UNIT 4B  IMAGINING THE NATION-2

Shad Naved and Uma Chakravarti

Structure

4.1B  Introduction

4.2B  Objectives

4.3B  Lyricism and Nationalism

  4.3.1B  Mahadevi Varma and Chhayavad

  4.3.2B  The National-Popular Genre, Geet

  4.3.2.1B  Faiz Ahmad Faiz and Sahir Ludhianvi

  4.3.2.2B  Film Lyrics: Pyaasa

4.4B  The National-Cinematic Institution

  4.4.1B  Secular Beginnings

  4.4.2B  In the Nation’s Shadow

  4.4.3B  New Nationalisms

4.5B  Poetry as Critique

  4.5.1B  Writing the Feminist Body

  4.5.1.1B  Kamala Das

  4.5.1.2B  New Song for Our Times

  4.5.1.3B  Imtiaz Dharker

  4.5.1.4B  Naseem Shafaie

  4.5.1.5B  Mona Zote

  4.5.1.6B  Meena Kandasamy

4.6B  Let Us Sum Up

4.7B  Unit End Questions

4.8B  References

4.9B  Suggested Readings

4.1B  INTRODUCTION

In the previous Unit 4 A, you have studied how performance, dance, music and drama have played a role in imagining the idea of the nation. In this Unit we will further explore the ways in which lyricism, cinema and poetry have textualized the category of the nation. We will also see how the national ‘tradition’ is reproduced through cultural articulations such as song, classical music, poetry, theatre and film. Lyricism will be examined in order to analyse its embedded nature in national-popular genres such as geet and poetry/film lyrics. At the same time, this Unit attempts to explain the secular, nationalistic, socially oriented, neo-nationalistic cinematic reconstructions on the nation. Poetry and other forms of literary genres in post-independent India also unleashed a critique of the traditional
understanding of women’s textualities. We will discuss all of these aspects on in the context of diverse imaginations about the nation.

4.2B OBJECTIVES

After completing this Unit, you should be able to:

- Discuss the rubric of the national - national-cinematic institution;
- Analyse the role of diverse modes of reading the nation within the above rubric;
- Describe the linkages between poetry as a social writing act, and notions of gender, sexuality, caste and class; and
- Provide examples of popular performance traditions that articulated the idea of the nation.

4.3B LYRICISM AND NATIONALISM

What do lyricism and nationalism have in common? Let us begin by looking at the inter-connections between these two ideas. Many of the prominent poets who began writing in the thick of the nationalist struggle foregrounded the personal quality of experience as part of their political poetry addressed to a nationalist public. A crucial example of this is Jibananda Das (1899-1954), a pioneer of the adhunik kabita (modernist poetry) in Bengali. He combined a strong sense of personal alienation with an overwhelming sense of history in his lyric poetry.

This process is best visible in the birth and development of a new literary tradition in the nationalist age. The emergence of Hindi language and literature as the dominant representative of the national struggle, a process that marginalized several north Indian linguistic cultures such as Urdu and contested by other so-called regional languages, required the fashioning of new literary styles and linguistic usage. The first significant movement in Hindi literature, after the influential Dwivedi period of politicized and nationalized Hindi prose and poetry, was Chhayavad (‘romanticism’). Represented by the poetry of Jayashankar Prasad (1889-1937), Suryakant Tripathi Nirala (1896-1961), Sumitranandan Pant (1900-1977) and Mahadevi Varma (1907-1987), this movement aimed to turn poetic language into an exploration of inner, subjective states. Chhayavad poetry kept away from overt themes of social reform and political concerns, but was able to imagine a whole cosmos within which the human subject had to struggle to make sense of itself and attain self-fulfillment. As shown in the case of invented traditions like Bharatanatyam and reformist poetry, the Chhayavad poets expressed abstractions of love, emotion and alienation through precisely marked ‘traditional’ idioms and vocabularies.
4.3.1B Mahadevi Varma and Chhayavad

Mahadevi Varma stands out among the poets of this generation not only because she was one of the few women writers who was recognized by the male literary establishment, but also because of her fierce exploration of subjective states, imagined in almost a social vacuum. But, as Karine Schomer notes in her study of Mahadevi Verma, this distance from social concerns is bridged in the poems by a search for abstract concepts that underlie the Indian tradition (Schomer, 1998, p. 41). Thus, Mahadevi Verma borrows imagery and symbolism from the Rigveda, the Upanishads, Sanskrit kavya, and the medieval bhakti saints in order to re-appropriate the tradition in a “personally meaningful way” (Schomer, 1998, p. 36). Being an artist as well, Verma illustrated her books with her favourite motif of the virahini (the woman pining in separation) and the burning lamp. Her chosen form too was a traditional, more precisely, folk medium of the geet (song) rather than the more literary doha, pad, savaiya etc. From 1934 onwards, when her collection Niraja was published, almost all her poems are geets. The devaluation of popular song traditions noted in the earlier section was thus rehabilitated by Mahadevi Verma in the decidedly high-literary register of her deeply meditative poems. Partly because of this meditative reworking of the geet form, critics and admirers labelled her the ‘modern Mira’. While she often wrote in a devotional register, using the voice of the virahini (a favourite trope in the medieval poetry of Mirabai). Mahadevi’s geets of love present an unselfconsciously articulate woman speaker contemplating not just her inner turmoil, but also her place in the universe. In a characteristic resolution to her poem “Pran hans kar le chala jab” (When Life Took On...),

she writes:

In the shadow of separation,
Thorns and flowers grow together.
This shell, soft as wax, nurtures a pearl of fire.
Becoming a lamp, it burns itself out,
blazing with a hundred flames of new creation.

The heavy symbolism of these lines mixes with the popular geet format to express the desire of the heart (“shell”) which although thwarted leads to “new creation” (Schomer, 1998, p. 91).

We can read Mahadevi’s singular choice of the geet as a kind of resistance against the strictures of literary taste as well as a statement about belonging to a women’s tradition. However, the main point in her poems, as Schomer argues, is to present states of transformative experience, rather than a devotional attitude towards poetry and (national) tradition.
4.3.2B The National-Popular Genre: Geet

By the time of Mahadevi Varma’s experiments in the geet form in the 1930s, political poetry had caught up with the energy and impact of the mass movement for independence launched by Mahatma Gandhi. Such a movement required the representativeness of literary forms for a mass audience who could hear within them the voices of their everyday concerns and experiences. During this period different progressive movements and groups were formed through which a new revolutionary poetry could be written and theorized. One of the most lasting influences was the Progressive Writers Association formed in 1936 by a group of young Urdu writers in London. Influenced by Marxism and the Russian Revolution, these writers were resolutely anti-colonial and believed in the struggle for an independent Indian nation.

4.3.2.1B Faiz Ahmad Faiz and Sahir Ludhianvi

Faiz Ahmad Faiz (1911-1984) was one of the most powerful writers among the Urdu Progressive poets. He was also one of the few modern Urdu poets who took the ghazal (the traditional Urdu poetic form) along with the nazm (metrically freer, continuous poems) in his struggle to find a revolutionary expression suitable for the anti-capitalist anti-imperialist movement. He too, like Mahadevi, wrote a number of geets, in which he moved away from the conventional tropes and vocabulary of the ghazal. Though unlike Mahadevi, the language of his geets is more colloquial (using rustic Hindi dialect at times) and attempts to move closer to the sung aspect of the geet (both Mahadevi and Faiz’s geets have been sung and recorded by major singers in the subcontinent). For instance, his continuous ghazal “Darbar-e-watan mein” (“In the homeland’s court”), though following the ghazal’s rhyme pattern, is written as an anthem exhorting the downtrodden to organize and strive for emancipation. In other poems like ‘Sipahi ka marsiya’ (Elegy for the Soldier) the nationalistic figure of the soldier is presented through the mother’s sung lament about his death in a pointless war. She sings to him “wake up from the earth” – as if trying to rouse a sleeping child (Faiz, 1995, p. 75).

The Progressive geet is taken to another level of popular appeal and lyrical perfection by the Urdu poet Sahir Ludhianvi (1921-1980). Like Faiz, Sahir also burst on the literary scene in the 1940s with his first collection of poetry. Many of his geets were either written as lyrics for Hindi film songs throughout the post-independence period or adapted into film songs. His lyrics appeared in almost 115 films over three decades. (Anantharaman, 2008, p. 113). But it is his lyrics for Guru Dutta’s Pyaasa that brought his revolutionary poetry to fruition through the cinematic depiction of the disillusionment of the poet-hero wandering through the urban jungle of materialism. All the poet’s songs in the film were written by Sahir.
4.3.2.2B Film Lyrics: Pyaasa (1957)

The strongest popular critique of the failure of the national project from the point of view of the margins in society (as articulated by an alienated poet from a lower middle class background, slipping into genteel poverty) came through the protagonist Vijay of the film Pyaasa (see discussion on films below.) The songs of this fictional poet were written by the Progressive Urdu poet Sahir. In Sahir’s own poem ‘Taj Mahal’, the speaker mocks romantic love by pointing to the construction of a marble monument built by a powerful and oppressive emperor through the labour of the poor but who themselves could not lay claim to a similar abstraction of eternal love. However, it is in his poem ‘Chakle’ (Brothels) that Sahir vividly captures life in the alleys, where women make a living amidst sickness and despair, mounting his critique of nationalism.

Both Sahir and Faiz’s poetry provided lyrical material to the song-based Hindi film format. This is not a coincidence. Historically popular-national poetic forms like the geet have been the vehicles of social consciousness which was reflected in the language, representational styles and narratives of the cinematic institution.

Check Your Progress:

Find out the lyrics written by Faiz and Ludhianvi. Analyse it in your own words.
4.4B THE NATIONAL–CINEMATIC INSTITUTION

In this section, let us turn to the fascinating relationship between cinema and the idea of the nation.

4.4.1B Secular Beginnings

Although cinema was closely linked to the mythological at its very beginning—the first film in India made by Dadasaheb Phalke (1870–1944) was Kaliya Mardan (1919) based on the exploits of Krishna which made for viewership in a new medium of religious themes, turning the latter into mass-produced spectacle. Sant Tukaram (1936) by Damle and Fattelal, a hugely popular film based on the life of the poet saint Tukaram from Maharashtra, was read as a veiled subversive nationalist attack on colonial rule evoking the figure of Gandhi (Dwyer, 2006, p. 69). The cinematic medium became a relay point between popular religiosity and anticolonial nationalism, which was the ideological basis of Gandhian nationalism (Kapur, 2000, p. 241; Bhaskar, 1998, p. 62). By the forties, themes of social reform underlining caste and gender fractures were the subject matter of cinema. Himansu Rai and Franz Osten’s Achhut Kanya (The Untouchable Girl; 1936), a hugely popular film, dealt with romance across caste barriers between an upper caste boy and an ‘untouchable’ girl—these were years when the caste question was being debated fiercely in India with Ambedkar and Gandhi locked in a bitter struggle over the demand for separate electorates. Duniya Na Mane (The World Demurs; 1937) directed by V. Shantaram was a bold film that dealt with incompatible marriage between a young girl tied to an old man and was a powerful critique of oppressive gender practices in Indian society. Thus early cinematic experiments were deeply associated with the invention of a cinematic language that could bring about a change in social consciousness in terms of gender and caste relations. While these were not revolutionary texts, often overshadowed by Gandhian nationalism, they opened up cinematic space for questioning the terms, imagery and assumptions of both nationalism and cinema as a national institution.

4.4.2B In the Nation’s Shadow

Post-independence filmmakers produced films both idealising the nation and interrogating it. Shaheed (1948) and Samadhi (1950) played out the theme of nationalist struggles and patriotism immediately after 1947. But by the early fifties there were serious critiques of the nation as it had come to be. Ritwik Ghatak (1925–1976), one of the key IPTA personalities of Bengal, is best known for his powerful films dealing with post-partition Bengal and its dislocated refugee populations. Pegged around strong female protagonists trying to re-build lives in a fractured society, gender norms are turned on their head in his films. While the men are unable or unwilling
to support families, women step in not only as emotionally nurturant figures but also as actual material sustainers of the household such as *Meghe Dhaka Tara’s* (1960) protagonist Neeta. Or else they cling to their ideals in a deeply corrupted world as the patriarchal head of a family decides to uphold caste identity in the face of humanitarian bonds that had built up between dislocated people, even though his decision leads to a tragic denouement in *Subarnarekha* (1962). Visually the female protagonists in Ghatak’s films are represented through the use of mythical and allegorical elements, heavy with symbolism, which lend the genre of melodrama a way to deal with notions of home, homeland, exile, and of a fractured nation in post-partition Bengal.

In *Guru Dutt’s* (1925-1964) *Pyaasa*, the failure of the nationalist project is articulated through its songs, as mentioned above. The poet Sahir reworks his poem ‘Chakle’ through an additional refrain: *jinhen naz hai Hind par woh kahan hain?* (“Where are they who are proud of India?”). The lyric writer of a film is able to make this move through a visualization of a song which heightens the sense of alienation within the genre of melodrama. Sahir’s poem, with its somewhat timeless appeal, is provided a specific setting through a refrain turning it into the theme song of the film sung by Vijay at what is meant to be his memorial meeting. (He is declared to be dead and his poems have been taken over by crass publishers making money from his poems even though they refused to publish them before.) Working within the more mainstream cinematic tradition, Guru Dutt’s film questions the relationship between art, capitalism and nationalism. While he does not break away from the conventions of modern mass-produced cinema, the filmmaker turns the emotional power of songs and performance (Dutt himself plays the brooding, suicidal poet) towards a critique of his own medium.

**IPTA on film**

In the late forties and through to the 70s filmmakers inspired by an association, directly or indirectly, with IPTA focused on the lives of people on the social margins. An early beginning was made with Chetan Anand’s *Neecha Nagar* (Lowly City; 1946), an adaptation of Gorky’s *Lower depths*, was a commercial failure even though it was screened at Cannes. K.A. Abbas’s *Dharti Ke Lal* (Children of the Land; 1946) and *Sheher aur Sapna* (The City and the Dream; 1963) focused on the underclass in rural and urban India. In the latter, a homeless female protagonist lives out her life in a metropolis, finding shelter from the elements in an unused drainpipe in Bombay. In Europe, the cinematic trend of neo-realism was reflected in films such as Vittorio de Sica’s *Bicycle Thief* (1948) which, along with IPTA’s politically activist theatre, created conditions for the emergence of the cinema of social realism in India. This was best represented in Bimal Roy’s *Do Bigha Zamin* (Two Acres of Land; 1953). Here, the peasant protagonist,
whose battle against feudal power and emerging industrial capital fails (leading to the loss of the eponymous two acres of land that he owns) was memorably played by the actor Balraj Sahni, himself an important member of the IPTA in the forties and fifties. *Do Bigha Zamin*’s publicity poster was made by Chittoprasad, an artist who had sketched the people affected by the Bengal famine. Its songs were set to IPTA lyrics drawn from folk tunes lending poignancy to the desperate battles of the peasantry against a range of oppressive forces. A different marginal location was immortalized by M.S. Sathyu in his *Garam Hawa* (Scorching Wind; 1973) which dealt with a middle-class Muslim family losing its livelihood in post partition Agra and contemplating migration to Pakistan. Social revolution, not communal migration, was the film’s resolution of this emotional and political conundrum of postcolonial Indian Muslim families.

### 4.4.3B New Nationalisms

Despite the nuanced criticism of the nation-idea and its mythology by Ghatak and Dutt, a distinct tradition of nationalist cinema has been kept alive by the Bombay film industry. In *Mother India* (1957), Mehboob Khan’s celebration of Indian womanhood, melodrama allows a turn away from the social realism of *Do Bigha Zamin* in order to depict the epic struggles of a widow fighting to feed her two young sons while retaining her virtue. She epitomizes the new nationalism, the nation as mother—poor but virtuous, surmounting the evil forces assailing her. The male peasant protagonist of *Do Bigha Zamin* is recast in *Mother India* as the peasant woman who tries to hold on to her land against great odds. The film also epitomizes the surmounting of good over evil in the form of Radha, the ‘Mother’ India, as she goes to the extent of killing her own son in order to uphold the honour of the village in which she lives. In later decades, films such as *1942: A Love Story* (1994), *Lagaan* (2001) and *Rang De Basanti* (2006) play with historical narratives of nationalism as a backdrop to produce contemporary cinematic spectacles. *1942: A Love Story* reduces the Quit India Movement to a backdrop for a romance between an Indian nationalist and an Anglicized elite man; *Lagaan* provides a patriotic rebuttal of British claims of superiority over Indians through the spectacle of a cricket match; and in *Rang de Basanti* the legacy of Bhagat Singh is deployed to challenge the political corruption of post-independence India, a theme that has gained popularity today particularly with the economically aspirant middle class. Women are undeniably part of these filmic narratives, but their protagonists are overwhelmingly male.
Check Your Progress:

i) Discuss the national-popular genres of geet and ghazal.

ii) What is relationship of IPTA with Cinema?

4.5B POETRY AS CRITIQUE

Due to the reformist and nationalist suspicion of pleasure in the nationalist phase of literature, music and dance, modern Indian poetry, both in English and the Indian languages, attempted to reconcile the demands of nationalist mobilization with the inner world of subjectivity and the mind. As shown in Section 4.3 B, this reconcilement meant the disowning of living traditions of women performers and artists. These female traditions were considered too public in their modes of address and circulation. Women poets who began writing in the aftermath of various nationalist poetries had to contend with the double burden of upholding an ‘ancient’ tradition as well as distinguishing themselves as women artists against the more public women performers: the courtesans, dancers and singers of the salon culture. Still, critics and readers treated women’s poetry different from men’s often trying to read banal personal details in their crafted writing. Yet women’s
poetry written in the post-independence period has thoroughly questioned both these restraints on women’s poetic endeavors, breaking a new path in the investigation of the mind, subjectivity and physical desire through the rules of poetic language. We will now review some of the major figures of critique and dissent and the kinds of poetry they wrote in the post-independence period.

4.5.1B Writing the Feminist Body

The pre-modern *rasa* theory of performance has influenced poetry written in the modern period, but its remaining erotic and sexualized components have led to some of the most important debates in aesthetics in the twentieth century. The stylized presentation of the Krishna–Radha romance in dance and music, for example, made room for the expression of more intimate, personalized feelings of desire and love in poetry. Poets like Mahadevi Varma turned the basic symbolism of the Krishna romantic cult into the examination of subjective states of the female speaker. With the reexamination of women’s writing and history in India, spurred by both western feminist theory as well as the Indian women’s movement, the physical body became an important site for locating women’s resistance against idealized social roles and physical violence in domesticity and public spaces. The space of the lyric poem allowed room for speaking about pleasure as simultaneously intensely felt and politically important experience. The credit for opening this space belongs to the post-independence generation of feminist poets.

4.5.1.1B Kamala Das

Kamala Das (later Kamala Suraiyya) (1934–2009) broke two taboos in her first collection of poetry, *Summer in Calcutta* (1965). She used English in such a way that it did not sound stilted and forced in the medium of poetry. This was a singular achievement for a poet who decided not write in English as an outsider. She owned the language as her own intimate medium. Such was the power of her English poems that non-Malayalam readers may not even know of her brilliant career as a fiction writer in Malayalam where she used the pen-name Madhavikutty. In a poem called ‘Introduction’in this collection, she writes:

The language I speak / All mine, mine alone.
It is half English, half /Indian, funny perhaps,
but it is honest...

(De Souza, ed., 1997, p. 10)

The second taboo was the discussion of sexuality and female desire in poetry, written publicly by a woman under her own name. These lines are from the same poem:
“When/ I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask
For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the
Bedroom and closed the door.
He did not beat me
But my sad woman-body felt so beaten”
(De Souza, ed., 1997, p. 10)

Kamala Das’s poetry thus announced her taking charge of poetic language, not as a world of external, stylized symbols (as in some pre-modern poetry), but as the inner sensations of the body.

This early poetry developed into a powerful interrogation of the languages of desire that women are forced to inhabit and have learnt to imbibe unthinkingly. In ‘The Old Playhouse’, a poem from her third collection published in 1973, the poetic persona unpacks the notion of love:

“... love is Narcissus at the water’s edge, haunted
By its own lonely face, and yet it must seek at last
An end, a pure, total freedom, it must will the mirrors
To shatter and the kind night to erase the water”
(De Souza, ed., 1997, p. 16)

In this remarkable poem, Das writes in her famous poetic persona (‘I’) trying to express both a personal experience of desire and its implications for women and sexual relationships in general. The speaker proposes that love does not end with two people coming together forever, but rather is a force that sets people free by removing the limits of their self in recognition of ‘a pure, total freedom.’ Written amidst the women’s struggle for emancipation worldwide in the 1970s, Das’s poetry aspired to move beyond the confines of home, nation and gender, not into a fantastic utopia, but in the clear light of self-knowledge.

4.5.1.2B New Song for Our Times

The generation of women poets inaugurated by Das also includes such pathbreaking figures as Pakistani poet, Fahmida Riaz (Urdu), Eunice de Souza (English) and Mamta Kalia (Hindi and English). Their work has analyzed and displaced effectively the dominant symbolism of women as birthgivers, as upholders of national identity and the motherland. E.g. Riaz’s second collection of poems Badan darida (The Lacerated Body) (1973) shook the Urdu literary establishment in both India and Pakistan due to its frank description of women’s physical sensations of sexuality, pregnancy and menstruation. Writing about a more culturally specific context, Eunice de Souza’s poetry ironically exposed the oppressive patriarchal strictures of Catholic society in Bombay.
It seems obvious today that women poets have moved beyond such oppressive symbolism in discovering newer languages of writing about women’s experiences and desire, but this has come about through a sustained struggle by poets like Das and her generation to give themselves a language which would be liberatory not just for them personally, but for the larger society. It is this impulse that continues to circulate in the writing of contemporary poets living under the renewed pressure of nationalist symbols and the increased violence of state and patriarchies against women’s bodies and right to self-expression. We now turn to a few poets who have written poetry of protest, assimilating the insights of the post-independence generation as well as offering their own views of poetic style and emancipation from nationalist-patriarchal symbolism.

4.5.1.3B Imtiaz Dharker

An important aspect of the post-independence period is the movement of populations and communities across sharply defined political frontiers. The first moment of this process was the partition of the subcontinent in 1947. But the decades after independence saw the establishment of diasporas of South Asian communities in Britain and North America. Although removed from the home countries, the symbolism of women as tradition and home-bound domesticity continued in diasporic communities. Many of the important postcolonial writers began there careers abroad or were born in diasporic communities. Interestingly the imaginative pull of the nation and its founding myths continued to be engaged in their writing. In particular, women writers have written about the accumulated weight of racism, traditional patriarchy and gender roles in the lives of expatriate families and communities.

Imtiaz Dharker was born in Lahore, Pakistan in 1954, raised in Britain and now lives in India. Her first collection of poems, *Purdah* (1989), brings together the dominant concerns of feminist poetry: the restrictions on women’s creativity, the symbolization of women as nation and tradition, and the repression of women’s autonomy in sexual and social terms. In her poem ‘Purdah I’, for example, she undoes the conventional image and institution of veiling by imagining the moment when a girl is first made to wear the veil:

“She stands outside herself, 
sometimes in all four corners of a room. 
Wherever she goes, she is always 
 inching past herself”

(De Souza, ed., 1997, p. 50).

The poem does not associate veiling with any particular religion or culture. Instead its focus is on the moment when the veil shuts down an old life for
Imagining the Nation-2

its wearer, and inaugurates a new one. The new restriction, the speaker reminds us, is meant for the girl ‘to learn some shame’. The veil forces the girl to look inwards if she is to make sense of this sudden, inexplicable change in her life. This focus on the inner life serves two political ends: (i) it insists on the subjectivity of women who have otherwise been restricted from public life behind the veil, and (ii) it universalizes the veil as the metaphor for femininity as it exists under patriarchy. Thus, the poet does not simplify the issue of ‘purdah’ as merely a physical hindrance or marker of cultural identity. It allows us to see the difficult choices women have to make in a society which views their bodies and lives as marked by shame, and offers possible ways out of this conundrum. The poem ends on the image of doors opening “inward and again/ inward” as a sign of the richness of the inner life of women living under the veil of national shame and honour and offering that as a possible way out of physical restrictions. (See MWG-008, Block 3 Unit 3).

4.5.1.4B Naseem Shafaie

If the novel and short-story form have been the dominant narrative frames for telling the story of nationalist and post-independence India, then poetry has been the predominant voice of protest and anger against state coercion, both colonial and postcolonial. Nationalist poetry itself relied on the symbols and metaphors of a poetic landscape to imagine a new dawn following the defeat of colonial forces. It is thus not surprising that poetry, with its introspective mood as well as song-like emotional appeal, has given voice to the disenfranchised and brutalized people of the so-called conflict zones in modern India. An important example is Irom Sarmila, the legendary one-woman protest icon of Manipur fasting against state repression, who has chosen poetry to reflect her hopes, desires and fears in her painful more than decade-long hunger strike against the Indian state (Sarmila, 2010).

Naseem Shafaie belongs culturally to a long, golden tradition of women poets writing in Kashmiri: Lal Ded, Habba Khatoon and Arinimal. She writes in Kashmiri and, according to Salma Ashraf, for decades was the sole woman participant in important mushairas (poetic gatherings) in the valley (Ashraf, 2012). Born in 1952, Shafaie was awarded the Sahitya Akademi award in 2011, a first for a Kashmiri woman poet. Although brought up with an Urdu-literary upbringing, she chooses to write in Kashmiri after formally studying her mother tongue at university and realizing its poetic expressiveness.

Having personally witnessed the insurgency and state repression in Kashmir during the 1990s, Shafaie’s most famous poem ‘Baakh’ (Wail) dramatizes a woman’s viewpoint otherwise lost in the masculine worlds of the insurgency and the army. Rather than write impersonally about women waiting for sons who had gone away to fight, Shafaie presents us with the predicament of
a ‘queen’ who awaits the return of her ‘young princes’. While others’ children have returned, she frantically awaits the return of her own, until someone quietly informs her that she might be waiting in vain. This leads to the poem’s dramatic high-point where the ‘queen’ withdraws into her house (Ashraf, 2010). The speaker shows the enormity of a grief, which, on the one hand, cannot be assuaged by any concrete news of the missing boys, and on the other, must be hidden from sight as the mother must remain within the house and mourn privately. But the poet makes the wail break out of the domestic confines and pierce the hearts of the neighbours and the poem’s readers. She suggests that women’s voices need to be heard if we are to make any sense of the violence that still continues in Kashmir.

4.5.1.5B Mona Zote

Mona Zote’s example stands out in contemporary Indian women’s poetry because of its resistance to becoming a mere representative of her community or region. Born in Bihar in 1973 to Mizo parents, Zote writes in English and lives in Aizawl. However this does not mean that she simply writes about her own life. In her own words, in an interview with Ashley Tellis, “I think every poet is a community unto herself” (Tellis, 2011, The Hindu). She insists that there may not be any superficial similarity between poets writing in mainland Indian and the peripheries, but there is mutual interest and comprehension of poetic form and writing in verse. However, she does acknowledge the burden of history in her homeland: its Christian patriarchal framework and the almost two-decades long violent uprising against the Indian state. Zote has not published any book yet, but her poems have widely appeared in anthologies and collections of women’s writing and poetry.

In one of these anthologized poems, ‘What Poetry Means to Ernestina in Peril,’ we encounter the dramatic mode of presenting another named woman as she sits contemplating “what should poetry mean to a woman in the hills” (Sen, ed., 2006, p. 66). The poem reminds us that all poetic ‘I’s are artificial constructs and we need to hear a poem to understand what it is trying to say rather than read it like an autobiographical confession. The poem’s protagonist Ernestina is one such artificial construct. Kamala Das’s personal life, for example, was endlessly scrutinized by critics in order to grasp the hidden meaning of her poems. Zote writes against this very critical tendency when she describes her protagonist Ernestina’s realization about the nature of poetry:

“Poetry must be raw like a side of beef, should drip blood, remind you of sweat and dusty slaughter and the epidermal crunch and the sudden bullet to the head.”

(Zote, 2005, p.66)
Poetry, for this speaker, requires an ability to register and convey extremes of emotion and sensation. The various references to bodily fluids and sensations in these lines remind us of the importance of the body in feminist poetry. The final image of the “sudden bullet’ brings forward the subdued history of violence in ‘the hills” (Zote, 2005, p.66). A later line in the same poem states: “We have been bombed silly out of our minds”(Zote, 2005,p.67). While being a meditation on poetry and writing for someone living in the national periphery, Zote’s poem addresses the barely hidden history of violence (national and patriarchal) through this meditation on poetic art. This shows that questions of art and politics are inseparable for this poet, even if on the surface it might not appear so. This is another mode of writing politically conscious poetry.

4.5.1.6B Meena Kandasamy

Although autobiography has been the predominant form of expression in the Dalit movement, poetry is increasingly being used to articulate the experience and self-formation of the modern Dalit subject. In this regard, formal, literary poetry is not the only poetic expression available to an individual or community. Just as Dalit autobiography’s claim (e.g. by Bama writing in Tamil) to represent a collective, rather than an individual autonomous self, oral and folk poetry has circulated in Dalit communities for centuries as part of the group effort at survival and sustenance in the face of exploitative and humiliating labouring conditions. The canonization of high-caste poetic models and poetics has meant a systematic silencing of this hidden tradition of poetic expression in the Indian tradition. A living tradition of protest songs, poetry and theatre has been nurtured, for example, by the Kabir Kala Manch based in Pune, Maharashtra. Following the anti-caste tradition of Phule and Ambedkar and the IPTA plays, the Manch performs angry social critique in its plays and songs, away from the commercial theatre stage, at streetcorners and local neighbourhoods (Patwardhan, 2012).

Dalit poets such as Mallika Amar Sheikh and Pradnya Lokhande (both write in Marathi) have already broached the questions of women’s experience and caste oppression in their poetry. Meena Kandasamy is a young poet who writes mostly in English, and translates from Tamil. A familiar face in the media as a voice for Dalit feminism, Kandasamy has published two books of poetry. The second collection, Ms. Militancy (2010), as the title suggests, is a militant manifesto for an anti-caste, anti-communal feminism. As in the case of Kamala Das and Mona Zote, Kandasamy is also interested in developing a poetic persona through which the limits of both the self and society could be explored and criticised. For her, female sexuality is an unharnessed revolutionary force which needs to be recovered from patriarchal repression and nationalist symbolism. Thus, in her poems a pronounced display of female desire shocks the reader into a political awareness of the silence
nation and imagination around women’s bodily pleasure and violation in our society. She achieves this effect notably by re-reading ancient Tamil and Sanskrit myths which have become frozen in the languages of devotion and religion. Kandasamy insists that true emancipation of women from tradition would occur through the double strategy of asserting female sexuality and forcefully questioning and reworking the symbols and myths that have justified women’s physical oppression for centuries. The body as the site of feminist resistance gets another lease of life through her Dalit feminist poetry.

4.6B LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, you have learnt how cultural expressions re-present the idea of the nation. We have looked at some of the complex relationships between lyricism, national-popular genres such as geet, the national-cinematic institution, neo-nationalistic interpretations, feminist-poetic critique and the category of nation. Thus, we have attempted to capture the nature of the plural-cultural interpretations of the idea of nation.

4.7B UNIT END QUESTIONS

1) In what ways is cinema a national-popular institution in India? Give examples from at least two filmmaker’s work in this context.

2) Why is the body and its desires important for contemporary feminist poetry? Explain with examples from any two poets from the post-independence period.

3) By choosing any one poet, analyse how her poetry provides a feminist interrogation of the idea of the nation.

4) Read any one ghazal by Faiz. Critically analyse its lyricism in the context of the imaging of the idea of the nation.

4.8B REFERENCES


4.9B SUGGESTED READINGS


