



Beyond Words: Contemporary Women poets from Tamil Nadu

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Tamil women poets have been prolific writers and have emerged as the articulation of an Indian voice. They have assimilated the Tamil poetic tradition. But they have also met with stiff opposition for the social space has always excluded women from any form of sexual dialogue. Another reason was that Tamil women's poetry was totally opposed to the powerful and dominant voice of Tamil nationalism. Kutti Revathi has an interesting quote “ Just as the body belongs to man, so do the words that denote the parts thereof... So, too, is the exclusion of women from poetry ¹And where her entry is permitted, such permission is granted only on condition that her poetry must subject itself to self-censorship.

Contemporary women poets are important for the politics they foster and extend to the poetic tradition, and are engaged actively in ideological debate. Poetry needs introspection and what makes these poets different is the way that they render in poetic language, the politics enforced on the female body by the repressive structures of either caste or sexual ideology. It is interesting to see that these poets attempt to express the oppression on the ‘body’ through institutions, be it caste or religion. They politicize body parts. For doing this, they have been hounded and the opposition has been immense by the Tamil nationalists, the media and the cultural police. For instance Kutti Revathi's second book of poetry *Mulaigal* (Breasts) published in 2002 faced the ire of the conservatives of the Tamil literary establishments. Film lyricists were outraged. She faced obscene calls and was threatened and the final straw was a hit on her morality. To this she explained “My aim is to explore Mulaigal as an ‘inhabited’, living reality, rather than an ‘exhibited’ commodity.”² She speaks about how narratives have been imprinted on their bodies and therefore women write because they are “... mines the boarded-up space that is her body for words and offers them to the world. As a

¹ <https://pt.scribd.com/.../Tamil-Women-s-Poetry-A-Current-of-Contemporary-Voices> Tamil Women's Poetry: A Current of Contemporary Voices p.30

² En.m. wikipedia.org accessed 12.20 pm 26.7.2017



means of protesting the silence into which it has been coerced, the female body keeps imprinting on itself all the seasonal changes being wrought continuously by Nature.³

There are two strands of thought explored here within the private and the public space: Writing and Sexuality. This is traced through four contemporary women writers from Tamil Nadu. The poets are Kutti Revathi⁴, Salma⁵, Kutti Revathi and Sukirtharani. Their first collection of poetry was published between 2000 and 2002.

Sexuality imprisons but so does the domestic space. Traditionally it is a space for women, quiet and private...too quiet that you have to strain to hear the voices within. The voices lie deep within the recesses of the human mind. You can smother speech, not words for they rise within as serpentine hiss, poisoned and potent. You need to decipher the language of the hiss, the poison to hear. You have to stay still, learn gestures again. These two spaces, the domestic/private and the public collide.

There are two strands of thoughts streaming here: writing and women. Both have always had a disturbing relationship: disturbing to the society, maybe because it touched a sensitive chord in the psyche. Denied education once upon a time, even now in certain sections of certain communities, women have had no access to the written word. When they were eventually given access to education, it did not take them long to utter what went on in the deepest recesses of their minds and this certainly was not acceptable. Beginning from Freud's *What do women really want?* and perhaps much earlier than that, women's writing has had to go through difficult times. Virginia Woolf, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Lalithambika Antaranjanam to name just a few, have tried to show the effects of not being allowed to write and when they eventually did, what they went through. Things have

³ http://www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/cou_article/item/6286/Weaving-the-Body-with-Words

⁴ Dr. S. Revathi (pen name: Kutti Revathi) Indian lyricist, poet, activist and doctor. She is the editor of Panikkudam, a Tamil feminist magazine. She has published three books of poetry

⁵ Rajathi Salma, poet/novelist from Tamil nadu. Her debut novel is *Hours Past Midnight* in 2004



changed a lot since then. Women have written to win accolades and admiration but certain areas still are a taboo: sexuality, most certainly.

What is confusing and difficult to understand is why does the society sit up and take notice when a woman speaks body? Since centuries she has always been identified as the body and much less as a mind. But when she attempts to speak her own body, she is labeled as obscene. There are numerous women writers who have been labeled as such: Kamala Das, Mridula Garg, Tehmima Durrani etc.

The focus of the writers in this collection is on language and there is always a connection between language and sexuality for women. Both are denied to women, for through language she attains her subject hood and voicing her sexuality gives her identity. This is a threat to patriarchy. As long as Patriarchy is vested with the sole right of speaking about women's sexuality, she as such is acceptable but within boundaries. But when the object becomes the subject of her own sexuality, she is termed obscene and uncontrollable. "Women's minds and bodies are suppressed, and that leads to violence because they under total control. You are not allowed to open your mind."⁶ (Interview with Salma on Metroplus Sunday Magazine , The Hindu)

Feminists see the opposition between mind and body as an opposition between the male and female. The female is drowned in her bodily existence which seemingly makes attainment of rationality questionable. "Women are somehow more biological, more corporeal, and more natural than men" (Grosz 14). "Feminist theorists of the body, working with the notion of the bodily imaginary, see creative acts directed at alterations in our mode of perceiving bodies, as central to the process of political and social transformation."⁷

⁶ Rawther Soyesh H *Salma beyond words* The Hindu January 06,2010 18.32 IST Updated January 07 2010. 17.54 IST TheHindu.com Accessed 20.07.2017 12 pm

⁷ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy Lennon, Kathleen, "Feminist Perspectives on the Body", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2010 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2010/entries/feminist-body/>>.



Why does a woman venture to speak out about her body, her sexuality and risk her modesty to the public? There is a need to change perceptions about the lived in experience of the body. The body image is one which gives identity. But this body image is not acquired naturally. The body as a whole and as a part is a symbol, partly visible and partly invisible. The different perceptions by women of their own bodies, either through the conditioned eyes/senses or through the transformed image is essential to bring in a change in the way one views a woman. It is only through speaking the body that a woman brings in change. This can be termed a protest and she speaks it in a language which is hers, something that communicates to herself and not to others. It could also be the need to see herself as she does and not as others do. And she does it in a language that she is comfortable with. She does not objectify a language, she subjectifies it and therefore privileges herself as an entity who exists. She feels the need to speak, write and more so feel in the language. She has to hear what she speaks but unfortunately the language of man does nothing for a woman. She feels an alien caught in the straight grammar of a tongue which is not hers. She strives to change the way things are understood. Obscenity is the result: to man, because he has never understood the way she has understood language. They cast off words as clothes and are termed immodest. They grip the words to twist and turn them until a new meaning emerges. Images rain down in the most strange ways...

Endearments become rain
childish prattle become birds
gibberish becomes grass
deference becomes a river
tenderness becomes a dewfall
humility becomes a moat
requests become curses
entreaty becomes a grave
dreams become cruel gods
desires become demons
silence becomes love
the language of God becomes the night
the language of Satan becomes the day
changing from one to the other



in our dictionary
as if a glass of wine ripples
becoming the wide sea.

(Malathi Maithri *Language Change*)

or

The demon's features are all
woman
woman's features are all
demon

Demon language
is poetry

Poetry's features are all
saint
become woman
become poet
become demon

Demon language
is liberty Malathi Maithri (Demon language)

Or listen to Sukirtharani who says

I need a language
still afloat in the womb
which no one has spoken so far,
which is not conveyed through signs and gestures.
It will be open and honourable
not hiding in my torn underclothes.
It will contain a thousand words



which won't stab you in the back
as you pass by.

....

The keys of that unique language
will put an end to sorrow,
make way for special pride.
You will read there my alphabet, and feel afraid.
You will plead with me in words
that are bitter, sour and putrid
to go back to my shards of darkened glass.

And I shall write about that too, bluntly
in an infant language, sticky with blood.

(Infant language)

Sukirtharani's⁸ first collection of poems *Kaippaatari En Kanavu Kel* (Hold Me and Hear My Dreams) branded her with other poets as obscene. This did not deter her. She "...realized then a woman's body had become the property of man. (She) ...realized that it was (her) first duty to redeem it. So (her) poetry began to put forward a politics of the body" (Wild Girls 26) "...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 her sexual self." (Wild Girls 27) Her poem *My Body* (*Ennudal*) "...charts (the body) as an exotic landscape with richly imagined geographical features.

Through a mountain where small shrubs abounds
flows a river.

...branches of trees

...

The fruits, tasting richly of ginger,
break open their fine skins
and put forth their seeds.
Water spills from the hollows

⁸ A woman dalit poet



..... and cascades from the edge of cliffs.

A tiger replete from its kill,
wets its blood-smearred mouth.

....

.... scarlet ash scatters
from a volcano's gaping mouth.

A vortex....

agitates the earth.

....Nature becomes
my body, lying still.

(Wild girls 205)

Braving the risk of being labeled essentialist, I read body into language. And language transforms body into meanings closely associated with the self. If this seems familiar and attempted by women in the west, let us remember that here the attempt is unique.

Malathi Maithri is a poet and an activist. "She writes of trying to find a language to write about this broken world and can only find a *pey mozhi*, a demon language. She mentions the many 'mad women' who inhabit her most recent poetry, 'who take me to the edge of emptiness, and make me stand there, as they look at me and weep'. (Wild Words 18)

Each poet uses language to voice her most intimate understanding of her body. Malathi Maithri in one of her poems uses very strong imagery

The stretch-marks on her mother's stomach
are like the wind's marking on a sandy beach.

Stroking the fine hair on her upper belly,
stamped with the foot-prints of a baby crab,

she asks:

Amma,



How did you give birth and survive?

....

....

In her dream she becomes
snow-storm and raging wave,
joyous stream and feasting forest,
and great exploding volcano.

(Bhumadevi)

The imagery is powerful: snow-storm, raging wave, joyous stream, feasting forest and exploding volcano. Childbirth is all of these and more. If one can feel, one understands.

Birth and nature are close to each other, they resemble. Woman is nature. Woman is eternal. She is everywhere and finds herself in every experience. This might sound essentialist, but for these women this is the truth of experience.

They have dared to speak body and display experiences which have been closeted so long. The poem *Cast Away Blood* brings in a chill.

The full moon, on a rainy night,
clings precariously to the flagpole
The parrot pecks at the light
shed by the moon's nose-ring, evades
Minakshi's outstretched hands
and flies away.

Minakshi follows

.....

...

Her feet shudder, her body thrills
She wipes with her underskirt
the warm blood seeping
against her thighs
and runs.



Through the corridor encircling
the inner shrine, along
the thousand-pillared mandapam
the parrot flies,
to the temple's Golden Lotus Tank,
and settles on the moon
afloat there.

She slips off her underskirt
and rinses it in the tank's water:
then – an old memory reviving –
spreads out her sari pallu
to catch the fish which gather
around her feet and nibble at her hands,
smelling blood.
Surprised to see
the moon in the tank reddening
slowly, slowly.

(Malathi Maithri)

She defies tradition and dares patriarchy which has silenced women for so long.
On one platform she brings in temple and blood.
Salma , who was imprisoned for twenty years with which I began this write up,
writes in *The Contract* which is about the contract of marriage

...

Everyday, in the bedroom
these are the first words to greet me:
'So, what is it, today?'
Often
they are
the last words, too

From a thousand shimmering stars



pointing fingers accuse me of whoredom
- once again –

You too
may have your complaints

but Time and History
make very clear
where I now stand:

To receive a little love
-however tarnished –
from you

To fulfil my responsibility
as your child's mother

To buy from the outside world
my sanitary napkins and contraceptives
and for many other little favours.

to hold a little authority over you
if possible

.....

In full knowledge of all this
my vagina opens.

Women need to speak and to utter what goes in the deepest recesses of their sleeping mind. The affairs of the world do not find a way into their poetry for it was never a part of their psyche. They live in body realities...and the poem portrays this. As an instance again of their intimate fears and pains *My ancestral home* opens for us another agonizing pain. Ironically, the poem is not about the



ancestral home as such, but about her ancestral home, her own body being dismembered.

At the appointed moment

the surgeons with great care
remove from her body
her womb –

....

It overhands the silent rim
of a vessel filled with water
like a thick piece of liver,
in mystery laid bare.

I see the piece of flesh
where my life once lurked.
My wish to protest
spurts...
then turns into sorrow.

What does it matter
how many times she bore a life?
That vital organ
must have seemed to her
just a curse...

She spoke in a fearless voice

‘Now I’m only half a woman.’

Woman has always been seen as the womb without which she is only half woman. When the time comes for her womb to be dismembered, she is conditioned to say that she is only “half a woman”. Woman, womb, child, mother ... the identity is such. Yet in Salma there is no fear for being only “half a woman”. For her it is a “betrayal of loss” but she braves it because she feels that



Perhaps its soul, turned into husk
after long and continuous hunting
may rest in peace...

Kutti Revathi's poem *Breasts* is another step in this direction

Breasts
are bubbles, rising from marshlands

As they gently swelled and blossomed
at due season, at Time's edge
I watched over them in amazement.

Never speaking to anyone else
they are with me always
singing
of quiet sorrow
of love
of ecstasy.

....

....

At times of penance
they struggle and strain;
and at the thrust and pull of lust
like the proud ascent of music
they stand erect.

From the press of an embrace
they distill love; from the shock
of childbirth
milk, flowing from blood

.....

(Wild words 159)

Kutti Revathi was born in Thiruverambur, Malaikoyil. Born in extreme poverty, she later grows up with turned fortunes and her father's encouragement and affection. In an interview to C.S.Lakshmi, she says that she owes her independent spirit to her father.⁹ College education brought in the awareness of caste sectarianism. Her first collection of poetry came out in 2001 called *Puunaiyaipol Alaiyum Veliccham (Light prowls like a cat)* and she's had many collections since then.¹⁰

Kutti Revathi distinguishes between early feminist writers in Tamil Nadu who came from privileged backgrounds and the poets of her own generation who have a different reality to portray. They are from the subaltern groups and do not talk about women as a single category. What is refreshing is the way that she speaks about the body. The poem *Breasts* tears away the conditioned mindset. For her 'childbirth' is a 'shock' and the 'milk' that flows is from this shock. For centuries of conditioning of the woman's mind about her role and about her body, Revathi deconditions the mind. Childbirth is always a shock and woman's body reacts to it as one reacts to stress and shock: with tears. Milk is woman's body reaction to the shock of her body being split open, for life to continue. Motherhood is privileged, and her body has to tear, not many talk about her pain

Women have to write their body because it is through an exploration of their bodies that they traverse continents and ideologies. They search their bodies and the emotions associated with it to investigate whether it is true at all. For Revathi, breasts are not a thing of shame, there is pride in the description and childbirth is a shock. It is through their bodies that they can challenge the pre conditioned mindset of both patriarchy and women who are conditioned to these patriarchal constructs. Theirs is a journey of discovery. To discover themselves they have to 'arrive at an unknown place somewhere.' and 'open eyes of hunger' to

gaze outward,
clutching the rim of the boat.
... see

⁹Wild girls wicked words

¹⁰ A list of her collection of poetry can be found in Wild girls wicked words 22.



a shining apple, shedding
a pale red light.
.. pluck it and bite deep,
continuing ... journey.
After this
... never return again
to ... own dark lands.

(She who ate the apple)

Freedom, the unknown, hunger, apple are Biblical patriarchal concepts. She 'pluck's to 'bite deep' never to return to 'dark lands'. The apple shines, there is no concept of sin, for there is no sin here. The boat lures up a picture of a woman afloat. A red apple (the color red symbolizing passion) appears out of nowhere, though pale, she bites into it and continues her journey of life with a determination not to return to her "own dark lands".

The woman writer of the subcontinent is ready to traverse lands, cross boundaries, scale heights: all through her own body.

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