UNIT 2  GENDER AND CLASS

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Structure

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2.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous Unit you read about race and ethnicity and how the politics of race and ethnicity impact notions of gender and nation. In this Unit, we will study about the concept of class which adds a further dimension of complexity to the highly stratified and hierarchised Indian society within which women have to struggle daily for their own place as individuals. You will learn about how women of all classes face disadvantages in different ways at the hands of patriarchal structures and individuals who perpetuate them. In fact, often women of higher classes fully participate in the oppression of their lower-class counterparts. Ironically, these same women may also be victims of discrimination at the hands of men and women of their own class.

2.2 OBJECTIVES

After completing this Unit you will be able to:

• Explain how class and gender intersect to form a ‘double bind’ of oppression in India;
• Examine the particular experiences of women from varied classes and background;
• Analyse the factors which contribute to the exploitation of women across classes; and
• Identify issues are highlighted in literary works so that they find representation and voice.
2.3 CONTEXT: GENDER AND CLASS IN INDIAN WRITING

The social classification of people into ‘classes’ has existed in every society from the beginning of civilisation, such as ‘patricians’ (those who could be members of the Senate and run for high office) and ‘plebeians’ (commoners) in the city republic of Rome; ‘estates’ in medieval England (where the first estate was constituted by the aristocrats, the second by the clergy and the commoners were identified as an undifferentiated mass of people who usually worked with their hand and had little or no property); and ‘zamindar’ (landlord) and ‘ryot’ (tenants or sharecroppers) in feudal India. According to the time and location, nomenclatures have been different but the strand which unifies all cultures in the matter of social classification is the ownership of property in the form of land or capital or the lack thereof. This has determined the position of a person in the class hierarchy as well as social status. Clearly, class is a carrier of more than economic power, or in other words, economic advantage leads to access of other privileges such as social and cultural advantages.

Karl Marx was one of the first social scientists to formally study this phenomenon and much of the foundational terminology used in discussions of the concept of ‘class’ is borrowed from his works. The Communist Manifesto (1859) by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels and Marx’s Das Kapital: Critique of Political Economy (1867) establish some of the fundamental critiques of class. Engel’s 1889 work The Origin of the Family, Private Property and State further traces the relationship between gender and class oppression which is not due to any perceived biological inferiority on the part of women but is a function of social relations. This implies that women and their bodies are used for transaction between men to further their ownership of property and capital. As such, the ‘purity’ of women is useful currency in such exchanges such as marriage and reproduction. (Please see earlier discussion on Marxism and Feminism in MWG-001, Block 5, Unit 1, Section 1.4).

In addition, economic marginalization or privilege translates into empowerment or its lack in other spheres as well, such as society and culture. The sociological concepts of cultural and social capital delineate this issue further. While working class men too suffer from this disadvantage, women’s suffering is further compounded due to their gender which forms a ‘double bind’ of oppression. In the Indian scenario, this is further complicated by complexities of caste, an issue which will be discussed in greater detail in the Unit on ‘Gender and Caste’ (You may revisit MWG-002 Block 2, Unit 2).

The subjection of women to the twin bondage of their gender as well as their class is a universal phenomenon. In the twentieth century, various
feminist movements have attempted to address both these issues. In India, socialist and dalit feminists also address these questions.

Here, a brief exploration of the position of women and engagement with gender in various traditions of Indian writing is required for our complete understanding of the issue at hand. The unique subject position of women and feminine experience constituted the main focus of the early Indian novel which emerged in the mid-nineteenth century. This was due to the fact that women were the site on which debates between tradition and modernity were played out. In addition, it is quite palpable that writers like Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya, Rabindranath Tagore, O. Chandu Menon mostly represented women characters of their own class—the educated elite and middle-classes. As such, the dilemmas of these women were particular to this class. Further, the issues and concerns highlighted by these upper-class and often upper-caste male authors reflected a conflict that derived from the national discourse, that between tradition and modernity. As a result, women characters often embodied one or another aspect of male anxiety. On the one hand, goddess-like, chaste and pure, she became the symbol of ‘Indian womanhood’; on the other, ironically, there was an element of wish-fulfillment to the feminine ideal moulded by Western liberal discourses which constructed women as companions to their male partners within the conventional patriarchal and heteronormative marital arrangement. Female characters like Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya’s ‘Indira’, Rabindranath Tagore’s ‘Binodini’ and O. Chandu Menon’s ‘Indulekha’ reflect these conflicting masculine desires and anxieties.

However, with the spread of education, rise of printing press as well as a growing literate population, the authorial base was also democratized as were the subjects of their inquiry. Women also entered the commercialized and public world of writing and publishing, often against the wishes of their family. Even the first step in this direction, the acquisition of literacy, was a dangerous and thus, transgressive move on the part of women. Authors such as Pandita Ramabai and Begum Rokeya Sekhawat Hussain and Ramabai Ranade document in their autobiographies the struggle against their own families in their quest for education, often, but not always, with the support of their husbands. More interesting are the efforts of women like Savitribai Phule, a ‘backward’ caste and working class woman and Nati Binodini, one of the first actresses in the emergent theatrical tradition of India. Their autobiographies, memoirs and other writings created space for lower-class women to express their selves within the emergent construct of modernity which otherwise remained an elite and masculine space. Savitribai along with her reformer husband Jyotirao Phule tirelessly championed the cause of education for girls from underprivileged backgrounds and contributed enormously to social reform. Conduct books or instructional manuals, written both by men and women, aimed at producing ideal women within the
stipulations of their caste, class, and region. These endeavours might be largely limited in their scope and regressive but in some instances, functioned as a rare space for the tentative expression of a nascent, independent subjectivity.

The advent of the All India Progressive Writers Association led by stalwarts such as Premchand aimed to address the issues of the oppressed and downtrodden, such as that of the labouring class and the agricultural poor. With this, their particular concerns found a voice in literature as well. Several visionary women writers were also associated with this movement who highlighted crucial issues of gender in their writing. Female authors such as Ismat Chughtai, Rashid Jehan and later Amrita Pritam represented the complex subject-position of women with reference to their gender, their sexual desires and orientation, their efforts at education and personal autonomy.

The rest of this Unit will discuss in detail the depiction of women characters of various classes by male as well as female authors and the varied dynamics of this representation. We will discuss a wide range of literary works, inclusive of the experiences of all classes of women as well as dalits and tribals. Class will be the main dimension discussed here in order to understand how wealth and status may not always be guarantors against patriarchal and social exploitation. On the other hand, those without the support of property, family affiliations and state are among the most marginalized sections of our society. In addition, a variety of genres like poetry, short stories and novels from Indian writing in English as well as translations are explored to make this discussion widely representative.

We will look at Premchand’s novel Godaan (1936), Jayanta Mahapatra’s poem ‘Hunger’, Anita Desai’s novel Fasting, Feasting (1999) and Mahashweta Devi’s short story ‘The Wet Nurse’ to examine women characters of various classes and their gendered experience in conjunction with their class position. As literary works are fictional constructs within which imaginary characters and circumstances are subjectively portrayed by the novelist or poet, their objective and critical reading is important. Thus, Premchand’s depiction of rural, poverty-stricken women and urban, middle-class, educated women is found to be coloured by his own understanding of feminine ideals. Anita Desai’s novel re-creates a middle-class family living in a provincial town where the post-independence promise of freedom is denied to women within their own households, even though there is no threat of homelessness and abject poverty in their case. Jayanta Mahapatra’s poem ‘Hunger’ critiques society where poverty forces a father to push his teenage daughter into prostitution. To save her family and herself from starvation, she must offer her body for food to wealthy men. Mahashweta Devi’s short story pushes the maternal image to the extremes, so much so that the figure of the nurturer (even though a poor woman), occupies the pedestal of the divine.
However, once her ‘use’ is over, she is pushed to the margins by society, her own family and it seems, by fate itself.

In conclusion, some of the positive developments in contemporary writing towards greater sensitivity to issues of class will be referred to.

## 2.4 WOMEN AND CLASS IN EARLY 20TH CENTURY LITERATURE

Premchand’s novel *Godaan* is a significant intervention in twentieth century Indian literature, bringing the plight of the agricultural poor suffering under feudalism to centre stage. The emergent domain of the political, economic and social, complicated with increasing industrialization, early electoral politics and a rising professional middle class (such as doctors and lawyers) is also brought within the ambit of discussion. The focus of this novel is on rural life and its ideals as opposed to the industrialized city. Women, as constituting an inherent part of the rural landscape of India and as a foil to the harsh masculinity or ‘false’ femininity of the city, present an interesting study for us, through this novel.

Dhaniya, Hori’s wife of 25 years, has been his constant companion in their daily struggle and the only remaining source of any happiness for both is the bond they share. While Dhaniya is more astute in her understanding of people, her apparent harshness is only a façade for she shares Hori’s ideals of piety, despite their own impoverished status. The upholding of these values such as hospitality to a guest or sympathy and generosity towards others is that which also disadvantages them. When Bhola, who has artfully conned them out of 20 rupees worth of straw, visits and calls Dhaniya ‘Lakshm’, she is overjoyed. Similarly, even in the most straitened circumstances, “Blessings for Hori welled up within her, inspired by all the devotion and self-sacrifice her womanhood could command” (Premchand, 2007, p.16, emphasis added).

While there is an ironic understanding of all such simplistic ideals, the intrinsic belief in them by the villagers, despite their erosion under colonialism and colonial modernity, is highlighted by Premchand. This rural ideal of women as goddess Lakshmi is in contrast with the harsh lives they lead. Domestic violence, as between Hori’s brother and his wife Hari and Punni, is common, as are the difficulties women face in their lives. They participate in back-breaking agricultural work in the fields as well as household chores, much like Black slave women reveal in their narratives. To retain any modicum of humanity and any ethical value under such circumstances functions as a feat in itself. Punni’s character serves as a foil (contrast) to Dhaniya as the former has turned into a raving, bitter and quarrelsome woman, a ‘Kali’ as opposed to Dhaniya’s Lakshmi. When a
family dispute arises and a fight over the sale of bamboos breaks out, Punni’s behaviour results in domestic violence and disharmony, again a jarring contrast to Hori and Dhaniya’s relationship.

“Arriving at the scene, Hira grabbed Punni’s hand, pulled her away and began kicking her. “You little bastard!’ he shouted. “determined to ruin my reputation, aren’t you? Running around fighting with these nobodies”.

(Premchand, 2007, p.45)

In response, Punni curses back as well. The suggestion is that while in the divine pantheon there are both prototypes of feminity available, a Lakshmi is preferred to a Kali within the domestic set-up. Also, a woman who is violent, quarrelsome and interferes in masculine transactions, un-sexes herself, i.e., she operates outside her gender and this ‘unfeminine’ behaviour results in ‘shame’ for her family.

On the other hand, Malti, the Cambridge-educated doctor is portrayed as a deviation from womanhood and her independent lifestyle is critiqued as shallow, licentious and lacking the essential qualities of a caregiver. This is the first description of her:

“The other, dressed in high heels and smiling brightly, was Miss Malti. A practicing physician who had studied medicine in England, she has frequent access to the mansions of zamindars. She was the living image of modernity—expertly made up, delicate but full of life, lacking any trace of hesitation or shyness, a wizard at sharp repartee, an expert in male psychology, a connoisseur of the pleasures of life, and a master of the art of charm and enticement. In place of conscience she had glitter; in place of heart, coquetry. And she had put a strong block on her feelings that checked all desires and passions”.

(Premchand, 2007, p.76, emphasis added).

Malti, in keeping with her image as a woman with no conscience and loose morals, is allegedly also flirting with Mr Khanna, a lawyer and a married man. Here, she is a contrast to Kamini, Khanna’s wife, similar to the Dhaniya-Punni, Lakshmi-Kali binary. In spite of her urban setting, education and wealth, Kamini adheres to the Gandhian ideal of women which Premchand deems appropriate, both in external appearance as well as morals, described as “wearing a homespun sari and looking very serious and thoughtful” (Premchand, 2007, p.127). She also forgives Khanna all his dalliances and cruel behaviour towards herself, attesting to her ideal as a ‘Savitri’. However, the fact the Malti exposes the hypocrisy of all the men present through her Wittiness and challenges their pretensions, is not depicted positively. Instead,
her intrusion into the masculine sphere adds to her construction as an immoral, unfeeling, harsh woman, who can hardly deserve the name ‘woman’.

The scene where Malti (who usually charges heavily for her medical advice) is inspired by Professor Mehta (whom she also loves and admires) to visit the villages to treat patients and partake in social service, is depicted as an important turning point. Here she meets Dhaniya and other rural women, as the two worlds of the city and village, typified by their women, meet. This is also the beginning of Malti’s transition from a shallow ‘westernised’ modern woman to one who uses her education for the good of the downtrodden. What is problematic are the values accrued to the term ‘modern’ and the portrait of the early professional woman as one who is sexually and socially unethical and one who needs to be rescued out of the situation through commitment to sexual chastity and selfless social work.

In the case of Hori and Dhaniya, their difficult lives continue as before even though their son has a well-paying job in the city. In addition to their own family, they also look after Hori’s family even though Hori had run away from the village after poisoning their cow. Hori passes away just as he had lived, slaving under impossible and demanding poverty and physical labour, but watched over by Dhaniya who comforts him in his last moments and keeps up a strong front. While they were still suffering under the shadow of paying off the debts due to the cow’s death, her family and neighbours urge her to make ‘godaan’ or gift of a cow to a Brahmin which is considered as a guarantee of gaining heaven for the departed soul. Dhaniya emerges as the true hero of the novel when she defiantly places the only remaining money in the house, 20 annas, in the hands of the priest saying that this was the only ‘godaan’ she could make. This touching scene is a slap in the face of ritualized Brahminical, upper-class society and practice, which runs only on the fuel of superficial rituals while lacking compassion and empathy. However, her giving-up of the only remaining bit of money towards the last rites of her husband is a complex choice complicated by their class. On one hand, it depicts Dhaniya’s love for him and belief in their shared ideal or dharma but also the inability to escape the conditioning of a caste-ridden, hierarchical society as there is no alternative towards which she may aspire. Dhaniya’s defiance and Hori’s compliance are both trenchant critiques of class-based society and the conditions of agricultural labourers in the country, denying and robbing them of humanity.

Thus, in Godaan, the lives of women such as Dhaniya and Punni, the wives of poor farmers are depicted humanely, despite essentialisms such as the Lakshmi-Kali binary. However, the portrayal of the ‘modern’, urban, upper-class feminine in the satirical sketch of Malti is stereotypical and prejudiced and her ultimate move towards selfless social service may reflect Premchand’s
Gandhian principles, but also evinces the fear and apprehension associated with women stepping outside their traditional roles in the early 20th century.

**Check Your Progress:**

*Do you agree with the projection of particular kind of class in Premchand's Godaan? Explain briefly in your own words.*

**2.5 WOMEN AND THE GREAT INDIAN MIDDLE CLASS**

Anita Desai’s *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) is the tale of a quintessential middle-class family set in a provincial town in a post-Independence India - the father a government official and mother, a traditional housewife with three children, Uma, Aruna and Arun. Their hegemony over the children is such that for them, the two parents have merged into one unit known as ‘Mama Papa’. While the beautiful, vivacious and rebellious Aruna is able to break away from rigid parental control through a ‘suitable’ marriage and Arun is sent to America to study where he seeks his solitude, the tale of the eldest, Uma, epitomizes the fate of millions of middle-class Indian women.
While Uma is a diligent student at the local convent, and attracted to the habits of the monastical Catholic nuns, her continuous poor results lead to her withdrawal from school when she is in Standard VIII. This is because an extra hand is in demand at home where her mother has delivered a baby boy after a sudden and unplanned late pregnancy. From here onwards, Uma’s life becomes one of constant household chores and care. Her clumsiness, physical ‘ordinariness’ and lack of ‘feminine’ skills such as cooking peg her further down in the hierarchy of societal approval and parental affection.

Once she is deemed to be of marriageable age, the hunt for a groom begins in earnest, with helpful neighbours pitching in—reflecting the Marxist maxim of women being commodities in the marital exchange. However, one ‘misfortune’ seems to follow another in all attempts to ‘marry off’ Uma. The first prospective groom’s family turn out to be mercenary cheats who rob the family of dowry and post-engagement, refuse to solemnize the marriage. Promises of a prosperous groom with a big house in the new part of the town are dashed for Uma. With her dowry gone, Uma’s chances are further reduced in ‘the marriage market’. On the other hand, the attractive and independent-minded Aruna plays the field and after rejecting several suitors, picks up the one who is “the handsomest, the richest, the most exciting of the suitors who presented themselves” (Desai, 1999, p.45). However, once separated from her family, Aruna seems to embody and perpetrate the same patriarchal rule her parents had, over her husband’s family, reserving only disdain for all.

The other young female member of the extended family is Anamika, their first cousin who lives in Bombay. Beautiful, talented as well as intelligent, she wins a scholarship to Oxford for college education. However, she lacks Aruna’s will and as is the practice in conservative middle-class families, is not allowed to go abroad to study. However, her achievement becomes an additional attraction to win her a suitable groom, and advertised as such by her family. Anamika’s marriage to a much older and repressive husband turns out to be an unhappy one, and she is physically and verbally abused by her husband and mother-in-law as a routine. However, even after clear cases of such criminal behavior by her in-laws, resulting even in her complete incarceration within the house and hospitalization, her immediate and extended family make no efforts to help her. Such cases are rampant in India and such negligent behavior on part of the woman’s family not unfamiliar.

What is shocking beyond everything else is the mercantile analogy such as ‘damaged goods’ used for women who cannot bear children as well as deemed to have other drawbacks such as being divorced or having lost their
virginity. While Aruna and Uma hope that Anamika finds escape by being 'sent back’, Mama’s response epitomizes stereotypical societal attitude and another instance of the role of women in internalization and propogation of patriarchy:

“Mama snapped as she whacked at a mosquito on her foot with the small palm-leaf fan she was waving. How can she be happy if she is sent home? What will people say? What will they think?” (Desai,1999, p.33).

Within the patriarchal, class and social matrix, Anamika is another mosquito to be swapped and the opinion of society on such damaged goods rather than her well-being is prioritised. When Aruna responds angrily to this, Mama shoots it down terming it ‘modern ideas’ learnt in the convent and that it would have been better to get the girls married the being sent to such a school. Towards the end of Part I, Anamika dies in a replay of another commonplace scenario in Indian households–burnt to death by her i-laws family and the incident being passed off as suicide. The terrible repression and cruelty practiced within the family reminds of Alice Walker’s novel *The Color Purple* and the injunction by one of the characters that no female child was free in a household of men, and in the Indian context, it can be extended to the women within the family such as Mama, Lila Aunty (Anamika’s mother who puts up silently with the fate of her child) and Anamika’s mother-in-law.

The second attempt at marriage for Uma turns out to be worse still, where her dowry is used by the much-married husband to support his first wife and their four children and his business. Uma is left as little more as a maid at the in-laws house, her husband abandoning her immediately after the marriage ceremony with the relationship unconsummated. The life that follows for her as a divorcée at her parent’s house may not make the cut as a textbook example of family repression faced by women, yet, is as touching and sad. She is burdened with all responsibilities of the household as well as those of a nurse and constant companion to her elderly parents. Any attempt on her part towards an independent life, one she cannot even articulate a latent desire for, is met with parental displeasure. In the overt and subtle modes via which Uma’s agency is snatched away, even if untouched by physical violence and only perpetrated through insidious parental pressure, leads to several psycho-somatic disorders such as epilepsy and depression, etc. She is not allowed to take up respectable offers of jobs such as being the warden of a nurses’ hostel by her demanding parents who also fear social reprimand in allowing their divorced daughter to work. Her efforts to find company with the missionaries is similarly thwarted and her short and only vacation as a companion to the over-zealous and religious Mira-masi also comes to an early end. Allowed no avenue outside the threshold
of the home such as a profession, a hobby or even friendship, Uma’s life becomes one of dull housework and nursing her parents, with her mother being the only and rather inadequate shield against paternal iron-clad discipline. Thus, middle-class women like those in the novel, may not suffer from want or hunger, but the systematic repression of their spirits is a regular practice.

2.6 ‘HUNGER’: POVERTY AND SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

Jayanta Mahapatra’s poem ‘Hunger’ is set in a coastal village of Orissa, where the meager income from fishing is all that keeps the all too immanent starvation away. The narrator is ‘carelessly’ offered the services of a prostitute by a fisherman, the irony being this was also a father offering his daughter for sale. Unaware of the reality of the situation and in the throes of sexual desire, “It was hard to believe the flesh was heavy on my back” he agrees (Mahapatra, 1976[1999], p.43). The bargain is thus struck between two men over the transaction of a woman’s body, and in this case, patriarchy does not operate as the overbearing system of the middle-classes which pretends to preserve the ‘honour’ and virginity of its women, using this status later in the marital transaction. Here, driven by extreme poverty and desperation, the father strikes a different exchange, even if offered carelessly as this might have become a matter of routine for him, but not without guilt.

as though his words
sanctified the purpose with which he faced himself.
I saw his white bone thrash his eyes.

(Mahapatra, 1976, p. 43)

Mahapatra portrays the circumstances with rare sensitivity, humanizing the situation and not addressing it at the mere level of polemic. The trauma of the father suffering the prospect of starvation and the guilt of the narrator labored by sexual ‘hunger’ is depicted. In this case, class operates to turn parasitic upon the woman whereas in the case of Desai’s Uma, it had imprisoned her into passivity and physical, emotional and psychological confinement. Sexual deprivation and sexual exploitation then are two sides of the same coin, limiting feminine subjectivity and rendering her marginal. The sea-side shack to which the narrator is led, makes him all too aware of the desperation which led men there, their sexuality repressed by a puritan social and moral code which in turn spawned such victimization and the yet more tragic situation of women like the prostitute.
Check Your Progress:

Describe in your own words the experience of poverty, hunger and sexual exploitation discussed above.

2.7 BREAST TALES

Mahasweta Devi’s ‘The Wet-Nurse’ is the tale of Jashoda, who takes up professional motherhood as her vocation for as she says, “this world is the monopoly of professionals” (Devi, 2006, p.26) and amateurs, even if they be beggars, have no space here. She is the wife of a Brahmin, Kangali, whose poverty nevertheless does not take away the sacred status he holds in society and whose feet act as ‘totems’ (Allison, 2010) for the rich Haldars who must touch his feet daily for his blessings. However, in a bizarre turn of events, his feet are lost in an accident when the Haldar son runs over his feet in his new Studebaker, resulting literally in a loss of his standing in society. This loss of livelihood as a cook results in the Haldar household hiring Jashoda as wet-nurse for the offspring of the family, for Kangali might have lost his feet but his virility is unscathed by the incident and Jashoda is in the incessant state of pregnancy and childbirth.

Prior to her arrival in the household, the same Haldar had sexually assaulted the cook who had murmured no protest and had held her secret, “quite
pleased her body had attracted the young man” (Devi, 2006, p. 28). However, the boy driven by guilt and fear of disclosure gets her fired on the pretext of her being a thief. This liminal status occupied by the female servant in well-do-to households reflects the double bind of class and gender they are incarcerated in, whereas sexual and economic exploitation and sudden loss of the meager livelihood is the order of the day.

For Jashoda, the situation is different, protected as she is by her caste which endows her with a certain sanctity, and her symbol as a totem required in several household religious ceremonies, as well as her status as nurturer of the offspring of the family. On the other hand, the upper-class women, the wives of the boardwalks, find her presence useful as they can now fulfil the paradox of their status wherein they must remain attractive to their husbands and thus maintain their figures, at the same time, ensuring progeny for the dynasty and such constant motherhood threatens their youth and beauty. Thus, a transaction is affected wherein the beauty of the breasts of the rich Haldar women is maintained to serve the lust of their husbands while the breasts of the wet-nurse of a high caste can keep the progeny fed: “They could act the eternal child, Gopal, in bed because their own children were being nursed by Jashoda; the wives had no grounds to reject their advances” (Devi, 2006, p. 41). This also pleases the wives further since the men continue to shower affection on them instead of seeking satisfaction outside the home with prostitutes. She also seems to affect a further moral change in the household as after being nursed by Jashoda, the male children develop a maternal attitude towards her and other maids and thus incidents like those with the cook, come to a stop. Thus, by occupying this maternal status in the household and entering into the sexual economy through the exclusive use of her breasts for the non-sexual purpose of nurture and care, she manages to regulate it for the rest.

Her maternal plenitude marks her as exclusive and she soon acquires a scared cultic status in the family and neighbourhood. Caught in the societal binary of being either a whore or a chaste wife, Jashoda’s position as chaste wife and universal mother transcend her to the other conventional subject position, of holiness and sanctity. Her husband’s friend and fellow priest at the Simvahini temple, Nabin Panda, who had lusted after Jashoda, undergoes a change as well and regards this ‘breast-giver’ with the same respect accorded to the goddess. What is crucial is that in a culture of female deities and worship of feminine power in Shakti cults, the attitude towards the women folk is not commensurate with such worship. As the name-sake of Krishna’s foster-mother Jashoda, this wet-nurse fulfils her maternal role. This business also benefits her own twenty children as she is well-fed and paid for her services by the Haldar household and her sons grow up to be well-to-do priests.
However, this spate of good luck comes to an end when there are no more young children to be reared and the lady of the household, Haldarginni, passes away. The joint family breaks down and Jashoda is retained as a lowly cook by one of the women of the household. No longer protected by her special status, Jashoda in her old age feels the cruelty of her position as a servant for the first time. Her own children do not care for their mother and her husband Kangali, who had lived off her all life-long is able to easily find a position in another temple and move out of their house. He who had lusted after her full breasts has no use for her and has an affair with a young girl who is his ‘Bhairavi’, meaning his consort in the tantric Shakti practices but in reality only an honourable word for a concubine.

Soon, rejected by the whole world, Jashoda’s breasts which had played such an important part in her life breaks out in sores, which turns out to be breast cancer. She suffers alone at the hospital as the haldar household is only too glad to not have the ‘sin’ of having a Brahmin woman die at their home. Jashoda is initially shown some attention by her husband who abandons her as well when her condition deteriorates and she finally dies at the hospital, in great pain, wondering how she had been the ‘world’s mother’ but lay suffering alone without any kin to call her own. The last line of the story indicts the cruel patriarchal and social system which renders such economic transactions so that Jashoda’s apparent ‘blessing’ becomes her curse, causing her cancer:

Jashoda’s death was god’s death. In this world, it has always happened that when a person takes on godhood upon himself, he is rejected by everyone and left to die alone.

(Devi, 2006, p. 72)

The writings discussed so far constitute some of the landmarks within the Indian canon. Since then, further positive developments have taken place, especially with the advent of postmodernism. This has created the space within the publishing industry for local, micro-narratives from a personal perspective, especially by people who belong to the marginalized working-class. For instance, autobiographies of sex-workers like Nalini Jamila and domestic workers like Baby Haldar have now found their deserved place. Upper-class authors of a diverse range of genres spanning both fiction and non-fiction are also representing working-class voices with greater complexity and sympathy. Arundhati Roy’s God of Small Things, Katherine Boo’s Beyond the Beautiful Forevers and Siddhartha Deb’s The Beautiful And the Damned: A Portrait of the New India are some recent examples.
2.8 LET US SUM UP

As evinced in the discussion of these stories, poems and novels, the Indian situation is unique wherein the escape from constraints of poverty does not ensure social or personal freedoms for women, or it may situate them in conflicted binaries such as that of the prostitute or the goddess. Thus, class and gender discriminations coalesce often to complicate the disadvantages faced by women as well as men, making it more difficult for them to define their subject-position or even occupy an individual space which is not determined by these handicaps. This analysis enables us to think of overarching categories such as gender or class in nuanced and complex ways. Within this framework, critical analysis of writings which reflect on the Indian scenario are an attempt to indicate new, more egalitarian possibilities.

2.9 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1) Discuss the history of the discourse on class and gender, particularly with reference to developments in Indian writing since the late nineteenth century.

2) With reference to Premchand’s *Godaan*, discuss what is the author’s understanding of class and femininity? Is it problematic and why?

3) Analyse Mama’s character in Anita Desai’s *Fasting, Feasting* with relation to her daughters Uma and Aruna and their cousin Anamika.

4) Does Jashoda’s status as a universal maternal figure symbolized by her milk-endowed breasts become her bane? Do you agree? Read the short story and give a reasoned answer.

5) Comment on the two varieties of hunger to which the fisherman’s daughter in Mahapatra’s poem ‘Hunger’ is the victim.

2.10 REFERENCES


### 2.11 SUGGESTED READINGS


