UNIT 2 MARGINALISATION

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2.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous Unit, you have read about violence against women, and we have discussed types of violence on female bodies. By now you are also familiar with the debates, how states sometimes are perpetrators of violence against women. In this Unit, we will study how marginalisation of women can be centrally understood as the process by which patriarchy has established the dominance of men by ensuring the exclusion of women from social, political and economic structures. An engagement with the intellectual tradition of both western and oriental discourses will make clear to the reader the absence of a female voice. Texts within these discourses generally provide a masculine perspective of the world, neglecting the world of women and their concerns.

Patriarchal society, beginning from the basic social unit of the family to larger political and economic structures like governing apparatuses, mercantile orders and corporate organisations, prevents women from assuming any position of agency and promotes their dependence on men for
both existence and identity. It was not until movements advocating equal rights for women began taking a stronghold in India in the mid-twentieth century that women began to enter spaces that were previously exclusive to men. However, marginalisation of women is still rampant today. While our language might be politically correct and guarantee equal status to women, reality still reveals how women have been pushed to the periphery. Their presence in male-dominated environments is therefore just a token presence.

2.2 OBJECTIVES

After completing this Unit, you will be able to:

• Identify the various factors that have led to gender marginalisation;
• Discuss some of the underlying debates of feminism and gender politics;
• Address the concerns of gender marginalisation in India; and
• Analyse the issue of marginalisation within the purview of women’s writing in India.

2.3 GENDER AND MARGINALISATION

This section aims at acquainting you with the idea and method of gender marginalisation. It would further engage with the debates of how marginalisation occurs and gets cemented through religious discourse and patriarchal interpolation that naturalises the secondary status given to women.

In the Indian tradition, the *Manusmruti* accords unequal status to women. They are neither permitted to learn the *vedas* from a guru nor are they allowed any independence. According to this text, before marriage, a woman’s father is her protector, after marriage it is her husband and if she were to become a widow her son looks after her welfare:

The “laws of Manu” claim:

She should do nothing independently, even in her own house.
In childhood subjected to her father, in youth to her husband,
And when her husband is dead, to her sons, she should never enjoy independence….
Though he be uncouth and prone to pleasure,
Though he have no good points at all,
The virtuous wife should ever worship her lord as a god.

(Basham, 1959, cited in Jacobson and Wadley, p. 56)
In their book *Women In India: Two Perspectives* (1992), Doranne Jacobson and Susan S. Wadley record instances, in the twentieth century, where women are considered impure after the birth of a child and require cleansing rituals to do away with ‘birth pollution’. While these rituals may have been derived to ensure the safety of mother and child in the ancient times and prevent them from contracting contagious infections or diseases, the continuance of these practices are driven by the agenda of marginalising women. Women are told that the Hindu religion defines them as impure before they return to the community in need of adequately cleaning. Further, texts like the *Atharvaveda* consist of charms and rituals in to ensure a male child over a daughter (Altekar, 1956, p.3). These factors within Hinduism have enabled the marginalisation and subjugation of women.

Within the western intellectual tradition, early Christian scholars like St. Jerome (347-420), St. Clement (150-215), St. Augustine (354-450) had very conservative notions of the corrupting influence of women. St. Jerome viewed marriage as a necessary evil required to produce legitimate progeny. Medieval literary texts like Guillaume de Lorris (1200-1240) and Jean de Meun’s (1240-1305) *Roman de la Rose* (1230-1275) characterise women as being deceitful, untrustworthy and therefore justify the subordination of women on the grounds that a woman’s spirit needs to be improved by the control and guidance provided by men.

The fourth chapter of the *Qu’ran*, the sura An-Nisa (pertaining to women) has been a subject of varied feminist debates. Certain interpretations of An-Nisa, especially verse 34, have allowed the possibilities of subservient gender roles. Some Islamic scholars like Jamal Badawi have argued that *Qu’ran* is not contentious but that the status of women as ‘lesser than men’ is to do with the socio-political circumstances in seventh century Arabia. In his 1971 essay “The Status of Women in Islam”, Badawi argues that “Throughout history, the reputation, chastity and maternal role of Muslim women were objects of admiration by impartial observers” (Badawani, 1971, p.18) while failing to recognise that his so-called liberal analysis is also rooted in a reduction of women’s role to family honour, virginity and motherhood. This interpretation also works on a potentially erroneous assumption that a woman is only interested in roles of domesticity and her selfhood is not autonomous but tied to family and community.

In the context of Buddhism, the diverse ways it is practiced throughout the world and its own evolution have also created variations on the status of women in Buddhism. The position of women in India during the advent of Buddhism (4-6 BCE) was not one of equality; the canonical Buddhist texts describe Buddha’s reluctance in admitting women into the Sangha (community of ordained nuns and monks). The Theravada tradition claims that the tradition of *Bhikkunis* (ordained female nuns) evolved five years after the *Bhikkus* (ordained male monks). However, as per varied Buddhist
Commentaries this was because of the Buddha’s fear for the safety of women. Canonical texts of Buddhism also reveal that the Buddha attests to the possibility of women attaining nirvana which was a shift from the position on the spiritual capabilities of women as per Hindu doctrines of the period. While these commentaries suggest that there is no marginalisation of women in Buddhism, the eight Garudhammas (additional rules to be followed by only the Bhikkunis placing them in a subservient position to the Bhikkus) seem to suggest otherwise. Subsequent Buddhist studies have debated the Garudhammas as original teachings of the Buddha; scholars like Karma Lekshe Tsomo and Bhikkuni Kusuma have pointed out inaccuracies related to a Buddhist Women’s history. Buddhist scholar Bhikkuni Kusuma states that in places like Sri Lanka “the garudhammas were not adhered to even in the third century BCE....This is clear evidence that the garudhammas are not a Vinaya requirement, either as precept or as practice” (Kusuma, 2000, p. 9). Bhikkuni Kusuma’s allusion is to subsequent interpolations of Buddhist doctrine that work towards subjugating women. Thus, Buddhism doctrine and teaching have also been interpreted through a patriarchal framework where women are given secondary status.

Sikhism as religion emerged in the fifteenth century India. One of the major tenets of the religion is to view all humanity as equal regardless of class, caste or gender. Owing to the time of its emergence, Sikhism was strongly influenced by the Bhakti Movement (14-17 CE) and therefore places a stress on equality. It emphasises on the equality of men and women and sees men and women as inter-dependent on each other. The sikh gurus denounced practices of purdah and sati and in order to facilitate equality for women, the sangat (assembly) and pangat (eating together) were practiced. In addition, unlike most other religious dictates that privilege celibacy and sexual abstinence, Sikhism advocates marriage and conjugal union. What needs to be engaged with however is that while Sikh religious texts like the Adi Granth address the equal status of women, women are constantly depicted as dutiful wives or devoted mothers. Therefore, the sexual reproductivity of a woman and her role within the familial unit becomes her identity marker. This allies itself to the promotion of marriage wherein a woman ties her identity to her status as wife and mother with limited possibilities of selfhood outside these definitions. Rajkumari Shanker in her essay “Women in Sikhism” argues:

Most Sikhs believe Sikhism is an egalitarian religion, more supportive of women than Hinduism, Islam, or other religions. However, contrary to the opinion of the majority, the Sikh canonical text does not always endorse this idea, The Âdi Granth reveals a wide spectrum of views on women, most of which reflect male attitudes of the enlightened religious gentry, whose attitudes seldom, if ever, reflect sexual equality.

(Shanker, 1994, p. 191)
Shanker elaborates on the marginalisation of women in Sikhism by referring to the variations between precepts and practices in the Sikh faith and also the interventions of Hindu rituals and practices on Sikh faith after formative years of Sikhism which take away from the more egalitarian tenets of Sikhism.

Thus, we infer the patriarchal interventions and interpretations within religious discourse and texts and the role they play in making the marginalisation of women a natural phenomenon. Before we move on to look at the various aspects of marginalisation, let us first understand what we mean by words like patriarchy, gender and conditioning which are inherent to discourses on gender studies.

### 2.4 CONCEPTS IN GENDER MARGINALISATION

Before reading further it would be useful for you to review the Unit on patriarchy in MWG-002, Block 1, Unit 1. Let us look at patriarchy in the context of the marginalization of women.

#### 2.4.1 Patriarchy

In context to all this, it has to be stated that the marginalisation of women till the late nineteenth century (in the west) was justified on the grounds of religion. Various interpretations of religious texts proclaimed a “view that women’s inferior status rested on God-ordained biological, physical, intellectual and moral inferiority” (Brewer, 2005, p.7). 

**Frederich Engels’** (1820-1895) study, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) posited labour and economy at the root of the suppression, exclusion and marginalisation of women from mainstream society. In Engels’ opinion, it was possible to overcome gender oppression as like class, gender was a conditioning enforced on women, it was not natural for women to remain subordinate, submissive and weak. Patriarchal society had constructed the notion of ideal womanhood in such a manner. But all of this still doesn’t adequately address what patriarchy is exactly.

**Heidi Hartman** defines patriarchy as “... a set of social relations between men, which have a material base, and which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women. Though patriarchy is hierarchical and men of different classes, races or ethnic groups have different places in the patriarchy, they are also united in their shared relationship of dominance over women; they are dependent on each other to maintain that domination” (Hartman, 1981, p. 107). Hartman’s definition makes clear that patriarchy is a system of social values that affirms the superiority of men and necessitates the inferior position of women. Within patriarchal setups, it is assumed that a woman is weaker, less intelligent and has to confine herself to the domestic...
environment concerning herself to the domain of the house, child-rearing and dependence on the men in her life.

Kate Millet in her work *Sexual Politics* (1970) examines the varied presence of patriarchy in social structures. In fact it was Millet’s thesis that brought the word patriarchy into dominant discourse. Her work examines the politics of sexual division that constantly affirms the marginalisation of women to a dependent and submissive position in society. She also claims that the political structure of civilisation is rooted in affirming a masculine order that thrives on the exclusion of women. Hence, a patriarchal system functions to assert male dominance and to constantly affirm this male dominance as necessary and natural and to this extent it prevents women from assuming any role outside the domestic environment. This dominance of men becomes the basis of the marginalisation of women.

2.4.2 Gender and Marginalization

*Economic Forces*

You will by now have become familiar with the concept of patriarchy and how it functions with religion, economics and society to establish the inferiority of women. The interpretation of religious scriptures by patriarchal establishments ensures a misogynistic outlook towards women. An analysis of the economic basis for the oppression of women is provided by Engels who posits the belief that social structures like family are the basis of the marginalisation of women. It is within the family that male and female roles get structured. A boy is allowed freedom while a girl is not. The father is the head of the household while the mother ensures his hold on the family and their obedience to the patriarchal figure. Therefore, from early childhood we begin to believe that the position of women is always subordinate to men and that this subordination is natural i.e. we believe that women were created as the weaker sex. Nevertheless, Engels has used Lewis H. Morgan’s (1818-1881) book *Ancient Society* (1877) to argue that early civilisations were not patriarchal but were matrilineal. This assumption of Engels and also Marx is not without contestation but Engels argues for the economic basis of modern society by claiming that since men wanted to establish their superiority and guarantee that it was their children who inherited their wealth, the institution of the family and limits on the sexual independence of women were established. In order to ensure the economic power of men, capitalist society marginalised women and to ensure the continued hegemony of men it then curtailed the sexuality of a woman to a monogamous relation that was sanctified by religion i.e. marriage and guaranteed her continued marginalisation. The significance of Engels’ work becomes vital to us in the underlying connotation that the inferior position of women is not a natural process but a concept conditioned by historical
forces and therefore like class, the notions of gender marginalisation can also be undone.

**Biological Factors**

Besides economic forces, biological grounds were also used in nineteenth century Europe to establish the inferiority of women and to present them as physically and mentally weak. Physicians and scientists claimed that women were more vulnerable to natural extremities and it was therefore assumed that they could not take on taxing roles like employment, governance, administration etc. Later day feminist study of the biological differences between men and women has claimed that in primitive society since women did not take on physically strenuous roles like hunting and were mostly involved in child-rearing, their bodies developed differently. The example of the Amazonian women is generally presented as a counterpoint to the argument that women are inherently biologically weaker than men. Biologic evolution has led to the development of men and women in a particular way. However, this has been an influence of the roles that men and women take up in society. Over a period of time since men have been more engaged in activities that rely on physical strength their bodies have developed accordingly and the same is true of women who due to a lack of physical exertion have evolved a lesser capacity for physical labour. The nineteenth century based its claims of the physical inferiority of women on newly evolved theories of science which were propounded by male doctors and scientists as a new means of asserting patriarchal dominance. A woman owing to her biological weakness needed to be protected by men and because of her fragile physical constitution was given to mental ill-health and hysteria and therefore could not be entrusted with any great or consequential responsibility. This cemented the basis of another ground for the marginalisation of women apart from religion the biological.

From the mid-twentieth century, a great deal of effort has been made by feminist scholarship to establish the distinction between sex and gender (please also see Unit 2, Block 1, MWG-002 for detailed discussion). Sexual difference is a biological given whereas gender is a social construct. The distinction between man and woman is a sexual distinction that is established at birth. However, the notions of what a boy can do or what a girl can do are social constructs. For example, there really was no biological reason that women could not vote, neither was there a natural restriction preventing women from taking on roles in mainstream society. However, patriarchal society established certain notions of feminity using the sexual difference as its justification. Therefore, over a period of time certain notions like sports being a male activity, cooking being a female activity, men being inherently protective, women being inherently maternal were established as commonplace norms. In her formative work, *Formation of Patriarchy*:
Women and History (1986), Gerda Lerner argues that the “…limited number of proven biological differences among the sexes has been vastly exaggerated by cultural interpretations and that the value put on sex differences is in itself a cultural product. Sexual attributes are a biological given, but gender is a product of historical process. The fact that women bear children is due to sex; that women nurture children is due to gender, a cultural construct. It is gender which has been chiefly responsible for fixing women’s place in society” (Lerner, 1986, p. 21). Thus, our notions of what a woman should or ought to do are what fix gender constructs. Scholars within gender studies argue that gender constructs are not water tight. Women can be masculine and men can display feministic traits. Contemporary society depicts this as what were formerly domains of feminine interest grooming, fashion, cooking etc. have been taken up by men whereas domains of masculine interest like sports, carpentry, biking now have a healthy female participation.

2.4.3 Conditioning

We now come to the third area of concern in our examination of gender studies. You have already seen that the basis of patriarchal society is to establish control over women and to assert its power in doing so. The means of this establishment is religious, biological and social. Feminist scholars like Kate Millet argue that in doing so patriarchy establishes its right to political power. The wielding of political authority by men provides them a legitimate means of ostracising or marginalising women from society. To ensure female compliance to the dominion of men as natural, justified and given, patriarchal structures employ discourses within religion, biology and society to condition women into accepting their oppression and subjugation. This conditioning exists in religious discourses presented by patriarchal interpretations that focus on the deviant aspects of womanhood. In the context of India, Uma Chakravarti argues that “the general subordination of women assumed a particularly severe form in India through the powerful instrument of religious traditions which have shaped social practices”(Chakravarti, 1993, p. 579). Thus, for generations we have accepted the validity and the authority of certain interpretations of religion that constantly foreground the malevolent aspects of women. However, we need to be wary of an essentialising position that is dominant in early feminist discourse that posits itself as being anti-men, rather than anti-patriarchy.

In denouncing men entirely, early feminism began to advocate the same things as a patriarchal structure except that the roles of the dominant and subordinate were reversed. Moreover, according to critics like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and Alice Walker, mainstream western feminism seems to speak universally for gender oppression while ignoring the material, racial or ethnic dynamics of gender oppression in non-western contexts.
Thus, conditioning operates even within certain feminist traditions that assume the authority of representing all of womanhood. Conditioning is inherent to the establishment of gender. For example, within sections of Indian society, a girl may be told from early childhood that she has to make do with the second best as her brother deserves better, or that women are conditioned into accepting their impure status owing to their menstrual cycle. Typical to an Indian construct of gender oppression and marginalisation is the two-fold role women play as both victims and perpetrators of discrimination. Within the Indian familial structure there exists the popular and to a certain degree established notion of the mother-in-law ill-treating the daughter-in-law. There is also a mother’s preferential treatment towards a son. Sex selective abortions are still rampant within India in the twenty-first century and this is both within urban and rural sections of the nation. The social conditioning of patriarchal society is so strong in India that it is often women who defend the patriarchal tradition of male dominance and continuously affirm their subordination from generation to generation. This conditioning not only coerces women into submission, it also coerces them into propagating male centric discourses detrimental to them.

Check Your Progress:

Explain how patriarchy functions via religious and political structures to marginalise women.
2.5 GENDER, SOCIETY AND STATE IN INDIA

As you have seen in Blocks 1 and 2, the concepts of state and nation are central to modern existence. Let us explore these notions further in the context of women’s marginalization in India, and in the west.

2.5.1 Nation and Society

In India, the rise of the early women’s movements was tied to the emerging nationalist sentiment. It is in the nineteenth century reform initiatives that were taken against sati and promoting widow remarriage that debates regarding the status of women in Indian society emerged. The Brahmo Samaj (which was an off shoot of Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) and Debendranath Tagore’s (1817-1905) Brahmo Sabha) advocated the emancipation of women and argued against the practices of dowry, child marriages, polygamy and sati that were prevalent in Hindu society. While Raja Ram Mohan Roy addressed the problem of sati, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891) was concerned with promoting the idea of widow remarriage. The nineteenth century India is marked by the rise of nationalism in India which has also been allied to the project of modernisation. Indian intellectuals of the period were concerned with eradicating the social evils of society and ushering in a secular, democratic and independent India. Women’s education and role in society had generated a lot of debates. The nationalist leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964) Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) and J.C. Bose (1889-1945), had integrated women into the struggle for independence. Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) and Nehru believed in the equal status of women in a marriage and saw marriage as a meeting of equal minds. These were a deviation from the notion espoused traditionally where the woman was considered to be of a lower status than her husband and incapable of reaching the same level of intelligence. This transition in attitudes to women is mostly attributed to influence of western education and the position of women in western society. (Please also refer to MWG-001, Block 1, Unit 1 and Unit 2).

However, we also have to consider that western civilisation is largely patriarchal in its political constitution and that the western notion of the nation state is patriarchal. You can now understand that the political machinery of our society is also gender biased and affirms the subordination of women. This is tied to Engels understanding of feudal and capitalistic societies that prioritise masculine vocations involving physical labour as being vital to the existence of society. Thus, most heads of state or political leaders are men, and professions like carpentry, mechanics and construction will abound with men. Within professions like medicine and law, distinctions between hard-core and soft-core subjects are made, men are usually associated with the former and women get saddled with the latter. In spite
of the entry of women into the professional space, there is prejudice attached to a woman’s professional capacity to this day. It is important that we remember two things vis-à-vis the professional prejudices with regard to employing women:

i) A woman is considered incapable of doing the same kind of job as a man - a female employee will always deliver a smaller output when compared to her male counterpart.

ii) There are of course some tasks that women excel at but these tasks are vastly inferior to the more strenuous and utilitarian engagement of men. Correspondingly, this would imply that there are two factors at work that function towards professionally marginalising a woman.

iii) Tasks like rearing children, knitting, sewing, cooking etc. are first established as women’s tasks and then presented as lowly tasks. Therefore, the things that woman potentially excel at are constantly projected as inferior.

iv) Women are considered unfit and therefore not trained to take on the tasks of men. Thus, there remains no way for women to establish their identity because they remain perpetually outcast and rejected as weak.

The sexual division of labour constantly associates and delegates only select jobs for women. The political state does not foreground equality in the workplace, it uses women’s vulnerability as an argument to curtail women within a limited range of jobs and tasks. The political state rather than enabling a non-prejudiced acceptance of women work, effectively bars them from positions of decision-making and power, all the while acting as a custodian of women’s liberation.

The first phase of the women’s movement in India was considered to be the nineteenth century reform movements, the second was during the national freedom movement and the third phase was in the 1970s for equal rights (Tharu and Lalitha, 1993, pg. 48). The third phase of the movement is marked by the need to ensure social and political rights for women that were guaranteed by the nation state for all its citizens. The arguments put forward earlier connecting patriarchy to the nation state become relevant to this phase of the women’s movement in India. Studies conducted by the Committee on the Status for Women in the 1970s show the substandard levels of medical benefits available to women and the low levels in female nutrition (Tharu and Lalitha, 1993, p. 65). Notwithstanding social stigma, the necessary healthcare structures for women were also non-functional. The political state rather than ensuring the welfare of women was only ensuring the continued victimisation of women; physically with poor standards of health care and mentally by labelling them as vulnerable and weak. The policies for women highlight women as requiring these initiatives to survive, to ensure that the gender stereotype was eradicated through education.
2.5.2 Subalternity

You have already come across the term ‘subaltern’ in MWG-001, Block 5, Unit 3, Section 3.5.2 and 3.5.3. Let us examine it further in this context. The term ‘subaltern’ was coined by Antonio Gramsci to denote the disempowered sections of society who were outside the hierarchical political structure. These sections do not have any political existence within structures of state machinery and therefore lead a marginal or peripheral existence. In the 1970s, the Subaltern Studies group comprising scholars like Ranajit Guha, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Sudipta Kaviraj, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak etc. popularised the phrase in postcolonial discourse and looked at the process of colonisation as an arena of marginalisation that robbed the colonial subject not just of agency but also of a voice representative. Spivak furthered the discourse of the colonial subaltern by examining its gender paradigm. The marginalisation of the native or indigenous woman was two-fold because she was a victim of persecution by the colonial master without and a misogynistic patriarchal setup within.

Spivak, in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” examines this very aspect of the native woman’s plight. She begins the essay by demonstrating the shortcomings of Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze’s work on power, hegemony and political structures (See MWG-007, Block 2). As you must by now be aware through varied sources in this course, the discourse put forth by post-structuralists like Foucault and Deleuze is that power lies at the centre of all political and civil structure. State machinery continually ensures retention of power by hegemonical structures and the subordination of the individual to these forces.

Spivak likens the position of women in society to that of a subaltern. While the essay at length discusses the ‘othering’ or aliening of the colonised subject by the colonising forces of west, it also looks at how the west constructs the colonising process as a benevolent mission for the bettering of the condition of the uncivilised natives of the east. This idea of alienation, othering and domination become relevant to our own understanding of marginalisation. The function of patriarchal conditioning is to ensure that the woman accepts her subordinate position as a project of improvement taken up by the masculine world. To put it in simpler words, the British claimed that they were civilising the Indians by ruling over them, the masculine world asserts that it improves women by dominating them. It now becomes clear to us how skewed this ideology is. The subaltern has been projected as the marginalised section of society that needs to be represented or spoken for. Nevertheless, in nature men speaking for women and the Coloniser speaking for the women there is the added factor of vested interests. It benefits the coloniser and patriarchal society to obfuscate their dominion as benevolence; to present themselves as righteous when reality is the exact opposite.
For Spivak, subalternity is a position without identity, it is the position of marginality and includes those who are marginal, the female and urban sub-proletariat. The subaltern has been made devoid of agency, autonomy and a voice of its own. Therefore, her voice is never articulated but represented. She claims in one of her lectures that no one can say I am a subaltern in whatever language. By this she implies that it is not only that the voice of the subaltern has been silenced but that the subaltern has been marginalised to such an extent that she does not have a voice to articulate her existence. Which is why she titles her essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”. She says that subalternity stands as a binary opposite to the nation state. It is against the vested interest of the patriarchal nation state to permit the self-articulation of the subaltern voice and the state machinery thrives on claiming to represent the subaltern while in actuality ensuring the continual speechlessness of the subaltern. In simple words, within the context of gender, the patriarchal nation state claims to represent its women and look after their welfare by assuming that they are incapable of doing it themselves. However, by representing them they rob these women of agency and the opportunity of self-enablement. Further, in doing so, the state projects the woman as the fragile and weaker sex that requires an external agent to voice her plight, thereby denying her equal status with men.

Spivak’s essay, while it addresses the problems of subjecthood and agency, simultaneously makes a call to build state and social infrastructure so that female agency would emerge. It is in this context that Spivak argues that while the abolition of sati was an unquestioned good, this kind of reformation would not last since women’s subject formation was not touched by the early reformers. In speaking for the Indian woman, the British forgot to consider her agency and autonomy. Moreover, they remained ignorant of the various facets of sati and did not always focus their attention on its voluntary aspects in some contexts. This further establishes the fact that even colonial or patriarchal benevolent structures like the welfare state and nation which apparently vouchsafe the safety of the women do so to continually preserve the silence of female voice. The questions we need to ask ourselves are multi-fold:

a) Does the female voice want to be represented?

b) Does the female voice want to articulate itself in a world of patriarchal domination where its speech is futile (useless)?

c) Is our attempt to highlight these problems also taking away from the broader question?

By this we imply that there is a necessity not merely to counteract patriarchy but to create an alternative to these entrenched systems. In this regard, it is fitting to observe that the female voice embodied in literature is
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Posited towards creating a parallel approach to reading the history of female inferiority as that of conditioning, subordination and marginalisation. Women have been coerced into accepting their positions as the subaltern. This coercion is both questioned and critiqued in select writing by women. In the next section, we will turn to some literary works for an examination of such contexts.

Check Your Progress:

i) What do you understand by “subalternity”?

ii) Who is the ‘Subaltern’ woman?
2.6 LITERATURE AND THE MARGINAL VOICE

By now you have understood the various ways in which women have been forced and coerced into submission. Women’s identities are very often decided for them by patriarchal society. A woman’s choices regarding her life are made by the men in her life: father, brother, husband, and son. She is relegated to the domestic environment and operates from within a barrier enforced on her. The marginalised woman cannot claim her selfhood, she is not an individual. Her existence is depicted as parasitic and dependent while the truth remains that she has been robbed of her independence. Some women writers address this absence of female voice and perspective by depicting the world through female perspectives. One of the primary agendas of women’s writing appears to be a need to revise history and narrate the systemic victimisation and violation of female identity. The pervasive influence of patriarchy is addressed in these narratives. Women’s writing enables the reader to address the woman as an individual outside her relation to the varied men in her life. It reclaims women’s voices, bodies, identities, and agency through narratives that are preoccupied with their perspectives.

In her author’s preface to Ari Sitarammaya and Madhu H. Kaza’s translated anthology Political Stories, Volga, the Telugu writer states, “Feminism entered our literature slowly, and gradually became a formidable force. In this new atmosphere of feminist idealism, women tried to rediscover themselves. They began to understand their bodies and their natural rhythms not according to the myths and ideologies spread by others, but based on their own experiences” (Ari and Kaza, 2007, p. vi). This aspect of reclaiming the female body and voice is depicted in both the literary texts under consideration – Volga’s short story “A Political Story” and Vimala’s poem “Vantillu”. Both the texts articulate in a subversive voice the rebellion of the Indian woman against patriarchal norms and her defiance of customs and traditions that constantly subordinate women to an unjust position at the margin or periphery of her husband’s life. They question the alliance of a woman’s identity to her husband and try in their questioning to promote a space for an autonomous female identity.

Chandra Nisha Singh in her Radical Feminism and Women’s Writing: Only So Far and No Further defines women’s writing in the following manner: “Women’s literature is the voice of a group of people who have remained oppressed, ignored and rejected by centuries of biases and vested political interests of the dominant males who, always aligned with each other, reduce womanhood to typical characteristics of inadequacy, impurity, frailty, and eternal silence” (Singh, 2007, p. 1). The intention of women’s writing by such a definition would be to claim a space for the female voice and to thwart the various representations of feminity as angelic, submissive and
obedient through a counteractive representation of women who questions these very notions of so called ideal femininity.

2.6.1 Volga’s “A Political Story”

Volga (b.1950) is a Telugu writer who was part of the feminist movement in Telugu literature in the 1970s. Born Popuri Lalitha Kumari, Volga has written novels, essays, plays, short stories and has also contributed to literary criticism and translation. Her honest criticism of patriarchy inherent in Indian society, during the 1970s, prevented her from assuming literary popularity. Her writing was often rejected by magazines, journals, publication houses owing to its radical and anti-patriarchal content. Most of her novels and short stories explore the victimisation of women. Nevertheless, not all of Volga’s protagonists defy their subservience to masculine norms. Her writing is equivocal because she tries to depict the entrenchment of conditioning in the psyche of her female characters whereby they are not always able to fight patriarchal oppression. It is also simultaneously depictive of a transformation of women from passive recipients of suppression to subjects who question their subservience to men.

Madhu H. Kaza asserts in her introduction to Political Stories, an anthology of short stories by Volga, that Volga’s stories highlight the development of critical awareness and the process by which one begins to question societal norms....they reflect moments of awakening in which a woman begins to think, and perhaps act, differently. In such moments we see the possibility of change, the possibility of a different society” (Ari and Kaza, 2007,p. xvi). This attitude is reflected in Volga’s short story, “A Political Story”. The narrative plot moves from the protagonist’s dreams of marital bliss and conjugal love as a young girl to her being eventually abandoned by her husband. However, the simplicity of the plot and narrative technique highlight a more political question of women’s identity and role within marriage and a more suggestive critique of patriarchal norms in Indian society.

In the story, the young woman enters her marital home devoted to her husband, perfectly willing to be the obedient wife. This is visible when we encounter her thoughts at her wedding - “I felt confident that he, his name, and my future life with him would all be sweet. The wedding was a sacred ceremony for me and I participated in it with intent devotion. The mangalayam was a precious blessing for me, a great fortune and a cherished boon” (Ari and Kaza, 2007 p.47). The young woman makes attempts to accommodate and adjust to the differing habits of her partner. The husband, Madhusudanarao, expects these personal sacrifices on the wife’s part without reciprocating by trying to make similar accommodations. As we move further into the story, when an accident results in the husband losing the fingers of his right hand, he breaks down wondering if the protagonist would love him now that he was disfigured. The protagonist reassures him that she
loves him and further guarantees “I will make sure that your life will go on as usual and that you will not suffer for lack of your fingers” (Ari and Kaza, 2007, p. 47). Volga subsequently moves the plot by reversing the situation of the two partners. When the protagonist suffers a miscarriage that results in an inability to conceive, she is neither consoled nor comforted by her spouse. She is relegated to the position of a criminal and is ostracised for being barren.

While she suffers the agony of a miscarriage and the anguish of never being able to bear a child, there is no one to offer solace or comfort her. The physical and psychological pain that she is going through becomes insignificant to the fact that she is barren. She questions the basis of her marriage “Could I not go on doing what I had been doing all along?....What prevented me from doing these things now? Weren’t there any women with no children? Didn’t their husbands love them?” (Ari and Kaza, 2007, p. 55). After presumably months (Volga does not give the readers a timeline) of taunts and criticism, the protagonist is ultimately asked to leave her husband’s house so that he can marry someone else and continue his ‘lineage’. The worth of a wife is therefore tied only in her ability to ensure the continuity of her husband’s lineage. The protagonist at this juncture questions why she was not told this reality about marriage and why was it that she was permitted to foster notions of romance and unconditional love. The story ends with the protagonist affirming that the ‘goal’ of her life is not marriage or children but in ensuring that womankind in unison stand up for themselves or they will continue to meet a similar fate. Collectivising women who have similar stories becomes the final statement of the story.

Volga’s protagonist is therefore articulating her grievance against the injustice done to her and is simultaneously affirming the need to prevent women from succumbing to patriarchal norms and expectations. In this regard, Volga’s title “A Political Story” also becomes a subversive assertion of her own politics. The writing of a story that undercuts the logic of a patriarchal nation-state politics with a deeply personal and experiential understanding of the control patriarchy manifests on a woman’s association with her body and self allows for the emergence of Volga’s personal politics that is working towards succumbing to manifestations of patriarchy.

2.6.2 Vimala’s “Vantillu”

Vimala (b.1959) is also a Telugu writer who grew up in a household with a politically active father and domestic mother. During her childhood she had read all the important books on Telugu literature. Vimala began writing at the age of sixteen at college where she also got involved in the student movement of the period. During the late 80s, women in Andhra Pradesh were facing hardships as men would drink liquor, spend their income and
beat their families. In 1991, Vimala was instrumental in organising the largest anti-liquor campaign in Andhra Pradesh at Karimnagar. Women picketed liquor shops and socially ostracised men. Vimala’s writing is marked by her representation of the woman’s world as other than the masculine world. In representing women at the periphery, she tries and makes the periphery the point of focus and debate. This inversion of the “vantillu” or kitchen is what Vimala achieves in her poem “Vantillu.”

The poem addresses the poet’s association of her mother with the kitchen. The atmosphere of the kitchen moves from warm and nostalgic to embodying the death of the woman’s own identity. Patriarchal control is then woven into the poem uniting both the mother and daughter’s trajectories and the poem finally ends on a passionate assertion of ensuring that subsequent generations do not undergo a similar loss of subjectivity. The term subjectivity has many meanings in the realm of philosophy and psychology. However, within literary studies and post-colonial studies it is generally used to connote agency, control, individualism and autonomy.

The idea of decay, stagnancy and an incomplete existence come through in the following lines:

_Our kitchen is a mortuary._

_Pans, tins, gunny bags_
_crowd it like cadavers_
_that hang amid clouds of damp wood smoke._

_Mother floats, a ghost here,_
_a floating kitchen herself,_
_her eyes melted in tears,_
_her hands worn to spoons_

(Tharu and Lalitha, 1993, p. 600)

However, what becomes even more significant is the implication that the woman’s body mutates into the kitchen. The pathos of the woman’s condition comes to the surface when her ghost-like, shadowy existence is alluded to. She ceases to be herself and becomes associated with the kitchen; her tears are symbolic of this loss of selfhood. A little later in the poem, Vimala writes “…Mother glows/…and burns through the kitchen, /pacing, restless, a caged tiger” (Tharu and Lalitha, 1993, p. 600). The woman’s ‘caged’ existence and her lack of selfhood come to the fore in her movement within the kitchen. Critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their work on Victorian women’s fiction, _The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination_ claim that the presence of mad women locked and bound in women’s writing of the period is symptomatic of the repressed female psyche. These ostracised women act
as alter-egos to the domestic and obedient daughters, wives, sisters and mothers. The mother in ‘Vantillu’ has been robbed of her own identity and the kitchen becomes her prison. Nonetheless, as stated before the kitchen also becomes an extension of her. Her ‘caged’ movement in the kitchen is symbolic of her subordinated/impersonal/ caged subjectivity.

The mother is made to seem in complete control of the kitchen but Vimala asserts “My mother was queen of the kitchen, / but the name engraved on the pots and pans is Father’s” (Tharu and Lalitha, 1993, p. 600). We notice in this line that in the word ‘mother’ the ‘m’ remains uncapsulated but there is a capitalisation of ‘f’ in the word ‘Father’s’. The choice of capitalisation subtly asserts the pervasive influence of patriarchy on women’s lives. The final assertion that Vimala makes is:

Damn all kitchens. May they burn to cinders,
the kitchens that steal our dreams, drain
turn lives, eat our days - like some enormous vulture....
...Come, let us tear down these private stoves,
before our daughters must step
solitary into these kitchens.
(Tharu and Lalitha, 1993, p.601)

In the last stanza of the poem Vimala asserts a need to ‘destroy’ the kitchens that incarcerate (imprison) women in order to prevent the subsequent generations from suffering the same torment. Vimala’s poem therefore addresses the need to address the woman’s association with the ‘kitchen’ which robs her of any identity of her own. The poem attempts to make an argument for the subjugation of women and stresses on the necessity of liberating women from the shackles of patriarchal tradition.

2.6.3 Dalit Women’s Writing

Dalit Women’s Writing attests to a two-fold marginality of women’s voices. The narratives of dalit women address their subjugation to the caste system and their subjugation at the hand of dalit men. Telugu Dalit poet and scholar Challapalli Swaroopa Rani in her essay Dalit Women’s Writing in Telugu claims:

If there is any soul in this country who is subjected to all kinds of oppression and exploitation, it is the dalit woman. On one side she is oppressed by the caste system, on the other side she is subjected to gender oppression and class exploitation. She is a dalit among dalits. It is from this angle that we need to understand dalit feminist poetry and its specificity.

(Rani, 1998 p. 21)
The two-fold marginality of the dalit woman’s experience alienates her from both the upper-caste woman and the dalit man. The larger communal identity that feminist scholarship constantly foregrounds as a means of subverting patriarchy cannot be co-opted by the dalit woman; she is at the margins of mainstream feminist discourse.

Do you remember
your words when
your husband plucked me
like a chicken?
Do you know how often
I was cheapened
at your hands
in your house


Neither can she be within an associative paradigm with the dalit man; she is at the margins of dalit discourse. “Why blame any other?/ my dalit himself / ties me across as a / clothesline” (Sasi Nirmala, ‘Dalituralu’, cited in Rani, 1998, p.23). The dalit woman’s voice thus faces the task of speaking for a subalternity of existence and experience deeply located within a body whose untouchablity is twice-born, i.e. the dalit woman is impure by caste and gender associations. The locativeness of the dalit woman’s voice in this untouchability is the ‘specificity’ alluded to by Challapalli Swaroopa Rani which becomes apparent in Sasi Nirmala’s poem ‘Daliturulu’. Both instances of touch in the poem imply violation of the body and a violation of the untouchability code. The implication here is that the female body does not remain absolutely untouchable when mediated through the gaze of male desire.

While poetry through metaphorical and allegorical means codifies a dalit feminist narrative that is precise in its critique of caste and patriarchal subjugation, the mode of life narratives has been the mainstay of Dalit literature owing to the stark brutality of violence, violation and discrimination and the necessity to address these narratives on their own terms outside a codified language. Dalit women’s writing like Baby Kamble’s Jina Amucha (The Prisons We Broke) (2008), Urmila Pawar’s Aidan (The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman’s Memoirs) (2003; 2008) break away from the existing tradition of dalit autobiographies through an exploration of gendered caste. Maya Pandit, the English translator of both the texts in her introduction to Jina Amucha says,
It is probably the first autobiography by a Dalit woman not in Marathi but in any Indian language... *The Prisons We Broke* is located in this tradition of direction self-assertion. But it also went two steps ahead; it was a head-on confrontation with Brahminical hegemony on the one hand and patriarchal domination on the other. (Pandit, 2008, pp. vii-ix)

Pandit’s assertion along with the narrative of both the texts that use memory to reclaim a past of oppression disturbs the complacent narrative of a unified dalit identity. Urmila Pawar and Baby Kamble highlight the divisions along gender lines within the dalit community. Through their narratives of domesticity and their subsequent forays into the socio-political environments of dalit activism, they force the necessity of engaging with gendered dalit identity.

In her work *Writing Caste/ Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women’s Testimonios* (2006), Sharmila Rege asserts that “In the early nineties, dalit feminist articulations, especially on the issue of quota within quotas, challenged the concepts of ‘genderless caste’ and ‘casteless gender” (Rege, 2006, p.3). This statement brings to light the two-fold dialectics of dalit feminist critiques, their struggles within dalit and feminist discourses to find the interstice of convergence between marginalisation of dalit and gendered identities.

As you will see in MWG-008, Block 4, Unit 3. Dalit author Bama Faustina Soosiraj’s (1958-) fictionalised autobiography *Karukku* (1992), focuses on the Dalit Christian gendered engagements with caste. She furthers the debates within a gendered caste engagement through an intersection of religion. The underlying context of *Karukku* is the conversion of Paraiyars to Christianity to escape castiest oppression and the disenchantment they suffered when the caste situation permeated even within the new religion. Bama traces her personal trajectory where she becomes a nun hoping to embrace the Christian humanist spirit. However, even within the convent among nuns who should embody the spirit of egalitarian humanism, she was discriminated against which eventually led to her decision to leave the convent. In this context Sharmila Rege’s assertion that ‘dalit life narratives are in fact testimonios, which forge a right to speak both for and beyond the individual and context explicitly or implicitly the ‘official forgetting’ of histories of caste oppression, struggles and resistance (Rege, 2006, p. 16) becomes relevant to understanding and engaging with dalit women’s narratives.
2.7 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, you have studied about the concept of marginalization, its roots, its condition and how it is exercised in society through patriarchy and patriarchal intervention in socio-political domain via religion. The Unit also reflects on the nation-state which shapes gender and its relation with society and state. We have discussed the position of the subaltern and examines feminine identity and agency within the subaltern framework. Finally, the Unit examines literary engagements with marginalisation, gender oppression and a dalit feminist politics that reclaim subjugated historiography with a subversive autobiographical narrative.

2.8 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1) Explain the functions of gender and conditioning in the marginalization of women.

2) How does women’s writing help women voice themselves and fight patriarchal tradition?

3) What do you understand by the term ‘Subaltern’? Think about any work of literature that you have read where this term may be applied. Discuss the aspect of subalternity with the help of examples.

4) Read the short stories by Volga and Vimala and discuss the issue of marginalization as represented in these stories.

5) Read the discussion of Bama’s works provided in MWG-008, Block 4, Unit 3 and relate it to the discussion of marginalization.

2.9 REFERENCES


### 2.10 SUGGESTED READINGS


