

**BEGC-132**  
**Selections From Indian**  
**Writing: Cultural**  
**Diversity**

Block

# 4

## Womenspeak

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## **BLOCK 4 WOMENSPEAK**

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This Block will take up writings which present a woman's point of view. Through their writing and the re telling of familiar stories, women strive to put forward their unique perspective in the context of a patriarchal world that upholds rules which are applied to and judge men and women differently. Whether it is being denied the right to education, the freedom to choose what they want to be and how or the moral standards that they are expected to live up to, women frequently find themselves at a disadvantage when compared to their male counterparts. The illustrative writings and the informed analysis with discussions will help learners become aware of the circumstances in which women have existed in a male-dominated society over the ages and how they respond to it. A woman's point of view need not always be articulated by a woman. And to bring home this point, we have included in this Block, an extract from a story written by a man.



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# UNIT 1 A WOMAN'S RETELLING OF THE RAMA-TALE: THE *CHANDRABATI* *RAMAYANA*

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## Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Chandrabati, the Writer
- 1.3 Excerpts from Essay by Nabaneeta Deb Sen
- 1.4 Analysis
- 1.5 Narrative Techniques
- 1.6 Insights
- 1.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.8 Aids to Activities
- 1.9 Glossary
- 1.10 Unit End Questions
- 1.11 References and Suggested Reading

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## 1.0 OBJECTIVES

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This unit will help you to understand the *Chandrabati Ramayana* on the basis of our reading of the essay by Nabaneeta Deb Sen. You will discover that the *Ramayana* written by Valmiki and Tulsidas, which is generally considered the standard version of *Ramayana*, has been written and re-interpreted by different writers down the ages. As such, the story line and the characters are greatly altered. *Chandrabati Ramayana* will help you appreciate the *Ramayana* from Sita's perspective. It is an imaginative and unique adaptation of *Ramayana* where you will see that when women write, their style and focus is different from a man's, and also how personal relationships are more important for a woman compared to war, politics and the public sphere. Reading some excerpts from the essay by Nabaneeta Deb Sen on the *Chandrabati Ramayana* will enable you to understand how patriarchy and patriarchal structures eventually take over women's writings because of which the original structure of the *Chandrabati Ramayana* has been greatly altered.

Words in **bold** are explained in the **Glossary**

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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It is difficult to separate religion from everyday life. Do you agree? All of us follow an unwritten code of conduct that has been passed down to us from one generation to another. Still, every community and each person has a different and distinctive approach to religion, and feels differently about their gods and goddesses. This is more so in a country like India which has a pluralistic society and social structures that are absolutely dissimilar. You can think of some very basic beliefs and religious practices/rituals which are alternatives to mainstream

approaches. The Ramlila is a socio-religious event in India where people from various walks of life and religious communities come together to enact and re-interpret incidents from *Ramayana*. It is through such enactments and gatherings that religion continuously evolves and avoids becoming stagnant. In India, we venerate and criticize religious icons whom we consider sacred as well as intimate members of our family. Here “religion is not something separate and apart from ordinary life. It is life... lived in the fuller awareness of its human quality and spiritual significance.”

### Activity 1

Does gender affect our reading and interpretation of texts?

## 1.2 CHANDRABATI, THE WRITER

Most of us are not familiar with Chandrabati and so, a good starting point would be getting to know her. Chandrabati holds the honour of being the first ever woman to re-write the *Ramayana*. She was born to Dij-Banshidas Bhattacharya and Shulochona Das Bhattacharya in 1550 in the village of Patuyari, on the banks of the Fulesshori River in Kishoreganj, East Bengal. Her father was a prolific writer who composed the Manasa's **ballads**.

Chandrabati wrote during an age when no one could even begin to imagine that a woman could write and render religious texts in her own way and on her own initiative. It was indeed revolutionary. Chandrabati's life was quite extraordinary. What brought her to writing was disillusionment in love: she immersed herself in the written word which helped her survive her grief. She fell in love with her childhood friend, Jayananda whom she dreamt of marrying. However, Jayananda married someone else and this broke Chandrabati's heart. She decided to never marry, and devoted her life to serving Lord Shiva on the advice of her father. She re-wrote the *Ramayana* from Sita's point of view. However, Chandrabati's *Ramayana* could not be completed. In a dramatic twist of events, Jayananda realised his folly and returned to Chandrabati who refused to accept him. Rejected and repentant, Jayananda committed suicide by jumping into the River Fulesshori. Chandrabati also ended her life by drowning in the same river. At the time of her death in 1600, she was fifty years old. We are indebted to this lady who faced odds in personal life and still gave us a rich legacy that continues to inspire many.

It is rather sad that such an intellectual and progressive woman like Chandrabati should be written off as a ballad writer, and her contribution as an outstanding epic writer should not be recognised by critics. In patriarchy, critics found it difficult to accommodate a woman-oriented adaptation of the *Ramayana*, which was more secular than martial and jingoistic. Till recent times, *Chandrabati Ramayana* remained a 'silenced text'. It is rather stimulating to re-visit this ignored text and see for ourselves how a woman thought that Sita felt, and how the social and emotional world would be if a woman became its central subject.

### Activity 2

Why do you think the *Chandrabati Ramayana* is referred to as a 'silenced text'?

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### 1.3 EXCERPTS FROM ESSAY 'A WOMAN'S RETELLING OF THE RAMA-TALE: NARRATIVE STRATEGIES EMPLOYED IN THE *CHANDRABATI RAMAYANA*' BY NABANEETA DEB SEN

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The author of this essay, Nabaneeta Deb Sen, writer, critic and academic, was a Professor at the Department of Comparative Literature in Jadavpur University. She has many books to her credit in a variety of genres: short stories, essays, travelogues, poetry, fiction, children's literature and verse-plays. Even her most scholarly essays are remarkable for their charming and humorous prose. She is one of the most popular authors in Bengal today. Among several honours, she has received the Padma Shree (2000), the Sahitya Akademi Award, the Kabir Samman, the Rabindra Puraskar and the Sanskriti Award. She is a Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Vice President of the Indian National Comparative Literature Association. She was the Radhakrishnan Memorial Lecturer of Oxford in 1996-7.

#### Excerpt:

...(All) scholars agree that what is found as *Chandrabati Ramayana* is an incomplete text, an incomplete *Ramayana*. All the collectors, the editors and the historians of Bengal literature support the view that the whole of the Rama-tale is not to be found in it. It is only a fragment.

...*Chandrabati Ramayana*... is the Rama-story retold by a Bengali Hindu village woman, a woman who had known suffering, a woman who had the courage to choose the lonely intellectual life of a poet, in sixteenth century rural East Bengal.

Sukumar Sen, when he mentions the life of Chandrabati in his history of literature... says – after telling us about her **unrequited love** – ‘she remained a virgin all her life. This is the sum total of the ballad.’ This is not the sum total of the ballad. The ballad mentions that she wrote the *Ramayana* and worshipped Shiva for the rest of her life.

Are we to note this as a silencing **tactic**? It is no wonder that this text had been silenced by the urban literate male **mediators** in the role of literary historians... In this unusual *Ramayana*, Rama himself is gently pushed back to a corner where he is hardly visible except in relation to Sita. The narrative pattern clearly and unmistakably follows the story line of Sita's life and the tale as it stands is **unabashedly** a Sita-tale under the traditional **guise** of a Rama-tale. The only episodes of the *Ramayana* depicted here are the episodes of Sita's life, beginning with the supernatural birth of Sita, going through her tales of woe, ‘Sita's **Baromasi**’ (which mentions her childhood, her marriage, her life as an **abducted** woman), describing her pregnancy, exile and her entry into mother earth. In a *Ramayana* you would expect the ‘**janmalila**’ section to treat the birth of Rama... The supernatural birth scene is supposed to tell us about Rama's birth and the purpose of his appearance on earth to destroy the evil Ravana... ‘According to rule, Rama's birth story should come first and Sita should come next.’

Chandrabati breaks the accepted pattern by beginning her epic with Sita's birth story... the first six long sections are devoted to describing the complex tale of conception and birth of Sita. Sita is born out of a sorrow – the blood of tortured

**ascetics** and the death wish of a neglected Mandodari **mingle** to create a Sita and she comes to destroy Ravana and his **clan**. The evil Ravana, strengthened by the boon of Brahma, was **tyrannizing** all three worlds and collected the blood of the ascetics, in a box as a poison to destroy the immortality of gods... Mandodari felt neglected and heart broken. So she decided to take the poison that was strong enough to kill the deathless tribe. She took the poison... Instead of dying she gives birth. Sita is born in the form of an egg. **Soothsayers** in Lanka predict that this egg would produce a dangerous daughter who would cause the total destruction of the demon dynasty. Hearing that Ravana wants to destroy the egg... She manages to make him throw the egg into the ocean, protected in a golden **casket**. It flows across the Bay of Bengal and a very poor but honest fisherman, Madhab Jalia finds it. He brings it home to his very poor but honest wife, Sata, who has nothing to eat, nothing to wear and nothing to complain about. She performs various **auspicious** rituals and receives the egg reverentially. Hence, Laksmi, the goddess hiding in the egg as Sita, showers her with riches. The poor fisherman becomes wealthy.

In the meantime, his wife Sata gets a dream message that Laksmi wants her to deliver the egg to the wife of King Janak. She immediately follows the divine instructions. The only reward she wants from the queen is that the daughter when born, should be named Sita, after her own name Sata... So with the name of a poor fishwife, Sita was born out of an egg in Chandrabati's text, not found by the king while tilling the soil as in the classical **legend**. King Janaka, in fact, has no role to play here. It is his wife who takes care of the egg which produces Sita. This is the supernatural birth of the heroine, to destroy evil. Sita is born to bring about the total destruction of Ravana and his clan... Ravana desires Sita without knowing she is Mandodari's child (she is not Ravana's child, only Mandodari's). The story also reminds us of Krishna and Kansa, and also of the Prahlad legend... Call it **intertextuality** if you like.

Chandrabati devotes only two comparatively shorter, later sections to the birth of Rama, his three brothers and one sister, the evil Kukuaya who has the Bengali (and Sanskrit) term for evil (ku) pronounced twice in her name.

In the next section, Book II, Sita herself is now the narrator. She sits in the inner apartment of Rama's palace, talking to her girlfriends, who ask her all kinds of questions about her personal experiences. Having returned from Lanka, Sita is now at ease and talks freely about her childhood, her marriage, her life with Rama as a bride, and in the exile, and her life in Lanka as an abducted woman. Rama's achievements – the breaking of Haradhan and the entire epic battle are only summarily referred to (not described) through Sita's 'Baromasi' (the song of twelve months, relating the incidents of one's life to the seasonal changes). The heroic code is thus gently broken. There are no **gory** battle scenes, no details of heroic achievement given at all. Most of the epic actions are referred to through the conceit of dream, as dream messages.

This section is most interesting because in an epic the epic battle is of central importance. But in *Chandrabati Ramayana*, twice mediated through feminine sensibility, once by Chandrabati's as the composer, and once by Sita's as the narrator, the epic battle loses all its glory and gets only a few lines to itself. Maximum colour and space are spent on the interludes of Sita and Rama in the forest...



After her return from Lanka, there are four more important events in Sita's life: (1) pregnancy (2) betrayal and exile (3) childbirth and (4) voluntary death or entry into Mother Earth. All these experiences are described in great detail. Mother Nature seems to appear in the form of Mother Earth to put an end to the human injustice that Sita was being subjected to.

The *Chandrabati Ramayana* most logically ends here with the death of Sita, and it is here that our third narrative begins. It is our story, yours and mine. The reader's story... We could... call it a heroic epic – if heroism is taken to signify man's superhuman ability to stand and overcome human suffering. Because this is what Sita displays here. It is not an epic battle with visible special weapons, but with weapons of moral values. And this is where we hear the clashing voices of Chandrabati I and Chandrabati II. Her Sita wins the battle by fighting with the traditional weapons of value supplied by the dominant **ideology** of Chandrabati's time, whereas Chandrabati herself, as the narrator-composer is challenging the same values in the very structure of the narrative.

We have here a narrative about a woman, narrated by a woman (by two women, in fact) meant for female audience. Yes, the text was originally intended for a female audience as the **recurring** formula here is 'shuno skhijana' (listen girlfriends), not 'shuno sabhajana' (listen, members of the court) nor 'shunu sarbajana' (listen one and all) as the regular formulae go. Hence the producer of the text is a woman, the product depicts a woman's life and the intended consumers are women.

In Book III the narrator changes once again. Chandrabati returns as the narrator but a male character finds his way in too, Lakshmana. He strongly voices the general patriarchal values, even... of Rama's superhuman quality once (of which there are no visible signs in the text – it is in that sense a secular *Ramayana*).

...In the first edition of the epic... this section is absent. But... in the second version this portion is found. Clearly, the poem had become a property of the bards of East Bengal long ago and was sung to a mixed audience... we also find that the regular form of the earlier address 'shuno sakhijana' becomes 'shuno sabhajana' or 'shuno sarbajana' from time to time. The intended audience remains female in Sita's own narrative about Rama where she is privately conversing with her girlfriends... in her inner chambers.

The patriarchal voice is clearly audible in the last section of the second version, where Lava, Kush and Hanuman interact heroically and the ascetics Vashistha and Valmiki appear in their full Brahminical splendour.

Hence, we can read it today as a silenced text of yesterday.

*Ramayana* is a misnomer for our narrative. It should have been called 'Sitayana', the route of Sita, Sita's journey. Rama is not at the centre of the narrative... Chandrabati often intrudes into the text and directly addresses the characters herself.

The *Chandrabati Ramayana* does not tell us about the route of Rama, but it tells us all about the life's journey of a woman – a complete biological life-cycle – her birth, her marriage, her pregnancy, childbirth, maturity and death. It is a woman's text, for the selection of episodes, for the highlighting and detailing of intimate feminine experiences (like the pregnant woman's craving for chewing burnt clay),

like pregnancy, childbirth (Mandodari's description), maternal feelings... the woman's desolation and desperation at being neglected, worship of local goddesses... and the performance of religious rituals. Chandrabati even uses *bratakatha*-style formulaic language when describing Sita's ritualistic performances...

As narrators, Sita and Chandrabati differ in that one is a character, the other is an outsider... Sita is an ideal representation of the dominant ideology but Chandrabati is a **dissenter**. She openly questions, challenges and punctures the ideology of her time in her personal intrusions, and also in her selection of episodes, depth of detail and silences. But, she does not criticize Sita for acting according to the dominant ideology.

... In Indian epics the epic battle is between good and evil, and in a patriarchal system (which produces the epic) both are represented by male characters. In *Chandrabati Ramayana* also, there is this war of good and evil – but both are represented by women, Lakshmi and Alakshmi, Sita and Kukuya.

... *Chandrabati Ramayana*... is what we call a silenced text... a poor literary work because it was a *Ramayana* that did not sing of Rama... Today, a re-reading of the narrative exposes an obvious failure: to recognize *Chandrabati Ramayana* as a personal interpretation of the Rama-tale, seen specifically from the wronged woman's point of view.

### Activity 3

In what way does Chandrabati make her own thoughts and feelings known in her narrative?

## 1.4 ANALYSIS

You have had a glimpse into Chandrabati's personal life and you must be quite eager now, after reading Nabaneeta Deb Sen's essay, to know about the text itself. Some of you who are real enthusiasts could visit the library of the University of Calcutta where Chandrabati's manuscript is kept. Just scanning through it would in itself be really exciting! We will group our analysis of this text under three heads –

- i) Text
- ii) Narrative techniques
- iii) Insights

Once we have completed our analysis, you will be able to understand the importance of woman-speak and how a woman approaches and interprets her life and its problems differently. We have with us a text that deals with and narrates Sita's entire life span – her *Baromasi* (a Hindi term which literally translates into *barah mahina*, i.e. twelve months – which represents a life cycle, each season representing a stage of life) – telling us about her happiness, sorrows and her eventual tragic death. You will find it interesting to see that war, and public appearance and affairs, which matter enormously in a male-centric society are treated very casually here. Even the people who are addressed and the way they are spoken to is remarkably different from the regular forms of social intercourse one finds in Valmiki's *Ramayana*.

Valmiki's *Ramayana* begins with *janmalila* – an entire section devoted to Rama's birth. Chandrabati departs from this tradition to begin her epic by devoting its first six sections to describing Sita's birth. Sita is born as an incarnation of Goddess Laxmi to fulfil a divine prophecy. She comes into this world to bring Ravana's end. She, not Rama, thus becomes the protagonist. In Valmiki, Sita is found abandoned in the fields by Raja Janak. However, in Chandrabati, Sita is Mandodari's offspring and has no father. *Chandrabati Ramayana* paints for us a Ravana who is dissolute, tyrannical, and over-ambitious because of Brahma's boon.

#### Activity 4

How does Sita replace Valmiki's Rama in *Chandrabati Ramayana*?

Ravana murders sages and collects their blood in a box as poison with which to end the immortality of the gods. He abducts beautiful women and spends time with them, completely neglecting his wife, Mandodari. Out of extreme sorrow, Mandodari drinks this potent potion to end her life and miseries. But in a dramatic twist, instead of dying, she gives birth to Sita in the form of an egg. Sita is thus conceived out of the blood of ascetics who had been brutally murdered and the agony of a much neglected and suffering Mandodari. When Mandodari gets to know that Ravana is out to destroy the egg, she puts it into a golden casket and makes Ravana throw it out of her castle window into the ocean. The egg floats across the Bay of Bengal. Ravana's threatening an innocent life seals his damnation. What happens to the egg? Does it get broken? No. It is found by Madhab Jalia, a poor and honest fisherman. His religious wife, Sata performs holy rites and receives the egg worshipfully, which pleases Goddess Lakshmi, who blesses the couple with wealth and prosperity. Lakshmi visits Sata in a dream and asks her to deliver the egg to King Janak's wife. Sata goes to the Queen and gives her the egg, requesting the Queen to name the child, Sita, as her namesake. Her wish is granted and the new born is named Sita – a derivative of Sata. Her conception and birth are as befitting a traditional male hero. Chandrabati's Sita's miraculous and divinely ordained birth without a male authoritative figure makes her one of the earliest radical feminists.

#### Activity 5

What is the importance of the character Madhab Jalia in *Chandrabati Ramayana*?

Chandrabati devotes only two comparatively shorter, later sections to the birth of Rama, his three brothers and one sister, the evil Kukuya who has the Bengali (and Sanskrit) term for evil (ku) pronounced twice in her name. The heroic code is subtly defied and re-written in *Chandrabati Ramayana*. Traditionally, epics are regulated by a heroic code which demands that the central character should be a man who is virtuous and masculine, and has martial prowess. He should uphold the dominant patriarchal social code of conduct. Chandrabati speaks up in her own person to denounce patriarchal ideology: Sita takes the centre stage with a supernatural birth generally reserved for heroes.

In Book II, we find that Sita has returned from her exile and subsequent abduction by Ravana, and is in her married home. In a flashback sequence, she recalls her entire life from her childhood to her life during her exile accompanied by her

husband, and her loneliness in Lanka. It is very interesting that the thrust of this book is not on Rama's heroic exploits but Sita's emotions. Rama's achievements – the breaking of Haradhan and the entire epic battle are mentioned briefly while the epic actions are referred to through dream sequences. Sita, however, has much to say about her relationship with Rama. Sita's pregnancy and her abandonment, her giving birth to their children, her and death or entry into Mother Earth to end her experience of injustice are described in detail. We have descriptions of exclusively feminine experiences like Sita's yearning to chew burnt clay during her pregnancy.

### Activity 6

How does shifting the focus from Rama to Sita in *Chandrabati Ramayana* alter the storyline?

Apparently, the original edition of *Chandrabati* ends here. However, we have a second edition which is in all probability an interpolation by male writers. We have the entry of Lakshmana, a representative patriarchal figure in Book III. He praises Rama's heroism on which *Chandrabati Ramayana* had remained silent so far. The text gets a patriarchal slant. Male characters take centre stage: we have the heroism of Lava, Kush and Hanuman; the ascetics Vashistha and Valmiki appear in their full Brahminical splendour.

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## 1.5 NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES

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*Chandrabati Ramayana* has a narrative sequence in which the speakers change from book to book, as does the mode of address to its audience and readers. The narrator of Book I is Chandrabati while the narrator of Book II is Sita herself. These two books are women-centric – they are written by women and articulated by women to an audience comprising women. The form of address is overwhelmingly, 'shuno skhijana' (listen girlfriends). Sita's confidantes are her close women friends with whom she shares her experiences. Typical women-centric ways, like *bratakatha*-style language, i.e. narratives of fasting are used here.

In later editions and in Book III, patriarchal authoritative voices take over. In all probability, the poem had become a property of the bards of East Bengal long ago and was sung to a mixed audience. The modes of address change: 'shuno skhijana' is replaced by 'shuno sabhajana' (listen, members of the court) and 'shunu sarbajana'. The tone shifts from intimate and emotional to public and celebratory.

It is interesting to note that Chandrabati remains critical of the dominant male ideology. At times she directly addresses the characters and shows her annoyance at their behaviour which brings sorrow into Sita's life. However, Chandrabati does not criticize her heroine, Sita for acting in accordance to the very same dominant ideology; Sita is celebrated because she follows this ideology unquestioningly.

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## 1.6 INSIGHTS

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*Chandrabati Ramayana* is undeniably an exciting text which helps readers to relate to the pain of women, and understand that every text has an authoritative

voice against which many dissenting voices rise. These dissenting voices create alternative text(s) which help maintain an ongoing discourse on ethics and value-systems. In a society which is patriarchal, it is the man and his supporters who call the shots. Here, literary works do not provide any space for woman-speak. It does not surprise us that it was only as recently as the sixteenth century that a woman-oriented *Ramayana* was written.

*Chandrabati Ramayana* is beyond doubt about Sita – her life, her problems and her personal experiences. Rama is a character in the margins. *Chandrabati Ramayana* is a 'Sitayana' – telling us about the journey of Sita's life; to call it *Ramayana* is misleading. This *Ramayana* is a heroic epic with a difference. Traditionally, heroism translates into masculine valour and a fight between the forces of good and evil which are generally violent, even virulent. However, here evil and good are represented by inner conflict, as ethical and moral forces. There are no visible weapons, and signs of traditional warfare are absent.

*Chandrabati Ramayana* is of great importance as it provides us with an alternative woman-centric point of view to understand, analyse and interpret religion. In this *Ramayana* we meet an anguished and stricken Sita who suffers despite being innocent and blameless. Here, the focus is not on Rama's martial prowess or his kingly attributes but the emotional aspects of Sita's life and her very limited happiness. We are made to feel the helplessness of women who are victimised because their morality is suspect and which has to rely on the judgement of male authority that sentences and punishes. Such mindless harshness destroys a woman's peace of mind and existence forever. Chandrabati paints for us a pregnant and lonely Sita who yearns to be pampered by her husband. Through Chandrabati, we re-visit a vulnerable Sita who tells us that she has always felt lonely and without a real home since she never knew her real parentage. Unlike Valmiki's Sita eclipsed by her husband, Lord Rama, Chandrabati's Sita comes out of the margins and shares the centre stage with her friends.

#### Activity 7

Can the *Chandrabati Ramayana* be referred to as a *Ramayana*?

### 1.7 LET US SUM UP

*Chandrabati Ramayana* is a text that was penned by a woman who was well read and critical of her times. Through her *Ramayana*, she gives us the woman's point of view. This piece of writing was generally neglected and overlooked by critics as trivial since it did not follow the typical patriarchal pattern of narration or writing. It remained a "silenced text" for long and was only rediscovered in the 1920s. What has intrigued the critics by and large is its creative intertextuality. *Chandrabati Ramayana* borrows across various mythologies like those of Krishna, Prahlad and Shakuntala. The concepts of a biological mother, a foster mother, fisherman and a cruel male-relative are not part of the original *Ramayana*. Chandrabati has encouraged fresh perspectives on *Ramayana*. Above all, it is extremely significant that Chandrabati's Sita is named after a fisherwoman, Sata – a deliberate strategy to underscore women and defy their secondary status in society.

Undeniably, *Chandrabati Ramayana* is and will continue to be a text which will continue to engage our intellect and force us to re-assess our moral yardstick.

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## 1.8 AIDS TO ACTIVITIES

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**Activity 1:** Gender affects our reading and interpretation to a certain extent in the process of identification with the thoughts and feelings of the characters.

**Activity 2:** It is called as such as it has been largely ignored within a system of patriarchy.

**Activity 3:** Chandrabati often intrudes into the text and directly addresses the characters herself.

**Activity 4:** Sita, not Rama, is the central character who brings an end to Ravana's evil rule. She is Lakshmi's incarnation who is destined to defeat Ravana and the first sections of the book are devoted to her.

**Activity 5:** Madhab Jalia in Chandrabati Ramayana rescues the egg which contains Sita's life after it is thrown into the sea by Mandodari. Sita chooses the name, Sita as a derivative of her own name.

**Activity 6:** Valmiki's *Ramayana* is built around Rama and his public and political image as a ruler and a brave warrior. In sharp contrast, *Chandrabati Ramayana* is written from Sita's point-of-view with hardly any mention of war and kingship.

**Activity 7:** The central character of *Chandrabati Ramayana* is Sita, not Rama. Therefore, it would be more appropriate to call it a *Sitayana*, not *Ramayana* since it narrates the life of Sita and expresses her point-of-view.

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## 1.9 GLOSSARY

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<b>abducted</b>	: kidnapped
<b>ascetic</b>	: a holy man/sage who has given up worldly pleasures
<b>auspicious</b>	: holy
<b>ballad</b>	: a folk song that tells a story
<b>Baromasi</b>	: covering a period of twelve months
<b>casket</b>	: basket/ case
<b>clan</b>	: a group of closely knit families
<b>dissenter</b>	: a person who disagrees
<b>exploits</b>	: brave acts
<b>gory</b>	: bloody
<b>guise</b>	: a fake appearance
<b>humiliation</b>	: insult
<b>ideology</b>	: a set of beliefs and ideas
<b>intertextuality</b>	: borrowings across texts
<b>janmalila</b>	: story about birth
<b>legend</b>	: famous person or story

<b>mediator</b>	: a person who helps bring in an agreement between two parties
<b>mingle</b>	: mix
<b>recurring</b>	: happening again and again
<b>soothsayer</b>	: a person who tells the future
<b>tactic</b>	: method/ strategy
<b>tyrannizing</b>	: behaving like a cruel and heartless ruler
<b>unabashedly</b>	: frankly
<b>unrequited love</b>	: love which is not returned/ one-sided love

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## 1.10 UNIT END QUESTIONS

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- 1) Who was Chandrabati? What is so special about her *Ramayana*?
- 2) Who are the narrators in Book I, Book II and Book III of *Chandrabati Ramayana*? How does it impact our reading of the text?
- 3) What do you understand by 'heroic code'? To what extent is it found in *Chandrabati Ramayana*?
- 4) How is Rama in *Chandrabati Ramayana* different from in Valmiki's *Ramayana*?
- 5) Why is Sita named after Sata in *Chandrabati Ramayana*? Why is this significant?
- 6) Which Book is written from a patriarchal viewpoint? Why?
- 7) Why is the *Chandrabati Ramayana* considered a 'silenced text'?

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## UNIT 2 LAKSHMI KANNAN AND INDIRA SANT: POEMS

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### Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Lakshmi Kannan and Rasha Sundari Debi
- 2.3 The Text - 'Don't Wash'
- 2.4 Understanding the Poem
- 2.5 Indira Sant
- 2.6 The Text – 'Her Dream'
- 2.7 Understanding the Poem
- 2.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.9 Glossary
- 2.10 Aids to Activities
- 2.11 Unit End Questions
- 2.12 References and Suggested Reading

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### 2.0 OBJECTIVES

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On completing this unit, you will understand the challenges in the life of India's first woman autobiographer, Rasha Sundari Devi whose courage and patience is the subject of Lakshmi Kannan's poem, 'Don't Wash'. You will also be able to see, through Indira Sant's poem 'Her Dream', how a widow in India feels unwanted because she does not have a husband to 'complete' her, and society thinks that she is therefore inferior and inauspicious. At the end of this unit you will see how society favours men and tries to keep women under control by denying them education and an equal status to men without whom they are made to feel like lesser beings.

Words in **bold** are explained in the **Glossary**

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### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

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The patriarchal system ensures that women are not allowed to participate fully in life activities and are forcibly circumscribed by the four walls of their home – and even more so, of the kitchen. In one of her interviews, Kannan tells us that she has 'always celebrated the struggle of the so-called "ordinary" women (and men)... as truly heroic in the way they strive to triumph over their endless struggles in life.' It is sad that even today across India, girls are not allowed to develop their talents and skills; they are only taught what is required to be deft homemakers.

## 2.2 LAKSHMI KANNAN AND RASHA SUNDARI DEBI

Lakshmi Kannan is a well-established Indian writer who writes on themes centred round women issues. Her subjects are mostly middle class women who rebel against limits imposed on them by society. Born in Mysore on 13 August 1947, Kannan is among the pioneering Indian feminists writing from first-hand observation and experience. She began writing in Tamil, and later in English as well. She has also done her own translations of her Tamil writings into English. Kannan writes under her Tamil pseudonym, Kaaveri something which reflects her fondness for the river, Kaaveri with which she has a strong spiritual connection. Her poems too reflect a lot of water and river images. She is a founding member, and member of the governing body of the Poetry Society of India and has had the distinction of being a jury-member for the Commonwealth Writers Prize, Eurasia.

Let us now talk a little about Rasha Sundari Devi – the person to whom Kannan has dedicated her poem, “Don’t Wash”. Let me tell you that the nineteenth century India in which Rasha Sundari was born was a very exciting age where traditions were probed, questioned and re-written. This age is known as the age of the Bengal Renaissance and Reformism – a time when women’s right to education was campaigned for, and resistance to child marriage grew. During the 1800s, women were largely deprived of education as it was widely believed that if a girl became literate, her husband would die. This attitude towards women prevailed everywhere – among the rich households as well as the poor ones.

Rasha Sundari was born in 1810 in the remote village of Pabna in East Bengal. She had no memories of her father, Padmalochan Roy, who died when she was a small child. There was a *pathshala* in her father’s house which was managed by a missionary woman. Only boys were allowed to study here. Though she was not allowed to attend this school, Rasha Sundari somehow learnt some Bangla and Persian by being around in the school’s vicinity and overhearing what was being taught. Her childhood came to an abrupt end when she was married off at the tender age of twelve to a wealthy landlord, Nilmani Roy. You can only begin to imagine her childhood trauma of leaving the security of her parental home to live with strangers where she was expected to manage household chores!

Rasha Sundari Devi was a privileged high caste Hindu who was not expected to do anything other than look after her family’s interest and serve them. Her family after marriage was not ready to accept or accommodate her aspiration to education and Rasha Sundari’s life is motivational because she dared to educate herself in the face of overwhelming odds. Her life became extraordinary because of her courage to dream and realise it in the face of stiff opposition. She had hardly any leisure time but she managed to practise reading and writing even while working in the kitchen. She learnt with practically nothing – two sheets of written paper and charcoal. She later recorded her life’s incredible story in her much-celebrated autobiography, *Amar Jiban* – India’s first autobiography written by a woman.

Rasha Sundari’s husband and in-laws were religious-minded. Well, Rasha Sundari too had a religious bent of mind! It was her strong desire to read devotional works first hand that fuelled her resolution to become self-taught and, at the age of twenty five, she started teaching herself to read the alphabets. Learning a language is not easy, and learning it all by yourself when no one supports you

and you are pressed for time is even more tough. It was by accident that her husband left a copy of the *Chaitanya Bhagvata* in the kitchen. She quickly tore a page out of this book, and, armed with this page and a palm leaf which her son used for writing, she practised writing and taught herself the Bengali script. She also scribbled on kitchen walls with charcoal stubs used for lighting the fire, to improve her writing skills. She became a widow at the age of fifty nine, and subsequently started working on her autobiography, *Amar Jiban*, which has been praised for its simple and clear prose. *Amar Jiban* gives us an account of the contemporary village life and the position of women. It also makes us familiar with the writer's views on various subjects, and motivates us to understand how important it is to follow your dream and to take a stand in your life. Rasha Sundari Debi died when she was around eighty eight years old, leaving behind a legacy of inspiration and emancipation.

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### 2.3 THE TEXT – ‘DON’T WASH’

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(For Rasha Sundari Debi)

No, don't.

Don't ever clean with water  
the dark, **sooty** walls  
of your kitchen, Rasha Sundari.  
For the akshara you **scratched**  
on the walls so **furtively**,  
the akshara you tried to match  
with the sounds you heard  
They've quickened now, with life.  
Even as you wash rice, fish, vegetables  
even as you peel, cut, bake, stir and cook  
the **thieving** letters on the wall will **take wings**.  
They fly down to the palm leaf  
you once stole from your son.  
See how the letters move  
in the eyes of the mind,  
then leap over, back to the wall  
from the page of Chaitanya Bhagavata  
you tore from the book  
when no one was looking.  
You need no book, Rasha Sundari  
no paper or pen either  
you have the black, **smudgy** kitchen wall  
for your magical **scribbles**  
lines, ellipses, curves  
all of them your secret codes for  
a whole new world.

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## 2.4 UNDERSTANDING THE POEM

The poem, 'Don't Wash' is written by Lakshmi Kannan to honour and pay tribute to Rasha Sundari Debi's extraordinary spirit and grit: a woman who even risked her reputation in her determination not to take anything lying down. Rasha Sundari lived in a society where educated women were considered a bad omen. 'Don't Wash' helps us appreciate the intelligence, determination and daring with which Rasha Sundari embraced what was socially unacceptable and even sinful, to fulfil her dreams and live life on her own terms.

Kannan uses the image of *wash* as the poem's central metaphor. 'Wash' symbolises customs which are considered sacred and are not to be questioned. Water has an important significance in Hinduism where washing the place of worship, altar and statues of gods and goddesses is an integral part of religious ceremonies. In itself, water cleans filth. However, in the poem the poet persuades Rasha Sundari Debi to leave the walls of her kitchen unwashed so that whatever she may have scribbled on the wall remains intact and unerasable. The sooty writing on the walls underlines Rasha Sundari's hopes and becomes a marker of her identity. Not washing the walls is like saying that you should not change yourself because society expects you to be different: your uniqueness should not be washed off because it is what will make the world a better place where everyone – man or woman – will have a fair chance to realise their worth. The kitchen walls in Rasha Sundari's house, blackened with charcoal soot look dirty and the kitchen appears messy. But the poet insists that the walls are not to be washed as the *akshara* is written on them. If you think about it a little more, you'll realise that the written word – *akshara* – is considered sacred in Hinduism. The poem argues that the *akshara* continues to remain sacred and is not defiled just because it is written by a woman.

### Activity 1

Why were women not allowed to read and write?

There was a superstition that the written word – *akshara* – would lose its sacredness and power if a woman wrote it. We are told that this writing on the wall has been done "furtively" - it is an act of secrecy. This secret and furtive act is not an act of cowardice but an effort which required commitment, guts and planning. To wash off the traces of this action would have smothered Rasha Sundari's inner self as it was this writing which had brought meaning to her mundane and routine life. The poet helps us appreciate the tremendous hard work and dedication that went into her learning as she did not neglect any work that she was expected to do.

### Activity 2

Do you think what Rasha Sundari did was correct? Why?

Rasha Sundari painstakingly completed all her household chores – "wash rice, fish, vegetables... peel, cut, bake, stir and cook" – and alongside worked doubly hard to memorise the letters she regularly scribbled on the walls. Despite her tough schedule, she persisted in her efforts which helped her imagination and intellect expand – "take wings." With education, she could understand the complex world and express herself in different ways. She was like a bird with strong wings with which it could fly fearlessly.

### Activity 3

Why did Rasha Sundari wish to get an education?

The poem has imaginative and complex descriptions written in a simple and clear language because of which we understand the the poem with ease and engage with difficult issues. We are provoked into re-thinking issues that we take for granted and to question religious customs that we practise every day without giving a second thought to how these customs underwrite and promote discrimination against women. By understanding Rash Sundari Debi's defiance and her dedication, planning and perseverance, we realise that social change and progress is only possible with belief in oneself, one's cause and and unrelenting commitment to it. A combination of intelligence and determination helped Rasha Sundari's fight against impossible odds. She had been able to tear merely a page from her husband's book, *Chaitanya Bhagwat*, and secretly keep with her only one of her son's palm leaves on which he practised writing. She constantly imagined and re-imagined words to re-create them. Even though she had a bare minimum, she taught herself to read and write - to eventually become an acclaimed writer whose life inspired many a woman to rise against social injustice. We unreservedly admire her daring to remain unwashed and unclean – blackened by the 'unholy' deed of learning to read and write.

### Activity 4

How does Rasha Sundari practise reading and writing?

The last four lines of the poem draw a subtle inference that the written script is mysterious, full of "magical scribbles" that seem like a complex maze of geometrical shapes – "lines, ellipses, curves" – to the illiterate. Only by not washing off this mysterious writing can women gain entry into the world of knowledge – "a whole new world." The poem rises above the specific life of Rasha Sundari to encourage women universally to take social criticism headlong by not being afraid of what society can/will say. Only by risking their security can women live on equal terms where they too have access to reading and writing – "secret codes" to empowerment. 'Don't Wash' is a poem that asks us to look into social taboos and assess their worth – whatever is forbidden is perhaps forbidden not because it is unclean or evil but because it gives muscle to the masters who do not allow and do not want certain sections of society, like women, to gain power or a status that challenges their monopoly.

'Don't Wash' is a powerful poem which asks women to say no to social customs that expect women to wash themselves of their dreams and their individual identities. The poem pays tribute to Rasha Sundari Debi's extraordinary courage to listen to her heart and educate herself. When she practised writing on walls which became black and sooty, she took a huge risk because she could have been caught studying and punished severely for it. Lakshmi Kannan finds it very disturbing that society takes whatever it finds serviceable from the women – their ability to do hard work, and utility as homemakers and breadwinners, but do not acknowledge or encourage their individuality and dreams. A woman's personal traits, talent, inclination or acquisition is considered useless unless it provides material comfort to the family members. She believes that it is important for women to get a chance at social participation and decision making and stresses the need to question and engage with the idea of what is acceptable and who

decides what is correct. To help women rise, you have to challenge patriarchy and draw attention to injustices against women. People have to be persuaded to understand that women should have equal rights and privileges as men. We need to sponsor *transgression*, i.e. a breaking down of the boundaries of social correctness. In her works, Kannan insists that in India women and 'dalits' have been bracketed together and denied basic rights, like the right to recite the *Gayatri Mantra*. To live their lives to the fullest, women have to rebel and create their space where they can achieve their full potential.

While women in the West undertook to define feminist thinking and fight social prejudices against women, Asian women have had a tough time trying to rationalise and weed out traditional beliefs and practices that target and constrict women to roles that are pre-defined for them. Indian society is suspicious of change and the idea *modern* itself. Any activity that challenges tradition or provides an alternative to tradition is labelled offensive and shamelessly modern. Kannan's works stoke women's passion to re-discover themselves and assert their identities as individuals, not just gendered beings – beings who are only limited to their biological identities and gender, woman, nothing else. Through her poems, Kannan gives us examples of women who refused to be restricted by their gender. Like Rasha Sundari Devi, they followed their dream. Such women inspire us to have faith in ourselves and the courage to risk our reputation and comfort zone so that our tomorrow as well as the future of the coming generation of women is more just and happy.

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## 2.5 INDIRA SANT

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Indira Sant is an acclaimed Marathi poet who has written on diverse issues that concern women. She was born into a progressive Maharashtrian family as Indira Dikshit on January 4, 1914 in the small town, Tavandi in Belgaum District, Karnataka. Her childhood was spent in the rural areas of Southern Maharashtra, which provided her with a typical Indian sensibility that colours her various works. She attended Rajaram College in Kolhapur and Fergusson College in Pune. It was at the latter college that she met Narayan Sant, whom she married in 1936. Together, they published a collection of their poems, *Sahwas* in 1940. However, their married life was short-lived as Narayan Sant died within ten years of their marriage. Indira was grief-stricken and the poignancy of her tragic loss echoes throughout her works. Her determination and optimism saw her reach heights in her professional and creative life. A professor, she later became the principal of a teachers' training college in Belgaum and wrote twenty-five books during her lifetime. In 1984, she was honoured with the Sahitya Academy Award for her collection of poems, *Garbhareshmi* as well as many other prestigious awards like the Janasthan Award and the Maharashtra State Award. In 1975, the acclaimed poet Nissim Ezekiel translated her poems into English and published them as *Snake-skin and other poems of Indira Sant*. She passed away on 13 July, 2000.

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## 2.6 'HER DREAM'

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Her dream, like the dream of a dozen other women.

A **full plate**, deliciously full.

Places to go, things to do, morning and evening.

Neatly ironed clothes. A nicely **furnished** home.  
Sometimes a play, sometimes a concert – with the best seats.  
All the happiness in the world on a **meagre** income.  
Laughter and teasing. Talk and **chatter**.  
Her dream, like the dreams of a dozen other women.  
But she woke up before the dream began.  
And then she never fell asleep again.

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## 2.7 UNDERSTANDING THE POEM

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‘Her Dream’ is a moving poem in which the poet gives us a realistic picture of an Indian widow. You must have noticed how widows are often treated cruelly by society and even by other married women. Even if widows are not openly insulted, they are expected to wear dull colours, be humble – even self-effacing - not enjoy life or eat lavish food and have personal desires and dreams. At this point, it is a good idea to discuss whether it is possible to be alive and not have dreams. We are humans; dreaming, planning and hoping come naturally to us. We may face tragedies but that does not make us stop looking forward to good times. Don’t you agree that in your darkest moments you wish someone could comfort you and make you smile again? Yes, no one wants to be alone or to receive shabby treatment. Why are widows deliberately made to feel their pain over and over again? Yes, some pain is unavoidable because of the absence of a husband and his companionship. But to force it down a woman’s throat and to victimise her because she is a widow is shameful and unforgivable. If you look around, you will see how widows are not invited to festivals and ceremonies like marriages – their presence is considered inauspicious. It is as if they are responsible for their husband’s death. As a result, widows become disillusioned and stop dreaming.

‘Her Dream’ begins on a poignant note. It tells us that every woman has dreams and dreaming is not limited to married women alone. The unnamed woman in the poem represents a typical Indian widow whose identity is lost because her life and existence depends on her husband: without a husband, she loses her social status and is unable to partake of the simple joys of married life. The poet lists the widow’s everyday dreams which move us because of their simplicity, and the eventual realisation that these humdrum activities are no longer for her. Even before she could have started relaxing and daydreaming leisurely after her wedding, her happiness was smashed and her dreams came to nought. Unable to dream, she became restive and sleep lost its pleasure. Her life became a stretch of hopelessness where there was no rest or serenity. She became agitated and felt utter despair when she lost her husband whom she loved tremendously and who pampered her.

The woman’s desires were simple. She had always hoped for a married life where she would be on her toes, busy running everyday errands, and also be spoilt by her husband’s affection. The joys that she had always looked forward to are listed in the poem. Her first desire had always been to have a “full plate.” The phrase “full plate” suggests not only sufficient food to eat, but a life full of responsibilities, doing chores so that there is hardly any leisure time. The woman had always looked forward to this hectic married life because it would have made her immensely happy, just like a plate filled with delicious and mouth-

watering delicacies pleases the taste buds. The poem tugs at our heart with the realisation that this woman no longer finds happiness because these responsibilities are no longer special for her after her husband's death. She feels unwanted and vulnerable. Her pain intensifies when she sees a "dozen women" around her busy with their daily errands, running around happily – their plates "deliciously full." The lives of these women are a flurry of activity – they accompany their families on various trips and are ever alert, seeing to it that everything functions smoothly. They have no time to spare. Mornings and evenings alike keep them engaged with an endless list of "things to do." The poet tells us that women are central to their families. It is a woman who sees to it that every family member is well turned-out with neatly ironed clothes. This involvement with the family makes a woman's life meaningful. However, without a husband, a woman feels incomplete and gets no happiness in doing household chores for she does not have a husband who will appreciate her and make her feel special.

### Activity 5

Why does the speaker wish for a "full plate"?

Married women keep their home spick and span, and the family members happy. A woman's home is "nicely furnished" because she takes complete care of everything while her husband contributes to her well-being. A woman's marital life is full of responsibilities that have their own pleasurable and light-hearted moments. The widow in the poem is no different from other women. She had always looked forward to spending quality time with her husband and enjoying his company and like any other young girl, had fancied the idea that her husband would escort her to some or the other event – "a play" or "a concert." She had pictured these moments of togetherness where her husband would go all out to make her feel special by booking the best seats for them so that they could relax and unwind, and enjoy the finest view possible. She had fantasised that life would be a beautiful journey of shared happiness and companionable moments. She had always anticipated a life where she would be indispensable to her man who would need her to take care of his day to day needs while he would make an effort to make her feel special by giving her comfort and a break from her routine. She believed that their togetherness would fill their lives with laughter and cheer and their happiness in being together would make problems like shortage of money, insignificant. The widow was convinced that she and her husband would tide through bad times because of their patience with each other and their shared love.

The reality of her life pains the widow as her life is strikingly different from her cherished daydreams. Hers is a cold and lonely world where she has no companion to share her troubles with or to make her feel treasured. She had visualised a husband who would love her dearly and see to it that she had everything she needed, and a lifestyle that would make her feel the significance she held for him. She had never imagined a life without her husband where mindless chatter and shared laughter would be missing. With her husband's death, she is left with shattered dreams and wistful longing. There is only desolation and nostalgia for her. Her marital life was short-lived and now seems like an impossible beautiful dream. With her husband's death, she was jolted into a harsh reality where she realised that the dreams she had shared with "a dozen other women" would never



come true. Her life was now so steeped in sorrow that “she never fell asleep again” and forgot her troubles: her dreams were ruined and relaxation became impossible.

The poem moves us with its simplicity and honesty of emotions. We feel for the woman whose dreams are like every other woman’s, but who now faces a life where her dreams remain sheer dreams, without a shred of possibility of their ever coming true. All the promising, beautiful moments that could have been possible with a husband now remain beyond her. She knows that now her life will be lonely where she will have to survive on a “meagre income” without a companion who would have seen to it that she always had a plush life with a “nicely furnished home” and regular visits to performances to relax and unwind. Her life appears quite meaningless to her because she feels left out in the cold without a husband needing her to complement his life and make it smooth by taking care of his routine needs. The poem expresses a widowed woman’s deep anguish at a life where responsibilities would continue unabated but love and companionship would be absent – a life of utter loneliness and hard work where shared laughter and talk would always be missing.

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## 2.8 LET US SUM UP

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The two poems read in this unit highlight two different aspects of women’s lives in India in the not so distant past – illiteracy and widowhood.

‘Don’t Wash’ is a powerful poem which asks women to say no to social customs that expect women to wash themselves of their dreams and their individual identities. The poem pays tribute to Rasha Sundari Debi’s extraordinary courage to listen to her heart and educate herself. Rasha Sundari practised writing on walls which became black and sooty. She took a huge risk by not washing the walls because she could have been caught studying and punished severely for it.

The speaker in the poem, ‘Her Dream’ is a widow who had always had simple dreams of being happy with her husband, looking after him and getting spoilt by him. There was nothing extraordinary about her dreams, except that when she lost her husband these dreams became impossible to realise and filled her life with immense grief. She had always looked forward to a happily busy life where she would have had to iron clothes, tidy the house and plan visits to plays and concerts. She had dreamt that her life would be full of caring for her family and loving her husband who in turn would also make her feel special by laughing with her and teasing her. It would be a beautiful life where relationships would matter and money would be secondary.

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## 2.9 GLOSSARY

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<b>chatter</b>	:	gossip, small talk
<b>ellipses</b> (plural of ellipsis)	:	three dots “...” in a sentence which show continuation of thought and mystery
<b>full plate</b>	:	a busy schedule
<b>furnished</b>	:	equipped with furniture
<b>furtively</b>	:	secretly

<b>meagre</b>	: not enough
<b>scratched</b>	: written hurriedly
<b>scribbles</b>	: untidy writing
<b>smudgy</b>	: dirty
<b>sooty</b>	: greyish black
<b>take wings</b>	: fly/ be free from confinement
<b>thieving</b>	: stolen
<b>quickenened with life</b>	: became meaningful/ came alive

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## 2.10 AIDS TO ACTIVITIES

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**Activity 1:** Women were not allowed to read and write because it was believed that if a woman was educated, she would bring bad luck and death to her family.

**Activity 2:** Rasha Sundari practises reading and writing furtively. It is correct because everyone has a right to education, which is denied to women because of baseless superstitions that educated women are a curse on their families.

**Activity 3:** Rasha Sundari was a very imaginative and intelligent woman who was curious about the world. She could only “fly” with the wings of education to gain access to this knowledge which was barred to women.

**Activity 4:** She tore out a page from her husband’s book, *Chaitanya Bhagwat* and took a palm leaf from her son’s book. She read and re-read the page from *Chaitanya Bhagwat* and imagined the words in different combinations. She practised writing on her son’s palm leaf and the walls of the kitchen where she prepared food and washed utensils.

**Activity 5:** The phrase “full plate” suggests a life which is full of activities that keep going on and on. The widow who feels she has no one to take care of or someone to make her feel special finds that everything is now meaningless.

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## 2.11 UNIT END QUESTIONS

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- 1) What is it that Lakshmi Kannan does not want to be washed? Why?
- 2) Why are the kitchen walls sooty, black and smudgy?
- 3) Why are the letters described as “thieving” and “taking wings”?
- 4) What would you say is the central idea of the poem, ‘Don’t Wash’?
- 5) What is the dream in the poem ‘Her Dream’? What happens to it?
- 6) What does the speaker in ‘Her Dream’ want her deliciously full plate to contain?
- 7) In what ways does the woman in ‘Her Dream’ feel that her dreams are unfulfilled?
- 8) Explain the line, “she woke up before the dream began./ And then she never fell asleep again”.

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## UNIT 3 NASEEM SHAFIAIE: POEMS

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### Structure:

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Text: 'Neither a Shadow Nor a Reflection'
- 3.3 Critical Analysis
- 3.4 Text: 'Solitude - For the Girl Child'
- 3.5 Critical Analysis
- 3.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.7 Glossary
- 3.8 Aids to Activities
- 3.9 Unit End Questions
- 3.10 References and Suggested Reading

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### 3.0 OBJECTIVES

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In this unit you will understand and analyse the poems 'Neither a Shadow nor a Reflection' and 'Solitude for the Girl Child' by Naseem Shafiaie. By the end of the unit you will be able to relate to problems faced by girls and women in a male-centric society. You will also appreciate that resistance and dialogue, more than confrontation, can empower women. Some important issues and questions that will be discussed and resolved through this unit will relate to the position and treatment of women down the history, and in contemporary times. You will be able to answer questions related to the need for respect, appreciation and consideration toward girls and women who leave their home to go and live with strangers when they get married.

Words in **bold** are explained in the **Glossary**

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### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

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Written in simple and moving language, the poems appeal to their readers to let women be. The poems argue about the need to allow women and girl children to realise their potential and we are aware of a restrictive society where change can only come if we become aware of the pain our traditions cause. The poems make a strong statement that women are individuals in their own right who cannot be treated as puppets by their husbands. What makes a woman worthy of being celebrated is that she does not seek revenge and has the strength to walk out of a bad situation to create a more wholesome society where people are more kind and accommodating.

**Naseem Shafiaie** (1952-) is a contemporary Kashmiri poet who writes, among other things, about Kashmir, women from Kashmir and their perspective. She has a Masters degree in Kashmiri language and literature. In 1984 she joined the higher education department of Jammu and Kashmir Government, and has taught undergrads at the University of Kashmir. In 2011, she was honoured with the

prestigious Sahitya Academy Award for her collection of poems, *Neither a Shadow nor a Reflection* (published in 2007). She is the first Kashmiri woman ever to have been bestowed this distinction. Her works have been translated into several languages including English, Italian, Korean, Urdu, Kannada, Tamil, Marathi and Telugu. According to a blog, *Kashmir Forum*, Shafaie's poetry is "an expression of a woman's inner passion for self-esteem, and self-admiration... termed as 'Sun Passion' by Kshemendra, the 10th century writer from Kashmir." You will be interested to know that in the 1970s, Shafaie was the only woman poet to attend *mushairas* in Kashmir.

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### 3.2 TEXT: 'NEITHER A SHADOW NOR A REFLECTION'

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As always you once again came, standing  
 at the door speechless. Only if I had been  
 in possession of a few words would I decorate  
 them on your lips and hear those **fiery** words you wish.  
 unable to **decipher**, I feel the heat of your eyes.  
 I knew for me you would certainly come,  
 I felt the hope of your arrival and felt,  
 that like a **gale** of spring, you would enter my heart, and  
**every particle** of my life would get **rejuvenated**.  
 But you stand still where the string was broken,  
 You never guess how many forms you gave me,  
 I, like Lalla, rose in the late hours of the night,  
 and **lulled** you in my lap and woke you up.  
 I, like Habba Khatoon, said you are the sky,  
 I am your earth, you the **shelter** of my secrets,  
 the garden belongs to you, come and enjoy it,  
 what **rival** of mine **lured** you away?  
**Stay a while** and **ponder**, didn't I sing:  
 Ó love I shall **adorn** you under the cherry trees,  
 Fasted I for you that you stay with me.  
 My nights passed reciting holy verses for you.  
 If like Krishna you wish and change your **guises**,  
 If that Habba Khatoon decides and leaves you **midway**, what  
 if she too feels hate, she is not to be **slayed**.  
 Even if now you find some clue, come and stay a while,  
 realise your fault, I shall know you have come for me; you  
 come now, like a true Adam beside me.  
 I shall be **assured** that you realised:  
 I am neither a shadow, nor a reflection.  
 (Translated from Kashmiri by Prof Indu Kilam)

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### 3.3 CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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While reading the poem you must have realised this is a love poem which is very different from the ones we generally read. In this poem, you hear the voice of a woman who loves her man with all her heart. She tells us throughout the poem how she has devoted her entire life to caring for her husband in every possible way. Whenever he needed her, she was there and she always adjusted to his ways. However, the subject of this love poem is not only this woman's love and dedication to her man. It also tells us the other side of the story – the man's attitude towards his beloved and how he returns her commitment and affection. You will agree with me that the poem shows us the politics of love in a man's world where women end up doing whatever is needed to make their man's life comfortable and happy, while men take their women for granted and gradually become indifferent towards them. The poet tells us in the opening words of the poem – "As always" – that this one-sidedness in a man-woman relationship is universal: it is to be found everywhere. The poem tries to make us understand that both - man and woman - can be equally happy if the man responds to a woman's love and care by being there for her when she needs him and by letting her be what she wishes to be, even helping her to express herself in ways she has never been allowed to by the male-centric society. I hope you can see for yourselves the significance of the poem's title – 'Neither a Shadow, Nor a Reflection'.

Have you ever thought of becoming your own shadow and reflection instead of remaining a shadow to others and someone else's reflection? Shadows and reflections have no independent existence. They are empty forms which merely follow and repeat the movements of the body. If you think about shadows and reflections, you will be able to see that shadows have no colour – they are black, whereas reflections have colour. Yet, both – shadows and reflection – cannot do anything on their own. The surface where they appear remains blank till something or somebody comes on the scene. Shadows and reflections are lifeless and their actions are never theirs. What would you like to be? Surely not a shadow and a reflection!

My guess is that all of us would want to be independent people with a fair chance to live and act the way we want to. The poem's title, 'Neither a Shadow nor a Reflection' conveys a similar desire – the hope to be a person with an identity and not merely another's shadow with no identity, dreams or ambitions. The woman in this poem asserts that she is a woman, a living being, not a lifeless reflection. And because she is animate, she is not to be shamed and treated with disrespect. This poem is an assertion of a woman's self-respect where she asks her man to be "beside" her. The woman reminds her man that she has been with him whenever he needed her, and that he should never ever abandon her even when the patriarchal society tries to silence her honest dreams and forbids her from talking about her pain and sorrow.

#### Activity 1

Write down your own thoughts on what you feel is the subject of the poem.

We have tried to understand the title of the poem. You must have realised by now that the title also indicates the theme, which is about a woman's protest at not

getting a fair deal from her man despite her being there for him whenever and in whatsoever capacity required. The poem's subject is the subjugation of a woman by patriarchy, and the woman's courage to raise her voice against the injustices done to her. What makes this poem unique is that while relating her sufferings and asking for a just treatment, the woman stresses that men complement women and they should be with each other, not against each other. The poem suggests that women should stand up against men's cruelty and indifference, and help them understand where they have gone wrong. Naseem Shafaie "re-imagines the whole relationship of male and female based on mutual love, self-respect and dignity."

The poet makes references to various religious and mythological figures. Why do you think she does this? Well, if you read the poem closely, you will see that the poem does not focus on any particular community; it tries to make the readers realise that women experience abuse and neglect globally. And, because societies are largely patriarchal/ male-dominated, don't you think the poet is trying to tell us that patriarchy needs to be checked? Women are capable of bringing in social equality and justice by refusing to accept ill-treatment silently. "If that Habba Khatoon decides and leaves you midway... she is not to be slayed" is a powerful statement that supports women who, refusing to compromise on their self-respect, walk out of bitter relationships. Slaying suggests extreme violence and the poet insists that violence can never improve relationships. Men and women can live together only when a man supports and respects his woman "like a true Adam" – the first human created by God– who never left his woman and always stood by her even when she made a wrong decision. The poet tries to make her readers understand that if you love someone, you do not make them feel guilty, but help them get over their mistakes and lead wholesome lives.

### Activity 2

Against whom does the speaker plan a protest? What is the strategy?

The poem has an intense tone. It begins with a rather exasperated and desperate woman who complains to her man that he keeps coming back to her but remains "speechless". We feel her sense of betrayal, for conversation happens only among friends who have common ground; by being incommunicative, she and her husband become near strangers. The woman tries to analyse her man's strange behaviour and concludes that he does not speak to her because he cannot understand her. She tells us that her vocabulary is limited and she does not "possess" the simplest of words through which she can make him understand her feelings and share her passion. The woman says that if she could begin to even speak about her own desire, her man would grow closer to her and share his "fiery words" of pleasure, which would enrich their relationship. You can easily imagine how much better this would be from their present where the man "stands still" and "speechless" and his woman is "unable to decipher" his passion.

### Activity 3

What is the woman "unable to decipher?" Why?

The poem celebrates and affirms a woman's faith in her man. She longs for him to come to her as she feels incomplete without him: "I felt the hope of your arrival...every particle of my life would get rejuvenated." With him she is filled

with optimism and an enthusiasm for life. However, when he does not treat her as a companion, a sense of worthlessness overcomes her— she is reduced to a musical instrument with broken strings that has neither beauty nor melody. The poet goes on to use mythological legends to portray how women have stood by their men through bad and good times down the ages.

Why do you think the poet refers to mythology? Why do you think the woman's dialogue with her man suddenly gets so complicated? What is the poet getting at? Well, you are right if you think she is trying to make the readers understand that a woman is emotional, passionate, dependable and strong, and that her belief in *mankind* has the power to inspire confidence in not only her man but in the entire society to treat their women folk with respect. All the women who are mentioned had the courage to move on when their husbands could not love them and treat them respectfully. We are made to think about complex issues like morality and society's expectations. Are we dealing with something that is more than just the subject, love? Let us explore the poem a little further.

Well, shadows and reflections are inversions: they are not only lifeless but altered – left becomes right and right becomes left. The poem suggests that this is a natural phenomenon. However, the man-woman relationship is a social phenomenon created by tradition and patriarchy. We can bring positive change by becoming more aware of the consequences of our actions. The best way forward is to generate awareness of how gender imbalances make women feel insecure, vulnerable and threatened. It is but natural that men will feel guilt and seek forgiveness, which the female voice in the poem says must be forthcoming: “realise your fault... I shall be assured that you realised:/ I am neither a shadow, nor a reflection.” Revenge is not a solution for it cannot undo injustices. To be given her space, freedom and identity is a woman's right. She should not let herself be reduced to a lifeless and drab reflection which follows her man's instructions and is not allowed to have hopes and dreams of her own. Lalla, Habba Khatoon and Eve – the much celebrated women in the poem – were not only dedicated to their men but had strong identities of their own. They were with their men in different avatars – as a mother or seductress or as a devotee or guide. Their strong individuality and faith in the power of love is legendary.

Lalla and Habba Khatoon were from Kashmir. The two of them had much in common even though Lalla was from the fourteenth century and Habba Khatoon lived in the seventeenth century. Both were married when they were just twelve or thirteen. Their husbands and in-laws treated them badly because of which they walked out of their marriage. Lalla became an ascetic who raised her voice against the wrongs committed by the ruling Brahmanical classes. Though she was a Kashmiri Pundit, she spread her revolutionary ideas by writing poetry in the Kashmiri language, not the elitist Sanskrit which was the symbol of the upper classes. Lalla challenged the authority of Sanskrit in the 1400s by composing Vakh in the local language. She inspired the peasants and the common man to such an extent that she has since been venerated by Muslims and Hindus alike.

Habba Khatoon was a beautiful and gifted child who composed sensitive poems and sang beautifully. Her original name was ‘Zoon,’ which is Kashmiri for moon. Her exceptional beauty attracted Yousuf Shah Chak who became her second husband and went on to be the last independent ruler of Kashmir during the Mughal era. It is believed that Zoon was his inspiration. She was widowed following a long tragic separation from him when he did not listen to her advice



to not accept the Mughal emperor, Akbar's invitation to visit Delhi. Akbar betrayed Yousuf's trust and imprisoned him till he died. Habba Khatoon was so heartbroken that she left her home, wandering from place to place, composing and singing sad soulful songs. Habba Khatoon was the last Queen of Kashmir who gave excellent advice to the king. She was also an accomplished poet who composed *Lol*, the first ever Kashmiri lyrics. She stirred the Kashmiri imagination greatly—a hill named after her testifies to her legacy.

Lalla and Habba Khatoon were women whose love-life was not all smooth. Their greatness lies in their refusal to accept defeat. They were strong and creative individuals who composed outstanding poetry which helped the local Kashmiri language to evolve and made people aware of social ills and the necessity of a just attitude towards women. Lalla created a new form of devotional and philosophic poetry – *Vakh*, while Habba Khatoon created lyric poetry, *Lol*. Eve is a mytho-religious figure who took an independent but incorrect decision to eat the forbidden fruit of Paradise. Her disobedience resulted in her and Adam being expelled from Paradise where life was extremely comfortable, to Earth, where life was very tough. Eve was a companion to God's first human creation, Adam. She took a bold decision to eat the forbidden fruit of Paradise because of which she and Adam were thrown out of Paradise to Earth where they faced innumerable problems. However, despite her rashness, Eve is celebrated because she remained loyal to her husband and never left him.

#### Activity 4

What makes the women from the myths exemplary?

'Neither a Shadow nor a Reflection' is an assertion of every woman's right to be like Krishna and behave as the situation requires for a woman is a thinking and feeling person, not just a lifeless image. The poet punctures the romantic image of an idealised beautiful woman by showing us women who are capable of anger and of overcoming it. All the three women are truly exemplary because they inspire other women to never accept defeat, to be courageous and to contribute to the betterment of society so that there is equality and justice. Their positive contribution to society is their hallmark.

'Neither a Shadow nor a Reflection' is a poem which describes the trauma faced by independent-minded women down the history and across religions. The poem tells us that a woman has enormous patience and courage because of which she is able to take care of her husband and also fight for him in adversity. A woman's selflessness should not be abused and lead to her victimisation. The poem gives us examples of courageous and strong women who were taken for granted and exploited, but who refused to take this unjust treatment silently. These women not only rebelled against their partners but also contributed to making a more just society. They have become legends and are universally celebrated.

### 3.4 TEXT: 'SOLITUDE - FOR THE GIRL CHILD'

Gently **rouse** her, calling in tones soft,  
**Lest** she should with loudness be **jarred**.  
 Full asleep is she, her eyes half open,  
 Such beauty in blameless purity makes me afraid,

Verily the smuggling case of my bosom is she  
 And the honour of her father's **tilted cap**.  
 A daughter she is, a **houri** of paradise;  
 Once she leaves home, it will be for ever.  
 When some day in distant parts she **dwells**  
 Where what the people be like! I know not,  
 Will they awaken her on gentle, **mellow** sounds?  
 Or, will they, I **misgive**, snatch her sleep away?  
 (Translated from Kashmiri by G.L.Labru)

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### 3.5 CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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'Solitude - for the Girl Child' is a touching lyric, musical and full of startling images. It is a mother's prayer for her daughter. The mother feels her heart ripping at the thought that her child will have to one day live with and among unfamiliar people who may not value her uniqueness. You know for sure that all parents treasure their children. Have you noticed how protective they are towards their girl child and wondered why it is so? Let's ask ourselves what makes parents, especially mothers worry over their girls. Don't you think it has to do with the way women are brought up and treated? Well, think again if you disagree! Mothers want their children to never have bad experiences. But a mother in traditional Indian society feels helpless when her daughter gets married as after her marriage, the daughter becomes part of her husband's family where her parents can only be visitors. The mother in the poem is agitated by the thought that her daughter may receive indifferent treatment in her marital home where lack of love and concern would make her restless and sleepless. The poem expresses a mother's overwhelming sorrow for her precious daughter's uncertain future where she could forever remain deprived of tender, loving care. The poem's title is her desperate desire to let her daughter be herself. The word *solitude* conveys a sense of comfort where a person is not disturbed but comfortable and happy with his/her identity. *Girl-child* suggests a pre-puberty girlhood, which is significant since once the child grows into a young girl, society will not leave her alone. The mother wants her daughter to have a carefree childhood without any tension because she is afraid that her life could be chaotic in the future.

The poem is composed as a prayer to all those who care to hear. Do you see how beautifully the poem begins? "Gently rouse her" tells us that the girl-child is fast asleep. We are asked to *gently* awaken her. The poet deliberately uses the word *rouse* as it is not only a synonym for awaken, but suggests awareness. The poem uses the image of a sleeping girl-child to portray innocence but who will sooner than later be made aware of the real world where kindness and consideration for a young girl is much wanting. The mother knows that her girl-child is just a child: completely trusting. She sleeps without a care, "her eyes half open." The "half open" eyes create a picture of a child who is full of energy and curiosity, and like every other child, wary of unfamiliar faces. The girl's attractive looks and innocent nature worry the mother even though she knows that the girl has done nothing wrong – is pure and *blameless*. Why? The next stanza subtly leads us to the answer after we are made to understand the society in which the family lives and their social status/ standing. The mother confesses that their daughter is her husband's pride just like a cap or turban or *pagdi* is the symbol of a clan's

honour. The entire clan is insulted if the *pagdi* is handled casually. Similarly, the father feels very strongly about his daughter's dignity, and the slightest possibility that his daughter may be disrespected upsets him. The poet describes the mother's heart as a box or a chest that has cracks. Like the stored objects in a cracked box are not completely safe, the mother's emotions are vulnerable because her heart – her case – has cracks of concern that her daughter may be abused. Worry keeps “smuggling” into her heart – consciously or subconsciously she remains anxious about her daughter and what can happen to her.

### Activity 5

Why does the mother say “Gently rouse her”?

The child is her father's pride and a product of his upbringing – she is the one who will now be the upholder of his values. She has to live her life with consideration to the family's traditions without breaking down the social structure.

The daughter is extremely attractive. She is described as an “*hour*” – a girl so beautiful that she seems to be a gift of paradise on earth. This worries the mother because the girl would sooner or later have a string of admirers. The thought that she could leave home to live among unfamiliar people who may admire her makes her jittery. The mother becomes extremely anxious thinking of what will happen to her daughter who in her parental home has always slept undisturbed and only been spoken to softly. There is a strong possibility that the people she goes on to live with could have a lifestyle and attitudes very different from theirs – people who are loud and disrespectful to women. The poem ends on an agitated note with the mother voicing her greatest fear that her daughter may lose her peace of mind completely and never ever sleep again.

The poem is a mother's desperate hope that her child always has a calm and peaceful life – solitude - even when she lives away from her parents with her husband and his family. I think you can understand that each one of us has a personal space where we can do things we like and be the way we want to be. We are carefree at home. Once we leave home, we are expected to shoulder responsibilities which sometimes break us. No one wants to be alone, but no one deserves to be taken for granted or ill-treated either. Married girls are usually expected to be uncomplaining even while doing backbreaking chores. You will agree with me that the poem ends on a note which is harsh and troubling, but realistic: a girl's innocence and attractiveness can get her a suitor but cannot guarantee her solitude and keep her safe from abuse.

In ‘Solitude - for the Girl Child’ we come across a mother's overwhelming concern for her daughter who is still to become a woman. The mother worries that her little girl who is at present full of life, spontaneity and happiness will soon be forced by society to follow suffocating customary practices. These customs will require the child to marry and become an obedient and unquestioning wife and daughter in law who will have no choice but to do what her in-laws ask her to do. The mother prays that her daughter will be looked after in her husband's home which will be in a strange land with unfamiliar customs. This poem grieves over the inescapable loss of the girl's spontaneity, freedom and carefree ways.

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### 3.6 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit you have read about a woman's courage to rise above her sad situation and contribute positively to society, which leads to her society celebrating her as a legend that continues to inspire people down the ages. She underscores her uniqueness by saying that no matter how comfortable and plush her life is and can be, she will never become a doormat because she is not a dark lifeless shadow or a colourful but emotionless image which has no self, and comes into existence only to replicate and duplicate someone. The woman says that she will not let anyone disrespect her or take her for granted because she is an individual with feelings and thought. She offers examples of much loved and devoted wives from earlier recorded times before her man so that he understands love, not persecution and revenge and thus help create a strong relationship.

You have also heard a mother's prayer for her daughter as she grows up in a traditional and orthodox society which does not allow freedom of expression and action to its women. The mother hopes that her daughter gets married into a family that accommodates her bubbly nature. These poems have helped you become aware of customary practices that are regressive with regard to women and need to be changed so that we can have a just society where women can express their individualities and be the person they want to be.

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### 3.7 GLOSSARY

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<b>adorn</b>	: decorate
<b>assured</b>	: become certain about/ not be doubtful of
<b>decipher</b>	: make sense of
<b>dwells</b>	: lives
<b>fiery</b>	: full of energy and high-spirited
<b>gale</b>	: strong breeze
<b>guise</b>	: appearance
<b>hourī</b>	: a pure and extremely beautiful girl
<b>jarred</b>	: very much disturbed
<b>midway</b>	: middle of the journey
<b>lest</b>	: otherwise
<b>lulled</b>	: put to sleep
<b>lured</b>	: attracted by wrong means
<b>mellow</b>	: soft and subtle
<b>misgive</b>	: be afraid of
<b>every particle</b>	: smallest part
<b>ponder</b>	: think deeply
<b>rejuvenated</b>	: filled with life once again
<b>rival</b>	: enemy
<b>rouse</b>	: awaken

<b>shelter</b>	: a place where you are safe
<b>slayed</b>	: killed with violence by a sword or a sharp weapon
<b>solitude</b>	: to be peacefully all by yourself
<b>stay a while</b>	: stop for some more time
<b>tilted cap</b>	: a metaphor for someone who is different from others and is lovable
<b>verily</b>	: in truth

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### 3.8 AIDS TO ACTIVITIES

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**Activity 1:** The poem's subject is a woman's strong refusal to be reduced to a nobody by a male-centric, patriarchal society. The female voice in the poem symbolises every oppressed woman's protest.

**Activity 2:** The speaker in the poem is a woman who plans a protest against people, especially men in a patriarchal society, who treat their women with disrespect. Her strategy is to reform such men through persuasion and insistence, not revenge and violent retaliation.

**Activity 3:** The woman is "unable to decipher" why her man stands silently at the door with passion in his eyes. She does not understand his silence and his intense, "fiery" passion because she has neither been taught her man's language nor permitted to express her passion.

**Activity 4:** The women from the myths are exemplary because of their strong personalities who lived life on their terms, never compromising their dignity. They had the courage to listen to their heart, follow their dreams and create a fair and just society.

**Activity 5:** The mother wants her girl-child to be treated with gentleness and wants her daughter to be woken up tenderly as she is still a child and who might, all too soon be among strangers who will not treat her so considerately.

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### 3.9 UNIT END QUESTIONS

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- 1) Why does the speaker in the first poem want to be "in possession of a few words"? What does she want to decorate?
- 2) What does the speaker mean when she says, "every particle of my life would get rejuvenated"?
- 3) Who stands "still where the strings was broken"? Why?
- 4) Why "if she too feels hate, she is not to be slayed"?
- 5) How can women be empowered, according to the poet?
- 6) Why does the mother ask everyone to speak in "tones soft"?
- 7) Why is the girl-child special? What is needed for her?
- 8) Explain the line, "Such beauty in blameless purity makes me afraid".
- 9) What can happen to the girl-child "When some day in distant parts she dwells"?

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### 3.10 REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READING

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## UNIT 4 ‘SAPAVIMOCHANAM’ (‘THE REDEMPTION’) BY PUDHUMAIPITHAN

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### Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 The author: Pudhumaipithan
- 4.3 Excerpts from ‘Sapa Vimochanam’ (‘The Redemption’)
- 4.4 Discussion
- 4.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.6 Aids to Activities
- 4.7 Glossary
- 4.8 Unit End Questions
- 4.9 References and Suggested Reading

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### 4.0 OBJECTIVES

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This unit will introduce you to ‘Sapa Vimochanam’ (‘The Redemption’) a Tamil retelling of the Ahilya story from another point of view. By the end of this unit, you will be able to appreciate how the recounting of a familiar story from a different perspective impacts the reader. You will also be in a position to understand that stories have not always been told from a woman’s point of view and how this affects the stories that were told and the response to them. Although the other texts featured in this Block – “Womenspeak” – have been written by women, it is significant that a male writer has recast a familiar tale from a woman’s perspective and is thus worthy of study.

Words in **bold** are explained in the **Glossary**

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### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

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It may be argued that every telling of a story handed down to us over the ages is, in essence, a re-telling for every narrator adds and revises – albeit sometimes unintentionally – the story, to suit the audience and the mood. On the other hand, some writers deliberately change and tweak details of a familiar story so that it offers new insights. It is like looking at the photograph of a well-known scene that one has become accustomed to and almost ignored but which now appears new and fresh because of a change in perspective. These revisions enjoy the advantage of presenting a story that is known to most readers but with a twist that serves to convey what the revisionist wishes to by the addition or otherwise of certain details in the oft-repeated tale. The first unit in this Block spoke about the retelling of the *Ramayana* by Chandrabati. This unit takes up one of the episodes in that epic and sees how the retelling is handled.

**Activity 1**

What purpose do you think a retelling serves? Can you think of any in your own language?

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## 4.2 THE AUTHOR: PUDHUMAIPITHAN

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Pudhumaipithan is the pseudonym of C. Viruthachalam (25 April 1906 – 5 May 1948), one of the most influential and revolutionary writers of Tamil fiction who wrote poetry, short stories and political works. His works were characterized by social satire, progressive thinking and outspoken criticism of accepted conventions. He as an individual and his works have been extensively reviewed and debated for over sixty years since his death. His influence has been accepted and appreciated by the present day writers and critics of Tamil fiction. Pudhumaipithan was the first Tamil writer to successfully use a dialect of Tamil other than that of Chennai or Tanjore. Most of his characters spoke the Tirunelveli dialect. His stories were set either in Madras or in Tirunelveli, the two places where he spent considerable portions of his life. His writing style had a mixture of colloquial and classical words. Gentle satire even while handling complicated and serious situations was his hallmark.

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## 4.3 EXCERPTS FROM ‘SAPA VIMOCHANAM’

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On the path, a statue of stone. Its broken, decrepit state notwithstanding, the enchanting face would still kindle chivalry. The intoxication it induces would make one wonder whether an extraordinary sculptor came down to the mortal world to crystallize his dreams in stone. However, in the eyes of that goddess brims a sorrow – a sadness that cannot be bound by words, which kills lust in onlookers and submerges them in grief too. It was no ordinary dream of the sculptor but was shaped by a curse. This is Ahilya.

She lies sculpted in stone on that forest path, sorrowful, in the lap of Nature which looks at her desolation with the detached eyes of an **ascetic**. She is scorched by the sun, soaked in mist, lashed by the rains. Dust, soil, sparrows, owls sit on her; fly away. She lies like a *tapasvi*, without awareness – as stone.

A short distance away is an anthill. Immersed in austerities, totally absorbed, forgetting his sorrow, sits **Gautama** in deep meditation. Nature nourishes him too...

The rustle of the Ganga in the distance. Mother Ganga could perhaps sense their boundless sorrow!

Many ages passed like this for the couple. Then one day...

The midday sun was undeniably severe. But in spite of that, the green shade and the flowing breeze flowed coolly into the mind like elements of faith that could soothe the **afflictions** of the world, seeming to banish sorrow by awakening belief and strength.

Like a lion, walking proudly, ruminating over the joy of having completed what he had undertaken, comes **Vishwamitra**. **Maricha** and **Subahu** have been obliterated without a trace. The old tyranny of **Thataka** has been crushed. There



is the satisfaction of having made of himself the medium through which peace and **succour** came to those who immersed themselves in religious rituals and were guardians of the scared flame.

He looks back frequently. What love shines in that glance! Two youngsters come running behind him, playing catch. They are none other than the child incarnations – Rama and Lakshmana themselves. Having begun the end of the demons and unaware of its import, they run and play, carefree.

Their running stirs up the dust. Lakshmana runs in front; the one who chases him is Rama. A drift of dust touches the statue...

Delighting in their boisterousness, Vishwamitra looks back. And just stands there, gazing.

A drift of dust settles on the statue.

The heart that had turned to stone some time long ago now throbs within. The blood that had **congealed** in the veins it used to course through now starts to flow. The warmth of life spreads through the stone and brings it to the roundedness of life. Consciousness returns.

Ahilya closes and opens her eyes. There is awareness. Redemption from the curse! Redemption from the curse!

O God! The flawed body of flesh has been made pure!

Who is the godly being that has come to give her renewed life? Is it that little child?

She prostrates at his feet. Rama looks at the rishi with astonishment.

Vishwamitra has understood all. She is Ahilya. The simpleton who had been deceived by Indra’s magical disguise. She is Gautama’s wife - one who, in her boundless love for her husband, had fallen prey to the illusion of Indra’s enchanted pretense and had defiled her body. He tells Rama the whole story. There, look at that anthill; like a silkworm cocooned in silence, Gautama sits immersed in meditation. Lo, he too has arisen now!

... Rama’s education peers through the eyes of dharma and assumes the light of clarity and serenity. But it has not been **honed** on the **whetstone** of experience; he has the teaching of **Vasishtha** who saw every strand of life’s tangles unbroken from one weave to the next. Yet he is unaware of the swerving from the virtuous path and consequent disgrace, giving the mind the strength to walk boldly on new paths.

What is the nature of the world that it should twist around and disturb one in such a contrary fashion! Punishing someone for a deed... which neither the heart nor the unhurriedness of the intellectual faculty could contain? With a cry of “Amma!” Rama falls at her feet in reverence.

Both the rishis (one possesses boldness itself for intelligence; the other views love as the foundation of all dharma) rejoice at the ideas that rise in the little one’s window of awareness. What a fine, loving, bold truth!

“To accept her who erred unknowingly would be the right thing to do”, says Vishwamitra softly.

The roughness of his voice seems to be at variance with the coolness-laden breeze.

Gautama, his wife, the pillarless structure which had once been their dwelling and had collapsed into a mound – none of this moved from the spot. But now, the place which had been **bereft** of life earlier was profusely drenched with signs of life.

...Their hearts were completely filled with tenderness and affection. Yet, both of them suffered in their two different mind-prisons.

Ahilya’s only worry was whether she was worthy of Gautama.

Gautama’s only worry was whether he was worthy of Ahilya.

The flowers that bloomed along the edges of the path looked at them and laughed.

... In accordance with Ahilya’s wishes, Gautama started his *dharma vichara* in a small hut on the banks of the river Sarayu in Ayodhya, a little away from the fields that skirted the city, in a place where the odour of human custom and tradition did not permeate. Gautama now had implicit faith in Ahilya. Even if he were to see her lying in Indra’s lap, he would not doubt her – such was his faith in her absolute chastity. He now felt that if she were not with him, it would completely destroy his *dharma vichara*.

Ahilya loved him greatly in a way that could not be measured. When she thought of him, her mind and every part of her body would thrill like that of a newly wed girl. But the stone that had settled on her mind did not shift. She wished to conduct herself in a way such that no one would point fingers at her, why, even stare at her in a particular way. Consequently, her demeanour underwent a change from its natural disposition. It was as though all those who surrounded her were Indras; fear lodged itself in her heart. From that time onwards, speech and playfulness vanished completely. She would speak only after having rehearsed the words a thousand times in her mind, having examined them from all perspectives and judged their appropriateness. She would agonize over whether there was any hidden meaning even in ordinary words uttered by Gautama.

Life itself had become the tortures of hell for her.

The rishi Mareechi came one day. Dareechi had visited them on an earlier occasion. Madanga too, on his way to Varanasi, dropped in to enquire about Gautama’s well being. Although they were full of love and concern, Ahilya cringed in their presence. Her mind lay all curled up and withered. Even the tradition of hospitality accorded to guests seemed to be on the point of being **transgressed**. She shied away from meeting the eyes of even those who looked at her in an ordinary manner, feeling that she could not look at them with a pure heart. She hid inside the hut.

...Sita and Rama would from time to time come that way eagerly, riding on their chariot. An incarnation, this child, to Gautama’s mind, seemed to be the embodiment of the ideal youth. Even his laughter and playfulness, like self-replenishing lamps of *dharma shastra*, appeared to interpret the essence. And, the fondness of that youthful couple! It reminded Gautama of his life in time past.

Sita was the dove that had come to **alleviate** the burden on Ahilya’s mind. To Ahilya, her speech and laughter seemed to scrub and rinse away the stains on her spirit. It was only in her presence that Ahilya’s lips would curve into a smile and the light of enthusiasm would gleam in her eyes.

They were destined to rule after all, growing up under the watchful eyes of Vasishtha, weren’t they? They came to this isolated, different world tucked away on the bank of the river Sarayu to the beings dwelling there, restoring the joy of a previous time.

Ahilya disliked going out and moving around in the outside world. Sita’s companionship eased the weight on her mind and gave her some strength.

She had consented to go to Ayodhya during the celebrations that would surround the coronation. But then, the power of the whirlpool of emotion that swirled within the palace! In one breath, it took away Dasaratha’s life, banished Rama to the forest and sent off Bharata in tears and **haircloth** to Nandigram.

It was as though some **transcendental** force, incomprehensible to the human faculty, had, with frenzied speed, rolled the dice in a hypnotic trance and ended it all.

As for Vasishtha, he had wished to establish a reign that would be the triumph of human dharma and had brought up the princes diligently and carefully towards that end. All his calculations crumbled to dust and became a flickering, unsteady light in Nandigram.

It would not be far from the truth to say that the hut on the bank of the Sarayu collapsed, bereft of pillars once more. The dharma vichara of Gautama was **pillaged** in the devilish storm and all his faith shriveled into nothingness.

And what of Ahilya? If her distress were to be measured, it would not be contained in words. She could comprehend nothing of what had happened and fell back wounded and exhausted. Rama went to the forest. His brother too followed him. And so did Sita. Ahilya’s mind went back to the state when it had lain inert while she was an image of stone. As dawn glimmered, Gautama completed his chanting and meditation, climbed the riverbank and entered his hut.

Holding out the brass pot filled with water for him to wash his feet, Ahilya’s lips quivered.

“I am not at peace here. Let us go away to Mithila”.

“All right, get ready then. It’s been a long time since we saw **Sadananda** too”, said Gautama as he went out of the hut.

Both of them walked towards Mithila. In the minds of both, a weight had settled and made its home. Gautama paused a little. He reached out for Ahilya’s hand as she followed him and held it tightly as he resumed walking. “Don’t be afraid”, he said. And they continued walking in the direction of Mithila.

... Ahilya loved bathing and playing in the river. Feeling that the bank of the Ganga would give her a sense of calm, she would go off alone at dawn, carrying her water pot.

For a couple of days, alone, in peace, allowing the tendrils of her mind to spread freely, with a contented feeling of having shed her burden, she bathed, dipped, played and came back with the pot full of water.

This did not go on for long.

She was walking back after a bath with bent glance, having let her mind wander, when she heard the tinkle of toe rings. Wives of some Rishis! They were also on their way to bathe in the river. As soon as they spotted her, they rushed away to avoid contact as though she were an outcaste, gave her a fearful look and proceeded.

“She is the one; she is Ahilya”, could be heard from a distance. These words scorched her more than the fire in Gautama’s innards that had given rise to the curse.

Her mind burned and roared like the flames at a cremation ground. Thoughts churned. “Dear god! Even if there has been redemption from the curse, will there never be redemption from the sin?” she agonized.

...The day declines and the horizon goes dim. Two people are walking towards Ayodhya along the edge of the Sarayu river.

Fourteen years have passed and merged with the floodwaters of Time. There are no munis or gods they have not glimpsed; not a holy place they have not visited. But peace of mind is the only thing they do not have.

Like a Shankara’s philosophical **edifice** that remains out of reach to the grasp of a man bereft of strength, they stood on weakly faltering legs and viewed the unattainable heights of Mount Kailasa from misty peaks.

They crossed deserts that seemed to be a metaphor for the **erosion** of faith which the burden of their pain had **engendered**.

They went around volcanoes that **spewed** smoking ash and dust like their scorched spirits.

They went up to look at the ceaseless waves of the ocean that battered the shore like their thoughts and retreated.

...Ahilya rejoiced in the thought that Sita and Rama would come to see them. And they did, as soon as the welcoming excitement subsided, without an attending retinue.

Rama, on whose brow experience had etched a network of lines, alighted from the chariot. Sita’s beauty had blossomed through her experience. The intense laughter of both evoked the ecstasy of **moksha**.

Gautama took Rama away with him on a stroll outside.

With the tender love like to one who had been carried in her womb, Ahilya escorted Sita inside. Both sat with faces wreathed in smiles.

Ravana carrying her away, the pain, the liberation – all this Sita related without the stains of anguish having faded away. After having been reconciled with Rama, where was the place for pain anymore?

She spoke about the agni pravesham, her ordeal through fire. Ahilya writhed in pain.

“Did He ask for that? Why did you do it?”

“He asked for it. I did it”, replied Sita calmly.

Both remained silent for a long time.

“Should it not be demonstrated to the world?” said Sita and laughed softly.

“Isn’t it enough for the heart to know? Is it possible to demonstrate the truth to the world?” questioned Ahilya. Conversation **languished**.

“In any case, will it become the truth through a demonstration? What if it never even touched the heart? Let it be; what of the world?” queried Ahilya.

The chariot rolled away; gradually the sound of the wheels subsided too.

Gautama stood there lost in thought...He went inside.

Ahilya was in a daze. Once again the Indra drama - the Indra drama that must needs be forgotten, was playing in the theatre of her mind.

Gautama embraced her.

To her it seemed to be Indra come in the guise of Gautama. Her heart congealed to stone. What peace!

Lying trapped in Gautama’s hands was a stone statue.

Ahilya turned into stone again.

The burden on the mind disappeared.

(Translated from Tamil by Malati Mathur)

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## 4.4 DISCUSSION

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The incident of Ahilya cursed by her husband, Rishi Gautama, for submitting to Lord Indra when he appeared in the guise of Gautama, and her redemption by young Rama, is a well-known episode that forms part of the *Ramayana*. The episode serves to reinforce the divinity of Rama and, as a **corollary**, the idea that there is redemption for even grave sins if there is submission and repentance. In addition, according to Jaya Srinivasan, Ahilya’s actions and the resultant curse are a warning that immoral behaviour leads to doom.

Early narratives portray Ahilya as consciously making the decision to accept Indra’s advances, having seen through his disguise as Gautama. She is said to have done this out of curiosity and flattered by his interest in her, as well as her pride in her incomparable beauty. As Jaya Srinivasan comments, “Ahilya was...sharp enough to recognise Indra’s disguise. Yet she **acquiesced** to his desire. In fact, being conscious of her beauty, she was proud to have been desired by Indra himself.”

However, later re-tellings **absolve** her of guilt and describe her as having been the victim of a cruel trick or of having been forced to submit to Indra's demands. All the narratives agree that she and Indra are cursed by her husband, the Rishi Gautama and while the nature of the curse may vary according to the text, they all reiterate that Rama would be the eventual cause of Ahilya's liberation from the curse. Interestingly enough, the Buddhist and Jain *Ramayana* do not feature the story of Ahilya.

In earlier versions of the story, Ahilya is purified by offering hospitality to Rama. Puranic tales were the first to describe her as being turned to stone and brought back to life by the touch of Rama's foot, a variation taken up by later versions as well.

### Activity 2

In what way would the patriarchal mindset have impacted the reworking of Ahilya's story?

Tulsidas, in his *Ramacharitamansa*, as well as other poets of the Bhakti period view this episode as exemplifying God's saving grace as epitomized by Rama. The story is just one of many in the epic as it develops upon the divine aspects of Rama's character and the fulfillment of his destiny as an *avatar* but modern writers often tell the story from Ahilya's perspective. Pradip Bhattacharya says Ahilya is unique in her daring act and its dire consequences. For Bhattacharya, Ahilya is the eternal woman who responds to her inner urges and the advances of the divine ruler, a direct contrast to her ascetic husband, who did not satisfy her womanly desires. The author regards Ahilya as an independent woman who makes her own decisions, takes risks, and is driven by curiosity to experiment with the extraordinary and then accepts the curse pronounced on her by patriarchal society.

While Ahilya is a minor character in all ancient sources, **stigmatized** and despised by those around her for violating gender norms, the kind of attention that she has received from modern South Indian writers suggests that she is no longer an insignificant figure.

In *Sapa Vimochanam* (1943), celebrated Tamil writer Pudumaipithan takes up the tale of Ahilya from where Valmiki leaves it off in the *Ramayana* and talks of her life after the redemption. Where the epic focuses more on the transgression, the punishment and the subsequent redemption, the Tamil story brings Ahilya to the reader as a real person with thoughts and feelings.

Prema Nandakumar remarks, "Pudhumaipithan's imagery partakes of the **sulphurous** currents that keep the human body in thrall". She then goes on to cite the opening lines of the story in which the incomparable beauty of the figure sculpted in stone is described as being bound by the overwhelming sorrow in the eyes which would, at a glance, kill lust in any beholder.

Pudhumaipithan goes with the later version of the tale and assumes that Ahilya is innocent and a victim of Indra's trickery. When Rama is told the story of Ahilya's curse after he has redeemed her from it, he wonders: 'What kind of a world would penalize one for an action controlled neither by the heart nor the mind?' And Vishwamitra tells Gautama: 'To accept her who erred unknowingly would be the right thing to do'.

Pudhumaipithan also describes how Gautama regrets his hastiness in judging and condemning Ahilya: ‘Gautama could not speak to her with an unsullied mind as in earlier times. That day, when he had abused her as a **harlot**, it was as though he had scorched his very tongue.’ As he muses upon dharma, Gautama concludes that ‘Only actions that came about with mindfulness and self-awareness would leave stains...In his mind, Ahilya glided as one without blemish. He was the one who had been foolish he reflected; the anger which had fed the flame of his curse had defiled him.’

Although both feel a depth of tenderness and affection for each other, ‘yet, both of them suffered in their two different mind-prisons. Ahilya’s only worry was whether she was worthy of Gautama. Gautama’s only worry was whether he was worthy of Ahilya.’

Interestingly, there is also the description of what has been called “post-trauma repetition syndrome” in which Ahilya relives and re-experiences Indra’s seduction and Gautama’s fury over and over again: ‘Ahilya loved him greatly in a way that could not be measured...But the stone that had settled on her mind did not shift. She wished to conduct herself in a way such that no one would point fingers at her, why, even stare at her in a particular way. Consequently, her demeanour underwent a change from its natural disposition...fear lodged itself in her heart...She would speak only after having rehearsed the words a thousand times in her mind...She would agonize over whether there was any hidden meaning even in ordinary words uttered by Gautama.’

### Activity 3

Why does Ahilya go over the past incidents over and over again?

So what did life after the redemption signify for Ahilya? It certainly wasn’t one of unalloyed joy at having been redeemed from the curse and given a second chance at life and marital bliss for, ‘Life itself had become the tortures of hell for her.’ She shied away from meeting anyone who came to visit them, refusing to meet the eyes of even those who approached with genuine love and concern as she felt that she could not do so with a pure heart.

Having started life anew, the couple experience pleasure in the visits of the youthful Rama and Sita, and the latter particularly seemed like a ‘dove that had come to alleviate the burden on Ahilya’s mind. To Ahilya, her speech and laughter seemed to scrub and rinse away the stains on her spirit. It was only in her presence that Ahilya’s lips would curve into a smile and the light of enthusiasm would gleam in her eyes.’ To Gautama, Rama ‘seemed to be the embodiment of the ideal youth. Even his laughter and playfulness, like self-replenishing lamps of *dharma shastra*, appeared to interpret the essence.’ And the obvious fondness that the couple shared reminds Gautama of his life in time past.

Ahilya is prepared to go for Rama’s coronation to Ayodhya but before that can happen, the forces that were unleashed ‘took away in one breath, Dasaratha’s life, banished Rama to the forest and sent off Bharata in tears and haircloth to Nandigram.’ Ahilya is so devastated by this that her ‘mind went back to the state when it had lain inert while she was an image of stone.’ It was as though her mind grows lifeless with the shock and sorrow, as when she had been in the stone-like state.

Gautama and Ahilya decide to go away to Mithila to be with their son. There, one day, when she is returning from her daily dip in the Ganga, Ahilya meets some women – the wives of other rishis. They recognize her and flinch from her presence as though she were an outcaste: “She is the one; she is Ahilya”. These words scorched her more than the fire in Gautama’s innards that had given rise to the curse. Her mind burned and roared like the flames at a cremation ground. Thoughts churned. “Dear god! Even if there has been redemption from the curse, will there never be redemption from the sin?” she agonized.’ The whispers and pointing fingers are an ongoing torment. What sort of redemption was this?

The two then set out on a long pilgrimage, returning only when fourteen years have passed, to await the return of Rama and Sita from the forest. As soon as the welcoming excitement subsides, the new king and queen of Ayodhya visit them and Sita tells Ahilya of all that had **transpired**, including her ordeal by fire. When Sita remarks with bitter irony that purity and innocence needs to be demonstrated to the world, Ahilya questions: ‘Isn’t it enough for the heart to know? Is it possible to demonstrate the truth to the world? In any case, will it become the truth through a demonstration?’ The allusion obviously is to her own experience wherein she feels that whatever happened between her and Indra never reached her heart as her heart always belonged to Gautama and could not be sullied by another’s touch.

When Gautama enters the hut after the royal guests have left, he finds Ahilya in a daze: ‘Once again the whole drama of Indra - the drama that must needs be forgotten, was playing in the theatre of her mind...Gautama embraced her. To her it seemed to be Indra come in the guise of Gautama. Her heart congealed to stone. What peace! Lying trapped in Gautama’s hands was a stone statue. Ahilya turned into stone again.’

Reverting to the state before her redemption by Rama is essentially the choice that Ahilya voluntarily makes not only because her life has become **abhorrent** to her in the **aftermath** of the curse but because of her intense rage over society’s injustice towards women. It is her protest against the hypocrisy of a patriarchal set up and the **arbitrary** judgment and punishment meted out to women as part of ‘dharma’. The Ahilya in the Tamil story emerges as a strong woman who, willingly turns to stone again, rejecting her redemption.

Prema Nandakumar comments that ‘There is a feverish glow about Pudhumaipithan’s Ahilya that does make the story feminist in essence.’ In ‘Sapa Vimochanam’, Pudhumaipithan brings Ahilya to life and casts her in a feminist mould, questioning and protesting against societal norms that are tragically **skewed** and heavily biased against women.

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## 4.5 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit, you read excerpts from ‘Sapa Vimochanam’ by the celebrated Tamil writer, Pudhumaipithan. You could see how the author portrays Ahilya as a sensitive woman who is tormented by her past and who, ultimately is filled with righteous anger and disgust at the double standards of society which had different rules for men and women.



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## 4.6 AIDS TO ACTIVITIES

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**Activity 1:** A re-telling allows the narrator to bring in local cultural elements and to offer a fresh perspective.

**Activity 2:** The patriarchal mindset would condemn a woman's conduct in this situation in absolute terms and banish her to a state of non-existence, as though she did not deserve to live any longer.

**Activity 3:** Every word and action of the past still affect her behaviour and make her over cautious in whatever she does or says.

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## 4.7 GLOSSARY

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<b>Abhorrent</b>	: inspiring disgust
<b>Absolve</b>	: declare free from guilt
<b>Acquiesced</b>	: accepted
<b>Afflictions</b>	: disorders
<b>Aftermath</b>	: effects
<b>Ahilya</b>	: wife of the sage Gautama Maharishi, seduced by Indra, cursed by her husband for infidelity, and liberated from the curse by Rama.
<b>Alleviate</b>	: reduce
<b>Arbitrary</b>	: without a system
<b>Ascetic</b>	: hermit
<b>Bereft</b>	: deprived of
<b>Congealed</b>	: to change to solid state
<b>Corollary</b>	: resulting from something
<b>Decrepit</b>	: broken down
<b>Edifice</b>	: structure
<b>Engendered</b>	: gave rise to
<b>Espousing</b>	: supporting
<b>Gautama</b>	: Rishi, husband of Ahilya
<b>Haircloth</b>	: stiff, rough cloth
<b>Harlot</b>	: woman of loose character
<b>Honed</b>	: sharpened
<b>Honorific</b>	: title
<b>Kannagi</b>	: legendary Tamil woman who forms the central character of the Tamil epic <i>Silapathikaram</i> (100-300 AD).
<b>Maricha</b>	: rakshasa (demon), killed by Rama.
<b>Moksha</b>	: salvation

<b>Pillaged</b>	: looted
<b>Sadananda</b>	: son of Ahilya and Gautama
<b>Skewed</b>	: biased
<b>Spewed</b>	: erupt
<b>Stigmatize</b>	: condemn
<b>Subahu</b>	: a rakshahsa
<b>Succour</b>	: comfort
<b>Sulphurous</b>	: wicked
<b>Tandava</b>	: divine dance performed by Shiva
<b>Thataka</b>	: rakshasi, mother of Subahu
<b>Transcendental</b>	: relating to the spiritual
<b>Transgressed</b>	: break the law
<b>Transpired</b>	: happened
<b>Vasishtha</b>	: a rishi
<b>Venerated</b>	: respected
<b>Vishwamitra</b>	: a rishi
<b>Whetstone</b>	: a fine-grained stone used for sharpening cutting tools

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#### 4.8 UNIT END QUESTIONS

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- 1) What is it that greatly troubles both Ahilya and Gautama after her redemption from the curse? Why do you think this is so?
- 2) Why does Ahilya shy away from meeting people? Is there any reason for her to do this?
- 3) What aspect of Sita's narration of the fourteen year exile touches Ahilya most? Why?
- 4) What do you think of Ahilya's voluntarily turning back into stone?

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