

A Language of One's Own: The Politics of the Body, Language and Identity in Sukirtharani's Poetry

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ABSTRACT

The twin oppressive structures of caste and patriarchy are foregrounded in the poetry of Sukirtharani. The six volumes of her poetry posit a critique of violence, containment and marginalization of Dalits, women, refugees in our contemporary society. Drawing upon myths, parables and social stereotyping, Sukirtharani denounces imposed hierarchies and division of experience on gendered, casteist lines. Interrogating binaries in spatial, poetic, aesthetic norms, Sukirtharani's poetry seeks to transcend received tradition to evolve a fresh, dynamic matrix in terms of form and content, image and language. This paper, briefly, traces Tamil poetics and contemporary literary discourse to locate Sukirtharani's poetry as transgressive and innovative. A close analysis of her poems reveals the radical standpoint of Dalit literary discourse in Tamil and highlights (in English translation) how she re-configures language to capture the close affinity between land, nature, woman's body and the common patterns of oppression. Evolving a poetic language that is embedded on a woman's corporeality and consciousness, Sukirtharani engages with body-politics, caste hegemony and traditional poetics.

KEYWORDS: *Dalit women, body-politics, marginalization, language, violence, caste hegemony*

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Tamil Poetics as enshrined in *Tolkappiyam* celebrates the woman's presence in all the five *thinai*s, the major landscapes of ancient Tamil land with a distinct set of references to flora, fauna, occupations of the inhabiting community, its presiding god, the musical instruments used, phases of love or combat situation in the domain of *agam* (the interior) and the *puram* (the exterior). The corpus of *agam* and *puram* poetry of the Sangam period explores the theme of love and war respectively, adhering to the poetic, stylistic, structural principles as envisaged in *Tolkappiyam*. While the woman as a beloved/wife is given a voice in *agam* poetry, she remains anonymous, her voice is mediated through the male poet who describes her responses to different phases in love and her conversation with her woman friend. She is simply referred to as *talaivi* and all the characters in the narrative poetry remain impersonal and anonymous. In the *puram* domain, the men (kings and patrons) are referred to by their names, with markers of their social position and political power. The women, in this domain, figure as mothers of warriors who valorise their sons' deaths in the battlefield. The woman poet Ovvai, a rare feminine voice amongst the bards and poets in the Sangam corpus, writes within this matrix of poetics.

Such a framework, located in a gendered binary has continued to impact poetic discourse in Tamil over the ages. The aesthetic, stylistic aspects of such a poetics found ready assimilation in Dravidian poetics/politics which valorised woman's body as a repository of high culture, embedded in abstractions like *karpu* (chastity), *thaimai* (motherhood). Another significant issue that dominated Dravidian ideology, pertained to the love of Tamil language, the valorising of Tamil through images of a mother figure. The conflation of a woman's *thaimai*/motherhood and the love for *Tamizh Thai* (mother Tamil) sought to subsume women's bodies within a patriarchal paradigm and led to an appropriation and containing of other identities within a monolithic linguistic one. While the Self-Respect movement of Periyar E. V. Ramasamy Naicker sought to posit marriage as an alliance of companionship and mutuality, the Dravidian politics located the woman as a devoted wife or a seductive beloved. The masculinist, patriarchal paradigm that shaped the literary discourse in the early twentieth century, in Tamil, received a cultural and political endorsement from *Kazhagam* leaders, many of whom

were writers, playwrights or script writers for the cinema.² The process of restricting Tamil women spatially within the institutions of family, marriage and home led to their representation in literature as upholding the roles of a wife, beloved, mother or alternatively as a deviant woman embodying sexual desire. This is a significant marker that reflected the ascendancy of *Kazhagam* culture in TN politics and polity. The woman's voice was mediated through the male discourse and visualised through a male gaze. Women writers were not taken seriously and their writing was monitored by male custodians of culture and literary merit. Interestingly, many male writers used a feminine pseudonym and wrote racy, erotic fiction. The dominant images in poetry were largely a collage of women's breasts, lips, thighs and cascading long hair flaunting jasmine strings. The Dravidian, male poets wrote eloquent poetry, in a captivating style but their language, imagery, aesthetics and standpoint remained masculinist and non-reflexive on a gendered, social hierarchy.³

Writers like Rajam Krishnan, Chudamani foregrounded insights and concerns from women's perspective but they were accommodated as *women* writers within a hegemonic masculinist tradition/critical reception.⁴ Ambai's voice in the mid-seventies and eighties was distinctly feminist but an exceptional one in such a context. The nineties altered the Tamil literary discourse dramatically and steered it towards a radical trajectory. The emergence of Dalit literature in the early nineties brought in, a much-needed subversion of the prevailing allegiance to a regressive, restrictive, patriarchal and a notably upper-caste hegemony in Tamil literary domain. It is significant that Dalit literature in Tamil, was spearheaded by Dalit women writers like Sivakami and Bama who set the agenda to interrogate the received literary tradition and brought in a new vocabulary and a feminist voice and standpoint. Sivakami's first novel, *Pazhiyana*

² Writers like Bharatidasan, M. Karunanidhi, Gopala Krishna Pillai in their adaptations of *Silappadhikaram*, located Kannagi within a regressive, masculinist discourse and diluted her subversive, interrogative presence in Ilango Adigal's classical epic. She was made to mouth platitudes that were valorised as tenets of conduct for Tamil women by leaders of the Dravidian movement. Poetry, film scripts, dramatic re-telling of classics were deployed to contain women's speech, conduct, place within the family and in society.

³ Tamil readers would recall the populist fiction of Pushpa Thangadurai and Balakumaran that represented women in highly eroticised images and language. Interestingly, the former wrote erotica and pulp fiction in popular weeklies under the female pseudonym Pushpa Thangadurai but wrote on spirituality and pilgrimage in travelogue style under his real name, Sri Venugopalan!

⁴ C.S. Lakshmi (Ambai) in her book, *The Face Behind the Mask*, discusses at great length the oeuvre and critical reception of women's writing/ women writers in Tamil.

Kazhidalum (1989) and Bama's autobiographical narrative, *Karukku* (1992) ushered in a transgressive mode of writing, in terms of form, content, style, and representation of Tamil society. Bama's interrogation of caste hegemony and gender structures set the agenda for contemporary Dalit writers in Tamil, both men and women. The foregrounding of Dalit patriarchy in the writings of Bama and Sivakami was not lost sight of by K. A. Gunasekaran in his plays, *Abimani*, *Idayavendan* in their short stories, *Anbadavan*, *Indran* in poetry or *Raj Gautaman*, *Ravi Kumar* in literary criticism. This self-reflexivity and a reckoning of intersectionality of caste, gender and class emerged much earlier in Tamil Dalit discourse than in other regions and languages. The twice oppressed lives of Dalit women who faced assaults on their bodies by upper caste men at workplace and by Dalit men at home are represented with critical rigour and interrogative mode. It is this interrogative, subversive, feminist Dalit discourse that facilitated emergence of women poets in Tamil in the first decade of twenty-first century who brought in a strong feminist standpoint in their poetry, experimented with language and poetic idiom and invested images with a radical, revisionist import.

The poetry of Salma, Kutti Revathi, Perundevi, Thenmozhi, Sukirtharani, Malathi Maithri offers a rich, interrogative, feminist discourse that foregrounds a significant shift in the rubric of Tamil poetry in contemporary times. Their poetry has been attacked severely by male poets, critics, cultural czars of Tamil Nadu. Some of them like Sukirtharani, Kutti Revathi, and Salma faced intimidation, death threats and were charged with obscenity and use of unfeminine register. What invited such dire ire upon their heads pertained to their choice of imagery, a distinct language and vocabulary to articulate their angst and aspirations by relying upon a woman's corporeality, and her material, bodily frame. The accessing of their selfhood through references to a woman's body, her sexuality and the notion of female desire provoked a violent, male rage against their writing. Male poets who had commodified women's bodies, and represented them in reductive, anatomical terms raised their objections to women poets writing about menstrual blood, body politics or references to breasts or vagina in their poems. The trend to write through their bodies, undertaken by women poets was perceived by male poets and critics as demeaning to Tamil culture. Revathi, Sukirtharani, Salma, Malathi were subjected to a media trial and labelled as bad poets

and characterless women. Sukirtharani's poetry created a greater furore as she critiqued caste hegemony and patriarchal control over Dalit women's bodies.

It is in this context, that a reading of Sukirtharani's poetry merits critical attention. In her writing, the process of locating the subjugation of women on account of their caste and gender acquires an interrogative scrutiny and a critique of our contemporary society. Her poetry argues that the performing of a caste-gender structure that centres on Dalit women's bodies to legitimise its oppressive practices requires to be interrogated. In this context, finding/evolving a language of one's own as reflected in the poetry of Sukirtharani, acquires a subversive significance. Further, her writing posits that all women cannot be categorised under a homogenising canopy. Being Dalit and a woman carries an enormity of social burden that is multi-pronged, more aggressively oppressive as the intersecting frames of caste and gender impinge upon Dalit women's lives far more venomously. This nuancing of a Dalit feminist discourse in Sukirtharani's poetry alerts us to a plurality of feminine subjectivities that demand a layered critical attention. Women's writing, in the Indian context, cannot be viewed in terms of a univocal register, as it stands embedded in a social problematic which accommodates diversities that intersect regional, religious, linguistic, class, caste, sexual orientation, disability and other identity markers. Such an intersection is reflective of a social rubric that perpetuates violence on women's bodies on multiple counts, not on account of a biological difference alone. Sukirtharani's poetry brings forth the various ways in which structures of power assert their hegemony by subjecting Dalit women's bodies to violent, sexual assaults to retain control over their community. In her six published anthologies, Sukirtharani seeks to evolve a new language to articulate the pattern of violence as well as resistance against the nexus of patriarchy and caste structures. Her exploration of an alternative poetic register and idiom to ably capture her standpoint as a Dalit and a woman, leads her to forge alliances between a woman's body, her language and the landscape. Her images capture the exploitation of Nature, land and a woman's body as intertwined and targeted by the same rapacious forces of masculinist and casteist power. To counter and blunt the attack, Sukirtharani deploys a language that is free from such a power structure. She, therefore, turns inward in a transgressive way. Her turning inward, paradoxically, results in affirming her body as her poetic self-expression. A Dalit woman's corporeal self that provokes the

oppressive structure to unleash violence and containment of her presence in social spaces is deployed by Sukirtharani as her mode of self-articulation. She evolves a language rooted in the woman's body that is at once, the site of violence as well as a mode of resistance against the oppressor.

Six anthologies of poetry by Sukirtharani have been published, as in the following: *Kai patri en kanavu kel* ("Hold My Hand and Listen to My Dream," 2002), *Iravu Mirugam* ("The Night Beast," 2004), *Avalai Mozhipeyarthal* ("Translating Her," 2006), *Teendapadadha Muttham* ("The Untouchable Kiss," 2010), *Kamaththipoo* ("Love's Blossom," 2012), and *Ippadikku Aevaal* ("Yours, Eve," 2016).

A reading of a selection of her poems from her anthologies alerts us to a radical marshalling of images of women's body, texture of body fluids and juxtaposing them to the five elements of air, water, fire, earth and space. The violation of a Dalit woman's body and the exploitation of land, Nature are conveyed powerfully in her poem, *En Udal* ("My Body," 2004). The diverse features of the land's topography seem to mirror the richness and depth of her body contours. The swirling river meanders through a rocky terrain, transforming into a splendid waterfall, just as a woman negotiates her way, changes her paths and evolves as a transformed, spontaneous but different entity. The image of a predatory tiger, with a blood-smeared mouth, quenching its thirst at the watering hole captures the violent, crude appropriation of a woman's body as well as those of waterbodies in our environment. The motif of a hunt opens up a conversation on the masculine principle of hunting down a woman's body at its most care-free state as much as the greedy acquisition of wild Nature and its gifts to the universe. The image of blood is suggestive of a non-consensual assault, a violation of Nature's bounty and that of the female body.

The poem continues to invoke the five elements in their ferocity, culminating in an image of a calm stillness that sustains itself despite the tumultuous, fiery eruptions and tremors. The "red ash" spills over the earth from a volcano, the sky looks ashen, a cyclonic storm shakes up the land and the fiery heat melts away as the night spreads its shade.

In the end, Nature
stays still as my body.

(Sukirtharani, *Iravumirugam* 14 translation mine).

The juxtaposition of Nature and Self that interplays throughout the poem through a series of images that fuse natural phenomenon with references to blood, red ash, and a predator's smug complacency following a successful hunt hint at a man's post-coital indifference and self-assurance at ensuring his power over the woman's body. The poem weaves in the notion of how women and the land, a woman's selfhood and Nature's presence are viewed as the rightful portion of masculine lust and greed. The woman's body sustains itself just like Nature does, despite the periodic plundering. The stillness and the calm at the end of the poem delinks the assault on the body from the notion of shame or loss. The predatory nature of the assaulter is destructive while the blood/cascading water/cool shade are resilient and self-contained. The conflation of "Nature" and "My body" underscore ecofeminist bearings of the poet's sensibility. The poem "My Body," demonstrates Sukirtharani's affirmation of a woman's body as life-sustaining, a gift disregarded by one's Other but not undermined by the act of violation. The poem breaks out of the traditional mode of positing the woman's body as a repository of cultural baggage, as a carrier of honour and subservient to a master's ownership. The poem maps the course of autonomy of the body, the negation of shame following an act of assault/intrusion and the ability to survive on its own right as a body that incorporates the life-sustaining elements embodied in the world of Nature. The underlying principle of creation that sustains the affinity between Nature and Woman runs through the poem as a leitmotif. These defining features of this poem are also the definitive departures from mainstream literary discourse in Tamil.

Numerous other poems from *Iravumirugam* carry references to her body reeking of "a faint smell of meat" (31), "birth marks" (15) recording her pregnancies, "breasts that do not turn tender" (18), "a torn body...dripping with spittoon and wetness of desire" (30), "a broken spine of words" (54), the "nudity of unwritten pages" (54), the "virility of vaginas" (60). Her deployment of the physicality of a woman's body to image her thoughts and feelings extend to reflect an ever-widening canvas, with a marked emphasis on her endeavour to write. She comments on the conflict between her womanly self and her writerly self, when her body is held captive by male desire, a spouse's embrace, a lover's ardent clasp disallowing her to transpose words, speech, silences on to a sheaf of paper. This ensues in a restraining of her body that results in a night of barren pages: her ovum spilling over and messing up the chapters, crushing the

spine of her speech, the sperm running over the underlined passages, “the naked pages” (Sukirtharani, *Iravumirugam* 54) smirking at her partner’s blissful sleep, snoring soundly in the poem *Thaalgalin Nirvanam* (“The Nude Pages,” 2004). It is a brilliant conflation of women’s writing and her sexuality, how both get contained by the claims of the man under the garb of conjugal love.

Sukirtharani explores a new poetic language that is embedded in the woman’s body and is sharp enough to comment on body-politics. She marshals such a language to examine her Dalit identity, to reflect upon the discrediting of language, body and self-articulation in the context of Dalit community. Mapping the narrator’s identity graph from denial, sense of shame, the fact of left-overs and friendless classrooms, one of her most eloquent poems concludes with a candid, assertive affirmation of her caste identity:

Now
When anyone enquires
I speak without subterfuge
That I am a Parachi.

(Sukirtharani, *Iravumirugam* 32 translation mine)

In the poem *Parakkadavul* (Paraiyar God), the narrator rages against the labelling of acts of toiling Dalits or those of birds and dogs in derogatory, casteist references while the venomous acts of hatred and blood spilling by deity-driven upper castes escape the label of a Paraiyar God:

You term
The back-searing heat
Paraiyar heat.
The scattering of damp, rotten grains
by a sharp-beaked bird is
A Paraiyar crow.
A dog that snatches away
A snack held tight within your wrists is
A Paraiyar dog.
The tilling of land
The sprouting of seed with our sweat is

Paraiyar chore.

If this is the way of the world

The blood-thirsty, hate-filled God

Which Paraiyar Lord is that one?

(Sukirtharani, *Iravumirugam* 33 translation mine).

Paraiyars are one of the lowest among the community of Dalits in Tamil Nadu, who play the *Parai* drum, made out of leather at funerals and processions. The affirmation of Paraiyar as a term of resistance and interrogation of dominant groups' vocabulary brings together questions of language, identity and affinity with land that figure repeatedly in Sukirtharani's poetry.

Her Collection *Avalai Mozhipeyarthal* ("Translating Her," 2006) explores different ways of bonding with women. A substantial number of poems foreground ways of self-expression and affirm solidarity with other women. The poet does not claim to be a spokesperson for women but rather a translator who negotiates ways of disseminating, empathising, and carrying-forth feminine angst, and modes of resistance or offer a poetic equivalence to a gendered experience. Sita's trial by fire is re-viewed through the angst of a Sri Lankan refugee woman subjected to sexual assault in "Padhinangu Ambugal" ("Fourteen Arrows," 2006). The act of putting down the fire through the woman's blood and the fourteen arrows embedded in her vagina conveys how a woman's body is at once a site of oppression and resistance. If her body is sought to be contained through sexual violence, her protest, and interrogation of her oppressor is enshrined in that very body that offers evidence as well as documentation and resistance:

My vagina is unlocked to let the fourteen arrows emerge in the open

The mammoth fire is put down by them and a bowlful of accompanying
blood.

(Sukirtharani, *Avalai Mozhipeyarthal* 51 translation mine)

The poet becomes the other woman, as she turns an interlocutor, as she translates her, as she becomes her. The Tamil word for translation is *Mozhi Peyarthal*. *Mozhi* stands for language; *Peyarthal* suggests a negotiation, a movement away from the original site, an act that need not be always smooth but might involve violence. Sukirtharani uses the latter implication to interplay language and subjectivity, to negotiate the barrier of class,

region, nationality or history, as she becomes the other in the process of writing about another oppressed woman. It could be a Srilankan refugee woman, a manual scavenger, a mythical icon or a starving farm hand. A woman's body fluids, blood, milk, sweat are as integral to her writing as her tropes, images and subversions of literary conventions. Nudity in her poems signifies the blank, unwritten pages as much as it points to a woman's body violently attacked by casteist hatemongers. In poems that comment on the Kairalanji caste-violence, honour killings of those who marry outside their caste, Srilankan refugee women mourning the rape of their school-going daughters or the mutilation of their lactating breasts, Sukirtharani uses images of blood, nudity, unwritten pages, unpreserved records powerfully to co-relate writing through the body and the body writing the resistance discourse. In the poem "Avalai mozhipeyarthal" ("Translating Her," 2006), the poet is conscious of her privilege, located in her class and education but she relates to the marginalised street singer as she conveys her condition to the curious, uninitiated, elitist, almost voyeuristic group inquisitive about the singer's *parai* drum and swaying motions of her emaciated body. The poet's act of mediating on behalf of the less privileged majority of her community to the academicist elite, positions her as a translator who becomes the subject, collapsing the line between the art and its object of study. The process of negotiating a lived reality of another oppressed woman, is an act of communitarian and feminist solidarity, traversing caste and gender subjectivities:

...To those curious about her
The one who devours her hunger
Consumed by ever-hungry impoverishment
Untouched by breeze
Her dark abode amongst the oppressed
While translating her
I had become her.

(Sukirtharani, *Avalai Mozhipeyarthal* 34 translation mine)

"Kaimaaru" is yet another powerful poem that underscores the notion of female bonding in terms of caste-gender solidarity in an oppressive social rubric. In Tamil, the term *Kaimaaru* suggests an exchange, often a monetary borrowing that requires to be returned. However, it also evokes notions of obligation, gratitude and the act of paying

back in kind. The poem, translated as “Debt,” talks about the dehumanising occupation of manual scavenging, imposed upon Dalit communities by society as well as by the government (in particular, in the Indian Railways) as a job assigned to them, with no possibility of refusal. Despite a legal ban on such a practice since 1993, it has continued to trap Dalits to undertake manual scavenging and that too without access to safety gear. The poem depicts a Dalit woman at work as a manual scavenger, cleaning-up dry latrines at homes in minute detail. The authentic documentation of her work, done with her bare hands and an iron sheet to scrape off loads of human shit shocks and numbs the reader by its stark images and compilation of facts regarding such a worker’s quotidian routine. The ending of the poem in an epigrammatic, anti-climax that underscores a surreal response from the narrator and is a brilliant stroke of critique and resistance. The narrator laments that she could help the manual scavenger, possibly in no other way than refrain from defecating once each day. The unnatural mode of enforcing a community to be a carrier of human excreta of other communities could be countered, perhaps by an equally unnatural mode of human conduct. The poem posits that the only way to show solidarity with the woman manual scavenger or resist such a dehumanising practice, is to hold back one’s bowels, to lessen her load and of those who are forced to carry the “night soil’ on their heads. The Gandhian euphemism is countered by a graphic image of the scavenger’s burden and the focus of the poem marks a shift from the Dalit woman scavenger to the woman narrator/reader, underlining the gaps in social locations and forms of oppression within a group bound by gender and caste but rendered apart by class and related privilege.

Neither a legal ban nor technology has put an end to such a dehumanising, casteist practice. No other caste except the lowest amongst the caste hierarchy, like the Paraiyars and Arundhatiyars, are forced to work in this sector of scavenging. They are not provided with safety gear when they enter a manhole or a sewer to clean the muck. The manual scavenging workers are ill-treated, ostracised and are forced to use their bare hands and a porous basket to collect and carry human shit of other/upper castes.

The aesthetics of the poem operates within the political resistance discourse of Dalit movement. The act of offering a documented, descriptive, authentic lived experience of an oppressed woman is dramatically juxtaposed to the act of witnessing by another woman who offers a subversive alternative, impossible to adhere to, by any

human being. The poem cannot be read merely as an empathetic comment. The narrator does not reveal any social interaction with the scavenger woman but the deliberateness of details damn the onlooker and the reader. In the twenty first century, the age-old practice continues without respite: of carrying a basket covered with hides at the bottom, a blunted iron sheet to scrape the accumulated human excreta and a fistful of ash to pour over to solidify it a bit and walk across to the next home with the basket on her head while the yellow, putrid fluid streams down her face. If the reader squirms under the onslaught of repugnant details, the poem ticks her off with the stark reminder that she is the implicated one, for not putting an end to such a practice. The helplessness, anger and the subversive irony in the concluding lines highlight how the narrator cannot possibly ever return the debt, her obligation towards the woman scavenger. She cannot ever pay back in kind as she is located higher in the caste/class hierarchy. The only way of redeeming such a debt is to defecate one time less a day, to reduce her burden. The devastating irony cannot be missed just as the sense of helplessness and inadequacy of such a measure remain stark and real (Sukirtharani, *Avalai Mozhipearthal* 35). The dual life led by the poet-narrator, as a privileged, middle-class professional and the traumatic memory of her caste-rife village that remains unchanged recurs in Sukirtharani's poetry as a haunting leitmotif in "En Gramathin Oviyam" ("A Portrait of My Village," 2006). The interplay of empathy and helplessness of the narrator underscores the need for structural changes in a casteist society, an institutional over-haul which could be pointed out by the individual but can hardly be executed on one's own. It is this friction that endows her poetry with a poignant starkness and simmering anger. The dramatic twist at the ending of most of her poems are a pointer to such a chasm in our social matrix.

In her next Collection, *Teendappadadha Muththam* ("The Untouchable Kiss," 2010), Sukirtharani moves further away from personal and individuated narratives to the impersonal and collective experiences of the marginalised: the reality of hate-prompted assaults on women's bodies. The poems capture and critique the socially sanctioned modes of settling scores with Dalit women who speak up or refuse to comply with casteist strictures pertaining to their choices in love, their agency over their bodies or their political standpoint. She explicitly dedicates this Collection to the oppressed lives and those killed at Khairlanji and Mullivaikkaal. She, thus, fuses narratives of

oppression on women's bodies at the regional, national and international spaces. The killing of four Dalits at Khairlanji in Maharashtra and the ethnic cleansing of more than forty thousand Tamils at Mullivaikaal in Srilanka haunt the poet-narrator in poems like "Vidudalaiyin Padhagai" ("Freedom's Flag"), "Yadum Oore Yavarum Keleer" ("Every Town is A Hometown, All are Kinsfolk"), "Eduvum Michcham Illai" ("Nothing Remains"), "Teendappadadha Muththam" ("The Untouchable Kiss"). The mother and daughter who were paraded naked, raped and murdered at Khairlanji made Sukhirtharani shudder at the possibility of how every Dalit woman in India faced a similar intimidation and risk to her life and dignity. In this Collection she repeatedly refers to the nation as "blind," "deaf" (Sukirtharani, *Teendappadadha Muththam* 13) a nation on fire that chooses to remain "untouched" (Sukirtharani, *Teendappadadha Muththam* 27). The violence on the grounds of caste or ethnicity, invariably, gets imprinted on women's bodies: mutilated breasts, bamboo sticks shoved into vaginas, bound feet and chopped hands, dripping with blood, turning the land and the water bodies into a dark shade of red.

In her Collection, *Kamaththee Poo* ("Love's Blossom," 2012), women's suppressed desire and repressed sexuality is historicized, and their marginalisation from their rights over land, love, labour cuts across different periods of history. The poet's literary grandmother, Ovvai (a poet from the Sangam period) did not escape it but it was never understood by the male poets or the kingly patrons of her age or by her literary descendants. In "Ovvayin Kaamam," ("Ovvai's Desire," 2012) the two women poets traverse a dark forest, witnessing scenes of valour and racing chariots. The spinster, granddame Ovvai sings a hitherto unheard song suffused with desire and willing suppleness. As they emerge out of the forest, the younger poet finds her hand stuffed with a fruit that sears her palm with the older poet's desire. Forbidden desire cuts across the Garden of Eden in many of Sukirtharani's poems but it does so most savagely/brilliantly in "Ovvaiyin Kaamam." The Collection is dedicated to the Dalit woman writer Bama, who is no less celebrated than Ovvai in the contemporary age, targeted by blatant patriarchal forces in the context of reception of women's writings. In "Viraitthuk Kidakkum Udal," ("The Stiff-Still Body," 2012), the woman invites her partner for dinner and drinks. Her response to the man's outstretched body on the bed is invoked by a reference to "a camel with a well-stocked hump, encountering a flowing

stream with nonchalance.” But her impulse takes over her prudence. The sight of “his dark-haired chest” precipitates “rain-filled clouds” in her body and she executes “the dance of desire,” unaided, all by herself, upon him. She wakes up to notice his stiff, outstretched body on the bed, the next morning (Sukirtharani, *Kaamathippoo* 14). The assertive sexuality of a woman, her refusal to cloak her desire in a prescriptive, coy, chaste conduct emerges as a celebratory, liberating impulse. The sexual impulse is no longer a repressed, unexperienced one for the woman. The fact that subversions and resistances in a patriarchal society are possible through an affirmation of a woman’s bodily needs and desires is reflected in this Collection of poems.

A deeply disturbing poem in this Collection, is ironically titled, “Migamiga Sadharanamanavai” (“Very Ordinary Events”). This poem is a chilling account of the massacre of seven Dalit men killed in Melavalavu, near Madurai on 30 June, 1996 by a politically empowered caste. The resentment towards the electoral win of Murugesan, a Scheduled Caste candidate in a municipal election at Melavalavu, led to a gruesome murder of the victorious candidate and his six associates in a state transport bus. The poem recalls each one of them from the survivors’ testimony, interspersing multiple, recurring atrocities on Dalits who aspire to challenge political hegemony through electoral processes. The fusing of memories adds a grim, blistering anger at the inhuman, unjust practices of casteist privilege. The narrative centres on the testimony of a woman witness to journalists and the policemen about the killings. What gets recorded as statistics stays imprinted on the woman’s memory as acts of oppression executed, as though, on her family members. The poem plays upon the suggestion that the woman witness has experienced similar atrocities in her life/ upon her family and the bonding she shares with other victims of caste oppression or violence prompted by hate-politics. The notion of woman as the eternal witness, whose testimony never gets recorded in official documents and historical accounts is turned on its head to offer a stringent critique:

I encounter you
Enveloped by blossoms of bitter memories.
I am least interested to do this
You are noting down
My torn clothes and unshod, bare feet

But there are many other details yet unknown to you.
We lived under the tall Peepul tree
Enveloped by its widening shade.
That man in the photograph is my father
Beheaded in the riots, his eyes gouged out
We found him seven days later.
This is my mother
She entered a temple once
Hence, limps around on one leg.
That is my brother
His hands were tied up, shit stuffed into his mouth.
This is my sister
The palm forest witnessed
Her agonising assault.
You would have spotted me in the narrow alleys
Sweeping away the human excreta at the public toilets.
You are recording my account, affixing your signatures.
These are very ordinary events, indeed
Being stuffed with human shit, women getting raped
Yes, very, very ordinary events.
(Sukirtharani, *Kaamathippoo* 38 translation mine)

Different facets, recurring assaults permeate women's lives but a woman remains, in Sukirtharani's universe, "Ainthinai Penn naan": I am a woman who embodies the five *thinai*s (Sukirtharani, *Kaamathippoo* 43).

Her Collection, *Ippadiki Aevaal* ("Yours, Eve," 2016), focusses on mounting assaults on Dalits, the ever-widening gulf between the *cheri* and the *Oor*, more violent modes of assaults on women's bodies like acid attacks, insertion of sticks and weapons in their private parts, honour killings, and attacks on couples who marry outside their caste. The Dalit woman refuses to remain a passive witness to acts of oppression and declares that the dominant castes could think of no worse assaults than rapes, mutilations, burning down *cheris* or force Dalits to drink urine or eat human shit but she could retaliate with the unimaginable, unheard act of violence: "Kolaiyum seyvaal

Parachi” (“A Parachi could Murder as well,” 2016). The notion of counter violence as an act of resistance and self-assertion reflects the oppressed community’s refusal to take casteist violence as their destined lot. The agency of the Dalit woman extends to decision-making, affirming her standpoint on social strife and bracing up for a no-nonsense confrontation of sexist, casteist assertion of power. She would rather let her lover live than affirm her love and risk his killing at the hands of blood-thirsty, insane regulators of inter-caste relations in society in “Baliyidappatta Kaadhal” (“A Love Sacrificed,” 2016). The sole unanswered question over the centuries, troubles multiple generations: “Will Cheri ever become part of the Oor?” (Sukirtharani, *Ippadikku Aevaal* 20)

In “Mudugin Meloru Cheri” (“A cheri over my Back”), the narrator inhabits a middle-class, modern, social space. She enjoys the comforts of modern amenities, technological advancements but the moment she steps out of her home:

Like a dog on a tight leash

My Cheri ascends on my back.

(Sukirtharani, *Ippadikku Aevaal* 41 translation mine)

In “Veedu Tirumbudal” (“Returning Home”), the gulf between the two spaces—*Oor* and the *Cheri*—engulfs inter-personal relations, ideological affinities, and class, gender and caste identities. The two activists receive a thundering applause for their fiery speeches valorising the power of words and writing. However, once the two of them get off the podium, he enters the *Oor* and she moves towards her *Cheri* (Sukirtharani, *Ippadikku Aevaal* 65). The poems get more reflexive and brutally graphic in this volume. In the poem, “Oru Jodi Cheruppu” (“A Pair of Slippers”), the narrator assumes the persona of a cobbler attending to his customers, under a tree on the road side. He had inherited this space from his father. The hunger that devours him on a rainy day, in a deserted street, agitates him as if crushed by a python as he remains conscious but helpless and trapped. He declares that the tree be cut down and its shade be unavailable to his daughter, freeing her from the indignity of looking for a pair of torn slippers with bent eyes focussed on the feet of the passers-by. The cobbler overhears grandiloquent speeches on freedom, rights, social formation but his eyes never lift up to watch the faces of those who attend the leader’s rally. He desperately strains to spot a pair of torn slippers awaiting a stitch from his needle and string. That

is the only way he could tide over yet another day of starvation. The gap between the leaders' rhetoric on freedom from disparity and the ground reality of the stake holders is brought out starkly in this poem (Sukirtharani, *Ippadikku Aevaal* 61). In "En Kavidhai" ("My Poem"), the poet enumerates the subject matter of her poetry as the unceasing casteist assaults on her community, on indigenous tribes, on women's bodies, the sweat of labouring children, on the indignity of being force-fed with human excreta as a punishment by intermediate castes (Sukirtharani, *Ippadikku Aevaal* 55).

Sukirtharani's mother was a Christian while her father was a Hindu. The practices of caste structure continue to impinge upon people from lower castes who had converted to Christianity or Islam in Tamil Nadu, despite the notion of caste being alien to non-Hindu religions. Bama's writings, for instance, foreground the plight of Christian Dalits. Sukirtharani's poetry highlights the all-encompassing structures of violence against the marginalised in rural, urban pockets. She deploys, re-reads Christian myths, imagery and underlines the difference between a patriarchal Adam and the transparent nudity/accessibility of Christ, the second Adam. The image of serpent recurs in all her Collections as a leitmotif to indicate insidious, venomous acts of caste-gender driven assaults on women's bodies. In an interesting twist, she attributes the sexual energy of the serpent, not with Eve projected as its ally in the Bible but rather as a projection of male pride in his virility. The snake's split tongue reminds the poet of man's sperm-churning penis that celebrates its venom/masculinity in the poem "Ippadikku Aeval" (Sukirtharani, *Ippadikku Aevaal* 43). Christ's love is contrasted with Adam's lust, the bane of today's eves in "Paazhaipona Aadam" ("The Wretched Adam," 48).

In re-configuring a new poetic language to explore body-politics, sexuality and caste identity, Sukirtharani's poetry foregrounds the intersectionality of gender, caste, class positions with the notion of writing, of self-articulation and the empowering possibility of speaking on behalf of one's community as well as against oppression of all marginalised peoples. Her gender and caste identity allows her to posit violence against marginalised peoples as a violation of human dignity, of livelihood, of the right to love and live in harmony with one another. A reading of Sukirtharani's poetry alerts us to the hegemonic structures of oppression in our contemporary society and possibilities of resistance through writing.

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