

The Quest for Identity in the Selected Poems of Sukritarani

Karthika. S. B.
Research Scholar
Dept. of English
St. Thomas College, Palai

Abstract

This paper traces the notion 'quest for identity' in Tamil poetess Sukritarani's selected poems and the selected poems are *Untitled Poem, I Speak up bluntly, Pariah God* and *Infant Language*. Being a dalit and female, Sukritarani faces many adverse situations in life and her poetry strongly reflects it. Each lines show the vigour and vitality of themes which taken from her own life experiences. Her life gives courage for fighting against the prevailed caste system and oppressive social norms. Sukritarani and her companions, Malathi Maithri, Salma and Kutti Revathi make their poems as a powerful weapon for challenging the age old bureaucratic customs and marginalizing principles. These social activists try to create a voice for their own race and open the discussions for the necessity of formulating a language of their own.

Keywords

Dalit, Female, Sukritarani, Identity, Bad Girls, New language

Sukritarani's poems are considered as the manifestation of Matthew Arnold's notion "poetry is the criticism of life". Her poems are the critical outburst of her life as well as society. Sukritarani is a much acclaimed Dalit poet in Tamil. She was born in 1973 in Lalapet, a village near Ranipet, in Vellore district. Hers was one of the twenty families who lived in the Cheri, the streets where dalits lived were known in Tamil Nadu and many dalit people lost their life in these cheris. In the introduction to *Wild Girls Wicked Words*, Lakshmi Holmstromm writes about her communities' occupation in which they were "to take away the carcasses of the dead animals belonging to the upper class people, and to bury and burn them. For this, they were paid in grain" (24). Her father studied only up to class three and he worked as a labourer in EID Parry Company in Ranipet. Marriage of her parents is an inter-caste one. His father was a Hindu, mother, a Christian and her family follows Christian doctrines. They have six children and Sukritarani is fifth. In her unpublished article *Naanum en ezuthum (My Writing and I)*, she writes "of growing up as a tomboy, wandering about with the boys, riding a cycle, climbing

trees, roaming through the mountains and forests, swimming in the tank until my eyes were read”.

She recalls her childhood memories for a canvas in which she can delineate her poetic imageries. As a girl when she reached puberty, she lost all the freedoms she had. When she joined in the school, she became aware of the caste distinctions which haunt her everywhere. She had insisted on removing the Christian middle name she was given which is the only note that reveal her caste straightly. She wants to be addressed as Sukritarani, but others knew her caste. So she always pushed back to the back benches and often sat alone. It was too difficult to tolerate these humiliations. Though she had not enough notebooks and learning materials, she learnt well and included in the school toppers’ list. Later in her eighth std. she was drawn towards Tamil literature inspired by a teacher. Then many questions related to gender equality were tormented her many years and after she had finished her studies, she was able to find out the answers. But she cannot get a perfect platform to speak out her answers in poetic form. Then she widens her reading and it helps to clarify the remaining doubts in her mind.

She is now a famous feminist, social activist and bold writer and one of the ‘bad girls’ in Tamil. The female feminists, including Sukritarani, Malathi Maithri, Salma and Kutti Revathi are perceived as ‘bad girls’ in Tamil public. They are called so because they broke the chains of age old customs and norms prevailed around them and the society saw it as their undisciplined behavior. They are charged with obscenity and immodesty. If they are considered as bad, there may be the so called good writers too. The expecting qualities of good writers in Tamil are fearfulness, propriety and modesty. The new generation Tamil ‘bad girls’ have immense power to unfold the uncivilized, prescribed rules of society.. The titles of their common anthologies are *Wild Girls Wicked Words* and *Wild Words Four Tamil Poets* and these works explore their role as dalit female writers. They are featured in the well-received documentary film *She write*. They are often judged by their pursual of themes, their poems even named as ‘body poetry’. The quality of their poems and the simple but powerful language, imageries, all are usually unnoticed by the literary circle. Their poetry tries to trace how the female body tolerates the male gaze the earlier times and they analyze a solution to break the shackles. Like others Sukritarani also tried to liberate herself.

Sukritarani holds an MA , BEd and MPhil in Tamil and currently pursuing an MA in English. Now she is working as a Tamil teacher in the Govt. Girls Higher Secondary School, Tamil Nadu. When the conflict between Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka took place, she arranged a writer’s protest especially poets against the violence, in 2009 and it got critical attention. Her reputation as a poetess rests on the poetry collections such as *Kaippatri Yen Kanavu Kel*, *Iravu Mirugam*, *Kaamatthipoo*, *Theendapadaatha Muttham*, *Avalai Mozhipeyarthal* and *Ippadikku Yeval*. The well-known short film *Kannadi Meen* is the adaptation of her poem *Appavin*

Nyabagamradhi. She is honoured by Thevamagal Kavithoovi award, The Puthumaipitthan Memorial Award and the Women's Achiever Award by the Pengal Munnani(Women's Front). Her dalit dimensional poetry was selected by the syllabus committee for both college students and schools and her poems are available in different languages such as English, Malayalam, Kannada, Hindi and German. In Germany, she is best known for her participation in the project *Poets translating Poets- Versschmuggel mit Sudasien*. She also participated in a reading tour through Germany and read among others, at the Haus fur Poesie in Berlin and at the Harbourfront Festival in Hamburg. Mainly the translation of her poems took place during a workshop in Chennai and Thriuvananthapuram in 2015.

Sukritarani's poems are really an attempt to weave new wings to her shattered dreams . She had a wide reading of Kamala Das's poems, Taslima Nazrin's novels like *Lajja* and Rabindranath Tagore's *Chandalika* and *Laboratory*. Tagore's one act play *Chandalika* narrates the spiritual rejuvenation of a chandalini, dalit girl Prakriti under the influence of a Buddhist monk Ananda. Her meeting with Ananda is considered as a new birth by her and she realized that "A religion that insults is a false religion". Tagore's words may enlighten our new brave poetess Sukritarani. With her reading experiences, she understands that the long prevailed notion which sees a woman's body is the property of man. She expresses her view in *My Writing and I*, "I realized that it was my first duty to redeem it. So my poetry began to put forward a politics of the body"(2). In her poems, she makes a voyage to create an identity of her being as a dalit and female too. History says that to live in a society, it is difficult to be a dalit, and it is more difficult to be a dalit woman.

Her poems *Untitled Poem, I Speak up bluntly, Pariah God* and *Infant Language* are the shining monuments of her 'self'. Through her poems, she always expects to give voice to the dalit women and their lives heard across ages and countries. Her poems are radical, polished and intellectual. Through her poems, she makes a new voyage from humiliation and shame to an assertion of pride in herself- the dalit woman identity. Her poem *Untitled Poem* is a very meaningful short poem. Its title itself is quite worthy of consideration. The poem is somewhat like a haiku in Japanese verse, haiku has three lines, the poem *Untitled Poem* has seven lines. The lyrical beauty and rhythmic nature of the poem is noteworthy. On the surface level the poem seems to be a love poem, sonnet, but it has deep meanings more than that. It narrates in the first person and the poetess addresses a person who may be her fiancé.

"With handful of poems

I come to you"

She approached her lover with a handful of poems. The word 'poems' may be used as a symbol for her wishes/life/love. She faced the expression 'don't' more frequently than her brothers. It is

evident that her wishes and likes got negative response very often and through this poem she expresses the loss of her lovable moments. She hopefully approaches him because she believed that he is capable for fulfilling her dreams. He can be considered as the personification of hope itself. She says,

“You wait for me
With countless kisses” .

The concept of waiting seems a little ambiguous. It reflects her optimistic thoughts. Kisses that stimulate love and which is referred as countless here. So she believes that one day all her broken dreams would become colorful by the touch of love. She firmly believes that several poems inherent in a kiss. But in a poem, she notices that several kisses slip away from them. These lines resonate the idea that when they are reaching their dreams, several obstacles come to their path. Those hindrances may be social norms, religious creeds, economic conditions etc. So their dreams and they too are untitled again by the power holders. They had a sadistic pleasure in seeing them as title-less people forever. She places a hand full of thoughts within a short poem like *Untitled Poem*.

Her poem *Pariah God* puts forth intense emotional reactions against the social norms. The title *Pariah God* manifests the conscious attempts of marginalization of even God by the so called high class people. The poem written in the form of complaints and addressed ‘you’ in the lines. Society as well as the upper class people is referred as you. The poems *Untitled Poem* and *Pariah God* were translated from Tamil to English by Meena Kandaswamy. The poem has eighteen lines and the phrase ‘you say’ is repeating always. That signifies the verb ‘say, speak’ are the privilege of the upper class, they only possess the voice to express their views. It is a thought provoking poem and obviously it traces the Dalit Identity. The upper classes’ voice always rebukes the deeds of the low class people. They try to marginalize sun, crow, dog etc. The Sun is always considered as Aryan God by the high class but that sun’s heat sears them, they call it as Pariah sun. A beak that steals the grains, they are damn sure that that beak belongs to pariah crow, a mouth snatches food along with their wrist, they named it as a pariah dog. The sweat sewing jobs like tilling of lands, are addressed as pariah labour. The verbs stealing, snatching, labour all these attributed to the oppressed people. The naming process pursued by the oppressors are resisted by one piercing question in the concluding lines:

“If this is how everything is named
What is the name of that pariah god
Who walks the earth blood-thirsty?

God, in upper class's opinion, 'pariah god', became too angry because they are tired of seeing the tears and pleadings shed by the Dalit people.

Sukritarani's poem *I Speak up bluntly* explores her Dalit identity and the nineteen lines poem depicts her journey from a cheri girl to a bold girl. It is written in the first person and its autobiographical tone adds realistic flavor to the poem. The beginning lines reveal her caste's occupation:

“ I shooed away crows

While flaying dead cows of their skin”

that their main job is to take away the dead animals of upper class households and bury them for payment in rice. She recalls that she stood for hours waiting to eat the town's waste. But she boasted in front of her friends that she ate hot, freshly cooked rice, though these dishes are never suit even to her dreams. When she sees her father in market, she avoids him and didn't look at him. Because the leather drum slung from his neck, reveals his job; she doesn't let anyone to know about his job and income. She always tries to hide her caste and relatives' occupations. By hiding these, she believes that she can escape from society's humiliation. But everyone including her teachers hit her mercilessly. Nobody is ready to make friendship with her and she sat alone in classroom and her allotted place is only back bench. This highlights the notion that in a social institution also there is a tendency to push back them voluntarily. The power holders try to maintain the backwardness in the powerless people. She explains that no one around her never knew the tears coming out of her due to the humiliations and later she liberates herself through her letters/poems. In the concluding lines, she proclaims that

“But now

If anyone asks me

I speak up bluntly:

I am a Paraichi”.

She now gained the identity, she traced through her poems and she feels proud to pronounce her caste loudly. One of the songs of Poikayil Appachan, concludes with the following lines and it explores the nature of defending the Dalit Identity:

“I am not ashamed

Of the frailties of our caste”.

The lines show the rejuvenated self of Dalits and they are now able to raise their voice against the atrocities that haunt them for many years. They are in need of a language in which the upper caste doesn't have any claim. Sukritarani too craves for a new language in her poem *Infant Language*. She speaks,

“ I need a language

Still afloat in the womb

Which no one has spoken so far”.

She hopes that in their new language, there will be thousand words which never stab anyone as they pass by, it should be open and honourable. Being the part of a unique language, she expects the words' meanings as wide as the skies. She is sure that this new, infant language became their pride. She questions the hypocrisy that prevailed in the caste practices by inscribing her identity. Her friend Malathi Maithri too speaks about a language which is capable of capturing the tormenting experiences of women through her poem *Demon Language* . She tries to formulate a new idiom of feminine identity through her poems:

“Demon language is poetry..

Poetry's features are all saint

Become woman

Become poet

Become demon”

Another poem by Arun Kamble, *Which Language Should I Speak*, which can be added to the reading of a poem highlighting the necessity of a language for dalits. He narrates in his poem:

“Picking through the Vedas

His tip-knot well-oiled with ghee,

My Brahmin teacher tells me,

You idiot, use the language correctly “

He concludes the poem with the ever vibrating lines that has thundering effect in all dalits:

“Now I ask you

Which language should I speak?"

Under the spins of caste, colour, language, Dalits often suffers much. Sukritarani and her contemporary writers make an effort to liberate themselves from social evils and male chauvinism. The themes of resistance against oppression and atrocities are the powerful draperies of dalit poetry. Undoubtedly Sukritarani's poems are encapsulated by the dalit's enlightenment to suppress their servile attitude. Her poems can turn out to be an eye opener to society. Seemingly simple poems, her poems get complex as we brood over it as a philosophical reflection on the history of the history-less people. Her poems have a universal appeal as it gives some messages not only to the Tamil society but also to the whole world. Sukritarani's verses can be hailed as the poetics of the dalit politics.

Works Cited

- Dangle, Arjun. (ed). *No Entry for the New Sun : Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Poetry*. Disha Books, 1992.
- Holmstrom, Lakshmi. (Ed.): *Wild Words Four Tamil Poets*, Harper Perennial, London 2015 .
- K. Satyanarayana & Susie Tharu (eds) *The Exercise of Freedom : An Introduction to Dalit Writing*, New Delhi : Narayana Pvt Ltd, 2013
- V. V. Swamy & E. V. Anil (Ed), Sekher, Ajay. (Tr). *Unknown Subjects: Songs of Poykayil Appachan*. Kottayam: IPRDSS, 2008.