
UNIT 3 CASTE

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Structure

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3.1 INTRODUCTION

Caste has already been discussed from a sociological perspective in a previous unit (see MWG 002, Block 2, Unit 2). The discussions on caste in this unit will be drawn from postmodern narratives, experiences and debates on caste in the past decade. There will be references and examples from autobiographical and fictional literature and some concepts from sociological work on caste as well as. Both sociological research and literary work on caste has been influenced by the social and political changes in the society. As you have learnt already, post modernism finds its roots in structuralism. However, it is difficult to pin point an exact time of its inception. Foucault, Derrida and Nandy are well known postmodernists. We know that the postmodern perspective moves away from grand narratives and objectivity. In understanding caste this has meant that there has been a shift away from generalising caste and seeing it as a uniform structure. Today, it is accepted that there are several narratives about caste - at regional and local levels. Caste hierarchies differ from village to village and each caste has a narrative of its own. In this unit, we will look at those works which talk about caste from this postmodern perspective.

3.2 OBJECTIVES

After completing this unit, you will be able to:

- Define caste in terms of historical and theoretical perspectives;
- Examine caste in the light of fictional work from English and regional literatures;
- Discuss the lives of the lower castes through their own writings; and
- Trace the relation between women and caste through literature and cinema.

3.3 HISTORY, DEFINITIONS AND THEORIES OF CASTE

Before examining the inter-linkages of caste and gender in contemporary literature, it would be worthwhile for us to understand the concept of caste within a historical and theoretical framework. Let us begin by looking at a brief history of caste.

Brief History of Caste

It is believed that the word caste originated from the Portuguese word 'Casta' and was used by Portuguese travellers who came to India in the 16th century. We already know that the conceptual division of society into four distinct hierarchical categories has been traced back to the *Rig Veda* and finds clear expression in the sacred literature of the Hindus, including the law books or the *dharmasastras*. However, one can cite several examples from the *Mahabharata* and the *Rig Veda* which show that caste was not hereditary in nature, for example "I am a poet, my father is a doctor, my mother is a grinder of corn" (*Rig Veda*, 9.112.3). Again in *Mahabharata*: "Listen about caste, Yaksha dear, not study, not learning is the caste of the twice born status. Conduct is the basis, there is no doubt about it" (*Mahabharata*, III.312.106).

It is interesting to note that a recent work of fiction *Immortals of Meluha* (2010) by Amish describes the origin of the caste much the same way as we have discussed above:

"Lord Brahma has decreed that people become Brahmin through competitive examination process." said Shiva.

That is true my Lord. But over time this process of selection lost its fairness. Children of Brahmins became Brahmins, children of Kshatriyas became Kshatriyas and so on. The formal system of selection ceased. A father would ensure that his children got all the resources and support needed to grow up and become a member of his own caste. So the caste system became rigid" said Daksha

So does that mean that there could have been a person talented enough to be a Brahmin but if he was born to Shudra parents he would not get opportunity to become a Brahmin?" asked Shiva. As we agreed that the best society is when a person's caste is decided only by his ability and karma.

(Amish, 2010, p. 95)

Let us now briefly recapitulate the definition and theories of caste from a sociological perspective.

Definitions of Caste

Let us take a look at how sociologists have defined caste as a result of years of study and research. The definitions of caste have been drawn largely from existing literature and empirical evidence gathered by anthropologists and sociologists. Given below are a couple of different definitions.

Definitions of Caste

"Caste can be defined as an "institutionalised system of interaction among hierarchically ranked hereditary groups for marriage, occupation, economic division of labour, enforcement of cultural norms and values by caste bodies and performance of rituals based on the principles of purity and pollution" (Singh, 1997, p.33).

Renowned anthropologist Srinivas defines caste as "A person was born into a caste which was a unit in a hierarchy of castes, and relations among these were governed by the ideas of pollution and purity. This means that in actual life, the highly elaborated and systematized principles of inclusion and exclusion of individuals on the basis of caste came into play. Individuals from a particular caste were included in one context living together and were excluded in another, endogamy and this applied all along the line. Inclusion and exclusion were also matters of degree for instance the social distance between castes in Kerala was traditionally expressed in spatial terms" (Srinivas, 1998, p.28).

Theoretical Perspectives on Caste

From a sociological perspective, there is a theoretical divergence in the explanations of social stratifications of caste.

The functionalist approach to caste is reflected in many historical accounts of caste and also in early sociological writings. "Caste continues to dominate Indian social worlds, even if in some larger political contexts it has been effaced by the conflict between Hindus and Muslims" (Dirk, 2002, p.7). Nicholas Dirk in his book *Castes of Mind* cites examples of the anti-Brahmin

movements. In Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra and lower caste mobilizations in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh and is of the opinion that caste has been a necessary vehicle of social and political mobilization.

Sharmila Rege in her book, *Writing Caste, Writing Gender* (2006) traces the development of the study of caste as a subject. She writes that caste was put under the heading of social structure and social change and there were no references to Dalit literature on the subject. Social movements too, initiated by Ambedkar, Periyar and other women's movements were classified under social movements. Rege also mentions that Gopal Guru, well known dalit scholar and activist is of the opinion that even today the classical model of caste, where every caste group performs a certain function for the harmony of the society persists. So according to this model while the priest would perform his duties in the temple the main job of the scheduled caste person was to maintain cleanliness of the village and so on.

Check Your Progress:

i) *What are the main features of the caste system as per the various definitions given by the scholars?*

ii) *Can you name the key sociological thinkers associated with caste?*

3.4 CHALLENGING CASTE THROUGH LITERATURE AND CULTURE

Literature often draws upon life and this is more so when the writings are on issues of caste, communalism or gender. While one cannot deny the role of imagination and creativity in works of literature, we have examples of many writers who wrote in realistic ways about society as they saw it. So we have Premchand, Saadat Manto and Raja Rao who wrote about poverty, caste, partition as they witnessed it in the society of their times. Another aspect of the intersection of caste and literature has been ‘language’ itself. “Language, occupying as it does, points of intersection between culture and literature, has become one of the most contested sites in the struggle over the right to define and produce culture. While ‘cultured’ Tamil used by the upper castes has for long been considered the language that befits literature, the dialects and more colloquial Tamil spoken by the lower castes have been condemned as barbarous on the grounds that lower or even destroy Tamil culture” (Israel, 2002, p. 115).

3.4.1 Caste and Literature

We can relate the discussions on language, literature and caste to the work of anthropologist **M.N. Srinivas**. Well known for his concepts of Sanskritization and Dominant castes, he has written extensively on the changes that are creeping into the caste system. Srinivas writes how the lower castes are slowly emulating the language and lifestyle of the upper castes and he calls this phenomenon “**sanskritization**”. Similarly, in literature too, taking forward the discussion by Hephzibah Israel, many lower caste/dalit writers made an attempt to write in ‘cultured’ Tamil so as to gain acceptance in the field of literature. But soon they realised that this shift towards sanskritization was not helpful in narrating the lives and turmoils of the Dalits. With this began a different culture of writing in folk language. Let us look at the examples of this through literary texts.

Premchand was one of the first major mainstream novelists to have written on caste and caste relations especially in rural areas. **Raja Rao’s** literary style deviates from Premchand’s style of narration and plots. While Premchand wrote mainly about the exploitation that the labourers faced in *jajmani* or the patron-client relationship that existed largely in the rural areas, in **Raja Rao’s** *Kanthapura* (1970) we find an echo of Srinivas’s thought. Of course, one has to keep in mind that Raja Rao’s story is set in preindependence era and Srinivas’s work is based on empirical study years later. However, the earlier writings on caste did not talk of revolutions but instead a steady change within the lower castes. Raja Rao depicts in *Kanthapura* that the different castes are neatly divided into segments- Brahmin quarters, Sudra quarters and Pariah quarters. Despite stratification into castes, however,

the villagers are mutually bound in various economic and social functions which maintain social harmony. Raja Rao's work looks at caste from the prism of Indian struggle for independence. In *Kanthapura*, when the protagonist Moorthy tries to inspire the village into participating in the freedom struggle he has to face resistance and criticism for mingling with the lower castes to spread Gandhiji's message.

Political mobilisation has meant a shift in the control of power and resources. It is with this that the concept of Dominant castes emerged. One example would be, in Andhra Pradesh the Reddys and Naidus are the dominant castes as the politics clearly shows. Dominant castes are defined by their number, resources and monetary strength. The dominant caste differs not only from State to State but also from village to village. In some villages, the Other Backward Castes may be the dominant castes and not the Brahmin and Kshatriya

We have a good example to illustrate this from Irathina Karikalán's "Oorakali" (2002) which tells the story of the relationship between Dalits and Vanniars. The 'upper caste' Brahmins and Kshatriyas have left the village for a better life in the cities, leaving behind the Dalits and Vanniars. The latter are just above the dalits in the hierarchy, yet the Dalits do not get control over the land, instead the Vanniars become the landlords. The Vanniars, the 'Dominant Castes,' due to their control over economic resources, now exploit the Dalits. Oorakali describes the life of a Dalit, Mandayan, and his family consisting of a son and daughter. Mandayan grazes the cattle of the whole village and gets food in return and some clothing during the festival season. However, with the modernisation of agriculture the number of cattle goes down and he is forced to engage his son and daughter as labourers in his master's house. Pavunamma, Madayan's daughter is very pretty and is pampered by her father and brother. When she grows up Madayan has to listen to the taunts of the village youth accusing his wife of adultery. Pavunaama is impregnated by someone in the master's house and dies a horrible and painful death following an attempt to abort the child. Israel in his article notes that "Padaiaatchi" used in the story has no English equivalent, but can be used to refer to the upper castes in general. But in the story it refers to the Vanniars who are 'superior' (at least) to the Dalits in the hierarchy, showing how the latter is relative, unstable and open to subversion and deconstruction.

There have been numerous works dealing with issues of caste by contemporary authors like **Mahashweta Devi** and **Urmila Pawar**. With caste continuing to be a dominant feature of Indian life- whether in politics or in the cultural space of marriage, many authors do write about caste even though it may not be the central theme in their works. Let us take some examples from contemporary literature to substantiate this statement.

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* is a winner of the 'Man Booker Prize' (2008). Dr. Anupama Srivastava describes *The White Tiger* in the following words:

A brutal view of India's class struggles is cunningly presented in Adiga's debut about a racist, homicidal chauffeur. Balram Halwai is from the Darkness, born where India's downtrodden and unlucky are destined to rot. Balram manages to escape his village and move to Delhi after being hired as a driver for a rich landlord. Telling his story in retrospect, the novel is a piecemeal correspondence from Balram to the premier of China, who is expected to visit India and whom Balram believes could learn a lesson or two about India's entrepreneurial underbelly. ... His personal fortunes and luck improve dramatically after he kills his boss and decamps for Bangalore.

(Srivastava, 2011)

The following is an excerpt from the book *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga, which, though not essentially about caste, does showcase the attitude towards caste in India today.

“‘Halwai’.

Halwai...he turned to the small dark man. ‘what caste is that, top or bottom’?

And I knew that my future depended on the answer to that question.”

...

“I should explain a thing or two about caste. Even Indians get confused about this word, especially educated Indians in the cities. ...See: Halwai, my name, means ‘sweet maker’.

That's my caste- my destiny. Everyone in the Darkness who hears that name knows all about me at once, that's why Kishan and I keep getting jobs at sweetshops wherever we went. But if we were Halwai's why was my father not making sweets but pulling a rickshaw... see this country, in its greatness, when it was the richest nation on earth, was like a zoo. A clean well kept orderly zoo. Everyone in his place, everyone happy. Goldsmiths here, cowherds here, landlords there. The man named halwai made sweets. The man called a cowherd tended cows. The untouchable cleaned faeces. ..To sum it up in the old days there were one thousand castes and destinies in India. These days there are just two castes: Men with big bellies and men with small bellies.”

...

“Are you from a top caste or bottom caste, boy?”

I didn't know what he wanted me to say, so I flipped both answers- I could have made a good case either way and then said “bottom, sir”.

Turning to Mukesh the old man said, ‘all our employees are top caste. It won't hurt to have one or two bottom castes working with us.’”

(Adiga, 2009, p. 62-65)

Manu Joseph's debut novel, *Serious Men*, was the winner of the Hindu inaugural best fiction award in 2010. It is a work of fiction that is centred totally on caste. Ayyan Mani, a dalit, is the secretary to a brahmin Astrophysicist Arvind Acharya at the Institute of Theory and research. Ayyan mani has a deep seated dislike towards brahmins and he takes it out in various ways by putting anti Brahmin statements in the quotes of the day that he puts up in the office space, eaves dropping on the conversation of his boss and find ways of putting him in trouble. The story revolves around Ayyan mani who deviously presents his partially deaf son as a prodigy who can recite the first thousand prime numbers. It is essentially a commentary on the perceived ‘intellectual superiority’ of Brahmins and the attempt by a Dalit to break this hegemony of a certain caste over knowledge.

Similarly, **Rohinton Mistry's** novel, *A Fine Balance* (1995) is located during the emergency era under the leadership of Indira Gandhi. The story revolves around two leather workers, (caste name chamars) who flee to the city due to the atrocities meted out to them in the cities and take up jobs as tailors.

Several literary works also reflect the changing times and the impact of development on the narratives of caste. Now we have an increasing number of autobiographical writings with Dalits narrating and sharing their daily life experiences and perspectives rather than the upper castes speaking of reforms or the exploitation of the lower castes, thus giving voice to those at the margins. The stories of today often reflect the current political and social debates. Say for example, the contentious issue of reservation has been depicted in the short story called “Promotion,” which appears in the collection of short stories called *Poisoned Bread* (Dangle, 2010). The following is a telling excerpt from “Promotion”:

“Awale Saheb: Does Godbole respect you?”

Wagah: He doesn't. And I suppose it's quite natural that the fact that I have been promoted to the post of Assistant Purchase manager even though I was junior to him.

Awale Saheb: Listen, it is only now that we are being promoted to the sahib positions in the 33% category. The other people have enjoyed being in the 100% reserved category for centuries.

(Dangle, 2010, p. 169)

Jhoothan by Omprakash Valmiki was first published in Hindi in 1997 and documents the author's memoirs growing up in Uttar Pradesh and the discrimination that he experienced as a Dalit.

Girish Karnard's play *Tale- Danda* (1993), tells the tale of Basavanna, a 12th century reformer from Karnataka and the founder of the Lingayat faith. Basavanna's philosophy was centered on the belief that "No barrier is true, you can transcend them" (Das, 2006, p.118). He had a revolutionary outlook and believed in the equality of sexes, rejection of idol worship, repudiation of Brahmanism and Sanskrit. The play by Girish Karnad traces the impact of Basavanna on the society of 12th Century Karnataka in the kingdom of Bijjala of Kalyana. Basavanna had a large number of followers who wanted to emulate him. One such disciple, in keeping with the teachings of Basavanna defies tradition and gives his daughter in marriage to an untouchable. All hell breaks loose and this action sees a violent aftermath. The disciple who 'dared' to take the step of accepting an untouchable as his son-in-law is killed, the king too is dethroned and even Basavanna dies a mysterious death. The story of 21st century India doesn't seem to have changed much. We read about caste based violence routinely in newspapers. As you can see, caste continues to act as a huge barrier between different sections of Indian society.

3.4.2 Caste Representation in Mainstream Cinema

Post independence cinema became a medium to speak up against caste with films like *Sujata* (1959) and *Achoot Kanya* (1936). However, say about a decade later, caste as an issue was no longer dealt with in mainstream popular Hindi cinema, though nationalism and nation building continued to be popular themes. Nevertheless, caste based atrocities continued to be depicted by what was popularly called the 'parallel cinema' and also regional cinema. In the recent past, three mainstream Hindi films have briefly dealt with the problem of caste. They are *Lagaan* (2001), *Swades* (2004) and *Aarakshan* (2011). Let us look at these three briefly.

Lagaan (2001), a period film set during the time of British rule, is a story of how a village takes up the challenge to play cricket with British authorities. The main protagonist, Bhuvan, (played by Aamir Khan) has picked up the gauntlet to beat the British at cricket. If his village wins then they wouldn't have to pay the tax for that year and if they lose they have to pay double the amount. Bhuvan creates a team of players with different abilities and

strengths. One such person is Kachra who is an untouchable with a disability which enables him to spin the ball. When Bhuvan declares his intention to take in Kachra he meets with opposition from the entire team. Kachra himself is a meek, submissive character who has accepted his fate of being the outsider in the village. Bhuvan manages to convince the villagers that it is only when they are united that they can triumph.

Swades (2004) is a movie set in today's India and largely based on the idea of 'brain drain' (migration of Indians to countries like USA/UK). The protagonist, who was settled in the USA and enjoys a successful career, comes to India to meet his nanny who took care of him and is now unwell. She refuses to go to the USA with him. The story of India is then told through the eyes of the protagonist, Mohan. *Swades* too depicts the caste discrimination that exists in our society. In one particular scene the whole village gathers to watch a movie. A screen is put up. The screen serves as a metaphor since the lower castes are forced to watch it on the reverse side. Suddenly there is an electricity failure and Mohan with the help of like-minded villagers gets all the people together on one side, thus breaking the physical and social barriers. The movie also has another character called Mela Ram who belongs to the scheduled caste and dreams of becoming a cook and opening his own restaurant. The irony is that he belongs to a caste which is considered impure and acceptance of food from him is taboo.

Aarakshan (2011), as the name suggests, is about the reservation issue which had rocked the country several years ago with the Mandal commission. The film reflects on the politics of caste. It is set in an educational institute where the question of reservation divides the student community and teachers. The principle of the college does not believe in caste or indulging in caste based discrimination but many of his colleagues think otherwise and even instigate the students on caste lines. Young boys and girls position themselves in opposing camps based on their caste. The principle then resigns from the college and decides to teach the poor and underprivileged irrespective of caste and class with the help of other students who too believe in the ideals of a society without barriers.

Contemporary popular films discussed above throw light on the position of the marginalized and oppressed members of society to expose the power structures which inform social hierarchies. You are encouraged to analyse these works in the light of the theories you have read about in Block 2 of this course.

Check Your Progress:

Can you name five regional films from your state based on caste? Do you think popular culture can bring about a change in the way caste is perceived and practiced today? Explain briefly in your own words.

3.5 UNTOUCHABILITY IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

Maariamamma

We understand
 why upper caste Gods
 and their 'good-girl' much-married, father-****
 virgin, vegetarian oh-so-pure Goddesses
 borne in their golden chariots
 don't come to our streets.

We know the reasons for their non-entry into slums.
 Actually, our poverty would soil their hearts
 and our labor corrupt their souls.

But Maariamamma,
 when you are still getting
 those roosters and goats,
 why have you stopped coming to our doors?
 Maari, our girl, Since when did you join their gang?

Meena Kandaswamy

(<http://meenakandasamy.wordpress.com/2008/06/01/maariamamma/>)

Activity:

After reading the above poem, answer the following questions:

i) *Who is speaking and about whom?*

ii) *What is the poet objecting to? Why?*

iii) *Who do you think is Maari?*

iv) *Why has she stopped entering the homes in the slums?*

v) *What does the poet mean by the word “gang”?*

vi) *Is there any sarcasm/irony in the poem? Is the poet able to subvert the power of the upper castes?*

What is Untouchability?

To understand what is untouchability, let us look at what Srinivas says about it:

Outside of the caste system are the Untouchables. Untouchable jobs, such as toilet cleaning and garbage removal, require them to be in contact with bodily fluids. They are therefore considered polluted and not to be touched. The importance of purity in the body and food is found in early Sanskrit literature. Untouchables have separate entrances to homes and must drink from separate wells. They are considered to be in a permanent state of impurity...

(Srinivas, 1998, p.57)

Much has been written about untouchability in India. In literature too, we find many examples of this issue as you can see from the poem cited above. Try to analyse the perspective represented in the poem in the light of Srinivas' commentary on untouchability.

Representation of Scheduled Castes in Contemporary Literature

The writings of sociologists such as M.N. Srinivas and Yogendra Singh can perhaps be explained better with the example of **Urmila Pawar's** autobiographical work *Aidan* (2006). Urmila Pawar talks about her life in the isolated hamlet of Phansawala. She remembers how the Brahmin priest would not take the trouble of climbing uphill to their village. Instead he would sit on a tree and conduct the ceremonies and perform a purificatory ritual for himself since he had come to the area of 'untouchables' but would not hesitate to carry away the gifts he would receive from them. Finally, Urmila's father becomes the priest for his community. There is a story regarding how their family got into priesthood. Apparently, it was a result of their ancestor defeating a Brahmin at meditation. So apart from conducting ceremonies Urmila's father would be often consulted to find missing cattle, persons or objects. When he dies he is buried in a sitting position like the other priests of his community.

Urmila's father was very keen that his children study. However, there was only one school in the village run by a Brahmin who taught only Brahmin children. There was another missionary school which again would teach only those who had converted to Christianity. Some years later the Brahmin teacher decided to include in his class those belonging to the Kunbi and Bhandari castes as long they would sit away from the rest of the class. There was a lot of resistance to girls studying and Urmila's father would often face taunts from his community people asking whether the education would turn his daughter into a Brahmin woman.

The patron-client relationship or the jajmani system is reflected well in the work of both Urmila Pawar and in Dangle's *Poisoned Bread* (2010). In the *Poisoned Bread*, the older generation maintains the status quo while the younger generation is ready to challenge the age old norms and traditions.

Let us look at one scene from *Poisoned Bread* where the grandfather takes along his grandchild to the patron to work so that they both get some food:

The grandfather says, "Anna, I am your slave, we find it a privilege to beg for our share of corn, master. I am your begging Mahar and feel proud to be so". But the patron replies, "You are no longer the mahar. You are now harijan, you have even started claiming equality, so I was told, eating and drinking with us at the city hotel."

(Dangle, 2010, p. 147).

In a sentence this captures the essence of change in the caste system.

The grandfather continues: "Even if a Mahar gets educated no one will ever call him brahmin. A mahar is a mahar even if he passes LLB and becomes a barrister" (Dangle, 2010, p.148).

Urmila Pawar describes the rituals post a popular festival in the village, whereby the lower castes would go around asking for the left over festival food from the dominant and higher castes (largely Brahmins, Marathas and Kulwadis). For some food be a payment for odd jobs done - like making bamboo baskets while for others who would work for the village throughout the year it would be the time to claim their rights over food cooked in the homes of the dominant and higher castes. Urmila Pawar's work reveals the deep caste wedges, poverty among the lower castes and the indignities they suffer in the village.

3.6 GENDER AND CASTE

In the above section, we have looked at the position of the lower castes as represented in literature. Women of different castes are impacted differently by patriarchal interpretations of their assigned roles, based on caste. This issue has been explored in contemporary literature in different ways.

In this section we will look at the position of women in the caste system - among the lower and higher castes through some of the available literature. The status of women in India is reflected clearly in the low education rates, declining sex ratio, low presence in employment and the ever increasing crime rate. While women as a group have a low status in Indian society, the upper and lower caste women have had differential experiences and lives. The upper caste women had to follow the rules laid down by religious and

other ancient scriptures and interpreted by upper caste men. Rural upper caste women were expected to get married early and stay at home. They were engaged in household work and their education would depend on whether or not their family would allow it. Several Bengali movies by the famous director, Satyajit Ray, like *Ghaire Baire* (1984) (Home and the World), *Teen Kanya* (1961) (Three girls) and *Charulata* (1964) explore this issue of the elite, upper caste woman bound to the confines of the home. In two of the stories of *Teen Kanya*, the men take the initiative in educating the girls who otherwise were only involved in household work. A Hindi tele-serial on similar lines is *Balika Badhu*, which showcased early marriage and the restricted lives of young girls from rich upper caste landed families.

Rural lower caste women have traditionally worked in fields and at home. They also work in the homes of the upper caste or dominant caste members, where they are often looked down upon or sexually exploited by the men of the upper caste. (This double victimization can be compared to that of African-American women who are oppressed based on gender and race, as we have seen in earlier units.)

The film *Mirch Masala* (1987) is an excellent example of the lives of women in a rural setting. The lower caste women have a double disadvantage of being a woman and belonging to the lower caste. Sri Narayana Guru Swamy of Kerala fought for the right of the lower caste Izhava women to cover the upper portion of their bodies. The Izhava women were denied the right to wear a blouse by the upper caste men. Even the matriarchal and matrilineal society of the Nairs of Kerala leads to exploitation of women as the men have the final say in most matters. So when a lower caste became Sanskritized, it unfortunately adopted the restrictive customs of the upper caste and this brought about changes in the lives of the women who had hitherto enjoyed some level of freedom. As Srinivas points out, “The upward mobility which Sanskritization promotes has adverse consequences on women. They lose their freedom to move about; in fact they become ‘immured’. They are too high to be seen by the lowly on the streets, they lose their freedom to work for wages. In brief, Sanskritization pushes her into the jaws of a totally one sided androcentric ethic” (Srinivas, 1998, p.16).

Arundhati Roy's much acclaimed book, *God of Small Things* (1997) comments on both the status of women and untouchability. The story revolves around an upper caste Christian family and an untouchable, Velutha. The story centres on events surrounding the visit and drowning death of the twins' half-English cousin, a nine year old girl named Sophie Mol. There is a parallel plot of a love affair between Ammu and the family's carpenter, Velutha, a member of the Untouchable caste. The story takes us back to an event that took place twenty three years before and which resulted in loss of life. The drowning in turn is linked to a forbidden love affair.

In many ways Velutha is a rebel since he is not meek or submissive in spite of belonging to the lowest group in the hierarchy: "Perhaps it was just a lack of hesitation. An unwarranted assurance. In the way he walked. The way he held his head. The quiet way he offered suggestions without being asked. Or the quiet way in which he disregarded suggestions without appearing to rebel" (Roy, 1997, p.73). Ammu, the central character of the novel, belongs to a traditional patriarchal society which places little importance on women's education. Ammu's father Pappachi, does not like the idea of spending money on his daughter, and she is never encouraged to find her place in life. Marriage is the only justification of her survival.

Ammu marries as per the wishes of her family but her marriage ends in divorce. This pushes her further to the margins of the family. A divorced woman is seen as a disgrace to the family. Srinivas in his article on women says that while lower caste women have the freedom to divorce or leave their husbands, upper caste women cannot do so. We find a reflection of this in *The God of Small Things*. Ammu is ignored and ostracised by her relatives, especially the elderly women: "Within first few months of her return to her parent's home; Ammu quickly learned to recognize and despise the ugly face of sympathy. Old female relations with their incipient beards and several wobbling chins made overnight trips to Aymenm to commiserate her about her divorce. She fought off the urge to slap them" (Roy, 1997, p.43). Ammu was expected to lead the same life as an upper caste widow - a frugal, austere life with no question of re-marriage.

Velutha's love affair with Ammu goes against the norms of the society which prevents any kind of interaction with the untouchables. Thus, Velutha incurs the wrath of Ammu's family and the Kerala police. He breaks the rigid social rules of the caste system and therefore, the authorities must punish him. Roy contrasts the lives of two men belonging to different extremes of the caste hierarchy. In contrast to Velutha, is the upper caste male character, Chacko, who can get away with his debauchery. His mother looks the other way when he exploits the women workers in his factory, but reacts violently to Ammu and Velutha's relationship. Velutha is punished for daring to have an affair with an upper caste and class woman and is killed.

When the family discovers the affair they lock up Ammu and in turn blame the twins- Rahel and Estha for curbing her presence by their very existence. The twins decide to run away from home and Sophie Mol too joins them in this adventure. During their attempt to cross the river, Sophie Mol drowns and dies. When the kids are not found at home, Baby Aunt puts the blame on Velutha. He is accused of kidnapping the twins and raping Ammu. Aunt Baby manipulates Estha into telling the police that Velutha is behind the kidnapping.

Velutha is tortured by the police and is found dead in the prison. Estha at some point thereafter stops speaking; Ammu is banished from her home, dying miserably and alone at age 31. Rahel is expelled from school, drifts, marries an American, whom she later leaves. The narrative begins and ends as Rahel returns to her family home in India and to Estha, where there is some hope that their love for each other and memories recollected from a distance will heal their deep wounds. Roy expresses her disillusionment with the social conditions of the postcolonial world in which the untouchables of the past still face a hostile society that does not let them live as free and independent individuals.

As you can see from the above discussion, Roy's novel focuses on the destructive influences of caste-based divisions on individuals. Women of upper castes and men of lower castes are seen here as equally trapped by social constraints and taboos.

Let us now look at similar issues in the work of another contemporary Indian author who writes in Bengali. One of the most prominent writers on caste and gender has been **Mahashweta Devi**. In her short story, 'Bayan' (2002), Chandidasi Gangadasi, is a beautiful and proud descendant of the Dom community which practices cremation of the dead. Chandidasi's main job is to bury dead children. But when she has a child of her own she cannot bring herself to do her job because, "of her own child, she now felt a deep pain for every dead child. Her breast ached with milk if she stayed too long in the graveyard" (Devi, 2002, p. 34). But the village cannot accept this rejection and soon she is termed a "bayan" (witch) and ostracised. She pays the price for seeking a life of her own. In this case the perpetrator is not an upper caste but the tribal community itself.

The social movements among the lower castes- the Periyar movement, Sri Narayana Guru Swamy Dharma Paripalana movement coupled with political initiatives of Ambedkar brought about some changes in the lives of the lower castes. One of the first indications was the vast amount of literature that emerged from Dalit men and women. One such example is the work of **Bama** (about whom you will read in some more detail in MWG 008, Block 4, Unit 3).

Bama, regarded as one of the pioneers of Dalit feminist literature has also become a significant regional voice among the women of the subcontinent. She writes in Tamil about her life and identity of being a dalit and a woman. One of her famous works, *Sangati* published in 2009 is revolutionary in nature and calls for massive social change. Instead of focussing on a single protagonist, the text deals with the experiences and stories of several dalit women, thus breaking the normative literary narrative of a single plot or story.

Bama through a collection of narratives paints a complex picture of dalit women who are mostly the wage earners of hard labour sweating it out in the fields, construction sites, and also match box factories. Dalit women are not only exploited by upper caste men but also by dalit men: “Everywhere you look, you see blows and beatings; shame and humiliation. If we had a little schooling at least, we could live with more awareness. When they humiliate us we do get furious and frustrated . . . because we haven’t been to school or learnt anything, we go about like slaves all our lives, from the day we are born till the day we die. As if we are blind, even though we have eyes” (Bama, 2009, p.118).

Bama also questions the socialisation process of boys and girls. She asks, “Why can’t we be the same as boys? We aren’t allowed to talk loudly or laugh noisily; even when we sleep we can’t stretch out on our backs nor lie face down on our bellies. We always have to walk with our heads bowed down, gazing at our toes . . . even when our stomachs are screaming with hunger, we mustn’t eat first. We are allowed to eat only after the men in the family have finished and gone. What, Paatti aren’t we also human beings?” (Bama, 2009, p.29). Bama also comments on how upper-caste women treat dalit women with contempt. She says that Dalit women should be proud that they earn their own living unlike the upper caste women, and that they are more capable of fighting back their men. Sometimes even a widow is allowed remarriage in their caste unlike that of the upper-caste tradition of excluding the widow from the mainstream of affairs. The stories of Maikanni, Muukkama, Irulaayi, and Pecchiamma throw more light on the lives of these women. For instance, women like Pecchiamma dare to end their marriage by walking out on their husbands.

Another work by Bama is called *Karakku* (2000) which can be roughly translated as ‘militant’ or as being ‘aggressively active’ (as in a cause). It is more autobiographical in nature and is an attempt to share with the world the ill-treatment meted out in the name of class, caste and religion. She shares the experience of being the child of a dalit and the abuse that they have to undergo. It seeks to expose the plight of thousands of dalit children. The author also finds that several of her own people have internalized the feelings of inferiority that are imposed on them by the upper classes.

Other writers and poets have also expressed anguish against caste discrimination through literary works. Meena Kandasamy’s book, *Ms Militancy* (2010) draws on Tamil mythologies to throw open the debate on caste. Here is a poem from the collection where she raises her voice against caste discrimination:

Once my silence held you spellbound
(on reading bell hooks)

.....

Denial of democracy follows the assertion of authority,
manipulating machinery of the state metes out violent punishment.....

or at patriarchy's refined best doles out verbal harassment.....

likewise exploitation and entanglement and estrangement share a
common platform that is threatened by the fear of exposure.....

and the terror of betrayal and everything leads to devaluation of the
militating marginalized who seek to disrupt dismantle.....

and destroy the status-quo even as they struggle against .the erasure
of identity that robs them of expression and makes them exiles
condemned to remain voiceless, speechless, tongueless incapable of
any transgress.

You wouldn't discuss me because my suffering was not theoretical
enough. Enough. Enough. Enough.

Now I am theoretical enough.

I am theatrical enough.

I have learnt all these big big words.

I can use them with abandon.

I can misuse them.

I can refuse them. I can throw them about and one day, I can throw
them out

I am the renegade who can drop these multi-syllable monsters for
stylistic, studied effect.

I am the rebel who can drop them altogether. I invent new ones every
passing day.

FYI, OED consults me.

Roget's Thesaurus finds it tough to stay updated.

But because I use these bedeviled words the way you use me never
means that

I have stopped seething in Anger that I have stopped swearing.

Kandaswamy (2011), www.sampsonia.org/blog

From all the above examples provided in this section, you would have
obtained a fair idea about how contemporary literary works have been used

by dalit authors to express their anguish, resistance and protest against caste discrimination in India. You will find it helpful to analyse this resistance in terms of postmodern theoretical frameworks that you are by now familiar with from your readings of previous blocks.

3.7 LET US SUM UP

We began this unit with a brief look at the historical accounts of caste both in the sense of its origin and its practice during different periods of time. From there we moved on to the changes that have been brought in the caste system through education, livelihood and political mobilization and involvement. In this context, we examined the relevance of the concept of ‘dominant caste’ (rather than the upper caste), as we understand that caste is practiced differently from village to village. A close look at literary works by Dalit writers helped us to analyse the representation of untouchability as well as the intersections between caste and gender in contemporary writings. The discussions in this unit help you to think about the issue of double marginalization faced by lower caste women in the context of subalternity and resistance discussed in the previous block. It will also be constructive for you to compare the debates and representations of caste with those of race and class, which we covered in the first two units of this block.

3.8 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) “Women across castes face discrimination but women of lower castes face double discrimination.” Comment with the help of examples from contemporary literature.
- 2) Do you think that religion is responsible for the existence of caste? Why? Justify your answer.
- 3)
 - a) Based on the discussion provided in this unit, describe caste relations in your area/village/state.
 - b) Now compare what you have described with the way caste relations have been represented in any contemporary work of literature.
- 4) Using any work of literature discussed in this unit, analyse the link between caste and gender by drawing upon the postmodern theoretical frameworks that you are already familiar with, with special attention to issues of marginality and subalternity.

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