UNIT 2 DALIT AND BLACK FEMINISM

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2.1 INTRODUCTION

Dalit feminism is the response to the mainstream feminist debate by dalit women. According to them mainstream feminism in India never addressed the relationship between caste and gender. It was developed by the educated middle class dalit women at the primary stage in Maharashtra and later taken up at the national level. Similarly, black feminism is the voice of Afro-American women articulating issues which were never raised by the white feminists. In other words, race was not in the analysis of white feminist movements. Unlike dalit women, the black feminist claims that the issues of Afro-American women are marginal and kept behind in the larger periphery in hegemonic discourse of United States, white women. The black feminists not only postulated their oppression based on gender, race and class but also criticized the black patriarchal structure. They explored the historicity of the slavery system in term of economic exploitation, production/income, resources and the sexual exploitation of black women. First, we will engage with dalit feminism and then move to black feminism.
2.2 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to:

- Explain the formation and historical background of dalit feminism in India and black feminism among Afro-Americans;
- Trace the genealogy of the movements based on caste and race;
- Analyse the factors which are oppressive towards dalit and black feminist development; and
- Identify certain issues and tensions among dalit and black feminists in the present context.

2.3 FORMATION OF DALIT FEMINISM

The National Federation of Dalit Women formed in the 1990s in the state of Maharashtra and on 11th August 1995 at the national level at New Delhi. They questioned the foundations of mainstream feminism in India. They argued that the questions of class and gender have been the only priority of feminist discourse of India. The question of caste and gender was marginalized in their approach of mainstream feminism. According to dalit feminists, mainstream feminist movement is hierarchical, brahmanic and dominated by upper castes. Dalit feminists contend that they are triply exploited based on caste, class and gender. Dalit women are oppressed through external and internal patriarchy. In other words, internal patriarchy stands for the oppression of dalit women by dalit men. External patriarchy means that they are oppressed by non-dalit men and non-dalit women. The day to day violence and discrimination on the basis of caste is part of the external patriarchy. The most evident example of this might be that dalit women are subjected to rape because they belong to dalit community/caste. At the same time, Dalit feminists argue that the patriarchy which is existing within their own/dalit community needs to be interrogated. We will examine these debates in the writings of Dalit women’s autobiography in the latter part of this unit.

2.4 HISTORY OF DALIT WOMEN’S MOVEMENT

The dalit feminists claim that their history starts from the 19th and 20th century. They argue that Jotirao Phule, Chattrapati Shahu Maharaj and Babasaheb Ambedkar, as discussed in the sub-sections below, were the main leaders who fought against oppression of caste, gender and patriarchy.

2.4.1 Jotirao Phule

Phule started the first school for girls in the year 1848 at Bheedewada in Budhwarpeth at Pune. But, the challenge before him was to find a teacher for the girl students. Therefore, Jotirao Phule trained his wife Savitribai as
a teacher. At Normal school under Madam Michal and Miss Farrar, Savitribai completed her course as school instructor/teacher from Ahmadnagar and Pune, and became the first women teacher in the history of Maharashtra. Savitribai and Jotirao dedicated their lives to end the inequality of women and untouchables through the caste system. They started the first school for untouchable girls in 1848. Phule established two more schools for girls, one each in 1851 and 1852. The school that opened at Nanapeth in 1851 was path breaking in nature. Savitribai Phule faced discriminations from the orthodox Brahmins. They threw stones and cow-dung at her. They also alleged that she was immoral to stop her from teaching.

Phule argued that education is important to redeem women and untouchables from exploitation. Phule initiated the night schools and adults’ school to address the aspirations of those students who were excluded from the mainstream schooling. During 1848-1852, Phule started around twenty schools at Pune. Phule focused on education to liberate lower caste and women. He liked the interventions of colonisers in the terrain of education. He approached the British colonizers to make them understand about the plight of education among the vulnerable sections. Thus, he exposed dominance and power of the Brahmins in the field of education.

2.4.2 Shahu Maharaj

Shahu Maharaj played a very important role in the creation and amendment of laws. In fact, Shahu contributed to the discourse of gender relations in Maharashtra. He was sympathetic towards the education of lower caste girls. He founded an autonomous school for girls from the Chamar and Dhor castes. They were marginalized in the case of education. He declared an amount of rupees ninety-six to be spent on women’s education. The budget for a couple of years and some consolidated amount were provided for lower class girl students by order of Shahu. He declared fee concessions to girl students. Shahu Maharaj revised the Hindu Code Bill that consisted of inheritance of property by women, conjugal rights of husband and wife, adaptation laws, adaptation process, rules and definition of joint families, and equal distribution of property.

Upper castes such as Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras gave a share of their property to their children. But this was not practiced among the untouchables. They were not entitled to property. Therefore, it was a case of further exclusion among the untouchables. The law amended by Shahu asserted that every child should get a share of the inheritance or property irrespective of the caste of the child. At the same time, while claiming property, the child should be at least eight years old. He encouraged inter-caste marriages between religion/communities. He contended that such marriages should have legal validity. He focused on the promotion of inter-
caste marriages to abolish the caste system. During 1920s, at Nagpur Speech, Shahu Maharaj argued that marriage outside the caste and community can only break the hegemony of Brahmins.

According to Shahu Maharaj, the family was the most oppressive system for the women. Oppression was also linked to the lack of education in India. It is connected to the attitude to women. Hindu religion also legitimized the oppression of women in the domestic spheres. Women were oppressed within the family in many ways. Illiteracy perpetuates the stereotypes of women. The family acts as a structure that legitimizes physical and psychological harassments of women by their husbands and other relatives. Thus, Shahu was conscious of the ideology of family and class. He emphasized that only education can liberate women from the oppressive systems of the society.

2.4.3 Babasaheb Ambedkar

Ambedkar empowered untouchables and women through his outstanding intellectual discourse and practice. He was greatly influenced by Phule and Shahu. Ambedkar was born on 14 April in the year 1891. He fought against the system that perpetuates caste based inequality. Ambedkar added a brilliant dimension to the movement of the untouchables through his relentless struggle. He considered the potentials of democracy to address the issues of the untouchables. Ambedkar organised his first conference on caste at Saswad in the year 1903 with one of the prominent activists of Maharashtra, Janba Kamble. He also participated in two conferences of untouchables in 1920. He was the president in the first conference held at Mangaon in Kolhapur State. The second conference of the depressed classes was held at Nagpur in 1920. Shahu Maharaj was the president of that conference. During the conference a resolution which addressed the cause of untouchables. However, the political discourse of Ambedkar questioned the entire ideology of caste and gender.

Ambedkar burned the *Manusmriti* during the Mahad conference in the year 1927. The Mahad Satyagraha was an attempt to gain the right to use public water sources. The *Manusmriti* legitimized the exploitative perspectives that oppress women and untouchables. The burning of *Manusmriti* represents the destruction of the power of Hindu religion. It is an act of rejecting Hindu religion. Ambedkar did his best to expose the concept of purity and pollution related to rights of untouchables to drinking water. He delivered a special speech for Dalit women at Mahad Satyagraha. Ambedkar encouraged them to join the anti-caste struggle. He argued that priority should be given to the women who were excluded from the male dominated domain of politics. Thus, he advised them to join the struggle to abolish untouchability along with Dalit men. He made a comparison between the dominant Brahmin
women with that of the oppression of the Dalit women in the public sphere. He made such a comparison to create political consciousness among Dalit women. He advised them to discard the stigmatized dress code; ornaments and occupations to annihilate the ideology of caste that was part of their day-to-day life. He argued that education is vital for the empowerment of the Dalit women. Thus, Dalit women declared their affinity to the perspectives of Ambedkar by passing their resolution in that meeting. Ambedkar succeeded in creating consciousness among dalit women.

Ambedkar in his work *Castes in India* (1976), delineated the linkages that exist between the three important stratifications of caste, gender and patriarchy. Ambedkar contended that social scientists paid scant attention to the institution of caste. Caste is produced through the prohibition of inter-marriage and limiting of the membership. Indians are divided on the basis of endogamy. The persistence of endogamy from time immemorial reveals the primitive mosaic of Indian society. On the other hand, exogamy i.e marrying outside the caste negates marriage within the same caste and further de-legitimizes the caste system. Therefore, intermarriage becomes a taboo in the Indian society. The dominant communities always prevented it. Dominant sections punish those who violate caste endogamy. Thus, caste is maintained through promoting endogamy and blocking intermarriage. It is controlled through the marriage. The sudden death of wife or husband challenge endogamy. Those women or men who exist after the death of husband or wife may become surplus in the society. In other words, they may indulge in remarriage or incest. Women are forced to undergo burning by themselves in the pyre of the husband. Men are asked to undergo self induced celibacy. Hence, caste, gender and patriarchy is exercised through endogamy.

Ambedkar in his pioneering work *The rise and fall of the Hindu Women* (2004) contends that Brahmins consider women and *Shudras* as inferiors. He further argues that the gender equality that existed before Manu changed due to the patriarchal ideology of the period of Manu. In other words, Manu justified the Brahmical value systems to construct an organised and hierarchical social order. Manu dismissed the Buddhist tradition that gives representation to the women as heretical. Consequently, Ambedkar rejected this act of Manu by structuring the Hindu code bill for women in the post-independent period.

The Hindu code bill addresses the law of maintenance, divorce, marriage, adoption, minority and guardianship. The bill also considers the equal distribution of inheritance to the widow, daughter and widow of the pre-deceased son. It considered females as heirs of property.
Ambedkar was very much concerned about the status of Dalit women. For example, Ambedkar in his speech on 4 July 1936 at Mumbai argues that the women who are involved in these sexuality related professions are living without dignity. In other words, they are carrying the stigmatized caste bound labour. Thus, he advised them to discard such scorned jobs and find employment with dignity in the society. Ambedkar encouraged them to leave Hindu religion that justifies such caste based occupation and to embrace Buddhism that is structured on gender equality. According to Ambedkar, conversion will provide them self respect. It is also important to understand the popular nature of the meetings conducted by Ambedkar.

Almost 25,000 Dalit women delegates participated in the second session of the All India Depressed Classes women’s conference conducted on 20 July 1942 at Nagpur. Ambedkar contended that development and progress can be measured from the social mobility of women from dalit community. He supported the building up of political consciousness among dalit women. He asserted that dalit women should focus on the education of their children. Thus, he cultivated the sense of aspiration among them. At the same time, he was conscious of the burden of patriarchal institutions such as marriage on dalit women. It is considered as one of the step to have a secure life of dalit women. Ambedkar also argued that dalit women should be treated with respect among their families.

Dalit women accepted Ambedkar as their pioneering leader. They elected Shantabai Dani as president of Scheduled Caste Federation at the Nasik conference. The second conference of Scheduled Caste Federation was held in 1944 at Kanpur and the third at Bombay in which Minambal Shivraj was president.

**Box 2.1**

*Activity: Reflect on some of the similarities and differences in the approaches of the three dalit leaders based on what you have read so far. Write these down and think about how some of these issues would have impacted dalit women.*

As you have seen above, Dalit women entered from the private to the public domain and started creating spaces for themselves. In the following section, we will learn about Dalit women’s critique of the Dalit leadership which was patriarchal in nature. We will analyse this dimension by exploring the three main socio-political movements in the history of Dalit movement in India.
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2.5 DALIT PATRIARCHY: CRITIQUE OF DALIT LEADERS

Dalit feminists argued that the dalit women were the active agents of change in the different movements. Dalit women participated in three main political movements in the post independence period. These important movements are the land struggle movement, the panther movement and ‘Namanter’ (re-naming) movement. Despite the active role played by dalite women, they did not have any sort of recognition due to Dalit leaders’ patriarchy. For instance, dalit women were in the vanguard of the above mentioned major dalit movements, but in the public domain these women never been projected as importatant leaders. The real leadership was always monopolized by dalit males. This systemic marginalization of dalit women has been an evidence of dalit patriarchy. In this section, we will learn about how dalit feminists have developed a critique of Dalit patriarchy.

2.5.1 Land Struggle Movement

The main motto of land struggle movement was that land should be given to those who are landless. This movement is also called as *Bhumihin Satyagrah* movement. It had three phases. The first phase, which began in 1953, was restricted to Marathwada and Ahmadnagar district. During the second phase starting from 1958-59, the movement spread to the whole of Maharashtra as well as to other parts of India. Significantly, the struggles during this phase had its repercussions in New Delhi in 1964-65. Latter on, this movement was spread up in all over India. Dadasaheb Gaikwad was one of the pioneering figure and dalit women such as Sitabai, Gitabai Gaikwad and Shantabai were active in that particular struggle. The Republican Party of India was also active during this period.

2.5.2 Dalit Panther Movement

The Dalit Panther movement in the 1970s was an epochal movement in the history of the Dalits. It represented the fundamental socio-economic anxieties of the Dalits in Maharashtra by questioning the patriarchal state agency. At the same time, it argued for industrial growth in the urban spaces and exposed rural caste chauvinism in Maharashtra. They judged Dalit and non-Dalit leaders/parties for their irresponsible approaches to the atrocities committed on Dalits and the deprivation of Scheduled Caste and Tribes in education by the Central and Sate Government after 23 years of independence.

2.5.3 Namantar (Re-naming) Movement

The *Namantar* movement was a movement following the Dalit Panthers. The fundamental debate that emerged during this movement was that Marathwada
University should be renamed as Dr. Ambedkar University, because it was the idea of Ambedkar to construct that university. That particular place (Aurangabad) was selected because Marathwada is the most underdeveloped region in the Maharashtra. But there were anti Namantar group who denied this proposal due to Marathwada chauvinism. From 1980 to 1988, the Namantar movement kept a low profile although processions and demonstrations went on. However, almost all the leading parties in Maharashtra have intervened in this political assertion for the renaming of the university. Dalit feminists contend that dalit women were invisible in these movements due to dalit patriarchy. They also argue that Dalit male leaders suppressed the autonomous emergence of Dalit women in the post-Ambedkarite era by excluding Dalit women from the cultural field of Dalit politics. For instance, the Dalit Mahila federation founded in 1942, left an indelible mark in history of women in general and Dalit women in particular. The main aim of the federation was to mobilise Dalit women from different places and conscientize them on different dimensions of harsh dalit realities. It was founded by Ambedkar during the meeting of Scheduled Caste Federation.

### 2.6 DEBATES ON DALIT WOMEN’S REPRESENTATION AND AUTONOMY

Dalit feminists re-articulate the category of Dalits through their critical reading on caste and gender. They rejected the claims of those upper caste feminist women who work for the cause of Dalit women. They protested against such forms of political patronage. By re-interpreting the perspectives of Phule and Ambedkar they also challenged dalit patriarchy. Their recognition of their oppression structured their identity. It resulted in the formation of the agency and subjectivity of dalit women.

The principal factor of the oppression of dalit women is the institution and ideology of caste that accelerates the patriarchy. For instance, the oppression of the dalit women are carried out through the tangible forms of violence against them. However, the specificity of such violence was not addressed in the mainstream or dominant feminist movement. Dalit feminists recognize this attitude of hegemonic feminist groups which sidelined the links between caste, gender and violence. Dalit feminists also emphasized that patriarchy within their community has to be annihilated in every respect. They also opined that the patriarchy that exists in the dalit community is culturally different from the patriarchy that exists in non-dalit/upper castes. They admit the relationship of dalit patriarchy to the dominant brahminic patriarchal ideology. The specificity of dalit patriarchy, according to dalit feminists, is linked to the oppression of dalits. Therefore, dalit feminists argue that mapping of dalit patriarchy is important to solve their existential
predicaments. Dalit patriarchy only oppressed them in the different spheres of dalit political discourse. However, dalit feminists debunked the facets of dalit patriarchy that subjugate their agency. Dalit feminists successfully exposed the patriarchy within their own families and communities through their autobiographical writings.

It is also important to understand the perceptions of dalit women about their representation. Their understanding of the pitfalls and potentials of their representations are ingrained in their cultural articulations. For instance, autobiographies and literary productions of dalit women elucidate the nuances of their representation, the persistence of the oppression, the contours of brahmanical patriarchy and so on. The development of dalit women’s agency acquires fruition in their writings. Eleanor Zelliot (1992) theorized dalit literature as a self conscious movement. Dalit literature is influenced by Russian and Chinese literature. However, the writings of dalit women are unique in their articulations of caste and gender. Baby Kamble is one of the leading dalit women writers of Maharashtra. Her autobiography *Jeena Aamucha* (Our ways of living) explored the relationship between rural areas, religion, superstitions and so on. She narrates the struggle of dalit girl students against practice of untouchability in the schools by upper caste girls. Thus, she explores the gap that created by caste and gender. She describes how assertive dalit women are treated in patriarchal dalit families. Those women are punished in a barbaric manner. They are also stereotyped as those women who are not confined within the surveillance of the family. Since the 1990s, Dalit women across India have produced autobiographies such as Bama’s *Koraku*, and Baby Kamble’s autobiography (translated into English as *The Prisons We Broke, Autobiography of a Community*). In recent years, many more autobiographies are getting published and translated into the English language. For those of you who want to know more about such works, you may like to refer to the suggested readings provided at the end of this unit.

Having examined dalit feminism within a historical perspective in some detail above, we will now turn to look at a similar women’s movement in the west. The black feminist movement, like the dalit women’s movement, arose as a response to, and dissatisfaction with mainstream women’s movements. As you read through the next part of this unit, try to look for similarities and differences between these two important feminist movements which were formed contemporaneously in different parts of the world.

### 2.7 FORMATION OF BLACK FEMINISM

Black feminism has articulated the voice of black women which was never raised by mainstream white women feminists. Black women have argued that race was not part of the analysis of white feminist’s movement. Black
feminists claim that the issues of black women were marginalized and kept behind in a larger periphery in the hegemonic discourse of US white women. The black feminists not only postulate their oppression based on gender, race and class but also criticize the black patriarchal structure. They explored the history of the slavery system in term of economic exploitation, production/ income, resources and sexual exploitation of black women.

2.7.1 History of Black Feminism

Black feminism has a history of its own. There is stratification among the black women on the basis of nation, ethnicity, class and so on. Therefore, the history of black women is enriched with their plural experiences. It will be interesting to look at the different forms of activity of black women, as well as the history of black woman activists and their collective assertions. For instance, Sojourner Truth (Isabella Baumfree), born in New York State (1797-1883) was a slave and traveling preacher. She delivered powerful lectures on the abolition of race and on suffrage. She emphasized the plight of black women and also challenged the stereotypes about black women. In one of her pioneering speeches “Ain’t I a Woman?” She argues that she is from a different nation, i.e, “the country of the slave.” This expression shows her understanding of her sidelined existence as a slave and woman. She contends that black women are equal to black men in the context of their rights. However, there is a silence about the rights of black women. She delineated that merely providing rights to black women is not going to challenge black patriarchy. Anna Julia Cooper is one of the renowned black woman activists from the United States (1858-1964). She was a slave who later worked as a teacher and school principal. She was active as an essayist, lecturer and organizer for women’s and civil rights and educational reform. She earned her doctorate at the age of 65. She is known as a social activist-educator and one of the early black feminist theoreticians. She was a founder of the Coloured Women’s League in Washington DC in 1894. She also helped to conduct the National Conference of Colorado Women in 1895. She was one of the founding members of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). She considered this as a living embodiment of women’s activists. Mary McLeod Bethune (1904-42) is one of the outstanding black women activists from United States. She was an educator, civil rights activist and organizer of Daughters of Slaves. She was the founder and President of Bethune-Cookman college (1904-42). She is the founder of National Council of Negro Women. She is the first women who managed a federal agency, the Division of Negro Affairs and focused on conditions of domestic service, child welfare, education, lynching, the public press and suffrage. She considers these aspects as some of the core dimensions of the lives of blacks. However, black feminists such as Mary Ann Weathers provided radical perspectives related to the liberation of black women. She was part
of civil rights movement of the 1960s and later joined in the Black feminist movement. She argues that black assertions suffer from patriarchy. She raises the questions such as if black men themselves are not liberated how can they liberate black women. She pointed out the internal patriarchy among the black community. She criticized the black women who operate within the non-black, dominant feminist circles. She considers black women as the most oppressed and degraded minority in the world. Therefore, she argues that black women have to claim for their place. She also urged black women to forge affinities irrespective of their stratification on the basis of class, education and poverty. At the same time, she advocated solidarity with non-black, poor women. She cautioned about the impact of conflict generating racist ideology on blacks as well as whites.

South African women protested against pass laws in 1913. The “Giriama resistance” plays a vital role in the history of black women. The Giriama are a group of people who belong to the place called Kilifi of the east African coastal region. Makatlili started the Girima resistance during the oath swearing campaign among women and men at Koya at 1913. Pare women protested against the colonial taxation. They are the ethnic group who belong to Pare mountains of northern Tanzania. They marched to Tanganvikan district head quarters in 1913. It was a resistance against the taxation of their husbands and sons. They argued that their husbands should be allowed to home from migrant wage labour. Kikuyu women were against the colonial labour policies in Kenya. They produced insulting songs against the colonial labour policies. Kom women were part of nationalistic politics in British cameroons during 1958. Some black women were arrested during the Mau Mau revolt during the period of 1952-1960. Some among them also worked as groups medicine, food and weapons to forest fighters. Several among them went to forest to take care of those children and men who were part of the revolt. Others took arms and joined in the revolt. Black women founded organizations such as Lagos Market womens association (1920s), Nigerian Women’s Party and Abeokuta Women’s Union(1940s). These organizations focused on resistance against colonial taxation,organized market’s women and women’s welfare. Bibi Titi Mohammed, the leader of the women’s musical group Dar es Salaam mobilized women and beer brewers under the Tanganyikan nationalist movement.

Van Allen argues that black women had common economic anxieties during the pre-colonial period and it resulted in their political agency. Black women participated in the major activities of NACCP during 1909 to 1945. Black female teachers were present in the New Orleans branch. Abolitionist leaders such as Harriet Jacobs, Harriet Tubman, Frances Ellen, Watkins Harper talked about race and gender. Angela Davis and Kathleen Cleaver were active in the Black Panthers Movement in the 1960s.
According to Carol Moselbrau, the civil rights activism was one track and the electoral process was the other. She was the first black women to serve in the US senate. A hybrid identity based on the intersection of black and woman formed through the advent of black women into the political arena.

2.7.2 Understanding the Solidarity and Critique of Black Feminist Discourse

Black feminism is not a stream in the wilderness among feminism. It has a genealogy of its own. It challenges the foundations of grand feminisms in a productive fashion. This unit explores the committal-pluralistic strands within the black feminism.

Oyeronke Oyewumi in her path breaking paper “Visualizing the body; western theories and African subjects,” maps the dynamics of “sisteriarchy” and its other. She argues that feminist scholars deploy cross cultural data to study different sections of women without considering their differences. She explores feminist erasures in terms such as Eurocentric as well as racist. Thus, she locates the social space of gendered-African subjects.

Patricia Hill Collins (1980, 1990) introduced the category ‘outsider within’ her group as well as her identity as a woman belonging to that community (1990, p.xi). She argues that African American women have a “self defined standpoint on their oppression.” However, Collins foregrounds that the relationship between black women’s standpoint and black feminist thought is dialectical in nature. The everyday knowledge forms of the women are articulated by experts among those women. Such articulations provide Black woman a different consciousness to differentiate themselves from hegemonic social order. Thus Black feminist thought articulates the already existing forms of knowledge of black women and provide new tools to challenge the hegemony. Collins also traces the Black women’s genealogy of ideas through practices and theories of organic Black woman intellectuals such as Anna.J.Cooper, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Ida.B.Wells, Mary Church Terrel and others. An Afrocentric feminist sensibility emerges through her oppositional-intellectual culture. Collins differs from value-neutral(white) feminists. She deconstructs Dorothy.E.Smith's notion of 'everyday' as the individual condition of white-middle class woman. On the other hand, the notion of everyday becomes ‘collective cum individual’ in the life worlds of Black women.

Patricia Hill Collins (1980, 1990) is one of the most well-known contemporary black feminist theorists who has explored the nature of the category of black feminist. She raised the questions such as who can be a black feminist. She argues that black feminist thought is abound with plural and contradictory meanings. According to her, black women distribute experiences
to enrich black feminist consciousness. She shows the connections between the lives of black women and their knowledge production. Black feminist thought, according to her, is the specialized knowledge produced by Afro-American women which foregrounds the standpoint for black women. Their survival is determined by the knowledge of the dynamics of race, gender and class subordination. Their wisdom lies in assessing that knowledge. It is more related to community than the individual. She theorizes the location of black female African-American as the “outsider-within.” The category of outsider-within shows the experience of being a part of the community and the simultaneous exclusion from it. She also dismissing the positivist epistemology as eurocentric, masculinist in nature. She emphasizes the afrocentric world view that is unique and opposite of the Eurocentric world view since the afrocentric point of view is collective and opposed to individual interests.

Now that we have examined some of the ideas of the main African-American feminists, let us look more closely at some current debates within the black feminist movement.

2.8 CURRENT DEBATES IN BLACK FEMINISM

Some of the debates that engage with the question of race and sexuality provide a different reading to the discourse of sexuality. In this regard, it is important to understand the contributions of the black feminist thinker Audre Lorde (1934-1992) on the question of sexuality, race and black feminist politics. An American writer who described herself as a “Black Lesbian Feminist Warrior Poet,” she was a poet, activist and founder of Kitchen Table; Women of Color Press. She argues that mainstream feminist movement ignores the question of race, sexual preference, class and age. Thus, their category of sisterhood is pretentious in the case of its homogeneity of experience. She also argues that there is bias in the mainstream curriculum related to colored women’s writings. Those writings are treated as the other. She considers the racial otherness of black women as a visible reality. She asserts that white women find it difficult to read black women’s writings because they find it difficult to acknowledge black women as women. They cannot admit their differences from white women.

However, Audre Lorde considers female circumcision among black women to be a crime against black women. She does not romanticize it as part of communitarian politics. Some of her perspectives on sexuality challenge the homophobia of the black community. She argues that black women are not a great vat of homogenized chocolate milk. There are different faces or pluralities among them and those differences are the part of their existence. She considers heterosexism and homophobia as obstacles to the mobilization of black women. She argues that heterosexism is simply one form of love.
Homophobia, according to her, is a terror that is centred on the love for/among the same sex. It results in hate. She challenges the retrogressive position of the black community against black lesbianism. They consider the lesbian as a threat. According to Audre Lorde, the institution of the black family is withered due to broken families, children out of wedlock and so on. She gives the perceptions of black feminists on the family. Thus, she argues that black lesbians do not deviate from their community. They also believe in the family. Audre Lorde argues that European history provides a conditioned understanding of human difference on the basis of simplified binary opposites. The subjects of systematic oppression such as black, third world people, working class, older people, women and so on occupy the field of the ‘dehumanized inferior’ (1984). Lorde contends that the oppressed should teach the oppressor her mistakes. Lorde expands the conceptual terrain of the notion ‘oppressed’ to sections such as afro American children, black and third world people, women, gays, and lesbians. Lorde deconstructs the dominant feminist categories such as sisterhood which erases the intersections of race, sexual preference, class and age. Lorde also emphasizes the determinations of class and economic differences. She also explores internal patriarchy through the atrocities that happen against black women. At the same time, Lorde engages within the differences of black women in a meaningful manner. Based on the above, we can say that Audre Lorde founded the premises of black lesbian sisterhood.

The Intersectionalist approach is a prominent discourse in critical race theory. It engages with race and gender. Kimberle Crenshaw is one of the founders of critical race theory. She is an African American critical race theorist who teaches law at the University of California, Los Angeles. According to her, the category of intersectionality denotes the multiple levels of interaction related to race and gender. It investigates how race and gender intersect in constructing the political, structural and representation dimensions of violence against women of colour. This category also challenges the project of identity politics that homogenizes identities; it focuses on competing identities. Women of colour are theorized as the product of intersections of race and gender. It also deals with the nuances of the marginalization of black women.

2.9 **LET US SUM UP**

You have seen in this unit how the historical struggles of the Dalit and Black feminists emerged as responses to mainstream Indian feminism in India, and to mainstream white feminism in the American women’s movement respectively. The unit discussed how some current debates mark a shift from the aforementioned perspectives on black women and provided a rationale to understand the nature of black feminist intellectual streams.
It focused on the aspect of identity tensions, which exist between the two streams of thought, i.e., black feminism vis-à-vis dalit feminism. We also looked at how these movements reflect the intersection of gender with other inequalities like race and caste.

### 2.10 GLOSSARY

**Afro-American Studies**: This term refers to residents of United States who have origins in any black populations of Africa. It is argued that Afro-American studies derives its critical acumen from Black aesthetics and Black sociology. It also challenges western European ideologies. It is an intellectual discourse that explores the multiple subjectivities of the Afro-American communities.

**Dalit**: This category derives from the Marathi word ‘dalit’ which means ‘broken up’. It became popular by dalit organic intellectual B.R.Ambedkar during the colonial period in India. This category acquired broader definition by radical dalit movement called Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra. It signifies the politicized identity or subject that is endowed with self dignity.

**Ethnocentrism**: This term is first introduced by W.G.Sumner in 1906. It refers to the biased attitude that exists between in-groups and out-groups. It shows the privilege of certain customs and behaviour in society. It is also deployed to refer to show the regional biases of social scientists that is evident in their works.

**Intersectionalist approach**: This feminist approach is initiated by Kimberley Crenshaw, one of the founders of critical race theory Crenshaw. It explores the diverse levels of interactions related to race and gender. It also examines the nature of the political and social dimensions of the gendered violence against black women.

**Race**: This category is used in social sciences to explore the social construction of social groups. It is deployed to explore shared, historical,
ethnic roots of certain communities. The problem with race studies is that sometimes it becomes ethnocentric, especially when race becomes an object of inquiry in the control of dominant/hegemonic communities. Thus, it may end up reproducing the stereotypes based on superior and subordinate race categories.

2.11 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1) Discuss the historical background of dalit feminism in India.

2) Analyse the dalit feminist critique of dalit patriarchy. Use examples of some of the ideas of the three main dalit leaders to formulate your response.

3) How do you understand the formation of the black feminist movement within a historical perspective? Explain.

4) Based on your understanding of the ideas of two major theorists of the black feminist movement, outline some of the commonalities, differences and debates within these.

5) Do you think there is identity tension among the dalit and black feminists in the contemporary period? Explain in your own words with the help of examples.

2.12 REFERENCES


Women and/in Movements


### 2.13 SUGGESTED READINGS


