UNIT 3 IMAGINING THE NATION-1

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3.1 INTRODUCTION

In the first two Units of this Block, you have been introduced to the major theoretical conceptions of the nation in the postcolonial context of India. The variety of such conceptions, from mainstream historical studies to feminist analyses, is indicative of the constantly changing and contested concept of the nation. In this Unit, you will read about the idea of the nation as it historically comes into being through the imagination of its constituents, i.e. its citizens, communities, both at the margins and in the mainstream. Literary writing embodies these various imaginings of the nation. This Unit will introduce you to prose genres such as novel, short story and essay whose adoption by writers coincides with the birth of modern
nationalism. Several of these texts about the formation of the nation are, at the same time, preoccupied with the question of gender relations within the nation. This Unit will give you a short history of the engagement of literary writing in India with issues of nation-building and national identity. You will read about the shifting answers to these questions reflected in writings of both major female and male writers of the late nineteenth, twentieth and the present century. You will also be introduced to the tradition of feminist thinking and critique in literature, based in South Asian realities, vis-à-vis the nation.

3.2 OBJECTIVES

After completing this Unit you will be able to:

• Explore the influence of gender in literary writing about the nation;
• Discuss the way in which assumptions about the nation affect the writing of literature;
• Comment on the struggle over the definition of the Indian nation and its current status; and
• Provide an overview of the history of feminist engagements with the nation through literary writing.

3.3 THE NATION AND LITERARY WRITING

Modern nation-states, particularly in Europe, have functioned as societies with a single dominant language and literary tradition. Countries such as France, Spain and the United Kingdom have their national languages (French, Spanish and English respectively). As you know, this situation does not prevail in India where historically several languages have been spoken and used for literary writing. Thus, with the birth of nationalism in the late nineteenth century, different expressions of that sentiment were made in many of the Indian languages. The consciousness of belonging to a singular, unified nation, however, was not instantly produced in this period. Most of the earliest writers of what came to be understood as ‘modern’ literature were men belonging to classes and caste groups which had the earliest access to colonial education. Women’s exclusion from colonial education was justified across regions through their identification with the idea of an unchanging, civilizational essence. Partha Chatterjee, whom you have read about in an earlier Unit of this block, has influentially argued that a class of women, in nationalist discourse, came to represent the private, inner zone of spirituality (Chatterjee, 1989, pp. 237-38). Real women’s lives, however, were not so stable or predetermined. The reform of women’s status in society, which came to be generally called ‘the women’s question’ in the nineteenth century, preoccupied almost all the major literary writers
of this period. They argued that the birth of a new national consciousness required a reform of its essential cultural features which for them were represented by the figure of the woman. Literary writing staged these questions within the framework of new imaginations. These new imaginations were a response to various colonial innovations such as the judiciary, railways, printing, and spread of education.

3.3.1 Literary Prose and National Consciousness

The effective expression of the dimensions, history and extent of the nationalist dream required the search for genres that could accommodate and concretize this dream. Several Indian languages had long traditions of literary writing, many of them rich in poetry. But the quintessential modern form for literary writing came to be the novel, which was distinguished by its western origins and aspirations. In western societies, the birth of the novel coincides with the spread of literacy and print capitalism. The novel form was not an elite form like the epic or the lyric poem in Indian literatures. Thus, some of the earliest novelists and readers were women from literate classes. Along with the novel, another emblem of modern consciousness was the non-fictional essay form, which could be used to express issues of social concern. The genre of the autobiography also became prevalent, via European paradigms, to exemplify great people who represented the core values of their cultures. While each of these forms can be said to have a western origin, they were introduced into Indian writing through the particular interests of a class that aimed to give substance and describe the contours of a nascent nation. This class was the major bourgeoisies or colonial middle-class Indians, for example the bhadralok in Bengal and the sharif Muslims of north India.

3.3.2 Modern Indian Literatures and the Women’s Question

Most early writings of an emerging nationalist class of writers address the woman’s question in the nineteenth century. This is no historical coincidence. Almost all the earliest novels, western-style plays and essays produced in Indian languages in this period, dealt with the women’s question. Apart from the writers we will study in this section, mention must be made here of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (1838-1894), Bengali novelist (Anandamath, Debi Choudhurani); Gulavadi Venkata Rao (1844-1913), Kannada novelist (Indirabai) and Potheri Kunhambu (1857-1919), Malayalam novelist (Saraswativilayam).

The idea of the nation required a group of thinkers, writers and followers who could mobilize people towards its consolidation. But cultural and linguistic differences in South Asian societies meant that no such mobilization could take place without addressing the particularities of these differences. The genres of prose fiction served two major functions in this regard:
a) consolidation of a modern body of writing in each of the major languages of the nascent nation to act as representative of collective sentiments; and

b) depict social debates and contestations as resolvable within the terms of ‘traditional’ society by using modern forms of expression.

Thus, ‘literature’ in the modern sense was born in Indian languages which aimed to realistically depict Indian social life as well as change the assumptions behind it.

**Nazir Ahmad, Gurajada Apparao and O. Chandu Menon**

Some representative examples of reformist literary writing of this period include the Urdu novelist Nazir Ahmad’s (1830–1912) novels about middle-class Muslim women’s education (e.g. *Mirat al-arus; ‘The Bride’s Mirror’* [1869]); one of the earliest Malayalam novels *Indulekha* (1889) by O. Chandu Menon (1847–1899) which argued for reform of marital alliances (*sambandham*) in Nair society; and Gurajada Apparao’s (1862–1916) first modern play in Telugu *Kanyasulkam (;Bride Price”*: 1897) also about the reform of the marital system in Brahmin society. While all three writers wrote in diverging styles and languages, they are united in their faith in literature to affect social relations and their belief in being pioneers of new forms of writing that inaugurate a new era in their literary histories.

**Nazir Ahmad’s *Mirat al-arus* became an early classic of Urdu fiction because of its realistic depiction of life in the women’s quarters. Its heroine Asghari is presented as an exemplary middle-class woman who, through her basic literacy and knowledge of house-keeping, safeguards the autonomy of the Muslim household faced by colonial social innovations such as western education, government service for men and reform of religious practices and codes.

**Gurajada Appa Rao** began writing in English but soon decided to experiment in his native Telugu but using the western form of the English drama. *Kanyasulkam* draws typical characters from the agenda of the women’s question such as the child bride, the widow and the prostitute each of whom represented an object for desirable reforms in traditional social practices (child marriage, enforced widowhood and tradition of so-called nautch girls respectively). Significantly, Apparao’s play shows the limits of good-hearted reformism because it treats women as objects of reform and fails to see the problems from the subject position of women.

**O. Chandu Menon’s novel** attempts to create the figure of an exemplary woman out of the matrilineal Nair context of Kerala. He does this by emphasizing the importance of choosing one’s husband as the sign of modern subjecthood. Through the love story of Indulekha and Madhavan, Menon points towards both the restrictions against women’s marital choice in Nair
society as well as a new imagination of companionate marital relations in a rapidly modernizing social context.

The reformist writing on the women’s question is deeply interested in cultural reforms but not inclusive in its depiction of a social world. For example, lower-caste characters and concerns are either not depicted or relegated to their ‘traditional’ place on the periphery of the story and the social world. Politics, for these writers, does not include mass agitation or questioning the rule of the colonial government since these ideas had not yet crystallized in any part of India. This is a writing produced almost exclusively by privileged but colonized men who envision the formation of a new exclusive leadership of communities and caste groups that could represent the inchoate beginnings of national life.

**Check Your Progress:**

i) Discuss some of the literary writing on the idea of the nation.

ii) Do you think the modern Indian literatures have taken up the question of women? Explain briefly.
3.4 THE GROWTH OF WOMEN’S WRITING AND THE NATIONALIST QUESTION

It might appear from the works of reformist writers that the women’s question was solved by relegating women to an inner, spiritual realm while allowing men to enter mainstream political struggles that adopted western styles of speech, writing, dress and behaviour. However, this picture cannot be considered complete without including the perspective of the newly emergent women writers. One direct effect of such significant fictional characters such as Asghari and Indulekha was the assertion of women’s subjecthood in social discourse. The gender politics of reformist writing created the need for listening to women’s voices if reform, launched in their name, was to succeed. The spread of novel writing as well as novel reading among leisured classes also meant the spread of literacy and literary tastes among women of those classes. The rise of the woman writer, although overshadowed by her male contemporaries, was not a minor phenomenon.

Pandita Ramabai, Tarabai Shinde and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain

The works of several late nineteenth century and early twentieth century pioneer women writers are available to us today thanks to the attempts of a generation of feminist scholars to retrieve them from forgotten archives. Pandita Ramabai (1858–1922) is one of the earliest critics of what Uma Chakravarti has theorized as ‘Brahmanical patriarchy’ but she has gone largely unsung in the annals of nationalist history (Chakravarti, 2003, p.34). This is primarily because of her insistence on treating the women’s question outside the realm of the unchanging, spiritual essence of Indian civilization and emphasizing caste discriminations that were embedded in ancient codes and hoary legalistic traditions of upper-caste Hindu society. In her own life, she became controversial for her conversion to Christianity, born in a Brahmin family and celebrated as a ‘Pandita’ or religious scholar of the ancient scriptures. Her conversion however did not mean a rejection of one heritage for another. She was critical of narrow denominational affiliations in Christianity. She maintained a fiercely independent and critical outlook in such pathbreaking tracts as The High-Caste Hindu Woman (1894). Written in English, it describes how elevated (i.e. chaste, upper-caste) femininity, which was the foundation of Indian national thinking, was produced through a dominant conjuction of caste discrimination and patriarchal control of women’s bodies and choices. Ramabai’s lifelong struggle for women’s self-determination revealed how entrenched patriarchal attitudes were simply transformed into mainstream nationalist thinking. The interests of the emerging national formation were starkly in tune with the older, non-modern forms of control over women’s lives.
**Tarabai Shinde** (c. 1850-c. 1910) was born in a Maratha family that was influenced by Jotiba Phule’s anti-caste *Satyashodhak Samaj* movement. She wrote an essay *Stri-Purush tulana* (‘A Comparison between Women and Men’ [1882] in Marathi in response to a news report about a young widow’s murdering her newborn child fearing social ostracism. The work was not simply a polemic against the ideals of *pativrata* or idealized upper-caste femininity, but sought to analyze images from the press, popular texts and traditional narratives that stereotyped women’s lives and experience. It also uncovered the way patriarchal ideology finds sustenance in such representations of femininity in the epics and the *shastras*. Shinde’s text then goes on to accuse male reformists of not really believing in what they preached about women’s emancipation. She shows how their words, dressing style, and attitudes are hypocritical because in public they appear to be westernized colonial subjects but at home they endorse oppression of women in the name of tradition. This was a unique moment in the growth of Indian nationalism where a woman hit at its very basis of segregating women from public life.

Tarabai’s rhetoric against male reformism tried to turn it on its head by questioning the very intentions of male reformists. A similar overturning of gender assumptions is presented in the proto-science fiction story *Sultana’s Dream* (1905) written first in English by the Bengali feminist *Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain* (1880-1932). Hossain was a lifelong champion of women’s education. She had grown up in the women’s quarter, excluded from college education and raised on readings of ‘good conduct’ literature for women. Her fantasy story describes the protagonist Sultana’s dream where she encounters ‘Ladyland’: a utopia where men live in the *zenana* (women’s quarters) while women go about freely conducting government, business and education! Through the use of this upside-down world, Hossein criticizes the bases of her own world which relegated women to the inner quarters and ascribed to them ‘natural’ weaknesses of body and mind. In Ladyland, women participate in politics just as men do in the real world, but their interactions with the world are more humane, just and ecologically sound.

While this is obviously a utopian world, it functions to highlight precisely those areas of national life from which women have been excluded. (You may also find it useful to review the discussion the story provided in MWG-008, Block 3, Unit 3).

Through the examples of women writers from the early years of nationalism, you have seen that new literary forms were used to question and re-formulate the bases of Indian nationalism. The issue of patriarchal oppression was a key area of contention between women writers and their male reformist interlocutors. Pandita Ramabai and Tarabai Shinde both highlight the oppression within their society. They therefore argue against a monolithic nationalism that related all the ills of social life to colonial governance.
They too have a vision of a free society, but a society that is free from internal oppressions of caste and gender.

### 3.5 THE NATIONALIST IMAGINATION OF GENDER RELATIONS

Just as Pandita Ramabai called for a deep analysis and critique of upper-caste Hindu society while studying abroad in England and travelling through the United States, Rabindranath Tagore’s critique of nationalism, *Nationalism* (1917), was first given as lectures in Japan and the United States. The historian Sumit Sarkar notes that Tagore’s early uncritical position on idealized Hindu femininity also underwent a radical change in his critical observations against nationalism (Sarkar, 2002, p. 119). In one of the lectures on this topic, Tagore said: “The idea of the Nation is one of the most powerful anaesthetics that man has invented. Under the influence of its fumes the whole people can carry out its systematic programme of the most virulent self-seeking without being in the least aware of its moral perversion” (Tagore, 1985, p. 57). This idea of the nation during the early twentieth century crystallized around the figure of the woman as Mother or Bharat Mata. Especially in his novel *Ghare Baire* (Home and the World, 1916) about the Swadeshi movement in Bengal Tagore showed the crucial linkages between this self-seeking male nationalism in the figure of the militant nationalist Sandip and the symbol of the woman as motherland in the heroine Bimala.

The valorized objectification of woman was only one kind of resolution of the nineteenth-century’s women’s question. The rise of prominent women writers in the period of the nationalist struggle carried on the tradition of late nineteenth-century figures like Tarabai, Ramabai and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain who now pressed the question: who speaks for the emerging nation? While the symbolism of mother India suggests that the imaginary, idealized Indian woman is a living reality, individual women’s voices, whether as writers, political activists, or everyday members of the national community are not similarly valued. The woman writer’s task in the pre-independence period therefore involved cutting through the idealization of femininity and giving voice to the complex experience of women in a colonized society.

#### 3.5.1 Lalithambika Antherjanam

Lalithambika Antherjanam’s (1909–1985) fiction presents women characters that find themselves in opposition to some key aspect of social life. Antherjanam was a rebel against the narrow confines of the *antherjanam* or the inner quarters where women were confined to live in Namboodiri society in Kerala. Although the Namboodiris were the elite caste, the women
lived under the double pressure of strict caste-based marital rules and the physical confinement that resulted from these rules. In one of her most controversial stories, ‘Praticaradevatha’ “The Goddess of Revenge”, 1938 Antherjanam narrates the legendary life of the Namboodiri woman Tatri whose name symbolized the adulterous passions of transgressive womanhood. Tatri broke the caste-rules of her society after being abandoned by her husband for a prostitute. She decided to give up marital life and became a courtesan herself. Once her husband visited her for her services and was horrified when she revealed her identity. This was followed by a caste trial (smartavicaram) meant to try adulterous women. At the trial she triumphantly revealed the names of several respectable Namboodiri men who had been her clients. In the short story, it is Tatri’s ghost that visits the protagonist who is a woman writer in order to narrate her story. The writer sympathizes with the ghost but tells her that her individual act of transgression does not amount to much in modern times. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan reads the reaction of the protagonist as representing the modern need for a mass movement for women’s emancipation rather than one based in individual acts of transgression, however brave (Sunder Rajan, 1993, p. 92). Antherjanam’s story stages the conversation between a woman of the emerging nation and another who lived in an older system but where both live under common situations of gender oppression. But the modern woman is aware of the need for political mobilization in order to achieve emancipation. This mobilization is closely related with the goals and strategies of the nationalist movement. The story suggests that women’s emancipation can take place along the lines of national liberation.

3.5.2 Rashid Jahan

The various instances of social differences present in the emerging nation were a constant reminder of diversity in the seemingly homogenous nation. The Urdu playwright and short-story writer Rashid Jahan (1905–1952) belonged to an elite Muslim family devoted to the reformist programme of women’s education in north India. Like Antherjanam, most of her stories and plays focus on the experience of women of the privileged class but living in seclusion. She highlights the crippling effects of lack of education, healthcare and political freedom in the lives of Muslim women in purdah. In stories where she depicts liberated women like herself (trained as a doctor), she also points to the difficulties of simply imagining unity of all women. In her story ‘Who’ (That One), for example, the privileged woman-protagonist is befriended by an old woman who is defaced by a venereal disease. Like Tatri’s ghost from the past, Rashid Jahan’s old woman, who is also a prostitute, haunts the liberated woman of the emerging nation. The story of this unusual friendship shows the imbalances within the nation even as there is consensus about freeing the country and establishing a new social system. The protagonist of the story learns to acknowledge the
bounds of feminist solidarity especially when they involve questioning one’s cherished notions of normalcy, respectability and morality. But, as Susie Tharu and K. Lalita note in relation to this story, the middle-class woman protagonist is the centre of the story and not the working-class, delegitimized prostitute (Tharu and Lalita, 1993, p.82). The protagonist is a typically successful modern woman who is valued by the nation and is sure of her achievements. She learns to recognize and sympathize with her less fortunate sister. But this sympathy does not question the conditions which create the misery and poverty of other citizens like the old prostitute.

**Check Your Progress:**

i) Do you think that Pandita Ramabai, Tarabai Shinde and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain changed the discourse of women’s writing? Substantiate your argument.

ii) Discuss the gender relation and nationalist imagination with suitable examples.
3.6 THE FOUNDING VIOLENCE OF THE NATION

The partition of British India in 1947 resulted in large-scale violence along religious and communal lines. The birth of two independent nations instead of one compromised the notion of a singular nationalist ideal. The violence had a particularly gendered dimension as recorded in testimonies and literature about the partition. The sense of devastating pessimism was captured in the voice of poets like Faiz Ahmad Faiz who wrote that this dawn of freedom was not what anybody had expected (Faiz, 2000, p. 123). The literatures of Urdu, Hindi, Punjabi, Bengali and Sindhi (languages spoken in areas directly affected by the violence) bore witness to the breakdown of civilizational certainties about cultural unity and resilience. The experience of women of non-elite classes depicted in these writings became the central metaphor for the aberrant nationalism that characterized the partition violence.

Saadat Hasan Manto and Amrita Pritam

Saadat Hasan Manto’s (1912–1955) fame rests on his Urdu afsanas or short stories which address key political and ethical issues of the post-independence period: cultural identity, religious faith, and sexual violence. Aamir Mufti has shown that one of the central figures for Manto’s social imagination, in contrast with mainstream nationalist evocations of the mother-figure, is the lower-class prostitute. It is through his dramatization of the economy and scenes of the disreputable brothel that Manto’s stories use the form of the short-story to convey a slice of life in the emerging nation but without idealizing that life through poetic or novelistic means (Mufti, 2000, p. 4). In the short story ‘Hatak’ “insult” 1940 Manto’s famous protagonist Saugandhi, a working-class prostitute, realizes the limits of her faith in romance and love when a middle-class client rejects her for her unattractiveness. Saugandhi is cured of her yearning for romance and domesticity when she realizes the commodification of all her relations with the world: lover, husband and client. This realization destabilizes the connection between woman as an eternal symbol of the nation. Similarly other stories by Manto such as ‘Mummy’ question, through the short-story form, the cherished myths of the nation that idealize women as pure, caring, self-sacrificing.

Amrita Pritam also writes about the same social context and historical period as Manto. Her Punjabi novel Pinjar “Skeleton”; originally written in 1950 powerfully evokes the cultural diversity of pre-partition Punjab but without excusing the patriarchal control over women’s lives and destinies. Significantly, the abduction of the Hindu protagonist Puro in the novel takes place before the partition and is not motivated by inter-communal antagonism. However, the coming of partition tears apart the village along
religious lines and it is the figure of Puro (now living as Hamida) that represents the impossible situation of a woman who does not belong fully to either religious community. But the most poignant character in the novel is a madwoman who comes to the feuding village. She gets pregnant by a villager and dies giving birth. Hindus and Muslims fight about her religious identity and the ownership of her newborn child. Her character is reminiscent of the famous Manto protagonist Toba Tek Singh who could not understand what partition meant or what differentiated the two emerging nations. Hamida decides to adopt the child of this madwoman. Pritam’s novel shows the radical break between national identities based in caste and religion and the lives of ordinary women who are turned into symbols of honour for their respective communities. After the partition, Puro/Hamida decides to stay with her abductor’s family in Pakistan and not join the new nation of India.

3.7 THE POSTCOLONIAL IMAGINATION OF THE NATION-STATE

The symbolism of women as the bearers of the nation’s honour and cultural purity, which had been exposed in its ugliest manifestation in the sexual violence of the partition riots, became harder to contest as the new nation insisted on producing a glorious history for itself. While universal adult franchise and fundamental rights of expression and belief heralded a new era for the women of the nation, the social realities of patriarchal control over women’s lives did not disappear with independence. The attainment of national sovereignty did make available new languages for expressing opposition to age-old social hierarchies of caste, class, region and gender.

3.7.1 War Against Women

The women’s movement took shape in the 1970s after more than two decades of nationalist rule in India. Susie Tharu and K. Lalita view this movement (see previous discussion in the MWG-001, Block 1) as arising out of the failed promises of national liberation such as the end of feudalism and imperialist control. The centralized state (which represented the ideals of the national movement) increasingly curtailed the rights of large segments of the population and ignored the particular realities of oppression suffered by minorities, Adivasis, lower castes and communities living in the periphery of the nation.

3.7.1.1 Mahasweta Devi

Mahasweta Devi’s (b. 1926) career as a writer and political activist in West Bengal shows not only a key concern with gender oppression but the systematic delegitimation of whole communities of people in the drive
towards modernization in the name of the national progress. Her most famous story ‘Draupadi’ (1978) brings together these varied concerns in the harrowing account of the life, imprisonment and sexual violation of a tribal, naxalite woman leader, Dopdi Mejhen. Mahasweta’s narrative style presents a fragmented consciousness and does not allow readers to comfortably settle into the pleasures of a linear story. The writer however anchors the story in the well-known narrative about Draupadi from the Mahabharata, particularly the episode about the disrobing of the wife of the Pandavas in the assembly hall. Dopdi Mejhen is apprehended for her revolutionary, anti-state activities and is raped on the orders of the commanding official Senanayak. She then refuses to put on any clothes and is brought naked and bleeding in front of the official, just like the disrobed queen of Hastinapur. And similar to Draupadi’s resounding defiance in front of the men who want to insult the Pandavas through her disrobing, Dopdi Mejhen embraces the official and rubs her torn body all over his clean exterior. This defiant act overturns the codes of honour and modesty that are imposed on the women of the nation. Moreover, it upturns the moral superiority of the preservers of the nation who are willing to use sexual violence to discipline its women citizens. There is little sense left in the nationalist dream at the end of the story as the all-powerful Senanayak stands shivering before the brutalized body of the adivasi woman.

3.7.1.2 Ambai

In the work of the feminist Tamil writer Ambai (b. 1944) we find a similar critical stance against the structures of state power which utilize nationalist sentiments to justify its ends. Thus, for example, in her story Black Horse Square (1992) we again meet the figure of the woman political revolutionary who has been sexually assaulted by policemen as part of the disciplining of ‘anti-national’ figures. Rosa has withdrawn to an inner silence as a result of this experience and her political comrades do not understand this silence. Her sister-in-law, Abhilasha, a middle-class feminist, approaches Rosa with a journalistic agenda but soon realizes that ordinary languages of anger, empathy or reportage do not capture the particular reality of sexual oppression in the lives of women. The story culminates in a tender scene where Rosa lets Abhilasha see the scars on her body as a sign of allowing female solidarity and feminist care to question and heal some of the violence perpetrated by the state in the name of national security.

3.7.2 Rewriting the Nation’s Self

The dominant history of the nationalist movement in India has highlighted the leadership and participation of great men. The autobiographical genre has been used to express the struggles of influential individuals in the movement (e.g. Mahatma Gandhi’s An Autobiography: The Story of My
Experiments with Truth 1940 and Jawaharlal Nehru’s An Autobiography 1936. The tradition of exemplary biographies was already a dominant feature of reformist writings in the late nineteenth century. After independence, struggles for women’s emancipation and dalit or low-caste liberation pointed to the unfinished work of national liberation due to nationwide inequalities and oppression against socially disadvantaged groups. The exemplary individual leader and his career, enshrined in the autobiographical genre, was no longer a figure of unquestioned adulation. The national self was understood by a large majority of citizens as an exclusive group of privileged class, caste and gender backgrounds. Thus, when both the women’s movement and the Ambedkarite movement (especially in the form of the Dalit Panthers’ struggle in Maharashtra) arose in the 1970s, a new kind of literature about the self was born. Women’s writing has a long history, as we have seen in this Unit, but the centre of many of these works by women is occupied by a particular kind of protagonist and speaker: urban, middle-class, English educated, conversant in all the privileged procedures of modernity.

Dalit autobiography, which emerged directly from the mobilization of dalit castes in the 1970s, argues for a different conception of the autobiographical self and by implication of the national self. In particular, dalit women’s autobiographical writing emerged as a serious challenge to the accepted views about who speaks on behalf of the nation. Dalit autobiographies were written across the various literary cultures of India; beginning powerfully in Marathi, it spread to Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada and Hindi. It constitutes an alternative to the canon of mainstream Indian literature that upholds the vision of a homogenous nation of privileged voices. It not only asks who speaks for the nation, but also questions why only some lives and voices come to represent this nation.

Bama and Dalit Women’s Autobiography

Bama (b. 1958) is a Tamil writer and her first book Karukku (1992) was an autobiographical account of her life in the Paraya (a low caste in the Tamil caste hierarchy) section of a village in Tamil Nadu. Please also see the discussion of Bama’s works in MWG-008, Block 4, Unit 3. Bama grew up to be a nun in a Catholic religious order but was dismayed by the prevalence of caste consciousness in even the seemingly egalitarian order of the Christian church. The book’s title evokes the double-edged palmyra leaf (called karukku in Tamil) as representing the double-edged nature of caste consciousness in modern India. Bama writes in order to express her growing sense of pride, hope and power in her dalit identity, the same identity which for centuries has been the reason for the destruction of the lives of her people. The narrative contrasts with the usual autobiographical first-person voice which maintains a careful distance from the public world and group identities. Bama’s autobiographical narrative not only attempts to
voice her individual struggles as a dalit woman, but simultaneously gives a
group identity to that voice so that the book becomes an account of the
struggles of the whole community. This is a dominant feature of several
other dalit autobiographical accounts which shows an attempt to imagine
a collectivity that is not confined to a nationalist view of cultural homogeneity
which simply ignores the realities of caste. In fact, dalit autobiographies
constant uncover the fiction of the private self of conventional
autobiographies to show that all our lives gain meaning in interaction with
social institutions and stratifications. The work of dalit writers in general
reveals how caste consciousness is not a roadblock to national integration
but is instead the basis of survival and political mobilization for the most
under-privileged communities living in India.

3.7.3 Voices of the Periphery

The centralization of national culture after independence has created
peripheral zones which are only geographically linked to the mainland of
India. This symbolic unity of the Indian nation derives its legitimacy through
armed control against insurgent groups in states ranging from Jammu and
Kashmir to Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, Mizoram and Tripura. The idea of a
peripheral or border area, instituted by state policy, renders the people,
culture and politics of these regions invisible. While the diversity of the
Indian nation is easily described in words, it is still a struggle for these
diverse peoples, living under conditions of internal war and violence to
claim the benefits and privileges of national citizenship. An internal racism
operates in mainstream national life against the culture, traditions and
aspirations of the various tribal and non-tribal groups in the north-east of
India. However, literary writing in these states, similar to the mobilizing
role of various Indian literatures during the struggle against the British, has
kept alive a tradition of self-representation and recording the struggles of
the people.

3.7.3.1 Nirupama Bargohain

Nirupama Bargohain (b. 1932) is an Assamese novelist and short-story writer.
She has been part of the women’s movement in the state as well as a critic
of narrow ethnic nationalisms in the region. Bargohain’s Abhiyatri (1995)
is a novelistic account of the life of the legendary feminist activist
Chandraprabha Saikiani (1901-1972), who was the founder of the nationalist
women’s movement in Assam in the 1920s. While Bargohain’s novel tries to
present a biographical picture of the great woman-activist, it simultaneously
shows the difficulties in memorializing the career of a tough, independent-
minded woman in history. Saikiani’s struggle to get an education and live
the life of an activist was hampered by social prejudice against her non-
marital relationship with a man and her being a single mother. However
Saikiani is presented to be a relentless fighter against gender hypocrisy of the male nationalist leadership. In a famous episode recounted in the novel, Saikiani tore down the bamboo partition behind which women delegates sat during a meeting of the Assam Sahitya Sabha while a speaker was giving a speech about freedom and women’s rights. Bargohain describes how despite her pioneering role as a grassroots activist and founder of women’s groups, a passionate writers and novelist, Chandraprabha Saikiani is not celebrated like other mainstream nationalist figures. This hidden history of the nationalist struggle, recounted in her novel, is necessary to complete our understanding of the passions and motivations behind the struggle across the subcontinent. Interestingly, Bargohain uses the format of a fictionalized biography and the novel form to bring to life the unsung career of this nationalist heroine.

3.7.3.2 Temsula Ao

The Naga writer and poet Temsula Ao (b. 1945) chooses to write in English. Her literary canvas is drawn from the carefully observed life and struggles of the Naga people. Apart from documenting folklore of the various tribes’ people of north-eastern India, Ao has written collections of short stories. In *These Hills Called Home: Stories from a War Zone* (2006), most of the stories take place in the backdrop of the early years of the armed insurgency in Nagaland. Apart from bearing witness to the violence of the army, especially sexual violence against women, the stories constantly focus on the inner dynamics of Naga patriarchal society. Ashley Tellis argues that Ao’s simple, unadorned prose works as a literary device for focusing anger against a violence that works at multiple layers: the state, society, family and inter-personal relationships. He shows how Ao is not interested in depicting an ethnically exotic picture of Naga life (Tellis, 2008). Her stories revolve around marginalized figures within Naga society: the single mother, the mentally challenged and the illegitimate, which produce a deep sense of witnessing the life of a community living under siege. Ao’s use of the short-story form is a reminder of how particular literary forms become useful to writers in engaging with aspects historical experiences.

3.8 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit you have read a history of literary writing (both fiction and non-fiction) in India that coincided with the birth of nationalism. The use of new genres of writing such as the novel, short story and the essay was a direct result of writers’ need to express a modern nationalistic outlook. But the idea of the nation did not crystallize once and for all in the late nineteenth century. While the women’s question was thought to be resolved by turning women into symbols of the inner, spiritual life of the nation,
women writers, from the very beginning, wrote against this resolution. The experience of partition and the achievement of independence forced writers to question the definition and assumptions behind the nation and its unified culture. This questioning involved using literary forms to convey a new awareness of national liberation and its shortcomings. The postcolonial experience of the Indian nation, embodied in new writings and genres, clearly shows that the nation continues to be redefined by marginalized groups such as dalits, minorities, and communities in peripheral areas. They have redefined traditional genres such as autobiography and the novel in order to contest their marginalization from national culture.

3.9 GLOSSARY

**Dalit**: A Marathi word meaning ‘ground down or broken’. It becomes popular during the 1970s Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra. It is also used affirmatively by members of the oppressed castes all over India to designate themselves.

**Brahmanical Patriarchy**: A set of rules and institutions in which caste and gender differences are linked and women are crucial in maintaining caste boundaries.

**Pativrata**: Title for an idealized woman in the Sanskrit corpus who is vowed to the well-being of her master/husband.

**Zenana**: Urdu term for the secluded apartments of women in an upper-class household.

**Antherjanam**: Malayalam term for the secluded household area designated for Namboodiri women.

3.10 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1) What was the “women’s question” of the late nineteenth century? Describe at least two literary responses to it.

2) What were the main features of the writings of nationalist women writers in pre-independence India? Discuss.

3) How did the partition of British India influence Indian writers’ perception of nationalism? Explain with the help of examples.

4) Describe in your own words the literary innovations practised by any one writer from a marginalized group in postcolonial India.


### 3.12 SUGGESTED READINGS

