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## UNIT 4 SUKIRTHARANI

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### 4.0 OBJECTIVES

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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.

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### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

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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.

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### 4.2 DALIT WRITING IN TAMIL NADU: THE BEGINNINGS

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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.

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### 4.3 DALIT WOMEN’S WRITING FROM TAMIL NADU

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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.

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#### 4.4 SUKIRTHARANI'S POETRY

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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.

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## 4.5 LET US SUM UP

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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.

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## 4.6 GLOSSARY

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

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## 4.7 QUESTIONS

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- 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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