

**WHEN WOMEN GO WILD****ANUJ KUSHWAHA**

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper reveals and makes manifest through the experiences of women poets of Tamil literature, the atrocities of self proclaimed ‘Guardians of Society’<sup>1</sup> in modern times. These guardians have assumed their duties of making the things falling in particular realm; physical as well as mental, where women have no space of their own. Though the situation of women is now quite apparent, what makes it more difficult for them to organize themselves is the fact that they are fighting against faceless monster. This faceless monster, the ‘patriarchal’ society, always creates confusion because it always saves its own masculine ideologies through the neutrality of society in general.*

*In other words, patriarchal society has to be fought against through diversified experiences of women poets because their sense of being a woman differs from each other as differs their situations of confrontations. These experiences can better be understood through the experiences of Tamil women poets like Malathi Maithri, Sukirtharani and Salma. They restrict the patriarchal dominance in the literary realm and through it hope of something constructive in the society. In this process, they are trying not only to question the so-called-guardians’ authority but also trying to suggest new ways of limiting these patriarchal voices. This time they are suggesting some wild ways through wicked words and hence title, ‘When Women Go Wild’.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Non-essentialised, Tamil literature, Tamil women poets, Persistent alteration, Zizek, Primal Baptism*

**INTRODUCTION**

Feminism is one of the strongest ideological fights for rights active today. Starting from Europe, feminism was based on egalitarian aspect, a quest to be like men but slowly it started feeling that

it can only get deceived by doing so. Children are important aspect of life be it male or female and motherhood needed to be transformed accordingly. Right to vote came with suffragette movement but subjugation was persistent. From household to office it was a well managed cobweb of patriarchy, a kind of matrix of which it was impossible to come out of. With the passage of time feminist realized that problematic of feminism is not simply political but is pervaded throughout: economic, social and cultural. Gayle Rubin in 'Thinking Sex' (1) explains how sex and sexual become troublesome and menacing in a conservative society. Society's inherent attitude which seemed common sense reaction were actually build up and so the reaction against say masturbation, gay sex, perversion, sodomy, prostitution, etc were infused in the masses through political implementation. As the time elapsed more theoretical explanations poured in and ultimately feminism stood on the verge of vulnerability. It essentialised the experience of women. Feminism and international feminism then became the well established abode of European and American affairs. Third world women were simply stereotyped and remained in the background. They were still colonized but this time colonization was intellectual. International feminist fought for third world women depriving them of their own say or voice and yet appropriated their own grand project. Chandra Talpade Mohanty heavily criticized this international frame of feminism which always talks from its own vantage point like homogenizing the experience of Arab and Muslim women (2). In this way solution found never really helped these women. In India too women were essentialised in the same way. For example experience of an anglicized women and experience of a native non anglicized women would be way too different as far as feminism is concerned but usually the former's account is taken into consideration and this problematizes the scenario (3). Keeping in mind such points, there is an effort been made in this respect by analyzing the experience of Tamil feminism through their poetry which at times is autobiographical.

## STUDY

With the advent of modern tamil literature, strong urge was felt for the restoration of lost tamil culture under the influence of colonial empire. Inevitably, the problematics of resolving the women's issue and education too emerged along with the national issue of freedom struggle. The outcome of these problems somehow, to summarize, was a synthesis of ancient and modern perspectives. So when the reformers like Vidanayagam Pillai and Thiru Vi Ka and others started advocating for women's education one factor remained constant as ever: chastity. In this regard, C.S. Lakshmi writes: "the one and only code that governed the life the lives of tamil women was embodied in *karpu*, the concept of chastity."(4) And again regarding the education of women commenting on Pillai's endeavour, she exerts: "Pillai *allayed* fears that educated women would disobey their husbands by saying that a bird however high it flew was confined to the sky, so also a woman to a man."(5) This had been the inherent attitude of Tamil society towards women since ancient times. Through these propagandist comments, they checked and controlled the private and public life of women. They were stereo-typed as mothers and wife. Therefore,

women need to be educated but only to be efficient “companion, mistress” of the husband so that man, who is acquiring the modern education and view, is adequately assisted by wife. In this sense, their identity relied on and was reflected only through father-figures.

In Purananuru, a poetic work belonging to Sangam period, a poem exhibits a mother’s duties: “To bring forth and rear a son is my duty, to make him noble is the father’s” (6)

and yet again in another poem:

Her delight  
when she heard  
that her son fell in battle  
felling an elephant  
was greater,  
than at his birth” (7)

The notion of motherhood in this way was essentialized within the child rearing. This means she had no direct accessibility to the nation. These are some of the problems which have succeeded in retaining their consistency since ancient times. In order to validate and make these aspects (like valor, nation, etc) innate, the mother-metaphors were used. C.S. Lakshmi explicates, “Tamil mother became the central element of purity of progeny and authenticator of historical continuity” (8). The stability of the patriarchy resided in stability of mother-metaphor. In so doing, everything associated with mother becomes the signifier of nation and therefore to protect women is the ethical job of men. Therefore, the imagery of fertility (begetter of soldier), breastfeeding, veneration, etc are associated with women. In this ritualistic veneration engendering literature, women have almost lost their expression, subjectivity and their voice and this has happened throughout Tamil history. Of course, the guardians of society cannot afford to disintegrate the conception of country as mother.

It is precisely against these conceptions that the modern tamil women poets, namely Malathi Maithry, Salma, Kutti Revathy and Sukirtharani, penned their voices.

First of all, a question of how these poets can be viewed emerges. Apparently, all these poets differ from each other in the treatment of their own versions of feminism. For example, Malathi Maithry’s feminism finds the expression in mother imagery which reflects her experience of motherhood, Salma dwells more on imaginary, Sukirtharani on subaltern experience and so on.

Kristeva proposes that “We cannot gain access to the temporal scene, i.e., to political affairs, except by identifying with the values considered to be masculine (dominance, superego, the endorsed communicative word that institutes stable social exchange)... and by this identification gain entry to social experience.”(9)

This somehow proves to be pitfall for Tamil women poets. The counter intuition lies in the fact that these poets are adamant in acquiring a language devoid of any phallic significance. Malathi Maithri in her poem 'Language change' defies words at symbolic level. For her "dreams become cruel gods/ abuse becomes chosen gods" (10) and she finds respite in demon since "the language of Satan becomes the day." The expression is sought here through negation. Sukirtharani is even more radical who demands a language "which no one has spoken so far/ which is not conveyed through signs and gestures. (WGWW, 2012: 193)" Sukirtharani in this sense defies the whole symbolic structure through the negation.

All this is stratified at the imaginary level. Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak writes off referring Catherine Clement:

"One would cut through all the heavy layers of ideology that have borne down since the beginnings of the family and private property: that can be done only in imagination. And this is precisely what feminist action is all about: to change the imaginary in order to be able to act on the real, to change the very forms of language which by its structure and history has been subject to a law that is patrilinear, therefore masculine (11)"

Clement's comment, however, does not mean that Malathi and Sukirtharani are engaged in the useless toil, though the impossibility of subversion of symbolic does pertain. Rather it carves a cleavage through which a 'persistent alteration' (12) of impossibility of subversion sustains. It is here that the potency of art lies. Art through form and content gives expression to this impossibility of subversion. Helene Cixous in same essay by Spivak is quoted (in context of Cixous's displacing hierarchized binary opposition): ""She (woman) does not exist, she may be nonexistent; but there must be something of her". She (Cixous) relates man to his particular "torment, his desire to be (at) the origin""(13). There is a certain proximity to the poets' desire of language of their own. We have already seen that man has relied on mother-metaphor in search of his own identity. The stability of mother "necessitates no redefinition or search of who the Tamil man is or what his actions ought to be (14)".

C.S. Lakshmi writes of women's role in Thirukkural: "Thirukkural, the Bible of Tamils, referred to women in three roles—wives, mothers and distracters of men from doing their 'manly' duties (15)". This manly duty is ethical, social and spiritual. How, then, the women prove to be distracters? Slavoj Zizek provides a pertinent answer to this and also a way out. In his work "Otto Weininger or Women doesn't exist", he explicates the misogynist work viz. 'Sex and Character' by Weininger in 1903 (16). 'Woman is a passive, impressionable object, which means that she is entirely dominated by sexuality', '... In aesthetics beauty is created by love... all beauty is really more a projection, an emanation of the requirements of love; and so the beauty of woman is not apart from love... is the love of man; they are not two things but one and the same thing' (17). For Weininger, love is a 'quilt' where a man hides his guilt that he is not able to perform ethical duties. Woman for him is 'kind of empty projection screen' in which the man

imparts his ideal image/self. In this way woman doesn't exist on her own but rather exist as a sin of man, sin of not committing ethical duties.

For Malathi Maithri, mother-figure is extremely important. It is through this that she projects her 'self': her experience as mother and her love for the nature. In 'Bhumadevi', baby- daughter asks her mother: "Amma, How did you give birth and survive?" Later, the baby imagines how "her grandmother,/ giving birth to the whole wide world/ like a hen laying an egg"(WGWW, 2012: 67). The evocation of such imagery through imagination of a kid puts forth the unique relationship of a woman to her daughter and nature. And this is important for Malathi in particular because her sense of motherhood encompasses the whole idea of society itself. It is by giving such expressions to maternity that she is able to get closer to what Kristeva calls 'third generation' (18) of women. We need to keep in mind that Malathi Maithri has been actively involved in social activities (WGWW, 2102: 17)

So for her this is the expression of feminine through which she thrusts the symbolic realm keeping in mind the pace of general feministic attitude. It is here that these feminist differ from Kristeva who, in turn, craves for 'masculine values'. The very femininity gives them their due. The imagery of 'grandmother/ giving birth to the whole wide world' seems to be inculcated from the religious belief that nature, "the feminine and creative principle of the cosmos" (19), is the begetter (like the grandmother) of the cosmos. In this regard Vandana Shiva writes:

"All existence arises from this primordial energy (i.e. Shakti) which is the substance of everything, pervading everything. The manifestation of this power, this energy, is called Nature (Prakriti)." And world is what 'world' is only in "conjunction with the masculine principle (Purusha)" (20). This indeed makes me think of Weininger's assertion again that woman doesn't exist by herself. Certainly, in Indian context she doesn't exist in the symbolic realm ("conjunction with the masculine power"), she is all encompassing, all pervading and this explains exactly why man's "torment, his desire to be (at) the origin" exist.

It is not surprising then that the space (cosmos) which is feminine has unique association with women. Maithri celebrates this connection with the working women in her yet another poem "Camels, horses and a fish basket".

My grandmother had  
 ... a fish basket.  
 .....  
 At earliest dawn  
 When even the morning star  
 Hesitated to appear,  
 She swept the courtyard..."  
 and when she is away to the village to sell fish,

A cool breeze untouched by light  
Held her hands, accompanying her  
And wiping away her fatigue.” (WGWW, 2102: 97)

Maithri exhibits very artistically the union of work and nature; productivity and nature. She sold her fish and “filled the empty basket with...” food to be eaten by kids. This very ‘grandmother’ is the essence of fertility (production) and investment (kids). It is somewhere here that Kristeva’s idea of third generation lies but Malathi got it in altogether different way.

Feminists’ engagement with nature and, therefore, with space is banal in such discourse. While Malathi Maithri thought of nature as ‘grand’ mother, taking maternity at the primordial stage, i.e. cosmos, other women poets thought of space in different way.

For Sukirtharani, space generates her experience of her own caste, untouchability and therefore subalternity. Few things at the very manifestation call forth some questioning: How Sukirtharani’s position can be viewed? How the position of these women poets can be taken into account?

Feminism, as it is already discussed, plays a role of ‘consistent subversion of impossibility’, and therefore, what all is spoken and written through them automatically become political. But why is it so? It is because their experience, their sense of living is always marginal; marginal as women and marginal as subaltern. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari write: “A minor literature doesn’t come from a minor language; it is rather that which minority constructs within major language “(21). Women’s experience is minority because it is always in constant flux with major male experience. Through such an experience when these women poets desire separate language of expression isn’t it a minority’s experience then? Is it not the cause of deterritorialisation of mainstream experience? This can now be argued that both minor and marginal reside in women as such. Deleuze and Guattari assert: “It is literature that produces an active solidarity in spite of skepticism; and if the writer is in the margins or completely outside his or her fragile community, this situation allows the writer all the more possibility to express another possible community” (22). In this sense the poetry of these poets are political. ‘Another possible community’, which remains manifest in the poems like “My home”, “Demon language” by Malathi Maithri; “Infant language”, “I speak up bluntly” by Sukirtharani, is fruitful in this regard. In ‘I speak up bluntly’, speaker reveals her trouble in identifying with her community and caste. The shame the speaker felt in association with caste turns into a radical acceptance of it in the end:

But now  
If anyone asks me  
I speak up bluntly:  
I am a Pariachi (WGWW, 2012: 197)

But will this Pariachi be able to come out of her subalternity? In India, there is a political intervention in a sense that there is reservation for women (in colleges, now in parliament), Sc/St and recently for Obc. This reservation is meant for the promotion of bridging the gap between Generals and minors along with the safeguard of their interests. Then why is it so that even after the effective implementation of these reservations, the gap is not able to be bridged? Recently, when Ashis Nandy commented on Obc, Sc and St saying that they are the most corrupt, he was encountered by “one of the panelists Ashutosh, a TV journalist.

This is the most bizarre statement I have heard. The Brahmins and the upper cast can do away with all the corruption but when a low caste person emulates the same thing it becomes so wrong. Such a statement is not right, he said. (23)

Hidden beneath this comment is the fact that why a Pariachi will not be able to come out of his/her subalternity. In metropolitan cities these categories are privileged because through reservation they gain access to power, influential position from where their voices are heard; the voices gain potency. So, civil servants, authors, intellectuals represent and re-present (24) these caste and communities. Yet even if Sc/St wants to leave its subalternity, he will not be able to do that. Precisely for two reasons: first is primal baptism, where “a word is connected to an object or the set of objects... and this link (of primal baptism) maintains itself even if the cluster of descriptive features which initially determined the meaning of word changes completely” (25). In short, form remains the same even if the content is shifted radically and it is on the basis of form itself that the content is assumed. So Pariachi remains Pariachi even if he/she lives the life of elite. Their content as such is ‘assumed’. Second reason is of course political. The politics of vote bank does not allow subalterns (Sc/St in particular) to come out of this condition through alluring negotiations. It is evident that subalterns in distant rural places do not have access to such privileges and therefore they are subjugated by upper caste and by the elite of their own caste. So there are ‘elite’ subalterns and ‘subaltern’ subalterns and elite subaltern enjoys his subalternity under the quilt of subaltern while the other one remains deprived. However, the same acts as boon for poets like Sukirtharani because keeping the hold of their own subalternity, they will be able to get themselves engaged in the ideological flow as well as they will check the elite of their class and caste. Writing in twenty first century about the subaltern experience, Sukirtharani makes the reader think of the humanity in this much-informed-world. In “A faint smell of meat”, she explicates what is ‘assumed’ by others. The whole poem needs mentioning here:

In their minds  
I, who smell faintly of meat,  
My house where bones hang  
Stripped entirely of flesh,  
And my street  
Where young men wander without restraint  
Making loud music

From coconut shells strung with skin  
Are all 'at the furthest point of our town'.  
But I, I keep assuring them  
We stand at the forefront." (emphasis mine, WGWW, 2102: 199)

One can easily grasp the connection between a Pariachi and space. They exist "at the furthest point of our town" and hence things are worked up and 'assumed' as if they are Weininger's women who are like 'empty projection screen' (26) where one can entertain his fantasy as per convenience. This same space is, at times, internalized in the poems like 'Infant language' where speaker wants her space, her subjectivity.

In the introduction to *Wild Girls Wicked Words*, Lakshmi Holmstrom writes about Sukirtharani's 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" (WGWW, 2012: 24). Their segregation from material world and its manifestation in the literature indeed brings conundrum as far as the normative acceptance of subaltern is concerned. Vinay Bahl points out:

In short, subaltern studies left out from their consideration material culture, such as clothes, food, furniture, living and working conditions, housing, technology, and financial system, and failed to show how material culture is produced by human agency in the process of social interaction. Moreover, this material culture is also important in the formation of the value culture of people along with the psychic activity of the brain. Besides leaving out the material aspect of people's culture, the subaltern studies' approach is not even capable of creating any emancipatory politics for the masses in whose name it came into existence. (27)

A very thin line of conscience then segregates the poets from those who are lucratively involved in the caste politics. Sukirtharani in this sense, at least, represent and re-present her class and caste appropriately.

Salma is a poet who deals extensively with private space, marriage and urban experiences. Her poems like 'The rust of silence', 'A midnight tale', 'The contract'; 'Solitude of painted house', 'Paths', 'Closure', etc focus on the exclusivity of different type. There is the solitude infested with solidarity, exclusivity is aligned with suggestiveness. In fact, Salma gives the impression of one of those poets who can be considered as cornered. Not cornered in the sense that they are completely derelicted but the one whose expressions confide in the corner and cornered situation. Gaston Bachelard, a French philosopher, notable phenomenologist in his work "The Poetics of Space" proposes:

every *corner* in a house, every angle in a room, every inch of a secluded space in which we like to hide, or withdraw into ourselves; is a symbol of solitude for the imagination; that is to say, it is the germ of the room, or of a house. (28)



This at the same time is the negation of universe. In this sense Salma is different from the other poets, who, no doubt experience such feelings of being into corner but Salma articulates it inherently.

In the rust of silence, she writes:

While I wait for your words

A heavy silence falls

Fills the space

Uninterrupted. (WGWW,2012: 105)

This is to be noticed that it is the silence that fills the space. Silence is one of the most important and elementary feature of corner. In the midnight tale, silence takes fierce turn when:

The tiger which sat quietly

Within the picture on the wall

Takes its place at my head

And stares

And stares. (WGWW,2012: 109)

This is imagination at its best. This is an internalized space which cannot be taken away from women. Infact, it is with in such a space that women are the strongest and it needs no mentioning that every utterance of these minor poets is in itself political and therefore subversive.

Even this abode is at stake when confronted with marriage as in 'the contract'. And this stake is so intense that another poem comes out, 'A closure', where speaker wants peace because:

Your shouts

And your screams

Are unbearable,

Never letting me sleep.

Yet

I have carved out my solitude

In the midst of the clamour. (WGWW, 2012: 119)

It is when one is in solitude; one is with his/her self. It is this intrapersonal dialogue, one with its self, that one becomes self critical and demanding. Otherwise the everyday activities take one away from what Virginia Woolf called the 'moment' or epiphany. It is only when one is cornered even while walking that it achieves its moment. In the solitude of a painting she is somewhat closer to this theme:

Hanging on my wall

The shade of a painted tree

A single cottage

Some flowers,

A sky.  
My eyes rest on the flowers  
While my heart seeks  
The solitude  
Of the painted house. (WGWW, 2012: 115)

The notion of rest-ness, tranquility is very peculiar to the poetry of Salma. It suggests that someone tired of accusations. Accusations of subverting society norms, of not readily available for sex, of stepping out of home and if society cannot handle this then Salma and almost all the four poets have an option of seclusion.

I would like to conclude by suggesting that women poets in my presentation have provided wide range of experiences and approaches of feminism to society. Their subversion is not necessarily the shedding off of the society rather implicit in their outrageous poetry is the desire that they want to go hand in hand with men, with society. They know the importance of marriage, motherhood and society and by complaining against the husbands they are not accusing husbands but the one blinded by the uncompromising rituals of the society.

#### Notes and References

- 1) Gayle Rubin, 'Thinking Sex: notes towards a radical theory of the Politics of Sexuality', in *The Routledge Critical and Cultural Theory Reader*, ed Neil Badmington and Julia Thomas, (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp 281-323
- 2) Chandra Talpade Mohanty, i.b.i.d, p 390.
- 3) The idea is based on Spivak's comment, "The distance between "the informant's world", her "own sense of the world she writes about," and that of the non-specialist feminist is so great that, paradoxically, pace the subtleties of reader-response theories, here the distinctions might easily be missed". Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, 'French Feminism in an International Frame', in *In other Worlds Essays in Cultural Politics*, (London: Routledge, 1988), p 135
- 4) C.S. Lakshmi, *Tradition and Modernity of Tamil Women Writers*, Vol. 4, No. 9 (Apr., 1976), *Social Scientist*, [www.jstor.org/stable/3516176](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3516176), p 38
- 5) i.b.i.d, p 39
- 6) 'A Mother's List of Duties', 'Poems of Love and War: from the Eight Anthologies and the Ten Long Poems of Classical Tamil', trans. A.K. Ramanujan, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985),p 185
- 7) 'Mother (2)', i.b.i.d, p 181
- 8) C.S. Lakshmi, 'Mother, Mother- Community and Mother Politics in Tamil Nadu', Vol. 25, No. 42/43 (Oct. 20-27, 1990), in *Economic and Political Weekly*, p WS 74
- 9) Quoted by Spivak in Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, 'French Feminism in an International Frame', in *In other Worlds Essays in Cultural Politics*, (London: Routledge, 1988), p 136

- 10) Quotations of poetry and otherwise of all the Tamil Women Poets will be from this work as WGWW. 'Wild Girls Wicked Words', ed. and trans. Lakshmi Holmstrom, (Banglore: Sangam House, 2012) P 91
- 11) Spivak, , 'French Feminism in an International Frame', p 145
- 12) i.b.i.d
- 13) i.b.i.d
- 14) C.S. Lakshmi, 'Mother, Mother- Community and Mother Politics in Tamil Nadu', Vol. 25, No. 42/43 (Oct. 20-27, 1990), in Economic and Political Weekly, p WS 73
- 15) C.S. Lakshmi, Tradition and Modernity of Tamil Women Writers, Vol. 4, No. 9 (Apr., 1976), Social Scientist, [www.jstor.org/stable/3516176](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3516176), p 38
- 16) Slavoj Zizek, 'Otto Weininger, or 'Woman doesn't Exist'', in The Zizek Reader, ed. Elizabeth Wright and Edmond Wright, (Blackwell, 1999), p
- 17) i.b.i.d, p 131-133
- 18) Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time', Literary Theory and Criticism: An Anthology, (Delhi: Doaba Publication, 2010) p 104
- 19) Vandana Shiva, 'Women in Nature', in 'Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India', (New Delhi: Kali For Women, 1988), p 37
- 20) i.b.i.d
- 21) Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, 'What is a Minor Literature?', in The Routledge Critical and Cultural Theory Reader, ed Neil Badmington and Julia Thomas, (New York: Routledge, 2012), p 166
- 22) i.b.i.d, p 167
- 23) Cited from the website: <http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/ashis-nandy-says-obc-sc-st-most-corrupt-triggers-storm/article4348182.ece>
- 24) For more details, read Spivak's account of representation in Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?,' in Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), p 276-277
- 25) For more detail read Slavoj Zizek, 'Che Voui?', in 'Sublime Object of Ideology', (London and New York: Verso, 2002), p 89-90
- 26) Slavoj Zizek, 'Otto Weininger, or 'Woman doesn't Exist'', p 132
- 27) Vinay Bahl, 'The Decline of the Subaltern in Subaltern Studies,' in Reading Subaltern Studies, ed. David Ludden, (Delhi: Permanent Black,2002) pg. 359
- 28) Gaston Bachelard, 'Corners', in 'The Poetics of Space', trans. Maria Jolas and foreword by John R. Stilgoe, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994) p 136.