UNIT 3  CASTE

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3.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous Unit, you have read about the debates on class from literary perspectives. In this Unit we will study about caste and its relationship with nation from a gendered perspective. As you know, the caste system is a unique feature of Asian countries, especially India. This system of stratification conditions all aspects of existence and all forms of expression, including writing. Gender becomes a multiple burden when it gets the
colour of caste as this ‘colour’ decides the predicament of that particular
gender within and outside the caste. This Unit unveils the discussions of
gender and caste raised by different movements and writers in the Indian
context with a focus on women. It explores the multiple forms and
manifestations of caste as they impinge upon women’s identities and lives
and as women debate them.

We can notice that caste in itself constitutes a ‘nation’ in India and people’s
attachment to their particular caste and their prejudice against other castes
becomes their ‘nationality’. This ‘caste-nationalism’ assumes a jingoistic
quality and demands the distancing and despising of other castes. Thus,
when we discuss caste and gender while interrogating the nation, we also
discuss other nations within the nation. These other nations narrate gender
and nation differently, based on their own assumed locations within the
larger nation.

3.2 OBJECTIVES

After completing this Unit, you will be able to:

- Explain the intersecting identities of caste, nation and gender;
- Discuss gender and nation from a caste perspective;
- Interpret multiple voices interrogating the nation; and
- Analyse movements and writings in their ideological contexts.

3.3 INFORMING BACKGROUNDS

A text has to be understood keeping in mind the context(s) from which it
emerges. A similar understanding of the contexts for the interrogation of
nation from a gender and caste perspective becomes a pre-requisite for an
understanding of the politics involved. We know that the caste system
existed for ages in this country. We also know that voices were raised every
now and then against this oppressive institution. Most of the voices that
were raised in protest were gradually appropriated by the mainstream
society in the name of incarnations, for instance Buddhism or in the name of
Bhakti movement, as in the case of the Dalit poet Chokhamela. In the
nineteenth century Indian society witnessed vehement resistance against
the caste hierarchy, in words as well as in deeds (Zelliot, 1996). In order
to understand the articulations of caste discrimination and the resultant
protests, we have to look at the inspiring personalities and ideas that
changed the predicament and attitude of people, both privileged and
underprivileged.
3. 3.1 Inspiring Pioneers

One of the key figures was Jotiba Phule (1827-1890), who was a revolutionary reformer. The philosophy that he believed in was manifest in his activism as well as his writings. One of his major works *Gulamgiri* (1873) gave a call to the lower castes to resist the exploitation and subjugation in the name of caste and overcome their hardships with the help of education. Similarly, Babasaheb Ambedkar (1891-1956) became a force of upliftment for the depressed sections, especially Dalits. A prolific writer, extraordinary scholar and brilliant statesman, Ambedkar helped to incorporate the spirit of equality and social justice into the Indian Constitution.

Both Phule and Ambedkar strongly believed that social independence should precede political freedom. They believed that unless and until the caste system was eliminated from the society, political freedom would mean a transfer of power from the foreigners to the natives but on the same foundation of colonisation. Their views about education and their efforts towards educating those who were outside the purview of education, resulted in tremendous change in the society. Their ideologies remain valid in the present times of globalisation and liberalisation.

The reform movement that began with Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Eshwar Chandra Vidyasagar and others in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, basically addressed women of the upper castes while the ‘other women’ remained completely out of this reform design. It was Phule and his wife Savitribai Phule (1831-1897) who wrote an alternative discourse of the reform movement by working for the transformation of lower caste women’s conditions. They founded a home for pregnant widows and orphaned children. The strong presence of Savitribai Phule along with Jotiba Phule is crucial for our understanding of the movement of women’s education and education of the depressed classes in the nineteen century.

3.3.2 The Reform Agenda

From your reading of previous Units, try to recollect the reform discourse of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. What are you reminded of? Sati, child marriage and widowhood, must have immediately come to your mind. Give a thought as to where these traditions existed and who were the victims of these traditions. It was a major revolution in the lives of Indian women when related laws where enacted. How many women came under this agenda and what happened to the majority of women who did not fall under the category of ‘suffering women’ according to this agenda? Did it mean that the other women had no problems and faced no oppression? The majority of Indian women who were not part of the mainstream, privileged sections of India were facing torture within as well as outside
their communities. However, these women were not counted in this reform movement at all as they were not even regarded as human beings because of their caste identities.

It is in such a social situations that women like Savitribai Phule emerged and gave a momentum to women’s education, especially women of the oppressed sections. She was the first woman teacher of the first school for girls in India. She started a school for ‘untouchable’ girls in 1852. She was a teacher, reformer and activist as well as a poet. She published two anthologies of poetry in Marathi. Savitribai Phule’s insightful stand on English education reflects her perception of English education as a source of liberation especially for the underprivileged sections. She gave a clear call in her poetry to move towards English to subvert the patterns of hegemony.

Learn English
Make self-reliance your occupation,
Exert yourself to gather the wealth of knowledge,
Without knowledge animals remained dumb,
Don’t rest! Strive to educate yourself.
The opportunity is here,
For the Shudras and Ati Shudras,
To learn English
To dispel all woes.
Throw away the authority
Of the Brahmin and his teachings,
Break the shackles of caste,
By learning English

Adapted from: Mali, M.G.
(Cited from Sundararaman, T. 2008, P.4)

3.3.3 Questioning Women

Two other women who rewrote the Indian women’s history in the nineteenth century were Tarabai Shinde (1850-1910) and Pandita Ramabai. Tarabai Shinde was a non-brahmin woman who questioned gender inequality in Indian society. Her pamphlet ‘Stri Purush Tulana’ published in 1883 in Marathi challenges the upper caste patriarchy as well as Hindu religion. Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922) is another activist and reformer in the similar century who raised the woman’s question. While Tarabai Shinde questioned the Hindu religion and its casteist and patriarchal nature, Ramabai protested against her status as a Hindu widow by marrying again and also by converting to Christianity.

The roots of contemporary Indian feminisms can be seen in the life and writings of Tarabai Shinde and Pandita Ramabai. It is interesting to note
that both Ramabai and Tarabai were closely associated with Jotiba and Savitribai Phule. While the negation of religion and caste can be seen in the writings of all the four abovementioned activists/writers, we can also see how this negation led to the creation of multiple nations in terms of their questions and objections to the mainstream construction of a free Hindu nation as opposed to a dependent British colony. Liberation of self, liberation of women and liberation of the downtrodden women and other sections was the crux of their missions that the above people carried out.

Pandita Ramabai’s life throws a challenge to the Hindu prohibition against conversions to other religions. In other contexts such as the Dalit, we see an alternative discourse on Christianity and conversion as the major means of escape from casteist oppression. The major example for this is Potheri Kunhambu’s Saraswati Vijayam (1892) which declares Christianity as the saving grace for Dalits and women as it gives them access to education and frees them from the clutches of tradition. Ramabai, as a woman of the privileged section who was oppressed by upper caste traditions also finds Christianity as a force of transformation.

However, another woman of a privileged class, Krupabai Satthianadhan looks at the issue of conversion from a different perspective in her autobiographical novel Saguna: A Story of Native Christian Life serialised between 1887 and 1888 in the prestigious Madras Christian College Magazine. The upper caste, well-respected man converting into Christianity to pursue his spiritual longings, his family getting excommunicated for this conversion, his own family members turning against him, his wife’s devotion to him and his children’s devotion to him and Christianity are all intersecting themes. Saguna presents an interesting identity crisis of the nineteenth century that resulted from conversion as a spiritual issue. Krupabai Satthianadhan interestingly focuses on the lack of choice of a woman who has to follow her husband even in conversion whether or not she believes in the new god and religion. Pandita Ramabai’s dilemma can be found in the protagonist’s mother in Saguna who silently suffers as a member of a converted family when her devotion to her husband and her devotion to religion are challenged.

### 3.3.4 Later Inspirations

These who followed Phule and Ambedkar in their struggle against the caste system and Hindu hegemony include Ayyankali, Narayana Guru and Periyar, all of them hailing from South India. They raised pertinent questions against discrimination and led major movements like temple entry for Dalits. Women were integral to these movements. The taxation system in South India where Dalit women’s bodies became the measurable properties for taxation and the imposed dress code on Dalit women partly exposing their bodies to
signal their availability became the target of these reformers. The major
debates that they raised were about Aryan-Dravidian divide, non-brahmin
resistance against brahmanical hierarchy and the respective nations that
they were trying to construct.

The self-respect movements and social reform movements that were initiated
by the above three pioneers, Ayyankali from a Dalit Community and Narayana
Guru and Periyar from the backward caste communities, targeted all spheres
of society, ranging from every day interactions to language, religion, region,
class, traditions and politics.

3.4 VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE IDENTITIES

While caste has been inherent in all Indian texts as it is in Indian society,
most of the time it remains subtle, especially in Indian Writing in English.
These writers ignore caste discrimination in Indian society or by focus only
on the privileged sections. We can also see an anxiety to create a pleasing
and exciting picture of India for the non-Indian readers or a pathetic picture
of homogenous Indian society, again for non-Indian readers. Hence, caste
category rarely comes of for discussion in Indian writing in English. Regional
literatures every now and then take up this issue although they too are
sometime oblivious of or sideline the lower castes. In the following section
of the Unit, let us examine how different writers have tried to narrate the
nation by integrating the issue of caste and also by bringing in the issue of
gender.

3.4.1 Allegories of Nation and the Related Debates

U.R. Ananthamurthy’s novel Samskara published in 1965 in Kannada and
published in English translation by A.K. Ramanujan in 1978 is often considered
a representative novel of Indian society. This novel is also looked upon as
a progressive novel as the protagonist of the novel challenges the Hindu
traditions and tries to prove himself a rebel. The novel discusses the
precarious conditions of brahmin society which is threatened by revolts and
shaken by questions. The agrahara in transformation becomes the location
of this novel, which focuses on dwindling values and human relations.

This novel needs to be read in order to understand the interpretation of the
interrogations of nation and culture that are offered by the rebels as well.
Like Raja Rao’s novel Kanthapura (1938), which is projected as an allegory
of Indian freedom struggle, Samskara is also projected as an allegory of
Indian reform of the ritual-ridden brahmin society. Like Kanthapura’s
superficial critique of caste system revealing its own casteist prejudices,
Samskara also reveals its prejudices when the protagonist looks upon his
relationship with a Dalit woman as the extreme of his protest against his
people and his society. One can say that because such a relationship is considered to be the most sinful ‘degradation’ of a brahmin man, the protagonist chooses the same to counter his society. However, the choice of the protagonist to prove his level of degradation according to the yardsticks provided by his society itself proves the intention of the writer as well as the protagonist behind the narration of such collapsing nation.

The silent and surrendered bodies of Dalit women in this novel not only function as sites of desire and exploitation but also as sites of protest for privileged sections against their traditions and cultures.

3.4.2 Mulk Raj Anand’s Nation

One cannot ignore Mulk Raj Anand’s interrogation of India in pre-independence times focusing on Dalits and their predicaments. His novel, Untouchable (1935), portrays the young Bakha’s life at a crossroads. He is unable to decide which means will rescue him from the burden of scavenging that he is being crushed under. Mulk Raj Anand brilliantly unveils another side of India which provides a counterpoint to the glorious India that was being romanticised or the politically enslaved India that was being fought for. Along with the nation that he was portraying, Anand portrayed other masculinities like that of Bakha which neither boasted of their gallantry nor sang the glory of their forefathers; neither sacrificed their lives for Indian freedom nor elevated themselves with the help of education.

Similarly, Bakha’s sister Sohini also personifies the struggle that Dalit women in those days went through. The movements led by the pioneers mentioned in the earlier sections come alive in fictional form in Untouchable when Anand depicts the priest’s attempt to abuse Sohini. The nation that Anand narrates here was based on abuse in different forms determined by the caste, class, religion and gender of individuals and the sections that they belonged to.

3.4.3 Dalit Women’s Communities and Nations

We take a huge leap in time when we read P. Sivakami’s novel The Grip of Change (1999) Between Anand and Sivakami are located many movements and developments that decided the emergence and course of literatures such as Dalit literature. Identity movements became stronger and varied after the Self- Respect Movement of Periyar and others. Castes, religions and regions started playing a major role in identity politics of literature. This gave rise to thoughts about writing and writing in a particular manner, locating the self in one’s writing and facing questions about it.
This is precisely where Sivakami’s novel can be located, not only for depicting Dalit lives but also for raising crucial questions about Dalit women’s writing and for analysing the interconnectedness between self and writing. Sivakami’s novel, *The Grip of Change*, originally published in Tamil in 1999 and published in English translation in 1999 comes with the Author’s Notes which discuss the politics of writing that not only targets the ‘others’ from outside but also the ‘others’ within one’s community or the group that one is associated with. The urgency of having to decide one’s loyalties pushes a writer, especially a Dalit woman writer, into the urgency of having to decide her location and positioning.

Another Dalit writer Bama also goes on a similar tirade against her own community when she tries to document her life. It is interesting to note that while postcolonial criticism looks upon life stories of the marginalised as collective narratives, these writers unveil the attacks that women faced from within their community characters in the life stories of these writers. Sivakami’s questions by becoming about the gaps between experience and expression become very crucial in the context of narratives that are preoccupied with the issues of caste and gender.

### 3.4.4 Tribal Women’s Forest Nations

C.K. Janu in her life story *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C.K. Janu* (2004) narrates a nation that lives in the forests but is manipulated by the mainstream. A tribal woman activist, Janu analyses how the tribal women of the forests are exploited by mainstream men; thus, creating a binary of two nations and two genders in the power dynamics. While the mainstream nation represents the male power of exploitation and subjugation, the tribal nation represents the feminine vulnerability to assault and atrocity. This feminine quality is reiterated even in the title that she chooses where she presents nature, forest and land that the tribal people are one with as their bounteous, generous mother who is accommodating and trusting.

Fascinatingly, she presents a binary of nations, one that lives in reality and the other that lives in fantasy and also creates fantastic tales about the other. She looks at the mainstream textbooks that teach children about talking animals thereby questioning the mainstream understanding of nature and living beings. Politics also become part of this scheme of discussion on nation, caste and gender as Janu exposes the state and the left movements that reduce the tribals to banner-bearing numbers and the tribal women to desire-satiating machines for their selfish and politicised purposes.
Check Your Progress:

What are visible and invisible identities?

3.5 CRITICAL FORMULATIONS

It would be interesting to see how these issues of caste, gender and nation are theorised and critical formulations offered on these interconnecting and intersecting identities and categories. Again, as we have discussed, these debates are layered as they analyse the above issues at various levels focusing on different sections. Also, an attempt to look at the self, an effort to look at the other and an interest in the juxtaposition of the self and the other have also been interpreted based on the location of the writers and individuals who raise these discussions. A discussion on subalternity can itself subalternise people because of the tendency to generalise the situation of a political nation, while ignoring the internal subalternisation and the ‘differences’ associated with it.

3.5.1 Colonial Discourses

The women’s question was one of the most contentious issues in colonial India. As the idea of nation took shape, the longing for nation grew and the nation in construction also became a strategy to fight against the colonizer; at the same time, the Indian woman was also constructed. Partha Chatterjee associates the women’s question with the colonial agenda. He says that the women’s question in the agenda of Indian social reform in the early
nineteenth century was more “about the political encounter between a colonial state and the supposed tradition of a conquered people” (Chatterjee, 1989, pp. 622-623).

Similarly, Lata Mani (1998) also perceives the so-called pro-women, reformist decisions and policies made by the British government as part of the colonial discourse. This shows how nation-building inevitably was based on or affected women directly. This pre-colonial situation of nation and women continued into independent India as well. Surprisingly, the woman that is perceived almost as synonymous of the Indian nation has always been the monolithic homogenised Indian woman, who is upper caste, Hindu, acceptable and respectable. Here, the castelessness of the woman representing the nation does not mean a casteless nation but an assumption that this nation should be represented or is represented only by a certain kind of woman. Think carefully about the visibility of other women. Why are they not seen in nation-making? Even if these other women are seen sometimes, how are they portrayed, represented and looked upon?

### 3.5.2 Other Women’s Voices

There existed some women’s voices that narrated a different nation and contested the nation that was being constructed. For instance, the first Indian woman barrister was Cornelia Sorabji. Her Parsi father was almost excommunicated from his society for converting into Christianity. This haunted Cornelia Sorabji as well and made her feel comfortable under British rule. She not only came up with a positive reading of Katherine Mayo’s much criticized work of *Mother India* (1927), but also wrote *India Calling* (1934) and *India Recalled* (1936) which did not fall under the nationalist agenda.

While the Hindu male reformers were trying to reform the lives of upper caste Hindu women from practices such as sati and child marriage, Cornelia Sorabji gave legal support to purda nashins (women in purda), who were deprived access to the outside world and were hence unable to protect their rights over the wealth that they owned. Like Phule and Ambedkar who believed in social independence before political independence, Cornelia Sorabji believed that only education can be the liberating means for women.

Similarly, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain’s (1880-1932) short story “Sultana’s Dream” subverts the male hegemony by creating an utopian nation where women are educated, self-reliant and powerful. Although this story is only a dream of the protagonist, Rokeya Hossain established the first school primarily for Muslim girls. Such diverse voices get lost somewhere while negotiating the nation and gender, whether in colonial times or in post-independence times. More significantly, the identity of caste is completely ignored in these discussions as this can spark controversies and differences.
3.5.3 Women of “Other Castes”

Sharmila Rege in her book Sociology of Gender explains how gender is a neglected area in sociological studies. When she refers to the absence of gender, she recognises the multiple dimensions of gender, in terms of gendered identities and its relations to social status. The writer goes on to argue in her other writings, how gender and caste are connected and how Dalit women write differently as their caste defines and decides their gender and leads to double jeopardy in their lives.

Similarly, Meena Kandasamy discusses the identity of Dalit women in its entire dimension. Kandasamy questions the Hindutva ideology of Indian society that burdens Dalit women with “triple injustices and dual patriarchies” (Kandasamy, 2005, p.26). B.R. Ambedkar in his writings addresses all sections of the Indian women. He appeals to Dalit women to shed the markers of caste that are imposed on them by the mainstream society. He also raises the awareness of the upper caste women against Manusmriti and its prejudice against women and the need for them to come out of the imprisonment of this Hindu code.

Kandasamy recalls how Swami Vivekananda connects women’s chastity with the life of the nation and the loss of chastity to the death of a race. She points out that Manusmriti has been changed quickly and slightly to suit the post colonial world while preserving its anti-women spirit by bulldozing and blackmailing women toward an obsession with their chastity. The chastity of women has always been associated with honour of the family and the life of the nation. In order to understand this argument, we can cite relevant examples from our contemporary times and our surroundings where we hear incidents of ‘honour killings’. We cannot forget that this concept of honour is closely linked with caste and religion apart from chastity. The degree of pollution varies on the basis of the caste and religion of the person with whom a woman has a relationship, according to the Hindu ideology which has already stratified the society into a complex caste system.

3.5.4 Other Men’s Women

While the mainstream ‘malestream’ imagines, instructs and restricts its women and other women, it would be interesting to see how the ‘other’ men look upon ‘their’ women as well as ‘other’ women. Let us examine Urvashi Butalia’s work The Other Side of Silence (1998) that documents the pain and violence of the partition of India. While the book records the violence in the context of communal riots triggered by political decisions, it registers how women’s bodies became the site of violence as well as the memory of violence, thus bringing together the nation’s religion and gender. Butalia states that women’s stories were hardly recollected and revealed
while men’s martyrdom was always celebrated. If some women were talked about, they were women who protected their honour and the family’s honour by committing suicide before they fell into the hands of the perpetrators. Whether it is constructing one’s own nation or targeting the other nation, whether it is a political conflict or the one related to religious differences, we can easily understand that the target is the woman’s body. It becomes the source of honour as well as revenge/anger. In all this, where is the ‘other’ woman who is not even talked about in terms of honour? What alternative stories of these women are still hidden and ignored?

One narrative that talks about lower-caste cultures and traditions that have never been part of the mainstream Hindu culture is written by Kancha Ilaiah in his Why I am Not a Hindu (1996). While writing about the beliefs, lifestyles and relationships that were not influenced by Hindutva, Ilaiah refers to women who were equal to men in the lower-caste egalitarian societies in all respects. The woman that Ilaiah constructs is not a victim and a pathetic figure but a powerful, independent and sustaining figure.

### 3.6 SEXUALITIES AND NATIONS

Normative definitions of women’s sexualities coexist with multiple forms of control over the sexualities of women. However, they are complicated further by caste. In this section let us discuss how caste identities determine the scope and form of sexualities.

#### 3.6.1 The Secluded Worlds

Lalitambika Antarjanam (1909–1987) brilliantly portrays the predicament of ‘antarjanam’ women in Namboodiri brahmin families in Kerala. Her short story ‘Revenge Herself’ narrates the story of mythical Tatri who breaks out of the domestic seclusion to become a courtesan. She makes a list of the men who visit her and presents it in the court. She is ridiculed and punished while the men are left untouched. This reveals how men’s rampant sexuality is considered a privilege while women’s sexuality even as an utterance is punishable. Here, we have to see the contrast between the women of two sections in Kerala itself. While ‘antarjanams’ suffered from seclusion, Dalit women’s bodies were measured by the officials for purposes of taxation.

In this context, we can explore some examples from Kerala in contemporary India, namely, Nalini Jameela’s Autobiography of a Sex Worker and Revathi’s autobiography The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story. The first one is the story of a woman forced into sex work while the other is the story of a man choosing to become a woman. These two stories will enhance your understanding of sexualities and identity politics in terms of caste, class, religion and region.
3.6.2 Of Mothers and Sisters

In the previous section, we discussed how men from marginalised communities perceive their women. While Kancha Ilaiah discusses how the women of his community and other lower-caste communities are different from ‘the Indian woman’, Kishore Shantabai Kale in his autobiography Against All Odds recollects his mother and women her mother as Dalit women who are compelled to live only as dancing women. Nalini Jameela does not express any remorse at being a sex-worker but Kale expresses his anguish and agony for his mother and the other women like her mother. Here, caste is a crucial factor that decides the course of a woman’s life.

This is closely linked to the issue of challenged masculinities, as Kale is haunted by the ‘disgrace’ of his mother’s life. Recall our discussion on the concept of honour and chastity in the context of privileged women. Caste played the role of preserving women’s reputation and thereby the prestige of the family and the community. In the case of underprivileged women, caste plays a different role by making Dalit women’s bodies available and accessible for privileged sections.

Check Your Progress:
Describe in your own words the relationship between nations and mother. Give suitable examples from any of the films you have seen.
3.7 CASTELESS IDENTITIES

As has been mentioned already, there are also representations of the nation as a casteless entity. Literature played its role in emphasising this ideal picture of India, like the official Indian delegation did in the Durban Conference Against Racial Discrimination of 2001, thereby erasing the existence of others who are not counted as legitimate citizens of this country. We are all familiar with the debates surrounding the Women’s Reservation Bill and the questions of inclusions and exclusions. The literary representations of such inclusions and exclusions will help us in understanding the caste-based gender politics in matters of policies and governance better.

3.7.1 Indian Women’s Writing in English

Indian writing in English, as we have already discussed, cleverly and clearly erases the caste issues and tries to create a universal Indian image, quite often a Hindu, upper caste image. It is a fact that most of the Indians writing in English come from a privileged background choosing familiar characters, themes and locations to be represented. However, this creates a glaring gap in Indian writing in English except for writers such as Mulk Raj Anand who focused on the underprivileged, blending Marxian and Gandhian ideals, and Arundhati Roy whose scope extends from writings to activism. Take a look at the writings of women writers such as Shashi Deshpande and Shobha De. Do they discuss caste identities or caste politics? No, but you can make out which social backgrounds the characters hail from. This limits not only the scope of the writers and the writings but also the people whose lives do not form a part of the liberation agenda.

3.7.2 Diasporic Writing

Such subtle assumptions and larger identities can be seen more extensively in diasporic writing where the writers’ constructions of home and abroad also generalise the identities. It is true that diasporic women’s writing is also analysed for its religious identities, for instance the writings of Bapsi Sidhwa, Taslima Nasrin, Monica Ali and others from the Indian sub-continent. But, when it comes to Indian women’s diasporic writing, the religious and caste identities get veiled though the related prejudices very much exist and the dominant social identities become the centre of experience and imagination once again.

It is very interesting that Indians who migrated to different countries first formed associations as Indian associations, gradually as regional associations and finally as caste associations. Yet diasporic writing mostly remains oblivious to such politics at home and abroad and narrates the nation either through nostalgia or in condemnation rather than problematising the complex caste identities of women in India.
3.7.3 Movements, Theories and Debates

The feminist movement, like Indian Writing in English and Diasporic Indian Writing has always been oblivious of ‘other’ women. Other women are as apprehensive about the mainstream dominant feminism as they are about mainstream patriarchy. Either they have tried to appropriate them by assigning them silent tokenistic roles or by completely effacing them from movements and discourses.

It is against this alienation and humiliation that Dalit Feminism emerged. Its attempt to interpret the casteist gender politics has led to interesting and inspiring intellectual and activist formulations. Dalit Feminism not only presents an alternative feminist argument but also presents a counter feminist discourse. It questions patriarchy, caste system and internal hegemonies. Dalit women declare solidarity with other women, for instance, the National Federation of Dalit women also reiterate the differences which are crucial to understand the problematic of casteist gender politics.

It would be worth reading Kumud Pawde’s “The Story of My Sanskrit” that narrates a Dalit woman’s journey into the world of Sanskrit which is open only for the men of the privileged sections. This access to the Other’s world in order to gain mastery over it in itself forms the basis of the politics of subversion. A similar attempt to reinterpret the very beliefs that maneuvered the lives of millions of people can be seen in the retellings that Dalits, especially Dalit women, offer, such as those in the form of caste mythologies.

3.8 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit we learnt how nation is narrated from the perspective of caste and gender. We understood that nation is not an apolitical, monolithic entity that remains untouched by identity politics. We examined various movements, and personalities who prepared the ground for understanding caste and gender politics, and traced a history of such developments. Thus, we analysed the mainstream nation and its narration from a gender perspective and also unveiled the other ignored and misinterpreted discourses related to gender, caste and nation that get effaced or appropriated in dominant identity politics. We tried to understand the dynamics of such politics as represented by literature, especially Indian literature and the various strands in it.

3.9 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1) Write an essay on the developments and movements that led to the articulation of alternative nations in India.
2) Do you agree with the view that the reform agenda in colonial times was a mere colonialist discourse? Discuss.

3) Discuss the various dimensions and concerns of contemporary Indian women’s writing in their construction of the nation.

4) How do you understand the interrogation of nation by ‘other’ women writers who question the existing notions of the nation and construct a contrasting image of the nation? Illustrate.

5) What is the significance of Dalit women’s writing in our understanding of the politics of nation-making in terms of the interconnectedness between caste and gender? Elaborate.

3.10 REFERENCES


**3.11 SUGGESTED READINGS**


