

Block

4

POETRY FROM THE MARGINS

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COURSE INTRODUCTION

Block 4: Poetry from the Margins

Dear student, this block titled, “Poetry from the Margins” will help you understand, visualise and interrogate the term marginality by exploring it through literature. The term ‘margins’ also suggests a centre in relation to which they are margins. With this in view, what is the nature and composition of literature from the margins and how does it contest the notion of a centre? What is really speaking the kind of literature that stands far away from the centre and demands assertion? This block will help you understand that there is no one way of analysing literature from the margins. Just as there is an amalgamation of powerful forces that constitute in many ways an apparently coherent centre that is dominant. The voices from the margin are diverse and gradually taking form; they continue to assert meaningfully. One of the most important aspects of studying literature from the margins is to understand the varied social contexts and the voices located therein; ones that we have been conditioned to ignore. The general tendency is to understand literature from the point of view of the centre. But it is when we look at the wide-ranging voices emerging from the margins that we appreciate literature and life in a holistic manner.

This block will introduce you to voices from different parts of the country and also from different social constructs. The first unit focuses on Indian English poetry with special reference to the poems of Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih. It will help you know the meaning of Indian Writing in English as a genre. The unit places Nongkynrih within the context of English poetry from the North-East. You will confront new ideas and will ask as to how poetry from the North-East is different from poetry in other parts of the country. What is it about poetry from the North-East that makes it marginal? You will have to contend with this challenging question. You will also wonder as to why these poets have been ignored for long. In the process your attention will be focussed on the Shillong poets and specifically the work of Kynphan Sing Nongkynrih. This will be followed by an analysis of his work, and the poems, “The Colours of Truth” and “The Ancient Rocks of Cherra”. The unit will also explain to you some of the myths and legends from Shillong that find their way into Nongkynrih’s poetry. To sum up, the first unit will help you appreciate the efforts of a poet from a region whose linguistic and cultural ethos finds expression in the English language.

The second unit of this block is based on the work of Nirmala Putul of the Santhali tribe. It will spring new questions in your mind regarding the nature of tribal voices from the margins. The answer lies in understanding the historical and cultural specificity of the tribes and their unequal positioning in literature that is acknowledged by the mainstream one. Putul is a woman from the Santhal tribe, an indigenous tribe of India. Voices like Putul’s came into the fore-front only recently. The poet uses simple language to explain the belief system and lives of the Santhal tribe. This unit will let you know from close quarters the idea of orality in literature. In terms of the centre, we are used to admitting the historical presence of literature that is written and recorded. But there is also a whole body of literature as songs, poems and other forms that have been passed down orally. This course is an attempt to understand and interpret the oral transmission of such literature that has been recorded in the written form only recently. An analysis

of Putul's poems, "The Mountain Woman" and "The Mountain Child" throw light on some of these aspects of Santhal life.

The third and fourth units will help you understand writings from the Dalit community. Socially the Dalits have been marginalised on the basis of caste. The socio-cultural and political marginalisation of the Dalit community has also prevented their writings from gaining buoyancy in the world which is fast changing today. Their writing and expression is an assertion and act of resistance to the forces that marginalise them. These two units will also show you the way in which writings by Dalits especially the women exists in an unequal relation to the determining central forces.

Unit 3 will provide you with an understanding of the theoretical debates and constructions used to analyse the writings by Dalit women. It will focus specifically on the work of the Marathi Dalit writer, Jyoti Lanjewar. You will also be able to comprehend the way in which the women from the Dalit community are marginalised on various counts. A brief history of the Dalit movement and the role of the women in it will help you recognise the social concerns of the Dalit women and their assertion of identity. The poems "Caves" and "Leadership" by Jyoti Lanjewar have been discussed in detail in this unit.

Unit 4 on the Tamil Dalit woman writer, Sukirtharani shows you the way in which the Dalit movement has evolved in recent times. The history and culture of marginalised communities find their way into the vibrant poetry by Dalit women. You will be able to locate a distinct feminist voice in the work of poets like Sukirtharani. An analysis of her poems "Pariah God" and "Untitled-II" show the ways in which the Dalit women respond to the new world of the twenty first century as active women, who participate in the process of building a society on their own terms. The block on "Literature from the Margins" brings to you the literary voices of different kinds to help understand the complex nature of marginality and the need to visualise it as a structure that has in it the potential to assert and take concrete form.

UNIT 1 KYNPHAM SING NONGKYNRIH

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Poetry from the North-East and Indian English Poetry: Some Debates
- 1.3 Writing from the North-East
 - 1.3.1 Welsh Missionaries, Soso Tham and Khasi Literature
 - 1.3.2 The Shillong Poets and Indian English Poetry
- 1.4 “The Colours of Truth”
 - 1.4.1 Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih
 - 1.4.2 “The Colours of Truth”: An Interpretation
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- 1.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.7 Glossary
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1.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will introduce you to:

- poetry from the North East;
- writing from the North East ;
- Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih and his two poems.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit has been divided into three broad sections. The first analyses English poetry from the North-East and its relationship to the construct of Indian English poetry. The second section examines the position of the Shillong poets in it. The third section will familiarise you with the poetry of the Indian English poet Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih who belongs to the North-eastern state of Meghalaya based in the capital city, Shillong. Nongkynrih is from the Khasi tribe and writes both in Khasi and in English. This unit focuses on two of his English poems, “The Colours of Truth” and the “Ancient Rocks of Cherra”.

1.2 POETRY FROM THE NORTH-EAST AND INDIAN ENGLISH POETRY: SOME DEBATES

Sanjukta Dasgupta in her essay, “Politics of Language and Post-Independence Indo-Anglian poetry” presents a historical trajectory of Indo-Anglian poetry from the pre-Independence period to the 1990s. Dasgupta mentions early poets during the “colonial period” such as Toru Dutt, Aurobindo Ghosh, Manmohan Ghosh,

Sarojini Naidu, Rabindranath Tagore and Vivekananda. Analysing the nineteenth century trends in poetry, she has explained how poets in this period made use of the tropes of English poetry to show a skilled usage of the colonisers' language. There was an attempt at a "harmonious assimilation" of the two contexts. A characteristic feature of pre-Independence poetry was the nationalistic fervour whereas the later poetry was marked by an attempt to realise hybridization of the two cultural contexts. This idea was ridiculed in the 1950s by poets such as P.Lal who formed the Writers Workshop in 1958 (Dasgupta 209). With this is associated the beginning of a new trend in Indian English poetry.

Let us face the following questions. How was one to reconcile to the issue of writers of an erstwhile colony writing in the language of the coloniser? Was it a betrayal of any sort? Would a borrowed language express the peculiarities of their context? According to Dasgupta:

Oppressed by a guilty conscience, the Indian poets writing in English experienced a sense of identity-crisis and as a result their integrity was flawed by lack of confidence, uncertainty and indecision. Their distress and desperation are registered in their poems which clearly signal their uneasiness and their simultaneous inability to use the mother tongue for the purpose of writing poetry. Tension, anxiety and schizophrenia are some of the recurrent problematics of such poetry... (210)

This anxiety regarding the use of the English language continued up to the 1980s. It is at the beginning of the 80s and later with the advent of globalization that a new idiom begins to emerge in Indian English poetry. Dasgupta elucidates how in the Third World this led to a kind of "cultural mosaic, encouraging cultural pluralism". This also created the hegemony of the West over the culture of the third world countries. But Dasgupta has also pointed out how the discourse of globalization brings in heterogeneity—

Instead of the canon and the grand narrative, activating the differences occupies prime importance, for such an approach discourages exclusionism and celebrates the primacy of inclusionism in the dissemination of culture. Aijaz Ahmed observes that in the case of a multilingual country like India, despite the fragmentation and splintering of national culture, the kaleidoscope of regional cultures simultaneously emphasises the presence of a national culture. (212)

This becomes an important point of entry to understand Indian English poetry from the region of the North-East. Dasgupta presents the polemical debate around Indian English. On the one hand English remains an elitist language since it emerges as a product of English schools and university education. On the other hand, Dasgupta uses Aijaz Ahmad's argument to point out the "Indianization" of English. The use and spread of English needs to be understood with respect to the assimilation of the language in the Indian context rather than as a "mode of ejection". Indian English poetry, too, expresses these contradictions—the use of a language that belonged to the coloniser, its assimilation within the Occidental context, overpowering market forces which allow integration in ways that make it an elitist language, and finally its use to focus on cultural heterogeneity. The last fragment is of great value in understanding the politics of poetry from the North-East. This blanket of cultural heterogeneity allows scope for a new patch of poetry to emerge. Elke Boehmer analyses the writer of Indian English as a

“cultural traveller” working and expressing third world contexts within a western premise that restores the supremacy accorded to English and the western context. Dasgupta counters the argument in the following manner:

This comment establishes the hegemony of the west on the culture of the rest of the world, which is a debatable premise, for the postcolonial writer is an empowered voice that would be able to distinguish between felicitous fusion and subordination. Migrant writers however follow the programme outlined by Boehmer as is evidenced in Rushdie, Mistry and Ghosh among others... Nevertheless, native writing in indigenous English or “Englishes” continues prioritising the culture of the nation and more intensely of the region while simultaneously expressing awareness of the dominant European cultural tradition, philosophy and intellectual experiments from Derrida to Foucault. Indo-Anglian poetry is very much a culture specific construction and its dynamism is obvious from the enthusiasm of the young and new poets who participate in thousands in the British Council sponsored All India Poetry Competition held every year. (216-217)

The critic points out how there are some “migrant poets” who would take the route suggested by Boehmer, but there are others who devise newer routes. She acknowledges the problem of English and writers from a privileged context of education, writing about the native context through a “spectatorial attitude”. But at the same time the idea of the plurality of “Englishes” allows expression of new ideas which makes it valuable both at the level of discourse and understanding. GJV Prasad, too, raises this question, “What is English doing in India that has been independent for more than fifty-six years? And what is Indian English, whose language is that?” According to him, we need to:

“... brown the language, to acculturate it, to create distinct Indian English voices. We needed our Indian English to gesture casually, with elan, to various Indian languages, to our texts and contexts, but unfortunately the language is still at ease only with white texts and literary contexts. Thus, the challenges to new Indian English poets is still the same that the earlier poets didn't or still haven't met squarely—to push English slowly but surely to the multiple locations of our complex. Indian lives. We have to ensure that the English language does not become, or should I say remain, the language that only prostitutes us—servicing the world through our call centres; we have to ensure that our English becomes truly a language that is flexible and supple and strong enough to give poetic expression to our India(s). We have to add colour to the language, to make rich with our flavours. As the poet Agha Shahid Ali once said, we should not chutnify English, we have to biryanise it, letting all flavours retain their distinct identities even when seeping into each other to create a unique offering... The fact is that English does not belong to any one region in India. (47)

According to Prasad, the term Indian English only demarcates it from English of other countries. But English in India is not a homogenous construct. Its usage, style and many other factors vary from region to region, and culture to culture. Taking cue from Prasad's argument, the writers of Indian English must interact with writers in other languages. This will help us redefine English and its role and function in life.

In our context, we might raise the question where English poetry from the North East is to be placed. What we have discussed so far would help us understand the historical evolution and transitions of a language, while also enabling us to realize the use and style of English. An attempt to analyse the poetry from the North-East necessitates an evolution of the language in that region. What is the rubric under which we can place the Indian English writers from the North-East? Do they use tropes similar to the ones used by poets from other? How do they fit in with this “globalised quilting,” to borrow Sanjukta Dasgupta’s phrase?

1.3 WRITING FROM THE NORTH-EAST

In geographical terms the North-East refers to the eight states of India—Sikkim, Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Tripura, Assam, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh. In the Introduction of an anthology of poetry from the North-East, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih and Robin S. Ngangom have observed:

‘North-East’ is, of course, a blanket term that has been used to imply a homogenous province, a single political domain, inhabited by kindred people with a common history. Understandably, with a tenuous historical and geographical link to the rest of India, the North-East remains little known, and perhaps largely misunderstood (singled out, for example as India’s insurgent heartland’). Its eight states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura are inhabited by a conglomeration of peoples, a melange of cultures, languages and religions that it would be a grave injustice to make any generalized statement about them. (ix)

Probing the question posed in this comment would indeed be useful. The North-East is not a uniform category but a confluence of different cultures. The many states constituting the North-East have people whose lineal descent and ancestry is from various tribes. In this region, there are people from the Indo-Aryan group, too, such as Assam and Tripura. According to Patricia Mukhim the North-East is inhabited by people from “South-east Asian origin such as Tibeto-Burman and the Mo-Khmer groups” whereas the rest of India is of “Dravidian or Aryan” descent (Mukhim 177). Ngangom and Nongkynrih explain how in Meghalaya, there are twenty ethnic groups in its list of Scheduled Tribes. These are further divided into sub-tribes and clans. Each of these groups has its own dialect and cultural identity. In short, any attempt to homogenise the North-East on any count will defeat the purpose of placing it in its linguistic and cultural context. To extend this further, an analysis of literature from any one of the states should be attempted for knowing the complexity of that region.

The literature of the North-East in English is fairly recent. Whereas Assamese, Manipuri and Bengali had an established script, the dialects of many other tribes did not have a script. In the nineteenth century, the Welsh missionaries came to the Khasi hills and brought the Roman script—

[In] 1841, Thomas Jones of the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists’ Mission cast the Khasi language in written form using the Roman script. As scholars on the subject have remarked, the success of Thomas Jones’s alphabet also inspired the Garo, the Mizo and the Naga tribes to adopt the Roman rather than the Bengali script, and later by almost all the tribes except for the

Kokboroks and Chakmas of Tripura, who use the Bengali script, and some in Assam, who use the Assamese script” (x).

An interesting cultural interaction can be marked in this discussion. Nineteenth century India was a colony of the British Empire. This was a period of great reform movements, and also one in which white missionaries came to India. In the context of the culture of the tribes, the Roman script of the coloniser provided a new medium of expression to the people of the North-East. The impact was both Christian and English. Literary expression started taking form in a language seen then. It is a fairly recent phenomenon in the history of the tribes. Ngangom and Nongkynrih point out how this created a hierarchy of a certain kind under which their own traditions were considered “pagan and preposterous”. Later in time, things moved on. Writers of today make use of Assamese, Bengali, Manipuri, and English along with their own particular dialects and languages. The important point is the influx of English as a language with its own cultural context and its linguistic and cultural aspects mingling with the North-East. Criss-crossing this are the traditions and rituals understood by people of the North-East in their own languages presented in the Roman script.

1.3.1 Welsh Missionaries, Soso Tham and Khasi Literature

It would have become clear to you by now that an analysis of Indian English poetry should take into account the specificities of the context that include region, tribe, culture and economy. The development of English in the North-East is to be gauged against its interactions with the regional languages. Schools started by the Welsh missionaries introduced literature in the English language in the study courses pursued there. Soso Tham (1873-1940), the Poet Laureate of Shillong studied in a missionary school till class VI. He finally taught Khasi in Shillong Government High School, Mawkhar. The only non-missionary poet of the region was a non-Khasi, S.M. Amjad Ali who also became the “father of Khasi poetry”. In short, the advent of the Welsh missionaries in Shillong started a new phase of writing. In “The Birth Pangs of a Poet: The Early Works of Soso Tham, Chief Bard of the Khasis”, Nongkynrih explains this cultural interaction as follows:

The Khasis, who had a rich oral literature consisting of* myths, folk stories, fairy tales, fables, narrative poetry, gnomic *phawar* (verse) and lively traditional songs, had never obtained the blessing of the written word until the mid-nineteenth century, that is, until the appearance of the Welsh Presbyterian Missionary, Thomas Jones, on July 22, 1841. Prior to this, around 1831, there were indeed attempts by Krishna Chandra Pal and Alexander B. Lish of the American Baptist Mission of Serampore, to reduce Khasi to the complex Bengali script. But these had proved unsuccessful and it was left to Jones to take up where they had left off. The tenacious and inventive Welshman resorted to Welsh orthography and the Roman script to cast the language in written form. The outcome was the publication, in early 1842, of the *First Khasi Reader* or *Cacitab Ban Hicai Ca Citien Cassia*. It is out of this little book that all other Khasi books have emerged. (141-142)

Understanding the position of Khasi in terms of the script helps locate the use of English in the early period. In its first phase of interaction, the Khasi language was written in the Roman script under the surveillance of the Welsh missionaries.

The literature was primarily “Christian and moralistic”; the exceptions being Khasi grammar books. Khasi writing in Roman script introduced English and influenced the writer imbibing both traditions in writing. Ngangom and Nongkynrih point out this dilemma:

The literary legacy of the missionaries can be said to be double-edged. While, on the one hand, they gifted the tribes with a common literary heritage, on the other, they made them deny the existence of their own literatures in their rich oral traditions and taught them to be ashamed of whatever is there is, as something pagan and preposterous. That is why the poetry of some of the hill-tribes even today is seen to be either singing hymns or adoring cuckoos in the woods and non-existent daffodils in the vales. (xi)

The advent of the Welsh missionary had given the writer a relationship with the English language. Yet, the cultural hegemony of English diluted the use of other languages as also the cultural specificities reflected in those writings. This presented a tough challenge to the writer from the North-East.

Ngangom and Nongkynrih provide new dimensions to the issue of language and the themes depicted through it. The modern poet from the North-East read extensively and are not confined to the Anglo-American trends. In the course of writing, they are able to evolve a new aesthetic—”these writers with their extensive reading of modern world literature from English translations, do passionately grapple with some of the psychological and social perplexities of the present. Having cut their teeth on Lorca, Seferis, Arghezi Neruda, and the hard-edged modernists of the Third world they find common ground in chronicling their subjective realities and the predicament of their people” (xi) Needless to say that such a venture fills them up with creative vigour and gives them a direction and a viewpoint to adopt.

1.3.2 The Shillong Poets and Indian English Poetry

Let us examine the issue of Indian English poetry in the North-East from the point of view of exclusion. We have already discussed the influence that English might exert on the writers of the North-East. But there are other related factors that exercise dominance within the domain of Indian English. One of the ways adopted by the hegemonic forces is to exclude the poets from the North East. That may benefit the writers of the mainland India writing in English. They can happily take it on themselves to represent the interest of the North-East and flaunt such a writing as genuine. In “Anthology-Making, the Nation, and the Shillong Poets”, Prasanta Das draws attention to two comprehensive anthologies. One of these is by Jeet Thayil, *60 Indian Poets* and the other by Ranjit Hoskote, *Reasons for Belonging*. Both the anthologies fail to include the Shillong Poets. So, we might wonder who the Shillong Poets are. For us, they are the ones to be found out and given emphasis. The Shillong poets include Temsula Ao, Robin S Ngangom, Desomnd S Kharmawplang, Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, Ananya S Guha, Indari Syiem Warjri, Almond D Syiem, and Donbokland Rynthathiang. Prasanta Das sees them in direct contrast to the Bombay poets like Jeet Thayil. Das acknowledges how Shillong with its missionary schools has over time become a place noting a peculiar flourish in Indian English writing. Citing the reasons behind their possible exclusion from these anthologies, Das explains how the tropes used by these poets are not those of Anglo American poetry. To quote:

Ngangom, Kharmawplang and Nonkynrih are dismissive of the work of the English and American poets. The poets they feel close to are the political ones like Pablo Neruda, Czeslaw Milos, Mahumd Darwish, Yehuda Amichii who by choice or circumstance (or both) voice the anguish and aspirations of their land and its people. Because Ngngom, Kharmawplang and Nongkynrih feel they have an obligation to write about the crucial contemporary problem of their region. They write about terrorism, insurgency, human rights abuses, environmental and ecological concerns, erosion of tribal values, and the corrupt politician-businessman-bureaucrat nexus. This gives their work a distinct identity within Indian English poetry but it also makes it different. The three write poetry that is narrative, emotional and lyrical; they also make statements in their poems. Thus, their poetry runs counter to the taste of “the Bombay poets” like Thayil who generally prefer poetry of symmetry, intellect, irony and wit. (20)

According to Das, contemporary poets such as Thayil concentrate on “craft”, whereas this is not the focus of poets like Nongkynrih. Das’s contention makes it clear that poets like Nongkynrih express the complex socio-political and cultural anxieties of their landscape—the political apathy of the state and the problem of insurgency against which the former is ranged. Das cites from the Introduction by Ngangom and Nongkynrih to the book on the North-East writing to say that the creative aims therein are bound to be different from poets coming from other parts of India. Arguing the case of the ethnic strife and insurgency in the North-East, Satpathy has explained how “The Shillong poets, for all their diversity, have all experienced paroxysms of ethnic strife. They have been caught in the crossfire between state terrorism and the terrorism of the insurgents” (14). Writing from the North-East will map these changes at the level of culture and politics. English language in the region will also evolve in a manner distinct from that of other regions and cultures.

This discussion benefits us in many ways. First, it approaches Indian English poetry from the point of view of the North-East. Also, it provides us with a broad spectrum of Indian English poetry. Indian English has multiple contexts from which different creative styles emerge. The concerned subjects of interest are seen as diverse and linked and they lend dynamism and vitality to the writing of the North-East within the framework of Indian English.

1.4 “THE COLOURS OF TRUTH”

Poetry from the North-East has many aspects that span the social, political, cultural, and linguistic. These factors gain substance when combined with images of the natural habitat. In poetry from the North-East, these find expression in a variety of ways. The social refers to the tribes and the non-tribal communities in the North-East. Those could be the Khasi, the Garo or any of the numerous tribes in Meghalaya. There is also the presence of the non-tribal people in the region. To begin with, the hill tribes of the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo were brought under the state of Assam by the British imperialist powers. During the partition of Bengal in 1905, they came under East Bengal. Following a unification of Bengal in 1912, Meghalaya became a part of Assam. The states of the North-East became a part of India in 1950 after the Instrument of Accession. But for various reasons there have been political conflicts made more complicated by the problem of insurgency. It is only in 1970 that Meghalaya was carved out of Assam as a

separate state. The word political is therefore made complex not only by this very chequered historical trajectory but also by different insurgent factions in the region. The conflict between the tribes and the state over supremacy of various kinds marks the social, cultural and other aspects of the region. Poetry from the North-East reflects the many kinds of conflicts in the region. All this is set against the veritable beauty of the region offering a contrast. Culturally, the North-East signifies plenitude—a rich region with oral narratives, legends, and stories passed down from generations in the previous era. Each tribe generally has its own creation myth. And this is interesting as it lends plurality and diversity to Indian culture. We are generally used to understanding the creation story only in terms of mainstream religions and belief systems. But the different creation stories from the North-East make our understanding of culture and myths diverse. It is only in the recent past that a lot of these have been written down. The complex inheritance of orality carries its own structures that resist the ‘normalcy’ of the written word. Oral transmission of these narratives is a dynamic process with its own specificities. All this is wound up with the advent of the missionaries, the establishment of Christianity and the use of English as has been discussed earlier.

1.4.1 Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih

Indian English poet Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih belongs to the North-Eastern state of Meghalaya. He is from the Khasi tribe and writes both in Khasi and in English. He teaches literature in the North Eastern Hill University (NEHU), Shillong. He is the author of *Around the Hearth: Khasi Legends* and is the co-editor of *Dancing Earth: An Anthology of Poetry from North-East India*. He has also published plays and his most recent one is *Manik*, a play in five acts.

1.4.2 “The Colour of Truth”: An Interpretation

“The Colours of truth”

The Colours of truth

A siesta phone call

Oozes friendly warnings.

Insurgents have grown

incredibly urbane, these days.

The question is, must we subterfuge

to shield a pedagogic stooge?

I close my eyes

turn towards the sun.

The colour I see is

disgorging blood.

I close my eyes

shade them with my palms.
 The colour I see is
 life-erasing black.

These are the colours of destiny
 of immutable truth
 and the colours also
 with which warring pawns
 are daily decorating our towns.

Indian Literature 48.3 (221) 2004; pg 25

The yearning of seeds 2011

“The Colours of truth” was first published in the journal *Indian Literature* in 2004. It then appeared in Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih’s 2011 poetry collection titled, *the yearning of seeds*. In it, this poem has been grouped along with other poems under the sub-title “The Season of the Wind”. “The Colours of Truth” presents the wide-ranging complexity emerging from the region, beset by the problem of insurgency. In “The Colours of Truth” cultural and ethnic complexity is set against the backdrop of conflict and insurgency in the region. Periods of political turmoil coupled with insurgency have redrawn the cultural map of the region in different ways. The poem focuses on the impact of these factors on the people who were traumatised by the conflict in the region. In the first stanza, the reader’s expectation regarding the comfort and solace offered by an afternoon siesta is pitted against warnings conveyed over the phone. The laziness of the “siesta” and the generous claims of the word “oozes” are belied by the “friendly warnings”. The caution conveyed over the phone is part of the “normal” in Meghalaya and refers to unrest in the region.

The second stanza lends clarity to the warnings further as the poem makes an explicit reference to the “insurgents” and their new ways. People creating conflict in the region have adopted the ways of the new world and their tactics seem more “urbane” to the poet; such as threats over the phone. It is, of course, a pithy comment on the issue of insurgency in the region. The phone call by the insurgents indicates the use of more modern methods to make demands from the people. The question posed by Nongkynrih disturbs the mind—“The question is, must we subterfuge/ to shield a pedagogic stooge?” This idea lies at the centre of the poem. The word “subterfuge” indicates both deceit and strategy. The poet asks the reader if the people of Meghalaya should cover up for people who have created unrest in the region. This is a dilemma faced by the common people in their daily lives. The poet refers to the insurgents as “pedagogic stooge”—one who unthinkingly serves the interests of a person or faction without understanding their own motivation. Keeping at bay the rationality, the person starts to follow a line of thinking that is detrimental to the peace-loving society around him. This phrase captures the way in which people are suddenly and passionately engulfed by an anarchic way of thinking that harms one and all. The poet poses a question—should “we” protect such people?

In the third stanza the poet closes his eyes and turns towards the sun. He does not do so with open eyes. The fact that he closes his eyes and thinks about the sun indicates his desire for hope and new life. But all he sees is the blood pouring out. An intense image, it expresses the violence that afflicts the region, as the poet sees only the colour of blood. Hope sits uneasy with the colour that prevails in the real world—that of blood. This image intensifies further in the next stanza. The poet now closes his eyes with his palms and sees only one colour—“life-erasing black”. This line is an immediate reflection on the one before this in which the question was posed. The work of insurgents has only led to eroding of lives. The beauty of Meghalaya with its many colours, its greenery and rain and clouds is replaced by the colour black that engulfs all. This is how Mamang Dai explains how poetry from the North-East can no longer be about the beauty of the place but has to be about insurgency:

It must be owned that all our home states are totally changed from what they once were. Today the stories emerging from this region are more about bloodshed and killings. This is an area that provokes thought and debate today, both amongst writers of the North-east and those who review these writers—as if the choice for contemporary literature from the region today is between guns and bullets or ancient tales and rhapsodies that should now be discarded as idyllic irrelevance. Yes, there is writing about bullets and guns and death and betrayal. It can hardly be otherwise, when we are confronted with changes that bring such terror and anguish. (5)

The poet refers to the colour of blood and of the darkness of death. These are colours of destiny. Is the poet being pessimistic? Probably not. But he is certainly disappointed at the political situation and the problem of insurgency which is taking the beauty of the region away from it. He calls it the “immutable truth”. He is accepting the reality of the situation. You can no longer see the many colours, violence and bloodshed have left only red and black to the region. The motif of black is a telling reflection of the poet’s poignant sense of the loss of the colourful diversity of Meghalaya because of insurgency in the region.

The “warring pawns” are the many conflictual forces in the region. Nongkynrih does not mention them as warring factions but as “warring pawns”. There are conflictual forces in the region, controlled by powerful people who use these factions as mere pawns of certain forces to further their interests. This ties up with the idea of the “pedagogic stooge” as someone who blindly follows a person or idea and is in turn exploited by it.

Nongkynrih’s poetry is an expression of the pain and anguish of the people. The imagery is visual. The image of an innocent afternoon siesta gives way to that of a sinister one of insurgency. The central picture of the poet closing his eyes and waiting for sunshine expresses the stark reality of the situation where the region is marked by blood due to conflict. Closing his eyes with the palms of his hands disturbs as the poet gets no respite. All he sees is black a colour that absorbs all; in this case all life. Referring to these colours as “decorating towns” carries none of the colour or revelry generally associated with decorating towns especially during a festival. The written word and the expectation that it generates is consistently belied.

The colours that define the region are those of truth—the red of blood and the black of darkness. Hope lies in accepting the truth of the situation. Both the

poet's attempt at turning towards the sun and the creative act of writing the poem to express truth indicate hope. Writing and expression can help the poet and the people of Meghalaya come to terms with the situation by accepting the colours of truth. Thinking that the people are basking in an idyllic surrounding in sunshine or decorating the region in a cultural context needs to be abandoned. The colourful veneer should be divested of its supposed worth and the truth accepted.

1.5 “THE ANCIENT ROCKS OF CHERRA”

The Ancient Rocks of Cherra

(For Nigel, Who Questioned)

This land is too old, too old
and withered, for life to be easy.

Poverty eats into the hills and squeezes
a living from stones and caterpillars
gathered for out-of-town drunks
each market-day.

Where the serpent's death throes
cut deep wounds into the land
lie deep gorges like fiendish mouths
yawning for desperate victims.

There is nothing remarkable here
only this incredible barrenness.

Men and trees have left their habitats
To a crude and lowly breed like brush,
but the sight of dark-grey rocks like sages
spells home to me.

The poem “The Ancient Rocks of Cherra” is a part of the section, “The Fungus” in the collection *the yearning of seeds*. The poem refers to the landscape and surroundings of Cherrapunjee or Sohra as it was formerly called. It was also the capital of Meghalaya before Shillong.

The poem begins with a kind of epigraph to Nigel Jenkins, the famous Welsh poet and critic and creates a dialogue between the poet and Jenkins; this can be seen in other works as well. More recently in Nongkynrih's book of haikus and the senryus, *Time's Barter*, the dedication to Nigel Jenkins suggests that the debate around Indian English poetry has entered a new phase. The dedication establishes

a historical link reminiscent of the Welsh missionaries who had come to the hills in the nineteenth century. The use of English and the transition to Christianity can be attributed to the impact of this interaction during the colonial period in India. In the present day, the interaction between the Welsh people and the people from the North-East can be called collaborative. At the same time, it ever keeps in sight the fact that English is an acquired language dealt with very differently in the case of the colonised. In this new phase the writers from the North-East evolve an identity that can be called unique.

The first stanza of the poem establishes the ancient history of Cherra through the rocks that have stood the test of time. At the same time though, the terrain of the place is rough. The rocks are old and withered and they do not make life easy for the ordinary people. Whereas the rocks show the age-old culture and physical presence of the place, their starkness reflects the region. It is a place marked by poverty. With great difficulty, the people manage to eke out a living from “stones and caterpillars/ gathered for out-of-town drunks/ each market day”. The plenty expected of a “market-day” is replaced by the plainness of the rocks and the emphasis is on squeezing a living. The market day was the time when people went out to buy and make merry. But even on such a day all they get is caterpillars gathered from the stones.

The next stanza refers to the legend of U Thlen, the man-eating serpent. According to Mamang Dai, “The legend of U Thlen is still very much alive in Meghalaya; and in the dim, rain-wet hills of Sohra, better known as Cherapunjee, it is quite easy to conjure up the shadow of the serpent and hear the ghostly beat of a drum (5). Nongkynrih explains the legend thus—The legend accounts for the introduction of evil in the society. U Thlen was the son of Ka Kma Kharai, daughter of U Mawlong Syiem, the chief god of the area. She was a harlot and hence considered depraved. She became an evil deity who gave birth to a deformed demon, U Thlen, who she abandoned in a cave at the foot of the Pomdoloï falls. As legend would have it, Thlen was an evil creature with super-natural powers who lived in the wilderness of Sohra. His favourite form was that of a gigantic python. The powerful god, Suitnoh provided a solution to get rid of U Thlen who had started eating up the people on their way to the market place. An iron ball was thrust down his throat and he vanished. Suitnoh asked everyone to consume the flesh of U Thlen in one day. However, an old woman forgot this instruction and kept some for her son leading to the resurrection of U Thlen who then tempted the old woman with riches. He eventually pushed her to get human beings to satiate his hunger and hence the practice of hiring paid killers for U Thlen. (A brief summary from Nongkynrih’s retelling of the legend of U Thlen, Refer: “U Thlen: the man-eating serpent”).

According to Nongkynrih, the legend of the man-eating serpent is much talked about and now signifies “the cause of a kind of deadly illness where a person loses his natural colour, grows thin and weak, with a strange bloatedness about his face and belly” (33). One can read into this story from two perspectives: One, that the onus of the evil lies on the women of Cherra as U Thlen is begotten of a harlot; two, that later it is an old woman who “forgets” to give the remaining piece of U Thlen’s body to her son to eat. The Biblical parallels also draw notice. The appearance of the serpent and the idea of temptation point towards Eve. But that is where this parallel ends. The Khasi legend has its own specificity. Sohra is seen through and presented by means of the lens of this tale that has been

passed orally from generation to generation. The death of UThlen “cut deep wounds into the land”. The geographic structure of the place, and its gorges are likened to the mouth of UThlen who would wait for his victims on the market-day. The ordinary people are the “desperate victims” who became food for the monster. But more importantly, an interpretation that gains ground is how the legend can be compared to the current situation in Meghalaya where the monster of insurgency makes the ordinary people its victim. In this way one can mark that poets make creative use of myths in different ways in the society.

This idea moves into the next stanza as the poet remarks how all is barren in Cherra. This sense of unproductivity is intensified by another factor. The people of Cherra have left their habitat and moved to other places leaving their homeland barren. Trees, too, have left the place leaving a “lowly breed like brush”. Who is the “lowly breed”? Whereas no clear answer emerges, there is a suggestion that it could possibly be the people left behind and who are seen as ineffectual. According to the Collins dictionary, “brush” refers to “an area of rough open land covered with small bushes and trees” Subashish Bhattacharjee and Saikat Guha have observed:

The region seems prehistoric in its barren wilderness. The only means of cultivation in some of the green North-eastern hills is *jhum* (slash-and-burn cultivation) which is practiced on the slopes of hills, but its productivity is very low. As a result, poverty reigns supreme over the hilly region... The grey rocks appear to him sages, the epitome of tolerance, which renders the unruly landscape bearable to him. It is also his profound love for his native land, bearing in its bosom the scars of insurgencies, that infuses tolerance within him... (85)

“The Ancient Rocks of Cherra” indicates that which is left behind and is neither productive nor organised. Insurgency and lack of means to improve productivity have resulted in the barren state of Cherra. The poet indicates that whatever be the situation, the dark-grey rocks of Cherra spell home to him. It asserts the desire to call people back to their space so they could bind with the historicity of the place, however stark. In “Hard-edged Modernism: contemporary poetry in North-east India” Nongkynrih has identified a kind of rootedness in the poetry from the North-East:

This same rootedness is visible everywhere in the poetry of the North-East today. The roots of their beloved land; the roots of their people’s culture; the roots of their times; and most of all, the roots of the past that is “lost” to them, have sunk deep into their psyche. And this is the chief reason why their poetry is found to be bonding—even though it may come from “the very different regions... (41)

The ancient rocks of Cherra, like the Himalayas, have been present all along. Nongkynrih’s attempt at reviving the sage-like quality of the rocks lends new meaning to the presence of the rocks of Cherra. The poem is both a creative act and one of recovery that adds new dimensions to poetry from the North-East. It is suggested that the rocks of Sohra have stood the test of time and will also overcome the phase of insurgency.

1.6 LET US SUM UP

This chapter has introduced the debates around Indian English Poetry with special focus on the idea of link between region and literature. It has emphasised, too, a vital relationship between literature and society. The unit has also presented a brief history of the beginnings of English in the Khasi region of the North-East. The insurgency and lack of political will created a dismal mood in the region. The poet, Nongkynrih struggles against all odds in these two poems to accept reality and to look for hope in the ancient history of Sohra.

1.7 GLOSSARY

- Myth** : Myth refers to a set of beliefs of a community of people. These are generally transmitted from one generation to the next.
- Legend** : It is a story that people believe in and which evolves through time, there being no historical veracity in it.
- Oral Narratives** : These are stories that are narrated and not written down. The transmission is oral. They are written down much later in the day.
- Insurgency** : Unrest and rebellion against the forces of the state.

1.8 QUESTIONS

- 1) How will you position English poetry from the North-East within the category of Indian English?
- 2) Who are the Shillong poets? Describe the different aspects of their poetry?
- 3) Discuss the significance of the title of the poem, “The Colour of Truth”.
- 4) Describe the myth used in the poem “The Ancient Rocks of Cherra”.
- 5) Comment critically on the poems of Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih.

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UNIT 2 NIRMALA PUTUL

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 The Santhals: An Introduction
- 2.3 Orality in Literature
- 2.4 Nirmala Putul's Poetry
- 2.5 "The Mountain Woman": An Analysis
- 2.6 "The Mountain Child": An Analysis
- 2.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.8 Glossary
- 2.9 Questions
- 2.10 References
- 2.11 Suggested Readings

2.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will introduce you to the Santhal tribe and their literature and culture. It will enable you to understand the wide range of Nirmala Putul's poems. The unit will enable you to critically analyse two of her poems.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit will introduce you to the social context and culture of the Santhals. It will familiarise you with the idea of orality in literature, tribal imagination and the importance of folk songs in translation. This will be followed by a note on Nirmala Putul's poetry and a detailed analysis of the two poems by Nirmala Putul, "The Mountain Woman" and "The Mountain Child".

2.2 THE SANTHALS: AN INTRODUCTION

The Santhals form one of the indigenous tribes of India. The tribe is considered to be one of the most homogenous ones spread over various states such as Assam, Orissa, West Bengal, Jharkhand, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh. They are also to be seen outside India in Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh. A Santhali chooses to call her/him as a *Hor-hoponor* the child of man. It is also stated that Santhals were earlier called *Kharwar*. What is to be particularly noted is that they believe in humanity and no other method of identity. At times, they also refer to themselves as *manjhi*. In *A Santal Dictionary* P.O. Bodding has explained the word Santal as follows:

The word is explained by the Santals themselves as meaning "one who belongs to *Santor Saotor Sat*, a country in the Midnapur district (the present Silda pargana). The name may also be connected with Santbhum (also Samantabhum) in the Bankura district, the Santals simply saying that it is on the other side of Sikhar. *Sat* is probably an abbreviation of Skr. *Samanta*, boundary; the meaning might thus be a borderman. (183)

Bodding has also explained how the word is spelt in English as *Santal* or *Sonthal*. The district where “more Santals live than in any other, is the Santal Parganas”. Historically, the Santhals have been classified by researchers like Col. Dalton under Dravidians and by Ranjit Guha as the Proto Australoid. It is generally accepted that they existed prior to both Aryans and Dravidians. Along with the Ho, Munda, Bhil, Gond, they “commence the ancient ethnic stratification of the country” (Das 208). The Santali language is part of the Austro-Asiatic group of languages. The Santhals are a community of people that can be described in terms of the movement related primarily to agriculture. The early documentation of the Santhals has been done by Sir John Shore in 1795 who spoke of their presence in “Ramgarh in Birbhum district” (Soren 22). There seems to have been migration of the tribe variously mapped by scholars such as L.O. Skresfrud from the North Western side to the Chotanagpur Plateau and by others like Colonel Dalton from the North-Eastern side to the Chotanagpur Plateau. (O’Malley 89). But as P.O. Bodding points out, the lack of written records indicates that one has to rely on their “their traditions, their customs, their language, their anthropological features and what may be found in foreign records” (Bodding qtd. in O’Malley 90). The culture of the Santhals has become available in the written form only in the recent past. The Santali language is one of the oldest spoken languages in India. It was included as a Scheduled Language, through the ninety-second amendment in 2003, in the Eighth Schedule of the constitution of India. The Santali language does not have an accepted script, but *Olchikkii* is considered to be its script. Santali existed in the oral form right to the nineteenth century when the Roman, Bengali or Odia script began to be used. *Olchikki* does not share the properties of scripts such as Devanagari. The *Olchikki* script was devised by Pandit Raghunath Murmu in 1925 who wrote literature in Santali. According to Carrin Tambslyche:

In 1976, Murmu explained to me that he wanted to translate in ideograms the basic gestures of life. He was also a dramatist, but what concerns us here is his stress on the importance of imagining a script which would embody the colour of village life, a script that Santal children could teach themselves to each other. This script is probably the only tribal script in India which has been able to establish itself in teaching, printing and distribution. Murmu founded in 1950 an institution for the propagation of Santal culture and literature which has since developed into a large network, operating in several states under the name of ASECA (Adivasi Socio Educational Association). He hoped that all Santals would adopt his script. It has indeed been very important in Orissa, but has not been taken up by the Santals living in Bengal or Jharkhand, who prefer to use the scripts of the dominant languages. (8-9)

Researchers who have recorded the life and customs of the Santhals, mention how the entire village moves together with its head or the *manjhi* (97). The shift is mainly for agricultural purposes. In 1832, the Santhals moved into the area called the Damin-i-koh in Jharkhand to settle down there. As is explained in the *Bengal District Gazetteers*, the introduction of Permanent Settlement led to “an extension of tillage” and the Santhals were called to cultivate the lowlands and to rid it of wild beasts. They are known for what is referred to the “ ‘slash and burn’ swidden type”, an expertise in clearing forests and turning it into arable land (Nathan et. al WS-59). In short, the basis of the Santhal life is the sense of

a community in the form of a village and that of land and cultivation. The task of clearing the land given to them by the British led to their settlement and subsequent oppression. Exploitation at the hands of the *zamindars* on the one hand and by the British colonisers on the other, led to their rebellion of 1855, also known as “Santhal Hool”. The rebellion was led by the Murmu brothers Sidhu, Kanhu, Chand and Bhairav and their two sisters Phulo and Jhano. Many Santhali women actively participated in this rebellion. Various missionary societies were established in the Santhal Paraganas after the rebellion. (Tamblyche 3). As W.J. Culshaw explains how the story of rebellion has become an integral part of Santhali consciousness and their songs continue to celebrate their leaders (6).

2.3 ORALITY IN LITERATURE

Santali literature has been handed down from one generation to the next in the oral form. As mentioned, the *Olchikki* script appeared only in 1925. The Santhal songs, folk tales and myths are a repository of their culture transmitted orally for generations. They function as a “cultural script” preserving the dynamism and fluidity of the tribe, “referring to the way(s) through which people organize experience and make sense of their lives in the cultural setting” (Mathur 105). Each tribe has its own creation myth which is often recited at key moments. According to Bodding, one of the key moments of this transmission is through the *guru-shishya* tradition especially when a member is included in the tribe. At that point during the ceremonial feast or the *chachochhatiar*, we are told: “One indispensable part of the ceremony is that a guru recites the traditions, beginning with the creation and ending with how they came to their present home” (O’Malley 92). According to their creation myth, the Santhals believed that there was nothing to begin with, except the ultimate cosmic force, “*Thakur Jiu*”. As Bodding records in *Traditions and Institutions of Santals*:

Towards the rising of the sun (the East) was the birth of man. At first there was only water, and under the water there was earth. Then *Tahkur Jiu* created the beings that live in water, the crab, the crocodile, the alligator, the raghob boar fish, the sole prawn, the earthworm, the tortoise and the others. (3)

It is believed that the first human couple came from a pair of swans *hans* and *hasil* created by *Thakur Jiu*. These laid eggs and then emerged the human race in the form of a boy and a girl *Pilchu Haram* and *Pilchu Budhi*—*Pilchu* meaning original, *Haram*, an elderly man and *Budhi* an elderly or a married woman. They were kept at *Hihiri Pipiri*. They roamed around naked till tempted by *Lita* to taste rice beer. With sexual desire, there came seven boy and girls who married among themselves. But as they did not lead the life laid out for them, *Thakur Jiu* instructed *Pilchu Haram* and *Pilchu Budhi* to hide in a cave while the rest were wiped out. The couple subsequently had more children. (O’ Malley 106). The creation myth is known as *binti* and is recited at marriages.

2.4 NIRMALA PUTUL’S POETRY

Nirmala Putul was born in 1972, in Dudhani Kuruva village, Dumka of the Santhal Pargana, Jharkhand to a Santali Adivasi (tribal) family. She writes in the Indian tribal language, Santali. She graduated in Political Science (Hons.) and has a Diploma in Nursing. Collections of her poems have been translated into Hindi such as *Nagare Ki Tarah Bajte Hain Shabad (Words Resound like Drums)* and

Apne Ghar Ki Talash Mein (In Search of One's Own House) and *Phutegaek Naya Vidroh* (There will be another rebellion). She is the recipient of many awards and is actively involved in developmental work in Dumka. She was awarded the "Sahitya Samman" in 2001 and the "Rajkiya Samman" by the Jharkhand government in 2006, in addition to several other awards.

Nirmala Putul's poetry is rooted in the culture and landscape of Santhali life. Her poems reflect a deep understanding of the integral connection between nature and Santali life. Literature, specifically poetry forms the basis of representing the meaning of nature to the Santhals. The poem "If You Were in my Place" questions the developmental paradigm of mainstream society that privileges some and leaves the others out. Putul asks pointed questions in this poem—

How would you feel
if your village stood in the lowlands of distant hills
and you lived in huts of grass and straw
right next to oxen, cows, goats and chickens and pigs
the anxious light of lamps about to flicker out?

Forced to see the faces of
children whimpering from hunger
how would you feel?

Translated from the Santali original by Arlene Zide with Pramod Kumar Tiwari and the poet.

Putul does not lose sight of her moorings and bases her work in Santali life, looks at the 'developed' world to ask, what if the positions had been reversed? This reversal posed as a question sheds light on the realities of the Santali life marked by people living in "huts of grass and straw" and "children whimpering from hunger". The successive stanzas point towards the complete lack of basic amenities such as water. In the developed world, people open taps in their houses to use water. But in the far-flung villages, water has to be given to children from "mouthfuls of water/ from a spring/ flowing miles away. The women have to gather firewood and the men have to break rocks for running the household. Whereas other children have access to education, the Santali children continue to lead a life in the village driven primarily on cultivation.

In the next three stanzas of the poem, the tone of the poem becomes sharper and more critical. She asks what if she was "sitting on a chair" and "you begging for some work,/ wheedling and whining/ in your sick little language?" She then asks what if you were being gazed at and exploited by someone else. Putul's questions are to the advocates of the developed world who have completely ignored the indigenous tribes like hers. She asks what if she were at the beginning of the line and "you" at the end? The physical features of the Santali are brought in the question next: "If you were black and your nose was flat,/ the soles of your feet full of cracks?" She asks how it would feel if you had these features and were mocked at for them. The questions raised by Putul point to a tone that is different from the one used in the poems such as "Mountain Man", "Mountain Woman" and "Mountain Child". Putul questions the extreme disparity that is there in the society.

Putul's voice places the concerns of Santali life from the woman's perspective. The span of her poetry is broad—from poems describing the Santali's connections with nature to the problems faced by the Santali women. There is an intensely lyrical quality to her descriptive poems and the tone turns dark in others where she foregrounds the problems faced by the women. In the poem "Bitia Murmu ke Liye" (For Bitia Murmu) Putul stresses the fractured times and the challenge that lay ahead for women like Bitia Murmu. In "What Am I to You?", Putul questions the position of the woman within the family asking what she is—"A hook/ on which you can hang/ the shirt you just took off/ filled with boredom, sadness and exhaustion/ Or a taut clothesline in the courtyard/ to pile on the clothes of the whole household." (Trans. from Hindi by Aruna Sitesh and Arlene Zide in consultation with the Poet and Pramod Kumar Tiwari). It is to be noted that Putul's work is significant for their holistic perspective. Lack of amenities and education to a lot of the women is a problem faced by the Santhali women and one that needs to be countered. In commenting on the problems faced by the Santhali women writers, Maya Mandi states:

The major problem of Santali woman-writer relates to lack of literacy among Santali women, and they don't have much interest in Santali literature. Thus women readers are few. Naturally if we write on the problems of Santal women, very few women can read it. They also cannot publish their writings in the form of books, as they themselves cannot move from place to place for selling them. Very few women get the help and inspiration from the editors of newspapers and journals. Moreover, the publications of the Santali literary journals, though so essential, do not usually get patronage of the State & Central Govt., like their counterparts in other Indian languages.

At present about 150 journals and magazines in Santali are being published from various parts of the country, as also about 100 books of various kinds every year, and more than 300 writers are involved in Santali literature as a whole. (141)

In this context, the work of Santali women writers like Nirmala Putul is a valuable contribution to the evolving cultural script of the Santhals.

2.5 "THE MOUNTAIN WOMAN": AN ANALYSIS

Mountain Woman

A bundle of dried wood on her head, she
comes down the hill
Mountain woman
will go straight to the bazaar
and selling all her wood,
will quench the fire of the entire family's hunger.

Hanging on her back,
a child wrapped in a sheet

Mountain woman, planting paddy
 planting her mountain of grief
 for a blossoming crop of happiness
 Breaking apart the stones of the mountain, she's breaking
 mountainous rituals and taboos.

Weaving mats on the mountains
 passing her mountainously long day

She makes brooms
 weapons to fight filth
 Piercing the knot of her hair with a flower
 She is piercing someone's heart

She runs after the cows and goats, her feet
 inscribe in the earth
 hundreds of her innocent maiden songs

Translated from the Santhali original by Aruna Sitiesh and Arlene Zide in consultation with Nirmala Putul

As the titles of three of her poems suggest, the mountain figures as an important trope in Nirmala Putul's poetry. It indicates the physical terrain of Santhal life as also the solidity of their identity. The mountain has stood the test of time and is ever present. The Santhals, too, come from the aboriginal tribes and have been present prior to the coming of the Aryans and Dravidians.

This poem presents glimpses of a Santali woman's life. In the first stanza of the "Mountain Woman", women are seen going to the forest to collect firewood. The journey down the hill means that the women have to first go uphill to collect firewood. It is almost like a ritual. It can be seen that it is the women who perform this work and not the men. Women work hard and go to the forest to procure wood. According to Nayan Jyoti Das,

The key role in the economy of the Santal society is played by the women. Most of the domestic works are performed by them. They engage themselves in domestic works, collection of firewood, rearing of child and domestic livestock, selling and marketing for the family. They also always are busy with agricultural activities like sowing and reaping, fishing, gathering forest product along with performing wage labour as and when required. They are the head loaders. They pick leaves. (208)

The woman in the poem is referred to as the "mountain woman" as she performs heavy tasks on a daily basis. Having collected firewood, she goes straight to the bazaar to sell it. The money will help, "will quench the fire of the entire family's

hunger”. Putul is suggesting how the woman is the bread winner of the family. She is aptly referred to as the “mountain woman”.

In the next stanza the mountain appears in a totally different manner. The mountain woman carries her child on her back as she works in the fields. This also explains how both tasks of tending to the farm and rearing the children is performed by the woman. The man is not to be seen anywhere. Santhal society is largely patriarchal. Even though women contribute economically to the growth of the family, it is men who are considered more important. In this way, mountain stands witness to the hard work performed by the woman. The Santhals are generally engaged in clearing forests or in paddy cultivation. In the poem, the woman does not sow paddy alone, but also her “mountain of grief”. The seeds that she sows will bring her not just crop but a “blossoming crop of happiness”. Two important aspects of Santhal life can be seen in this poem. The work is done entirely by women. Further, the association of the woman with the mountain points towards the tough life led by the Santhal woman. The happiness lies in the harvest as it is an agrarian society. In doing all this work that is hard, the woman is also breaking stereotypes and taboos that have restricted her. Putul presents the woman as a worker, a producer. Labour transforms the woman’s grief to joy as it yields harvest as well as happiness. The woman continues to perform the role of the nurturer as she “plants”. The tasks performed by the woman remind one of Putul’s poem, “If You Were in My Place”. In it she asks: How would you, who are part of mainstream society feel, in case your wife, “to light the house-stove/ was forced to gather firewood/ and bring it from the jungle”? Women’s productivity, labour and their role as nurturer remain a matter of concern in Putul’s poetry.

In the next two lines of the poem, the word “mountain” has been used in yet another way—”mountainous rituals and taboos”. Mostly, the breaking of stones involves use of implements associated with men. As Das points out, “Women, for example, are not allowed to plough. They cannot even thatch a roof or use a leveller. They are prevented from shooting arrows, using razor, chiselling holes, striking with an axe or fishing with line and hook” (209). Therefore the breaking of stones, generally a male task is being performed by the woman who is then in breaking the mountain also breaking taboos. A glimpse of the work done by the mountain in the poem “Mountain Man” clarifies this further:

Sitting on the mountain, sings mountain-songs

Writes on the mountain in mountain script

– “m” is for mountain

Honing the blade of his axe on the mountain

He’s sharpening up the dulled numbness of what’s lodged inside him

(Translated from the Santhali original by Aruna Sitiesh and Arlene Zide in consultation with Nirmala Putul and PK Tiwari)

The man sits on the mountain, sings songs and sharpens his blade to break the rock. In the “Mountain Woman” this task is taken up by the woman. In doing so she breaks the taboos placed on the women and their position in the family.

The next two lines indicate both the nature of work and the immensity of it. Her day is packed with work ranging from household chores to working in the fields.

What she then weaves on the mountain is the verdure of the paddy. The green mat or the entire planting of the paddy is done by the woman. Her day is “mountainously long” and she continues to perform her tasks untired. Women and their labour has been ignored by patriarchal societies everywhere. In her poetry, Putul presents women as active workers and throws light on this aspect of Santali women’s lives.

The next stanza amalgamates the woman’s strength with her beauty. Her “brooms” are “weapons to fight filth”. The use of the term weapons indicates that the filth is not just one that can be cleaned up. It points towards the “filth” in society. This could be the leering men or other practices that marginalise the women. In the same stanza, the next two lines emphasise her femininity as she pierces the knot of her hair with a flower and in the process someone’s heart. The indication being that there is an onlooker appreciative of her beauty. But when analysed with respect to the first two lines of this stanza, the use of filth and the broom as a weapon to counter it shows how she is ready to combat anyone who misbehaves with her.

The final stanza emphasises her form as a young woman. This is in contrast to the hard work laid out for the woman in the previous stanzas. The woman is seen uninhibited as she runs around full of fun and frolic and chases the “cows and goats”. Her feet inscribe the earth and show how she runs around barefeet, singing “innocent maiden songs”.

The poem’s description of the woman in terms of hard work done through the day is in sharp contrast to the way the mountain man has been described in “The Mountain Man”. He is seen as stationary and unproductive, defined only in terms of his physical strength and machoism—

Mountain-like body

Mountain-like chest

Mountain-like complexion

Man’s physical features are akin to the mountain but he is not seen moving around with the kind of agility noticed in the mountain woman. He relates to the mountain, carries its history, and shares his sorrow and joys. But he is not seen working with the mountain woman in the fields. The work in the fields, the tending to the young ones is all done by the mountain woman. This points towards the disparity in the roles accorded to the men and women in Santali society. According to Dev Nathan *et al*:

But no woman is allowed to participate in the rites. They cannot sacrifice animals or witness the sacrifice [Archer 1983: 129]. They can assist in certain ceremonies but can only share certain portions of the sacrificial meat, i e, other than the head, which is the ritually most valued part of the meat. Thus, women are ritually not full members of the clan or family. On marriage they leave the father’s clan, but never become full members of the husband’s clan. This is a crucial step in creating a class of persons with lower political rights. Women are also excluded from most of the village collective rituals. They cannot enter the sacred grove (jaher or sarna). They do not participate in the main dance of the agriculturist harvest festival (lohrae). But in the gathering-related flower or spring festival (baha) they alone perform the main dance. (WS-60)

The poem under discussion is a translation of a Santali poem by Nirmala Putul. It has tremendous visual appeal. In the translation, too, one can mark a distinct rhythm and the use of word pictures. The woman carrying dried wood, or working in the field with a child on her back, all create word pictures in the mind. The woman putting a flower in her hair, or her feet digging into the earth throws up earthy smells that create appeal. As indicated above, the word “mountain” is used in many different ways, to denote toughness, security, and burdensome responsibilities. Its use is both metaphoric and metonymic. It represents not just the woman’s hardy nature but also aspects of her life metonymically. Putul’s presentation of the woman as worker in “Mountain Woman” focusses on her mountain-like difficulties. She is both a worker and a nurturer. And yet, in Putul’s style the sensuousness (dancing around the mountain in a free-spirited manner) at the end of the poem is a sign of hope.

2.6 “THE MOUNTAIN CHILD”: AN ANALYSIS

The mountain child —
 a fragment of the mountain —
 plays in the lap of the mountain
 Toddling up the mountain
 he plants his feet in the mountain soil
 to rise like a mountain
 in the land of mountains
 The whole mountain
 lives inside the mountain child
 And in the lap of the mountain
 lives the scurrying mountain child
 The mountain child sees
 a plane flying over the mountain
 And he asks his father —
 What is that bird?

(Trans. Lucy Rosenstein)

This poem describes the growth of the child in the lap of nature. It charts the development from an infant to a young boy running around the mountain highlighting the integral connection between the Santhals and nature. It is in four stanzas and has the point of view of one who is observing a Santhal child. The mountain child is referred to as “a fragment of the mountain”. For the Santhal community the earth and the mountain take on the nurturing role. Also, nature and human relations are integrated into one ecosystem in the case. As a child plays in its mother’s lap, so does the mountain child in the lap of the mountain.

The growth of the child can be marked in the next stanza as it moves from the mother’s lap to become a toddler. Here, too, the child ambles in the mountain soil and plants his feet there. The warmth of the mother’s lap changes to the

mountain soil that holds the child's feet and teaches them to stand. The child "plants his feet" or stands firmly just like the mountain. Just as a child takes on its parents' attributes, the child, too, takes on the qualities of the mountain—an idea emphasized in the next two lines of the stanza. It "rises like a mountain/ in the land of mountains". This also shows how the mountainous landscape is a vital aspect of the child's growth.

The connection described in the previous stanza turns metaphorically into an umbilical one as the mountain remains within the child and the child runs around in the mountains. In this stanza, a new movement is discernible in the child. From sitting in the lap to being a toddler who learnt its first steps, the child is now "scurrying" in the mountains. This movement of dashing or running around in the mountain shows how the child has learnt to walk. This growth takes place in the mountain's lap.

In the last stanza another character appears—the father. The child is inquisitive and asks the father about an aeroplane flying above its head. The young child wonders as to what it is. It thinks the object to be a bird and asks—"what is that bird?". This is a telling line. It shows how the defining factor of growth in a Santhal child is nature and not machine. The growth of children from mainstream society might take place in a developed world with machines, technology and the sighting of aeroplanes. But this is a mountain child growing up in the midst of nature. It sees the aeroplane in the image of "a bird," and not a machine. The child's curiosity touches the heart. G.N. Devy has explained:

The tribal imagination, on the other hand, is dreamlike and hallucinatory. It admits fusion between various planes of existence and levels of time in a natural way. In tribal stories, oceans fly in the sky as birds, mountains swim in the water as fish, animals speak as humans and stars grow like plants. Spatial order and temporal sequence do not restrict the narrative. This is not to say that the tribal creations have no convention or rules, but simply that they admit the principle of association between emotion and the narrative motif. (170)

The imagination is used in this poem, "Mountain Child" to make us think how there are two different growth patterns that can be seen in society. One is machine-based and the other is nature-based. The Santhal child grows up in nature's lap and its growth and development follow the model of nature. That is why the child identifies the aeroplane as a bird. Nature is essential to the growth of the Santhal child. The poet makes us think of children growing up in the cities and towns who might be able to identify the aeroplane but not a single bird or flower. The poem stresses the importance of the way the Santhal child grows up in the mountains and takes on qualities of strength and solidity from it. Each stanza marks the development of the child from an infant to a young child scampering around. Santhal identity is developed in nature.

Both the poems reflect on the simplicity as well as aural and visual quality of Putul's poetry. It is a blend of all these that tap the senses to give us a glimpse into the world of tribal imagination—one that contests the superficial ways of the modern world. The use of word pictures, presentation of nature in a sensuous manner in a simple and meaningful manner speaks for a reorientation of perspective.

2.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit you gained familiarity with the Santhal tribe and its creation myth. This was followed by a discussion of the wide range of Nirmala Putul's poetry. Finally, an analysis of the poems "Mountain Woman" and "Mountain Child" would have help you relate with all that is associated with the mountain as a metaphor to understand about the Santhal woman and the child.

2.8 GLOSSARY

- Myth** : Myth refers to a set of beliefs of a community of people. These are generally transmitted from one generation to the next.
- Oral Narratives** : These are stories that are narrated and not written down. The transmission is oral.
- Umbilical** : The chord that connects the mother to the child in the womb.

2.9 QUESTIONS

- 1) Write a note on the Santhals.
- 2) Analyse the tropes employed by Nirmala Putul in her poems.
- 3) Discuss "The Mountain Woman" with reference to its focus on human strength.
- 4) Describe the atmosphere created in the poem "Mountain Child".
- 5) Analyse the relationship between Santhal writing and nature.
- 6) Comment on the nature of tribal imagination and the role it might play in literature.

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UNIT 3 JYOTI LANJEWAR

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Women and Dalit Writing: Some debates
 - 3.2.1 Dalit women and the Feminist Movement: Gopal Guru and Sharmila Rege
- 3.3 Marathi Dalit Poetry
 - 3.3.1 Jyoti Lanjewar
- 3.4 “Caves”: An analysis
- 3.5 “Leadership”: An analysis
- 3.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.7 Glossary
- 3.8 Questions
- 3.9 References
- 3.10 Suggested Readings

3.0 OBJECTIVES

After having read this unit you will be able to:

- understand Women and Dalit Writing;
- analyse critically two poems of Jyoti Lanjewar.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit will acquaint you with the debates around Dalit writing. It will provide you with a theoretical methodology to understand the evolution of writing by Dalit women and Dalit feminist writers. You will also be familiarized with the terms “difference”, “Dalit feminist standpoint” and “diversality”. This will be followed by an analysis of Jyoti Lanjewar’s work with special reference to the poems “Caves” and “Leadership”.

3.2 WOMEN AND DALIT WRITING: SOME DEBATES

The discussion around the discourse of women’s writing acquired new significance with interventions from Dalit writing. In the recent past, questions regarding writings by Dalit women and those by feminist orientation have appeared leading to a reformulation of the structure of Dalit feminist thought. The most pivotal article in this context is Gopal Guru’s “Dalit Women Talk Differently” that appeared in the *Economic and Political Weekly* in 1995.

3.2.1 Dalit Women and the Feminist Movement: Gopal Guru and Sharmila Rege

This section will introduce contemporary debates around Dalit feminist theory—Gopal Guru’s idea of the distinctness of Dalit women’s voice, Sharmila Rege’s

critique of this uniqueness and suggestion of a Dalit feminist standpoint as well as Nivedita Menon's idea of "diversality". Gopal Guru's article, "Dalit Women Speak Differently" brought to the fore the specific context of Dalit women. It triggered a debate about the relationship of the oppressed women to the feminist movement, and reconstituted it on the lines of "difference". In his argument, Guru distinguishes the voice of Dalit women from all others and presents it within a distinct context—this he labels as "different" from other constructs used for feminist discussions. In his article, he also interprets the issue of the women marginalized along caste lines as a consequence of both external and internal factors in our society. In the case of the former, a non-Dalit framework of feminism claims to explore Dalit women's issues, but really speaking does so without understanding their socio-economic and political context. The internal factors refer to the exploitation of these women by patriarchal social structures. Consequently, Dalit women's writing needs to be analysed along coordinates that must be distinct from those usually employed to understand women's concerns. The feminist movement does speak for them but according to Guru, it lacks an understanding of the specifics (socio-political) of their context; in his opinion, therefore, it remains non-Dalit and middle class. As one sees, writing by Dalit women articulates exploitation within patriarchal structures such as the family. He explains:

The claim for women's solidarity at both national and global levels subsumes contradictions that exist between high caste and Dalit women. The latent manifestations of these contradictions involve subtle forms of caste discrimination as practiced by upper caste upper class women against Dalit women in the urban areas and resorting to slander of Dalit women in rural areas... They consider the feminist theory developed by non-Dalit women as unauthentic since it does not capture their reality. This comprehension gets clearly reflected in the 12-point agenda adopted by the NFDW and in several papers presented by the Dalit women at the Maharashtra Dalit Women's Conference held in Pune in May 1995. Dalit women define the concept of Dalit strictly in caste terms, refuting the claim of upper caste women to Dalithood. Dalit women activists quote Phule and Ambedkar to invalidate the attempt of a non-Dalit woman to non-Dalit identity. (EPW 2548)

For Guru, there are various reasons for understanding the distinctiveness of the Dalit women. The first is the "ultimate subordination" of the woman's voice to other powerful voices in the peasant movement. The second reason is that the "moral economy" practiced by the upper class did not apply at all to the case of the Dalit women for various reasons. In the case of the third factor, as cited above, Guru mentions how the contradictions between Dalit women and upper castes are not taken into account. The relationship between the two is skewed in favour of the privileged and this aspect needs to be interrogated. Therefore, due to a combination of reasons, the Dalit woman's voice gets subsumed within other voices and what we have is the non-Dalit woman speaking on her behalf. He further explains the internal factor of marginalization by Dalit patriarchy:

In the post-Ambedkar period, Dalit leaders have always subordinated, and at times suppressed, an independent political expression of Dalit women. This political marginalization has been openly condemned by Dalit women at the regional conferences of Dalit women and at the

Delhi meet. It is not only in the political arena that Dalit women face exclusion. In the cultural field, for instance, Dalit women have criticized their male counterparts for dominating the literary scene. Dalit male writers do not take serious note of the literary output of Dalit women and tend to be dismissive of it. Dalit women rightly question why they are not considered for the top positions in Dalit literary conferences and institutions. (*EPW* 2549)

Guru explains how the question of the Dalit woman must be examined from her point of view which would necessitate a re-articulation of the frame of reference itself. According to him, such a position contains “emancipatory potential”, and has a more “encompassing view of reality”. When looked at from within the context of “difference,” the identity of the Dalit woman finds expression and articulation. It is this “talking differently” that forms the identity of the Dalit woman in Gopal Guru’s theorization.

In response to this argument, another contemporary theorist and scholar, Sharmila Rege who has recently written, *Writing Caste, Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women’s Testimonios*, argues the matter differently. In her article, “Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of ‘Difference’ and Towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position”, Rege gives another dimension to the discussion. The article was initially presented as a paper at a seminar on Dalit visions organized by the Vikas Adhayayan Kendra in Pune in March 1998. In it, Rege raises a crucial point about the act of constituting the Dalit woman question as distinct since it separates the cause of Dalit women from the larger feminist movement. The Dalit woman question, when considered as particular, could then be raised only by the Dalit woman. Rege cites the example of the black woman in Western feminism. Arising out of a confluence of literary theories like Post-structuralism, Deconstruction and Postmodernism, the black woman is situated within a distinct politics and as a result both feminism and the white woman remain silent on the race question. Rege analyses the complexity of the question of the Dalit woman and the way in which it is addressed both by the women’s organisations of the Left and the feminist movement. She elaborates:

Thus in retrospect, it is clear that while the left party-based women’s organizations collapsed caste into class, the autonomous women’s groups collapsed caste into sisterhood—both leaving Brahmanism unchallenged. The movement has addressed issues concerning women of the Dalit, tribal and minority communities and substantial gains have been achieved but a feminist politics centering around the women of the most marginalized communities could not emerge. The history of agitations and struggles of the second wave of the women’s movement articulated strong anti-patriarchal positions on different issues. Issues of sexuality and sexual politics which are crucial for a feminist politics remained largely within an individualistic and lifestyle frame. Issues of sexuality are intrinsically linked to caste and addressal of sexual politics without a challenge to Brahmanism results in lifestyle feminisms. (WS-43)

Mainstream feminism is therefore seen as wanting and limited in scope by both the scholars. But where Gopal Guru places the recovery of the lost voice within a structure of “difference”, Rege rightly challenges it and presents an alternative problematic for the Dalit woman question and for enhancing the larger concerns of the overall women’s movement. As Rege avers:

Though Guru's argument is well taken and we agree that Dalit women must name the difference, to privilege knowledge claims on the basis of direct experience on claims of authenticity may lead to a narrow identity politics. Such a narrow frame may in fact limit the emancipatory potential of the Dalit women's organizations and also their epistemological standpoints. (WS-44)

Rege also explains how it will be valuable to actually present the concerns of Dalit women through what she calls a "Dalit feminist standpoint"—one that will be located within the lives of these women on the margins and will hence be emancipatory.

This position argues that it is more emancipatory than other existing positions and counters pluralism and relativism by which all knowledge based and political claims are thought to be valid in their own way. It places emphasis on individual experiences within socially constructed groups and focuses on the hierarchical, multiple, changing structural power relations of caste, class, ethnic, which construct such a group. It is obvious that the subject/agent of Dalit women's standpoint is multiple, heterogeneous even contradictory, i.e., that the category 'Dalit woman' is not homogeneous — such a recognition underlines the fact that the subject of Dalit feminist liberatory knowledge must also be the subject of every other liberatory project and this requires a sharp focus on the processes by which gender, race, class, caste, sexuality—all construct each other. Thus, we agree that the Dalit feminist standpoint itself is open to liberatory interrogations and revisions. The Dalit feminist standpoint which emerges from the practices and struggles of Dalit woman, we recognise, may originate in the works of Dalit feminist intellectuals but it cannot flourish if isolated from the experiences and ideas of other groups who must educate themselves about the histories, the preferred social relations and Utopias and the struggles of the marginalized. A transformation from 'their cause' to 'our cause' is possible for subjectivities can be transformed. By this we do not argue that non-Dalit feminists can 'speak as' or 'for the' Dalit women but they can reinvent themselves as 'Dalit feminist'. Such a position, therefore, avoids the narrow alley of direct experience-based 'authenticity' and narrow Identity politics'. For many of us non-Dalit feminists, such a standpoint is more emancipatory in that it rejects more completely the relations of rule in which we participated (i.e., the Brahmanical, middle class biases of earlier feminist standpoints are interrogated). Thus, adopting a Dalit feminist standpoint position means sometimes losing, sometimes revisioning the 'voice' that we as feminists had gained in the 1980s. This process, we believe is one of transforming individual feminists into oppositional and collective subjects. (WS-45)

The important point to take away from Sharmila Rege's argument is that any positionality that speaks about the lives of Dalit women must be located within their specific context. As a result, this construct should be analyzed as one that is "heterogeneous" and "contradictory". Thus the anxiety of the woman oppressed by caste has to be understood from within her social construct and should not be seen as unique and hence isolated. Further, it should not mean that the Dalit feminist standpoint is based on lived experience alone. Rege recreates the feminist

field to articulate the Dalit feminist standpoint and allows for a rethink in feminist discourse. According to her, one must explain the way in which the Dalit feminist standpoint will be interventionist within the feminist field and create a wider theoretical and practical expanse for both Dalit and non-Dalit women.

Feminism must expand its frontiers to speak about the question of the Dalit woman. Anupama Rao points out how this debate has been extended with Chaya Datar's critique of this argument and a focus on "the centrality of economic exploitation and market fundamentalism in disenfranchising women" (Rao 4). Rao elaborates the way in which writings by Dalit women have challenged the "masculine register of *dalit sahitya*" (Rao 30). The feminist scholar Nivedita Menon presents on a positive note the point that "diversality" is a more inclusive term to address the concerns of Dalit women than "intersectionality". The latter is a term used frequently in feminist discourse. "Intersectionality" has been used to analyze identity as constituted at the intersection of a plurality of discourses. The understanding being that identity and the woman question need to be analyzed from the point of view of caste, class and other factors. However, the feminist scholar Nivedita Menon finds this to be a term that has limitations. According to her, it emerges within the construct of law and deals with issue of race and gender. However, in the context of India the vectors to determine women's identity are many. In place of intersectionality, she advocates the idea of "Diversality". Combining Rege's Dalit feminist stand with the idea of diversality gives us a methodological tool with which to place the discussion around Dalit women and their work. Menon explains how feminism must take cognizance of the idea that "women" is neither a stable or homogeneous category and nor are "caste, race or class" (Arya 25). She cites the example of western theories and identifies in them a kind of unidirectionality by which 'their' theories apply to the contemporary reality in general. But 'our' theories are not cited as an example to understand the feminist discourse in the west. In her critique of the idea of intersectionality, Menon states:

Feminist solidarities as well as disjunctures in solidarity must be seen as conjunctural, fluid and radically negotiable. No universal nature can capture the conjunctural nature of political engagement; and (2) I suggest that as we saw with the governmentalisation of gender, the easy acceptability of intersectionality for international funding agencies should give us pause. The term intersectionality seems to work not for feminism, but for state and international funding agencies...Feminism is heterogeneous and internally differentiated across contexts. This recognition makes it impossible to articulate a simple feminist position on any issue, and alerts us to what Walter Mignolo has termed 'diversality'—the recognition of diversity as a universal condition (2000). Analyses that begin with the assumption of a unified and homogenous category of 'woman' may well be productively opened up to other identities by the intersectionality framework; but analyses that begin with the understanding that identity is provisional and conjunctural, would find, I have argued, that the intersectionality framework freezes notions of pre-existing individual, woman and other identities. (Arya 38)

Menon's postulation of 'diversality' as a methodological tool helps us understand that the universal frameworks are limited and wanting. It is therefore important

to reorient the feminist movement by looking at it from the perspective of Rege's idea of the Dalit feminist standpoint and Menon's idea of diversity. This will help us understand how at any given point in time, things can clash in contradictory ways. The Dalit woman's standpoint is a considered move towards diversity to understand how at any given moment, the issues of caste, class identity, and patriarchy clash to raise questions we would have otherwise ignored.

3.3 MARATHI DALIT POETRY

Marathi Dalit writing can be traced back to the Bhakti movement of the fourteenth century and the reform movements of the nineteenth century. Writings by Jotiba Phule in the nineteenth and by B.R. Ambedkar in the twentieth century articulated the context of the Dalits in literary expression. In the post-Independence period, Dalit writing in Marathi gained impetus with the work of Baburao Bagul in the 1960s with his short story collection *When I Had Concealed My Caste*. Poetry by writers such as Narayan Surve combined a Marxist outlook with the Dalit context giving new directions to this writing. Articles in the magazine *Asmitadarsha* introduced debates around Dalit issues and their representation in writing. The 1970s saw the beginning of the Dalit Panther movement with Namdeo Dhasal, Arjun Dangle and J.V. Pawar in the forefront (Dangle xl). Dhasal's poetry collection *Golapitha* (1972) shook people out of their complacency with an unabashed expression and a totally different style of writing. The bold images and vocabulary used by the male poets around the time made their writing an anathema for many in the field. Where the spotlight remained on the works by the Dalit panthers, the writing by women had emerged around this time in a powerful manner and begun to speak in new ways. In the article, "How three generations of Dalit women writers saw their identities and struggles?" translator of Dalit writings, Maya Pandit has pointed out how Dalit women entered the domain of the written word around the 1970s—

From Baby Kamble, the first Dalit woman to write her autobiography, to the new generation women writers like Pradnya Pawar, Chaya Koregaonkar, Shilpa Kamble, one can see a clear progression in the way they have interpreted and re-constructed the realities of their gendered existence... The most significant aspect was their indomitable spirit, which took pride in their being Dalit Mahar women and which protested strongly against Hindu religious doctrine and the caste oppression it had generated. Their portrayal of the graded patriarchy among the Dalit communities reflected a rare and humane maturity. They did not denounce their men, but tried to explain the violence directed at them as the only outlet available to their men suffering under the yoke of caste oppression. Significantly, they were markedly different from their male counterparts, both in the perception of gendered inequalities and a sense of agency.

Pandit also poses the question of whether the writing of the women was different from that of men. According to Pandit, writing by women was more sensitive and nuanced. It made use of the cultural practices of their lives which were known to them. This was unlike the position held by the men who rarely saw them as agents of transformation in society. In *Dalit Personal Narratives*, Raj Kumar has explained how most upper caste writers of Indian literature have ignored the interventions made by Dalit women and have restricted their

understanding to women as victims. However, women have at all times made their presence felt. Lack of education, knowledge of the written word might have prevented clear articulation but this does not diminish the struggles of women who refused to remain passive. Like Pandit, Kumar, too, traces many generations of women writers from those that lay “emphasis on women’s rights” in the first phase to the second phase of “emphasis on women’s liberation and autonomy” (216). Raj Kumar stresses on the need for a more unified Dalit women’s movement. According to him lack of education is one of the primary reasons for the absence of a concrete Dalit women’s movement—

Despite nearly five decades of literacy programmes and formal educational facilities available in independent India, the number of literates among Dalit women is abysmally low. A majority of them strive to lead a simple and ordinary life due to rampant poverty in their families. Poverty forces them to abandon education and work hard to find ways and means to survive. Illiterate women cannot write their autobiographies. But, as there are examples, these women, given a chance, can narrate their joys as well as sorrows to someone who can help document their narrative voices. (210)

Raj Kumar’s argument combines the theoretical with a more practical approach taking into account the complexities of lived life. He also traces the Dalit women’s movement to E.V. Ramasamy Periyar and the Self-Respect Movement, one that helped women deal with “self-respect, marriages and measures of birth-control” (214). The Ambedkarite philosophy and way of life gave confidence to the women. These ideas are reflected in Lanjewar’s poetry.

3.3.1 Jyoti Lanjewar (1950-2013)

Jyoti Lanjewar was a Dalit feminist poet from Maharashtra. Born to a middle class family in Nagpur, Lanjewar did her PhD in Marathi. She taught in Shree Binzani City College, Nagpur University. She was a member of the Republican party of India (Athawale) and presided over the women’s front. She participated in the Namantar Andolan (1978-1994), a struggle launched to change the name of Marathwada University, Pune to Babasaheb Ambedkar University. It was finally changed to Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University. *Disha* was her first poetry collection followed by *Jhep*. Lanjewar was deeply aware of the issues of caste, class and gender and the way in which women were exploited due to a combination of these factors.

Jyoti Lanjewar’s poetry

Lanjewar belongs to the second generation of Dalit women writers. Like her contemporaries Kumud Pawde (1938-) and Urmila Pawar (1945-), she wrote with conviction. According to Pandit, these women came into an urban and industrialized world that gave them a “fractured modernity”. On the one hand, the aftermath of the green revolution compelled migration to the cities and on the other, conversion to Buddhism gave them “a rare self-confidence”. In this context, Dalit women evolved their own style of feminism as against the Savarna feminism of the 1980s that ignored the caste question. According to Maya Pandit:

They (Dalit women) were quite “different” from their predecessors in the way they saw their lives constructed by a fractured modernity. Their

voice is modern, intensely individual, acutely sentient and deliberately audacious. They challenged the Varna system and proposed a critique of patriarchal ideologies and practices in their own communities as well as in the society around them. They were strongly 'feminist' and in that they were distinctly different from their men; but at the same time, they were quite 'different' from the upper class/ upper caste women in the feminist movement who demanded reforms in rape laws and in the family institution as their political agenda. But did not see caste as one of the foundational principles of social structures that generated that violence. This is where the Dalit women's consciousness registered a strong protest. Their incisive critique of the Savarna feminist movement of the eighties exposed the inadequacies, and emphasized the organic connection between caste and gender oppression. They provided alternative perceptions of the construction of Dalit women's identities in post-Independence India, where the nexus between caste, and patriarchy dominated.

Jyoti Lanjewar has written many poems such as "Disha", "Why were you born?", "Sting", "Mother" and many more. The exploitation of the woman at the level of caste, class and patriarchy are the subjects of her poetry. Her poems express the impact of the Ambedkarite movement on Dalit thinking. She is deeply aware of the battles to be fought by Dalit women at many levels. "Mother", is one of the most powerful poems that present this idea. She remembers the 'mother' who derives strength and fortitude from Ambedkarite thinking and tells her daughter to follow the same path. "Mother" has been described by Eleanor Zelliot as a "social and revolutionary" poem. Descriptions of the life of a Dalit woman in "Mother" disturb the reader. Take a look at this excerpt from "Mother":

putting a five paise coin
on a little hand
saying 'go eat candy'
taking the little bundle from the cradle to your breast
saying "Study, become an Ambedkar"
and let the baskets fall from my hands...

...

I have seen you
on a crowded street with a market basket on your head
trying always to keep your head covered with the end of your sari
chasing anyone who nudged you deliberately
with your sandal in your hand...

I have seen you working until sunset
piercing the darkness to turn toward home,
then forcing from the door
that man who staggered in from the hooch hut.....

I have seen you
at the front of the Long March
the end of your sari tucked tightly at the waist
shouting “Change the name”
taking the blow of the police stick on your upraised hands
going to jail with head held high.....
(Anand and Zelliott 100-102)

“Mother” describes the travails of a Dalit woman as also her participation in the “Long March”. It was a march that took place in 1979 after the government’s reversal of the decision to rename Marathwada University in the name of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. According to the translators, Martinez, Thorat and Zelliott, “Jyoti Lanjewar’s entire poem is a pain of praise to the hardworking Dalit women who in spite of illiteracy and many forms of back-breaking labour give great strength to the dalit movement begun by Ambedkar” (Anand and Zelliott 103). At the same time, the poem’s vivid descriptions of a Dalit woman’s life leave on us strong impact. This voice of protest characterize her other poems also such as “Caves”.

3.4 “THE CAVES”: AN ANALYSIS

Their inhuman atrocities have carved caves
in the rock of my heart
I must tread this forest with wary steps
Eyes fixed on the changing times
The tables have turned now
Protests spark
Now here
Now there.
I have been silent all these years
listening to the voice of right and wrong
But now I will fan the flames
of human rights
How did we ever reach to this place
this land which was never mother to us?
Which never gave us
even the life of cats and dogs?
I hold their unpardonable sins as witness
and turn, here and now.
a rebel.

This poem is an example of protest poetry and must be read against the background of Dalit oppression from the Dalit feminist standpoint. It is the voice of a Dalit

woman speaking against the oppression and subjugation taking place at multiple levels. The poem questions the atrocities inflicted on Dalits by a society regulated by powerful people. There is also a lot of pain that is visible in this poem as can be seen in the lines:

Their inhuman atrocities have carved caves
in the rock of my heart

In the opening lines, the poet speaks of “inhuman atrocities” that have carved out caves in the poet’s heart. The atrocities refer to the violence inflicted on the Dalits and their marginalization. We need to interrogate “their” in the first line. Who or what does “their” refer to? It refers to the upper caste, the society, in short, the powers that oppress. Likewise, “Inhuman” indicates the brutal manner in which Dalits are treated; it is a sort of behaviour that would not be meted out to a human being in normal circumstances. It also says a lot about people who inflict violence. What kind of people are they? Their insensitivity and barbaric nature come to the fore. Strangely, they are considered to be civilized. But Lanjewar’s citing of the inhuman atrocities exposes how they are barbaric and cynical in nature. Lanjewar’s is a woman’s voice and, therefore, a hidden implication about the atrocities inflicted on the Dalit woman gets stressed. The poem works at two levels—the oppression of Dalits and the exploitation of Dalit women in particular.

In the poem, the poet refers to the woman’s journey in life as a walk in the forest. She needs to walk carefully. It seems as if she is worried about an impending danger. Each step has to be taken with caution. One is tempted to ask as to why caution is required. The poet observes “change” around her and looks out for it. As her gaze remains fixed on the changing currents, it appears that the poet wants to see what change will mean for her in the time to come.

The idea of change is mapped at this juncture. The tide has turned and the shift in situation is marked as one where the existing system has been toppled. The oppressed people have found a voice—that of protest. The resulting change is that of protest against the inhuman atrocities the oppressed were compelled to bear. The poet also maps Dalit histories by mentioning how they have been quiet all these years. They had been fed on what was traditionally thought to be right. Clearly, who decides the right? The answer quite obviously is: it is the people in power. The present statement might work at two levels. It is the entire upper caste Brahmanical practice that conditions the Dalits into believing that the upper castes are superior to them. The Dalits are trained to accepting and giving consent to the ‘assumed supremacy’ of the upper caste people. Lanjewar’s poem is a protest poem resisting this idea. At another level we need to bring in the Dalit feminist standpoint. This will help mark the oppression of the Dalit woman—she is doubly marginalized as compared with the male. Her oppression as Dalit is coupled with instances of beating and torture both within the family structure and outside of it. That is why the Dalit feminist standpoint discussed in the previous section needs to be thought over.

Here, we might remain conscious of the fact that the writer is a woman. She takes a decisive leap as she plans to fan the flames of “human rights”. Lanjewar uses the idea of human rights as a point of entry into the structure of protest. Human rights will destroy the structure of the said right created to a whole section

of the productive lot. The poet challenges the atrocities committed on the oppressed by using the framework of human rights.

The question to be raised is—why do the socially oppressed not question the given rubric of the right and wrong? The poet expresses her disappointment and anger at the fact that this land where they remained was never the motherland it was meant to be. It did not nurture them or provide them with a full life. She rejects the land, and the nation in which they are placed, and asks—how can a land that treated the Dalits inhumanly belong to them? It makes the reader question the boundaries of the nation-state and its complete marginalization of the Dalits. A nation has to be constructed on the idea that it belongs to all. Each of its citizens should enjoy equal rights in the country. If that were to be the case, how is it that one section exercises control whereas the rest are treated as of a lower status? Lanjewar's is the voice of rationality and humanity as she asks pertinent questions.

Lanjewar considers atrocities inflicted on Dalits as “unpardonable sins.” The treatment meted out to the Dalits will bear testimony to their oppression. The poem culminates on a note of protest as in the final lines the poet declares her opposition to the oppression. It is also a moment of the Dalit woman speaking and asserting herself in the social domain. The poem is a mark of protest against the savage treatment meted out to the Dalits.

3.5 “LEADERSHIP”: AN ANALYSIS

“Leadership”

Trees should not make
 Any assurance to anyone
 Clinging to old objects of devotion
 Should not be leaders to hypocrites
 Trees should remain like a “tree”
 Quite unnecessarily
 Trees grow as tall grasses
 Calling themselves rebels
 Caring for their own camps
 Few have built secure fences around
 Constructed limits for themselves

Sometimes Trees turn providers
 Not to one but several birds
 With them
 Indulge in child play
 Help them
 To built nests

For others
 Protect their younglings
 Provide warmth of leaves
 Gradually as the birds come of age
 The trees also teach them
 To change the nest
 And not just so
 On convenience
 Bid them to fly.

In “Leadership” Jyoti Lanjewar has used the example of a tree to elaborate her views on the idea of leadership and what it should entail. The poem’s tone and style reminds us of Gieve Patel’s poem, “On Killing a Tree”. A simple idea from nature is used to comment on the current scenario and to make the reader think about that which leads to a better world.

The poem’s title, “Leadership” elaborates the qualities needed in an able leader. This can be understood to mean a true leader who will take the Dalit movement forward. It draws a direct parallel between trees and leaders as both are supposed to serve the people. Lanjewar uses the example of the tree to advise the leaders about employing discretion in giving assurances to people. According to Lanjewar, the tree remains rooted at one place, standing solid. But its strength should not be associated with a tendency to adhere to old ideas—”old objects of devotion”. The trees should not provide assurances to anyone based on traditional ideas. The trees provide shelter but these facilities should not be extended to “hypocrites”. Lanjewar uses this idea to elaborate the role of the leaders in giving them new and dynamic ideas. The tree should follow its natural course and grow in the direction it thinks fit. The growth of the trees is not altered or is not incumbent on any “assurance” to anyone. The leader should not play to the gallery and be hypocritical in his utterances. The beauty of the tree lies in being in its natural state. Leaders, too, should just be themselves. They have a job to perform and they should continue to do this irrespective of the many influences around. The sense of discrimination is what they require.

The growth of trees as tall grasses is seen in contrast to the solidity mentioned previously. The similarity of the tree to tall grasses is seen as an unruly, uncontrolled growth, and is likened to leaders who call themselves rebels. Lanjewar considers this as problematic. When people start moving only their specific line of thinking, they would “care for their own camps”. The poem’s tone changes in the next two lines. The idea is that there are only a few people who have built “secure fences” around. This could mean two things. One, the poet could be referring to the integrity of the leader that will prevent a person from falling prey to the designs of the powerful people. Without such secure fences, people end up serving the interests of the rich and mighty. The idea of determining one’s limit is important. How far will one go? There will be temptations and pressures of many kinds, but the leaders have to create a secure chain around them so that they have the strength to follow their own convictions. The poet is quick to point out that there are very few who are able to follow convictions. There is also a subtle suggestion of negotiation in this poem. It is

mentioned that leaders should remain alert about lure of the times. As Lanjewar describes her own work in the following lines:

My poetry is about humanity and its seemingly endless struggles for survival, for change, for justice and sometimes humanity happens to be the oppressed marginalized... it's a wonderful process of all these voices coming out of me. (qtd. in Vitthal)

In the poem, Lanjewar explains the role of the leader as a provider. According to her, some trees turn providers but they are not selective about this role. The leaders, too, are to serve the cause not of any one group of people but of other groups as well so that the benefits reach the people at large. As trees provide shelter and help the birds build their nests, leadership might be genial to the people. The idea of building a nest is not to indicate just the four walls, but the need to build lives. Leaders have to take it upon themselves to help people protect those the weak and insecurely placed. When translated to the context of leadership, the younglings are people who are underprivileged and require tending to. The trees also teach the birds to change their nest once they have learnt how to fly. From the leader in the political world to the one at home, all must imbibe these qualities. The general tone in which Lanjewar writes prevents this from being a sermon.

The dominant idea that surfaces in Lanjewar's poetry is about leaders extending their leadership benefits to people irrespective of caste, class or gender. Her poetry is a voice of protest denouncing inequality. Her emphasis is on human rights and equality, on an egalitarian world in which all enjoy the rights and privileges of the country.

3.6 LET US SUM UP

This unit has presented an understanding of the debates around Dalit feminism. It acquaints the readers with a variety of views elaborated by scholars of Dalit feminism and explains terms such as Dalit feminist standpoint and diversity. The unit has also positioned Jyoti Lanjewar in line with Dalit women's writing as belonging to the second generation of Marathi women writers whose work was wide-ranging and nuanced. Here, the poet's larger social concerns are in focus.

3.7 GLOSSARY

Diversity : A new coinage. It calls into question the tendency to put in one basket the many identities in a society. Instead, it emphasizes the need to protect the given cultures and life-patterns by analyzing them in terms of the specifics of their context.

Black Panther : It is a Dalit movement that started in 1970s with the writings of Namdeo Dhasal, Arjun Dangle and J.V. Pawar. On 9th July, 1972 the Dalit Panthers group was established in Bombay. (Dangle xl)

Egalitarian : A term rich in ideological associations. It stresses the importance of equality in a society divided into classes with prejudices and oppressive tendencies.

Jyoti Lanjewar

3.8 QUESTIONS

- 1) Write a note on the debates around Dalit feminism.
- 2) Write a critical note on Dalit women's writing.
- 3) Comment on the title of the poem, "Caves".
- 4) Critically comment on the qualities of a leader as expressed in the poem, "Leadership".
- 5) Analyse Jyoti Lanjewar's poetry as the voice of protest.

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UNIT 4 SUKIRTHARANI

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Dalit Writing in Tamil Nadu: The Beginnings
- 4.3 Dalit Women's Writing from Tamil Nadu
- 4.4 Sukirtharani's Poetry
 - 4.4.1 "Pariah God": An Analysis
 - 4.4.2 "Untitled-II": An Analysis
 - 4.4.3 Sukirtharani: A Feminist Voice
- 4.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.6 Glossary
- 4.7 Questions
- 4.8 References
- 4.9 Suggested Readings

4.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to:

- know about the life and works of Sukirtharani's poetry;
- examine two poems of Sukirtharani critically.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit you have studied Marathi Dalit poetry. The unit also explained the debates around writings by Dalit women and the methodology through which Dalit feminist writing can be approached. In this unit you will study Sukirtharani, a Dalit feminist poet from Tamil Nadu. There will be an analysis of the note of protest in this stream of Tamil poetry. This will be followed by an elaboration of the discussions around this writing. Sukirtharani's poems "Pariah God" and "Untitled-II" will be examined in detail.

4.2 DALIT WRITING IN TAMIL NADU: THE BEGINNINGS

The beginnings of Dalit writing can be traced to Maharashtra. The writings of Jotiba Phule (1827-1890) in the nineteenth and of B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956) in the twentieth century set the path for a new way of expression. This acquired great stimulus from the works of Baburao Bagul (1930-2008) in the post-Independence period in India. The Dalit Panthers movement of the 1970s brought to the forefront not only a new set of writers but also an entirely different way of thinking and expression. Writings by Namdeo Dhasal (1949-2014) and others defied the usual mode of expression to narrate to the world, stories of the atrocities committed on Dalits. These found voice in a realistic mode without any dressing up of expression. Writings by women began to appear in a more cohesive manner

in Maharashtra around this time. The work of Dalit women writers gave fresh directions to the corpus of this writing. The form of life writings such as the autobiography, biography and the *testimonio* became popular as a part of this trend.

The epicentre of this writing can be located in Maharashtra, yet it reverberated in other parts of the country. In Tamil Nadu, an awareness of women's rights can be traced to the Self-Respect movement, "a radical anti-caste movement begun by E.V. Ramasamy Periyar in 1925, and which convulsed the Tamil country into eruptions of defiance, anger and subversion for the next two decades" (V. Geetha in Deshpande 325). Proponents of this movement advocated the use of reason to make choices and a secular approach was to be adopted in all matters. "Reason and mutuality" were the cornerstones of this movement. The Self-Respect movement considered marriage as a trap for women and Periyar was critical of the way in which Brahminism "condemned women to the servitude of marriage". This was resisted by the self-respecters through inter-caste marriages and also widow remarriage. As V. Geetha explains, "By rendering marriage a matter of individual choice and desire, as well as a social contract, the self-respect marriage form made the caste Hindu family appear suddenly vulnerable" (Deshpande 327). However, the movement was limited in approach. It is in the 1990s as the translations of B.R. Ambedkar's writings became available in the form of the "first Tamil volume in 1993," a new wave of resistance and realisation of Dalit identity began in Tamil Nadu. (Satyanarayana and Tharu 21). This was accompanied with rise of new Dalit organisations in 1989. Writings by Tamil Dalits appeared in journals and little magazines such as *Nirapirikkai*. According to Satyanarayana and Tharu,

In November 1994 a special dalit issue of *Nirapirikkai* was published, with translations from Marathi dalit writing (selections from *Poisoned Bread*) and carried the work of Tamil Dalits. In 1995 the Tamil *India Today* brought out a special issue on Tamil dalit writing that included Raj Gauthaman's critical essay, stories by Sivakami, Idayaventhan, Bama, Ravikumar, Cho. Dharman and Imayan, poetry by K.A. Gunasekaran and Pratibha Jeyachandran. This moment can be described as the birth of dalit writing in Tamil Nadu. (26).

The Dalit movement in Tamil Nadu in the twentieth century has been led by Cho. Dharman (born 1953), Bama (born 1958), T. Dharmraj (born 1967), Raj Gauthaman (born 1950), K.A. Gunasekaran (born 1955), Iyamam (born 1964), N.D. Rajkumar (born 1966), Ravikumar (born 1961) and many others. The Dalit women's writing in Tamil can be credited to Bama (born 1958), P. Sivakami (born 1957), Malthi Maithri (born 1968), Salma (born 1968), Kutti Revathi (born 1974) and Sukirtharani (born 1973). They have all contributed to the making of Tamil Dalit literature through life writings and narratives in the form of biographies, autobiographies, short stories, novels, poetry testimonies, memoirs and many other forms of literary expression. Anthologies such as *No Alphabet in Sight* and collections such as *Wild Words* have made the works of these writers available in English translation.

A common thread that runs through these works is of a rejection of the caste system that hierarchizes and privileges the Brahmins and other castes while relegating Dalits to the bottom of the system, considering them to be impure and untouchable. Protest against oppression by a realistic presentation of their lives

and a rejection of the methods of cultural hegemony is a prominent marker of this writing. Examining the nature of Dalit protest, in the article, “Dalit Culture”, Tamil intellectual, Raj Gauthaman raises important points about the role of protest in Dalit culture. He explains how the identity of a Dalit is posited as a “negative” one as against that of the Hindu hegemonic caste considered as “positive”. By way of countering this, the critic suggests that firstly the Dalits need to ally with the blacks and women. Secondly, they should also collaborate with other marginal social groups such as the tribals. To quote, “Dalit culture should distinguish itself as sub-national, defined in contrast to the national” (153). He explains how they should then evolve Dalit culture as an alternative culture. The task is not easy due to years of oppression that have made the Dalits vulnerable. Gauthaman uses Richard Lanoy’s term “antipodal culture” to suggest the formation of an alternative culture by the Dalits. However, as they begin, the Dalits will have to engage with the structures available in society such as religion and caste, as these forms continue to perpetuate in society. The protest culture of the Dalits must invert the paradigms created by the hegemonic caste groups. From here they need to move to a stage of integration:

The dalit protest culture cannot rest with turning the hegemonic cultural symbols of power on their head. ...Dalits who destroy the divide between the positive and negative identities by means of the dalit cultural movement should consolidate their freedom by opposing the national bourgeoisie, agrarian bourgeoisie and their collaborating classes...In short, the dalit liberation movement which begins in the cultural plane as a negative movement should in stages become a positive movement for the liberation of all human beings. (157).

Where this protest movement should begin by asserting itself against the hegemony of the dominant groups, it needs to move from resistance, formation of an alternative culture and finally to a positive movement for the liberation of all. Literature by Dalit women suggests the road ahead as their writing combines these factors. Writings by Dalit women in Tamil inverts the order created by the dominant power structures at the levels of caste, class and gender. But their ability to evolve a fresh paradigm in writing creates an alternative rubric—one that allows the women to combine critique with a new language that allows free and easy expression. This is liberating for the community of women at large. Sukirtharani’s poetry needs to be analyzed from this perspective.

4.3 DALIT WOMEN’S WRITING FROM TAMIL NADU

This section will introduce you to a debate around the writing, especially poetry, by Dalit women in Tamil. Contemporary Dalit women’s writing marks a distinct turn from the kind available earlier. At present there is a spark of feminist poetry from poets such as Sukirtharani, Kutti Revathi and Salma. According to the poet Kutti Revathi, Dalit women’s poetry in Tamil Nadu came into its own with the work of Kutti Revathi, Salma and Sukirtharani. The collection *Wild Words: Four Tamil Poets* (2012) is a testimony to the same. In “Of What Our Written Language Speaks...”, Revathi explains the problems around women’s writing,

For one, ours is a social space which has excluded women from any form of sexual dialogue. Another reason is that Tamil women’s poetry

was totally opposed to the extant dominant voice of Tamil nationalism. Just as the body belongs to man, so do the words that denote the parts thereof, is another reason. So, too, is the exclusion of women from poetry, the finest literary form. And where her entry is permitted, such permission is granted only on condition that her poetry must subject itself to self-censorship. (30)

Revathi is critical of dominant discourses in Tamil society that prevent the woman from coming out to speak and when she does it is through strategies of censorship to control her voice. She explains further how in the case of Tamil poetry, the women writers engaged with classical literature for a long time and the new voices emerged only in the twentieth century. She mentions the work of twentieth century poets such as Meenakshi and then Perundevi and Rishi. In the case of Perundevi and Rishi, their poetry expressed women's lives but they continued to work within the "mainstream without claiming a separate identity". It is in the works of Sukirtharani, Salma, Malathi Maithri and Kutti Revathi that the critic marks the advent of a new voice, feminist and assertive as well as one that explores new directions. She states:

...poetry constitutes a kind of weaponry for a language, an essential articulation of that society and a form of its activism. Therefore, even in the very adoption by women of poetry as their literary form of choice, there is a profound politics as well as activism. (30)

In the present time, women seek expression of their lives in different ways creating "weaponry" for a new language. Whereas for Revathi, this change takes place only recently in the twentieth century, Latha Ramakrishnan who writes under the pen name "Rishi" thinks otherwise. Writing in response to Kutti Revathi's article, Latha Ramakrishnan in "Regarding the Article by Kutti Revathi on Women Poetry in Tamil" argues against Revathi's comment regarding "the lack of a separate identity" in her work. According to Latha Ramakrishnan,

Such categorization restricts the layers of meaning of a poem. New Poetry is rich with the element of ambiguity and open-endedness and the line between lines and readerly texts which include the feminist text too but the demarcation of a poem as feminist poetry or 'women writing poetry' restricts the expanse of a poem, in my opinion.(21)

The poet-critic in this quote terms this as "reductionist theory" and elaborates how many like her may not have asked for a separate category of expression, but they certainly foregrounded issues related to women's lives. There might be no easy resolution but it is significant to mark how issues surrounding Dalit women are at the centre of this discussion and this must be considered as a significant milestone in literary analysis. Where Ramakrishnan's point about the relevance of her poetry is pertinent, we need to acknowledge that the new tone used by poets such as Kutti Revathi and Sukirtharani is markedly different from what has been written before their time. Take a look at these lines from poems by four different poets:

The demon's features are all

Woman

Woman's features are all demon

Demon language

Is poetry

(From “Demon Language” by Malathi Maithri, *Wild Words* 27)

Nature has been

more perfidious to me

than even you;

But from you began

the first stage of my downfall

(From “A midnight tale” by Salma *Wild Words*32)

I know a woman who made

of the body’s aridity, a beautiful knife—

and went to prison.

She hated the dawn.

(From “Dawn” by Kutti Revathi *Wild Words*61)

I translate her poverty

the hunger she eats,

the hunger she expels,

her dwelling place

whose air is sprinkled with untouchability

her oppressed community

I speak the words becoming her

(From “Translating her” by Sukirtharani *Wild Words*81)

In all these poems there is a forthright voice that demands complete expression of women’s life in all its aspects. The poems give us a glimpse into the thought processes as also the life processes of these women. In an interview given to K. Srilata and Swarnalatha Rangarajan, Suikrtharani comments on the nature of women’s writing as follows:

Land, language, culture, tradition and heritage are factors that influence women’s writing. What unifies the work of all women writers is the subject of women’s oppression. Women who write about feminism or who are concerned about reforming society are not asking for your sympathy—our voices are politically charged arguments aimed at challenging oppressive forces acting against women. There is always a political statement in our poems. (183)

In the work of these poets, the woman is produced as an active agency performing life-affirming actions while at the same time expressing the anxieties of living a triple marginalized life. These poets are cognizant of their exclusion at the levels

of caste, class and gender. There is therefore an attempt on their part at forging a new language to reconstitute women's lives in poetry.

4.4 SUKIRTHARANI'S POETRY

Sukirtharani was born in Lalapet, a small village near Ranipet in Vellore district, Tamil Nadu. She teaches Tamil in a government girls' high school there. Hers was one of the ten or twelve Dalit families who lived in the "cheri". Her father was a Hindu and mother a Christian, even as the family followed the Christian faith. She was the fifth of six children and the siblings managed to complete their school education in course of time. As Lakshmi Holmstrom explains, "Traditionally, their occupation was to take away the carcasses of the dead animals belonging to the upper caste people, and to bury or burn them. For this, they were paid in grain" (Holmstrom 115).

Sukirtharani has brought out six poetry collections in Tamil—*Kaipattri Yen Kanavu Kel*, (*Hold My Hand Listen to My Dreams*, 2002), *Iravu Mirugam* (*The Night Beast*, 2004), *Avalai Mozhipeyarthal* (*Translating Her*, 2006), *Tiindapadaada Muttham* (*Untouchable Kiss*, 2010), *Kaamatthipoo* (*The Flower of Lust*, 2012) and *Ippadikku Yeval* (*Yours Eve*, 2019). She is currently working on a novel. She is a recipient of many awards. Sukirtharani appeared in a documentary film, *She Writes*, with other Tamil poets.

In her writings and interviews, she recounts the brutal discrimination against Dalits. Her understanding of the marginalized life is experiential and exploratory, and the voice is of protest and inquiry. Sukirtharani's poetry poses questions about living in an unequal world where identity is marked by ostracism. Instead of writing an autobiography or a testimonial, she chooses the genre of poetry to express herself. In their article, S. Shankar and Charu Gupta explain how life narratives are an "imprecise term" to describe writing about lives. They employ the term "life narratives" (as against life writing) in a "generically fluid" manner to include not just autobiographies and biographies but also memoirs, ethnographic interviews, nonfictional references within fiction, biopics, legal testimonies, art work, memoirs, Facebook posts, blogs, confessional poetry, and, lastly and most tragically, a suicide note" (4). Their rationale for doing so is as follows:

In using this term, we sometimes stretch the meaning of the word "narrative." We deploy life narratives in a generically fluid and wide variety of ways, as we wish to include not only biographies and autobiographies, but indeed to recognize the multiplicity of subgenres in which lives are narrated. It has seemed to us better to use the term "life narrative" rather than such alternative terms as "life writing" or "life representation" (not all texts are written, after all; and representation seems at once too theoretically loaded and vague a term). "Life narrative" has seemed the best of the terms on offer because more often than not, as an object of study, a life offers itself to us in some (fragmentary or otherwise) narrated form. (Shankar and Gupta 4)

The use of the term "life narratives" as against "life writing" provides us with a way of documenting these women's lives through their poetry, fictional work and other forms of expression. They help in creating the antipodal culture mentioned by Gauthaman. The poetry of Sukirtharani and other Dalit feminist

poets are also instances of a life narrative. On her part, Sukirtharani finds it easier to reach out to her audience through poetry as for the most she remains busy as a teacher, a role that she takes on with great seriousness.

Having been discriminated against on the basis of caste in school, the poet felt that the teacher's role is very important. It is because of her teacher Kalyani that Sukirtharani's interest in Tamil grew and she would always sign in Tamil. Another teacher who influenced her was Shyamala Gowri. Sukirtharani realized soon enough in life that the possibility of creating an identity by choice is not there as you are always judged in terms of the caste to which you do or do not belong. The poet from Tamil Nadu is ever conscious of her voice as that of a woman's in a society that tries to control and contain it. Her poetry is therefore marked by an intensity and openness that compels the reader to rethink the way in which boundaries are drawn in the society.

Sukirtharani's poetry is marked by the anguish of having grown up on the margins. Exclusionary caste-based practices have left a scar that is difficult to overcome. She recounts numerous instances that drove her caste identity ahead of her. The shaping up of a young girl in an unequal society is difficult. The poems are then both a way of mapping Dalit lives as also resisting societal practices that marginalize and oppress Dalit women. Tropes such as the body, sexuality and woman's viewpoint are at the centre of her work. According to Lakshmi Holmstrom,

In poems such as "I speak up bluntly" and "A faint smell of meat", her poetry charts her journey as a young woman, from humiliation and shame to an assertion of pride in herself—and that includes her body and sexual self. (118)

For her poetry is a mapping of Dalit lives and their protest against the way in which power structures and coalitions in society oppress subjects caught in them. Sukirtharani's poetic voice is an assertion of the Dalit feminist standpoint. In the poem, "Infant Language," she writes:

I need a language
Still afloat in the womb
which no one has spoken so far,
which is not conveyed through signs and gestures.
...
The keys of that unique language
Will put an end to sorrow,
Make way for a special pride.
(*Wild Words*77)

These lines assert the need for a new idiom in which the poet chooses to express herself, through words that no one has spoken so far. Poetry presents new idioms of protest. At the same time, she gives to this language an honour, dignity and a "special pride". Sukirtharani sees this act as liberating—one that will end the sorrow faced by women like her. Poetic expression, has a social purpose in the work of Sukirtharani. In the next two stanzas of this poem, there is a feral power

in the words as she states—”You will read there my alphabet, and feel afraid.” In her own words,

In most of my poems, there is a powerful sense of ‘I’, a strong subjectivity. I strongly feel the need to bring my sense of self into the picture. It is said that bringing the “I” repeatedly into one’s work is a mistake as it can crystallise into one’s ego. But the “I” which I use does not stand for Sukirtharani alone, it represents several women like Sukirtharani. This representative “I” is an integral part of my poems and I must use it. (Srilata and Rangarajan 183)

Sukirtharani’s poems bear signs of a poignant subjectivity and an intense desire to evolve poetry that subverts societal norms and prejudices. People are used to looking at caste matters from the perspective of the binary divisions, but she holds a mirror up to the society showing the people exactly what she intends doing. Sukirtharani’s poetic concerns range from an attempt to forge a new language to describing the horrors of Dalit lives and the way in which they have had to bear ostracism and humiliation over the ages. Instances of skinning carcass of dead cattle, beating the drum at funerals and processions, suppression of women’s bodies and lives are the subject of Sukirtharani’s poetry. Poems such as “A faint smell of meat”, “A portrait of my village” present the dark picture of Dalit lives. The episodes from this life provide us with a fragment of a life narrative.

4.4.1 “Pariah God”: An Analysis

“Pariah God”

You say
the heat that sears your side
is a pariah sun.

You say
the beak that steals
the worm-ridden grain spread out to sun
is a pariah crow.

You say
the mouth that snatches
food along with your wrist
is a pariah dog.

When the land is tilled
and sweat is sown
you say
it is pariah labour.

If this is how everything is named
 what is the name of that pariah god
 who walks the earth blood-thirsty?

Translated Meena Kandasamy
 (Satyanarayana and Tharu, 313)

The poem, “Pariah God” explores the construction of the term “pariah”. It originally comes from the word *parai*, a musical instrument. The people who played the *parai* or the drum on weddings and funerals constituted a specific social group, considered lower in terms of caste divisions. People belonging to this group were discriminated against by the privileged caste groups. Over a period of time, *pariah* was used to refer to Dalits in Tamil Nadu. At the same time, *pariah* also refers to an outsider, one who does not belong to the social system. The term *pariah* therefore captures both the social history and the lineage of humiliation and ostracism faced by the Dalits in Tamil Nadu. As Sukirtharani recounts in an interview with Divya Karthikeyan,

My grandfather played *parai* (the musical instrument after which the Dalits in Tamil Nadu were named as Pariah) in events of the village. My father worked in EID Parry as a labourer. In festivals or funerals, *parai* is an important part of the rituals. Every year one person would be chosen to perform the task of playing *parai*, which he should oblige. My father protested and the *panchayat* called him and cast him out of the village. As my father was working at Parry’s in Ranipet, it didn’t affect him.

The construction of Dalits as *pariah* is an attempt to label them as outsiders. In their respective zones of habitation, the Dalits are treated as outcasts and pariahs. In writing “Pariah God”, Sukirtharani reveals the process of naming and contests the legacy of being a pariah in society. One is reminded of the theorist Frantz Fanon who in his book *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) presented the wide disparity in the habitations of the blacks from the white settlements and the strategies of marginalisation of the blacks.

The poem is structured in I-You format and is framed as a question. The “I” is the Dalit voice and “you” refers to one who occupies a privileged position. The poem is both an accusation and a question to the privileged caste groups. Written in five stanzas, the opening sentence of the first three begins with “You say” to question the strategy of naming and difference. The poem presents the way in which the upper caste groups name and categorise the Dalits as pariahs. Sukirtharani points out how the entire structure of Dalit existence as been rendered as a pariah. Every aspect of their life ranging from natural elements to birds and animals are ‘named’ as pariah.

The opening line of the first stanza in an accusatory tone inverts the usual order—”You say”. Through this first statement, the subservient position of the Dalits is inverted and it is the privileged caste people who are interrogated. In it, the sun that gives light and is life affirming is also harsh. The harshness of the sun is blamed as pariah. The “heat that sears your side” indicates how the powerful social groups name the harshness of the sun as “pariah sun”. The Dalits are not given credit for the light and life-giving aspects of the sun, but its heat is attributed to them.

The second stanza again opens in the questioning tone—"You say". This time the bird stealing the grain spread out in the sun is considered to be a pariah. Note how the bird's natural act of pecking at the grain is considered as theft, she "steals" it. Moreover, the grain spread out is "worm-ridden" and not healthy grain. When the crow pecks at the useless worm-eaten grain it is called the "pariah crow". The crow's natural act is tantamount to stealing and it is accorded pariah status. This is the way in which theft is associated with the marginalised. Sukirtharani's poetry shows that the world in which they live is not conducive to their existence as their entire ecosystem is seen as pariah. There is a continuous battle with the things around. Each aspect of their lived life is a reminder that in their own world they are outcasts.

The next stanza re-emphasizes the I-you format. Here, the dog who "snatches" the food away from "your" hand is considered to be pariah, too. This is an act of violence as the dog grabs the food and also the "wrist". The bird "steals", the dog "snatches" and they are all considered pariah. By extension, not only are the Dalits 'named' as pariah but their identity is also framed as negative as theft, and violence is associated with them. This phraseology indicates the way Dalits are trapped in a structure created by the upper castes. Sukirtharani's poem interrogates these assumptions pointing a way out of this structure. The poem is a process of writing back to question the basis of this naming. Dalit lives are ridden by this unequal relation with respect to the other privileged people. Writing is a challenge to the norms set by the socially privileged.

The fourth stanza turns the argument around. The first sentence begins on a different note. It presents Dalits as productive labour. It suggests how labour is performed by the pariahs as the work force does not come from the privileged caste. The latter only enjoy the fruits of the labour of the former. The fourth stanza draws the attention of the reader to the real work done by them—"land is tilled" and "sweat is sown". The labour is pariah, but they are not seen as producers in society. They are only exploited as "pariah labour".

The first four stanzas enumerate the many ways of the construction of a pariah, and the last stanza poses a question as Sukirtharani challenges this process of naming—"What is the name of that pariah god/ who walks the earth blood-thirsty?" The opening line reiterates this arbitrary process of naming. She asks if there are a community of people who are pariahs, then surely there must be a "pariah god". However, this is a god who has given them a life of oppression and deprivation and is "blood-thirsty" as the lives of the Dalits are denied the vigour of life.

"Pariah God" interrogates and exposes the multiple ways in which each aspect of lived lives is rendered a pariah by the powerful castes and social groups. The poem is also written as a challenge to such strategies of naming. It documents the exclusionary practices of the powerful. An inquiry into the nature of the "pariah" status is a process of "inversion" that unsettles the coordinates used by the hegemonic caste groups to marginalise and exploit the Dalits.

4.4.2 "Untitled Poem-II": An Analysis

"Untitled Poem-II"

As they skinned a dead cow

I stood guard
chasing the crows away.

The leftover rice
gathered as alms
from sundry village homes
after long waits
turned piping hot in
my bragging.

Seeing my father
down the street
with a tell-tale drum
slung around his neck,

I passed quickly,
face averted.

Unable to state
In the classroom
my father's vocation
and his annual pay,
in the classroom,
I'd fell victim
to the teacher's cane.

Sitting friendless
in the back row,
I broke down and cried,
My grief invisible to the world's gaze.

But now,
should anyone happen to ask,
I tell them readily:
Yes, I am a pariah girl.

Translated N. Kalyan Raman,
(Satyanarayana and Tharu, 317)

Untitled-II is a declaration of pariah identity. It documents the life of the outcasts and the atrocities inflicted on them. Instances from Dalit lives are presented through the eyes of a young Dalit girl. The poem maps her transition from youth

to maturation. Sukirtharani's poetry is experiential as it provides different instances of both lived and observed lives. In this sense the poem is an instance of a "life narrative" (to use the term given by S. Shankar and Charu Gupta). The poem does not carry a conventional title, a trend that can be seen in the poetry of other writers of this orientation like N.D. Rajkumar. In a discussion of Bama's *Karakku*, M.S.S. Pandian has stated that "to name is to exercise power. But a deliberate refusal to name can enable a politics of collectivity. In this case, the shroud of anonymity frees events, persons and institutions from the possibility of individuation and renders them general" (Rao 132). In this case the naming of the poem as "untitled" is a rejection of the process of naming. At the same time, it points towards a collective social condition of the marginalized.

The first stanza of the poem, "Untitled-II" presents the vocation of the oppressed community. The pariahs were the drummers. Over a period of time they began to move dead cattle out of the village and were given grain in return. The opening lines, presented from the eyes of a young girl present a picture of the work done by the Dalits "as they skinned a dead cow". The poetic persona explains how it was her job to chase the crows away. She is the onlooker who stands and watches the task being performed. Her growing up has been mediated through these acts.

The second stanza presents another dimension. We get to know how the poet would wait for food outside homes to collect "leftover rice/ gathered as alms". Sukirtharani points out how this, too, was procured after a long wait. In her concocted story the food turns "piping hot" as the young vulnerable girl later brags about a hearty meal. But in reality, this food was denied to her. As her imagination converts the "leftover rice" into piping hot food, the wide gap between desire and reality stands exposed. Moreover, the desire is for a basic human right. Dalits performing their social function of removing dead cattle were considered impure and were made to wait for food.

The third stanza brings to the fore the practice of beating the drum performed by the Dalits. The poem provides a glimpse into the excruciating pain and humiliation as also the very bleak picture of Dalit lives. The drum is a "tell-tale drum". It is the witness and repository of the many stories of pain and humiliation borne by the Dalits. On seeing her father beating the drum, the poetic persona of the young girl is made to confront her status as pariah. Sukirtharani points out how these stories are not necessarily from her life but from the lives of other Dalit people—"It was a collective experience of many Dalits. At one point of my life, I was ashamed of my caste. At my school, teachers used to ask who belonged to forward caste and who are *Harijans*? But I couldn't openly identify myself with that term. If we are the children of God, then whose children are the others?" (Karthikeyan). Sukirtharani's tone is honest and straightforward as she uses words to weave the pain of her experience and accepts the embarrassment associated with growing up in such an environment. The young girl feels embarrassed at accepting the humiliation they are subject to and walks away "face averted". Her father and family did not fit into the developmental paradigm created by the privileged upper caste people who held sway in society. She is embarrassed and unable to state her father's profession or the meagre income, and was subject to the teacher's cane. In Sukirtharani's poetic world, the teacher has a role to play, as someone who shapes lives. In her own time, she was greatly influenced by her Tamil teacher. But in this case the teacher's cane falling on the student is a mindless act and shows the insensitivity of the teacher. The young girl's life is

marked by solitary sadness as she sits “friendless/ in the back row” and cries. This might make the girl lose self-esteem. Her grief is “invisible/ to the world’s gaze”. Not only the teacher but the rest of the world, too, is unable to understand the grief of the young girl.

But in the last stanza, the poetic voice is no longer that of an insecure young girl. It is a voice that belongs to the mature woman who has dealt with the complexities of her life. We see in it a woman who carries within her the pain of growing up in an unequal world. All this has taught her to declare, “Yes, I am a pariah girl”. This declaration is a challenge to the world of the privileged. The poetic voice announces the young girl’s pariah status to liberate herself from the shackles of a debilitating structure. Sukirtharani explains the complexities associated with the word pariah as follows:

When people keep referring to me as *parachi* (outcast) to belittle me, I feel I must confront them by affirming my identity. There is a difference between the identity one takes upon oneself and the one that others force on to you. In my village, people continue to refer to us by offensive caste names such as *parathevaidya* or *parathevaidyapasanga*. When I am at home, I don’t have to think about my caste, but the moment I set foot outside my house, caste chases after me like a dog. I am known as a ‘dalit’ teacher in my school. I seem to be carrying this burden onto my shoulders without being conscious of it. This is something very characteristic of my life. Caste, therefore, seeps into the self I construct through my poems. (Srilata and Rangarajan 185)

Her comments make clear the peculiar reference point of caste and gender in her poetry. Identity is formed in terms of the many discourses that pervade her life in its many phases. Her acceptance of the status as “pariah” is a declaration that she has inverted the order established by the hegemony of the upper caste. She will now use it in a life-affirming manner through her poetry. The “Untitled Poem-II” expresses the angst of growing up in a world where the classification and rigidity of caste identities deal a blow to her Dalit identity. Sukirtharani acknowledges this sense of pain and loss but hers is the voice of strength. As she emerges from the pain, she locates within her a strong woman who rejects such societal classifications and inequalities. Sukirtharani’s words are an assertion of human dignity as a Dalit woman.

4.4.3 Sukirtharani: A Feminist Voice

Sukirtharani’s poetry has a strong quality to it that creates a fresh voice of poetry. The tone is direct and unhindered. Her poetry developed against the normative structures of caste and family and was considered obscene. As she recounts,

Her poetry developed, she says, in atmosphere of disapproval, refusal of permission to attend public meetings on the part of her parents, and evasive lies on her part. When her first collection, *Kaipattri En Kanavu Kel (Hold Me and Hear my Dreams)* was published in 2002 and her name was bandied about with that of other women poets and trashed for its so called obscenity’, she received no support from her family. . . .None of this broke her spirit. Instead, she says, she was inspired to read the poetry of other women closely: Sri Lankan and other Asian women poets, Kamala Das, the novels of Taslima Nasreen. ‘I realized then,’ she

writes, 'a woman's body had become the property of man. I realized that it was my first duty to redeem it. So my poetry began to put forward a politics of the body'. (Holmstrom 117)

Despite no support from family and society, she moved on to define her literary pursuits. The influence of writers like Kamala Das, Taslima Nasreen and closer home, Kutti Revathi helped her develop a unique style of writing. Sukirtharani is ever conscious of being marginalised both at the level of caste and gender. She captures in her poetry scenes from lived and observed life in which women are controlled and contained as much by patriarchal structures as by caste. Her realisation that the female body is controlled by a society divided at different levels leads her to speak for equality for women. Sukirtharani explains,

I began to think and write about the body. First, I thought about feelings. *Tolkapiyam* mentions eight kinds of feelings. All eight kinds of feelings come from the body; one had to liberate one's feelings, one's body from male domination. Second, the body is the object of sexual violence; it is also the means of labour. I made this work into a project. One can think about dalit women and the double violence they experience in relation to each of these areas. (Satyanarayana and Tharu 312)

This combination of caste and gender in understanding women's lives brings forth poetry that is liberated.

Sukirtharani's poetry expresses a deep consciousness of the body. She writes to bring forth the way in which patriarchal societies contain female bodies and treat them as property. But in her poetry, there is also a celebration of the female form. The woman's realisation of her body's exploitation and the act of reclaiming it as her own is a significant marker of her poetry. Take a look at "Untitled Poem-I"—"With handfuls of poems/ I come to you;/ You wait for me/ with countless kisses./ In a kiss, several poems—/ In a poem, several kisses/ slip away from us." In it, the woman is the active doer. She is not the passive individual whose body is being acted upon. She is the performer. In poems such as "Night Beast" or "The Smile of Aeons," beauty and deep sensuality are combined to define the female form in a totally new way. For instance, in the lines from "The Smile of Aeons"—"Broad shoulders adorned/ with drawings of sugarcane and vine/glitter from a coat of sandal paste./ Gentle tooth marks sink/into a high, nubile breast" we see a clear emphasis on the body. Sukirtharani's poetry restores a sense of confidence and dignity to the female body. In explaining her idea of feminism to Karthikeyan, she says,

Feminism is supposed to be inclusive. And if there's space for dalit writing, so why shouldn't there be one for dalit women, I thought. We can never define feminism by one standard. My language of feminism is different from yours. For some, feminism may be about having the right to go to pubs and stay out late at nights. For me, feminism is having the right to be able to step out of the house, and both are equally important.

We need to understand that the feminism in New Delhi is not the same as in Kanyakumari. The feminism in Lalapet is different from that of Kanyakumari. But what is important is the common thread of women's freedom that runs through. It is only laced externally with personal

experiences. On this respect, dalit feminism is different and important just as much.

Sukirtharani's voice resonates with those of the other Dalit women poets writing in Tamil. Her poetry is an instance of her understanding of the complexities of identity formation that confronts diverse discourses ranging from caste, class and gender. Susie Tharu describes Sukirtharani's poetry as "a brave and moving engagement with sexuality that draws on the feminist reclamation of desire and sexual pleasure" (Arya 184). Sukirtharani wrests free her Dalit identity and the body of the woman from restrictive traditions that cause humiliation. Her poetry is powerful and liberating as it inspires to follow the path of dignified living.

4.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have studied the context of Dalit women's poetry from Tamil Nadu. The idea of protest in it sets new directions for the reader to observe. This unit has provided an overview of writings by women poets like Sukirtharani and Kutti Revathi. They have been central to creating new possibilities in women's writing. The unit has also focussed on the idea of life-narratives that afford a deeper understanding of the life of the marginalized women. In the end, we had a view of the modern values these women poets cherished. That strengthened their faith in the feminist ideals of equality and honest conduct. Sukirtharani and Revathi succeed in gaining a voice of assertion and struggle.

4.6 GLOSSARY

cheri	: the streets where Dalits lived.
hegemonic	: power and control exercised by one social group at the level of ideas.
antipodal	: directly opposed to.
diversality	: used in the sense of Nivedita Menon's explanation of the term; preserving and supporting difference.

4.7 QUESTIONS

- 1) Write a note on Dalit women's writing from Tamil Nadu.
- 2) Discuss how Sukirtharani's poetry is an example of life narrative.
- 3) Comment on the title of the poem "Pariah God".
- 4) Analyze the poem, "Untitled-II" and show its relevance to dignified living.
- 5) Critically comment on Sukirtharani's feminism as reflected in her poetry.

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