her off to a man 14 years her senior, and a small-time decorator. She had her first child at the age of 13, and two more in quick succession. Meanwhile, after her sister was strangled to death by her husband, she started working as domestic servant in the neighbourhood. Finally in 1999, at the age of 25, after years of domestic violence, she left her husband, escaping to Delhi on a train, with her three children on board. As a single parent, she started working as a housemaid in New Delhi homes, to support and educate her children, and encountered several exploitative employers in the process. Years later, in interviews Baby has stated dispassionately, “Where should I start? Should I begin with how when I was seven-years-old my mother suddenly left us by thrusting a coin each in our hands, or tell you about how my nephew told my Baba that he saw his father strangling his mother, my Didi, to death, or how my Baba used to suddenly vanish from our life and then resurface. Or should I tell you about my husband to whom I was married off when I was 12 and why I left him and came to Delhi with my

three children?” “Many girls back home go through a similar life and yet nobody looks at it as anything different,” she says, critiquing the hypocrisies of Indian domesticity in her stride (Pisharoty, 2006).

Baby was lucky to have as her mentor her last employer, writer and retired anthropology professor Prabodh Kumar and a grandson of Hindi literary giant Munshi Premchand who lives in Gurgaon, a suburb of New Delhi. Seeing her interest in books, he encouraged her to first read leading authors, starting with Taslima Nasreen’s autobiographical *Amar Meyebela* (My Girlhood) whose angst and stark honesty deeply moved Halder and would later on inspire her to pen her own memoirs. Baby soon began to read books by Mahasweta Devi, Shanko Ghosh, Rabindranath Tagore, Ashapura Devi, Nazrul Islam and other Bengali luminaries.

Subsequently before going on a trip to South India, her employer bought her a notebook and pen and encouraged her to write her life story, which she did late at night after work and sometimes in between chores, using plain matter-of-fact language and writing in native Bengali. When Kumar was back after a month, she had written about a 100 pages.

Prof. Kumar also aided in editing the manuscript, shared it with local literary circles and translated it into Hindi. The work was published under the title *A Life Less Ordinary: A Memoir* in 2002 by a small Kolkata-based publishing house. The book turned out to be a best-seller and received extensive media attention as it threw light on the hard lives led by domestic servants in Asia.

In this context, you can also use as reference “‘Birds in a Cage’: Changes in Bengali Social Life as Recorded in Autobiographies by Women” by Srabashi Ghosh in *Ideals, Images and Real Lives: Women in Literature and History* which will provide you a fair idea about the early female autobiographies which were written by women belonging to the upper classes of Bengali society and the lesser number of autobiographies written by those who did not have a family background to be proud of.

A Life Less Ordinary

Halder’s *A Life Less Ordinary*, charts the life-story of the author herself as not just marginalised on the basis of gender but on the basis of economic disparity in an urban Indian society. While being aware that her lot is similar to many others like her Halder is also aware of her own responsibility as one who is voicing the anger and anguish of the voiceless. For her, her narrative thus become not only a means of expression but one that would enable her to enter a different world of literary people where she would not be judged on the basis of her occupation as domestic help. The narrative is unapologetic in tone and does little to gloss over the ugliest phases of the narrator’s life.

2.6 NAYANTARA SAHGAL: *PRISON & CHOCOLATE CAKE*

About Nayantara Sahgal

Born on 10 May, 1927, Nayantara Sahgal wrote in English. Her fiction deals with India's elite responding to the crises resulting from political change. She was one of the first female Indian writers in English to receive wide recognition. A member of the Nehru-Gandhi family, the second of the three daughters born Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, she was awarded the 1986 Sahitya Akademi Award for English, for her novel, *Rich Like Us* (1985), by the Sahitya Akademi, India's National Academy of Letters.

Prison and Chocolate Cake

In an interview given in 1990, Nayantara Sahgal defined what politics signified for her, and also offered a definition of the political novel. If politics was the “use of power” and “the abuse of power”, a political novel “would be an awareness of the use of power whether it is directly in politics or reflected in domestic life or other aspects of it” (Jain, 1996b).

Set against the backdrop of the freedom movement, *Prison and Chocolate Cake* appears to be a portrait gallery of some of the illustrious members of the Nehru-Gandhi family that has spearheaded the Congress party's ambivalent tryst with the erstwhile British rulers. Nayantara Sahgal, Jawaharlal Nehru's niece, though not a direct participant in the freedom movement, is nevertheless affected by the active participation in it by the other members of her family. Thus, as a peripheral participant, she has the privilege of observing from close quarters, larger-than-life heroes who shaped larger-than-life events— viz. Pandit Nehru, Mahatma Gandhi, Sarojini Naidu, her own parents Vijayalakshmi Pandit and Ranjit Sitaram Pandit. There are witticisms—in this case from the wonderfully irreverent sisters, Chandralekha, Rita, and Nayantara herself. This is the personal story/history of a girl growing up in the midst of the freedom struggle. There are behind-the-scenes anecdotes—in this case sketching a portrait of Nehru the man, not the statesman as recorded by history, the deliciously carefree days spent in Anand Bhawan. There is the sense of history being relived but in a different form—in this case an insider's history of the Nehru family from the time that Sahgal starts observing her life to Gandhi's assassination in 1948. The author's journey to America on a troop-ship in 1943 reveals to her actual nature of the war. On the conflicting opinions of the ‘violence’ that takes place in the battlefield and Gandhiji's ‘ahimsa’ and non-cooperation, Sahgal observes, “We compared the Indian struggle with the early struggles of the Christian Church. Not since the apostles of Jesus went forth to preach his gospel of peace and to accept willingly whatever hardship came their way had the world seen a crusade of this sort” (Sahgal, 1954, p. 14).

Earlier, in Block 1, Unit 2 (“Forms”), we had briefly discussed Anne Frank’s *Diary of a Young Girl*. It would be interesting for you to compare Nayantara’s memoir with Anne Frank’s work as Anne’s diary also reflects political turmoil. The perspectives of the two narrators are of course very different.

2.7 GLORIA ANZALDUA: *LA FRONTERA*

In the above sections, we have examined the life narratives of two women authors from India. In this section, let us turn to a Chicana writer who is well-known for her exploration of marginality through the literary use of the image of the ‘border’, based on her life experiences of growing up at the Mexican-American border. Let us start by looking at this metaphor which plays an important role in defining her work, and that of many others who may feel marginalized due to their gender, class, caste or national identity.

2.7.1 The Border

The concept of ‘The Border’ as simultaneously a physical border and a metaphorical site of both marginality and radical transgression was first enunciated by Gloria Anzaldua in *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987). In demanding a space for the Other within the mainstream, border theory also problematises the Westphalian concept of the homogenous nation through its postmodern inscription of difference. (In the Westphalian system, the national interests and goals of states (and later nation-states) were widely assumed to go beyond those of any citizen or any ruler.

In trying to study American inflexions within the postmodern movement, one can begin by considering the effects of shifting critical paradigms in American studies away from linear narratives of immigration, assimilation and nationhood. The emergence of diaspora literature in contemporary America is structured around ‘border crossings’ and a need to articulate the concept of the ‘La Frontera’. As Walter Mignolo puts it:

“the postmodern and the postcolonial in the Americans are two faces of the same coin, locating imaginary constructions and loci of enunciations in different aspects of modernity, colonization and imperial ‘world orders.’”

(Roy, 2008, p.24)

Such ‘crossings’ in every sphere can denote ‘traversing’ or ‘mixing’ but they have made specific contribution towards the production of ‘cultures of displacements’. These ‘history of movements’ resulted in the discarding of the white-American literary form and in its place, we have different genres like the ‘corrido’, the ‘auto historias’ and the ‘talk story’.

A scholar of Chicana cultural theory, feminist theory, and queer theory, Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa (September 26, 1942 – May 15, 2004), based her most well-known book, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* on her life growing up on the Mexican-Texas border and incorporated her lifelong feelings of social and cultural marginalization into her works. Let us look at her life and the concept of the ‘*mestiza*’ before discussing her work.

2.7.2 Anzaldúa’s Life in Brief

Anzaldúa travails began when she started menstruating when only three months old, a symptom of the endocrine condition that caused her to stop growing physically at the age of twelve. Her mother would also ensure that a cloth was placed in Anzaldúa’s underwear as a child in case of bleeding. Reflecting upon her illness, she would later announce: “I was born a queer” - a feeling that will later on influence her writings as well as her sexual choice (Anzaldua, 2009, p.39).

In her writing, Anzaldua uses a unique blend of eight languages, two variations of English and six of Spanish. In many ways, by writing in “Spanglish,” Anzaldua creates a daunting task for the non-bilingual reader to decipher the full meaning of the text. However, there is irony in the mainstream reader’s feeling of frustration and irritation. These are the very emotions Anzaldua dealt with throughout her life, as she struggled to communicate in a country where she felt as a non-English speaker she was shunned and punished.

2.7.3 What is the ‘*Mestiza*’?

Anzaldua, as mentioned earlier, made contributions to ideas of feminism, and contributed to the fields of cultural theory/Chicana and queer theory. One of her major contributions was her introduction to United States academic audiences of the term *mestizaje*, meaning a state of being beyond binary conception, into academic writing and discussion. In her theoretical works, Anzaldúa called for a “new *mestiza*,” which she described as an individual aware of her conflicting and meshing identities and who uses “a pluralistic mode” to challenge binary thinking in the Western world (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 101). The “new *mestiza*” way of thinking is illustrated in postcolonial feminism. In the same way that Anzaldúa felt she could not be classified as only part of one race or the other, she felt that she possessed a multi-sexuality.

Describing herself as a very spiritual person, Anzaldua also speaks of four out-of-body experiences during her lifetime.

The dictionary definition of a *mestiza* is “a [woman] of mixed parentage, especially the offspring of a Spanish American and an American Indian” (<http://www.thefreedictionary.com>). The “borderlands” she is a descendant of are the familiar borderlands between Mexico and the United States, specifically Texas. However, this is simply the tangible borderland that Anzaldua discusses. The important counterpart to these physical borderlands that she addresses throughout her book are “[t]he psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands, and the spiritual borderlands [that] are not particular to the Southwest” (Anzaldua, 1987, preface).

2.7.4 Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza

Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza (1987) is a set of essays and poems exploring identity, each drawing on Anzaldua’s experience as a Chicana, a lesbian, and an activist.

Anzaldua challenges the conception of a border as a simple divide. In a bid to thematize ‘borderland’ tensions, which also incorporate unresolved sexism, Anzaldua’s ‘La Frontera’ foregrounds an alternative narrative that subverts the colonizer’s periodized literary form. *La Frontera* focuses on specific geographic locale, the U.S.-Mexico border and presents a specific history - that of Mexican origin U.S. Chicanos. However, as a treatise that is above all a feminist one, it opens up a radical way of restructuring the way we study history. Using a new genre that she calls ‘auto historia’, Anzaldua presents history as serpentine cycle rather than a linear narrative. This form as defined by Anzaldua, is expressed through ‘visual narrative’ -this form goes beyond the traditional self-portrait of autobiography in telling the writer/artist’s personal story; it also includes the artist’s cultural history. In the narrative, we encounter the emergence of the ‘cyborg’ (a post-modern creation) and find the protagonist passing through the ‘Nepantla’ phase - a stage that women and men, and whoever is willing to change into a new person and further grow and develop must pass through. The concept is articulated as a process of writing that redefines the lesbian identity of Anzaldua. (See definition of the term ‘cyborg’ in previous units - MWG 003, Block 4, Unit 5 & MWG 007, Block 3, Unit 1).

La Frontera is a semi-autobiographical account in which, Anzaldua comes to terms with her Chicana lesbian identity to recognize the components of its existence. Not only does her lesbian nature have traces of both male and female identities, but her culture is a mixture of many different races and cultures. By using both English and Spanish in her writing, she demonstrates that the Chicana literature cannot be expressed in only one language. She even references eight of the other borderland languages which she knows.

2.7.5 History of the Chicanos in Anzaldua's Narrative

In her book, Anzaldua also tells the story of the mestizos' descendants, beginning with the Chicanos in what is now Texas in 35,000 B.C. In 1,000 B.C. they moved south to what is now Mexico and Central America where their children, the Aztecs, were defeated by Hernán Cortés. At this time the *mestizo*, part Spanish, part native, arose. The *mestizo* then traveled to what is now the southwest United States and built their lives there. Later, as the United States began to grow in population, they began moving into Mexico (currently Texas) and forcibly taking their lands. War broke out and Mexico eventually was defeated. With the Treaty of Guadalupe in 1848 100,000 Mexicans became homeless. Although some tried to fight back and keep their homes it resulted in lynching and terror. After the war American companies began encroaching on Mexican turf again. At the end of the nineteenth century, they employed one fourth of Mexicans in factories, forcing them to work long hours and learn about American culture and ideals. In doing this, they devalued the peso and created a high unemployment rate throughout Mexico. For many Mexicans "the choice is to stay in Mexico and starve or move north and live" (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 32). These undocumented immigrants who create the border culture, risk their lives to come to the USA out of desperation. Anzaldúa ends the text by returning to the mestizos' feeling of being trapped stating that "This is her home, this thin edge of barbwire" (Anzaldua, 1987, pp. 12-13).

Anzaldúa's book is divided into two main sections. The semi-autobiographical first section that deals with life on the borderlands and the challenges faced during this time in her life and the challenges faced by all *mestizos*. This first section is broken down into seven parts. The first discussing the homeland, the next discusses rebellion and betrayal. The third section is entitled "Entering Into the Serpent". The next section is called "The Coatlicue State". The final three sections discuss language, writing, and speaking in the borderland world. The second "notes" section is a poetic homage to the native people of these "borderlands", not just the physical, but the mental, as well.

While describing the traditional history of Mexico Anzaldua narrates the Aztec myth of Huitzilopochtli, the God of War, who guided his people to the place (that later became Mexico City) where an eagle with a writhing serpent in its beak perched on a cactus. The eagle symbolizes the spirit (as the sun, the father); the serpent symbolizes the soul (as the earth, the mother). Together, they symbolize the struggle between the spiritual/celestial/male and the underworld/earth/feminine. The symbolic sacrifice of the serpent to the "higher" masculine powers indicates that the patriarchal order had already vanquished the feminine and matriarchal order in pre-

Columbian America. Anzaldúa next goes into the Spaniards invading Mexico and how they conquered it.

2.7.6 Anzaldúa's Personal Migration in *La Frontera*

Anzaldúa then moves on to her own personal migration as the first one in her family in six generations to leave home. However, she took with her many aspects of her home. She describes how women, in her culture and many others, are to serve beneath the men. The men hold the power and make the rules. Those women who do not follow the rules become “*mujer mala*” or bad women, while the good women are those who remain virgins until married (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 39). In her culture and time, the only options for a woman were to become a nun, a prostitute, or a wife. There is now a fourth option to become educated and autonomous; however, very few make up this category. These roles are to keep women “safe”. The only safe woman is one who is stuck into a rigid culture sector. Next, Anzaldúa explores her homosexuality and male/female identity. She discusses how, being raised Catholic, she made the choice to be homosexual.

The Personal Becomes Political in Anzaldúa's Book

In the subsequent chapters, Anzaldúa goes on to describe the folk-Catholic heritage she has come from and describes the pagan ideas that link up with the Catholic religious stories. She describes how the goddesses were disfigured and rendered insignificant. Again, the male dominance was cemented further into the culture through religious stories. She goes on to describe how the Catholic Church had combined *La Virgen de Guadalupe* and *la Virgen Maria* into one woman. She is now the “most potent religious, political and cultural image of the Chicano/mexicano” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p.52).

She also discusses how writing was seen as a connection between humans and gods. She elaborates on how the black and red colors used in codices were signs of writing and wisdom. Metaphor and symbols, truth and poetry could be used as a tool to achieve communication with the gods. She continues to discuss how the borderlands create unease between cultures and ideas, and how this unease and unbalance creates a need to write.

The final chapter of this first half deals with her race, ethnicity, and culture as a whole. She begins by discussing a “cosmic race”, one that consists of all races, an intermixed species that resembles those people on the borderlands. It resembles them that they are a mix of several cultures, races, and ethnicities. However, this idea is hard to sort out because one struggles to find a harmony within their selves when they have a mixed background tugging them constantly in different directions.

Check Your Progress:

i) *Explain the following terms:*

'La Mestiza'; 'La Frontera'; 'Chicana'

ii) *How is 'the borderlands' both a physical and a metaphorical term?*

iii) *In what way does Anzaldua use the Aztec myth of Huitzilopochtli to convey the idea of female subjugation?*

2.8 SARA SULERI: *MEATLESS DAYS*

About Sara Suleri Goodyear

Sara Suleri, is an author and, since 1983, professor of English at Yale University, where her fields of study and teaching include Romantic and Victorian poetry as well as a recent interest in Edmund Burke. Born in Pakistan to a Welsh mother and a Pakistani father, Z. A. Suleri, Sara Suleri received her B.A. at Kinnaird College, in Lahore, in 1974. Two years later, she was awarded an M.A. from Punjab University, and went on to graduate with a Ph.D. from Indiana University in 1983.

In her book *Meatless Days*, Suleri weaves her own personal history into that of Pakistan revealing her struggle with the displacement caused by migration. With a Welsh mother and a Pakistani father, she probably experienced identity problems while living in both Britain and Pakistan. Writing out of New Haven, she feels compelled to depict (and sometimes justify) her complex relationship to Pakistan - the result of her childhood days spent in Pakistan. Suleri hesitates to characterize *Meatless Days* as a memoir or autobiography and asserts instead its status as an alternative history of Pakistan. Being the daughter of a Welsh mother (the representative of the white colonizer) and a Pakistani father, she probably experienced identity problems as a woman from the third-world, while living in both Britain and Pakistan.

2.8.1 *Meatless Days*

Very much like Anzaldua's *La Frontera*, Sara Suleri's memoir, *Meatless Days* (1989), is an exploration of the complex interweaving of national history and personal biography. In her book Suleri carefully weaves intimate tales of tragedy and love with the history of Pakistan's tumultuous invention. Guided by the interpretative figure of migrancy, Suleri's narrative technique implicitly establishes a nuanced understanding of colonialism as a means to "provide a language for the slippage of trauma from apocalypse into narrative" (Suleri, 1992, p. 5). Indeed, the apocalyptic trauma of Pakistan's invention entitles Suleri's memoir, i.e., on the heels of the so-called birth of Pakistan in 1947 the government mandated that every Tuesday and Wednesday all butchers' shops must close as a means to preserve the national supply of goats and cattle. This initiative proved limited in its effectiveness, as Suleri explains, "As a principle of hygiene I suppose it was a good idea although it really had very little to do with conservation: the people who could afford to buy meat, after all, were those who could afford refrigeration, so the only thing the government accomplished was to make some people's Mondays very busy indeed" (Suleri, 1989, p. 31). For

Suleri, the daughter of a widely published journalist and a university professor, these meatless days summoned curiosity rather than abstinence.

Besides a governmental imperative, Suleri also introduces meatlessness as an idiom to flesh out the indigestible declaration that “there are no women in the third world” (Suleri, 1989, p. 20). This particular language of meatlessness translates “migrancy as an interpretative figure” (Suleri, 1992, p. 5) that is portrayed best through the narrator’s relationship with her mother, a white, Welsh woman living in Pakistan. Significantly, much of what Suleri intimates about her mother’s diasporic situation in Pakistan as an English teacher inversely describes Suleri’s own profession in the United States and her shared disembodiment from a situated place. Repeatedly Suleri teases out of her tales the space between body and self, making organs, muscles, and thoughts autonomous and separable. Yet like meat and excrement, these distinctions remain intimately related to form and function. And for the female, socially marked by the body she inhabits, a possibility of comfort lies first in acknowledgment of this predicament and then in (dis)embodiment. Grieving the loss of the meatless sustenance of her mother’s being, Suleri launches into the surreal details of a dream that captures the multiple metaphors of meatlessness:

A blue van drove up: I noticed it was a refrigerated car and my father was inside it. He came to tell me that we must put my mother in her coffin, and he opened the blue hatch of the van to make me reach inside, where it was very cold. What I found were hunks of meat wrapped in cellophane, and each of them felt like Mamma, in some odd way. . .when my father’s back was turned, I found myself engaged in rapid theft. . . I stole away a portion of that body. It was a piece of her foot I found, a small bone like knuckle, which I quickly hid inside my mouth, under my tongue.

(Suleri, 1992, p.44)

This tenderly grotesque parable celebrates the meatless temperament Suleri has adopted from her mother: the foot that travels and the tongue that enables learning. The red hunks of meat, their texture recognizable, offer the grieving narrator solace in her familiarity with her mother’s practiced disembodiment.

Conversely, Suleri’s sister Ifat devotes herself to Pakistan. Perhaps shame for her light skin compels her to marry Javed, a dark, a polo-playing Pakistani. She learns to speak Punjabi and even masters the Jehlum dialect. She takes pains to educate herself in the army’s history and the customs of Javed’s ancestral village. Ifat denies displacement and becomes Pakistan.

Like Salman Rushdie in his novel *Shame* (1983), Suleri also struggles with the displacement caused by migration. Writing out of New Haven, she feels compelled to depict (and sometimes justify) her complex relationship to Pakistan. With a Welsh mother and a Pakistani father, she probably experienced identity problems while living in both Britain and Pakistan. She spent most of her childhood days in Pakistan and consequently developed a distaste for a history “synonymous with grief and always most at home in the attitudes of grieving” (Suleri, 1989, p.19). Suleri eventually flees, feeling “supped full of history, hungry for flavors less stringent on [her] palate, less demanding of [her] loyalty” (Suleri, 1989, p.23). Thus she begins to float, rootless and rambling, never quite finding a spatial reality.

2.8.2 A Short Study of Suleri’s Friend Mustakor

Although not part of the family, Suleri’s eclectic friend Mustakor appears as yet another figure displaced by migration. Having lived in various places - East Africa, Britain, America - Mustakor comically acquires just as many names - Congo Lise, Faze Mackaw, Fancy Musgrave. Acting in plays with Sara, she attempts to create realities for herself, forming “a deep allegiance to the principle of radical separation: mind and body, existence and performance, would never be allowed to occupy the same space of time” (Suleri, 1992, p.49). Because of her inability to settle and her drifting interests, Mustakor fails to create an identity for herself away from the stage and other forms of fanfare. Perhaps like the author herself, she remains deprived of history, bereft of roots, thus foregrounding the plight of the postcolonial, urban immigrant woman.

2.8.3 Exploring Sexuality and the Body

When Suleri’s young niece announces the discovery of her vagina, she gives her aunt hope of an unlocked future. “It made me glad for her that she had such introspective courage to knock at the door of her body and insist it let her in” (Suleri, 1992, p. 42). We relate to Suleri’s promising discovery of her curious niece; her innocence and straightforward breakthrough reminds the reader of the beauty of untainted exploration. Suleri’s niece gives us all hope that perhaps doors will unlock for women, their bodies and especially their mother-making machinery.

Check Your Progress:

How does Sara Suleri play with the term “meatlessness” in the context of women from the third world? Read the first few chapters from the book to respond.

2.9 RIGOBERTA MENCHU’S AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Another author whose life narrative has gained her much literary fame is Rigoberta Menchu. In this section, let us learn more about her life and work. As you read the works by these authors in the original, it will be helpful for you to draw your own comparisons between their experiences and their works.

2.9.1 Rigoberta Menchu: A Life of Pain and Horror

Rigoberta Menchú was born on January 9, 1959 to a poor Indian (Native American) peasant family and raised in the Quiche branch of the Mayan culture. (We will be using the term ‘Indian’ here to refer to native inhabitants of the Americas, since the term is commonly applied to them also. Other current terminologies include ‘American-Indian’ or ‘Native American’. The latter is the more preferable term today.) In her early years she helped

with the family farm work, either in the northern highlands where her family lived, or on the Pacific coast, where both adults and children went to pick coffee on the big plantations.

Rigoberta soon became involved in social reform activities through the Catholic Church, and became prominent in the women's rights movement when still only a teenager. Such reform work aroused considerable opposition in influential circles, especially after a guerilla organization established itself in the area. The Menchú family was accused of taking part in guerrilla activities and Rigoberta's father, Vicente, was imprisoned and tortured for allegedly having participated in the execution of a local plantation owner. After his release, he joined the recently founded Committee of the Peasant Union (CUC).

In 1979, Rigoberta, too, joined the CUC. That year her brother was arrested, tortured and killed by the army and the following year, her father was killed when security forces in the capital stormed the Spanish Embassy where he and some other peasants were staying. Shortly afterwards, her mother also died after having been arrested, tortured and raped. Rigoberta became increasingly active in the CUC, and taught herself Spanish as well as other Mayan languages than her native Quiche. She joined the radical 31st of January Popular Front, in which her contribution chiefly consisted of educating the Indian peasant population in resistance to massive military oppression.

In 1981, Rigoberta Menchú had to go into hiding in Guatemala, and then flee to Mexico. That marked the beginning of a new phase in her life as the organizer abroad of resistance to oppression in Guatemala and the struggle for Indian peasant peoples' rights. In 1982, she took part in the founding of the joint opposition body, The United Representation of the Guatemalan Opposition (RUOG). In 1986, Rigoberta Menchú became a member of the National Coordinating Committee of the CUC, and the following year she performed as the narrator in a powerful film called *When the Mountains Tremble*, about the struggles and sufferings of the Mayan people.

Over the years, Rigoberta Menchú has become widely known as a leading advocate of American-Indian rights and ethno-cultural reconciliation, not only in Guatemala but in the Western Hemisphere generally, and her work has earned her several international awards.

2.9.2 *I, Rigoberta Menchu*

In 1983, during a visit to Paris as part of the Guatemalan political organization known as "the 31 January Popular Front", Rigoberta told her life story to Venezuelan anthropologist Elisabeth Burgos Debray. The resulting book, called in English, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, is a gripping human document which

attracted considerable international attention. The original Spanish title in 1983 was “My Name is Rigoberta Menchú and This is How My Consciousness Was Raised.” Translated into more than twelve languages and recipient of several international awards, the autobiography became a most influential image internationally of the atrocities committed by the Guatemalan army in peasant villages during the civil war.

As a Quiche Indian, Rigoberta’s her life has been split between the highlands of Guatemala, known as the Altiplano, and low country plantations, or fincas. Each year, she and her family spent about eight months at the fincas working for ladinos, i.e. Guatemalans of Spanish descent. Starvation and malnutrition plagued the finca, and the native Indians were routinely sprayed with pesticides. The only respite that Rigoberta and her people found were in the months they spent in their small village in the Altiplano that they called home. In the deeply wooded Altiplano, Rigoberta’s life centers around the ceremonies and traditions of her community, many of which celebrate the natural world - a contrast, to the struggle for survival in cramped, miserable conditions at the mercy of wealthy landowners and their overseers at the fincas.

Though she lives in a traditional Indian society, Rigoberta’s awareness of a world beyond the finca and the Altiplano begins to dawn when she is still quite young. When her younger brother, Nicolas, dies of malnutrition while at the finca, Rigoberta begins to feel both angry and afraid of what the future will hold for her. As she grows older, Rigoberta starts to yearn for change, both for herself and for her community. She craves education and wishes above all to learn to speak Spanish so that she can explore the world outside of the Altiplano and the finca. Though she begins to follow in her father’s footsteps and take on leadership duties in her community, she also yearns to learn about the world and its people.

When she is offered a job as a maid at the home of a wealthy landowner in Guatemala City, Rigoberta leaps at the opportunity, hoping she will get a chance to master Spanish. Upon arriving in Guatemala City, however, she understands the discrimination that exists for people of her heritage. The most influential force in Rigoberta’s life as she figures out the various household tasks is Candelaria. Like Rigoberta, Candelaria is an Indian, yet she has learned to speak Spanish and dresses as a ladino. She has also figured out how to get under the mistress’s skin and routinely sabotages her by neglecting certain chores and talking back. Rigoberta doesn’t follow in Candelaria’s footsteps right away, but Candelaria’s rebellious spirit has an impact on her that continues even after Candelaria is booted out of the house.

Upon returning from her work in the capital, Rigoberta finds out that her father has been jailed because he refused to cooperate with ladino landowners who attempt to claim the land in the Altiplano where Rigoberta's community lives. This is the first of several times that Rigoberta's father is jailed, and Rigoberta and her siblings work constantly to free him for good. Led in part by Rigoberta's father, the Indians form the Committee of the Peasant Union or CUC, to pool their resources against the powerful ladino government and business owners. By this time, Rigoberta has taken a leadership role in her community, and she and the rest of her family play a major part in helping the Indians develop strategies to defend their lands against the Guatemalan army.

After securing her own people's holdings, Rigoberta goes on the road as a representative of the CUC, helping Indian communities secure their lands and outsmart the Guatemalan army. As the CUC becomes increasingly influential, Rigoberta and her family find themselves more at risk. First, Rigoberta's brother, Petrocinio, is kidnapped, tortured and burned alive while Rigoberta's entire family and village are forced to watch. Then Rigoberta's father leads an offensive on Guatemala City and is killed along with a group of protesters while storming the Spanish Embassy. Finally, Rigoberta's mother is kidnapped, raped, tortured, and murdered. Rigoberta responds by renouncing marriage and motherhood and becoming more involved in the peasant cause, leading strikes and other rebellious actions until she finds herself in danger and is forced into exile. Though Rigoberta's sisters join the guerilla army to fight for the rights of Guatemala's Indian peasants, Rigoberta decides to take a diplomatic route, telling stories of her people and putting legislation into place as a way of furthering the rights of the native Indian people.

2.10 MYTH AND GENDERED, POSTCOLONIAL HISTORIES

Why read 'gendered postcolonial identities'? And why should we associate myth with colonial/postcolonial histories? In the light of the historical contexts of the narratives of Sahgal, Suleri, Anzaldua and Menchu, this section will now become easier for you to understand.

In her article "Mythologising History: The Indo-British Experience", Jasbir Jain has succinctly summed up the relevance of studying history and unearthing cultural realities through the deconstruction of traditional myths and creation of new myths, or simple revision of myths:

Contemporary writing increasingly evinces a concern with the past, with the continuities and discontinuities of history and with the marginalized and peripheral voices and concerns hitherto neglected. Rewriting history with a view to unravelling the mysterious nature of reality is also a concern of postcolonial writing. Part of this concern is directed towards mythologizing, which again is expressed in a variety of ways. ...Negotiating the worlds of myth and history is the form of the novel.

(Jain, 1996a, p. 152)

Until recently, feminist and postcolonial theory have concerned themselves with the study and defense of marginalized 'Others' within repressive structures of domination and, in so doing, both have followed a remarkably similar theoretical trajectory. Feminist and postcolonial theory alike began with an attempt to simply invert prevailing hierarchies of gender/culture/race, and they have each progressively welcomed the poststructuralist invitation to refuse the binary oppositions upon which patriarchal/colonial authority constructs itself.

However, the most significant collision and collusion of postcolonial and feminist theory occurs around the contentious figure of the 'third world woman'. Some feminist postcolonial theorists have cogently argued that a blinkered focus on racial politics inevitably elides the 'double colonization' of women under imperial conditions. Such theory postulates the 'third-world woman' as victim *par excellence* - the forgotten casualty of both imperial ideology, and native and foreign patriarchies. Is this where a counter-narrative to the postcolonial counter-narrative might begin? This is a question for you to continue thinking about in the context of the life narratives that you read.

2.11 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have examined the life narratives of five very distinct women authors, all of whom write within the framework of postcolonialism. Let us try to briefly summarize some of the similarities and dissimilarities between these works. (You may like to add to these based on your own readings of the works.)

You will notice during the course of your study that all the authors have experienced discrimination/marginalization in one way or the other. As a domestic help **Baby Halder** has faced class discrimination in the form of exploitative employers, as well as gender discrimination as victim of domestic abuse. A Quiche Mayan from Guatemala, **Rigoberta Menchu's** life is somewhat similar to Baby's in that she had at one point of her life been a domestic servant. **Nayantara Sahgal's** *Prison and Chocolate Cake* is a very readable,

humorous, yet somber even venerable depiction of a family with privilege and its participation in India's struggle for independence. The discrimination though not as acute in this case, is nevertheless present in its subtle form since she is speaking of an India under foreign rule - a nation whose natives are sent to jail for wanting freedom.

Sara Suleri on the other hand, is plagued by a dubious sense of her own 'nationality' as a white-skinned woman in a country inhabited by dark-skinned people. For Gloria Anzaldua, it is not just gender and racial discrimination that motivates her but identity crisis as a lesbian and refugee and language becomes for her a medium for expression her anxiety as well as asserting her individuality. It is hoped that your reading of these important works will further deepen and enrich your understanding of feminist perspectives in the context of literary works.

2.12 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Do you consider Baby Haldar's narrative different from the narratives of the other four authors in this unit? In what ways? Explain.
- 2) Do you think the work *A Life Less Ordinary* is merely autobiographical, or one that has a feminist agenda in view? Justify with examples.
- 3) In what ways can you associate the lives of Baby Haldar and Rigoberta Menchu? Discuss.
- 4) Discuss the role of the following in *Prison and Chocolate Cake*:
 - a) Gandhiji's teachings of non-violence and non-cooperation in Nayantara's life.
 - b) Nayantara's parents in the lives of their three daughters.
- 5) In *Meatless Days*, Suleri's relationship with her mother calls into question the naturalization of the metaphors motherland and mother tongue. In what way does her dream - in particular, the placement of her mother's foot under her tongue - enact a critique of the metaphors? Analyse.
- 6) 'Anzaldua's *La Frontera* foregrounds an alternative narrative that subverts the colonizer's periodized literary form'. Discuss.

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2.14 SUGGESTED READINGS

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UNIT 3 DALIT LIFE WRITINGS

Rajni Walia

Structure

- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Objectives
- 3.3 Background: Dalit Literature
- 3.4 The Central Place of Life Writings in Dalit Literature
- 3.5 Women's Perspectives
- 3.6 Dalit Women's Life Writings in Marathi
 - 3.6.1 Baby Kamble: *The Prisons we Broke*
 - 3.6.2 Urmila Pawar: *The Weave of my Life*
- 3.7 Life Writing in Tamil: Bama's *Karruku*
- 3.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.9 Unit End Questions
- 3.10 References
- 3.11 Suggested Readings

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In the preceding two units you have already been introduced to life writings by women from marginalised spaces, such as slave narratives, as well as postcolonial writing. In this unit we will focus exclusively on dalit life writings from the Indian subcontinent. For illustration, elucidation and analysis, we have selected writings by dalit women. Since the social construction of womanhood exposes the gender biases of a society, life writings by dalit women assume special importance. They have provided a space to these women to 'tell their own story' from their own point of view. Reading their life narratives contributes towards an expansion in our understanding about various aspects concerning the lives of dalit women and their communities. What is the meaning of the word 'dalit'? What is the status of life writings by dalit women among the broad category of what may be called 'dalit literature'? What are the issues that dalit women engage with in their life writings? We will try to look for the answers to these and various other related questions which would arise in the course of this unit.

3.2 OBJECTIVES

On completion of this unit you will be able to:

- Discuss dalit life writings in the light of traditional autobiography;
- Describe the centrality of the notion of collective identity in dalit life writings;
- Analyse how gender intersects with caste and class in the oppression of dalit women; and
- Identify the formulation of a dalit feminist perspective in life writings.

3.3 BACKGROUND: DALIT LITERATURE

Let us begin by examining the term ‘dalit’ in the context of literature. The meaning of the word ‘dalit’ in Hindi and Marathi is ‘ground down, depressed’. It was first used by Ambedkar to mean a life condition which characterizes the exploitation, suppression and marginalization of the lower castes by the upper caste brahminical order. The word found a ready acceptance among all the formerly untouchable communities in India and began to replace all earlier terms such as ‘harijan’, depressed classes, etc because ‘dalit’ means being oppressed from above, and not a defect in the human being for being polluted. It implies the need to revolt against oppression. Moreover, the word ascribes a collective political identity to the various lower castes and sub-castes spread across the regional and linguistic variations, within India. It is a symbol of assertive pride, and of resistance to the linked oppressions of caste and class.

Dalit literature is the outcome of the awareness of this oppression. It is based on the real life experiences of the dalits as a community and expresses the writer’s quest for social change, based on humanist, egalitarian and scientific principles. In the modern era, it is related to the dalit liberation movement in Maharashtra, started by the revolutionary leader, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956) and the dalit literature movement in the seventies. Starting initially from Maharashtra in the late nineteen sixties and seventies, dalit writings followed from other regions and languages, in Gujarati, Tamil, Malayalam, Kannada, Telugu, Oriya, Bengali, Hindi and Punjabi, among others. Dalit literature is a part of the dalit struggle against injustices through political as well as cultural means. Dalit women writers have been fewer in number than the male writers but there is still a substantial output of life writings, poems, novels and short fiction authored by them, deserving of critical attention. The earlier unit on “Dalit and Black Feminism” that you read (MWG 001, Block 2, Unit 2) provided you with some necessary background information on dalit feminism which will enrich your

understanding of this unit. Here, we will critically engage with life writings by selected dalit women writers.

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3.4 THE CENTRAL PLACE OF LIFE WRITINGS IN DALIT LITERATURE

Dalit literature is primarily based on the lived and real life experiences of dalit writers. That is why autobiography has become somewhat of a favourite genre for them. In her "Introduction" to her English translation of Valmiki's *Joothan*, Arun Prabha Mukherjee (2003) has rightly remarked that this is because of the emphasis that dalit writers place on "authenticity of experience" (Mukherjee, 2003, p.xxxv). In her "Foreword" to this translation, she has pointed out that although high caste Indian writers have written

about the dalits out of sympathy, it is mostly as pathetic characters or as objects of pity, who are unable to speak about their oppression or feel enraged (Mukherjee, 2003, p.x). Since dalits were earlier denied even the right to education, the life narratives written by those who are literate, assume a special significance. They provide a voice to the members of the community to give a self-representation about their experience, which is actually a shared experience of the entire community.

Sharmila Rege (2006) has asserted that dalit life narratives are one of the most direct ways of countering the silence and misrepresentation of the community. Their main intention is not to gain literary merit but to communicate the lived reality of a group's oppression and struggle. Rege has convincingly argued that dalit life narratives are different from traditional autobiography because in them the individual self "seeks affirmation in the collective mode" of the community. That is why, they should be considered as *testimonios* (Rege, 2006, p.13-14). It is a Spanish term meaning testimony, although *testimonio* is not concerned with legal testimony but is a literary genre, popular in Latin America. It may be narrated in the first person but is generally about a community. Rege has rightly emphasized that dalit life narratives "violate the parameters set by bourgeois autobiography and create testimonios of caste based oppression, anti caste struggles and resistance" (Rege, 2006, p.14). As you read the analysis of the selected life narratives in the following sections of this unit, do judge for yourself the appropriateness of viewing them in this light.

The box below will give you an idea of some of the prominent dalit life narratives written in various regional languages of India:

Box No.3.1

Dalit life narratives have been predominantly written in the regional languages. Those in Marathi have provided the lead and also outnumbered the others. Some of these by male authors include Daya Pawar's *Baluta* (1978), Laxman Mane's *Upara* (1980), Sharan Kumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi* (1984), Laxman Gaikwad's *Uchalya* (1987), Vasant Moon's *Vasti* (1985), among others. Life narratives in Marathi by dalit women writers are the pride of dalit literature. These include Shantabai Dani's *Ratrandin Amha* (1990), Mukta Sarvagod's *Mitleli Kavaade* (1983), Baby Kamble's *Jina Amucha* (1982), Kumud Pawade's *Antapshot* (1981), Shantabai Kamble's *Majya Jalmachi Chittarkatha* (1990), Urmila Pawar's *Aaydan* (2003), Janabai Girhe's *Marankala* (1992) and Vimal More's *Teen Dagdachi Chul* (2000). Some of these Marathi texts are also available in English translation. Dalit life narratives written in Kannada include Siddalingaiah's *Ooru Keri* in English translation (2003), English translation of Aravind Malagatti's Kannada autobiography entitled *Government Brahmana* (2007), Ramayya's *MaNegara* (n.d.), and Govindaraju's *Manavilladavare Madhye*

(n.d.). Some well-known Tamil dalit life narratives are Bama's *Karruku* (1992) which is available in English translation (2000) and the English translation of K.A. Gunasekaran's Tamil autobiography entitled *The Scar* (2009). B.Kesharshivam's *Purnasatya* (2002) is written in Gujarati. Some of the dalit autobiographies written in Hindi are Om Prakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (1997) available in English translation as *Joothan: An Untouchable's Life* (2003), Jai Prakash Kardam's *Jhappar*, Mohandas Namishray's *Apne Apne Pinjare* (1995) & Sheoraj Singh Bechain's *Mera Bachpan Mere Kandhon Par* (2009). Among those written in Hindi by women writers are Kausalya Baisantri's *Dohra Abhishaap* (1999) and Sushila Takbhaure's *Shikanje Ka Dard* (2011). In Punjabi, there is Prem Gorkhi's *Gair Hazir Aadmi* (1994) and Balbir Madhopuri's *Changya Rukh* (2003), the first Punjabi dalit autobiography to be available in English translation as *Changya Rukh Against the Night An Autobiography* (2010).

Depending on your mother tongue and your interest, it might be rewarding for you to read at least one of the texts mentioned in above, in the original. It is a continuing debate that translation has some limitations in conveying the flavour of the original, particularly in the case of dalit texts which are rich in using local dialects and speech variations, with a purpose. Yet, translation is so important in enriching literature in English by creating space for these voices from the margins which powerfully convey a firsthand expression of the dalit experience and ideology.

3.5 WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVES

As compared to the male writers who mostly voice their protest against the caste and class inequities suffered by the dalit community, some of the writing by dalit women also offers a gendered perspective on the specific socio-cultural situation of dalit women, who are subjected to triple exploitation, due to the intersection of gender with caste and class. You have learnt about the history and rationale of the dalit women's movement in the unit on 'Dalit and Black Feminism' in MWG 001. Taking a dalit feminist viewpoint, dalit women activists have argued that the dalit movement has been silent about the brutal patriarchy within the dalit communities and the feminist movement has not laid the requisite focus on the issue of caste, which determines the kind of violence which only dalit women are subjected to. Many of the dalit women writers are activists within the movement. Their literary texts express a dalit feminist perspective by revealing and critiquing the caste, class and gender nexus, contributing to the harsh reality of dalit women's lives, and through their vision for social and political change.

Dalit women's life narratives are written from within their own lived situation. These *testimonios* serve as a protest against their exploitation at the hands of the state, the market, social patriarchy, dalit patriarchy and religion. We will examine how they also provide an insight into the creativity and resilience which dalit women display, in their daily lives. As compared to the writing by men, dalit women's life writings are much more conscious about collective experiences. Many of the Marathi dalit women's narratives recreate history by bringing to light the submerged aspects about dalit women's contribution as active agents for change, within the Ambedkarite movement.

In the upcoming sections, we will examine two well known life writings in Marathi and one in Tamil in their English translations. The specific texts have been selected because they are representative, well-known, and also easily available, in translation. You are advised to read the texts to enhance your understanding of the points raised in the following analysis.

3.6 DALIT WOMEN'S LIFE WRITINGS IN MARATHI

Let us begin this section by examining two works, authored by Baby Kamble and Urmila Pawar, as representative dalit life narratives in Marathi.

3.6.1 Baby Kamble: *The Prisons We Broke*

Baby Kamble has been involved from her early years in the Dalit movement in Maharashtra which was started under the leadership of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, in the first half of the twentieth century. Her original life narrative in Marathi, called *Jina Amucha* was first serialised in the Pune women's magazine, *Stree*, in 1982, before it was published as a book, in 1986. Its English translation by Maya Pandit, entitled as *The Prisons We Broke*, was first published in 2008. Kamble has revealed in an interview that it was published almost twenty years after she completed writing it. It has been acknowledged as the first autobiography by a dalit woman, written in Marathi or in any Indian language.

In this narrative, Kamble has provided an insider's account of the the socio-cultural conditions and the historical and political scenario in which the Mahar community lived, in the pre- Independence time. Although she has also written about herself, but it is essentially as an integral part of the Mahar community in Maharashtra, to which she belongs. In her interview with Maya Pandit, which has been included after the translated life narrative, Kamble has claimed that the suffering of her community has always been more important for her than her own individual suffering. She says that since she has identified herself completely with her people, *Jina Amucha* is the autobiography of her entire community (Kamble, 2008, p.157). It has

often been remarked that her life narrative reads more like a socio-biography, rather than an autobiography. As she was growing up, the movement of the formerly untouchable Mang and Mahar castes, started by B. R. Ambedkar (1891-1956) was at its height. In her narrative, Kamble has provided graphic details of the inhuman life conditions to which the dalit community has been subjected, due to the atrocities perpetuated by the Hindu caste system, for thousands of years. Alongside, she has also given a profile of the transformation of this society, due to the attitudinal changes and the education and conversion of the people, brought about by the revolutionary activities of the Ambedkarite movement, in the 1950s.

A distinctive aspect of Kamble's life narrative is that even as she describes the abject poverty, humiliation and deprivation of the dalit community, she also emphasizes the "iron in their souls" (Kamble, 2008, p.11) and tries to inculcate a sense of self-respect among them for belonging to this very community. She gives her lived experience of the miseries and hope, the ignorance, illiteracy, superstitions, rituals, fairs, festivals, food habits and clothing of her community, who lived on the fringes of society, ruthlessly exploited, subjugated and discriminated against, by the upper castes. Against a realistic sketch of the ordeals that they suffered, Kamble tries to instil a sense of pride and the spirit of resistance among the present and future generations of her people. In her "Introduction" to *The Prisons We Broke*, Maya Pandit (2008) has included her translation of what Kamble has asserted in her foreword to the original Marathi *Jina Amucha*. To quote: "Today, our young educated people are ashamed of being called a Mahar. But what is there to be ashamed of? We are the great race of the Mahars of Maharashtra. We are its original inhabitants, the sons of the soil....I love our caste name, Mahar- it... reminds me of our terrible struggle for truth" (Kamble, 2008, p.ix).

As you read Kamble's narrative in the original Marathi version or in its English translation, you will notice how she has particularly brought to light the private and public dimensions of the lives of the Mahar women. She has shown how they not only shared the brunt of the caste and class inequalities alongwith the rest of the community but also suffered physical and psychic violence within their families, due to the operation of patriarchy within the dalit community. Kamble herself had to hide her writing for twenty years. Her narrative introduces a dalit feminist perspective in exposing and critiquing the power play and cruelty suffered by the women of the community. As Kamble reveals, the daughters -in -law usually suffered the worst fate after being married off at the age of under ten and being subjected to near slavery and inhuman practices, at the hands of their husbands, in-laws and relatives. Extreme economic hardship and ignorance determined how the women suffered during and after childbirth from near starvation, unhygienic labour conditions, illness and calamity. Alongside, Kamble has also brought

out the grit and perseverance of the Mahar women as survivors, the dignity of their labour, and the potential and strength through which they are able to take an active role towards the reform of their community, under Ambedkar's leadership. The conflict within the community as some show resistance to the modern ideas of Ambedkar and the contribution of the women in showing staunch loyalty to his call for educating their children as a first step towards liberation, is highlighted. The text also shows how they act as agents in stopping practices such as eating the meat of dead animals, age-old superstitions, and participate in the political gatherings.

Kamble has called herself a "product of the Ambedkar movement" (Kamble, 2008, p.125). Towards this end, her narrative takes up the threads of her present life by highlighting it as an outcome of her role within the community. She admits that it is due to the movement that she got an opportunity to go to school, educate her children, participate in political meetings, start a business of her own alongwith her husband, and establish a residential school for socially backward children, in Nimbure, near Phaltan. Kamble has been honoured with awards for her social work as well as her literary work. Like many dalit women writers today, her life and her literary work are integrally related and are a part of her ongoing struggle for the upliftment of her community.

As you know, dalit literature is an expression of protest against the caste system. As you read Kamble's text, try to find out and understand how her life narrative is a part of this tradition of dalit writing as well as how it goes beyond it by extending the dimensions of autobiographical and protest writing, in various ways.

Activity:

Find out more about the Mahar community and describe how this information helps you to deepen your understanding of Baby Kamble's work.

3.6.2 Urmila Pawar: *The Weave of My Life*

Urmila Pawar is well known as a dalit woman writer in Marathi as well as an activist in the dalit and feminist struggles in Maharashtra. Her autobiography, *Aaydan* (2003) has been translated as *The Weave of My Life* (2008), by Maya Pandit. Pawar (2008) has clarified in her “Preface” to Pandit’s translation of her autobiography that ‘*aaydan*’ is the generic term used for all things made from bamboo and that its other meanings are ‘utensil’ and ‘weapon’ (Pawar, 2008, p.x). In the Konkan region of Maharashtra, it was the Mahar caste to which Pawar herself belongs, that performed the traditional job of weaving *aaydans*. Pawar has claimed that there is a link between the weaving of bamboo by her mother and the weaving of words, in her own writing. To quote: “I find that her act of weaving and my act of writing are organically linked. The weave is similar. It is the weave of pain, suffering and agony that links us” (Pawar, 2008, p.x). Elsewhere, Pawar has acknowledged her longstanding debt to the women of her village, who indulged her and carried her in their arms despite their arduous toil in climbing up and down the hills, with excessive loads on their head, to make ends meet. Being educated, it is Pawar’s attempt to repay in small measure the debt to these women and other people of her community by using the “weave” she has inherited from her mother to spin her autobiography in the words which communicate the conditions of her life as a dalit woman, who grew up in the Ambedkarite & post- Ambedkarite period.

As compared to Kamble who has written in her *Jina Amucha* about the life of her community and minimum about her personal life, Pawar reveals innumerable details of her own life from her childhood days up till the present but still, the narrative about her individual experience is essentially as a woman from a dalit community. She has stated within her memoir that every person’s life is a “social document” (Pawar, 2008, p.320) and therefore what the writer writes is not about an individual life but “social reality” (Pawar, 2008, p.230). The period of time which the book covers is twenty years later than Kamble’s. It is roughly the last five decades of the twentieth century. Her honest and frank narration of her lived experiences gives ample insight into her socio-cultural context and the life of the women, men and children belonging to it.

As with most dalit life narratives, the memoir weaves a pattern of the memories of how “caste” entered into the humiliation which the community people were subjected to, time and again. Unlike in the other parts of Maharashtra where the Mahars lived in the borders of the village (as Kamble mentions), in the Konkan region on the West coast of India, the Mahar community lived in its centre, so as to be within the easy beck and call of the upper castes. As a child, Pawar remembers the caste and gender based

division of labour and the back-breaking work and poverty of the women who sold their wares in the Ratnagiri market or went to the creek during low tide, to collect oysters and clams. The baskets woven by women like her mother would be purified with water before being accepted by the higher castes. At school, the dalit children were constantly discriminated against. During Holi, the Mahar boys were made to do all the work but forbidden to join in the celebrations during which it was customary to pray that all the misfortunes may leave the upper castes and be heaped on the Mahars. The memoir captures the characteristic movement of some community people to urban areas, at that time. Even in the city, where Pawar moved with her husband Harishchandra, to join her government job, her narrative of her own experience brings to light how it was difficult for the dalits to find accommodation, the taboo on social intercourse with them and the abuses and discrimination they were subjected to, because of the spreading resentment against dalit men, for getting education and taking up salaried jobs.

Pawar (2008) has stated in her “Preface” to the translated text that she considers the conversion from Hinduism to Buddhism as the most significant part of her life (Pawar, 2008, p.x). Her recounting of the locally organised Dharmantar programme in the grounds of Gogate College in Ratnagiri, in her memoir, is representative of many other such programmes organised by the dalits, after Ambedkar’s conversion. The gradual process through which the community attempted to discard the age-old rituals and superstitions and embrace this new way of life, based on humanitarian principles, to free themselves from subjugation and move towards modernity based on the Ambedkarite and Buddhist philosophy, is an integral part of the narrative. In her “Afterword” to Pandit’s translation of Pawar’s testimonio, Sharmila Rege (2008) has pointed out its role as “a mapping of dalit modernity as a social experience in process” (Rege, 2008, p. 344). She has stressed on the importance of introducing the text in the classroom by emphasising its contribution as a “historical narrative of experience” (Rege, 2008, p.328).

You have already learnt about how Kamble has given special attention to the role of women within the Ambedkarite movement within her life narrative. Pawar is equally concerned about this aspect and has earlier co-authored the Marathi book entitled *Aamhihi Itihaas Ghadwala:Ambedkari Chalvalitil Streeyancha Sahabhag* (1989), alongwith Meenakshi Moon, in which she has brought out the submerged contribution of dalit women in the Ambedkarite movement, based on a series of interviews with those who were active participants. In *Weave*, as Pawar narrates her life experiences of childhood, getting educated, marriage with a person of her choice, job in a Govt. Office in the metropolis, bringing up children and supporting her daughters in marriages of their choice, receiving honours and awards for her literary writing and her activism, she exposes and critiques caste and

the patriarchy both within and outside her community. She develops a dalit feminist perspective as she offers her insights, in her narrative. As she recounts about her life as a dalit woman activist, she has exposed the contradictions, divisions and the omissions within the dalit and the feminist movements. She has brought out how the specific issues concerning dalit women did not find any place in the emerging dalit politics and how the feminist movement ignored the important legacy of the Phule- Ambedkarite philosophy, in the woman and caste question. The memoir documents her participation in the formation of “Samvadini,” the literary platform for dalit women and her organizing for dalit feminism in Maharashtra, which are significant contributions to the dalit feminist movement, as it is emerging today.

Activity:

Find out more about the following and jot down your comments:

i) *Ambedkarite movement:*

ii) *The influence of the above movement on Dalit feminism:*

iii) *Samvadini*:

3.7 LIFE WRITING IN TAMIL: BAMA'S *KARRUKU*

Writers such as Idayavendan, Abhimani, Unjairajan, Vidivelli, Marku, Imayan, Arivazhagan, Sivakami and Bama, among others, are making their contribution to dalit literature in Tamil. The context in Tamil Nadu was provided by the rationalist thought propagated by E.V. Ramasamy Periyar (1880-1974) and the literary output came as a part of the agitations, anti-caste struggles and political protests (Gauthaman, 1995, p. 96). In comparison with the large number of life writings or testimonios in Marathi, there are fewer autobiographical writings in Tamil. *Karruku* (1992) by **Bama** has been acclaimed to be the first autobiography of its kind to be published in Tamil. It is available in an English translation by Lakshmi Holmstrom (2000).

'Karruku' means palmyra leaves which have serrated edges on both sides and appear to be like two edged swords. 'Karu' in Tamil means embryo or seed. In her 'Preface' to the book, Bama has explained the significance of the symbol by drawing attention to the 'Epistle to the Hebrews' (*New Testament*) which describes the Word of God as a two edged sword which no longer pierces the hardened hearts of those who have exploited and disempowered the dalits. We might say that Bama uses the word as a metaphor for her writing and hopes that it would perform the dual purpose

of stirring the dalits to unite and battle for their rights as well as challenge the oppressors by searing them out of complacency. She hopes to sow the seeds of social change by sharing her vision of a new society based on justice, equality and love.

Bama's life narrative is based on her life as a dalit Christian belonging to the Paraya community. This Tamil dalit community has converted to Christianity but Bama's narrative sheds light on how conversion did not help them to be saved from caste discrimination which is practised as much in Christianity as in Hinduism. The book is written at a point of crisis in Bama's life. She had joined the convent as a nun with the objective of serving the poor dalit community but after discovering the impossibility of realising her mission within an order which differs in practice from what it outwardly professes, she decided to leave the nunnery and her secure job and join back her community. She wrote the narrative at this juncture and in it she shares the context of dalit life within the community in which she grew up. She has written about their world of hard labour, food habits, games, inter-community conflicts within her village, their exploitation at the hands of the upper castes, state machinery, police etc, her determined efforts to get an education, her realisation of the presence of casteism in all institutions, her Christian upbringing, joining the Catholic order, disappointment with the hypocrisies she encounters and her quest for living a meaningful life, by working for the liberation of the dalits.

As we read *Karruku*, we notice that Bama has creatively and purposefully transgressed the traditional expectations from autobiographical writing, as a genre. In this context, M. S.S. Pandian has brought out the relevance of some of the **textual strategies** used by her. Firstly, her not giving any specific name to herself as protagonist, or to her village and the institutions and important people that figure in the narrative effectively serves to replace the autobiographical 'I', a product of bourgeois individualism, with the collectivity of the dalit community. It is not just her story but her community's story since her pain, strength, beliefs, religion, language, culture, etc, are all what her community provided. Further, this strategy of anonymity serves to shift the narrative from the local into a universal indictment against oppression (Pandian, 1998, p.129-135). Another striking feature of *Karruku* is that the story is not told in a linear narrative traditionally associated with autobiographical writing. Events and incidents are re-visited repeatedly, giving different perspectives on them which Bama gains at different stages of her life. This mode also serves to deepen the reader's understanding of the dalit experience.

As you read the text, you will find it a refreshing change to take note of how Bama has experimented with sequence and form as well as made a departure from traditional literary norms, with respect to the language she has used in *Karruku*. In an article by Bama, entitled as “Dalit Literature” (in its English translation), available in the journal *Indian Literature*, she has clarified her purpose by asserting that writing and reading are “political practice” and since the dalits have a different vocabulary and speech, they should write as dalits (Bama, 1999, p. 98). As appropriate to the context of her narrative, Bama has deliberately used spoken dalit Tamil in *Karruku*, breaking the rules of written grammar and spelling and creating space and validity for the dalit way of life. She has also interspersed the narrative with a re-telling of some characteristic stories, work-chants, songs, rituals, dances, etc performed by them, as a successful device in communicating ‘dalit culture’. It is the dalit women who seem to play an important role as the custodians of Dalit culture.

As compared to the two Marathi life narratives by Kamble and Pawar, Bama’s *Karruku* does not offer a detailed and focussed analysis of the life of the women of her community. It is in her later publication, the novel *Sangati* (1994) that Bama has dealt primarily with the lives of a community of dalit women and their joint struggle and strengths. Yet, even in *Karruku*, the narrative is interspersed with a gendered perspective as she points out the anomaly about men being always paid more for the same labour (Bama, 1992, p.46), or when she states matter of factly that the community cannot see the sense in sending girls to school since it is the girl child who bears the burden of the dire poverty of the family by staying at home, collecting firewood, looking after the chores, caring for the babies, etc (Bama, 1992, p.68). When she narrates the incident about the inter-caste trouble which led to most of the men of the community being taken into police custody, she brings out a gendered perspective on how the women were subjected to obscene comments and sexually charged suggestions from the policemen who came to inspect the houses.

What animates the narrative is that Bama does not simply tell a tale of women as helpless, passive victims but brings out their resilience, ingenuity and strength, in the midst of their hard labour and multiple anxieties. She also narrates various instances to highlight the grit and creativity of the women who not only manage to look after themselves and the children without the men but also employ strategies to protect some of the men to escape arrest or how they cleverly help one of the men to attend his son’s funeral inspite of the police vigil. In this way, Bama draws attention to the fact that, despite the harsh realities of their lives, the women of her community deserve admiration and not pity. By drawing attention to some

of the admirable qualities of the women of her community, Bama's narrative compels us to re-think and change our pre-set attitudes about dalit women.

As outlined earlier, Bama's main concern in *Karruku*, appears to be her attempt to bring about social change by bringing to the forefront and then questioning the irrational casteism which dalits like herself are subjected to, within all social structures and institutions, including within the Catholic church. Her narration of her life experiences in the book is indeed a part of her political struggle to incite the dalits about the injustice of the inhuman discriminatory practices which she has observed and experienced and to bring awareness within them about their strengths and the necessity to unite and battle for their rights. She feels that the worst injustice is when the dalits unquestioningly internalise their subjugation due to a handed down sense of their inferiority, based on fate. Laying emphasis on the important role of education, she has claimed that she could dare to speak up for herself and hold her head high only because of the ability she acquired through her education. The narrative communicates her continual questioning on behalf of her community. "How did the upper castes become so elevated?" she asks. She wants the dalits to "dare to stand up for change" and a "just society where all are equal" (Bama, 1992, p.24). We notice that unlike Kamble and Pawar who have prominently brought in the legacy of Ambedkar in the liberation struggle of the dalits, Bama does not specifically mention either Ambedkar or the Tamil leader, Periyar, although her views and her vision are in consonance with them and a part of the larger dalit movement.

Bama links her goal towards an equal and just society with her narrative of her personal journey towards discovering the true meaning of God who has "the greatest compassion for the oppressed" (Bama, 1992, p.90). Her narration of her life as a Tamil dalit Christian who earlier adhered to the prescribed religious rituals out of fear, her joining the convent and understanding of the "lack of humanity" in the professed piety of the nuns and priests who discriminated against and exploited rather than served the poor and needy followed by her reading and interpretation of the Bible for herself, mark the stages in her spiritual growth. She learns that God's true meaning is linked to the questioning of injustice which is indeed the purpose of her own life as it ought to be for all dalits who should reclaim their likeness to God and live with self-respect and a love towards all humankind (Bama, 1992, p.94). Bama's self-discovery of this truth is also on behalf of her community.

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3.8 LET US SUM UP

In this unit you have seen how life writings assume special significance within dalit literature. They provide a voice to the writer to protest against oppression by giving a self-representation about the lived reality of their lives. The unit discussed the difference between traditional autobiography and dalit life narratives which generate a sense of collective identity and the relevance of considering them as testimonials was pointed out. Life narratives by some women provide insight into the triple exploitation of dalit women due to the intersection of gender with caste and class, within their specific socio-cultural situation. They also provide a social critique from a dalit feminist perspective. The analysis of three dalit women's testimonials discussed the points of similarity and difference between them. It brought out that they do not show dalit women as just victims, but shed light on their strength and survival techniques among the harsh realities of their lives, alongside their role as agents for change. As you may have learned from your reading, dalit women's literary work and their lives as activists are integrally related, since both are a part of their ongoing struggle for social reform, and the upliftment of their communities.

3.9 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Why have life writings assumed a special significance in dalit literature? Do they also serve a role within the wider dalit movement for social reform? Explain how.
- 2) Discuss the importance of the collective identity of the community in dalit life narratives by women.
- 3) Discuss Bama's *Karruku* as a dalit testimonial narrative. Analyse how and why Bama has subverted the norms of traditional autobiography.
- 4) What do you understand by a dalit feminist perspective? How is it reflected in the life writings by the Marathi dalit women writers introduced to you in this unit? Discuss.

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3.11 SUGGESTED READINGS

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UNIT 4 NARRATING QUEER LIVES

Maitreyee Mandal

Structure

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4.1 INTRODUCTION

In this Block we have already examined various marginalized positions representing race, postcoloniality and caste from the perspective of life narratives. In this Unit, we will look specifically at the issue of queer experiences, as they are represented in life narratives. Beginning with the notion of identity and sexuality, we will try and understand what sets apart the queer identity in literary writing. We will use several examples of literary texts to help us in examining the representation of queer experiences. You have already come across discussions on non-normative identities, heteronormativity, and queer sexuality in various courses of this programme (for instance, MWG 001, MWG 003). It would help you to review some of those units as you begin reading this one, in order to locate the issues raised in this Unit within a larger framework.

4.2 OBJECTIVES

After completing this Unit, you will be able to:

- Explain the relationship between identity and sexual orientation;
- Describe the origin and meaning of the term 'queer';
- Analyse what constitutes 'queer' experiences;
- Interpret how queer experiences are represented in life narratives; and
- Discuss the historical trajectory of queer experiences through literature.

4.3 BACKGROUND: IDENTITY AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Let us begin our discussion with the notion of identity. Identity comprises a certain sense of belonging. It provides an individual with the feeling of personal location and facilitates one's interactions with another. So identity is about what one has in common and what differentiates a particular person from the other.

The renowned economist, Amartya Sen in his seminal work, *Identity and Violence* says that with the passage of time, man develops multiple identities (Sen, 2006, p.4). When a child is born, he/she is the son/daughter of someone. Then the child enters school where he/she acquires the identity of a student of a certain school, followed by college and various other institutions, all of which constitute a particular identity. It will be like the ripples that spread out on the surface of the pond when a stone is thrown in. The ripples spread out as a circle that gets bigger as time goes on. The smallest ripple is the child at birth whose identity gets multiplied owing to various social, political and religious affiliations. Any person therefore is a constitution of multiple identities. Within a social system, the construction of identity is also responsible for ascribing authority or power to certain positions in comparison to others. The problem arises, when only one identity is given supreme importance and the other identities get compromised in the process.

Gender, sex and sexual orientation have become some of the significant factors of consideration as far as construction of identities in the modern world is concerned. By gender, we mean the social status of an individual as a man or a woman. Sex refers to the biological entity of being male or female and sexual orientation refers to the sexual desires of an individual.

Depending upon the sexuality or sexual orientation of an individual, the society recognizes some individuals to be dominant which means they are in possession of larger authority in comparison to the others. This largely

explains the dichotomy between the heterosexual and the 'queer'. While the heterosexual population shows sexual attraction towards members of their opposite sex or gender, the queer population has a range of varied sexual interests which lies contrary to heterosexuality.

Talking about 'queer', it becomes necessary to trace the trajectory of this word. Generally, it means strange or unusual but has been used as an acronym for homosexuals, that is, individuals who are attracted to members of the same sex or gender (gays and lesbians). The emergence of the word 'queer' can be traced to the context of the gays in US during 1990s. An organization called Queer Nation was responsible for bringing in this term into the space of campaigning and activism for the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) community in New York. The members of the organization were tired of the discrimination that was made towards HIV/AIDS individuals and their constant neglect by the heterosexual counterparts. The term 'queer' attained quick popularity and became a term of freedom and empowerment for the LGBT community especially those of colour in the US at that time.

What is unique about a 'queer' identity is that it accommodates a domain of plurality within itself which encompasses all non-heteronormative sexualities. Therefore, it is difficult to have a single consolidated definition for the range of queer experiences since it would then limit the gamut of multiplicities which are inherent in such identities. Yet, one cannot ignore the ambiguity that comes along with such negotiations.

Narrain and Gautam Bhan remark in *Because I Have a Voice: Queer Politics in India*, one of the earliest anthologies on the queer movement in India:

The term 'queer' is, in some ways, both a deeply personal identity and a defiant political perspective. It embodies within itself a rejection of the primacy of the heterosexual, patriarchal family as the cornerstone of our society. In doing so, it rejects the assumption of compulsory heterosexuality- society's firm yet unsaid belief that the world around (everyone in it) is heterosexual until proven otherwise. It captures and validates the identities and desires of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people, but also represents for many, an understanding of sexuality that goes beyond the categories of 'homosexual' and 'heterosexual.'

(Narrain & Bhan, 2005, p. 3-4)

One of the factors that a queer individual in many countries including India, had to negotiate with is the system of law and order that has made itself regressive ever since the nineteenth century. A British law of the time criminalized any kind of unnatural sexuality, meaning that anything against the norms of heterosexuality was liable to legal prosecution but was

specifically known as the sodomy law. It was incorporated within the Indian Penal Code under Section 377 that made a crime out of male homosexuality and almost failed to acknowledge the very existence of a lesbian identity. As a reservation out of a religio-social-political situation, it became an agency to manipulate and to control. The free expression of sexual orientation thus became restrictive. However, as you have already learnt in a previous course, the decriminalization of the act in 2009 brought in a slight sense of relief for the LGBT group, which once again received a setback with the Supreme Court judgment of 2013. (For a detailed discussion of the reading down of Section 377, please review MWG 001, Block 3, Unit 3. You may also find it useful to do your own search for recent developments and updates on decisions regarding Section 377.)

It becomes pertinent to mention that 'queer' movements all over the world are socio-political movements that fight for the rights of LGBT community. It has a long history of campaigning for acquiring social equality for LGBT people and to liberate other people from the notions of homophobia and heterosexism. Queer movements today are a combination of political activism, organizing activities like street marches and awareness through cultural performances as well as an adequate portion of research work.

Check Your Progress:

i) *What do you understand by the term 'identity'?*

ii) *Based on the above, how would you locate 'queer identity' within the larger rubric of 'identity'?*

4.4 QUEER LIFE NARRATIVES

Life narratives as we understand can be the writing of one's own or someone else's life which may constitute events from birth or early childhood to an age of maturity or even death. Queer narratives generally comprise biographies, autobiographies, memoirs, diaries, letters or visual culture like films and photographs.

However, there is generally a sense of struggle between the real life identity of the author/narrator and how it gets represented in the print or visual culture. Therefore, the use of pseudonyms or writing as anonymous writers as well as fictionalizing their own stories, are convenient ways of disguising their real identities. Maintaining a sense of secrecy becomes a prominent feature.

The idea of taboo or prohibition or restriction comes from the idea of what is accepted and what is rejected by the largely normative society, here, it being the dichotomy between heterosexual and non-heterosexual experiences. Queer narratives deal with this gap between what an individual sexuality is about and what does the society expects him/her to be. Thus, queer narratives are constituted by the negotiation between this gap, with inhibitions at various levels, whether physical or psychological.

Let us now discuss some of the most popular queer narratives in the domain of literature.

4.4.1 E.M Forster: *Maurice*

Set in early twentieth century England, this is a tale of homosexual love between two men, Maurice and Alec Scudder, written by E. M. Forster (published in 1971). The story charts the life of Maurice Hall, the protagonist, from his school days as a fourteen year old. Quite early in the narrative Forster makes it clear that Maurice is distanced from the concept of marriage with a person of the opposite sex. During his university years he gets aware of homosexual love not only by reading Greek literature but also experiencing feelings of affection with a fellow student, Clive Durham. But the relationship does not survive given that Clive intends to have a 'normal' heterosexual marriage. Maurice is also shown to visit a hypnotist, Mr. Lasker Jones to cure his homosexuality as if it were a disease, but remains unsuccessful till the end. Finally, Maurice meets Alec Scudder, a young man at Penge with whom he falls in love and eventually shares close physical space, something that he had not experienced before.

The novel depicts how the English society of the times viewed such a relationship as inadequate and how the characters themselves being a part of the same ethical structure undergo a lot of trauma to come to terms with their own sexuality. Though Forster at the end portrays a 'they happily lived ever after' kind of a scenario, the publication of this book underwent

a lot of trouble. Irrespective of being written in 1913-14, it had to be revised twice and finally got published in 1971 only after Forster's death owing to the prevalent attitude towards homosexuality.

4.4.2 Virginia Woolf: *Orlando*

Published in 1928, this was a semi autobiographical novel based on the life of Virginia Woolf's real life lover, Vita Sackville West. The narrative opens with Orlando, the protagonist being a young man born in England during the times of Queen Elizabeth I. After briefly being a lover to the elderly queen till her death, he has a brief romantic affair with Sasha, an attractive woman in the entourage of the Russian embassy. The love story at the backdrop of the Great Frost of 1608 is full of all the wonderful experiences that comprise young love. But Sasha's sudden return to Russia leaves Orlando heartbroken, and causes him to turn back to writing a poem called "The Oak Tree", which he had left unfinished earlier. His composition meets criticism from Nicholas Greene, a famous poet of his times. Later Orlando realizes his responsibility towards his ancestral home and develops into an active social persona who caters to the populace. Soon Orlando has to flee the country owing to the harassment of a persistent suitor, Archduchess Harriet. Amidst the troublesome political scenario he serves well but falls victim to a night of civil unrest and riots. He falls asleep for days and on suddenly waking up finds himself transformed into a woman.

The new Lady Orlando makes her escape along with a gypsy group but has to eventually return to her homeland. Orlando realizes the magnitude of being a woman only on the ship back to England owing to the various constraints that a woman has from her clothes to her body. Orlando once again gets to confront the archduchess who now reveals herself to be a man, Archduke Harry. But Orlando continues to avoid his marriage proposals. Instead he juggles living his life both as a man and as a woman. The novel depicts a simultaneous transference between gender roles.

The character of Orlando is timeless, hence is next shown in the eighteenth-nineteenth century, when not only her poem "The Oak Tree" gets published, but Orlando wins the lawsuit over her property and is shown to be a happy wife to a successful sea captain.

This journey from being a man to a woman consolidates a varying range of experiences and questions the nature of each of them vis-à-vis gender roles. This multiplicity of experiences rightly puts Orlando's narrative into the genre of queer narratives.

4.4.3 Annie Proulx: "Brokeback Mountain"

"Brokeback Mountain" by Annie Proulx was published as a short story in *The New Yorker* in October 1997 and later became a part of Proulx's collection of short stories in 1999. It was adapted as a movie in 2005 with the same name and went on to win numerous awards including the Academy Awards.

The story depicts the tale of two American gay cowboys, Jack Twist and Ennis del Mar who meet at Wyoming in 1963 and find themselves emotionally and sexually attached to each other. The societal taboo towards a gay identity, makes them part ways and they get into the usual rigmarole of marriage, family and children totally letting go of their love for each other. But life has other plans for them as they continue to meet for their moments of union and togetherness on various camping trips over a period of the next twenty years.

It would be interesting for you to read the short story and compare it to the film adaptation.

4.4.4 D.H Lawrence: *The Fox*

Published for the first time in *The Dial* in 1922, this piece of work by D. H. Lawrence has been called a 'novella' which is a literary genre that is shorter than a full fledged novel but more expansive than a short story. The plot revolves around two women protagonists, Banford and March who reside in the Bailey Farm which is located on the outskirts of civilization. They are in their late twenties with no prospect of marriage and looking after a decadent farm and trying to survive against odds. Lawrence gives a very distinct description of both these characters. While March was almost always seen "in her puttees and breeches, her belted coat and her loose cap, she looked almost like some graceful, loose-balanced young man, for her shoulders were straight, and her movement easy and confident, even tinged with a little indifference, or irony," Banford was "nervous and delicate, was a warm, generous soul" clearly hinting at a set up which functions as an alternate man-woman household (Lawrence, 1923, p. 8-9).

Though life at the farm is not luxurious for the two women, they are shown to be in a mutually sustaining relationship until the arrival of Henry, a young man, which disrupts their otherwise peaceful existence. The story is both literal and metaphorical in the sense that while March fails in capturing the fox which carries poultry from the farm being enticed by its look every time and causes economic loss, Henry too, like the fox captures March's attention, seduces her and makes her a participant in the killing of Banford.

Critics have read the story as an interference of the patriarchal structure in the harmonious lesbian existence and the prevalence of a heterosexual relationship over a homosexual one. The end of the story does not portray a happy life of togetherness for Henry and March. Rather the guilt of Banford's murder seems to haunt them, thus disrupting their cohabitation.

The concept of a 'lesbian continuum' by Adrienne Rich which basically urges women to project their energies and efforts towards other women instead of men, can be investigated with respect to this text as Lawrence tries to project it as an alternate system of existence to the ever dominant heterosexual forces.

4.4.5 Audre Lorde: *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*

First published in 1982, this is an autobiographical work by Audre Lorde. It tells the story of the protagonist from her childhood to a considerable age of maturity. It talks about the varied experiences that she had as an individual growing up in the American society during 1940s to 1960s. What makes this novel so memorable is the description of all her relations with various women at various junctures of her life. Starting with her mother to her lovers and other acquaintances, Lorde charts out her life as a black American lesbian.

Therefore, her race, gender and sexuality are largely unacknowledged or rejected by the society and how at every step Lorde's life proves to be a struggle against the dominant forces. The novel has been considered as a coming-of-age story of a black lesbian feminist intent on claiming her identity.

The title of the novel *Zami* is significant because it is the Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers. Genie, Ginger, Bea, Eudora, Muriel, Rhea, Felicia, Kitty a.k.a Afrekete are some of the many women who contribute to Lorde's life journey by helping her to evolve as a person.

Activity:

Read any one of the works discussed in the above section. How is the notion of 'queer identity' negotiated in this work? Explain in your own words.

4.5 QUEER WRITING IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

Queer writing in the Indian context is rather limited owing to the various socio politico religious notions associated with the presence of such community. There is a dearth of writers as well as a lack of acknowledgement of the same. As you have seen in an earlier course, homophobia poses a major challenge to the very concept of queer writing. (You may find it helpful to review the Units on queer literature provided in Block 6 of MWG 001, especially Unit 3, “Indian Perspectives”).

An anthology called *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian writing from India* edited by **Ashwini Sukthankar** in 1999 was considered the first text of its kind in the country that comprised writings by lesbians from autobiographical pieces to critical comments on their lives in India. The anthology thus negotiates the very construction of the identity of a lesbian in the Indian context. Sukthankar’s introduction is crucial as it opens up various questions around an Indian ‘queer’ subjectivity that distinguishes itself from hegemonic representations of this subject that empty it of sociological particularity and expressive language of a culturally specific variety. She begins rather skeptically with the question whether there are lesbian writers in India, the answer to which is obviously affirmative. The skepticism is clearly due to the treatment that lesbians have received in India in trying to express their presence in public, which has been rather inhibiting for same-sex identified women. She cites how one of the contributors to the anthology preferred to be anonymous, could not be made to script a small article and required vigorous hours of convincing. “Write as a lesbian? Sorry, forgotten how,” was her reply on further insistence (Sukthankar, 1999, p. xiv). But what is noteworthy is the urgency to fictionalize the real life experiences on pen and paper by these writers. “I’ll call it fiction...After all it would be appropriate to call it that,” was her reaction even when she was about to use a pseudonym for her writing (Sukthankar, 1999, p. xiv). She was a well-known lesbian novelist of the 1960s who was forced to write under a pseudonym and whose book was published only after she was compelled to transfer her heroine (probably a lesbian) into a man.

The above mentioned episode is one of the many literary compromises made in the space of queer writing owing to the idea of shame, prohibition, condemnation, ignorance and censorship. **Hoshang Merchant**, a gay writer and editor of *Yaarana: Gay writing from South Asia* (1999) states how the term ‘homosexual’ is an invention of the late nineteenth century European science and complains that “NRI gays in *Trikone* (an organization in San Jose, California) have concocted a terminology for Gays: ‘Samlingan’ for the sexuality, ‘samlingia’ for ‘homosexual’, i.e, a literal translation of Western terms. Such a term does not exist in India, where the practice is not codified, only quietly condoned and above all, not talked about”

(Merchant, 1999, p. xi). He also remarks that “Homosexuality as it is known in the West does not exist in India. Most men are bisexuals. Or, to put it another way, most homosexuals get married due to societal pressures. Some commit suicide. Most adjust to a double life, so do their wives,” all of which pertains to a scenario of crisis as far as the very existence of queer individuals are concerned (Merchant, 1999, p. xvi). Therefore, writers contributing to the genre of queer writing in India are constantly delving into these zones of dichotomies and it is the struggle that dominates such kind of writing.

Below are given some of the trendsetting works of queer writing in the Indian context, where writers through fictional and autobiographical modes have tried to negotiate with the subjectivity of a ‘queer’ individual.

4.5.1 Ismat Chughtai: “*Lihaf*”

Published in 1942 in an Urdu journal called *Adab-i-Latif*, this remains the most popular short story by Ismat Chughtai. Not just for its literary brilliance but perhaps because the story was charged for being obscene and Chughtai was summoned by the court of Lahore in 1944. Eventually she won the case but her expression of same-sex desire between two women caused the entire controversy. (See also the previous discussion of this story in MWG 001, Block 6, Unit 2.6.4.)

“*Lihaf*” or “The Quilt” (as translated into English) narrates the story of Begum Jan, an aristocratic wife of a Nawab who has lost interest in his wife clearly because he too has a preference for younger boys. The narrator is a child who has been sent to the Begum’s household for a time period and it is through her eyes that the entire story unfolds. The child narrator enables Chughtai to talk about the lesbian relationship between Begum Jan and Rabbo, a lower class maid in the most innocent manner possible. The lack of knowledge on the part of the child also makes her a victim of some of the Begum’s advances in the absence of Rabbo and yet her inability to fathom the situation somehow makes the experience even more prominent. It is the story of a wife who feels neglected by the husband and tries to derive that sexual pleasure from a female companion.

Chughtai goes on to question this construction of the world of women, a world within the boundaries of which lie the secrets of her life. She presents the most explicit sexual details without being awkward due to the child’s perception of the same. The climax of the story is the high point when the child quite accidentally sees the two women making out under the cover of the ‘lihaf’. She says, “Under the lihaf the elephant turned a violent somersault and collapsed. But the somersault had lifted the corner of the lihaf by a foot - ‘Allah!’ I dived for my bed!” (Chughtai, 1990, p. 22).

4.5.2 Kamala Das: *The Sandal Trees*

The writings of Kamala Das are known for their honest, guilt free expression of female sexuality and this short story does justice to a woman's desire for another woman. It narrates the tale of two women, the narrator, Sheela and her childhood friend Kalyanikutty. The story has been told as a recollection of the time that has passed.

It depicts a childhood of two girls brought up together but one dependent on the other financially due to her state of poverty. But inspite of this economic discrimination Sheela and Kalyanikutty find solace in each others companionship until the project of marriage separates them. Das gives ample proof of their affection and sexual desire for each other and constructs Kalyanikutty as the dominant partner in such a relationship. Owing to the familial pressure, Sheela ends up marrying a man twenty years her senior and eventually Kalyanikutty too marries a young and handsome doctor, though none of the two seem contented in their matrimony. Years later, when they meet (in the present of the story), various revelations are made by both the characters. While Sheela confesses to being unsatisfied in bed with her husband, Kalyanikutty divorces her first husband, marries a second one and is shown to live the life of an affluent widow henceforth. There seems to be a constant lack in the lives of these characters which they try to negotiate with various alternatives only to realize that it is the company of each other that they need and desire.

Kamala Das, through her women protagonists portrays the condition of women in a middle class set up, shows how a heterosexual marriage is the only option for them irrespective of their desires and what happens when the heterosexual structure is proved inadequate in living a peaceful life. The answer she provides reflects a kind of disharmony that is incapable of holding these lives together and the result is a conscious but forceful detachment.

4.5.3 Mahesh Dattani: "Night Queen"

Published in 1999 as a part of the anthology *Yaarana: Gay writings from South Asia*, "Night Queen" is a one act play with two men protagonists, Raghu and Ash. The story begins at a point when both the men have picked each other up from a park and have landed at Raghu's place for sex. The actual situation of the characters gradually gets revealed by the verbal interaction and the audience realizes that Ash is about to be engaged to Raghu's sister, Gayatri. While he is unaware of this reality assuming Raghu to be one of his casual sexual encounters, the latter has recognized him as his sister's potential groom.

Maresh Dattani throws light upon the life of two urban homosexual men, both of whom live a very clandestine life. While Raghu is well placed in his family which consists of an old mother and a young sister, Ash is a gay man, about to enter into a heterosexual marriage to avoid getting ostracized from society at large. Both the characters have a very distinct public and personal image to hold onto, yet the sudden realization that Ash would invariably marry Gayatri throw their lives into disarray. In a way the play actually depicts the state of an Indian homosexual man who cannot come out easily due to the patriarchal set up that expects him to love a woman and bear children with her. There is no option of desiring another man, so much so that the characters themselves have to struggle to negotiate with their own sexuality here:

Raghu: (ignoring him) Pretending that she turns you on. That you are in love with her. That everything will be all right after marriage. Such pretence! And when you sleep with her, you will be groaning extra loud with pleasure, shutting your eyes, Thinking of your snake god or whatever, and penetrating her with those images in your mind. Pretending, pretending all the fucking way!

Ash: No! That won't happen! I know it won't!

(Dattani in Merchant, 1999, p.74)

4.5.4 **Parvati Sharma: *The Dead Camel and Other Love Stories***

Published in 2010, this is arguably the first collection of queer stories by an Indian author, **Parvati Sharma**, though it was not announced as such. The collection comprises twelve short stories, each of which talks about the various shades of human relationships. As the title of the book suggests, they all deal with love in different spaces, amongst varied people and even in the most unpredictable circumstances. What is unique about the collection is that the term 'lesbian' is totally absent from the text. The reason behind such an attempt might be that the use of specific terms like 'gay' or 'lesbian' tends to limit the boundaries of experiences of the individuals concerned. Moreover, the entire concept of queer politics is post-identity, which clearly states that it comprises subjectivities that go beyond the realm of LGBT experiences as well.

It seems that the author creates a world where homosexuality is as viable an option as heterosexuality which is quite different from the contemporary Indian scenario. It seems like a wish-fulfillment project for Sharma where she can portray lesbianism as something that is not a social stigma. All her characters are complex and layered even as they do not seem to be affected as gay people actually are in our homophobic society. The discourses of

caste, class, politics, religion, gender and sexuality are brought in but often so subtly so as to be almost unrecognizable.

Stories like “The Dead Camel”, “Re: Elections, 2004” and “The Quilt” seems to portray ‘queer’ identity of a particular class, that is, the upper middle class in the Indian society. It is a class that believes in a certain kind of working culture, is in possession of a specific kind of education and follows a particular life pattern. Sharma herself inhabits this class without much self-reflexivity due to which the very existence of her characters seems distant from the actual societal reality which generally associates notions of taboo and ostracism to the queer community. However, the portrayal of her characters is rather radical and seems to get seamlessly accommodated within the otherwise predominantly heterosexual world.

Activity:

Read the short stories by Indian authors discussed in the above section. Do you find a particularly Indian sensibility operating in these stories, when you compare them with the ones works discussed in the previous section? Jot down your responses and thoughts as you analyse each of the stories.

4.6 LET US SUM UP

Based on our theoretical discussion and analysis of various texts in this Unit, let us attempt to conclude by pinpointing some important aspects of queer life narratives:

- Though ‘queer’ has been used as an umbrella term to depict a number of identities that challenge the heteronormative order, the ambiguity of this term cannot be ignored. It is a term which is elusive. It claims to encompass many identities yet it might not have clear cut boundaries of recognition.
- There is a dichotomy in the status of a lesbian woman or a gay man as a ‘normal’ human being in her/his life and love choices and the struggle that an individual has to bear vis-à-vis society often dominate the space of queer narratives.
- It also becomes relevant to consider the way in which popular culture and media represents the members of the queer community around us, where they are shown as characters of comic relief or are mocked at, perhaps portrayed for sensationalism. Whether it is the gay couple in *Dostana* (a Bollywood film) or the reactions of/to Kantaben in *Kal Ho Na Ho* (a Karan Johar blockbuster) even at the slightest imitation of homosexuality by the central characters, all depict the lack of progress in the mental perceptions of the masses towards non-heterosexual identities.

As you have learnt from the above discussion, queer life narratives play an important role in posing questions about societal attitudes towards non-heteronormative identities. By doing so, such works of literature help raise our awareness of these critical gender related issues.

4.7 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) What do you understand by ‘queer narratives’? Discuss how identity politics is a prominent feature of such writings.
- 2) “The sense of restriction towards homosexuality gets represented in literary texts also.” Justify the statement with examples from some of the works discussed.
- 3) Discuss how Virginia Woolf in her work *Orlando* incorporates both gender performance and queer experiences.
- 4) Do the Western queer narratives seem more progressive than their Indian counterparts? If so, in what ways? Analyse and explain.

- 5) Discuss how the stories of Parvati Sharma are an attempt to create a reflection of the modern day Indian queer, and yet her project seems to be quite utopic.

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UNIT 5 WOMEN OF COLOUR

Malati Mathur

Structure

- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 Objectives
- 5.3 Defining 'Women of Colour'
- 5.4 Bell Hooks: *Bone Black*
- 5.5 Toni Morrison: *Sula*
- 5.6 Sally Morgan: *My Place*
- 5.7 Alice Walker: *Once*
- 5.8 Bessie Head: *The Collector of Treasures*
- 5.9 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.10 Unit End Questions
- 5.11 References
- 5.12 Suggested Readings

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The colour of one's skin has, for too many years now, determined one's place in society, the treatment that is meted out by other members of the society one belongs to, matrimonial alliances, class - and in unfortunately far too many cases, one's own perception of oneself. What does it mean to be marginalised not only for reasons of your colour but also for being a woman? Neither of these is under an individual's control but people are mocked, pushed out of the mainstream and looked down upon for both reasons. Don't you think this is a ridiculous state of affairs? But this has been going on for centuries all over the world!

In a world that places a premium on 'white', it is a given that people with less than white skins will be penalised - for no fault of their own - in innumerable ways, some subtle , some blatant and overt.

On the one hand, certain communities or even the natives of entire nations are humiliated, colonised or pushed into slavery for reasons of their colour. On the other hand, female foetuses are aborted, girls are killed at birth and there are women who are discriminated against within their own communities or families due to stereotyped, patriarchal notions of what constitutes 'good' behaviour and conduct becoming of a girl child.

In this Unit, we will read some life narratives by women of colour from different countries of the world and see whether their experiences are similar in certain ways. Does being a woman of colour mean being discriminated on both counts? What does this entail in terms of physical and psychological trauma? Let us try to respond to these questions through our discussion of specific works.

5.2 OBJECTIVES

After completing this unit, you will be able to:

- Define the term ‘women of colour’;
- Discuss the situation of marginalized women through the study of literary works by women of colour;
- Distinguish between autobiographies from majority communities and those of minority communities;
- Discuss the societal, collective aspects inherent in autobiographies written by women of colour; and
- Analyse the representation of the self in such autobiographies as a social act.

5.3 DEFINING ‘WOMEN OF COLOUR’

The problem with a lot of discussion about earlier feminist theories was that many feminists tended to ignore women’s differences. Many of them spoke about women as if they were a homogenous group: all white, educated, middle class...While trying to put women on the same platform with men, they also put women on the same platform with other women, which as we all know, is just not in tune with reality. Emphasising women’s sameness in their attempt to assert their equality with men made feminists guilty of what they accused patriarchy of doing for, to ignore differences is also a form of oppression just as ignoring similarities is. Also, for white women to think that women with different coloured skin are just the same underneath is to insult, trivialise and objectify those women. (Similar issues have been discussed in previous courses: for instance, see discussions in MWG 002, Block 2, Unit 3; MWG 007, Block 3, Unit 1.)

This is why many women of colour refused to accept feminist thought, viewing it as the white woman’s way of thinking. Audre Lorde, Bell Hooks, and Patricia Hill Collins were among the very first to speak of women’s differences and articulate the complexity of what it meant to be ‘coloured’ or part of other minority groups in America. However, part of the debate also dealt with the apprehension that to define themselves as ‘women of colour’ would mean that the white woman is the ‘self’, the point of reference

and the woman of colour is the 'other'. So would the term be liberating or oppressive? This led to feminists like Maria Lugones and Audre Lorde asserting that even if the term 'women of colour' was in opposition to the implicit 'women of non-colour', these women needed to see themselves as themselves and stop trying to explain their differences from white women. On the contrary, they should demand explanations from white women about how they were different from non-white women.

The writing of these women is a description of their experiences in a world that discriminates against non-white skin; an expression of their feelings and ideas and the determination to stand up and speak out both as 'coloured' people and as women. Apart from its intrinsic worth as literature, writing, whether fiction, poetry, essay or drama, provides a window into society and, as such, is a useful tool in the analysis of sociological, political and anthropological facets of culture and civilization. And when the writing is done by a (doubly!) marginalized section of the world's populace, its significance increases a hundredfold.

In the next few sections of this Unit, let us look at some specific life narratives by women of colour in which these aspects are brought to the forefront.

5.4 BELL HOOKS: *BONE BLACK*

The Black Belt region in the Deep South of the United States was initially called so because of the prairies and dark soil to be found in and around central Alabama and northeast Mississippi. However, it has also, for long, come to denote the agricultural region in the South that was characterised by plantations and with a high population of African-Americans whose ancestors were brought to America as slaves to work on the plantations. Having lived for several generations there, many of them stayed on after the American Civil War and the Emancipation (when the slaves were declared free) although they continued to face discrimination even after that for many years. A large number of them were rural workers, tenant farmers or sharecroppers but with the decline of family farms, acute poverty was rampant. This often resulted in low literacy levels, inadequate hygiene and healthcare, pathetic living conditions, high unemployment figures, a high crime rate and rural migration.

The earliest black short-fiction writing was probably from the South, mainly about the slave experience and its aftermath. As you have already learnt from your reading of the unit on "Slave Narratives" (Unit 1 of this block), slave narratives were integral to the literature produced by African-Americans. Their writing can be seen as refuting the dominant literary culture and also as existing both inside and outside American culture. This was because although they lived in the USA for several generations, they

were not accepted as part of the mainstream and were kept on the fringes of white society. They thus were both within as well as out of American society. Black writing brought in new styles of story telling and a unique voice which has enriched American literature.

Activity:

Before we begin to discuss the book, spare a few minutes to think of the way the author's name has been written without any capital letters as is the custom. What do you think it says about her? Try to find out more about why the author chooses to spell her name in this manner.

Bone Black reiterates the cathartic power of the written word, of the imagination and of memory - to heal and give rebirth. By writing about the agonisingly painful memories of her past, bell hooks does not reject her past but sees it as a means to come to terms with what has happened, with her own self and uses the experience to put together the broken pieces of her self. As she says:

In the end I did not feel as if I had killed the Gloria of my childhood. Instead I had rescued her. She was no longer the enemy within, the little girl who had to be annihilated for the woman to come into being. In writing about her, I reclaimed that part of myself I had long ago rejected, left uncared for, just as she had often felt alone and uncared for as a child. Remembering was part of a cycle of reunion, a joining of fragments, 'the bits and pieces of my heart' that the narrative made whole again. (hooks, 1989, p.159)

Bone Black, while being a remarkably forceful book that records the author's experiences of growing up as a black girl in the South, is also an account of her evolution as a writer. The book is a touching memoir that merges feeling and ideas and traces the development of a strong-spirited child as she gradually becomes aware of the place of women in a man's world and how vulnerable children can be. The society in which she grows up is one in which all the joys of marriage seem to be reserved for the menfolk while all the drudgery and labour is for the women who are expected to put up with their lot in stoic silence. There is no question of rebelling against this state of affairs as the women are raised into believing that this is what constitutes life. The world of men and women is so different that daughters are alienated from their fathers as though they live in separate domains even though they live in the same house.

The situation in school is no better for the little black children are herded together like animals in an ostensibly white and black 'integrated' school where they are expected to turn their backs on their own history and traditions and injustices meted out to them through the years and fall in with the ways of the white folk.

A touching part of the book deals with the experiences of the author within her own family. She is the active, questioning one - the rebellious daughter who refuses to accept the passive role that society has decreed for women. As a result, she is scolded and punished, viewed as a heartless person with no attachment and love for her kinfolk. This is so blatantly untrue and unjust that as one reads the book, one is filled with compassion for the little girl who dares to swim against the tide and forge her own identity. However, intertwined inextricably in the rebelliousness of the child is the insatiable and perhaps universal wish to belong, to be loved, to be accepted, to be understood.

The book comes across as a series of recollections, of sketches but they are not only of actual incidents but also of those imagined and dreamt - something that hooks is aware of. Autobiography therefore emerges as just one of the versions of truth - it is a retelling of events as the author remembers them - or wants to remember them - rather than an unalloyed representation of reality as it occurred. And, even more important than the incidents themselves are the imprint they left on the mind of the author as is evident from the final words in her foreword: "...this is an autobiography of perceptions and ideas. The events described are always less significant than the impressions they leave on the mind and heart." (hooks, 1989, p. xv)

But memories are evoked not merely for a sense of nostalgia, a longing to return things to what they were or an airing of hurts and grievances but as a way towards a knowledge of and learning from the past so that it can

inform and enlighten the present. This is an extremely positive, constructive and creative way of harnessing recall of even painful memories to fashion a cogent and dynamic present.

Activity:

Read the novel and jot down the author's experiences of discrimination.

To what extent can these experiences be related to her gender or to her colour?

Being an inhabitant of an unfair world, the author needs to find escape - as though she needs an open window to breathe in fresh air - which she finds in books and in blessed solitude to think her own thoughts and nurture her burgeoning creativity. Having been taught quilting by one of the older women who tells her that it would make her patient, hooks does indeed use her patience and courage along with an intuitive analysis about life and people to tap into reserves of strength. This enables her to recognise the hurt within her and, even more importantly, to rise beyond that pain into a creativity that embraces her history.

In the next section, let us turn to the work of another well-known contemporary African-American author, Toni Morrison. As you begin to read these works in the original, look for similarities and differences in the works.

5.5 TONI MORRISON: *SULA*

The novel *Sula* can be said to be a ‘frame narrative’. This is a literary technique in which the writer sets out a story and then leads on to one or more other stories within it. Opening with a prologue in the first part that is set in 1965, the story then takes the reader back to the year 1919 after which it moves linearly and chronologically forward to end at the year where it all started - in 1965. The importance of time is further emphasised by each chapter or section titled by a year. The story traces the life of its main characters through various stages and situations.

Beginning with an introduction to the place that serves as the setting to the events of the novel - The Bottom - and the interesting character of Shadrack with his weird? National Suicide Day, the book ushers in Sula and her friendship with Nel that may be said to be the backbone of the plot. With Nel’s marriage, Sula leaves The Bottom for ten years and this signals the end of the first part of the book.

The second part begins with Sula’s return and thenceforward relates major events in the lives of the two main characters, like Sula sleeping with Nel’s husband, the falling out between the two friends, Sula’s ostracism by her community and eventually her death. By the end of her life, Sula has come to believe that her life has had no meaning, served no purpose. But we later see Nel acknowledge that, even more than marriage or motherhood, it was Sula’s presence and their friendship that had been the most significant - in fact the best part - of her life.

While the first part of the book is set at the time of World War I and the years following it, the second has the time frame of the years leading up to the Second World War. The gradual end of The Bottom is an echo of the changes occurring in the lives of African-Americans during that time, something that is reflected in the time shift and dislocation that begins the novel. Morrison says in ‘Unspeakable Things Spoken’: “In between ‘place’ and ‘neighborhood,’ I [now] have to squeeze the specificity and the difference; the nostalgia, the history, and the nostalgia for the history; the violence done to it and the consequences of that violence” (Morrison, 1989, p.152).

Activity:

Read the novel and put the various events in a time frame. See how each impacts the other and how the events mould and influence the main characters.

It was a time of great change in America, particularly for Black America. The beginning of the century saw thousands of African Americans filling up jobs in rail and shipyards, domestic and hotel services, steel mills and meat packaging houses. They were part of what came to be known as the Great Migration when they left the South to fan out in the North for opportunities that the War had opened up while natural disasters contributed to their loss of jobs in the farms and plantations, forcing them to migrate. This naturally led to a sea change in the attitudes of both the black people and white Americans. The former slaves were now economically more strong, outspoken, aggressive and critical of racism. Predictably perhaps, the reaction against this 'new Negro' was often violent.

The novel traces the life and loves and struggles of two black women who share a deep and rich friendship but follow divergent paths in life. While it is a commentary on life and relationships, it also offers meaningful

insights about what it meant to be a black woman growing up and living in the America of that time. Even as it talks about the intense and vibrant relationship between the two protagonists, it also talks about a rural black community battling economic woes in a small town in Ohio. In fact, the novel begins with the end and violent dislocation of this community: “In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighborhood” (Morison, 1989, p.3).

One of the major events in the novel is the death of a little boy called Chicken Little who, during the course of a playful session with Sula and Nel, is accidentally drowned. The girls decide not to tell anyone about this incident but while Sula is distraught over the death of the little boy and blames herself all her life, believing that she was evil, Nel encourages her in this belief. She is smug in her sense of innocence that she did not cause the death and was merely a witness to it but she also secretly rejoices. At the end, Nel accepts that she is in fact, more evil than Sula ever was. Sula, with all her wild, unconventional ways was much more honest than Nel who lived out her life in a prim and proper way, clothed in hypocrisy and deluding herself and the world about her own goodness.

The strands of good and evil, right and wrong, truth and lies, acceptance and denial, ignorance and awareness run throughout the novel as the events play out and the characters develop and grow with time and experience. The contradictory nature of identity and self-awareness foregrounded against violence, betrayal and death is brought out starkly in the story. For instance, the very name of the place - The Bottom - came about because a black slave was tricked into settling on hill land, being assured that it was the bottom of heaven!

One of the themes in the novel is relationships/friendships and their presence or absence thereof. The two girls influence the lives and perspectives of each other both when they are together in love and friendship and later when there is bitterness and betrayal between them. Even in their absences, they still influence each other - as when Nel visits Sula’s grave and finally accepts the hypocrisy of her own conduct.

The influence of family is another significant element in the story. The lives and conduct of Sula’s and Nel’s mothers and grandmothers seem to chart a course for the girls - either to follow or to rebel against - and this shapes their lives and personalities substantially. The need for love and commitment - even if unperceived at the conscious level - informs the conduct and perspective of the characters in the novel. Even though Sula always professes herself to be above this need to be loved, she realises the hollowness of

this claim when she falls in love with Ajax but scares him away with her intensity.

Key characters in the novel leave their home for various reasons but come back changed either physically or emotionally. While the characters returning to their home is not exactly a reflection of what happened during the Great Migration, it is, as critics have opined, a good indication of the collective sense of belonging to a place that the African Americans shared. In the words of Barbara Christian, “Like the ancestral African tradition, place is as important as the human actors, for the land is a participant in the maintenance of the folk tradition. It is one of the necessary constants through which the folk dramatize the meaning of life, as it is passed on from one generation to the next. Setting then, is organic to the characters’ view of themselves” (Christian, 1985, p.48).

The already dislocated African people, facing another dislocation are full of the desire to be liberated in all ways, a desire that appears to be symbolised by the character of Sula. Morrison says of her created character that she “is a new world black and new world woman extracting choice from choicelessness, responding inventively to found things. Improvisational. Daring, disruptive, imaginative, modern, out-of-the-house, outlawed, policing, uncontained and uncontainable. And dangerously female” (Morrison, 1989, p.153).

In the end, *Sula* leaves us with the idea that good and bad are both mixed up in each other. While Sula lives out her life in daring and selfishness, she dies an early and lonely death. But finally, Nel realises how much she has missed her friend over the years. Nel is the one in whom Sula still survives and she is the character who ultimately draws all the loose strands together to give a conclusion to the novel.

“Nel emerges as the traditional “old world” hero, because Sula, as Morrison conceives and constructs her, cannot. Because the notion of progress is antithetical to Sula’s make-up, her character never builds any momentum...Though exciting, independent, and unpredictable, her character is fundamentally, finally static; Sula’s uncontainability is so well-contained that no one and nothing can get to her. A non-traditional or, to use Morrison’s word, “improvisational” character cannot sustain a traditional role...Only by eluding the formal containment of narrative realism, and shrugging off the responsibilities of novelistic form, does Sula become the “new world woman” of Morrison’s vision (Galehouse, 1999, p.339).

Activity:

Read the book and make a chart of the characteristics that mark out the two women. What do you think draws them together?

As one reads this novel, one becomes aware of how there are so many elements that go to make up one's identity. It is not just the family, it is also the community, the environment that shape us even if they may appear at times, amorphous and barely present. How then is one to discover what one is? It is through memories that light up the past, of fitting together various pieces of history into a composite mosaic so that a coherent strand of narrative informs our sense of who and what we are.

5.6 SALLY MORGAN: MY PLACE

The Aborigines are the original inhabitants of Australia and the living representatives of the ancestors of mankind. Discrimination and humiliation are experiences familiar to Aboriginal women in double measure - as women and as aborigines. Some of these women have now started telling their stories, often intertwined with the stories of their family and community.

The Aborigines believe that their ancestors sang their land into existence during their travel in the Dreamtime. Those on walkabout, singing the song-lines, maintain its continued existence even after 40,000 years. Each boulder and crevice of the unremittingly immense outback has a song associated with it and, incredible as it may sound, the entire continent can be sung like a musical composition.

These songs acted as travel and navigating aids because the traveller knew the location of each geographical landmark exactly by its place along the song-line. Thus, any deviation from the precision of the song would most certainly bring death to the traveller.

Similarly, and symbolically enough, the narratives of the Aboriginal people emphasize the role of memory as they establish important markers in the authors' long and difficult journey to self-realization, self-worth and identity. Their stories are the search for their roots and their Aboriginality, in which the family plays its own pivotal part as it adds its cache of recollections, long suppressed and buried beyond its own consciousness in an attempt to survive the pain of those memories.

These narratives also trace the Aborigines' fight for survival and their awakening political consciousness leading to the 1967 referendum through which, in a supreme irony of circumstances and colonial angst, they became citizens for the first time in their own land! **Sally Morgan**, in *My Place* also speaks of her efforts to rise above the disadvantage of her social position and be empowered through education.

The stories recount the ways in which these people struggled to come to terms with their changed circumstances, some managing to adapt while others were consigned to the rubbish heap as they tragically failed to bridge the gap between the two cultures. The stories dwell on the reasons for the increasing role of women in Aboriginal society and are evidence too of the growing number of indigenous women taking to autobiography and the documentation of their family's and community's experiences and history.

Check Your Progress:

*What are the various ways in which the title *My Place* can be interpreted?
What do you think the word 'place' could stand for?*

Sally Morgan's *My Place* is not pure autobiography, history or novel but rather an eclectic mix of all these - it draws on various available literary devices and genres and also relies extensively on library research, which further validates the historical, sociological and anthropological content of the book. *My Place* is not just Sally Morgan's story. Since it includes the life stories of her mother, grandmother and great-uncle, it is also biographical. She says, "There's almost nothing written from a personal point of view about the Aboriginal people...No one knows what it was like for us...A lot of our history has been lost..." (Morgan, 1987, p. 163-4). It is clear then that the book goes beyond personal histories and is visualized in terms of a social document. She states that her reason for writing the book is to let people know what has been done to the Aboriginal people, how history has been distorted and misrepresented. "All the history's about the white man," says Sally's mother (Morgan, 1987, p.161). This, then, is meant to be the Aboriginal version of history.

It is important to remember that at one time or the other, Sally, her mother and grandmother were very ambivalent towards owning up to their Aboriginality. In fact, for a long time, Sally thought they were Indian. This needs to be understood in the context of the assimilation policy in which Aboriginal children were taken away from their families and raised separately, forbidden to speak their language or follow any of their customs. They were brought up as Christians, trained to serve as domestic help. These children constituted the 'stolen generation'. Daisy and Gladys are therefore justifiably fearful and ashamed of their Aboriginality which they conceal while making every attempt to repress their memories of their past. But the book is a testimony to the attitude of the younger generation towards their Aboriginality. They wear this identity proudly.

Spiritualism and a mystical sense of the universe is a strong element in *My Place*. Morgan recalls that although religion was never imposed on her, she and her siblings were in the habit of reciting The Lord's Prayer which she humorously alludes to as "mum's secret weapon" (Morgan, 1987, p.62). Mum Gladys took her children "to every religious meeting imaginable" without any sense of prejudice or bias. While Morgan initially conceptualised the Almighty as a dreaded Being, she suddenly has a strange experience at a youth meeting in church: "I was having an audience with Him, whom I dreaded. The mental images that I had built up of Him so far in my life began to dissolve, and in their place came a new image. A person, overwhelming love, acceptance and humour.....In an instant I became what others refer to as a believer" (Morgan, 1987, p. 102).

In another instance, Morgan describes how Christianity and Aboriginal spirituality blend beautifully together when the whole family prays together during the final days of Nan, her grandmother. There is the description of an experience that follows the prayers and the family feels that her end is near as they hear “...a weird sound, like a bird call, only it wasn’t. It was something spiritual, something out of this world. I think she’ll be going soon” (Morgan, 1987, p. 356). In an interview, Morgan has also spoken about the possibility of Christianity and Aboriginal spirituality co-existing in complete harmony: “...there is a conflict when people make it a conflict...spirituality doesn’t function on one level, it functions in layers, and so you might have a form of spirituality in the Christian sense but then you can have another from outside of that which is just as valuable, and that tends to be what happens in Aboriginal people” (Bird & Haskell, 1992, p.11).

Humour can be seen as a survival mechanism, as a way of getting around authority or subverting the system. Humour comes across as a very strong Aboriginal trait in their attempt to deal with their circumstances, no matter how difficult.

Family and mateship - especially between women - is a strong presence in *My Place*. Most Aboriginal families have at least one strong female character - it could be a grandmother or an aunt - who holds everything together and to whom everyone goes to when faced with problems or need help. Even the other women who might appear deceptively passive are quite strong - stronger than the men in their lives and with a more determined sense of survival and the ability to cope than their male counterparts. This difference can be seen quite clearly in the way in which Morgan’s parents respond to and engage with life and difficulties.

The family is the site of story telling - the way in which memories are conserved and history is transmitted. This is an important part of the process of the forging of one’s Aboriginal identity and becomes specially important in oral cultures where there are no written records. *My Place* weaves together the strands of many stories - the mother, the grandmother, the great-uncle, Sally herself - all have their own narratives that together make up a composite picture of their world - and their own ‘place’ in this world.

Sally’s family history, as that of countless other Aborigines, is underlined by the laws and governmental policies that affected the lives and personalities of so many of her relatives. In writing about all this, by bringing it all out into the open, the book evolves into a powerful political statement.

Check Your Progress:

Look at the instances of family conflict and conversely, family support that dot the narrative. See how they reinforce the familial bonds and enable each member to face the outside world. Jot down your thoughts.

The writing of Australian Aboriginal women reveals their concern about the onslaught of white civilization on the Aboriginal way of life and the dispossession of Aboriginal land and holy sites. These writers have attempted to create an awareness of the injustices perpetrated on Aborigines in the past (and which have not completely ended yet) and their own desire to be part of the majority culture and governance of Australia.

The stories dwell on the facts of colonization that are only just coming out: the refutation of the fiction of Australia as having been ‘terra nullius’ (empty land) on which the white man settled through ‘peaceful’ means; the impact of immigration on its society and policies; a definition of Aboriginal rights and an attempt to shift their location from the periphery to the centre.

In the above sections, we have looked at life narratives in the form of novels. Let us now turn to other genres such as poetry and short stories, which have also been employed by women authors to explore issues of race and marginalization.

5.7 ALICE WALKER: *ONCE*

Alice Walker is an eminent American writer, poet, critic and activist. Her book *The Color Purple* (which won the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize) is one of her most read, quoted and prescribed books for study in universities across the world. She is actively involved and passionately articulate about issues that involve both gender and race and all her work - be it fiction, poetry or essays - deal with these concerns and she is known as one of the most effective and intense voices of black American women writers.

Once was Alice Walker's very first published volume of poetry and was immediately recognised as the work of a mature, sensitive and powerful poet.

The poems in this collection dwell on varied themes, arising from Walker's own experiences during her travels to Africa and with the civil rights movement. While the first few are vignettes of Africa as seen from the perspective of a Black American woman, others focus on the Civil Rights Movement in America, the South and on love. Some of the poems are witty and flowing while some are meditations on love and even suicide. After her visit to Africa in 1964, Walker returned to her college and then was ridden with conflicting feelings on having to cope with an unwanted pregnancy. She has written honestly about her struggle and the mental and physical torment she underwent on finally deciding to undergo an abortion. Certain poems in *Once* are an expression of that sorrow which prompted her to consider suicide. But, her turning away from this dark abyss and the positive decision she made to overcome despondency and live life to the fullest, are also given expression.

Check Your Progress:

Look at the poems that are observations made during the poet's travels to Africa. What are the qualities that make them appealing to the reader?

The little 'snapshots' that Walker offers of her African journey, encompass within their ambit, landscape, people, animals, attitudes and reactions. There is also the understated concern over the loss of animal habitats and their killing coupled with an insane commercial greed and superstition as when she talks about "A tall warrior/and at his feet/only/Elephant bones" (Walker, 1968, p.4). And again, "Elephant legs/In a store/To hold/Umbrellas" (Walker, 1968, p. 4). Or, "The fresh corpse/of a white rhinoceros/His horn gone/Some Indian woman/Will be approached/Tonight" (Walker, 1968, p. 9).

But she is equally concerned with the plight of humans in an under-developed, malnourished world: "A tall man/Without clothes/Beautiful/Like a statue/Up close/His eyes/Are running/Sores" (Walker, 1968, p 20). He is the embodiment of that well-worn Western cliché of the "The Noble Savage" but who, standing barefoot but erect, displays on close consideration, "His pierced ears/Infected" (Walker, 1968, p 20).

The poet sees a woman "Bare breasts loose/In the sun/The skin cracked/The nipples covered/With flies/But she is an old/Woman/What?-twenty?" (Walker, 1968, p 21). Even where there appears to be some spark of hope, it turns out to a deceptive light: "How bright the little/girl's/Eyes were!/a first sign of/Glaucoma" (Walker, 1968, p. 22).

There is no poetical posturing or placard waving here. The starkly pictured image is all and it is this which makes the poetry so intense and poignant. Let us look more closely at the title poem "Once" quoted below:

Green lawn

a picket fence

flowers-

My friend smiles

she had heard

that Southern

jails

were drab...

Running down

Atlanta

streets

With my sign

I see heads

turn

Eyes

goggle

"a nice girl

like her!"

A Negro cook
assures
her mistress-
But I had seen
the fingers
near her eyes
wet with
tears.

(Walker, 1968, p. 23-36)

The title poem “Once” has been written in free verse and has fourteen numbered sections of irregular lines, ranging from fifteen to forty one. The first begins with the poet in jail for her activism and each of the sections then goes on to present a picture or account relating to her involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. It is like an Impressionist painting, each section coming together with the others like a mosaic to form the complete image. The other poems with this theme are terse but pithy descriptions of people, events and attitudes, some wryly humorous as when an “an old mistress” of her mother gifts the girl a pair of bloomers that is “ten sizes too big”. Her father comments that this is so typical of the white masters - “neither the colour/she knows/nor the/number” (Walker, 1968, p. 40). Some matter-of-factly stated poems tug at the heart strings with their undercurrent of pathos as when the narrator prays all night for sight to be restored, not knowing if it ever will for “...last sight/had been/a broken bottle/held negligently/in a racist/fist...” (Walker, 1968, p. 39).

Check Your Progress:

Look at the various aspects of love that the poet brings out and jot them down.

The poems that deal with love (“Johann”, “Ballad of the Brown Girl”, “Watching you frown...”), speak freely of what it means for two people of different races to come together and what it entails both in society, given its history of racism and for the two individuals themselves (Walker, 1968, p. 63; p. 72; p. 56). They also speak of love, longing and separation. But it is not as though youth has a monopoly on love and companionship. There is a touching tenderness in the poem “Medicine” (Walker, 1968, p. 70) where the poet speaks of the beautiful bond between grandparents. Some of the untitled pieces on love are like short paragraphs - almost like diary entries that capture a fleeting moment, an ephemeral feeling, a wisp of emotion. One can see the influence of the Japanese haiku form of poetry and the philosophy of Albert Camus (she begins the volume with a quotation from Camus) in Alice Walker’s musings.

5.8 BESSIE HEAD: *THE COLLECTOR OF TREASURES*

One of Africa’s most well known writers - one can even say the best known - Bessie Head’s stories in this volume are all set in Botswana. Although she was born in South Africa, she went to Botswana as a refugee where she lived for many years before she finally received the citizenship of that country. Her life was not a very happy or peaceful one. She was born the illegitimate daughter to a black mother and white father and was raised by foster parents. Later, she had a broken marriage and underwent the ordeal of surviving as a refugee in another land. She died at the relatively young age of 49. However, Head used all her experiences and struggles as malleable clay and moulded stories from them, firmly fixing her position in the literary firmament as a greatly respected writer. She put her observation and first hand experiences as a black woman to creative use and makes strong statements in her stories about the treatment meted out to them. Women - both in pre-independence Botswana as well as later - were mistreated in various ways. It is also interesting to see how their suffering changed after independence and how the new ways and customs still wounded them. The stories in this collection have emerged from the oral story-telling tradition of Southern Africa, strongly evoking the language and imagery of that genre.

Head’s stories are not only drawn from her own life but also weave in tales she had heard from various people over the years. All the stories in *The Collector of Treasures* - her fourth book, published in 1977 - speak in varied ways of a precariously balanced society in which old customs vied to survive in the face of new ideas and a different way of life that followed the country’s independence. It is obvious that, in this struggle between the old and new, people face a lot of difficulties as they strive to come to terms with the passing of an era and the beginning of another. There is no clear

endorsement of either of the two ways of life, no clear-cut stand of one versus the other although it is quite obvious - and inevitable - that the new customs pose problems and cause discord.

The stories draw out the conflicts in the newly independent society - particularly as they affect women. The skirmishes are various - between men and women; different religious beliefs; old customs and new - the age-old tussle between 'tradition' and 'modernity' - problems arising out of the spread of education, insistence on certain marriage rites and the expectations thereof; the emerging capitalist market and the communal gift economy. Stories like 'Witchcraft', 'Jacob: The Story of a Faith-Healing Priest', 'Snapshots of a Wedding' and 'The Wind and a Boy' are portrayals of the ways in which the capitalist western values are slowly making an onslaught on the traditional, community-based lifestyles and how they impact the society - specially the women, often marking the death of an entire way of living and sharing.

Activity:

*Read the title story in the collection **The Collector of Treasures** and see how the title has been used ironically by the writer. Explain the use of the title in your own words.*

Head uses uncomplicated and direct language and the stories - deceptively simple - actually give the reader something to think about. The stories offer a vivid and tangible portrayal of a changing society with characters who seem real. The reader is drawn into the world that Head conjures up and can even identify with the motives, choices and actions of the characters. The author does not offer clear cut opinions or judgements regarding the character she portrays in her stories. Rather, the reader is taken into their lives and out of it somewhat abruptly and expected to make their own

decisions regarding the encounters. It is as though we have gone into someone's home and met certain people. We come away feeling that human nature is inscrutable and unpredictable.

There is also the sense of reading real stories about real people and their attitudes and experiences. For instance, 'Looking for the Rain God' is a tragic tale that has the feel of mythology and has its roots in a community's beliefs and experiences. Similarly, the so-called 'saint' Mma-Moompati ('The Village Saint') who is finally exposed as a bad mother-in-law ill-treating her son's wife and Galethebe, the deeply religious Christian woman who marries a man from the Setswana creed, ('Heaven is Not Closed') are all vividly pencilled characters who appear to have been created from real village people. Dikeledi Mokopi, the protagonist of the title story 'The Collector of Treasures' is a long-suffering woman who finally kills her husband and is punished for it but she embodies compassion, a resigned acceptance of reality and the complex nature of people in her attitude that always picks out treasures (moments of happiness) in the midst of all her trials and tribulations. The story is also a strong indictment of the cruelty and oppression that society allows against women and children from the men, who are supposed to care for, love and protect them.

Head's active involvement with social and political issues is used creatively in the form of her fiction and the manner in which she puts across her views about this genre. She attached great importance to reading as an inspiration and one can see that her varied reading has not only helped her to crystallise her ideas of what role she should play as a writer but has also influenced the layering of structure and meaning that one encounters in these stories.

Check Your Progress:

Read the stories and categorise them into the nature of the conflict that each one depicts. How many of them deal only with one issue? How many talk about multiple societal dilemmas?

5.9 LET US SUM UP

In all the works that we have discussed in this Unit, we can see some common strands that run through the writing by such different people from various corners of the globe. It is not only the gender and colour that we can see as a common element, it is also the writers' determination to rise above these constraints and establish an identity of their own that comes across so strongly in their work.

The family unit is an important constituent for that is where relationships are forged - and sometimes break up, personalities are formed and one's perceptions of society and one's own self are crystallised.

Faith is another concern that comes into focus when we read these works. Faith - or a lack of it - informs many of our attitudes and endeavours and is frequently the cause of conflict even in 'civilised' societies. And, it is impossible to miss the wit and the humour that runs through so much of these writers' work. Humour can even be viewed as a strategy of survival as it helps to dissipate some of the stress and bleakness of a given situation. It also helps to bond people together and give them the energy to work collectively towards a goal or to fight against discrimination.

The writers selected for study in this Unit take up notions of gender, patriarchy, race, society and change. Sometimes these strands are so inextricably linked that it is impossible to tease them apart and say that a particular writer is taking up specifically one or two of these issues. Sometimes one is left wondering at the similarity of experiences and feeling, the exploitation and humiliation and - of course - the triumph, whether psychological or otherwise, experienced by women all over the world, regardless of race or colour.

5.10 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) "For bell hooks, fighting oppression doesn't require anger or conflict—just opening our hearts and speaking the truth fearlessly". Do you agree? Illustrate.
- 2) How does bell hooks articulate the concerns of a black female child growing up in America? Is her experience similar to other like-minded girls growing up anywhere else in the world? Discuss.
- 3) Would you say that shifts and changes in an oppressive society sometimes result in too extreme a swing of the pendulum? Elaborate with reference to Toni Morrison's *Sula*.
- 4) Do you think the experiences of Aboriginal men and Aboriginal women are similar as brought out in *My Place*? Discuss.

- 5) a) How does the brevity of Alice Walker's poetry affect the reader? Does it increase or take away from the intensity of her feelings and strength of her ideas? Elaborate.
- b) How does Alice Walker delineate love in her poems? Illustrate with suitable examples.
- 6) How does Bessie Head bring out the social imbalances between men and women in the story *The Collector of Treasures*?
- 7) Select any one story from the volume *The Collector of Treasures* and analyse it from a feminist viewpoint.

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