

Block

# 4

**COMPARATIVE WORLD LITERATURE-I**

<b>Block Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>UNIT 1</b>	
<b>Ways of Looking at Reality</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>UNIT 2</b>	
<b>Life Writings</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>UNIT 3</b>	
<b>Words to Win: Rashsundari Debi's Amar Jiban</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>UNIT 4</b>	
<b>Sally Morgan <i>My Place</i></b>	<b>44</b>

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## **BLOCK INTRODUCTION**

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### **Comparative World Literature-I**

Examples from Dalit literature, Diasporic literature, African writing and West Indian writing serve to show how hidden realities are revealed. This Block will examine the numerous ways of self expression for the writer to reveal these truths, one significant device being self narratives. When only one side of the picture is painted, the reality is only half truth.. By discussing certain key concepts and ideas around Genre, Gender, Culture and Literature, and by making references to some texts, we can observe the coming together of the personal, the political and the literary. Where oppressed and exploited groups are concerned, the life writing of one is usually the expression of the whole community. By examining the life writing of Sally Morgan, an Australian aboriginal writer and Rashasundari Debi, we can understand their urge to share their experiences with the other, crying out for social justice and understanding.



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# UNIT 1 WAYS OF LOOKING AT REALITY

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## Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 The Writer's Reality as an Insider (Autobiographies)
- 1.3 The Writer as an Outsider (Fiction, other Genres and Various Slants Used in Writing)
- 1.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.5 Glossary
- 1.6 Unit End Questions
- 1.7 References and Suggested Reading

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## 1.0 OBJECTIVES

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Reading Comparative Literature helps us to enrich and widen our knowledge of different cultures, customs, history and tradition of nations. It also enables us to view different writings from various angles by becoming conversant with critical thought like deconstruction, Post colonialism and hybridity. By the end of this unit, you will be able to view a given text from more than one viewpoint or interpretation. This will not only help you to develop your analytical and critical skills but enable you to understand realities from other experiences as well.

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

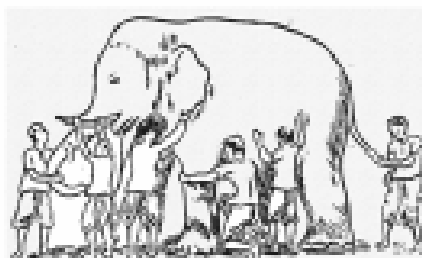
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What is reality? Something that you see around you? Something that you feel deep inside you? Something that tells you, this is the truth? Or something that others tell you about? Reality is all these, and much more. It is related to each individual's experience with him/herself and the outside world. But the reality of one may differ from that of the other on the same subject, because the perspective or the way of looking at reality of each individual may be different.

Wallace Stevens' poem *Thirteen ways of looking at a Blackbird* best exemplifies this point when a writer gives us a multiplicity of perspectives and asks us to open up and question our mindset which sticks to expected assumptions. He also talks about the unification of the world in various ways e.g. through man and woman or through man, woman and a blackbird.

In Jainism, Syadvad or Anekantvad is explained with the parable of the blind men and an elephant. When each blind man is asked about the elephant, one holds the ear, the other the trunk, the third the leg, and describes it accordingly. No one can see the whole elephant, which means that human knowledge is limited and cannot be perceived through the senses.

Syadvad or Anekantvad refers to the principles of pluralism and multiplicity of view points, the notion that truth and reality are perceived from diverse points of view and that no single point of view is the truth. It encourages its



adherents to consider the rules and beliefs of their rivals and opposing parties. So one might say, the whole idea of Comparative Literature is based on this philosophy. The multiplicity of narratives and their view points need to be shared with each other to get a total view of the glimpse of world literature.

### Activity 1

Think of some texts where tradition has been questioned. This would mean that there is another way of looking at reality. One example is Maithili Sharan Gupta's *Saket*. Read it and see how the difference in perspective brings in other dimensions of the same situation. Find and read other such texts.

## 1.2 THE WRITER'S REALITY AS AN INSIDER (AUTOBIOGRAPHIES)

Before we discuss any kind of writing as a category: as autobiographies, marginalized writing or diasporic writing, we have to keep in mind that there are points of both convergence and divergence. In these writings, while the writers may share the major experience of marginalization, loss of identity and expression or confinement and suppression or even enrichment, their social, political and cultural differences mark them as individuals with their unique experiences.

When the writer interacts with his self and his surroundings with intense subjectivity and builds up his experiences, the writing emerges in the form of confessional writings or autobiographies. We have writings of great public figures and national leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, B.R. Ambedkar, Jawahar Lal Nehru, Martin Luther King and APJ Kalam. Their writing is motivational as their writing relates to the analysis, growth and development of the self in relation to public and political events. It is an account of how they were able to rise with strength above terrible experiences of discrimination, imprisonment and suffering and emerge victorious as leaders.

We have autobiographies of women, who, culturally placed in different backgrounds, have completely new and diverse experiences to relate. For e.g. Reshsundari Debi's *Amar Jiban* is the story of a Bengali illiterate woman who secretly acquired literacy skills to read sacred texts in an age when girls and women were denied education and deemed fit only for household chores. Sally Morgan's *My Place* is her narrative of aboriginal Colonization by the Europeans in Australia. It is more than a feminist text and works as a critique of Australian history. Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (1969)* is an account of an African American woman's expression of the trauma of racism and abuse of the body of a black woman.

Dalit autobiographies have opened up an entirely different world, the world of the marginalized category where the speaking subject narrates his own tale of suffering as the main protagonist. Dalit literature is a critique of traditional Hindu Brahminical society that perpetrates untouchability. It maps a new world of realism where we have realistic portraits of the society in the form of autobiographies. These realities are explored in Limbale's *Akkarmashi*, Shanta Bai Kale's *Chora Kulhati Ka*, Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* and Bama's *Sangati*. All the autobiographies talk of individual lives yet explore Dalithood in its fullness. While *Joothan* expresses the humiliation of having to eat the soggy leftovers of upper caste children, *Akkarmashi* is the pain of an illegitimate child, with no name and no place to call his own. *Chora Kulhati Ka* is the experience of the dancer's son who faced extreme poverty and misery and yet was able to rise above his circumstances to study medicine and

become a doctor. Dalit women writers like Bama have given Dalit literature a feminist slant by exploring patriarchal oppressions within the Dalit community. She exposes the double marginalization and sculpts a separate culture at the same time.

Dalit literature makes place for a new kind of aesthetics - Dalit aesthetics. It rejects the aesthetics of beauty and pleasure found in Marathi literature and fosters the feeling of liberation and freedom. Rebellion and anger are its hallmarks and it aims to achieve dignity and self respect. All Dalit literature is inspired by Ambedkarite thought. The language of Dalits is marginalized by some non-Dalit critics and labeled as obscene and the language of slums. By using this very language, Bama in Tamil Dalit literature has created a landmark in literary history. She has used the native idiom of the Paraiya women, which sparkles with vibrancy and makes a space for Dalit culture with its songs, rhymes and chants. This colloquial style of Bama upsets the decorum of upper caste Tamil language users and its aesthetics. Abusive language is a means of hitting out at the patriarchal setup in which Dalit women live and it is perhaps the only way to escape physical manhandling or subvert authority. She has reclaimed the language of the women of her community. When the Tamil Dalit writers try to reclaim Dalit art forms of oral tradition like spectacle, mask, gesture and language without compromising with the mainstream Tamil writer, they form a new aesthetics.

Similarly, Dalit Marathi and Hindi writers subvert the symbols of dominance. The teacher in *Joothan* who refuses to give admission to Valmiki is called Dronacharya by Valmiki's father. Dronacharya is given a negative connotation by Valmiki. He is considered prejudicial in his attitude for Eklavya. Similarly, Limbale calls his mother (who is a mistress of the Patel) Sita and Kunti. He calls himself Karan, thereby upsetting the traditional notion of purity and superiority. These writers give prominence to authenticity of experience rather than the beauty of language. Limbale also uses language full of sexual inferences in *Hindu*. Dalit writing is a form of activism as it is a collective effort for change through rebellion. The question of whether the writing of non-Dalit writers writing Dalit literature is authentic is a debatable issue. The difference persists in the perspectives of both the writings.

In the short stories and novels of Premchand, Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things* and U.R. Anantha Murthy's *Bhartipura*, we have seen that the characters are pitiful figures incapable of action themselves, weighed down by circumstances and victims of oppression. If there are mass movements, they are led by the Savarnas. In Premchand's novel *Karma Bhumi*, Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* and U.R. Anantha Murthy's *Bhartipura* where mass movements are shown, individual Dalit figures are almost negligible and character portrayals are inadequate. The protagonist in *Bhartipura* shows his inability to communicate with them. Where individual figures are drawn as in Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things* and Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* - both Velutha and Bakha are sensitive characters but victims of circumstances unable to act on their own. In Limbale's *Hindu* where Dalit characters actively participate in the Andolan, they have the capability of changing the course of events. They are rebellious, aggressive and self-assertive. Some of them are bought by money but others have the ability to hit back. This is the great difference between the writings of Dalit and Non-Dalit writers.

Can Dalit writing be equated with Marxist writing or Afro-American writing? The Dalit Panther movement (1972) was inspired by the militancy of the Afro-American movement (1966) and many similarities were found. Both fight for equal rights in



an unjust system. The Afro-Americans are segregated by their colour and the Dalits by their caste. Both the movements were born out of pain and agony, to fight discrimination of all kinds and the struggle for self-respect and dignity. Afro-Americans have not experienced the pain of untouchability, which the untouchables have gone through. In this, it is different and distinct from the Afro-Americans' situation. But in their fight against injustice they share a common ground. The Afro-American feeling of pain is expressed through blues, ballads, stories and novels. The Dalit pain is expressed through autobiographies, novels, poetry and folk-theatre. Dalit literature is also equated with Marxist literature especially by Non-Dalit writers.

Kancha Ilaiah talks of Dalit marginalization in all walks of life: in culture, language, textbooks and social norms and suppression by Brahminical hegemony, in his seminal work *Why I Am Not a Hindu*, he contests the Brahminic culture, civilization and history, and builds up a Dalit alterity with its traditions, culture, history, language and society. One is reminded of Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* which talks of the violence inflicted on the lives of Blacks, their culture and society in different forms. This process of repression is similar to that of the Hindu society of the untouchables. In the text, Ilaiah goes on to celebrate Dalit life and proves that it is more democratic than Hindu society. In this way, while he deconstructs the supremacy of Hindu culture, he also builds up an alternative theoretical discourse for the writers of Dalit literature.

When Dalit writers present Dalit life with their experiences and construct their autobiographies on the details of everyday life, on the one hand they expose casteist practices, on the other they build up Dalit culture. So while they disrupt the hegemony of Brahminical life, values and culture, they also present Dalit culture in its differentness, with its resistance of upper caste and upper class norms. Dalit writers are thus making space for themselves in life and literature.

### Activity 2

Mark and note down points of similarity and difference in the autobiographical writings of national leaders and Dalit writers.

All migratory writing explores the theme of rootlessness and unbelongingness. But while Diasporic writing is the expression of conflict and tension of being caught up between two cultures and countries (e.g. Jhumpa Lahiri's writings) forced migration or exile evokes writing which carries marks of suffering and the pain of the physical torture of their ancestors, of emotional starvation and segregation. In his autobiographical work, *Requiem for a Rainbow*, the Fijian writer Satendra Nandan writes, "...they must understand the fractures of our history; the parameters of our heart's pain... The only manuscripts to decipher are the broken, battered lives"(254). Satendra Nandan pours out his anger, love, sadness, loss and understanding in writing about his ancestors. In a way, this kind of autobiography is not merely a documentation of facts but the detailing of the inner experiences of a whole generation. His grandparents were the 'Girmityas', the 'girit people' "More than 60000 were brought in from May 1879 to 1966. They came as young men and young women, Hindu and Muslim, North and South Indian, carrying in their gathries the obsessions, passions and prejudices of the submerged India: people from an ancient culture..." (133). These indentured people tried to find a foothold in an alien land by clutching tightly to their Indianness.

Their cultural identity became a framework for their individual identity. The Indian rituals, marriage ceremonies, festivals, and theatres (of Ramlila) formed a part of their life which forged an Indian imagination. Colonial Education and an alien



language took them away from the native Fiji language. Living with a “fractured identity”, when political upheaval shook Fiji, once again Nandan had to leave his native soil and transplant himself in Australia. The fragile nature of his self forced him to vent his feelings in the shape of an Autobiography. So his autobiography thus becomes history, “the outside is the movement and placement of people in a given historical moment; what actually happened in the past and the inside component consists of the thoughts of historical agents. All history is the history of thoughts”. (Wallach 447) These are some examples to show the different kinds of reality portrayed in the writing of Autobiographies. Later in this Block, you will be reading Sally Morgan’s *My Place* as Australian Aboriginal Writing. You will then be able to see how her experience is different from the autobiographies already discussed here.

### Activity 3

Pick up a couple of autobiographies in any language and see how the writers document and analyse experience. Is there a difference in the autobiographies written by men and women or people from marginalized and mainstream communities? What is the difference?

## 1.3 THE WRITER AS AN OUTSIDER (FICTION, OTHER GENRES AND VARIOUS SLANTS USED IN WRITING)

The experiences of the writer are sometimes fictionalized or other genres used to express realities. When the writer experiences emotions of love, pity, humor, anger or ecstasy and mixes it with an objectivity which fuses his/her vision or philosophy of life, the writing that emerges is imaginative. It is seen in the form of poetry, fiction, drama, travel writing and essays etc. Such writing could take a Marxist stand or Freudian view point. Munshi Premchand’s writings which are mainly village narratives have a Marxist leaning. D.H. Lawrence makes use of the Freudian drive and George Orwell is known for his democratic outlook. Rousseau’s passion for nature is depicted in his essays and Wordsworth expresses his love for nature in his poems.

There are different types of writing depending on the slant, or the angle the writer takes. Realistic writing makes use of a social, political historical or cultural backdrop to enact the human drama of life, while highly imaginative writing can be seen in the form of fairy tales, supernatural writing, adventure stories, detective writing or science fiction. Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* is a realistic text and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is an example of science fiction. To express ideas, the writer makes use of certain devices such as allegory, myth, legend, fantasy, mystery etc and produces epics, folk tales or archetypal writing. In fact, some of the elements and devices cannot be separated from each other. A single work can also be viewed from different angles. For example *Animal Farm* is an allegory, a fable and also a political treatise. Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* lends itself to a moralistic interpretation, but is also full of supernatural and magical elements. *Harry Potter* is a mixture of magic, adventure, mystery, thrill and fantasy. Similarly Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* can be viewed as a fantasy and magical realistic text. Grimm’s *Fairy tales* combine in themselves adventure, magic, mystery and morality and in this way the examples can go on. We have seen how writers order their experience in various ways and this enables us to look at writings from various angles.

#### Activity 4

Give one example each of any text that you have read where (i) Myth (ii) Legend (iii) Archetype is used. Can you differentiate one from the other? (Look at the **Glossary** for an explanation of these terms)

Translational studies form an important part of Comparative literature. Translation is an effective mode of transmitting knowledge and culture. When a text in one language is translated into another, what could emerge may be a copy of the original or a completely new text. But the essence remains the same and the entire history and culture of one nation can be shared with another. Ibsen's *A Doll's House* has been translated into fourteen languages. Dalit literature has become widely popular because of translations (from Marathi, Tamil and Telegu into English and Hindi). The translations of great epics like the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* (from Sanskrit into Hindi and English) are good examples of how the reading experience can be universalized.

There is still another way of looking at reality. The original text can be seen with a different perspective when retelling or reframing takes place. What happens in these retellings? While on the one hand, it extends the frontiers of the original text, on the other, it challenges the hegemonic structures of narration and themes and brings out those issues to the fore, which have been hitherto ignored. It questions cultural assumptions and ways of thought and forges a new written text with a change in meaning, themes, characters and narrative. With the retelling, subversion, restructuring and deconstruction take place at the same time. The writer formulates theories that encompass in it a wide range of writings like Postmodern, Postcolonial, Post structuralism and Hybridity.

Now we shall take the example of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* where the technique of deconstruction has been used and see, how through the use of it, the text becomes a Postcolonial text. *Things Fall Apart* can be seen as a deconstructionist reading of the savage myth. Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) deconstructs this very myth by proving that society and culture did exist, however primitive, that "Man" did exist, but was converted into a brute by the aggression of the French on Nigerian soil. The process of humanizing the so called "Animals" of Africa and bringing enlightenment to the world of Africans through the spread of Christianity, culture and science by the West, was one of violence. Peace was brought about by mass slaughter, splitting up of the native community, uprooting of traditions, religion, language and elimination of tribes in the name of education. Hence Achebe depicts a perfectly cohesive society with its values, traditions, customs and religious leanings; a humane society which exhibits feelings of love, hate, violence, worship, marriage, recreation and earning from the land. It is a society with a past that Nigerians need not be ashamed of and Europeans need to take cognizance of.

*Things Fall Apart* holds special significance in colonial history for its unraveling of reality seen through the eyes of the colonized and the sufferer. It is a representative novel, as Gilbert Phelps points out in his essay on "Two Nigerian Writers: Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka". It was realized, that "*Things Fall Apart* was in effect the archetypal African novel, in that the situation it describes — the falling of traditional African rural society as a result of the coming of the white man, was a traumatic experience common to all the colonial or former territories" (331).

Regarded as a man of action and highly esteemed for his physical strength and courage, Okonkwo is the chief protagonist in the novel. Okonkwo's exile is the turning point in the novel. With his downfall begins the disjunction of Umuofia.

During his stay in Mbanta, his friend Obireka brings news that Abame has been wiped out. He says, “After a few days a few white men came to the market place which was full and began to shoot. Everybody was killed except the old and the sick who were at home.... Their clan is now completely empty” (129). The white missionaries arrive in Mbanta and begin to educate the natives about the falsity of their own gods and religion. Ironically, it is Okonkwo’s son Nwoye who is lured by their talk and becomes a convert. When the Christians desecrate the personal gods of the natives, they invite their wrath. Okonkwo and the leader of Umuofia decide to demolish the church that has parted them. It results in their imprisonment and a fine of two hundred and fifty cowries. Their stay in the prison is one of hunger, humiliation and insults. Okonkwo is filled with despair. Umuofia has failed him. Rather than accept the white man’s slavery, he decides to take his own life. Okonkwo’s death is the result of a dilemma that all natives face. “If he shows fight, the soldiers’ fire and he is a dead man; if he gives in, he degrades himself and he is no longer a man at all: shame and fear will split up his character and make his innermost self fall to pieces” (preface,13). The end of *Things Fall Apart* is a displacement of Ibo culture, language and traditions by the English language, religion and culture.

The savage myth, of the Blacks being uncivilized and the spread of enlightenment and education by the West, is not only questioned but reversed completely. It is the whites who are in fact, the brutes in their cruelty and elimination of African culture and the Blacks who are civilized. So the unraveling of colonial history is not through the eyes of the European, but the African who is given a voice to reveal his own history, life and downfall. In fact, the entire process of reading a text as Postcolonial, gives voice to the other side, the Colonized and the sufferer.

#### Activity 5

Find some other texts in which the technique of deconstruction has been used.

Now let us take the example of Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*, a very famous text of the nineteenth century which was re-written as *Wide Sargasso Sea* in the twentieth century by Jean Rhys from the West Indies. In Bronte’s text, the mad woman Bertha is hardly visible. She is locked away in the attic at Thornfield, because Rochester feels that “Bertha Mason, the true daughter of an infamous mother dragged me through all the hideous and degrading agonies which must attend a man bound to a wife at once intemperate and unchaste”. (Chapter XXVII, *Jane Eyre*) We sympathized with Rochester in Bronte’s text, but, because Rhys was a part of the West Indies and so was Bertha Mason, she wanted to give a different picture of the conditions that must have led to Bertha’s madness. She wanted to show her readers that Bertha’s insanity was not a hereditary trait but the result of the “abominable treatment” meted out to her by Rochester. Rhys felt, “For me (and for you I hope) she must be right on stage. She must be at least plausible with a past, the reason why Mr. Rochester treats her so abominably and feels justified, the reasons why he thinks she is mad and why of course she goes mad...(Rhys, *letters* 156)”. So she created a life story for her.

Antoinette is the beautiful, young white creole heiress pulsating with life and passion in the primitive surroundings of lush tropical islands. The backdrop of slavery, the emancipation act of 1834 is given to show that the Negroes had become dangerous for the white creole women. In *Wide Sargasso Sea* the Blacks set fire to the Coulibri estate in which her brother dies and the rest of the family barely escapes. A plausible reason for the madness of Annette whose son is dead (Antoinette’s mother) is also

given to discount Rochester's statement in *Jane Eyre* that "Bertha came of a mad family; idiotic and maniacs through three generations" (*Jane Eyre* 330).

Rochester is made the villain and not the hero of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. But Rhys gives him too, a plausible past, with his version of the story. He is full of doubt and confusions on this island and, unable to resolve issues with his self, he vents his hatred on Antoinette. He interprets her desire for life and love as the over sexualized trait of the mixed race (creole). His jealousy and Victorian English prudery allow him to have sex with the slave girl Amelie but view Antoinette as unfaithful. He decides to curb her sexual desire and make her a prisoner in his attic at Thornfield where she ultimately becomes insane. He tries to break her will and is successful in silencing her. He marries her for her money and in fact it is a mercenary motive that brings him to the Caribbean islands. Hence it is the onslaught of the European or white man's civilization on the lush tropical islands of the West Indies. Rhys does not give him a name in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. He is diminished in size by Rhys and he becomes the nameless figure in *Wide Sargasso Sea* in place of the voiceless mad Bertha of Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. Here, instead of Rochester, Antoinette becomes the victim of the breakup of their marriage. The text is re-written, but this time not for the benefit of Bronte's English heroine, but for the insane creole woman of the West Indies.

While the English readers had heard of such insane creole women in the West Indies, Rhys had actually seen and experienced their misery. So the reality for both the writers is totally different. Looking at the differences in the two texts, we are able to view how, through subversion techniques, Rhys has given us the "other side" of the story. Bronte's text has a single narrative voice. Rhys' two narratives of Jane and Rochester authenticate their experience and fills in the gaps and silences of Bronte's text. Bronte's text uses Standard English, while Rhys' text makes use of the creole speech as well. Her Negro nurse, Christophine, and Daniel, who calls himself Antoinette's half brother, use Creole speech. It proves much more effective than the Standard English used by Rochester. Christophine tells Rochester:

That word mean doll, eh? Because you don't speak. You want to force her to cry and speak . . . But she won't. So you think up something else. You bring that worthless girl to play with next door and you talk and laugh and love so that she hear everything. You meant her to hear. (154)

Dominica, Roseau and other islands with their flamboyant colors and beauty are contrasted with England which is always dark and cold and where Antoinette is given a grey wrapper with which to cover herself.

In the last section in *Jane Eyre* Bertha jumps from the attic and dies. But in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, she jumps and she wakes up, which means that she was dreaming. In Bronte's narrative, Antoinette is the ghost of a "woman" whereas in Rhys' text Jane is "the woman who haunts this place". Rhys tries to indicate that there is a thin border line demarcating sanity and madness and her text is open ended. Bertha has become Antoinette, found a voice, a life story and a justifiable reason for her madness. This has become possible because the reality of her life was imagined by the writer who belonged to the same place. So we see how the shift in perspective changes the reality for another writer. Hidden truths are revealed and the suppressed voice finds its place in the domain of writing.

#### Activity 6

Read the two texts and give some more examples of the change in events of both.

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## 1.4 LET US SUM UP

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We have taken examples from Dalit literature, Diasporic literature, African writing and West Indian writing to show how hidden realities have been revealed. We have also seen that there are umpteen ways of self expression for the writer to reveal these truths. When only one side of the picture is painted, the reality is only half truth. Hence it becomes necessary to read the literature of diverse backgrounds and people.

Reality constitutes the myriad experiences of the writer with layers and layers of meaning. The writer and the reader in one part of the world may share the same experience with others across the globe. For example, Dalit writers draw their inspiration from the Afro American writers. Colonial societies share their experience of bondage and slavery and post colonial writing shares ways of coming to terms with it. Diasporic writing is the shared account of migrations the world over. Women learn, identify and create a space for themselves through feminist writings. It thus becomes imperative to exchange, learn and share the cultural, social and political milieu of various societies the world over.

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## 1.5 GLOSSARY

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### Myth

A traditional story which embodies a belief regarding some fact or phenomenon of experience, and in which often the forces of nature and of the soul are personified; a sacred narrative regarding a god, a hero, the origin of the world or of a people, etc.

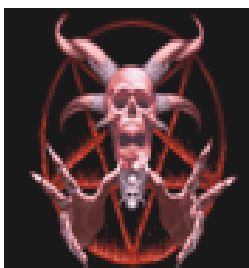
Example: In Greek mythology, a phoenix is a long-lived bird that is cyclically regenerated or reborn. Associated with the sun, a phoenix obtains new life by arising from the ashes of its predecessor.



Phoenix

### Archetype

- 1) A character, story, or object that is based on a known character, story, or object. Traditionally archetype refers to the model upon which something is based, but it has also come to mean an example of a personality archetype, particularly a fictional character in a story based on a well-established personality model.
- 2) An ideal example of something; a quintessence.

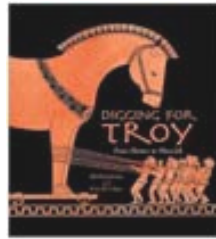


Satan , the archetype of evil.



## Legend

- 1) A story of unknown origin describing plausible but extraordinary past events. eg. The legend of Troy was discovered to have historical basis.
- 2) A story in which a kernel of truth is embellished to an unlikely degree.



The legend of the Trojan horse

## Deconstruction

Decomposition into components in order to study a complex thing, concept, theory...

## Postmodern

Postmodernism was applied to a whole host of movements, many in art, music, and literature, that reacted against tendencies in the imperialist phase of capitalism called “modernism,” and are typically marked by revival of historical elements and techniques. In 1971, the Arab-American scholar Ihab Hassan published *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature*, an early work of literary criticism from a postmodern perspective, in which the author traces the development of what he calls “literature of silence” through Marquis de Sade, Franz Kafka, Ernest Hemingway, Beckett, and many others, including developments such as the Theatre of the Absurd.

## PostColonialism

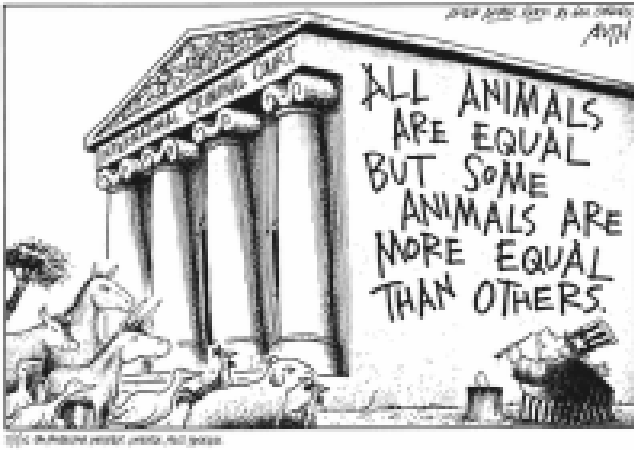
Post-colonialism (also Post-colonial Studies, Post-colonial Theory, and Postcolonialism) is an academic discipline featuring methods of intellectual discourse that analyze, explain, and respond to the cultural legacies of colonialism and of imperialism, to the human consequences of controlling a country and establishing settlers for the economic exploitation of the native people and their land. Drawing from post-modern schools of thought, Post-colonial Studies analyse the politics of knowledge (creation, control, and distribution) by analysing the functional relations of social and political power that sustain colonialism and neo-colonialism.

## Hybridity

It is a cross between two separate races or cultures. The term is characterized by literature and theory that study the effects of mixture (hybridity) upon identity and culture. The principal theorists of hybridity are Homi Bhabha, Néstor García Canclini, Stuart Hall, Gayatri Spivak, and Paul Gilroy, whose works respond to the multi-cultural awareness that emerged in the early 1990s.

## Allegory

It is a literary device in which characters or events in a literary, visual, or musical art form represent or symbolize ideas and concepts. Allegory is generally treated as a figure of rhetoric; a rhetorical allegory is a demonstrative form of representation conveying meaning other than the words that are spoken. As a literary device, an allegory in its most general sense is an extended metaphor.



*Animal Farm*, an allegory

### Fantasy

It is a genre of fiction that commonly uses magic and other supernatural phenomena as a primary plot element, theme, or setting. Many works within the genre take place in imaginary worlds where magic and magical creatures are common. In popular culture, the fantasy genre is predominantly of the medievalist form, especially since the worldwide success of *The Lord of the Rings* and related books by J. R. R. Tolkien. In its broadest sense, however, fantasy comprises works by many writers, artists, filmmakers, and musicians, from ancient myths and legends to many recent works embraced by a wide audience today. Fantasy is a vibrant area of academic study in a number of disciplines (English, cultural studies, comparative literature, history, medieval studies).



*Harry Potter*, a fantasy

### Epic

An epic is a traditionally a genre of poetry, known as epic poetry. However in modern terms, epic is often extended to other art forms, such as epic theatre, films, music, novels, plays, television shows, and video games, wherein the story has a theme of grandeur and heroism, just as in epic poetry.



Homer's great epic, the *Odyssey*

### Fairy tale

It is a type of short story that typically features European folkloric fantasy characters, such as fairies, goblins, elves, trolls, dwarves, giants, mermaids, or gnomes, and



usually magic or enchantment. Fairy tales may be distinguished from other folk narratives such as legends (which generally involve belief in the veracity of the events described) and explicitly moral tales, including beast fables.

In cultures where demons and witches are perceived as real, fairy tales may merge into legends, where the narrative is perceived both by teller and hearers as being grounded in historical truth. However, unlike legends and epics, they usually do not contain more than superficial references to religion and actual places, people, and events; they take place once upon a time rather than in actual times.



Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs

### Fable

A fable is a succinct fictional story, in prose or verse, that features animals, mythical creatures, plants, inanimate objects or forces of nature which are anthropomorphized (given human qualities such as verbal communication), and that illustrates or leads to an interpretation of a moral lesson (a “moral”), which may at the end be added explicitly in a pithy maxim. A fable differs from a parable in that the latter *excludes* animals, plants, inanimate objects, and forces of nature as actors that assume speech and other powers of humankind.



Cat guarding geese

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## 1.6 UNIT END QUESTIONS

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- 1) Discuss the various kinds of autobiographies enumerated in this unit. Take any two autobiographies and see how they are different from each other.
- 2) Read *Animal Farm* by George Orwell and analyze it.
  - i) As an allegory
  - ii) As a political treatise

- 3) In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, we have discussed deconstruction of the savage myth. Do you think this takes place with the help of Okonkwo's character (the main protagonist)? Elaborate.
- 4) Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a retelling of Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. Discuss it as a Postcolonial text.
- 5) How do you think comparative literature will benefit you as a student of literature?

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## UNIT 2 LIFE WRITINGS

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### Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Life Writing and Comparative Literature
  - 2.2.1 "The Personal is Political"
  - 2.2.2 Culture/Literature
  - 2.2.3 Autobiography and the "Cultural Moment"
- 2.3 When, how and why do People Write their Lives
- 2.4 Autobiography and Confessional Writing
- 2.5 Autobiography, Empowerment and Collective Consciousness
  - 2.5.1 Slave Narratives and African American Writing
  - 2.5.2 The Testimonio
  - 2.5.3 The Controversial *I Rigoberta Menchú*
- 2.6 Life Writings and Liberation Movements
- 2.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.8 Unit End Questions
- 2.9 References and Suggested Reading

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## 2.0 OBJECTIVES

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Individual tastes differ when it comes to reading. There are some people who find life writing 'inspiring' and have a predilection for such works. There are some who would love to read a poem before going to bed, while there are others who read a novel over a week, snatching moments that they get on a train/bus. Some others read a few pages of a novel before winding up their day. About two or three decades ago, a person who was interested in life writing was not considered "literary minded". Autobiography, it was thought, paled in comparison to fiction. It was in the words of James Olney (who has written extensively on this genre), the "least literary." Today, however, with the upsurge of interest in "culture", life writings are a treasure trove, an inexhaustible mine which theoreticians never cease to dredge. By the end of this unit, you will be able to see how life writings have significance in various ways apart from their intrinsic worth of being a record of an individual's experiences.

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## 2.1 INTRODUCTION

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Music has genres – jazz, rock, country, classical etc. So does Literature (drama, poetry, etc). Taking a close look at life writing as a genre could be an eye opener to understanding more about Literature and "literariness". Life writing is also the inscription of the self in writing. The examination of 'how' the self is inscribed will reveal to us that life writing is valuable both for the writer and the reader. Most writers who have employed this genre have confessed that the writing of their life stories has been therapeutic for them. While this is the experience of the writer, the reader of a fine piece of life writing finds it inspirational.

There are some who are inclined to view autobiography as fiction. Autobiography is considered a close kin to fiction (there are some who regard it as a distant relative!).

The tendency to view life writing as “fiction” could stem from debates around authenticity of information: some of these writings are criticized for not being “factual” or for “misrepresenting”. Apart from the question of authenticity, one must admit that “narration” (or narrative style) and “perspective” (or point of view) are integral to both life writing and the novel.

With reference to narrative style in life writing, a term that is often employed is bildungsroman. According to the *Anthem Dictionary of Literary Terms and Theory*, “the term literally means ‘formation novel.’ “It refers to a novel that charts the development, both psychological and spiritual, of a character from childhood to maturity... A bildungsroman is often autobiographical, but need not be necessarily so.” Marianne Hirsch in her essay, “The Novel of Formation: Between Great Expectations and Lost Illusions” states that a bildungsroman is generally the story of a single individual’s growth and development within the context of a defined social order. (Chakrabarti 26)

Life writing is probably the most effective means of illustrating that texts emerge from contexts. A piece of life writing may also be viewed as a social document. The life and times of an individual, the social milieu in which s/he lived and the group that the individual represents (if that is the case) opens up another avenue for discussion - life writing as ‘historiography’.

#### Activity 1

Look up the meaning of the word ‘historiography’. How do you think the term is relevant to life writing?

## 2.2 LIFE WRITING AND COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

An exclusive unit on ‘life writing’ in a course on ‘comparative literature’ is something worth reflecting on. Life writing, as the term implies, encompasses autobiography, biography and other means by which the ‘self’ is inscribed. Since this type of writing hinges on the question of identity, it occupies a significant place in discussions on Comparative Literature. Jola Skulj’s opening line in the essay, “Comparative Literature and Cultural Identity” declares, “The problem of cultural identity involves the question of the self and of culture.” (Skulj). This stand is further explicated in the following statement:

Cultural identity as expressed in literature is reestablished through constant dialogue with other cultures and literatures. This dialogic nature pre-determines that the study of cultural identity and /in literature is best performed in and with the tools of the discipline of comparative literature. (Skulj)

Before we engage with the question of “cultural identity” and the associated “engagement with other cultures and literatures”, we shouldn’t overlook the fact that life writing is the inscription of the self (a life, an individual identity). Culture, sexuality and political ideology, among others are facets of individual identity. It is important at this stage to distinguish between personality and identity. Every individual has a personality, but identity is about ‘representation’ – how the individual represents himself and how he is represented (by others).

#### Activity 2

Pen down the Key concepts of Comparative Literature that you have gleaned from the preceding units.

### 2.2.1 “The Personal is Political”

You might have already come across the expression, “The Personal is Political”. This expression which owes its origin to feminist ideology (Carol Hanisch’s essay, “The Personal is Political” published in 1970) is almost epigrammatic and may be employed in other spheres where identity is foregrounded. The use of this expression in the context of cultural identity is by no means simplistic. Since the expression itself is historically embedded in power equations and power relationships, it is not free of these connotations.

Give a thought for a moment to the story of Malala, a young girl, from the Swat Valley of Pakistan who has become a household name in the recent past. She scaled great heights as an ambassador for the rights of children to education and was awarded the highest award – The Nobel Peace Prize – in 2014. Her mission is an outcome of what happened to her personally - she became the target of the Taliban (terrorist) attack on education for women. Her life story – *I Am Malala* – is available online. Read it to discover how the personal is political.

Do you think that the term ‘the personal is political’ applies only to stories that emerge from political turmoil such as terrorism or war? Certainly not, as the term owes its origin to feminism. We mentioned power relations and power equations. We inhabit a world where inequalities exist: where factors like colour, race, caste, ethnicity, gender, affluence/poverty, (dis)ability could strongly influence - even determine the course of your life. Human lives are lived in these socio, economic, cultural and political contexts. For instance, the life writing of Baby Halder (*Aalo Aandhari A Life Less Ordinary*, 2006), a domestic worker is ‘political’ – it is the expression of an individual who has occupied one of the lower rungs of society and has done domestic work for a livelihood. Moreover, domestic work is (apart from some exceptions) undertaken largely by women, which brings us to the question of gender parity.

#### Activity 3

On serious reflection we see that no life is apolitical. Write a brief account of your life and see how the personal is political.

### 2.2.2 Culture/Literature

In an earlier section of this unit (1.3 – Life Writing and Comparative Literature), we reflected on how life writing which is the inscription of the self should inevitably involve, include and engage with the issue of “cultural identity”.

In recent years Culture Studies has gained prominence among students of ‘English Literature’. This trend has caused anxiety in some quarters. There is an ongoing debate - “Is literature a part of culture studies?” or “Is culture a part of literary studies?” The debate is inconclusive. Nevertheless, the emergence and development of the discipline – comparative literature – is inextricably connected to the question of cultural identity. Moreover, there has been a paradigm shift in the way the term ‘representation’ is used: ‘Representation’ is no longer confined to aesthetics. Plato’s mimetic theory of art, which influenced literary criticism for ages, stated that art was a reproduction of nature: in his Republic he stated, “what artists do... is to hold the mirror up to nature.”

With the growth of culture studies ‘representation’ has a lot to do with identity politics (what gains priority, the political or the aesthetic is indeed a challenging question). Today, life writing features in a big way in deliberations on culture and



identity. However, it important to see “culture studies” as a wave that is overwhelming many scholars and theoreticians: while it is important to establish the connection between life writings and culture studies, it is equally important to understand that the term ‘representation’ has both aesthetic and political connotations. There is also anxiety in some quarters that the ‘political’ might eclipse the ‘aesthetic’ (We will see more of this when we come to our section on Testimonio)

### 2.2.3 Autobiography and the “Cultural Moment”

The tradition of autobiography is said to begin with St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, thereby making it a form of expression that was both Western and Christian in its orientation. The “inward-turning gaze” of western autobiography is obviously a progression from this point. The confessional mode recommended itself not only to the “pietist”<sup>1</sup> but also to the social thinkers – Rousseau, Montaigne, Goethe, Franklin and Gibbon, amongst others. James Olney, the expert on this genre, expresses the view that this form, “In addition to being the simplest and commonest of writing propositions ...is also the least ‘literary’ kind of writing practiced by people who would neither imagine nor admit that they were ‘writers’. But it is also (or can be and often has been) the most rarified and self-conscious of literary performances” (*Olney Autobiography* 4). In Olney’s view the autobiographies of St. Augustine, Montaigne and Rousseau were “lacking in self-consciousness or were without literary awareness” (4). Moreover autobiography eluded a legitimate definition as a literary form or genre: “Here all sorts of generic boundaries (and even lines dividing discipline from discipline) are simply wiped away, and we often cannot tell whether we should call something a novel, a poem, a critical dissertation, or an autobiography” (*Olney Autobiography* 4). Could this ‘ambiguity’ be the cause for evasion in recognising the aesthetic merit of these writings?

Olney is willing to go so far as to concede that “In the hands of other critics, autobiography has become the *focalizing literature* for various studies that otherwise have little by way of a defining organizing centre to them” (13) (*italics mine*). Some of the “studies” he cites are “American studies”, “Black Studies”, “Women’s Studies” (13). He expresses it in terms of a simple equation: “To understand the American mind in all its complexity – so goes the argument – read a variety of American autobiographies” (14).

Olney’s perceptions are challenging because he holds that autobiography has significance only as far as some specialised “Studies” (Black Studies, Women’s Studies etc.) are concerned: “history was preserved in autobiographies rather than in standard histories” and that the writers – black writers for instance, “from Frederick Douglas to Malcolm X, from Olaudah Equiano to Maya Angelou” – “entered into the house of literature through the door of autobiography” (15).

#### Activity 4

Did you notice that James Olney uses the term “Studies” and not “Literature”? What is your response to the remark that writers like Maya Angelou “entered the house of Literature through the door of autobiography”? Do you agree with Olney?

The focal point of Olney’s discussion is that autobiography is a collection for cultural “studies”. Olney’s observation is very much a signpost pointing in the direction of

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The word used by Roy Pascal in *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (p. 34) is descriptive of John Bunyan, Margery Kempe and St. Teresa among other religious minded writers of autobiography.



Linda Anderson’s work on “locating difference” and taking the issue of difference beyond “sexual difference” which was initially addressed by Virginia Woolf (Anderson 102). The view that autobiographies are significant in terms of highlighting a “cultural moment” seems to be shared by Julia Swindells as well because she states:

Autobiography now has the potential to be the text of the oppressed and the culturally displaced, forging a right to speak both for and beyond the individual. People in a position of powerlessness – women, black people, and working class people – have more than begun to insert themselves into the culture via autobiography, via the assertion of a ‘personal’ voice, which speaks beyond itself. (qtd. in Anderson 103 -104).

#### Activity 5

How does life writing offer a platform to assert individuality and difference? Access a copy of *Autobiography* by Linda Anderson and make notes on the idea of “locating difference”

## 2.3 WHEN, HOW AND WHY DO PEOPLE WRITE THEIR LIVES

There is no straightforward answer to the question of when, why and how people write their life stories. James Olney in “Some Versions of Memory” observes that autobiography is not just individual history and narrative but “the vital impulse - the impulse of life- that is transformed by being lived through *the unique medium of the individual and the individual’s special, peculiar psychic configuration*: we can understand it as *consciousness, pure and simple*, ...we can understand it as *participation in an absolute existence* far transcending the shifting, changing unrealities of mundane life: we can understand it as *the moral tenor of the individual’s being*.” (qtd. in Benstock 10). “How does writing mediate the space between ‘self’ and ‘life’ that the autobiography would traverse and transgress? One definition of autobiography suggests that it is an effort to recapture the self - in Hegel’s claim, to know the self through “consciousness” (Gusdorf 38). Such a claim presumes that there is such a thing as the “self” and that it is “knowable”. This coming-to-knowledge of the self constitutes both the desire that initiates the autobiographical act and the goal toward which autobiography directs itself. By means of writing, such desire presumably can be fulfilled. Thus the place to begin our investigation of autobiography might be at the crossroads of “writing” and “selfhood”. (Benstock 11)

## 2.4 AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND CONFESSIOAL WRITING

Writings like *The Confessions of St Augustine’s* and *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* by M.K. Gandhi have been described as “confessional” writings. Relating, in the Introduction to the book, his objective in writing his story, M.K. Gandhi states

What I want to achieve,—what I have been striving and pining to achieve these thirty years—is self-realization, to see God face to face, to attain Moksha. I live and move and have my being in pursuit of this goal. All that I do by way of speaking and writing, and all my ventures in the political

field, are directed to this same end. But as I have all along believed that what is possible for one is possible for all, my experiments have not been conducted in the closet, but in the open; and I do not think that this fact detracts from their spiritual value. There are some things which are known only to oneself and one's Maker. These are clearly incommunicable. The experiments I am about to relate are not such. But they are spiritual or rather moral; for the essence of religion is morality.

'Morality' is his overriding concern – in the course of his narrative he speaks time and again about vegetarianism and the sin of meat eating: he confesses that he felt a sense of shame when he succumbed to the temptation to eat meat. He discloses to his readers that his relationship with his wife wasn't ideal, their marriage having been performed when they were but children, is in his view one of the factors for it being so. He admits to having a 'carnal' love for his wife and being driven by lust in their conjugal relationship. He also pours into the text of his autobiography the regret that he felt over not spending adequate time with his wife and not taking the initiative for her to have an education and be empowered.

*The Confessions of St Augustine*, one of the earliest known autobiographies comprises 13 books. Augustine's 'confessions' are similar to that of Gandhi, but informed by the Christian world view. He confesses to being wretched in the sight of God and offers thanks to Christ for reaching out to him and saving him from this condition. In Book II he relates how he was a dissipated youth: he degenerated into fornication and thieving. He sought to love and be loved, but ended up satiating the lust that was burning within him. In the opening lines of Book II he lays bare his objective in inscribing his experiences as a young man who sought to fill the void within with fleeting pleasures. He declares

I will now call to mind my past foulness, and the carnal corruption of my soul, not because I love them, but that I may love Thee, O my God. For love of Thy love do I do it, reviewing my most wicked ways in the very bitterness of remembrance that Thou mayest grow sweet unto me.

When these quotes from the autobiographies of M.K. Gandhi and Augustine are read alongside Gusdorf's theory of the "autobiographical self" – his comments on 'self' and 'selfhood' (which could be paraphrased as perception of self/individual identity), it becomes evident that the narrative is steered and charted by authorial intent and perception of self/sense of self. 'Truth' in autobiography is therefore 'relative' (i.e it is conditioned by authorial intent and sense of self) and the text could very well merit being described as fiction. This is what Benstock reiterates when she states the place to begin our investigation of autobiography might be at the crossroads of "writing" and "selfhood". (Benstock 11) Autobiography in Shari Benstock's view is 'fiction' because Autobiography reveals gaps, and not only gaps in time and space or between the individual and the social, but also a widening divergence between the manner and matter of its discourse. That is, autobiography reveals the impossibility of its own dream: what begins on the presumption of self-knowledge ends in the creation of a fiction that covers over the premises of its construction." (11)

#### Activity 6

Read M.K. Gandhi's *My Experiments with Truth* as well as *The Confessions of Saint Augustine* (the Biblical rhetoric in this text is a bit tedious for the modern reader. But do make an attempt to acquaint yourself with the text). Both texts are available online in pdf format. What do you think about the laying bare of very personal details in these texts?

Before continuing, it would be a good idea for you to pause, ponder over what you have read so far and perhaps read it once more so that there is no overload of information!

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## 2.5 AUTOBIOGRAPHY, EMPOWERMENT AND COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS

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Having applied ourselves to the “confessional” and the “fictional” aspects of autobiographical writing, we need to dwell on the “representational” aspect of autobiography. You might at this stage recall that we had reflected on that epigrammatic slogan – The Personal is Political. “Representation” - whether through marches on the street or through writing - is “political”.

In, “Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice”. Susan Stanford Friedman distinguishes between the “individualistic concept of the autobiographical self” and the “collective sense of self”. Traditional autobiography (that of statesmen or of pietists which stress the personal and emotional aspects of religion), is “individualistic” while it is a collective sense of self that characterizes the life writing of “women, minorities and many non-Western peoples.” (Benstock 34). She says that “the self, self-creation, and self-consciousness are profoundly different for women, minorities, and many non-Western peoples.” ( Benstock 34)

How and why this “collective sense of self”, i.e. an identity that is political develops is clearly articulated by W.E.B Dubois, a pioneer in African American writing and activism. Dubois stated:

In order to create an alternative an oppressed group must at once shatter the self-reflecting world which encircles it and, at the same time, project its own image onto history. In order to discover its own identity as distinct from that of the oppressor it has to become visible to itself. All revolutionary movements create their own ways of seeing. But this is a result of great labour ... The first step is to connect and learn to trust one another ... Solidarity has to be a collective consciousness which at once comes through individual self-consciousness and transforms it.”(Benstock 40)

Though it might seem as if one is stating the obvious, at this stage it is necessary to reiterate that “women, minorities and many non-Western peoples” are the marginalized groups in society: ‘representation’ is crucial for their emancipation. The collective sense of self as ‘black’ or ‘women’ is fundamental to representation.

You will recall that it was James Olney who perceived the emergence of “alternative histories” – i.e. of life writing by ‘black’ people and ‘women’ - as the arrival of the “cultural moment”. However, a reading of Estelle Jelinek’s *Women’s Autobiography* shows us that there is more to the question of women’s life writing than merely being material for “women’s studies”. She makes a correlation between women’s empowerment and their expression through autobiography. She states that one must exercise caution in accepting the theories of critics of autobiography as most of their objective theories are not applicable to women’s studies. She cites as a case in point the theory of James Cox who argues that the periods of greatest productivity in autobiography correspond to important events in American history. However, Jelinek finds that the sum total of diaries and autobiographies listed in various bibliographies according to historical periods shows that this theory of “productivity” does not apply to writing by women. The periods of increased diary writing by men were, for example, during the Revolution and the Gold Rush in the US. But these

same periods were periods of decreased productivity by women. During the American Civil War, there was an increase in autobiographies by military men, but women's autobiographies did not begin to be published in significant numbers until the end of the nineteenth century. Female diaries and autobiographies increased as literacy and educational opportunities for women improved. The peak of autobiographical productivity for women in America was during the Progressive Era – 1890 to the First World War, an era of path-breaking public service by women - and the late 1960s and 1970s. The periods of greatest productivity for women's autobiographies, according to Jelinek, have not been during revolutionary (male) times but during the high points of women's history (Jelinek 5-6).

The content and style of women's autobiographies is distinctly different from that of men. Helena Grice in her article "Gender and Life Writing" observes:

Traditional auto/biography has taken for its definition male writing about the self, usually including celebrations of public success, while also, following the pattern of the *Bildungsroman*, dealing with the development of the individual ... Women's concept of selfhood, however, is often far from individualistic in this manner, as many feminist autobiography critics have noted. Drawing upon psychoanalytic theories of women's development, feminist critics have shown how women often have a far more *relational sense of selfhood*, [my italics] in which their identity is felt to be intertwined with that of others: mothers, friends, lovers, or children. (Grice 359) Maya Angelou's *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* and Audre Lorde's *Zami* illustrate this concept of woman's identity, i.e. the individual woman in relation to the collective – the community.

It is important to reiterate at this stage that not only is the writing different, the writing is also about difference. For example, *Auntie Rita* by Australian Aboriginal women Jackie and Rita Huggins, and Dalit writer Bama's *Karukku* and *Sangati* are very much about their difference from the dominant group - Rita and Jackie Huggins foreground their difference from white Australian women and Bama celebrates the difference of Dalit women from upper caste women in Tamil Nadu (South India).

This objective of this section on Autobiography, Empowerment and Collective Consciousness was to emphasise the fact that 'self-representation' in autobiographical writing is not necessarily individualistic: 'Collective consciousness' characterizes the life writings of those who have been denied human rights: women and racial groups which face discrimination have had to strive hard to represent their case for fair treatment and life writing has certainly been one avenue of self representation. The observation made by Estelle Jelinek (in *Women's Autobiographies*) that the case with women's self expression through the writing of diaries and autobiographies was only in proportion to the improvement in literacy and educational opportunities for women, makes a clear case for the correspondence between self empowerment and self expression through life writing.

#### Activity 7

Read Bama's *Karukku/Sangati* (They are not very long texts) or any other life-writing by a person of the oppressed class and make your observations about the "collective consciousness" of the author.

### 2.5.1 Slave Narratives and African American Writing

The life writings of African American writers Maya Angelou and Audre Lorde have already been cited in relation to solidarity and collective consciousness.



However, their literary forbears were the authors of slave narratives (which were one of the earliest autobiographical expressions by African American people).

Slave narratives came into circulation due to the efforts of the abolitionists who edited, promoted and distributed them after 1836. There was a great demand for these writings as anti-slavery organizations were eager to publish these accounts of slaves' experiences. Many narrators wrote in order to purchase freedom for their relatives. Some of their accounts were in pamphlets. Some, with cheap binding, were sold for 25 cents while the more lengthy ones, with better binding, went for a dollar or a dollar and half. The narratives contained appeals for the abolition of slavery. "So successful were the narratives from a commercial point of view that free Negroes and whites took up the pen and wrote on similar subjects" (Nichols 150). From this point of Abolitionist initiative, the trend gathered momentum, initially in the form of speeches, tracts and essays. The literary form of the autobiography and the adventure story were later additions. (Johnson 82-83).

Two celebrated slave narratives are that of Olaudah Equiano and Fredrick Douglass. A glance at the title page of Olaudah Equiano's narrative enlightens readers about the sense of urgency with which these narratives were marketed by the pro abolitionists. The express purpose of Equiano's narrative is to draw the attention of humanitarians and legislators to the inhuman practice of slave trade. Kidnapped from his homeland Benin (The Kingdom of Benen) in Guinea, he is placed on a slave ship bound for the West Indies. This is only the beginning of many journeys as a slave. By delineating his own experiences and making an appeal to the white man's sense of Christian virtue and humane conduct, he seeks to achieve the abolition of slave trade.

His narrative (which is in 12 chapters) concludes with the inclusion of an appeal he submitted to the Queen of England. The far reaching impact of Olaudah Equiano's life and writing may be understood from the movie *Amazing Grace*, in which Equiano's meetings with William Wilberforce, the architect of the abolition of slavery in England is presented. William Wilberforce strove for 18 years to push motions in the British Parliament for the abolition of slavery and his efforts ultimately met with success in 1833.

### Activity 8

Watch the movie *Amazing Grace* directed by Michael Apted and note down your observations regarding the power of words.

While Olaudah Equiano's narrative takes us back to the slave ships that transported slaves from Africa, Frederick Douglass' narrative presents the experiences of one who was born in 1818 in a slave cabin at Tuckahoe, Maryland. The process by which Douglass (as well as Equiano) were self educated, even to the extent of being able to address the white ruler in the most convincing and articulate manner possible is astounding.

The narrative and the style of publication of Equiano's and Douglass' texts are driven by a strong sense of purpose, i.e. to achieve the abolition of slavery. The Preface to Douglass' is by Lloyd Garrison Boston who while commending Douglass' style of writing, speaks of his acquaintance with him and his credentials as an activist in the anti slavery campaign. To ensure that readers don't lose sight of the objective in publishing this narrative, the writer of the Preface signs off with

Reader! are you with the man-stealers in sympathy and purpose, or on the side of their down-trodden victims? If with the former, then you are the foe of God and man. If with the latter, what are you prepared to do and dare in their behalf? Be faithful, be vigilant, be untiring in your efforts to break every yoke, and let the oppressed go free. Come what may – cost what it may – inscribe on the banner which you unfurl to the breeze, as your religious and political motto – NO COMPROMISE SLAVERY! NO UNION WITH SLAVEHOLDERS!

Douglass signs off his narrative in a similar fashion with these words

Sincerely and earnestly hoping that this little book may do something toward throwing light on the American slave system, and hastening the glad day of deliverance to the millions of my brethren in bonds—faithfully relying upon the power of truth, love, and justice, for success in my humble efforts—and solemnly pledging my self anew to the sacred cause,—I subscribe myself,  
FREDERICK DOUGLASS.

LYNN, *Mass.*, April 28, 1845.

While Equiano’s and Douglass’ texts pertain to the objective in publishing their work, their life’s experiences, feelings and dreams are presented in the most engaging style and these texts must therefore also be valued for the power of storytelling.

Slave writings had a profound influence on the course of African American writing, beginning with Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of the famous American classic, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. These narratives provided new images of the Negro and the Southern plantation system, which challenged the existing stereotypes and gave to Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe the needed models to forge the most effective popular indictment of American slavery in the nineteenth century. In more recent times celebrated African-American writer Toni Morrison confesses, “a very large part of my literary heritage is the autobiography” ( qtd. in Easton “Subjects-in-Time” 175).

In her essay, “Subjects-in-Time: Slavery and African-American Women’s Autobiographies.” Alison Easton describes slave narratives as “sites of memory.” (Easton 177) The slave narrative is credited with (and rightly so) the status of a public celebration, a monument/work of art which commemorates a landmark/watershed. The slave narrative (which is a text) most certainly has this virtue of being a “site of memory,”

In the 1960s there appeared a text that was similar to the slave narrative, but radically different in terms of world view. That text was the autobiography of Malcolm X. Malcolm X embraced Islam: he was influenced by the teachings of Elijah Muhammad and the ‘Back to Africa’ movement.

### Activity 9

Watch this presentation of an excerpt from the famous speech of Frederick Douglass, “What the Black Man Wants” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gzcddec5cug>

How does the language and style influence the effect on the listener?

## 2.5.2 The Testimonio

If America was the soil from which the slave narrative emerged, the roots of the testimonio could be traced to the Cuban revolution. In his article, “Authoring the

Ethnicized Subject” Arturo Arias makes an interesting comment on the political nature of Latin American testimonios:

The testimonio of the 1980s also implied the logic of collective political action. A testimonio was supposed to exercise formative influence and thus play a pedagogical role analogous to that of slave narratives in the United States before and during the Civil War. This role was necessarily contingent, since it exceeded the symbolic dimensions from which it originated, marked by violence and conflict. Inasmuch as the genre was developed as a means of empowering subaltern subjects and hearing their voices, one can hardly be surprised that it was a tool for political agency. (Arias “Authoring Ethnicized Subjects” 76-77)

After discussing various definitions of testimonio, Doris Sommer succinctly states that it is a first-person narrative in Latin America, which, like other oral histories, can be elicited by sympathetic individuals who interview the illiterate or semiliterate working people. This genre of writing is broadly political and judicial in the sense that the speaker “testifies” against abuses suffered by the class or community (s)he represents. This genre, according to Sommer, was given official literary status as a politicized alternative to fiction when the government of Cuba lost the support of Latin American liberal novelists after Castro defended the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. This gesture of promoting the testimonio was the Cuban way of saying that “there were more interesting stories being produced than the difficult experimental prose of late modernist ‘Boom’ novels; there were real stories about real people in struggle” (Sommer 914). In 1970, Cuba’s publishing house, Casa de las Americas designated testimonio as a category in its annual international awards for literature. Since then this form has been the object of sustained critical attention and discussion (Sommer 914).

The two important books on testimonio are Felman and Laub’s *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992) which they have based on testimonies of people who have been through the Holocaust, and *The Real Thing* (1996) edited by Georg Gugelberger which deals with Latin American testimonios. The writing of a testimonio as presented in the existing scholarship is occasioned by a ‘crisis’, by ‘trauma’. It is also called ‘witness’ and conveys the sense of presenting before a jury the truth of the happening. There is an unmistakable sense of urgency, a desire for action that prompts the telling.

In a broader sense, the testimonio is characteristic of the writing emerging from the Third World wherever there is a centre of revolutionary activity. Gugelberger and Kearney cite Fredric Jameson’s observation that it has been Third World liberation activities which have helped liberate thought and action even in the West “those inner colonised of the First World – ‘minorities,’ marginals and women” (qtd. in Gugelberger and Kearney 7-8).

Taking/ recording ‘testimonies’ of patients or clients in order to address their situation and work out some measure for their well being is the method followed by psychoanalysts and those who work in such spheres. Felman and Laub, authors of *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992) view this activity with a great deal of curiosity. They regard these ‘testimonies’ as ‘histories’. Such testimonies are both educative in content and powerful in expression. They have a role to play beyond their clinical function. Therefore Felman and Laub pose the following questions: “What is the relation between Literature and testimony, between the writer and the witness? What is the relation between the act of witnessing and testifying, and the acts of writing and of reading, particularly



in our era?" (xiii). This intellectual curiosity has led Felman and Laub to explore the larger areas of the "interactions between the clinical and the historical, between the literary and the pedagogical" (1). In terms that are even more 'pedagogical' they suggest that the value of testimonial writing can be fully apprehended through the "*textualization of the context*" and "*contextualization of the text*" (xv). These processes of "textualizing" and "contextualizing" are of utmost significance to understanding not only the social significance of the work, but also its "literariness".

Turning to India we find Leela Fernandes observing that *I Phoolan Devi* echoes the title of the famous Latin American testimonio *I Rigoberta Menchú*. Phoolan Devi's life story might be viewed by some as a saga of aggression. However, the armed resistance of the Dalit woman Phoolan Devi who earned the reputation of being a 'bandit queen', does not amount to mere vendetta. Her story provides an interesting study of the 'sense of self', since she sees herself as Kali, the goddess who avenges with bloodshed. It might seem as if she is viewed in an unfavourable light when her violent deeds are considered as proceeding from a wounded psyche. In reality they are retaliations to the inhumanity of her oppressors. The two forces to be reckoned with here are inhuman oppression and violent retaliation. Moreover, Phoolan Devi views herself as representing the oppressed. In *I, Phoolan Devi* she declares,

People of my caste heard all about it. If a mother wanted to protect her daughter, or a father his wife or sister, they knew all they had to do was say to the rapist that Phoolan Devi would punish them. And I did. I helped the poor by giving them money and I punished the wicked with the same tortures they inflicted on others, because I knew the police never listened to the complaints of the poor. (Devi 396)

Speaking in a metaphor borrowed from the local lore of her village she says,

.... In my village, they say that when the demon Kans strikes with lightning at the birth of a baby girl and kills her, she will rise up in the sky to become the lightning in her turn. The demon struck me with lightning, and I became the lightning for others. (Devi 495)

Phoolan Devi's story is indeed a story of fierce power: her fiery zeal for retribution was ignited by the flames of caste discrimination. What 'empowerment' means in relation to this life story is a mind-boggling and soul-searching question.

Apart from Phoolan Devi's narrative, another home sprung testimonio is *Karukku* by Dalit writer, Bama. In his article "Bama's Karukku: Dalit Autobiography as Testimonio", Pramod K Nayar argues that the term autobiography is inadequate to describe Dalit life writings. His argument hinges on two points – Bama's text speaks for the community and she speaks as a 'witness' of the 'trauma' of caste based violence and discrimination. This article by Nayar is extremely educative on the subject of Dalit writings and testimonio.

#### Activity 10

View this video <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ONQpYuMVkEU> on Youtube about the Shoah Foundation and the recording of testimonies. Do watch the movie *Schindler's List* and understand how the movie was made based on testimonies of the holocaust.

### 2.5.3 The Controversial *I Rigoberta Menchú*

The testimonio, *I, Rigoberta Menchú, : an Indian Woman in Guatemala* (1984), became a subject of debate after the publication of anthropologist David Stoll's

*Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of all Poor Guatemalans* (1988). Stoll's book claimed that Menchú had distorted key facts in her autobiography. Menchú in turn pointed at Burgos-Debray for the alleged inconsistencies. Burgos-Debray, who had transcribed and prepared the text, stated that she had evidence to prove that she did not exploit Menchú financially and adhered to what was transcribed (Waterman).

As far as this exploration into life writings and (at the moment into) testimonio goes, what we are concerned with is not so much the question of truth in Menchú's autobiography. What we are concerned with will gradually unfold as we examine the response of the critic Dinesh D'Souza to *I, Rigoberta Menchu*.

In his book *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (1991) Dinesh D'Souza devotes one whole chapter - "Travels with Rigoberta: Multiculturalism at Stanford" - to denouncing the inclusion of *I, Rigoberta Menchú* in the Western Culture program of Stanford University. D'Souza did receive criticism for his views from many quarters but defended his stand in "Fraudulent Storyteller Still Praised". The book, in his opinion, must be removed from the syllabus on two grounds. Firstly, Menchú's "lies" are exposed by Stoll's book *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of all Poor Guatemalans* (1988). Secondly, it is dismissed on the grounds of not being "literature". D'Souza is resolute in holding the opinion that *I, Rigoberta Menchú* was "a sadly typical example of the bogus multi-cultural agitprop that was displacing the Western classics on the reading lists for undergraduates at elite universities like Stanford" (D'Souza, "Fraudulent Storyteller"). He cites Hemingway's memoir to qualify his statement that "the claim of factual inaccuracy might be beside the point". For D'Souza, "A Moveable Feast, Hemingway's memoir of his life in Paris, would remain a minor fictional classic even if it turned out to be an unreliable account of that phase of Hemingway's life". "Rigoberta, though, does not run the risk of being confused with Hemingway", he concludes.

D'Souza's indictment of *I, Rigoberta Menchú* takes us back to the question of 'representation' – of what gains priority - the aesthetic or the political. As mentioned in the section 1.3.2. Culture/Literature, the term 'representation' has taken on a new meaning – it veers more towards the political than the literary and this is a cause of concern for critics like Dinesh D'Souza. On the other hand, D'Souza might come across to some as an 'elitist' – one who dismisses spontaneity and the moving narration of real life experience for a kind of embellishment called "literariness."

### Activity 11

You might have noticed in the deliberations so far that we have not been able to pin down that thing called the *power of expression*. Does it come from the context? Or is the context a heap of bits and pieces from which a careful selection is made for a piece (the text) that is deftly sewn together? What are your thoughts on this?

## 2.6 LIFE WRITINGS AND LIBERATION MOVEMENTS

Life writings, especially non-western writings which gain renown are those that are associated with the struggle for the civil liberties of the disenfranchised/marginalized/discriminated peoples. Every pocket of struggle in the globe, has also witnessed an upsurge of life writings. This is true of the Civil Rights Movements of the 60s in America, the Dalit Panther movement (of the 70s) in Maharashtra in

India, the Aboriginal people's activism in Australia (in the 60s and up to the 90s) and the Red Power Movement among the Native Americans peoples (eg. the writings of Lee Maracle, a prominent activist in the Red Power Movement)

### Activity 12

Make an attempt to read Lee Maracle's *Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel* or something about this remarkable woman associated with the Red Power Movement by Native Americans. What are the similarities you can observe among the various Movements?

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## 2.7 LET US SUM UP

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If you don't want to be lost in a maze of information on life writing, you might find your way around with four key words – Genre, Gender, Culture and Literature. This unit discussed certain key concepts and ideas around these four words. By making references to some texts, there was the attempt to observe the coming together of the personal, the political and the literary.

It might seem like one is stating the obvious when we say that texts emerge from contexts but this is never more true than in the case of Life Writings especially by those from the marginalized sections of society. While the term 'life writing' usually brings to mind the picture of an individual setting out his/her thoughts and experiences, where oppressed and exploited groups are concerned, the life writing of one is usually the expression of the whole community.

The fictional/non-fictional aspect of life writing has been debated as well, with some critics accepting fictional autobiographies in terms of their literary merit while rejecting others. Generally, a piece of writing is rated on two criteria – content and style. What makes a life writing a compelling narrative is a combination of factors. Most often, the experience itself is gripping. The power of expression could be attributed to the nature of the experience being narrated. However, one cannot ignore the fact that the manner of narration (or style) is equally crucial to effective presentation. Therefore one cannot skirt around the issue of the "literariness": there needs to be serious reflection on this question.

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## 2.8 UNIT END QUESTIONS

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- 1) Critic Julia Swindells states that "Autobiography now has the potential to be the text of the oppressed and the culturally displaced...". Could you substantiate this statement with the reading you have done on the subject of Life Writing?
- 2) Write a note on the "confessional" aspect in life writing.
- 3) Why do some critics describe autobiography as fiction? Explain.
- 4) How is group activism, empowerment of the marginalised and "collective consciousness" reflected in life writing?
- 5) What has self empowerment got to do with expression through life writing?
- 6) Explain how slave narratives are "sites of memory" for African American writing.
- 7) Explain how 'testimonio' is a genre of life writing.
- 8) What are your views on the concerns about the aesthetic value/"literariness" of life writings?

- 9) Explore the writings you have come across in this unit and make a presentation on how texts emerge from contexts.

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## UNIT 3 WORDS TO WIN: RASHSUNDARI DEBI'S AMAR JIBAN

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### Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Rashsundari Debi
- 3.3 *Words to Win (Amar Jiban)*
- 3.4 The Social and Cultural Context of Rashsundari Debi
- 3.5 How Rashsundari Debi Learns to Read and Write
- 3.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.7 Unit End Questions
- 3.8 References and Suggested Reading

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### 3.0 OBJECTIVES

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In this Block you will be reading the Life Writings, i.e. the autobiographies of two authors from two different countries. In this unit we will also make references to another very important writer, Maya Angelou and see how she traces the experiences of a black girl in America. In reading the works of these authors, you will find points of similarity that converge on the grim actuality of being a woman who occupies a subaltern status within the hierarchy of her society. You may locate parallel experiences in their lives - neglect, deprivation in some cases, lack of, or even a total denial of education, and a sense of being put down by society and at times by one's own family for being female. Given these conditions, it is remarkable how they have risen above what seemed to be a stagnant situation to bring about a radical change in their lives that they have recorded in their autobiography with commendable honesty and clarity.

In this unit which discusses Rashsundari's *Words to Win*, we can discern two or more major strands as to how

- a) her initial illiteracy could not stop her from learning to read and write
- b) she creates her Self to objectify it in her book
- c) she uses the space of an autobiography to critique a woman's lot in her times
- d) and above all, base all her brave efforts in her firm faith in the Lord Dayamadhav.

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### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

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In this Block you will note how each of the authors has a distinctive way of looking at the reality of her life. Sally Morgan writes in *My Place* (published 1987) how she became aware of looking very "different" from the Whites in her school, and is told by her mother that she is an Indian, a term that implied an entirely different nationality to Western and North-American people. It was only when she turned fifteen that she realized she was actually an Australian Aboriginal. Rashsundari Debi, born in East Bengal (now Bangladesh) writes in *Amar Jiban* (published 1875) that notwithstanding her wealthy, landed and upper caste background, she was marked for a very "different" life because she was a girl. Although she did not suffer any racial discrimination, the gendered constraints of her times stifled her life.

In order to fully understand and appreciate her life and work, let us first get to know about her background before we move on to the book *Words to Win*.

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### 3.2 RASHSUNDARI DEBI

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Rashsundari Debi was born around 1809 in the village of Potajia in East Bengal - now Bangladesh - into an upper caste wealthy family of landed zamindars and was brought up by her widowed mother and uncle. Her close bonding with her mother is revealed when she writes “A mother is such a precious gift.” (1999: 166) Although she had a privileged life of comfort and social standing within her doting family, she says that she was a very timid and nervous child, and her worst fear was the possibility of being taken away from her dear mother after her marriage. To allay her fears, her mother instils in her, very early in life, a deep faith in God Dayamadhav and tells her that He will always be there to protect her. This comforts the little girl all through her childhood and stays with her till the very end of her life. You can see how each of the entries in her autobiography is always preceded by a verse invocation addressed to her God.

In conformity with the social and cultural constraints of her times, she was not sent to school because of a widely prevalent belief that an educated girl is fated to be widowed. For a very brief period during her childhood, she attended classes that were held in her house and even that had to stop after her marriage to Sitanath Ray, another prosperous landlord from Ramdia village in Faridpur.

For all her loneliness and sense of disorientation in her husband’s place as a young child bride, there is remarkable fair play in the way Rashsundari Debi recounts her early years in her husband’s home. Her mother-in-law was affectionate, gave her many toys, arranged for other young girls from the village to visit and play with her and never allowed her to do any work. Although she was pampered, what set apart Rashsundari Debi from the rest of the girls her age was her longing to read. She was not interested in their frivolous pastimes. Even this period of play was a short one, for her life changed drastically after her mother-in-law passed on. The entire responsibility of cooking for the family and managing a large household fell on her young shoulders. She was then just fourteen.

Rashsundari Debi gave birth to twelve children between the age of eighteen and forty one. So burdened was she with unending cooking for a very large family twice in a day that she found very little time to rest or even eat a full meal. She would cook, but could not eat what she had cooked! Yet, despite her exhaustion, she was all along driven by this one desire - to learn the letters of Bengali so that she could read a religious book. She also wanted to learn to write. At age twenty five, in a bold departure from the stern custom of her times, Rashsundari Debi learned to read and write on her own, without anyone to teach her even the basic letters of Bengali!

She was widowed in 1867 at age fifty nine and the following year, she completed the first version of her autobiography. (Note: According to Ghulam Murshid, it was published in 1875, although in her text Rashsundari Debi says she completed it in 1868).

#### Activity 1

Have you come across any other writer who was denied literacy and had to learn to read on his/her own, right from the basics of having to learn the letters in an alphabet, to the matching sounds of the letters? Try to find out something about him/her, the obstacles that challenged them and how they were overcome.



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### 3.3 WORDS TO WIN (*AMAR JIBAN*)

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*Words to Win* is the English translation of *Amar Jiban*, the first full-scale autobiography written in Bengali by a woman. It has an Introduction by a distinguished literary figure, Jyotirindranath Tagore.

In structure, each entry of the autobiography is preceded by a verse composition addressed to her Lord Dayamadhav. It is in two parts, and the second part was written in 1896, when she was eighty eight years old. Translating a work entails working very closely with the text and this intimacy grants a translator some insights into the working of the text. Consider this observation on Rashsundari by Sarkar: "She underlines the distance and the difference between the writing self and the written self." (1999:11) Although we read an autobiography with the implicit trust that whatever is written must have happened in the author's life in exactly the way it is narrated, yet the very process of writing objectifies the 'self' of the writer into something slightly different from the 'self' that went through the experiences in the past that she now recalls with the power of her memory, her pen and of course, her valuable perspective. Once she locates herself, Rashsundari uses the duality to write with both honesty and objectivity about her life. For instance, you can see how she goes through the motions of being a docile housewife on the one hand, and at the same time, unveil the society that kept its women chained to the drudgery of housework, denied her literacy and glorified her role as a 'devoted home maker.' Writing her autobiography helps her greatly to achieve self-actualization in the midst of the various conflicts in her life.

This brings us to an interesting aspect of an autobiography. It is a genre of writing that occupies a sensitive area between the private and the public. Written obviously to be read by the public, you find the author sharing things that she considers "private" and therefore not sharable with the people around her! There is a curious paradox of writing about something that one hesitates to speak about. Take a look at these lines that critique her society for imposing certain unstated conditions on women such as eating the food that she has cooked! "It would have been most shameful to refer to my eating in public," says Rashsundari (1999:166). Having discovered the power of writing, she remarks "How amazing! Who has made me fearless? Now I fear nothing." (1991:180)

The tradition of women telling their stories is not new for it has been done through songs or tales, even just talking to each other as a social act. In many parts of India, there are stories that have been told by women saints about their life and which have been told and retold, carried on through an oral culture. As each generation listens to these stories, there is a feeling of familiarity, a kinship as the stories speak of a commonality of experience shared by Indian women.

Marguerite, the Black American girl in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (published 1970) realizes very early in her childhood that as a victim of racial discrimination, her life takes its place in a long history of Blacks who were "compounded by slavery and confirmed by centuries of promises made and promises broken" (1993: 164).

The process of writing their autobiographies helped Rashsundari Debi, Maya Angelou and Sally Morgan to search for their self and their place in the society and culture of their times. It also gave them a chance to critique their society from a feminist perspective.

### Activity 2

Speak to some elderly women in your house/neighbourhood. Ask them what challenges they faced in order to be educated. If they have remained unlettered, ask them to outline the reasons for remaining so, whether they wished to get an education and the factors that contributed towards keeping them illiterate.

## 3.4 THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT OF RASHSUNDARI DEBI

Let us now take a brief look at her life and times to understand how challenging it was for women to even read, let alone write.

Rashsundari lived in times when girl children got married early after which the young married girls were not allowed to attend school on the wide-spread belief and male fear that educated women are fated to be widowed. Even upper caste and wealthy households in which the male members were educated, held on to this belief. The upper caste woman was socialised into looking upon education for women as something evil, a disreputable act that could lead to the death of the husband.

No matter how prosperous the family a girl got married into, the only role for her was to run the household and cook endlessly for her husband and his large family from inside a stiflingly long veil that fully covered her face. She had to raise the children all by herself, serve food to everybody even if it meant that she would often go hungry at the end of it all. There are passages in the book which describe how Rashsundari starves after cooking a huge meal for twenty five people every day. Rashsundari distances herself from her own situation to comment objectively on the paradox in a woman's life - she is glorified as a "selfless" nurturer if she starves or gives her up her food to others. This is what she writes:

There was nobody to do the household chores in the inner quarters. I was the only one. As was the custom, I had to do all the work and look after the children as well. I had to work right through the day and night, without a moment's rest. Suffice it to say that I had no time to think about my own health. So much so that I often did not eat either of the two meals. There were days when the pressure of work did not let me even have one meal during the course of the day...God only knows what I had to go through during those twenty-three years. Nobody else had any idea either. (Susie Tharu and K Lalita, 196)

It is no wonder that Rashsundari often felt so trapped in her situation that she referred to herself as a "caged bird".

One of the interesting aspects of *Words to Win* is her translator Tanika Sarkar's comments on this custom in the section on "Food and Eating in the Woman's Life": "*Amar Jiban* establishes a very peculiar relationship between the woman and the food she cooked and served".

This was not an isolated instance or confined to a particular region of India. Women's responsibilities were strenuously demanding elsewhere as well. Anandibai Karve (b. 1865), married to a noted social reformer D. K. Karve, writes that the responsibilities of running a household had devolved on her frail shoulders from the tender age of eleven. Her duties were not limited to just cleaning the house, cooking the food, scrubbing the dishes, doing the family washing, fetching water and involvement in religious rituals and their meticulous preparation, but also

entailed responsible participation in other outdoor activities such as tending livestock and supervising workers in the fields. This effectively ensured that they had hardly any time or the energy to pursue their academic interests.

There are other literary works where this theme of a woman being 'trapped' within domestic walls is explored. The constraints were set upon her by social concepts of what is 'proper' and what is not. But the woman still has some liberating moments which arise from her desire to go beyond those walls even if only metaphorically. For instance, Charlotte Perkins' 'The Yellow Wallpaper', Rabindranath Tagore's 'The Exercise Book', and Kate Chopin's 'Story of an Hour' clearly spell out the struggle to overcome the dominant enemy of patriarchy which sought to suppress the female voice and which ironically enough, drew some of its strength from collusion with women such as the mother in law or elderly female relatives who served not only as patriarchy's mouthpiece but also spread the concept of gender inequality deeper into the fabric of family and social life. As Rashsundari too remarks perceptively, women conspired against other women to perpetuate this situation: "Really, how cross those old housewives would be if they saw a woman with as much as a paper in their hands"(1999:168). Girls were not allowed to even listen to the recitation of a sacred text.

The experience of Lilabai Patwardhan was a little different though. While her life seemed to epitomise all the qualities that go into the making of a modern woman, (her studies at the Women's College in Poona, her late marriage and her flouting of convention by being seen in public with her husband), but it was still a life in which household responsibilities played a major role. Her husband did not like her to be so involved with the house like an uneducated woman and he relentlessly kept up the pressure on her to spend more time reading and writing. She wrote, however, that, "I hardly ever found it possible." When he set passages for her to read everyday and regularly checked her comprehension, she "...had to give up my afternoon nap." Still, she wrote, "I gradually got used to it."(295-6)

Although Christian missionaries were active in educating people, orthodox families scrupulously avoided any contact with them for fear that they may proselytize their wards.

Rashsundari Debi has the wisdom that comes with a thorough understanding of her times, her society and her place in it as a woman. Likewise, Sally Morgan understands her cultural roots as an Aboriginal descending from the Palku people of Pilbara in her hometown Perth in Western Australia. Look at the appealing simplicity of their titles—one author titled her book as *Amar Jiban* (My Life) and the other titled it as *My Place*. The remarkably telling and simple titles lend credibility to their personal narratives and underscore the reality of their lives.

### Activity 3

Look around you at the women in your family or neighbourhood. Many of them juggle jobs/education with household responsibilities. Talk to them and ask what they feel about their situation. What would they like the other members of their family to do in terms of easing their burden a little?

## 3.5 HOW RASHSUNDARI LEARNS TO READ AND WRITE

Very early in life, the young Rashsundari longed to learn the letters mainly to be able to read a religious manuscript. She says: "I was immersed in a life of labour,

I hardly knew how time went by. Little by little, a desire took shape in my mind and I came to be possessed by a single wish: I will learn to read, and I will read a sacred text. I began to resent my own thoughts. What is wrong with me? Women do not read, how will I do it and why does this bother me so?"(1999:168) And one day she has a dream that she is reading *Chaitanya Bhagwat*.

From then on, she sets out to find the book and waits for an opportunity to grab it, almost like a thief in her own house! One of the most memorable passages in the book describes how she once overheard her husband telling their son that he had left the book *Chaitanya Bhagwat* in the kitchen. Quickly, she stole a page that was pressed between the wooden slats of the book and hid it in the kitchen. Then very painfully but courageously, she learnt the letters, matching them with the sounds of her son practising the words that he had written on a palm leaf. Slowly and with much perseverance, she learnt to read. All this had to be done in utmost secrecy because for women, especially married woman, reading amounted to committing a crime against the principles of her culture. Having learnt to read, Rashsundari moved on to the next step and learnt to write at the first opportunity when she had some leisure at her son's home at Kanthalapota. Thanks to her efforts, today we and the rest of the world have a remarkable record of her exemplary life in *Words to Win!*

#### Activity 4

In what ways do you think Rashsundari was different from the rest of the women during her times? Was she aware of this difference and did this awareness play a role in her self-education? Read the book and look for passages which tell us about this aspect of her personality.

Rashsundari Debi got the courage to learn the alphabets secretly because of her deep faith in her Lord and the belief that He will help her in her efforts. There are instances where she attributes her success in teaching herself to read and write to her Lord's Will: Rashsundari Debi begins by appealing to God, "My Lord! Teach me to read. I'll read manuscripts." (1999:m162). Then she dreams that she was reading *Chaitanya Bhagwat*. (1999; 169). She searches for the book and when it is left in the kitchen by her husband and she overhears him talking to their son Bipin about it, she says "What a miraculous proof I had of the wonderful mercy of the Compassionate One! As I was brooding, he heard my wish and he set about granting it immediately." (169)

She believes that it was the Great Lord who took care of her as a child and "made her sit in that class room..." and adds "that helped me a lot". Slowly and painfully, she learns to read in silence. "With tremendous care and effort and over a long stretch of time, I learnt somehow to limp and stammer across *Chaitanya Bhagwat*." (172) She finally learns to read on her own with her persistent efforts and tenacity, and attributes her success to the will of the Lord: "It is almost an impossible achievement, it was possible in my case only because the Great Lord himself guided me with his own hands." (173)

We can compare it with Marguerite in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* who draws strength from her Faith in the Lord and often tells herself 'Jesus loves me, This I know' along with the Negro national anthem, "Lift ev'ry voice and sing/ Till earth and heaven ring/ Ring with the harmonies of Liberty." (1993:155) The same thing happens in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, an epistolary novel which focuses on the life of women of colour in the southern United States in the 1930s, addressing numerous issues including their exceedingly low position in American social culture. Celie, the fourteen year old uneducated narrator and protagonist writes letters to God, pouring out her story and this becomes her only outlet.



On her first visit to her mother's house after her marriage, Rashsundari asks her a direct question: "Ma, why did you give me away to a stranger?" This not only sets the path she would take in her life from then on, it also marks her out as a very different girl from the rest of the girls of her times. The question at once expresses her shock that her dear mother whom she loved more than anyone else could do something like that. At first glance, her question appears as if her mother has betrayed her daughter's trust. But if you read about the life and times of Rashsundari Debi as given in the thoroughly researched background by her translator Tanika Sarkar, you would concede that what the mother did was a very normal thing. Marriages were always between families according to parity of economic and social standing, caste and various other factors. The man and his bride may have never met each other before, but the families decide that they should marry in the best interests of not just the girl and the man, but in the interests of the two families that get related by marriage.

When Rashsundari uses the word "stranger" to refer to her husband, it shows the reader how distanced she is from the customs of her times even while being part of it. What is left unsaid in her autobiography is the fact that the question of a mental compatibility between a girl and her husband never figured in the arranging of marriage partners. This was typical of the times, and sadly, continues till date in many families. Compared to the social background of Maya Angelou and Sally Morgan, the fact that a girl is married to a "stranger" can be taken as something unique to the culture of Indians during the times of Rashsundari. Unlike Angelou or Morgan, she had no say in deciding on whom to marry, much less on when to marry. It was all pre-ordained for her by her family and her community.

Still, we see a lot of similarity in the lives of these women. Even if they were not forced into a marriage, Maya Angelou and Sally Morgan had lots of other constraints - some had to do with gender, a lot had to do with race and what was perceived as "outside" the mainstream culture. Yet, it is remarkable that all three of them decided to write about their lives, which in itself is a radical move. If Rashsundari was denied education because she was a girl, Marguerite in Angelou's book was denied respect and even visibility because she is Black. But finally, both the 'birds' take wing.

#### Activity 5

Rashsundari Debi frequently refers to herself as a caged bird and a "tamed bird". However, at the end of writing this bold personal narrative, do you think this caged bird also sings like the one in the title of Maya Angelou's autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*?

### 3.6 LET US SUM UP

Rassundari's *Amar Jiban* was the first autobiography not only by a woman but also in Bengal. At a time in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when Reformism in Bengal was in full flow, it is surprising that the first full length autobiography was written by an unknown, self-taught housewife who belonged to a high caste, conservative Hindu household in rural Bengal. It was written in chaste Bangla and it gives us a picture of rural Bengal in the process of change while at the same time giving us an idea of the place of women in that picture and offering details of reformists' efforts to change women's lives. While Rashsundari followed many of the restrictive social customs imposed on her as a 'good' Hindu housewife living far away from the cultural hub of Calcutta, yet, by the act of teaching herself to read, and then go on



to write (both being forbidden to women of her times) in an objective, critical manner was itself an act of liberation, of emancipating herself from the shackles of ritual and tradition. However, there is no mention of her in the standard histories of her time!

It was Rashsundari Devi's longing to draw closer to God by reading *Chaitanya Bhagwat* that was to be the road down which she travelled with the determination to learn to read and subsequently, to write. In this process, she realised her own self and defined her identity. In the words of the acclaimed writer Alice Walker, "Writing is a way of becoming."

In this unit we noted the subtle, yet powerful transition an author makes by writing about what is otherwise held to be 'private' and 'not to be talked about.' Units 1 and 2 prepared the ground for you to read and analyze an autobiography as a genre of Life Writings. Each of the authors in this Block sets out to record her life as she absorbed and understood it. It was her Way of Looking at reality. They could leave behind a record of their lives that can resonate in the lives of many other women who have had similar experiences in their lives. This is what makes each one of the books so unique that together they have continued to interest readers for several decades now and have taken their rightful place under the classification of World Literature.

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### 3.7 UNIT END QUESTIONS

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- 1) While there are many autobiographies, what makes Rashsundari Devi's *Words to Win (Amar Jiban)* unique?
- 2) As you can see from her book, Rashsundari Devi was very close to her mother who teaches her as a child to repose her faith in God Dayamadhav and live without fear. This faith deepened and bloomed as a steadfast devotion in her life. Does Momma, the grandmother of Marguerite in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* have a similar influence on the young girl in her growing years?
- 3) How does Rashsundari effectively distance herself from the myriad domestic demands in her personal life and pursue her passion for learning to read a sacred text?
- 4) Do you think Rashsundari would have had a better life if she had openly rebelled and refused to be trapped within domestic constraints?
- 5) Could Rashsundari portray the reality of her times accurately because she stayed within her social set up while enduring all the hardship of endless cooking and house work?
- 6) In her Introduction, the translator Tanika Sarkar comments that *Amar Jiban* is a curiously self-absorbed and non-dialogic narrative", (1999:8). Why do you think Rashsundari Devi chose not to write about the many socio-political changes and uprising happening around her?

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### 3.8 REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READING

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## UNIT 4 SALLY MORGAN *MY PLACE*

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### Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Who are the Australian Aboriginal Peoples?
- 4.3 The Aboriginal Peoples as Victims of Racial Discrimination
- 4.4 Aboriginal Memory Preserving Black History
- 4.5 Autobiography: Women's Life Stories
- 4.6 Dalits in India and the Aboriginal Peoples in Australia
- 4.7 Comparative Study of Dalit and Aboriginal Women Writers
- 4.8 Aboriginal Women Writers
- 4.9 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.10 Unit End Questions
- 4.11 References and Suggested Reading

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### 4.0 OBJECTIVES

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The objective of this unit is to highlight the struggle of the aboriginal women surviving between cultures and see how they cope with the changing patterns of their lives. Once the meaning of terms like Indigenous as well as Australian Aboriginal peoples is discussed, it will be easy to understand how the Aboriginal peoples have been victims of racial discrimination. By examining the autobiographies of Aboriginal women writers - particularly Sally Morgan's *My Place* and some other autobiographies - you will see how autobiographies in general have developed as a powerful means of communication. Thus this will further help you to understand that the process of cultural revolution is still continuing which is visible in their writings.

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### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

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The autobiography is a medium of communication for aboriginal writers particularly women. Life narratives bring the past up close and establish the identity of indigenous women. Sally Morgan's *My Place* deals with various aspects of Sally's life and her family life history. Different autobiographies depict their struggle for survival. Aboriginal women writings reveal their concern over the onslaught of white civilization on their way of life and it also shows the way Aboriginal people were dispossessed of land and holy places. These writings also depict the steps taken by aboriginal women for survival - their frankness and their desire to record their experiences in order to give voice to their people.

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### 4.2 WHO ARE THE AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL PEOPLES?

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Who are indigenous people? The definition accepted by the **UN Working Group in Indigenous Population**: "Indigenous population are composed of the existing descendants of the people who inhabited the present territory of a country wholly

or partially at the time when persons of a different culture or ethnic origin arrived there from other parts of the world, overcame them and, by conquest, settlement or other means, reduced them to a non-dominant or colonial condition who today live more in conformity with their particular social, economic and cultural, customs, traditions than with the institution of the country of which they now form a part, under a state structure which incorporates mainly the national, social and cultural characteristics of other segments of the population which are predominant.”

Many of the indigenous people of Australia object to the term ‘indigenous’ or ‘aborigines’. They prefer to be known as the Australian Aboriginal peoples with a plural ‘s’ as they are not one homogenous community but many tribes and groups with their own languages, customs and culture.

The original inhabitants of the continent are one of the best known and least understood people in the world. Before 1967, the Aboriginal peoples were classified as wards of the state rather than as citizens. This was the year when Prime Minister Harold Holt agreed to hold a referendum to see whether white Australians would agree to allow the Aboriginal people to vote. Surprisingly, 90 percent of white Australian people agreed to the Constitutional Amendment. Thus the Aboriginal peoples became citizens for the first time in their own country! The Aboriginal peoples have occupied Australia for at least 40,000 years but went through stages of being conquered through an invasion and taking over of their lands.

There is no written record regarding pre-historic Aboriginal Australia. Their history is learnt through reliable dates derived from archaeological evidence. ‘History is not what happened but what is told’. These words make a perfect citation for the whole story of the Aboriginal nations since 1788.

Aboriginal Australians have often been called the most socially and economically disadvantaged group in Australia. On the contrary, white Australians as they lived in the colony of Britain, were considered to be *colonial* as they have taken away aboriginal land; they have been called *colonizing* in the sense that they have colonized Aboriginal people. The latter had to conform to the lives and standard of invaders and their tribal lives meant nothing to the white men.

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### **4.3 THE ABORIGINAL PEOPLES AS VICTIMS OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION**

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Throughout the European History of Australia, the Aboriginal peoples have been victims of racial discrimination in one form or other. They were neither allowed to practice traditional ceremonies nor permitted to speak traditional languages.

The settlers had arrived in this country to build a new life for themselves and had no time or regard for the Aboriginal peoples. In fact they were often considered to be a nuisance. The population of Australia at the time of arrival of the whites in 1788 was probably between 24,000 and 400,000. Some Aboriginal people adapted to the white lifestyle and in doing so, they were often reduced to beggars. The settlers separated them from their own people and these people were reduced to nothing for the society. Others were removed from their families and placed in institutions.

Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Aboriginal people have gained the reputation of being the world’s most ancient culture. They tried their best to keep alive their traditional ways of living viz bark paintings, rock art etc. Whether it was adapting to the

changing weather or searching for food and water, it all required great knowledge of the environment and they were exceptionally good at this.

Aboriginal people travelled frequently and the practice of agriculture is not consistent with this type of living. Due to the fact that Aboriginal people did not cultivate land to grow crops or domesticate animals, they tended to be looked down upon as 'just' hunter-gatherers without a vibrant culture which is usually associated with more stable communities. However, Aboriginal groups did influence each other. Their culture was dynamic and not static and changes can be seen in the entire continent - changes in tools and implements, in social organizations and in ceremonial practices and mythological concepts. They had a complete understanding of the flora and fauna of their regions.

We have so far in this Unit discussed the Australian Aboriginal peoples as well as how they were racially discriminated. At this point we should try to understand culture.

#### **Activity 1**

Try to define the word 'Culture'. What is the dictionary meaning of culture? In small groups discuss with your friends how coming from different cultural backgrounds affects their lives and social relationships. On the basis of this discussion try to make a list of some common cultural characteristics.

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## **4.4 ABORIGINAL MEMORY PRESERVING BLACK HISTORY**

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The Aboriginal peoples have experienced such catastrophic effects on their lives that there has been little time to theorise these changes or ask questions relating to identity. It is only the Aboriginal memory which is preserving the unwritten black history of colonization. All this is emerging in the public arena now in the form of life stories by Aboriginal women. Finally, the Aboriginal peoples have, after one hundred and fifty years of systematic repression, found spokespersons who are giving voice to their suppressed history.

The initial wave of Aboriginal life stories in the late 1940's and the 1960's focused on men. Though men have continued to produce autobiographical narratives, the genre has been dominated by women.

A wave of women's autobiographical based narratives gained momentum with the publication of Sally Morgan's *My Place* (1987). Other titles include Glenyse Ward's *Wandering Girl* (1987) Ruby Langford's *Don't Take your Love To Town* (1988), Alice Nannup's *When the Pelican Laughed* (1992), Evelyn Crawford's *Over My Tracks* (1993) and many more.

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## **4.5 AUTOBIOGRAPHY: WOMEN'S LIFE STORIES**

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When we talk of autobiography, the general idea is that it is a story of a person's life, written by that person. This is the most basic idea of the genre but it contains much more than that for it is a process during which one examines important aspects of one's life (childhood, adolescence, family issues, relationships, love etc). The writing of autobiography thus transforms the person entirely.



The other important fact about Aboriginal life stories is that many Aboriginal autobiographical narratives are collaborated works. Several Aboriginal women have in fact written their autobiographies even with non-Aboriginal editorial intervention - for example, Sally Morgan's *My Place* and Glenyse Ward's *Wandering Girl*.

This type of autobiographical literature proved to be very beneficial for succeeding generations to become aware and have an understanding of the reality. Many of the life stories tell of the removal of children and whole families from their native lands and their imprisonment in white homes. The history of Aboriginal women's autobiographical writing was shaped by gendered difference and their exploitation by white men. Issues like slavery and cruelties of child labour gave indirect encouragement to a new kind of woman's autobiographies. Those advocating the abolition of slavery encouraged the reawakening of memories of the slave woman's journey to freedom.

What makes the reading of autobiography so interesting and appealing is the chance it offers to see how this man or that woman has struggled through life. Most of us take a lot of interest in the plots of movies or T.V. specials about some person of importance. Our own interest in examining our life is somewhat hidden. Thus, while we are reading a very emotional story what really hold us is our own life which we try to relate with this story; it is none other than the autobiographer who sets this in motion.

### Activity 2

Why do people sit down at a desk and begin to tell their story? Try to read the life stories of different persons or listen carefully to television interviews. What is the tone and attitude of the writer: honest, hesitant, candid...?

Do you remember that in Unit 2 (Life writings) we said that the personal is political? Coming back to the discussion once again, after reading some autobiographies, don't you feel that they have a political spark as we read them as representative of a group rather than of a person?

The writing of these narratives has an important role in the building of identity. Writing an autobiography is a difficult art as the author needs to correlate the public as well as the private image in the work.

Women are traditionally low toned, in other words they are taught to be subdued. Autobiography for women in particular is a huge task as they maintain the delicate balance between self-expression and live experience. During the course of time, the focus of aboriginal women's life stories has now expanded to include biographies and histories of the family. Sally Morgan's Second book, *Wanamurraganya : Story of Jack McPhee* (1989) is the life story of her grandfather and even *My Place* includes the biographies of her mother, her grandmother and her great uncle. Ruby Langford's second and third books, *Real Deadly* (1992) and *My Bundjalung People* (1994), similarly include the details of the extended family.

Australian Aboriginal Autobiography throws light on different spheres of life which are of interest to the cultural historian – specially the patterns of family life and the respective roles of father, mother and elder brother. The closing words of Glenyse Ward's *Wandering Girl* sum it up thus:

We will be making sure that our  
Kids will be given every opportunity  
In their lives to get a good education

So that they can take their place  
In today's society as Lawyers or Doctors,  
Or etc. and be equal in the one human race !

(Quoted in Mudrooroo, 1997 16)

We have so far in this unit discussed Aboriginal Australians. Now let's find out what is being done to preserve black history. Are they writing life stories to preserve black memory?

Be it Dalits or Untouchables in India or the Aboriginal people in Australia both have faced cruelty. Before we touch upon this issue in depth let us try to find out why these people have started including biographies in their writings.

### Activity 3

Biography is a kind of tool which helps us to understand the life of another person in a particular time and circumstances.

Try to interview someone around you who has inspired you the most and try to compare your life with theirs. Look at the variance in cultural and other background features.

We notice that there are several visible and invisible differences. These points help you to understand that person if not fully, surely to some extent. Moreover we can even conclude that no individual is totally cut off from society and their cultural background.

This is one of the essential features of Aboriginal life-narratives: they want to show that no individual can remain unaffected by society and social norms. Every individual is in fact a representative of the particular community.

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## 4.6 DALITS IN INDIA AND ABORIGINAL PEOPLE IN AUSTRALIA

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Be it Dalits or untouchables in India or the Aboriginal people in Australia, both have faced cruelty and hardships all through their life. The fight for civil rights continues in Indian politics even though untouchability and the caste system were finally wiped away by a legal ruling of the Indian government. Once known as the Harijans, meaning 'God's people', now the untouchables are known politically as the Dalits, or 'the depressed'. But because the caste system in India has been outlawed it does not mean that it is not practiced. They still are deprived of voice. The Dalit community can still be easily silenced. On one hand, India is a country with a magnificent history and incredibly beautiful landscapes. But on the other, the caste system is still practised despite its being banned by law.

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## 4.7 COMPARATIVE STUDY OF DALIT AND ABORIGINAL WOMEN WRITERS

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The Dalit women in India and the Aboriginal women in Australia have however, assumed this task of writing autobiographies with freedom not only to draw the attention of society to their torment, but also to undertake self-evaluation. One of the effective modes to approach, view and understand Dalit and Aboriginal women

is to study their autobiographies. When these women take to self-expression, they reveal themselves in a unique way.

In India, Dalit women's autobiographies started off mainly in Marathi literature but have since spread to other languages as well (eg. Bama's *Karukku* in Tamil). With Dr. Ambedkar's call to the down-trodden to take up their fight with the caste-ridden society, Dalit literature is the literature of protest, and is a product of struggle.

Out of this struggle has sprung up the genre of Dalit autobiography in which Dalit women brought forth their agony - the agony of being doubly oppressed as a Dalit and female. The Dalit woman as reflected in the writings of Babytai Kamble, Janabai Girahe, Shantabai Dani, is a hard-working, solitary, oppressed being who has to survive in high-caste society as well as in her poverty-ridden, filthy, superstitious social environs. The same is the plight of Aboriginal women, and that is why they also started writing autobiographies.

After reading these autobiographies we come to know that be it Dalits or Aboriginal people, a woman is forced to submit to the lecherous advances of men much against her wishes. The scar goes deep down into the psyche but she can do nothing to alter a social order which has double norms - one for the white or 'higher' caste women and another for the black or 'lower caste' woman.

We also come to know the ills of poverty, illiteracy and unhygienic living. The woman is a lonely being whose lot is to work like a beast. She cannot be the beloved of any man but an object of desire who is sexually exploited and discarded. And though illiterate and helpless, she has inner-strength, will power and racial pride. That speaks of her ability to face all hardships and obstacles. These women do not deny their caste or Aboriginality but in their confrontation with discrimination, they vow to fight it out. In the autobiographies of Aboriginal women we come to know that though most of the women take pride in being Black and have been taught to be proud, they seem to suffer secretly because of their colour.

In examining the attitude of Gladys Milroy and Daisy Corunna towards their Aboriginality in Sally's *My Place*, we see that both refuse the name 'Aboriginal'. Daisy admits that she always wanted to be white and Gladys says that she does not want to be Aboriginal. Self-hatred and self-doubt result from racial oppression. When racial oppression is coupled with the state of being female, the result is doubly agonizing. Black men, exploited and oppressed themselves, tried to place restrictions on their women, because they were female.

In Dalit autobiography, the women are aware of their low self-esteem, and inferior position as compared to the women of higher classes. Similarly in Aboriginal writing the woman suffers because she is judged by white standards as well as colour.

Thus Black and Dalit women autobiographies insist at length upon the condition and mechanism of oppression of the individuals and their communities. Dalit literature and Aboriginal literature overcome these fears and courageously, though with anger, purposively look back again. In fact, it is an urgent duty to future generations that they should not be allowed to conveniently forget what has happened.

Women's memories do not display resentment or shame of oneself. They denounce frankly, each in their own style. But they do not beg for pity or put the blame on someone in particular. Women wounded by life and overpowered by the strongest

are seen drawing upon internal forces, in order to survive with self respect and die with dignity.

We can see that autobiographies are recollections with a motive. They are not merely public records: the past is re-visited, recomposed, re-assessed and recognized in the light that finally shines at the moment of fulfillment. And so they reveal the real history. Autobiographies prove to be historical achievements to the extent that they lay the foundation of the future on a critical examination of the past.

The autobiographical approach is a device for getting a deeper insight into the complexity of human societies. In short, Black and Dalit women's autobiographies tackle the issue of identity, of defining and understanding the Black or the Dalit self.

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## 4.8 ABORIGINAL WOMEN WRITERS

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It is clear that women writers have adapted the technique of the novel from its initial stage and incorporated their domestic and personal experiences of society. In the 1980's, fiction was used as a political medium for aboriginal writers – especially men. Gradually it has given way to autobiographical writing.

Many Aboriginal women writers say their experiences are similar to those of many other aboriginal women. All these women writers have been able to construct a visible identity as indigenous women within Australian society. *Don't Take Your Love to Town* then is part of a group of Aboriginal women's autobiographical texts but in some ways it seems to be more explicit about aspects of sexuality and sexual oppression. Ruby Langford-Ginibi, the Koori writer, explains why she wrote her life story at the end of *Don't Take Your Love to Town*:

I knew when I finished this book a weight would be lifted from my mind, not only because I could examine my own life form it and know who I was, but because it may help better the relationship between the Aboriginal and white people. That it might give some idea of the difficulty we had surviving between two cultures, that we are here and will always be here. (269).

Certain basic facts about the life of Aboriginal people are clear but there is still a lot to be done to acquire the real facts about them.

Personal autobiographical life writing has a documentary effect; it gives the reader the sense of being told the truth. Morgan's and Langford-Ginibi's books are very different from one another in a number of respects, but they have certain commonalities. *My Place* and *Don't Take Your Love To Town* each involve the first-person narrative accounts of Aboriginal women who speak powerfully and directly about their lives and their histories – in Morgan's case, a narrative in which her heritage was successively submerged and then regained over several generations within her own family; in Langford-Ginibi's case, a narrative in which her Aboriginal history was never in doubt but in which the way she was variously disabled and enabled to take hold of that history and its meanings were increasingly politicized and empowered over time.

Reading *My Place* by Sally Morgan; writes Judith Brett, 'reminds one of how powerful a book can be when there is an urgent story to be told. (9)

*Don't Take Your Love To Town* was slower to make its way into the educational domain, may be because it dealt so much more robustly with issues of men, sexuality,

law and labor than did *My Place* but by the early 1990's it too had secured its place. One reason, perhaps why *My Place* had the appeal that it did among white readers is that it is a book which offers some hope for peaceful living together of different races in the future. It is possible, for a white (or non-black) reader of *My Place*, to feel that racial discrimination in Australia was of the past only, and that blacks now have emerged, triumphantly, from their struggle.

Morgan's second book, *Wanamurraganya: Story of Jack McPhee* has been condemned by black communities because it contains knowledge which should not be revealed to anyone but initiated members of the group to which it belongs.

Interestingly the distinction between silence and speech also works to structure the narrative in terms of gender. *My Place* is mostly a story about the lives of women. Arthur, the only male storyteller and the first to tell his story to Sally, does not wish to preserve the silence around Aboriginal experience. His tale is self-consciously public. The life stories of *My Place* are, with the exception of Arthur's, told by women that too, to a woman, Sally herself. The stories focus on family relations as much as an individual selfhood. It is through the interaction between narrators and narratee that these stories guarantee the intimacy which is often linked with women's autobiography. In the course of the story we feel that male readers are excluded from the narrative construct. Gladys and Daisy have to be coaxed out of their silence; they are reluctant storytellers, unwilling to part with the painful secrets of their past life.

At the end of the story, this exclusion of the reader becomes more universal. It is better that we back away from full knowledge and resume our lives as whites, as males, or, simply as strangers.

In Sally Morgan's *My Place*, When Daisy Corunna dies, it is the call of the bird which tells Sally about the end of her grandmother's life. Moreover what we find is, Sally's connection with her grandmother is a connection with the past and so *My Place* is the medium through which the narrator is in search of her roots and her past. *My Place* shows various forms of Aboriginal Spirituality. One of these is love of the bush. Sally Morgan in particular tells us about the swamp, a playground for the children. She goes on to describe how she

... imagined myself as an adventure always curious to know what was around the next bend...(49)

Both swamp and bush play a major role in making children attracted towards mother nature. Everyone in this book considers that their old one's spirits stay close to them and to the land they were born and lived in. Thus we see how *My Place* is linked with family, community and relationship with country.

The element of Aboriginal spirituality is also evident in Ruby Langford's *Don't Take Your Love to Town*. She describes receiving a sign of bad news when late at night there are three knocks at her door, but no one is in sight. Next day she learns of a death.

Despite the particular nature of both Morgan's narrative and the controversies it has engendered, the publication of Australian Indigenous women's life-writing continued to grow steadily throughout the 1990's; for example the publication of Alice Nannup's *When the Pelican Laughed*, Langford-Ginibi's *Real Deadly* and *My Bundjalung people*, Rosemary van den Berg's *No Options, No Choice*. Because of the historical timing of the material covered in these life-stories, contemporary readers should not be surprised to find a similarity in their themes. All of them



share one kind of basis in the history of Australian state interventions in and control over Aboriginal lives. The hardships, cruelties, privations and resistances, of Aboriginal women's lives led in the context of mission orphanages and schools.

One common thread that runs through all these autobiographies is the narration of humorous incidents. In both Ruby Langford-Ginibi's texts, *Don't Take Your Love to Town*, and *Real Deadly*, there are a number of stories which reveal humour.

When we examine Glenyse Ward's other autobiographical novel, *Wandering Girl*, we find it to be a story of a young girl overcoming adversity. After she finished the book, she continued to write. She wanted to involve herself in writing and publishing work all through her life so that she would be able to help her own people. Ward claims that *Wandering Girl* is her story, the one she wanted to tell by looking back at the past to see the 'funny side'. She tells of her life from the age of sixteen when she left Wandering Mission, her 'home' since the age of three. She worked for a white family in the rural districts of the South West of Western Australia during the 1960's. Ward uses the technique of telling her story to create an image of herself as one who has survived a life of bitterness.

Her story, presented in the autobiographical form, became a source of inspiration for other Indigenous people. On one hand she wants to tell her story from the 'funny side' and at the same time, she tells in detail the harshness of her life while working for the Bigelow family. When she wrote this book she was thirty seven but she has been very successful in presenting this story through the eyes of a sixteen-year old.

Another writer, Alice Nannup, the Injibarndi writer, was born Alice Benett on a Pilbara Station near Roebourne in 1911. (the Injibarndi 'tribe' is the group to which the majority of indigenous people around Roebourne (the Mill Stream area) belong. The spelling of Injibarndi and the term 'tribe' is used by indigenous people from the area.) Her mother was a mix of Aboriginal and Indian, while her father was European. Interestingly her father was a very caring man who accepted responsibility for Alice and her mother, very rare for that time and place. But they were all destined to be separated for, at the age of twelve, Alice was taken away on a ship to Perth. Alice explains in her book *When The Pelican Laughed* how the Aboriginal Affairs representative from Perth had come up to Malina Station (north-west western Australia) to 'look for the half-caste kids'.

Thus Alice's tale takes up the issue of racial discrimination in detail without becoming bitter. Alice accepted her fate, as did most others taken away from their family at the time. What else could they do? The entire police force and government were set up to keep them apart. It is something that would destroy the spirit of anyone. She goes on to tell of her adventures in the mission at Moore River, a horrible life filled with harsh rules and little caring. She married and had 13 children all together. But just when you think the story is over, the final chapter takes us back to her home country – reuniting her with her long lost family from the Pilbara – specifically her mother.

We can see the marks of story-telling in the passage in phrases like, 'it used to turn out really nice, too; 'and you mix all that together'. It is this style which creates a warm atmosphere between the reader and narrator. One major effect of separating children was the lesser use of Aboriginal language, as Nannup goes on to describes in this book.

Moreover she wants to acquaint others with the problems faced by Aboriginal people. Phrases such as 'looking back', 'when I think back' and 'thinking back' establish

Nannup's speaking position as in the present and the events about which she speaks as in the past. We see that the past is important as it also denotes a sense of loss. This sense of loss is most acute in *When The Pelican Laughed* when Nannup first returns to the Pilbara after many years absence, and in the middle of the night, passes by the station where her mother, sister and little nephew were buried. Nannup says she felt cheated and dispossessed.

As in Sally Morgan's *My Place* and Ruby Langford's *Don't Take Your Love To Town*, elements of aboriginal spirituality are also present in Alice Nannup's book. Alice, after being away for many years, returns to make peace with her country and with the snake who lives in the waterhole at Mallina, by performing water based rituals.

#### Activity 4

Put down your own views regarding the statement: it is through education that one can lighten the burden of one's life.

## 4.9 LET US SUM UP

We have in this unit attempted to study aboriginal autobiographies by focusing on Sally Morgan's *My Place*.

The Aboriginal people are fighting a difficult battle for survival to retain human dignity and freedom and much of it gets reflected in their literature. Australia is a multicultural country, a country that has accepted people from all over the world. But people in turn have failed to understand and adapt to the land they settled in and the indigenous people of the land.

The life writing of Australian aboriginal writers such as Ruby Langford, Sally Morgan, Roberta Sykes and Glenyse Ward is an invaluable contribution to Australian literature. It is evident that the writing of these life stories is driven by the urge to share the Australian aboriginal experience with the other (white society). It is the voice of their society crying out for social justice and understanding.

Sally Morgan's *My Place* remains till date one of the most influential works in Australian literature by an Aboriginal writer. Here Sally herself plays the role of interactive audience. Thus a kind of relationship develops between Sally and the reader, a relationship of confidence, emotional involvement and the identification. The success of *My Place* is a clear indication of a new freedom for aboriginal writers. It would be wrong to deny the importance of *My Place* in introducing many white readers for the first time to the actualities of Aboriginal experience, the violence already done to aboriginal people and the cruel, misguided thinking which led to the separation of children from their families. Thus we guess that the purpose behind the writing of this book is to find a position, a place from which Aboriginal people may speak and write to and for you, their experience.

By comparing these writings with Indian Dalit autobiographical narratives, we can conclude that whether it is Dalit untouchables in India or Australian Aboriginal peoples, they have faced cruelty and hardship throughout their lives. These life histories are a significant milestone in their long and difficult journey towards acceptance and recognition. A kind of common thread of suffering runs through all these writings as they reveal the agony of shame and self-hatred and the attempts to rise above these negative feelings. The genre of autobiography assumes new dimensions at the hands of these women.

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## 4.10 UNIT END QUESTIONS

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- 1) Elucidate the term 'indigenous' in your own words.
- 2) How are Australian Aboriginal people trying to preserve black history?
- 3) Examine the motives that might have led people to include biographies and history of family in Autobiographies.
- 4) Black and Dalit women autobiographies insist at length upon the condition and mechanism of oppression of the individuals and their communities. In the light of this statement describe the essential features of Dalit Autobiographical narratives.
- 4) What are the arguments in favour of regarding many of the Aboriginal women writers' experiences as similar to those of other Aboriginal writers?
- 6) Judith Brett says that Sally Morgan's *My Place* 'reminds one of how powerful a book can be when there is an urgent story to be told.' How would you interpret this?
- 7) State the role of narrating humorous incidents in the autobiographies.
- 8) How do the phrases such as 'looking back,' 'when I think back' and 'thinking back' highlight the importance of past in Aboriginal writings ?
- 10) What are the arguments in favour of having multiple talents as this might affect the original work ?

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