



Poetry

3

Block

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POETRY

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BLOCK INTRODUCTION

Welcome, dear student, to Block 3.

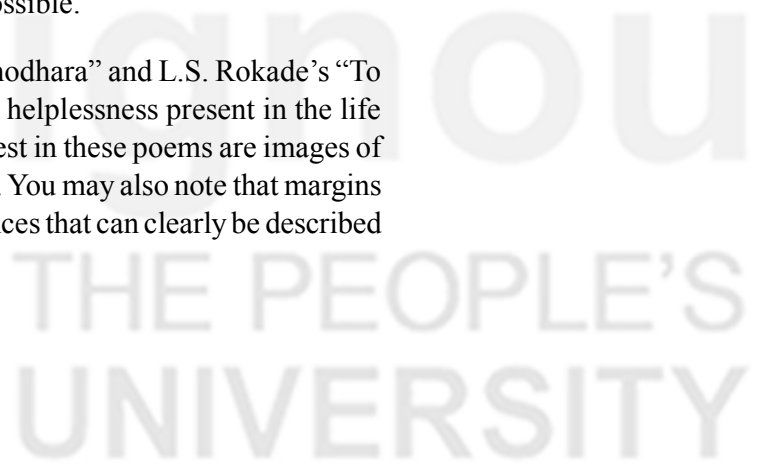
This block consists of selected poems. The block presents an analysis of poems written by four dalit poets: Sunny Kavikkad, Kalekuri Prasad, Adigopula Venkataratnam, Basudev Sunani and Hira Bansode and L S Rokade. Each of these poets has a view of life reflecting social conditions that restrict progress and smooth functioning of individual's existence on the margins. Here you will be face to face with stresses and pressure under which the dalit subject is forced to live. You may note here the individuality of the poets mentioning boldly the factors they are not happy with, and those which they wish to identify and work against.

In the first unit two poems of Sunny Kavikkad, "Native Truths" and "With Love" have been analysed in some detail. You will see how specific words used in them operate as pointers.

In Kalekuri Prasad's "For a Fistful of Self Respect" and Adigopala Venkataratnam's "Jasmine Creeper under a Banyan Tree", (unit 2) you will confront a sense of struggle by individuals not willing to accept difficulties as fateful. Instead, they vent their anger through the poet's representation.

In unit 3 Basudev Sunani's poem "Coaching Centre" is discussed in detail. In this poem the poet delves into the operation of the caste system and strongly believes that it should end to make an egalitarian society possible.

Likewise, unit 4 is devoted to Hira Bansode's "Yashodhara" and L.S. Rokade's "To Be or Not To Be Born". You get to know about the helplessness present in the life pattern on the society's margins. Of particular interest in these poems are images of culture. These have their character defined in myths. You may also note that margins in our society offer pictures of the stark class differences that can clearly be described in terms of injustice and cruelty.



UNIT 1 SUNNY KAVIKKAD'S TWO POEMS: “NAKED TRUTHS” AND “WITH LOVE”

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Biographical Details
- 1.3 Comments on “Naked Truths”
- 1.4 Textual Analysis of “Naked Truths”
- 1.5 Comment on “With Love”
- 1.6 Sunny Kavikkad as the Poet of Two Poems “Naked Truth” and “With Love”
- 1.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.8 Glossary
- 1.9 Questions
- 1.10 Suggested Readings

1.0 OBJECTIVES

This course offers a variety of discussions on the life of the marginalized. Through them we have learnt about some aspects of the experience this section has undergone over a long period. We know at this stage, for instance, that inequality in our midst has remained among social sections ever since classes came into existence. Obviously, there were reasons behind the emergence of classes. Compelling a whole group of people into servility is not easy. The phenomenon was presented as a broad sweep covering centuries, if not millennia. Let us recognize: poverty, misery, and divisions are as old in human-social existence as the hills. In the case of the marginalized, the denial of equality has translated into a state of permanent subjugation and loss of honour. This has placed the marginalized at the mercy of the privileged. In this unit, we shall study the manifestations of inequality and prejudice in literary writing of the last few decades. In particular, we shall focus upon two poems of a young Malayalam poet Sunny Kavikkad. The titles of the poems are: “Naked Truths” and “With Love.” The plan under which the discussion will happen is as follows.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

As you would have observed by now, poetry has a different set of parameters than fictional or dramatic writing. Certain conventions of versification should be kept in mind while appreciating a poem. A poem is rhythmic and it uses metre. It also has similes, metaphors and symbols with the help of which it puts across to the reader its purpose and intent. Behind the poem stands the poet, the individual who noted and assimilated experience at first hand and decided to express in words something s/he wished to share with others. Additionally, poetry is evocative and expresses emotions and sentiments through suggestions. The poem may use a statement but in the middle of it one may find words that are emotional, that create in our mind

the sense of energy and excitement or conversely satisfaction. Poetry empowers the author, it also tells the reader that s/he, too, is a creative human being and can understand the pains that people in general suffer. The poet follows a linguistic and literary strategy to communicate to the reader her/his understanding of society. For this reason, poems require certain skills on the part of the reader. I hope you will keep this in mind while considering the two poems of Sunny Kavikkad. I am sure that both “Naked Truths” and “With Love” will yield their specific meaning and sense in good measure and appeal to you as expressions of anguish, dissatisfaction and protest. These will add to your knowledge about the state of life of the marginalized, and will also increase your sensitivity towards a whole section of people at the receiving end of injustice. Being deprived of basic amenities of life, they are also compelled to live in circumstances of hardship.

1.2 BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS

Sunny Kavikkad was born in 1959 in Kerala. Coming from a dalit family made him aware of the difficulties normally associated with economic deprivation. This left a lasting impression on his mind. The circumstances made him self-conscious about his place in society. His eyes would be drawn constantly to the inequities present in Kerala’s social scene. In a different sense dalit surroundings compelled him to think more and more of the ways through which he could attain a sense of liberation from the stranglehold of circumstance. This was partly achieved through an early association with dalit movement. Simultaneously he was drawn towards two influences – of the revolutionary circles that were active in his background and the community life he was surrounded by. There was however a sense of dilemma in the early years; this is expressed in a statement, “When I left the movement in the mid-1980s, I was overcome with despair. I was left with nothing : no political community, no friends, only debts and loneliness. I even considered suicide.” (qtd. in K. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu. Ed. *No Alphabet in Sight : New Dalit Writing from South India*. New Delhi : Penguin. 2011. P.486) The quotation makes us aware of a poetic sensibility in the process of evolution. The despair he talks of here takes us to the period of turmoil in the 1980s that occurred because of the onset of events in the wake of what is called the Mandal induced movement. This was a moment of crucial significance in post-independence India, when dalit sections of the population left the protective umbrella of congress party and moved towards an independent identity of their own. For Sunny Kavikkad, the transformation of an individual from Maoist influence to a consciousness determined by origins of birth in dalit community was intense and nerve-racking. Leaving behind what he calls political community covered in with despair this may have put him in the place of intellectual isolation; he had to find a new sense of self in the changed circumstance. The despair here is connected with another statement he makes, “Afterall, I was a Marxist. I kept searching for it and through it for myself. That is how I came into poetry and it was through poetry that I connected with the dalit movement.” It is to be noted that Sunny Kavikkad remained rooted in Marxism even as he branched out into the dalit political phenomenon. Soon after this he began writing poems in which he explored the theme of nation that went much beyond his caste. This phase of life offered issues and questions of an ideological – aesthetic nature. The ideological part made him interpret his immediate social surroundings in terms of change and the aesthetic part took him towards the expression of pain, anguish, and revolt. After publishing a number of poems in journals and little magazines, his collection of poems under the title *Padierrungunnu* (Descending the Stairs, 1993). The second

collection under the title *Baliyaadukalude Velipaadukal* (The Visions of Scapegoats) was published in 2000. Around this time he also composed his novel *Nilathezhuthukal* that can be translated as *[First] Letters Traced in San*.

Sunny Kavikkad's Two Poems:
"Naked Truths" and "With
Love"

"NAKED TRUTHS"

Translated by Jayasree Kalathil and T.M. Yesudasan

Go with me
guardian deities of my clan
as I fly away leaving the nest.

In the stillbirth of my firstborn,
I realize your wrath.
Night creeps closer stifling
the flame flickering in the wind.

I have nothing to tell
pressing palms in prayer
save the lore of tears
swelling in my eyes.

Harvest festivities are over.

Loans and leases
and never-ending debts
lie strewn over life's lanes.

Fighting and crying over
a coconut-shell ladle of gruel
children huddle
in the corner of the hovel.

Shivering fevers and father's
protracted last breath,
a wedlock-broken sister's tears,
and the wedding night of a sibling,
all unfold in a single room.

Standing in the field,
do you hear the cry of a child?
Is wetness bursting from your breasts?
Is your face throbbing?
What memories these!

Black gods, undying dead,
Your visages found in no legend,
rise up and speak the countless naked truths,
stop the sun a second time to
recast everything.

1.3 COMMENTS ON “NAKED TRUTHS”

The poem lets us view aspects of life in the plural that catch our attention independently. Parts and segments of life and their impressions find a central place in this poem. In the case of a typical dalit writer, it is his place, family, means of livelihood, experiences of the problems faced and broader determining forces that demand attention. This poem contains comments on all these critically. The poet has very little to tell the reader in terms of appreciation and acceptance. For him life has been “the lore of tears/swelling in my eyes.” The family scene has children huddled in a corner waiting to get food. In another scene a young child cries because s/he does not know how to take milk from its mother’s “bursting...breasts.” At the end, the poet evokes Gods who are dead and yet they remain. They did not get mention in the legend, yet they speak to the family “countless naked truths”.

1.4 TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF “NAKED TRUTHS”

The title “Naked Truths” is a pointer; we are supposed to pause and think the suggestion it carries. In the present case, the title refers to happenings in the distant past as well as those the poet witnessed in his own lifetime. The past and the present are imagined as coexisting here in the form of what the poet calls truths. Truths are larger than happenings; they present for the advantage of the reader the life of a dalit. An important thing in this poem is the presence of deities, god-like figures guarding interests of the community. To the naked eye they are invisible, but they remain present to inspire and help the community when need arises. In the first stanza, there is a talk of “deities” whom poet has requested to be with him and “go with me.” More than the larger society of a whole region, the poet-persona belongs to a clan bound by the principle of language, culture and folklore. In the same breath, the poet associates himself with a bird that flies “away leaving the nest.” The bird helps the poet escape from the clutches of a cruel society—it did not provide to him strength and sustenance. That is why the poet wishes to fly away from his “nest.”

One may call it a good beginning of the poem that aims to expose a number of bitter truths about the man-made agency called society. At this juncture, let us raise the question: Why does the poet have a sudden urge to leave the nest? My own feeling is that the rest of the poem, the thirty four line long verse, is an answer to this question. It is communicated to us that the society depicted here is no place for a dalit, that it is impossible to belong to it in any way. This is the truth to which the poet has added the word “bitter.”

The first stanza of the poem contains three lines, whereas the second, third, fourth and fifth stanzas have four lines each. The difference in length seems to be for no specific reason, except that the beginning is the point of entry and the shorter the mention the better. Take a look at the second stanza:

In the stillbirth of my firstborn,
I realize your wrath.
Night creeps closer stifling
the flame flickering in the wind.

Here, the poem’s strong title gets extra emphasis from “the stillbirth of my firstborn.” Few shocks are stronger for a parent than the birth of a dead child. Also, the effect

is further heightened here by "firstborn." This event in life is interpreted as the wrath of the deities. What does the poet convey by saying that his clan's deities are angry with him? The question is kept open and the poet turns to the night and "the flame flickering in the wind." Also mark "creeps" which contains clear hints of slow death. There is a feeling here that nothing is right with the world in which the poet is forced to live. This is a typical dalit predicament – his very existence is a denial of life since he has no right to extend his family to the next generation. We see the suggestion in the lines that deities, the night, and the wind are part of a plan under which the poet will suffer punishment of accepting such a "truth."

Lest the dead child should symbolize a fate in which deities and nature have colluded, the quoted lines reflect on the conditions in which dalits have lived since time immemorial. Lack of hygiene in Indian villages is cause of innumerable deaths of women and children. This is particularly true of dalit women and children. The rebel poet has decided here to state this aspect tellingly so that stark facts of the poor and deprived are brought to light. In any case, "truths" are all social in the case of dalit experience that is a product of man-made social circumstance.

In the third and fourth stanzas, two phrases catch attention – "lore of tears/ swelling in my eyes" and "never-ending debts/ lie strewn over life's lanes." Think particularly of "lore." It denotes the string of stories that have evolved their own pattern in the spread of time. The dalit community thrives on stories of devastation and misery which present to it a tradition of suffering. Helplessness is crux of the dalit experience as men and women of this large group can ever feel the rush of tears in their eyes. The length of time in "lore" takes us to the history that has been kept away from clear articulation – so far as dalits are concerned, history is only allowed to coexist with sufferings they undergo in the present. If the past were not to be "lore" but a written account of happenings in a sequence, dalits would decipher codes of rationale embedded in it. This perception connects the description with the second phrase "never-ending debts/ lie strewn over life's lanes." Factual words in the second phrase are "debts" and "life's lanes." The economic idea behind "debts" is a comment on the system that enables the rich to keep a tight leash on the dalit community. Equally meaningfully, "life's lanes" presents the arrangement of relations as a complex mechanism of controlling dalit vitality.

In the fifth stanza the general strain about economic hardship is turned into the scene of children denied food to eat. They wait for the "ladle of gruel" reaching their plate.

The last four (stanza 5 unanalyzed) stanzas of the poem have five lines each. The first of these (the sixth in the poem) runs as follows:

Shivering fevers and father's
protracted last breath,
a wedlock-broken sister's tears,
and the wedding night of a sibling,
all unfold in a single room.

Here, "shivering fevers" and "father's/ protracted last breath" belong to two different persons; these together link with the "sister's tears" and "a sibling" in the next two lines.

Essentially, it is family scene. On this you may well ask: A family scene? Yes, it accepts the format of a family with usual family ties of parents and children, marriage, mutuality, sense of responsibility, and cohesion. It runs on principles such as being worried about and looking after one or other in the household. In the particular case of this stanza, we have the situation of a child, woman or man that has fallen ill, in addition to the incident of father's death, a sister has been turned out of her husband's home and cries, and finally a brother who is initiating pleasure of intimacy with his bride in the precincts of the "single room" this group occupies.

We also observe here that the presented scene is emotive in scale. Mark words such as "shivering," "protracted," "wedlock-broken" and "unfold." They indicate disapproval, if not downright anger. If healthcare facilities are available in society, why would somebody shiver in the home? Or, why would the old father have a protracted breath before dying? Family members having an ailment would be shifted to a hospital and given appropriate treatment by competent healthcare personnel. "Wedlock-broken" likewise tells the reader that illiterate unskilled women get some sense of safety only when they are in marriage and have a husband who would feed and look after them. Instead, if the marriage is broken, it falls on woman to maintain herself physically – in the sense that she has to do something to live on and survive. This doesn't seem possible in the scenario the poem presents. So far as the use of "unfold" is concerned, it is a word taking us to situations in a drama where connected occurrences are shown to the audience in a predetermined sequence. The narrator in the poem shares with the listener his sense of disgust about the state of the family that he compares with scenes and characters in a drama.

From this point, we move on to the last two stanzas where a young mother is working in the field as her child awaits breastfeeding, and the poet finally invokes black gods to "stop the sun a second time to/ recast everything."

As a whole, the poem rejects circumstances of naked aggression against life that the existing social system practices. "Recast everything" is the outcome of the poet's critical exercise of observing patterns that deny minimal living in the country's surroundings.

"WITH LOVE"

Translated by T. M. Yesudasan

Mercy dear,
do not flatter black
as seven charms
and might of tempest.

When Blacks are being hacked,
humiliated, hounded out,
despite songs of praise
from poets and Time,
Mercy dear, do not flatter
black as seven charms
and might of tempest.

Do not say without knowing
that the mighty who left
horse power borne
and taken captives
will ever return.

When the fisherman prophesies
a sunken ship
do not speak without knowing
of the worm-eaten nectar
in the womb of the sea.

Do not speak
without knowing my father
absent-ever from dinner
and my mother breeding
without thought.

Do not say anything
without knowing
the street that uncovered
your deferred youth.

Do not say
without knowing first hand
that black is this breeze
caressing lovingly
and my love a bad counter.

Mercy dear, do not say anything
without knowing
of the blood falling on the ground
when my black sister,
tried of puffing at the fire,
pines as a lover
and turns into dust as mother.

1.5 COMMENT ON "WITH LOVE"

The title of the poem "With Love" contains a sharp irony – love which signifies peace and harmony, is actually non-existent in the life of fishermen depicted here. There is the figure of a woman known as Mercy, who is addressed in the poem as a constant refrain. On this refrain are hung details of death, violence, and the cynical game thrust upon the fishermen living near the sea-shore. These are the poor at the receiving end of those who came once as "horse-power borne" and took away members of the fishing community as captives. We are left to guess who the captives were – whether young men who would join the raiders as slaves or young women

as objects of lust. The whole poem is filled with ever increasing complaint about knowing. Knowing is the most important subject as is clear from the emphasis it has received from the poet.

Textual Analysis of “with Love”.

Let us look at the meaning of ‘black’ as well as ‘Blacks’ used in the first two stanzas. The first time it is a small b and is linked with seven charms. In the second stanza, b is capital which may make it signify something different from the first usage. The community of fishermen is shown as not being able to grasp their conventional beliefs. For them black is magical and can empower human beings to match the might of tempest. In the second case however the fishermen themselves are black and they frequently meet the fate of being hacked, humiliated and hounded out. The poet warns them against their accepting such a fate since the folk songs have been praising the events as expressions of fate. Killing of people should not any longer be the subject of celebration and sacrifice as conventional songs present them. So far as the poet is concerned the modern generation of fishermen should recognize the evil nature of violence for what it actually is.

In the third and fourth stanzas, the reader is acquainted with tales that fishermen weave. The sunken ship for instance does not go to the bottom of the sea and get nectar there. For him, if the nectar exists “in the womb of the sea”, it is “worm-eaten nectar”.

From the second stanza onwards upto the last one which is the eighth, there is a mention of “knowing” in each case. In fact the expression is “without knowing” that further stresses the importance of knowledge. Modern methods of understanding, assessing and recognizing are important since these alone can free the fishermen from the bondage of myth and folklore. The poet repeats again and again the relevance of the reality human beings have to see with their eyes and grasp with their intellect. The question is : what is reality in their case. Is is the reality of raiders attacking the hutments on the seashore, of ships that went into the sea that never came back, of the father who remained ever absent from dinner even as his wife (my mother) kept giving birth to one child after another “without thought”. The series of events takes a toll of the “deferred youth” of the young woman Mercy and the sensuousness that never got realized in a consummation of happiness since another young woman was seen as dying in childbirth.

In the penultimate and the last paragraph, black occurs again. In the first case it is “black is this breeze”; it denotes a human figure that may lovingly touch a woman to “know” her first hand and to realize how the woman appreciates the human figure’s approach. This takes the reader in the direction of an intimate communication with the woman who in return will lovingly respond. At the same time the breeze as a human figure becomes the poet who has stood all this while at a distance from the woman. Why does the poet say that “my love” is “a bad counter”? there is no clear answer to this query. Still the poem hints at a kind of pact between the two which seems to have gone sour – become a bad counter. If we go into the reasons of how it happened, we may comprehend that the poet states through this, the fact of no relationship being possible against the background of a community driven by ignorance and faith. The voice permeating the poem is of modernity, unaffected by a destiny that human beings created in an earlier period of helplessness against forces of nature. Nature at that time may have appeared mysterious and terrifying when unfamiliar figures came from other lands and climes, the fishermen may have

believed that these came from another universe as visiting Gods. The modern poet rejects such an acceptance of ignorance and wishes that this should be replaced by an enlightened knowledge of their own surroundings and the motives of those who attack them. The poem "with love" is ironical in the sense that strange looking occurrences have no future in the present day phenomenon of knowledge and where love at the moment is a distant dream because it is understood in the old light of faith. See the violence that inheres in the terminology of this poem. We come across a long list of hate words here that violate human love, endearment and comfort. Here we have families from where the father went away and the mother gave birth to children and reared them all by herself. She did not know what happened to her, nor how to cope with the pressures of happening that came about "without thought". In the poem, giving birth to children is described as "breeding", a natural animal act. This is interestingly preceded by "dinner", a word standing for culture and high manners and "black" is a word in the poem having negative connotations except where in the penultimate stanza it befriends breeze that enjoys the company of the woman hidden behind the negative expression of "bad counter". Note that "Mercy dear" is asked not to flatter or appreciate the might of tempest, or still more by the magic of seven charms. "Mercy dear" is not aware of the danger, but the danger does lurk behind charms and tempests.

In the second stanza time is used in the sense of history and the threat of the mighty tempests is repeated. "Horse-power borne" and "captives" are expressions of extreme violence. And the sunken ship in the next stanza takes "deathly trap of life on a higher plane – the sunken ship without knowledge of the worm eaten nectar. The last stanza hides the worst of fates when the black sister of the speaker in the poem will wait for the lover endlessly till she "turns into dust as a mother".

Even though no statements are made in the poem, the tone in the poem is that of a speaker who knows, and who also understands that his listeners do not know. How one wishes that the speaker and the reader join together in a common pursuit of knowing the topsy-turvy world and introduced harmony into it!

1.6 SUNNY KAVIKKAD AS THE POET OF TWO POEMS "NAKED TRUTH" AND "WITH LOVE".

Both "Naked Truth" and "With Love" contain indictment of forces that shake and destroy the world today. The phenomena of our times is looked at from the angle of a dalit subject who has to study and re-interpret all that he has and reject it with an awareness of a positive world in whose making he has to participate actively. Indeed the two poems visualize an active participant in contemporary culture and society. Read together, the two poems merge into a vision resting on horror and asking for a paradigm of dignity, and fellow feeling. The positive side of life remains ever hidden in these poems but it is suggested through the sequence of broken marriages, economic deprivation as well as acceptance of evil as fate. The supposedly civilized world of people placed higher than dalits has to learn a great deal from poems such as these, and may attain an invaluable rich level of consciousness by reading these poetic utterances.

Some Observations

As we look at these poems in their context we become aware of the background against which these stand and give out what may be called messages of pain and anger. At the same time we also find that an insufficient amount of signals are

visible in the poems. Why so? One simple reason that can be given is that these are poems and not studies done with an intent to enlighten the reader. Another thing that can be said is that the poets do not reflect the tendency to think – there are pointers in them but that is all. Is it because the mode used by Kavikkad is poetic in the modern sense where suggestion alone is thought to be an adequate medium. Kavikkad has the model of the modern poem in mind, in this sense. We may place this modern element against the traditional way in which dalits, tribals and other marginalized express themselves and respond to a variety of situations they find themselves in. Let us remind ourselves that forms of poetry conventionally present in India had a rich wealth of relevance and appeal. Folk songs would be one example. In the folk song individuals and groups participate and give voice to a feeling that is commonly shared. The tradition of folk songs also takes into account the seasonal changes rooted in nature, processes of production as in the fields and ponds and a kind of interaction of the common people with agencies in the village market. The market again is a corner of society allowing people to come together and mingle. The marketplace, the village fair, the festival, among other things become the subject of folk literature. One may wonder why this kind of conventional literary mode is rejected and instead the poet is taken recourse to expression of the self which gets embroiled in the problems of life and talks to oneself that either is grasped by the poet or by a few others like him. Kavikkad's poems altogether remain distant from that folk tradition which was historical as well as sociological. It talked about the legends and tales of the past and brought them to bear upon the situations in which the folk poet used them as parallels to their fate in the new circumstances. It will indeed be relevant to raise this question vis-à-vis the writing of the marginalized in the closing years of the twentieth century and the opening years of the twenty first century.

1.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have discussed the poet Sunny Kavikkad with reference to the two poems, “Naked Truths” and “With Love”. In the first poem the attention of the reader is drawn to harsh aspects of life that visit the present day human figures – these figures have the potentialities of grasping truths and also asserting themselves through the interpretation of their circumstances. Violence is an important dimension of their lived reality. The marginalized sections in our midst watch with helplessness the cruelties that the rich and powerful inflict on them. The violence does not occur between man and man directly, but through agencies that couch the naked truths in relationships. Both the poems take us to the inside layers of humans – young and old, as well as infirm and helpless. The poet uses symbols through which the meaning is expanded and made to cover the larger expanse of social existence. Our attention is drawn also to the link between the struggles the poet underwent and the expressions that he chose to articulate his emotions. For us here biographical details assist in comprehending the nature of oppression that the marginalized confront. In many a case as we have seen, the biographical is not confined to the individual or to an individual community but is a clear pointer of those truths which are shared in their naked form, as it were. So far as the case of love is concerned, we realize that it exists in the life of the marginalized only in the name. However the violence to love or its absence in life only highlights the value and significance of this precious emotion. With the help of Sunny Kavikkad we are able to make an entry into those people, men and women who constitute the pillars of society as a whole. They produce, sustain others through their labor and yet they are denied basic amenities

of life. Still worse, they are treated with insensitivity. The labour should have given them dignity and freedom because as producers they would have the first right to the produce, still the social structure being what it is, the producer starves and relatively idle ones enjoy simply because their power and hold over the society is legitimized by convention.

Sunny Kavikkad's Two Poems:
"Naked Truths" and "With
Love"

1.8 GLOSSARY

Emotive	: Affective or that which expresses emotion; having emotional colouring.
Modernity	: Different than contemporary; it is to highlight opposition to the old and traditional.
Paradigm	: A distinct opinion.
Legitimize	: To make acceptable.

1.9 QUESTIONS

- 1) Comment on the title, "Naked Truth".
- 2) How does reference to the poet's biography help in understanding his poetic appeal? Give examples.
- 3) Keeping in view the two poems, discuss Kavikkad as a dalit poet.

1.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

Pandit, Maya. Tr. Baby Kamble: *The Prisons We Broke*. Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2008.

Satyanarayana, K and Susie Tharu. Ed. *No Alphabet in Sight :New Dalit Writing from South India, Dossier I:Tamil and Malayalam*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2011.

UNIT 2 KALEKURI PRASAD AND ADIGOPULA VENKATRATNAM

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Text: “For a Fistful of Self Respect”
- 2.3 Commentary and Analysis of “For a Fistful of Self Respect”
- 2.4 Some Observations of “For a Fistful of Self Respect”
- 2.5 Text: “Jasmine Creeper under a Banyan Tree”
- 2.6 Commentary and Textual Analysis of “Jasmine Creeper Under a Banyan Tree”
- 2.7 Some Observations of “Jasmine Creeper Under a Banyan Tree”
- 2.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.9 Glossary
- 2.10 Questions
- 2.11 Suggested Readings

2.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we take up for discussion two Telugu poems in English translation, first one by Kalekuri Prasad and the second by Adigopula Venkatratnam. Kalekuri’s Prasad’s “For a Fistful of Self Respect” is a very eloquent poem of dalit assertion. It belongs to the latter part of the Twentieth Century. Adigopula Venkatratnam’s poem “Jasmine Creeper Under a Banyan Tree” tells us about the humiliation suffered by a dalit child in our time. The poet narrates episodes of great pain in the life of the young protagonist. These episodes acquaint the reader with inequality existing between the masters and the deprived.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

We begin first with Prasad’s poem, analyzing it for its rich and heroic content. Apart from the modest title starting with ‘For’, the two words “fistful” and “self respect” take us into the realm of human pride. The title for this reason takes the reader along a meaningful journey that will finally lead all of us humans to an aware existence demanding courage and bold intervention. “Fistful” gives us the idea of defining the stand with strength as well as economy. It suggests that we do not want all that is ours but only a small part of it. What that ‘all’ is, is termed as self respect. Straightaway we realize that the poem has not the mundane but the humanly realizable ideal of recognition of the hardworking masses as heroes of our times. The poem by Prasad is truly heroic. After covering the various emphasis of the poet, we will discuss this poetic piece with respect to the changing paradigms it presents in the course of its evolution.

2.2 TEXT: “FOR A FISTFUL OF SELF RESPECT”

Kalekuri Prasad and
Adigopula Venkataratnam

I do not know when I was born,
but I know I was killed on the same soil
thousands of years back!
'Punarapi jananam, Punarapi maranam'
I do not know of the theory of *karma*,
Yet I am being born again and again
In the land where I am killed
Again and again!
My body mingled with the soil of this country
To form the plains of Ganga and Sindhu!
My eyeballs melted into tears
To flow as the life giving rivers of this country!
The lifeblood of my veins has flown into this earth
To make this land green and abundant!
I saw *Sambuka* in *Tretayug!*
Twenty two years back my name was
Kanchikicherla Kotesu!
Neerukonda!
The harsh cruelty of the exploitation
Took its shape as the tattoo written on my heart
with the sharp blade of the plough
Chundur!
Hereafter *Chundur* is not a proper noun,
It will be pronoun!
Now every heart is a *Chundur!*
A cancerous wound that burns!
I am the wound of the masses!
And a mass of wounds!
I am the slave in a free country!
For generations
The victim of humiliations,
insults, rape and tortures!
The one who raised his head
For a fistful of self-respect!
In a country ruled by powers,
blind with wealth and caste egos,
I am the one whose life is a protest!
I die a hundred times to live!
Do not call me a victim!
I am immortal! Immortal! Immortal!
I am the blue-throated Siva

Who gulped draught to leave the world rich!
 I am the one who kicked The Sun on his
 Head to straighten his dawn when
 It rested on its head in *Shirsasan!*
 I am the one trying to raise slogans
 In the burning ovens of my hearts!
 I do not want words of sympathy!
 I do not want bags of tears!
 I am not a victim! I am Immortal!
 I am the flying flag of protest!
 Do not shed tears for me;
 If you can, bury me in the center of
 Your city!
 Then I will be born again as
 A garden of bamboos
 That can breathe songs of life!
 Let my dead body be the cover page of this country!
 I will spread into the pages of history
 As beautiful future!
 As a struggle of raging fire
 I will be born again and again
 In this country mine!

2.3 COMMENTARY AND ANALYSIS OF “FOR A FISTFUL OF SELF RESPECT”

Let us read the first three lines which run as follows:

*I do not know when I was born,
 but I know I was killed on the same soil
 thousands of years back!*

What do we note here except that the person does not know when he was born even as he remembers that he was killed at the place in a distant past. This is quite simple but behind the plainness of description one notices associations of “was born” and “was killed”. It is not a simple matter like that of going away and coming back but of life and death where death only testifies that the birth took place. This is what I meant by the poem being of epic proportions. The poem is about today when the writer tells us the account and the account takes us to the birth a “thousands of years back”. The wide expanse of time spreads before us a great spectacle of being born and being killed. The question is: whose story could it be? The answer is contained in the fourth line which uses Sanskrit words ritualistically: *punarapi jananam, punarapi manaram*, signifying that birth and death are nothing but a chain of coming up and being buried. This is precisely what the theory of karma has been in the Indian folklore. People are born because they carry forward through their birth the results of past existence and at the appointed time reach their destined death. This cycle is defined in lucid terms in the following three lines:

*Yet I am being born again and again,
In the land where I'm killed
Again and again!*

Mark that birth and death here have no association with violence or destruction - they appear to be ordinary acts of emergence of humanity that will carry on with the tasks assigned to it. Behind this spectacle indeed is hidden the submerged history of those who were born and were killed as a matter of routine. The question is who these people were and why their life has been interpreted in terms of a factual description as if in a mythical account with no connection with the reality of dying. The impersonal nature of violence in this poem is stressed further in the poem when the poet tells us in a matter of fact way:

*My body mingled with the soil of this country
To form the plains of Ganga and Sindhu!*

Here the word “mingled” is a euphemism for the person’s burial in the deeper layers of the earth to become earth itself and the poet takes the description further to the constituting layers of soil of India’s two big rivers- Ganga and Sindhu. The poet lets the reader know that the two rivers are in fact the lifelines of India and sustain life with the bounty they provide to its inhabitants. But can we overlook the destruction of human bodies that eventually turn into soil? If that were the case dying and being born would be no acts in human living but only parts of a natural process. The poet is aware of this implication and imbues the apparent natural process with tears that are human –

*My eyeballs melted into tears
To flow as the life giving rivers of this country.*

We wonder why rivers are being called tears that flow through the land. Later on these rivers will have in them not just tears but the narrator’s life blood that has flown through his veins into this earth “to make this land green and abundant.” The imagery of death and life goes parallel with the imagery of earth’s crust turning into fertile soil and affording abundant crops. Should this description be accepted as no concern of justice and recognition? This question is built into the description of this poem and creates a multiplicity of life related parameters. It is clear finally that the land we stand on is a land of dead bodies turned into soil and that forgetting it would be forgetting the entire heritage of destruction and violence on which our own existence rests. It is ironical that those who cast a curious glance at their surroundings do not realize that they are the chosen ones sustaining themselves with and enjoying at the cost of those who crept into the soil as dead and forgotten. If this fact were known the poet would allocate pride to the heritage. The poem is about the identification of this detail as the crux of our present day life. Needless to say that this crux is the labour and productive force of the people on the margins.

Even as the poem is not divided into stanzas one can locate phases of evolution in the episode that struggles forth towards self realization. For the poet, today’s episode of recognition has a past not merely in material terms but also in those others involving interpretation, ideology and myths as well as folklore. In fact the next reference to the killing of the *Sambuka* is an indication that the poem is made to branch out into an interpretive effort. *Sambuka* was a dalit ascetic belonging to the period when Lord Rama lived and having the supposed audacity to equal the upper

castes in living life of austerity and self-control. A person from the margins competing with the upper castes in pursuit of excellence would have ruffled feathers in his time when the life of the low in the hierarchy was but to play second fiddle to the powerful and privileged in society.

The poem has a clear reference to India's exploitative past. Ram, the hero of the Kshatriyas and the king of the country treats the people lower down as ones who should be doing things other than spiritual and soul-related. On the other side the death of Sambuka at the hands of the canonized hero is a part of bitter memory of the marginalized. The poem tells us about those places which are inhabited by the poor and downtrodden. Ordinary masses work in the fields unnoticed. They are targeted easily by the powerful and nobody moves one's finger in their support. The poem mentions places such as *Chundur, Kilavenmani, Karamchedua and Meerukonda* are villages away from urban centers. They are mentioned in the poem since they remind us of the way dalit youth in the recent past have been punished and tortured. Are the dalit youth allowed to raise their head and demand self respect? This is not the case since the powerful in our country are "blind with wealth and caste egos". In a sharp statement, the poet says that the one who is suppressed has his life assuming the form of protest. The poet says in first person singular – "I am the one whose life is a protest." This sentence is pregnant with a number of layers of meaning. Protest is not in terms of an action but in terms of a whole life that symbolizes opposition. Thus people die again and again and the whole series of their deaths becomes a comprehensive rejection of the persistent violence in our midst. Some people die, and then still more die. Ironically, more and more people dying becomes a rule and deaths do not stop. Out of this a new moral emerges – "Do not call me a victim! / I am Immortal! Immortal! Immortal! / I'm the blue throated siva." The turning of death into immortality is a decisive phenomena of dalit existence. Yet dalits have a potential to kick "The Sun on his/Head to straighten his dawn" so that those who are above go downwards and those who are below come up. This is termed *shirsasan*, another name for revolution.

Later in the poem, the writer defines himself as an identity and uses "I" again and again. To quote

I am the one trying to raise slogans
 In the burning ovens of my heart!
 I do not want words of sympathy!
 I do not want bags of tears!
 I am not a victim! I am immortal!
 I am the flying flag of protest.

Here an uncompromising negation is asserted. The poet takes the process of assertion to a still higher plane where death actually is a mark of regeneration. The act of dying plants the seed of dignity so that people gain through it a whole flowering of their existence. There is a belief in the poem of history leading to meaningful struggle and the struggle in turn taking to inevitable success. When the poet talks of rebirth he does not express faith in the clichéd idea of cyclical existence, but one that comes back again and again with added vigour –

If you can, bury me in the center of

Your city!

Then I will be born again as

A garden of bamboos
That can breathe songs of life!
Let my dead body be the cover page of this country!
I will spread into the pages of history.
As beautiful future!
As a struggle of raging fire
I will be born again and again
In this country mine!

The issue of a different kind of nationalism is unmistakably present in these lines. Nationalism has gone beyond identity of the common people. Instead the masses lay down their lives to free themselves from the yoke of slavery and become their own masters. They are driven by the urge to make a beautiful future. Their decision to be born again and again adds to the truth of a resource called national experience, of which they are an integral part. In this sense the masses themselves are the country since they earn the title of their place becoming “this country mine”. We note that such a country does not have distortions attending the high and the low, or the powerful and powerless. The place is socially produced owned and pushed forward towards a new dawn. It is to be appreciated that the poem stresses continued struggle and no dreams of harmony outside their effort. Being effort centered the poem manages to meaningfully escape from romantic idealism that visualizes old myths in a later context. Here visualization comes through struggle, not that the future has contours of an old experience.

“Pages of history” in these lines is no reference to the past – history is seen here as being produced in the present in such a manner that it will be known as history only later. The suggestion is that the making of history by conscious humans ensures a “beautiful future”. This new history entirely the making of human labour and is crucially different from the other history that merely went along lines of conflicts between contending interests in a long continuum.

2.4 SOME OBSERVATIONS OF “FOR A FISTFUL OF SELF RESPECT”

The poem is full of words that appear as contradictions. Life and death, health and disease, the present and the past, are denoted in the same breath as paradoxes. In another case “harsh cruelty of exploitation” is mentioned as something that will create its opposite in the time to come. We have lord Siva holding all the poison in his throat and rendering the world vibrant and rich. The paradoxes go further into expressions of rejecting sympathy as well as bag of tears so that the person taken to be a victim is introduced to the reader as immortal. In another example, the protesting person becomes protest oneself. Of particular significance is the historical expanse in which the past and the present coexist to fight untruth so that it turns into a future of truthfulness. What is at stake for the poet is self respect that counters humiliations. The question is why the poet is drawing attention to the issues of life in such a power packed vocabulary. In answer one can say that the poet is dealing with not day to day miseries, anguishes and troubles, but events that generate passion at a higher level of existence. It is centuries and millennia that are the markers of life, not short moments of individual suffering. In many lines the poet expresses his selfhood through “I” but the poet’s “I” is the suffering and struggling humanity ever

fighting for the cause of change in history. Kalekuri Prasad is a poet of clear revolutionary dimensions who will retain the vigour of yesterday and will make it into something impressive and all-encompassing. The list of assertive words is long in the poem and consists of indicators that operate at the level of ‘meaning’ and form.

2.5 TEXT: “JASMINE CREEPER UNDER A BANYAN TREE”

We have no dearth of experiences!
 Our body is too full a flood of humiliations!
 The way my mother had to run from
 House to house to fetch
 Me a glass of milk, begging around
 To bring me up!
 The way I had to go to school
 With a broken slate
 In a tattered shirt, and no knickers too,
 To be sent back by the teacher
 Who ruled that I would be good for
 Neither farming nor for schooling!
 He ruled that I should only live by
 Kneading the mud!
 The way I was imprisoned
 In a cattle shed, like a cattle
 For two full days!
 The way my master gave me over to the police
 Stamping me a thief, proud achievement it was!
 He thought that while even an Eswara cannot
 Catch the thief inside the house he could do it!
 The way they conducted a post mortem on my
 Father’s dead body and proved a murder into suicide!
 Our blood is too full a flood of humiliations!
 We are like the jasmine creepers under a banyan tree!
 We should live, while not growing!
 Survive, while not dying!
 Yet, you should be able to boast
 We have not grown, though we were given
 Shade and sustenance!

2.6 COMMENTARY AND TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF “JASMINE CREEPER UNDER A BANYAN TREE”

Let us first take the title. The metaphor of the creeper not being able to grow beyond a point has its own background of ideology. Under this maintenance and sustenance do not mean much, instead they tell a tale of slow death. In any case mere survival

is not a good strategy; it should indicate the possibility of awareness if not a certain idea of growth. Whereas 'jasmine' stands for beauty and fragrance, 'creeper' tells of suppleness contained by a weak and helpless trunk. These bear a close resemblance with women not supported by a steady job. On the other side banyan tree is a protective umbrella that covers, protects, and shelters. See that all the three attributes of banyan tree refer to the attitude of superiority if not superciliousness. There is hidden in the banyan tree the sense of being profoundly meaningful, far reaching and mature. Taken together, the title may take us towards a structure that humankind propped up to live under and remain comfortable because of the structure providing stability. In the poem the title reflects the beneficence of caste hierarchy assigning specific jobs to each caste. If Brahmins have to provide thought and perspective, the shudras have to make existence of the upper castes comfortable. Under the hierarchy, the lower and the upper castes complement each other and keep the arrangement lasting for a long time. However the poem gives the lie to this title and attacks it for its shallowness and unsustainability.

The beginning of the poem has the sentence regarding "no dearth of experiences." Indeed experiences of torture and neglect are countless. No "dearth" hides the violence of repeated tortures. Suppression creates its own shade of insult, and if continued for a long time it turns into a deadly substance. Mark the figure of the child's mother running from one house to another for getting a glass of milk for her son. Her only mission is to give nourishment to the son so that in the days to come he grows into a man of promise. In the stark atmosphere of the poem the child requires more than a body. He cannot go to school unless properly clothed. The reader is told that farming and schooling are impossible for him to think of since he cannot adequately cover his body. In the school the teacher has to maintain decorum and has to send him back since he has no knickers to wear. "The teacher's ruling" is deafening. The child is meant only to knead the mud so that perhaps he can make the mud good enough for the brick that would be toughened in fire. One or two details are hidden from the readers view – they seem to be too gory for sighting. Thus we only know that for some lapse he was "imprisoned/ in a cattle shed, like a cattle/ for two full days!" the violence does not stop here and the child is handed over next to the police with the charge that he committed theft. Here the master aspires to be the owner of the child who is treated as bonded labour.

The next detail equally well hidden is of the father found murdered in his hut or in the fields. This was later proved to be a suicide that father committed. The narrator calls these incidents "a flood of humiliations" – clearly they are more than this. Towards the end of the poem the reader is reminded that the shelter the master has provided for keeping the father and the son is best illustrated as a banyan tree. Under this the father-son duo can "survive while not dying". The final words of the child are addressed to the master who should boast to the world that he maintained the father and the son so that they survived – he gave them shade and sustenance. What about growing? The answer is that the two survived but did not grow.

There are significant gaps in the poem with many a half sentence heightening by the impact. The subtle difference between "living" and "growing" add to the effect of the poem that becomes a severe indictment of social hierarchy denying freedom to people so essential for its upkeep and support. Beneath the surface of words the poem bears the strong charge of emotion that will not rest with merely acknowledging the truth of the arrangement. The narrative is of full scale rejection of the shelter and its well entrenched providers.

The poem follows the format of a character talking in first person singular and referring to a number of episodes in his life so that he can share his experiences with the reader. The account given by the character has a story built in it which begins with his childhood protected by his mother. The child knows that the mother works day and night to bring him up arranging food and other necessities for him. He knows that she can go to the extent of begging for help from the neighbours, her only mission being to see that he grows up. There is also a mention of the desire in the mother to send him to school. Clearly the scene belongs to the post independence era in India when the doors of schools were open to the lower sections for encouraging them to get education. However this was only at the level of policies – the intent behind the policies did not percolate to the mind and consciousness of the school teacher. It was not for the teacher to encourage the poor student to sit in the class and have a sense of comfort while learning his lessons. In the situation of the child broken slate would not matter much; nonetheless it becomes the excuse because of which the teacher sends him back home. In the list of the broken slate are also his tattered shirt and “no knickers”. It is suggested in the poem that the teacher was not sensitive about the life of deprivation that the dalit child suffered. At this stage the voice of the child and that of the writer become one. Mark the use of “ruled” in the poem. The teacher gave out the *ruling*, much in the manner of an established court, that in the time to come the child would be no good for “farming nor for schooling!” the announcement of the teacher unsettles the voice of the poet. This is substantiated by the use of “ruled” immediately after they talk of farming and schooling. The first ruling is regarding what the child will not do. And the second one is regarding what he will do – “kneading the mud”. We mark in this description the highhandedness of a well provided upper caste teacher who can predict the future in the case of the socially weak. The teacher’s voice is that of destiny – it is the child’s destiny to knead the mud all his life. The poem takes us from here to the child being compelled to remain in a cattle-shed for two full days since it is feared that he has stolen something from his master’s household. The master is the landlord even though in the following description the child’s confessional stance is maintained. The language goes more and more into the control of the poet directly. The poet compares the landlord with God, “Eswara”, and finds that what God cannot do the landlord can. The satire is sharp and telling and the bitterness it underlines reflects the attitude of the poet – it is full of rejection and indeed sense of condemnation.

2.7 SOME OBSERVATIONS OF “JASMINE CREEPER UNDER A BANYAN TREE”

The poem can be read at two levels – at the level of thematic value and the aesthetic appeal suggested in it. So far as the thematic value is concerned, it is characterized by the bitterness of experience the socially oppressed sections undergo. The inequality between the rich and the poor in general and the rich and the socially oppressed in particular, comes out effectively. The gap is so wide that it does not appear it can be eliminated or narrowed. The important phrase under the head content is “the flood of humiliations”. This phrase is repeated towards the end of the poem, too. Does it have any connection with the jasmine creeper, with which the speaker in the poem compares him and the people close to him. We realize that towards the end of the poem “I” turns into “we” and the “we” soon enough starts looking towards the adversary and calls him “you”. Mark the line “*you* should be able to boast” the poem moves towards acquiring an aesthetics of its own. The conventional idea of beauty is turned into an ironical presence of weakness. In day to day use, jasmine

creepers symbolize elasticity, movement and softness; mostly young women are compared with jasmine creepers. As against this conventional image jasmine creeper is used here to denote lack of support and the inability to sustain oneself, as if one is born to always lean on someone else. We see here the aesthetic of criticizing established notions and creating the paradigm of assertion through it.

2.8 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have discussed one poem each of Kalekuri Prasad and Adigopula Venkataratnam. In the poems of these poets we have identified areas of recognition of the questions they face and the answers they give or point towards. Kalekuri Prasad has talked of strong assertion of the human in all of us, from the point of view of those who remained for a long time victims of oppression and denial. Prasad's poem uses broad imagery of historical events and their change into an area of optimism. Venkataratnam's poem on the other hand refers the reader to the deprivations and social brutality that the oppressed sections suffer. In the discussion given in this unit the two poets form one significant wholeness that becomes an effective indictment of the state of affairs that exist. In case of each poet, the aspects of what we term meaning and aesthetic have been underlined.

2.9 GLOSSARY

- punarapi jananam,** : literally the expression means being born again, also
punarapi maranam dying again. The implication is that the cycle of birth and death continues in human life.
- Sambuka** : a reference to the lower Caste ascetic sambuka in treta yug, the era of lord Rama. Rama killed him for performing religious rituals beyond his social call.

2.10 QUESTIONS

- 1) How is the idea of self-respect defined in the poem "For a Fistful of Self Respect"? Explain.
- 2) What does the Jasmine Creeper signify as against the Banyan Tree in Adigopula Venkataratnam's poem "Jasmine Creeper Under a Banyan Tree"? Bring out the connection between the two.

2.11 SUGGESTED READINGS

Satyanarayana, K. and Susie Tharu. *No Alphabet in Sight: New Dalit Writing From South India*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2011.

Ravikumar. *Venomous Touch: Notes on Caste, Culture and Politics*. Kolkata Samya, 2007.

Limbale, Sharankumar. *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature*. New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2007.

UNIT 3 BASUDEV SUNANI'S "COACHING CENTRE"

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction to Oriya Verse
- 3.2 Dalit Writings in Odisha
- 3.3 Basudev Sunani and his Poetry
- 3.4 Poem – "Coaching Centre"
- 3.5 Theme of Sunani's Poetry
- 3.6 Let Us sum Up
- 3.7 Questions
- 3.8 Suggested Readings

3.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will tell you about Oriya verse in general and then trace the presence and contribution of Basudev Sunani in particular. Sunani makes a fervent appeal to overcome the traditional pattern of education which promotes cultural hegemony of one particular social section. His satirical account is subtle and takes his poetry to a new height. Your course has got only one poem of Sunani – "Coaching centre". However, we will have a comprehensive view of the themes and writing patterns of the given poet through an extended discussion. Reading his poems gives us an orientation into Indian social life and I am sure that you will enjoy the discussion provided below.

3.1 INTRODUCTION TO ORIYA VERSE

The origin of Oriya poetry can be traced back to the Charyapadas, a form of Buddhist mystical verses, composed presumably in the tenth century A.D. Sarala Das's *Mahabharat*, written in the fifteenth century, clearly shows that Oriya had already matured as a language and become a fit medium for stable literature. Medieval Oriya poetry, composed between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries, consisted mostly of *kavyas* (romantic/narrative poems), *Puranas* (narrative poems with themes borrowed from the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Bhagabata* and folklore), *Bhajanas* (devotional poems), *Champus*, *Chautishas* and *Chhandas* (poetic forms with a variety of themes). Medieval poets mostly depended on the Royal Court and the folk performers for popularising their work among the masses.

Radhanath Roy (1848-1908) emerged as the first major modern poet who broke away from the medieval tradition. He was successful in creating a new idiom and form and explored new themes. Some people feel that his poetry was stimulated with western education. In all, he wrote nine *kavyas*, the themes of which were borrowed from Greek sources. These blended the two literary traditions: the Indian and the western. Patriotism is a dominant theme in his work.

Madhu Sudan Rao (1853-1912), Gangadhar Mehar (1962-1924), Nanda Kishore Bal (1875-1928) and Fakir Mohan Senapati (1843-1918) were Ray's contemporaries.

Rao wrote lyrics and other forms on divine love and patriotism in a style that is sanskritised and literary. Meher borrowed his themes from the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and other classical sources and was a superb craftsman. Senapati wrote about ordinary experiences of life, in a language that is colloquial.

The first two decades of the twentieth century saw the emergence of a group of poets whose chief concern was patriotism. Gopabandhu Das (1877-1928), one of the founders of the modern Odisha state, was the leader of this group, which was known as the Satyabadi Group. It was followed by another group, called the Sabuja (the Greens) who wrote under the influence of Western and Bengali literatures. The sabuja poets introduced new themes and forms, and their work was youthful.

Considering the fact that the reading public in Odisha is limited, the richness and variety of modern Odia poetry is amazing. It clearly proves that poetry is the genre in which the Odia genius has been most articulate. Mayadhar Mansinha (1905-1973), Radha Mohan Gadanayak (b.1911) and Godavarish Mohapatra (1900-1938), Ananta Patnaik (1910-1988) and Sachidananda Routray (b.1919), who belong to both pre-and post-independence periods, are major poets of this century.

Mansinha and Gadanayak have written excellent lyrics, odes, sonnets and ballads on variety of subjects. Mansinha's love lyrics in his collections *Dhupa* (sacred Flame) and Gadanayak's collections of ballads in *Smaranika* (Remembrances) are classics in Odia poetry. Godavarish Mohapatra, who edited *Niankhunta* (*Burning Pastle*), a magazine devoted to political and social criticism, published a large number of satires which have added a new dimension to modern Odia poetry. Ananta Patnaik has made bold experiments in the diction and form of modern poetry; (unlike Mansinha and Gadanayak, who generally preferred a conventional style and form) His themes range from Marxism to the disillusionment that followed India's independence.

It is also important to take note of Rout Roy. He took the Odia readers by storm when he published *Baji Rout* in 1943, a long poem that celebrated the martyrdom of a boatman boy who succumbed to the bullets of British police. Rout Roy is a prolific poet and has published as many as twenty collections of poems. His *Pallishri*, dealing with Odia village life, is as successful as his *Pratima Nayak* a poem that portrays the suffering and the predicament of a city girl. A winner of *Jnanpitha* award, Rout Roy has recently published a few poems with religion as their theme. It is interesting that a poet, who was inspired by Marxism in this youth, has chosen Lord Jaganath as a theme in his old age.

Guru Prasad Mohanty (b.1924), Ramakanta Rath (b.1934), Sitakant Mahapatra (b.1937), Jagannath Prasad Das (b.1936), Soubhgya Kumar Mishra (b.1941) Devdas Chhotray (b.1946) Rajendra Kishore Panda (b.1944) and Hara Prasad Das (b.1945) are some of the major poets of the post-independence period. The list given here is by no means exhaustive.

Guru Prasad Mohanty's 'Kala-Purusha', is a land mark in modern Odia Poetry, Though based on T.S.Eliot's 'The Waste Land', 'Kala-Purusha' reads like an original poem, with its Indian (Odia) landscapes, situation and characters. Ramakanta Rath is perhaps the most powerful poet of the post-Rout Roy scenario. In an idiom that is distinct and sophisticated, and imagery that is startling, Rath often deals with loneliness, death and agony in a metaphysical vein. Sitakant Mahapatra writes about intimate personal experiences in colloquial idiom and often blends myth and

contemporaneity. He is the most widely translated poet in Odia. Rath and Mahapatra have won the Saraswati and the Jnanpitha awards respectively and have brought distinction to modern Odia Poetry, Jagannath Prasad Das, like Rath, often concerns himself with the lonely predicament of the modern man.

Soubhgya Kumar Mishra is a distinct voice, witty, ironical and fresh. Rajendra Kishore Panda (b.1944) can employ a verity of styles successfully, colloquial as well as literary. Chhotroy is lyrical and witty. Hara Prasad Das makes bold experiments in form and language. Harihar Mishra derives much of this inspiration and imagery from his native town, Puri, the citadel of Lord Jagannath. He employs religious imagery and symbolism in a secular sense. Some of the other important poets of modern period are Brajanath Rath, Sourindra Barik, Nrusingha Kumar Rath, Prasanna Kumar Mishra, Hara Prasad Paricha Patnaik and Phani Mohanty. The emergence of a number of women poets is an important fact in the post-independence literary scene. Manorama Mohapatra Biswal, Pratibha Satpathy, Brahmotri Mohanty and Sucheta Mishra have brought in lyricism, grace and the feminine perspective to modern Odia poetry. Satpathy has been the most prolific of the women poets and like Sitakant Mahapatra, has often blended myth and reality.

3.2 DALIT WRITINGS IN ODISHA

Noted Oriya dalit critics such as Prof Raj Kumar would prefer to trace the development of Odia Dalit Literature to 17th Century and consider other forms of protest literature as pioneering in this field. This is also relevant to mention that there was no distinct literary movement in the name of “Oriya Dalit Literature” in the pre-Independence era. Unlike Maharashtra, Gujarat, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and other Indian states, the state of Orissa has not experienced vigorous Dalit protest in a socio-political sense. It is only recently that some writers and poets have seriously started writing to represent a “divided people” (There are at least ninety-three Scheduled Caste communities in Odisha having different customs, traditions, dialects and deities of their own. It is in this sense Dalits in Odisha, as elsewhere, are divided communities). The literary genres they have started experimenting with are limited to poetry, short stories, plays and critical essays. Novels, autobiographies and other forms of literature are rare.

Among the story writers the name of Ramachandra Sethi finds prominence. In his stories, and particularly in “Dwitiya Buddha” (The Second Buddha), Sethi provides a powerful critique of the pervasive Jagannath Cult of Orissa. The untouchable protagonist, alter ego of the author, finds Sri Kshetra and Sri Jagannath in the body of his wife. Here both Jagannath, the sacred and the supposedly untouchable body become metaphors to cross their swords on each other. Apparently there is no rejection of the Hindu God but the subtle suggestion is hardly missed. Among the poets who have been raising their voices powerfully against inequality and injustice are Bichitranand Nayak, Basudev Sunani, Kumaramani Tanti, Sanjay Bag, Anjubala Jena, and Mohan Jena.

3.3 BASUDEV SUNANI AND HIS POETRY

Basudev Sunani (born 1962) is another poet of growing repute who has been identified as one of the most powerful poetic voices in Odisha. Though he fundamentally writes in his mother tongue but by virtue of his translation in English

and other Indian languages, he has got readers and followers all over country as well. The Collections of Poetry include:

Aneka Kichhi Ghatibara Achhi (1995)
Mahula Bana (1999)
Asprushya (2001)
Karadi Hata (2005)
Chhi (2008)
Caste Out (2008)
Kalia Ubachha (2010)

According to Odiya poet-translator, J P. Das, "Primarily, Basudev Sunani is a poet who has refused to associate with the typical provincial, regional and pastoral literatures of Odisha". He presents through his poems a powerful critique of the so called mainstream but a decadent, hypocritical, and hegemonic Bramhanical culture that provides the alternative in the folk tradition and mythology typical to the dalits. An intense desire for a just and more human world marks the poetry of Sunani. He has to his credit several volumes of poetry with myriad colours of day to day life, all revolving a round the humanistic concerns of the poet. All poems deal with the touching issues of untouchability, questioning the very rationale of a society which perpetrates such heinous crimes against humanity. Through his poems Sunani performs the twin function: annihilation of the hegemonic structure and reconstruction of the same on the foundation of humanity.

Over the years, Sunani has come up with many literary masterpieces to his credit – besides four collections of poetry. His recent book on *Dalit, Capitalism and Globalisation* has put him in the league of dalit thinkers. Through this book he has once again tried to show that dalit discourse is not essentially that of dalit but is a highly coherent perspective of Indian nationalism. His poetry represents a strong, articulate and engaged Dalit presence in the world of Oriya verse. Sunani belongs to Gana/Dom caste of Western Orissa and is a veterinarian by profession. He takes great delight in sharing his imagination through poetry, essays, short stories and newspaper columns. He has written many poems, essays and short stories. His works have been widely published in various journals and magazines, both national and regional, on various issues pertaining to the Dalits. His essays: *Mahatma Phule* (2008), *Dalit Punjibaad O Bhumandlikarana* (2006) and prose works such as *Dalita Sanskrutara Itihasa* (History of Dalit Culture, 2009) and *Dalit Encounter* (2010) give us a glimpse of the sheer profundity in Dalit Literature and its social relevance.

Sunani's ideas have represented a mixed bag. A Dalit voice is noticeable throughout his work. Since he came from the traditionally underdeveloped hilly tract of western Orissa, sympathy for the oppressed class ran through his poetry. One need only look at the marginalised characters in his poems: they could be goatherds, farmers or petty politicians, but none was above the poverty line. Gradually, Sunani began to take an increasingly clear stance that became particularly pronounced with the publication of his third collection, *Asprushya*, or 'Untouchable'. From this point on, Sunani began to be identified specifically with Dalit poetry. It seemed that he had found his true voice at last. Encouraged by public appreciation, Sunani went on to produce two more collections of this kind, *Karadi Haata* (Bamboo Shoots Market) and *Chhi* (Sneer).

The Dalit focus of Sunani's work does not suggest that no other Oriya poet deals with issues of class discrimination and social injustice. Senior writers such as

Ashutosh Parida and Prasanna Mishra have delved into the subject. Sunani's contemporaries, including Bharat Majhi and Akhil Nayak, also explore the theme sensitively, even though indirectly. Sunani, however, writes almost exclusively on the lives of his people; and in so doing, he seems to be growing from strength to strength.

As far as his opinion about Indian social situation and the point of representation is concerned, Basudev Sunani has stated unequivocally the impossibility of sharing the caste experience of being Dalit with anyone outside the fold. This is primarily because of the perpetuation of the caste related hegemonic tendencies in Indian society. He has also expressed concern over the inability of Oriya literature in exploring the issue of caste in its many overt and insidious avatars. His poetry is a scathing indictment of a rigidly stratified and deeply inhuman social order and it is reflected in Sunani's scorching, forthright but textured verse. The strength of his poetry lies in the absence of sentimentalism and an emphasis on reasoning and a spirit of enquiry.

3.4 POEM –"COACHING CENTRE"

Oh learned men!

The poem begins with an engaging note that can also be termed as dialogic and conversational. The tone may remind our literature students of Donne's invocations and abrupt colloquial style, such as "For God's sake hold your tongue and let me love". When we look further, the poem turns this dialogue into argumentation.

You surely know
that impurities of touch
completely dissolve
when a high caste man
takes a dip in water
and changes his clothes.

The poem is made of short and pithy sentences which seem to carry a lot of steam and passion. The poem raises the question of untouchability and probes its reasons and justification. In a subtle way, Sunani suggests that untouchability has nothing to do with one being "pure" or "impure". If that was being the case, one could easily take a dip into a flowing stream and get purged of all impurities. Read the following:

But look at the untouchable hordes!
Howsoever much
they rub themselves
with soap and water
and splash and dip
and scrub and polish,
they cannot shake off 'untouchability',
which clings to their bodies.

Through these lines, Sunani effectively communicates the hollowness of the purity arguments which are offered to support the caste system. He is somehow able to signal to the fact that the caste system has been employed to subjugate and suppress

a particular section of society and to create a divisive framework. This is what Dr B R Ambedkar has mentioned bringing in the point that Caste system is not a division of labour but a division of labourers. Going further with the poem, we note:

That is how and why
they have remained untouchables
over the millennia.
No-one has been able to decide
if untouchability
is a colour or a touch,
a feeling or an ideal;
whether it resides
in the one who touches,
or the one who is touched.

The poet is able to delve deeper into the origin and rationale of the caste system through these lines. A sense of intrigue is expressed with the perpetual influence of the caste system amidst most other socio-economic changes. These lines simultaneously underline the fixity of this system and also how it has gone unchallenged for all these years without any serious reconsideration.

A learned high caste man
could start a coaching center
and make good money
if he could simply teach untouchables
how to shake off untouchability
with a single dip in water
and a change of clothes.

The last stanza offers a piece of advice as to how a person belonging to the upper caste can initiate an entrepreneurial venture in the form of a coaching centre to wipe off untouchability. This is also acceptance of the fact that caste still has not gone away.

The usage of the word "learned" is satirical and calls for an urgent change in the conventional ways and thinking on untouchability.

3.5 THEME OF SUNANI'S POETRY

Sunani has primarily written poems based on dalit identity and discourse but has also engaged himself with some poems such as "The Visitor", "This Crow" and "Golden Jubilee", which do not deal with the Dalit experience per se. However, his literary fame rests more on his reputation as a Dalit Poet. His association with the Dalit theme reflects in almost every poem he has written, for example, the eponymous visitor in the dead of night is a mysterious being; the crow has donned white feathers; and the "Golden Jubilee" paints a satirical picture:

*Gandhi –
a cool painting
to brighten up
the living room.*

Only at the end of this poem, can a Dalit reading be made from the following lines:

*The dancers do not know
how many years
they have been dancing.*

Or perhaps it is that the translator intended to enhance and broaden the selection of Dalit writing. Overall, Das presents a one-dimensional Sunani: socially committed and, by extension, somewhat scatological, digging up dirt and sewage pits to let readers have the “Smell of Untouchability”:

*Simply because my feet
touched the ground
you are seeking to purify it,
sprinkling holy water.*

This poem portrays how acutely the sense of caste persists among many ‘upper’ castes – how it oftentimes lurks just under the skin:

*Perhaps you do not know
that the land your house stands on
is surrounded by air
suffused with my dirty breath.*

These lines prepare the reader to face a poet driven by rage at the upper castes, and the sense of inferiority among his own people. As such, he takes it upon himself to drive away this dated discrimination. Though this message is not explicitly stated in the poems selected for *Cast Out*, one feels it through and through. Sunani might point to the indignity and humiliations that a Dalit suffers in his day-to-day life; yet nowhere does he lose control over his tongue, letting it mouth obscenities. (This is quite unlike much of Dalit poetry in Marathi, such as that of Namdeo Dhasal). On the other hand, neither does he exhibit self-pity; instead, he maintains a fine balance, the kind evident in “Content”:

*I changed my religion,
Not because I thought
I'd attain salvation
But only for a bit of consolation
When I'm in mental agony.*

The very first poem included in this volume, “Prayer”, sets the tone, adopted by the poet throughout much of the rest of the work – that of an oppressed caste, treated unfairly, sometimes to a sub-human level. Going beyond any well-meaning man, or a purportedly concerned society, Sunani says that even god is helpless in doing away with the caste system. Read the following lines:

*Can you do that, God –
Pick from the bowl
Our respective surnames
And return them
Each to his own?*

These lines bear the desires emphasis, which is authentic since practiced by an insider. In “Nectar-seekers”, Sunani chastises upper-caste men who seek “nectar”.

The question is apt and carries great appeal:

*Can you show me the man here
who has tasted nectar?
I'll pull him by the hair;
give him a slap and tell him:
you fool...*

Instead the people placed high in society should, writes the chastising poet, "empathize with" the ones they look down upon. Empathy is the fountainhead of all nectars, Sunani powerfully writes. But writing declamatory verse – and Dalit poetry is mostly of this mode – is an uphill task, requiring the writer to overcome the stereotypical picture of a Dalit as downtrodden and subjugated by humiliation. This image is evident on the cover of the book, with the reproduction of Jogen Choudhury's famous painting "Fear". In contrast, Sunani's achievement as a Dalit poet lies in his subtlety of expression. Talking of the 'taste' of nectar, he brings in a loving picture of a woman labourer who hides berries in the end of her sari, making his imagery realistic and convincing.

A great many poems in this selection – such as "Seek Him Out" and "Cursed City" – deal with the oppressed class's social as well as physical conditions. In this, Sunani represents a contradiction. On the one hand, he says, in "Self-Respect":

*From now on,
the hatred I face everyday
will be my self-respect.*

But when he falls off this cherished tract he can be preachy and a bit loud, as is the case in "Alone in the Temple":

*Here,
one who cannot scream
his heart out
is impotent*

The poet is sombre, however, when he withholds more than he says, becoming less angry and vituperative. There are extraordinary patches in many of the poems included in *Cast Out*, in which the poet is seen to be the blessed one seeking forgiveness – forgiving his tormentors. The intent in these works is that, with a change in caste dynamics being a possibility, the writer does not have to say anything harsh: "The monkey knows/which branch will break today."

Some of Sunani's most accomplished poetic pieces are, however, those containing brief character sketches, of a Haju Tandhi, Chelin Bai or Sadananda. It is the innocence of these characters that saves them from being impostors. Chelin Bai is the goatherd in whose eyes the poet "sees the innocence of a thousand goats". Sadananda, a farmer from the drought-affected tribal pocket of Orissa who has come to receive a medal from the governor "for growing the best brinjal", finds that the sea has imprisoned all water. Or Haju Tandhi, a common labourer, who has the "strength"

*to do any task you give him:
from collecting flowers
for your puja,
to cleaning your latrine*

For instance, *Cast Out* (2008) is the name of the volume which is translated into English by J P. Das and contains powerful poems like “Coaching Center”, “Body Purification”, “Prayer”, “Smell of Untouchability”, “Nectar Seekers” and “Chelin Bai”. In poems after poems, Sunani powerfully critiques the caste system of the country; his critiques range from simple questioning and expression of displeasure to the most complex processes of myth making; for instance, in “Prayer” he puts a rhetorical question in the form of a challenge to God: Can God really differentiate between the surnames and return them to their respective holders if they are offered to Him in a bowl? It is pertinent to note that surnames are the indicators of caste and hierarchy in the society on the basis of which so much of oppression is legitimized. In “Coaching Center” he mocks at the sheer materialist agenda of the supposed spiritual pursuits. But in the volumes titled *Asprushya* (2001) and *Chhi* (2008) one finds the lofty questions on the tradition and culture based on hypocrisy and inhumanity.

Just like what Sunani does so successfully in the poem “Coaching Centre”, he has used satire in almost all his poetry. There are Volumes titled *Mahula Bana* (1999), *Karadi Haat* (2005) and *Kalia Ubacha* (2011) where one finds all the more subtle but powerful satire on the dominant Oriya culture. In *Kalia Ubacha*, for example, one finds a sharp allusion to the origin and nature of the all powerful Jagannath Cult of Orissa. Sunani makes Kalia, another popular name for Lord Jagannath, the protagonist of this long poem. Kalia seems to have been fed up of the restrictive rituals of the Puri temple and goes to the sea beach in search of his childhood friend, a low caste person. He pours his heart out in front of his friend and expresses his shock, dismay and disillusionment with the way he has been appropriated by the dominant social groups. He fondly remembers his early days when he was the family deity of the Shabar Biswabasu (a tribal). He also feels cheated at the way the Kshyatriya King Indradyumna stole Him from Biswabasu.

After hearing of the deities Indradyumna had appointed the cunning and crooked Bramhin Vidyapati to snare Lalita (the innocent daughter of Biswabasu) in amorous relation. Through Lalita, Vidyapati got to know the secret place where the deities were worshipped and later on finding an opportune moment he stole the deities— Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra— to hand them over to King Indradyumna.

Alluding to the plight of the untouchables and non-Hindus who are prevented from entering the Puri Temple and many other temples in Orissa, Kalia also expresses his strong displeasure at the way the Jagannath (literally, Lord of the Universe) has been made into Hindunath (Lord of the Hindus). Kalia feels suffocated at the hand of the priests and finds relief only in the company of his childhood friend who has nothing to offer, neither the wealth of the wealthy nor the knowledge and erudition of the Pandits but a compassionate heart of the dalit poet capable of human sympathy. Here in this poem as in many others, Sunani works in the realm of the folk and attempts to create a parallel history of his people.

It is in this way that Sunani’s works constitute not only documentation of the folk life, history, music and an alternate belief system but also provides a powerful alternative to the dominant socio-religious structure. Sunani invests great deal of intensity in his poems. Besides Sunani’s poetry leaves us with questions. The pain of the masses, lower down in scale is so disquieting since it has remained suppressed for years, with brute violence meted out to those who dare to utter them:

"My tongue will be severed/ And I will turn to stone." But there is no passive defeatism in this poetry either, "Why pray," he asks with quiet logic in one of his poems, "if one is not afraid/ of the dark?"

In another poem that lashes out at the laughable farce of contemporary Independent India, Sunani likens the country's mute citizenry to a troupe of robotic circus performers always ready to dance to another's tune. And there is an even deeper tragedy at work: "The dancers do not know/ how long they have been doing their job."

What is clear, however, is that, this is a poet who is deeply hurt and fulfils his role honestly through poems that leave a mark on the reader.

3.6 LET US SUM UP

We can sum up the discussion on this poem with an understanding that Sunani's poem caters to the overall spirit of the content and context of this unit. It is centered on the literature of the margins aims at giving the writings their true and deserved space which have largely been denied in the mainstream literary framework. The poem "Coaching Centre" gives us a glimpse of the operation of caste system and makes a vehement call for ending it so that one moves towards an egalitarian society. "Coaching centre" also hints at a coaching of the mind in which all divisive patterns take shape.

3.7 QUESTIONS

- 1) Write a critical appreciation of the poem "Coaching Centre"
- 2) List out the salient features of Basudev Sunani's poetry.
- 3) Do you agree that Sunani raises the all important issue of Contemporary Indian society that needs immediate solution? Discuss.
- 4) "Coaching Centre" is a satire on the overall system of knowledge working on our midst. Comment.

3.8 SUGGESTED READINGS

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UNIT 4 HIRA BANSODE AND L.S. ROKADE

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Indian Poetry – A Historical Perspective
- 4.3 The Aesthetics of Dalit Literature
 - 4.3.1 Hira Bansode: A Brief Life-Sketch
- 4.4 The Poetic Appeal
- 4.5 “Yashodhara”: Text
- 4.6 “Yashodhara”: Contexts and Perspectives
- 4.7 L.S. Rokade’s Poem “To Be or Not to Be Born”
- 4.8 Text: “To Be or Not to Be Born”
- 4.9 Commentary and Textual Analysis of “To Be or Not to Be Born”
- 4.10 Observations
- 4.11 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.12 Questions
- 4.13 Suggested Readings

4.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you should be able to:

- Understand the craft of poetry as reflected in Hira Bansode’s poem;
- Understand a brief Historical Perspective on Indian poetry;
- Appreciate as to what Dalit Discourse is;
- Understand the Poem “Yashodhara” and its multiple layers of meaning; and
- Analyse L.S. Rokade’s poem.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Dear Students, you always have enjoyed poetry but it is interesting to note that poetry written in India during the twentieth-century is connected often in numerous complicated ways to the world in which it is written, read, and circulated. Poetry written during the last few decades, can easily be termed as a ‘silent volcano’ with a number of voices. The variety of words and expressions relates in modern Indian poems to an unusually large number of contexts, many of which make individual texts significant simultaneously at the local, regional, national, and international levels.

In order to understand how these contexts mediate particular poems, it is useful to look synoptically at three of them: the history of poetic movements in India; the network of national and international allusions, references, and influences that gives modern Indian poetry inter-textual resonance; and the social circumstances in which recent Indian writers have produced their poetry.

Incidentally, this poem may take you to the Prologue of Wife of Bath in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tale*. While reading that poem you would have realized how the reading of religious scriptures has always been a male domain and how it can be overturned if a woman begins to interpret it. The orientation which you got through the character of Wife of Bath will help your understanding of the current poem.

Centrality of the poem "Yashodhara" is a sense of deep-rooted concern about the absence of women's contribution to this world. Right from the title, every word and sentence raises a doubt and distrust over the ways and means of writing history. One of the primary contexts of this poem lies in contesting the historicity of history.

You must have come across the charge against history by the feminist movement that history means 'his' story and not 'her' story. Bansode argues in a very subtle and effective way about modern life, that it contains many stereotypes against women. A passive project and prejudice in history is responsible for this state of affairs. It is because of that 'absence', that women's identity has been mastered and misappropriated by patriarchal forces.

This poem does not address directly the voices or screaming silences of billions of women who have been discriminated, against and insulted by patriarchal forces over the years. The arguments made through this poem concern the crisis that women face in general.

The worst condition in such a case is testified by UN report that reveals the fact that one in every three women experiences violence in her life time. This means one billion women have become victims in one way or the other. This violence takes place within homes at the hands of people closest to the women. This is domestic terrorism and it has its roots globally. The two 'great' Civilizations, India and China have killed approximately one hundred million members of female sex because of patriarchal reasons. This is not an act of illiterate people but of the educated who execute these killings with latest technologies. On the other hand, millions of women were killed in Europe as witches between the 16th and 18th centuries. This showed the dark face of human civilization. Thus, millions were trafficked, and millions were forced to undergo genital mutilation, to look like Barbie doll. The horrifying scene is that there are less women than men on this Planet at the present time. Thus problems of women have been understood only partially, by feminists. To complete the feminist movement with inclusive spirit, poets like Bansode have taken up the issue through their writings.

4.2 INDIAN POETRY – A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

When we survey the history of poetic movements in India, we find that Indian poetry has largely been a 'male domain'. However, the situation of women poets in Indian English, may prove to be a good measure of the change as a whole. In the 1960s the foreground was occupied by relatively isolated figures like Monika Verma and Kamala Das. In the 1970s Gauri Deshpande, Malathi Rao, Anna Sujatha Modayik, Lakshmi Kannan, Mamta Kalia, and Sunita Jain, as well as Eunice de Souza, Melanie Silgado, Priya Karunakaran, Debjani Chatterjee, Nasima Aziz, and Meena Alexander entered the scene, giving it the look of a community of women poets. In the 1980s and early 1990s, Imtiaz Dharker, Tilottama Rajan, Charmayne D'Souza, Shanta Acharya, Menka Shivdasani, Chitra Divakaruni and Sujata Bhatt,

among others, filled the frame joining the poets who had begun their careers in the previous decades, giving that community an impressive new profile. Together with their counterparts in the other languages, these women writers have effectively freed Indian writing from its “traditional male-dominated centers.”

4.3 THE AESTHETICS OF DALIT LITERATURE

The rejection of the past that flows through the heart of Dalit literature is the main strength of Dalit literature. Several examples of such rejection occur in the Dalit literature which achieves because of this a great deal of density, vivacity and verbal polish.

Besides, rejecting the whole traditional logic of pollution through touch, ritual purification, genealogical transmission, discrimination and exploitation, Dalit writers also reject the canon of Hindu literature itself, seeing in classics like the *Mahabharata* and the Sanskrit Shastras (legal and social codes) the aberrations of thought that made untouchability a horrifying reality. This would be amply demonstrated when one reads Hira Bansode’s poems. Their content is broadly similar to African American writers, such as Sonia Sanchez, to suggest that the roots of racism lie partly in ancient works like Sanskrit Vedas, with their valorization of light over darkness, and of fair-skinned Indo-Europeans over the dark-skinned indigenous people of the Indo-Gangetic plain. Despite Bagul’s claim that Dalit literature as such begins only in 1956, the dark skinned Dalits have not done away with the past altogether. During the past thirty years they have demolished the classical Hindu traditions only to replace them with a Dalit version of ancient Buddhist mythology and a canon of Marathi writing by Dalits, going back to the earliest surviving writings of the 1890s, and through oral narratives and songs to Chokhamela in the thirteenth century, a shudra saint-poet.

To grasp the issue clearly, we must approach works of Eleanor Zelliot, who goes beyond her historical research on Dr Ambedkar to concentrate on Dalit women writers who, together with Dalit men, are enriching Marathi and, indeed, Indian literature. Amidst a lot of material, Zelliot’s article, “Stri Dalit Sahitya: the new voice of women poets” provides much-needed material, translated into English, from significant Dalit women’s poetry. These complement the four volumes, edited by Arjun Dangle, of Dalit autobiographies, short fiction and verse written mainly by men, and the abhangas (religious lyrics) of the few Untouchable women among 14th century Bhakti poets in the first volume by Tharu and Lalita, *Women’s Writing in India*. Zelliot’s translations and critique of Dalit women poets across two generations- Hira Bansode, Jyoti Lanjewar and Mina Gajbhiye—make images of women’s experience invaluable.

4.3.1 Hira Bansode: A Brief Life-Sketch

Hira Bansode was born as Kamble, an Untouchable from the Mahar caste. She grew up in a neighbourhood of various castes, yet her contours of personality were established at a young age: We could not enter the house of a Maratha or touch their water when they came to fill pitchers at the well. If a Maratha child played with one of us, he or she would be beaten, yet as children we were not fully aware of the concept of caste. While still in the ninth standard, Hira Bansode’s marriage was fixed. Her new husband as well as her father-in-law encouraged her to continue education, seeing that she held great potential as a student. However, her mother-in-law, fearing Hira would overshadow her less educated son, opposed Hira’s

scholastic goals and gave her rigorous tasks to perform at home, hoping this would leave her with no energy or time for school. Hira maintained her household and only after all the day's work was completed, could rush to the school. Early mornings and late evenings Hira would study her Marathi texts by the light of a street lamp. On the day of her S.S.C. examination, Hira's mother-in-law locked her in a room. Hira was unable to complete the examination and would have to wait an entire year for another opportunity. The next year, Hira passed with a first class ranking and later continued her education only after her mother-in-law's death. Such opposition to education is not uncommon among Dalits, to whom education offers a way out of their difficult conditions. In many cases, the mother of a Dalit child becomes the strongest supporter of her child's education: The mother [of Dalit children] sweeps the common pathways, collects the waste and washes the clothes. She is accustomed to begging for the children in order to send them to school. The mother does countless minor jobs for her children, and suffers because of this so they can have education.

Eventually, Hira earned a B. A. in Marathi and in Sanskrit, as well as an M.A. in Marathi. She lives now outside Bombay and works as a government employee. Her experiences from childhood and adolescence became handy in later years for challenging the age old mores of caste and untouchability. This happened through her conversion to Buddhism, of presiding over a Dalit women's colloquy, *Samvadini*, combining the principles of *stri mukti* and Dalit ethnicity. These gave her distinctive poetic voice. Hira's education and familiarity with Sanskrit are evident in her poetry and offer an interesting paradox to the reader who hears the language of high caste culture. "Sanskriti" best exhibits this versatility, drawing heavily from the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, and employing Sanskrit words intermingled with the vernacular. A departure from Hira's usual subject matter is the odd poem "Hippy." In it she describes her impressions of the life of street children in their teens and early twenties as the narrator adopts their perspective, attacking what Hira sees as their romanticization of poverty and lack of morals. What strikes us as peculiar about this poem is its inclusion in *Phyriad*, a collection of poetry dedicated to lodging her complaint against caste Hindu culture. Through her criticism of "Hippies" she turns the table on her oppressors, becoming herself a judge, and to some extent, I have included this poem with the others because it suggests the various points of view Hira presents, shifting her narrative perspective often, and offers a richer variety to her work.

4.4 THE POETIC APPEAL

Hira Bansode has emerged as a major voice for women as well as a poet, as Christian Novetzke's recent article in *The Journal of South Asian Literature* (28:1&2) shows. While there have been women writers in the Dalit sahitya movement almost from the beginning, their voices now seem stronger and their numbers are greater. Those who read the anthology *Poisoned Bread* should note the autobiographical essay by Kusum Pawde on her "Story of My Sanskrit," her long battle to become a teacher of that sacred language in a Nagpur College. A short story in Marathi by Urmilla Pawar has been included as text book reading for S.N.D.T. Women's University in Bombay, and she is a frequent speaker at conferences on Dalit problems as well as at women's gatherings.

Among the important points that Bansode raises through her poetry, one is that Dalit women continue to struggle to make their voices heard and understood, to shed light on the oppression of their culture, and eventually to alleviate the sense of

oppression. Though so much time has passed after Indian Independence, the social situation has remained static for Dalits. The feminist movement which has made lofty claims about its achievements has done nothing sufficient to challenge India's status quo. Hira also expresses the need for a massive social movement as it is not possible for a handful of people to effectively challenge age-old systems like caste and patriarchy. She has talked about initiating an alternative forum which has a broad base. In her opinion, a mass movement led by Dalit women should replace the current Stri Mukti.

Hira Bansode believes that the task of literature and art has always been to expose social inadequacies and the same is visible through her poems also. It is seen that Literature and art have never been devoted solely to exposure. Dalit revolutionary writers and artists' targets for exposure had never been masses but only aggressors, exploiters and oppressors. Here, it is indispensable that a writer should criticize the people's shortcomings but attention should be given to their educational needs.

Hira Bansode, in the introduction to her book of poetry *Phyriad*, published in Pune by Samaj Prabodhan Sanatha Prakashan in 1984, expressed the vitality and urgency of the Dalit movement with this metaphor:

I visualize a funny picture: A white collar woman is running behind a western lady. There is a hundred mile's distance between them. And two thousand miles behind the white collared woman, there is a tiny point on the horizon, a Dalit woman, ever so slowly travelling in that direction. This is an uneven race. The golden day of Babasaheb's dream will dawn the moment this race is finished. We are waiting for that moment.

Bansode's poetry has exposed us to diverse themes as womanhood, motherhood, friendship, honest commitment, human values and love. Her poetry critiqued the forces of status quo and projected dauntless passion, wisdom, and intensity that dismantle stereotypes, and render candidly the lived and shared experiences, of women. It vehemently, reflected the socio-cultural oppression, representing women belonging to the poorest strata of Indian society while historicizing and clinically diagnosing its inherent contradictions. As a versatile writer, Hira seems uninterested in being boxed into categories and has managed to transcend its constraints to acknowledge a larger humanity. As she rightly observed said once "My poetry is about humanity and its seemingly endless struggles for survival, for change, for justice and sometimes humanity happen to be the oppressed marginalized... it's a wonderful process of all these voices coming out of me."

Another strain in women's poetry (and to some extent in the newer poetry of all Dalits) is a criticism of the Dalit group itself. Her poetry reflects a wonderful blend of personal emotional response and socially aware response to her environment. Her poems focus on women's issues, particularly those dealing with women's mental and psychological harassment, and repression of their desires. She is willing to sacrifice all for her fellow sufferers.

Bansode is able to combine poetry with activism, and participated in the "Long March" for the renaming of Marathwada University in honour of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, whose work in the 1950's had brought higher education to the Marathwada area.

4.5 “YASHODHARA”: TEXT

O Yashodhara!

You are like a dream of sharp pain,
 life-long sorrow.
 I don't have the audacity to look at you.
 we were brightened by Buddha's light,
 but you absorbed the dark
 until your life was mottled blue and dark,
 a fragmented life, burned out,

O Yashodahara!

The tender sky comes to you for refuge
 seeing your shining but fruitless life
 and the pained stars shed tears
 My heart breaks,
 seeing your matchless beauty,
 separated from your love,
 dimming like twilight.
 Listening to your silent sighs,
 I feel the promise of heavenly happiness is hollow.

Tell me one thing, Yashodhara, how did you
 contain the raging storm in your small hands?
 Just the idea of your life shakes the earth
 and sends the creaming waves
 dashing against the shore.
 You would have remembered
 while your life slipped by
 the last kiss of Siddharth's final farewell,
 those tender lips.

But weren't you aware, dear,
 of the heart-melting fire
 and the fearful awakening power
 of that kiss?

Lightening fell, and you didn't know it.
 he was moving towards a great splendor,
 far from the place you lay....

He went, he conquered, he shone.
 While you listened to the songs of his triumph
 your womanliness must have wept.
 You who lost husband and son
 must have felt uprooted

like the tender banana plant
But history doesn't talk about
the great story of your sacrifice.
If Siddarth had gone through
the charade of *samadhi*
a great epic would have been written about you!
You would have become famous in purana and palm-leaf
like Sita and Savithri
O Yashodhara!

I am ashamed of the injustice.
You are not to be found in a single Buddhist Vihara.
Were you really of no account?
But wait – don't suffer so.
I have seen your beautiful face.
You are between the closed eyelids of Siddharta.
Yashu, just you.

*By Hira Bansode, Marathi Poem translated by Jayant Karve and Philip Engblom.
Source: Poisoned Bread -Marathi Dalit Literature*

4.6 “YASHODHARA”: CONTEXTS AND PERSPECTIVES

There have been poems and narratives elsewhere in other languages as well about the way Gautam Buddha left his home without informing his wife. Poets and critics have offered a critical view of that situation. However, we do not see any adverse remark in this poem against the manner of Buddha leaving his home. Perhaps it is accepted that Buddha's coming out of his palace was part of a divine calling.

The title of the poem has an ironic undertone since her guests do not in anyway live up to her expectations. Bansode explores the psyche of legendary and historical figures whose voices have gone unrecorded. This is characteristic of all major Dalit creative writers that they take their audience to what has remained unrecorded in the history books. “Yashodhara” was first published in the popular magazine *Stree* in 1979. The praise used in the poem adds to the symbolic elements of the poem. ‘Absorbed the darkness’ suggests irony and power of poetry at the same time. Absorption of darkness is treated equal with enlightenment.

“Yashodhara” is fundamentally a scathing attack on the hypocritical caste-ridden society. The poet here articulates the pain Yashodhara suffered at the hands of the upper class. The experience of constant subjugation, separation and marginalization is expressed in a tone that is both vehement and sarcastic.

It is pertinent to share some biographical information about the main character in the poem. Yasodhara was the daughter of King Suppabuddha, and Pamitâ, sister of the Buddha's father, King Suddhodana. She was wedded to the Shakya prince Siddhartha, when she was 16 years of age. She gave birth to their only child, a boy named Râhula. On the day of his birth, the Prince left the palace. Yasodharâ was

devastated and overcome with grief. Hearing that her husband was leading a holy life, she emulated him by removing her jewellery, wearing a plain yellow robe and eating only one meal a day. Although relatives sent her messages to say that they would maintain her, she did not accept those offers. Several princes sought her hand but she rejected the proposals. Throughout her husband's six year of absence, Princess Yasodharâ followed the news of his actions closely.

When Lord Buddha visited Kapilavastu after enlightenment, Yasodharâ did not go to see her former husband but asked Rahula to go to Buddha to seek inheritance. For herself, she thought: "Surely if I have gained any virtue at all the Lord will come to my presence." To fulfill her wish Lord Buddha came to her and admired her patience and sacrifice which helped him to fulfill his wishes not just in this birth but also in previous birth.

After her son Râhula became a novice monk, Yasodharâ also entered the Order of Monks and Nuns and in due time attained Arahantship. She was ordained as Bhikkhuni included among the five hundred ladies following Mahaprajapati Gotami to establish Bhikkhuni Order. She died at 78, two years before Buddha's Parinirvaâna.

Bansode deserves special credit for bringing a clear feminist slant to Dalit poetry. She has used her poetry as a mouth-piece of Dalit women. The narrator in the poem plays the role of hostess to some upper-caste guests. Her treatment of the guests is unconditional and unpretentious. She appreciates her guests for their gesture of magnanimity since they have shed their feeling of caste superiority. She finds it surprising as the gap between low class and upper class was too large to be bridged. But the age-old problem has been effortlessly remedied by her guests with the mind as large as the sky.

In the poem, the devotion showed by the hostess has been compared to that of Shabari of the *Ramayana*. But unfortunately her devotion was short lived. The feeling of caste- superiority suddenly found expression in her guests' insolent remarks on the table-etiquette of the hostess. One of them even says, "You folk will never improve".

The hostess is terribly offended and breaks into a sense of nostalgia. She recalls her days of poverty when she had no access to milk or yoghurt. The expectations of the guests cannot be fulfilled since the hostess has been brought up in utter poverty. Her only source of energy was chutney on coarse bread. The hostess also says that shrikhand was not part of their language. The hostess who was so happy at the arrival of the guests now sounds like a liberated woman and defends her ignorance of table etiquette since it was society that had shaped her.

Hira Bansode has worked on a number of themes and concerns, particularly for the cause of Dalit women. All her poems including "Yashodhara" stress upon the need of Dalit women writers to articulate their concerns. Here it is also important to refer to the poem "To Shabari" in which Bansode remembers Shabari who tasted every berry before she offered it to Rama. Shabari has been occasionally referred to in the mainstream literary texts. Bansode decides to be on her side for being a sister and as an outcast.

4.7 L.S. ROKADE'S POEM "TO BE OR NOT TO BE BORN"

In this unit we also familiarize ourselves with Dalit poetry focusing upon L.S. Rokade's poem "To be or Not to be Born". In this block we have come across a number of Dalit poetic expressions that reflect the problematic existence of the socially oppressed sections in our society. Here, we will see one more distinct variation of Dalit experience that adds to our understanding of the class divided nature of our system. This is in the interrogatory mode. We are aware in general too that unless a social structure is subjected to critical examination, it does not yield its meaning in its complexity and objectivity. We also notice in this poem the wide range of representation from nature to society and from there to civilization.

4.8 TEXT: "TO BE OR NOT TO BE BORN"

Translated by Shanta Gokhale

Mother, you used to tell me
when I was born
your labour was very long.
The reason, mother,
the reason for your long labour:
I, still in your womb, was wondering
Do I want to be born –
Do I want to be born at all
in the land?
Where all paths raced horizonwards
but to me was barred.
All of you lay, eyes fixed on the sky
then shut them, saying
calmly, yes,
the sky has a prop, a prop!
Your body covered
with generation of dire poverty.
Your head pillowed
on constant need.
You sleep at night
and in the day you writhed
with empty fists tied to your breast!
Here you are not supposed to say
that every human being comes
from the union of man and woman.
Here, nobody dare
broaden the beaten track.
You ran round and round yourself
exclaiming YES, of course

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the earth is round, is round.
 Mother, this is your land
 flowing with water.
 Rivers break their banks,
 Lakes brim over,
 And you, one of the human race
 must shed blood
 struggle and strike
 for a palmful of water.
 I spit on this great civilization
 Is this land yours, mother,
 because you were born here?
 Is it mine
 because I was born to you?
 Must I call this great land mine love it
 sing its glory?
 Sorry, mother, but truth to tell
 I must confess I wondered
 Should I be born
 Should I be born into this land?

4.9 COMMENTARY AND TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF “TO BE OR NOT TO BE BORN”

The title reminds us of the famous Hamlet’s soliloquy which starts with “to be or not to be”. In the soliloquy Hamlet is thinking of the question whether he should continue living or “cease to be”. This poem however, borrows only the few words from Shakespeare’s Hamlet but takes us straightaway into a direction Hamlet talked of. L.S. Rokade goes into the question of whether to be born and if yes, where. There is a fond expression of choice – should the child decide to be born in a country that will take him to a particular part of the earth, what he calls “this land”. The mood of the poem is the dialogue that takes us to the dilemma of the child just to be born. The presence of the mother in the poem is that of a listener whereas the child yet to be born is the speaker, observer, and interpreter. Let us see what the child observes in the world where he is about to be born.

It is perceived by the child that he has in front of him, a number of paths one of which might be allowed for him to adopt. These paths, believes the child, may help one journey upwards. The bitter truth however, of the child’s situation is that the particular path tradition allotted to him would not take him upwards- the reason is that this path is blocked and will compel him to remain stuck where he is born. This is the primary question of the accident called birth. The moment the child is born, a place comes into existence with its restrictions and particular choices that it will grant to its citizens. For the child in the poem, the sky has a prop. It is not exactly certain what a prop means in the context. It is the people accompanying the mother who all say calmly that the sky has a prop, a support on which the sky itself stands. But therein lies the uncertainty. We begin asking whether the opinion of the people

is correct. The question continues into the next statement that the mother's body has a long history of being "covered with generations of dire poverty." It is indeed a child's bad luck that it is born to a mother who is poor and deprived. The fault is not in the mother though, poverty is society given and the person as mother is not to blame, in fact she had no control over its resources.

The question of poverty broadens the scope of this poem and the poet has taken a good look at it. The poem begins with the mother seeing as having "pillowed" her head "on constant need". What does it signify? We feel that the figure of the child uses the image of the pillow to say something specific. Does it denote taking rest? Or else does it refer to the physical weakness of the mother because of which she can't stand properly and is lying down with her head on the pillow. In the second sense the pillow stands for support that the person needs for standing up and walking around. This meaning emanates from the word 'need' that indicates food to eat and other facilities to make a person being active for living a purposeful life. "Need" is directly connected to the "sleep at night"-- one can sleep only if the needs of food and water have been met. The child's mother faces the gloomy prospect of writhing "with empty fists tied to your breast!" The woman cannot stand nor calmly lie on the floor and has to console herself by tying the fists to her body.

Imagine the child not yet born has come to know in the poem that he is coming into a world where birth of a human being depends upon "the union of man and woman." Again we ask how is this linked with the aforementioned need of food? It is suggested that misery and deprivation have something to do with inequality between men and women. This is what the child is telling his mother by saying that equality in the society is not to be mentioned in social discourse. If men and women are projected as equal partners in general production as well as in giving birth to children, it will create a commotion in the social surroundings. The society is supposed to maintain its balance through making men masters of society and women servants that will arrange sundry facilities for society and home. Another still more general aspect of life is ideological. It was political to question inequality in society. It is ideological to introduce the notion of the accepted course. People should follow only that which has been time tested and stability giving, even if that stability was nothing more than death. We note that the writer is steeped in the understanding of reality around him which is both economic and idea related. Either the economic fact keeps people away from new ideas or the absence of new ideas do not influence life so that economic practice can be changed for the better. In either way, it is the common people, and particularly women, who suffer the most. All along, men and women have given uncritical approval to everything that existed. If they were told, the mother said, according to the child, yes of course to all that people asked her to accept she would not raise a question regarding the pronouncements by the powerful about environment, society, or general state of affairs.

But will things always remain as they have remained for centuries in the past? This question is squarely posed in the poem. The poet is aware of living in the twentieth century which has generated new systems of production, social relations and culture. In particular, democracy has been the reigning doctrine of the twentieth century, sometimes stretching to equality and social justice in a number of countries. The question is how these trends are visualized by our poets. Rokade's example is that of nurturing hope in the midst of direst circumstances. See what the poet says following his attack on inequality and the beaten path.

Mother, this is your land
 Flowing with water.
 Rivers break their banks
 Lakes brim over,
 And you, one of the human race
 Must shed blood
 Struggle and strike
 For a palmful of water.

Let us consider these lines closely. The poet shares the picture of a different world that exists beyond human social organization. Two examples are given: of the land flowing with water, and rivers as well as lakes – forcing them to go beyond the banks and brimming over the banks to flow on a wider area, respectively. In a clear sense social logic does not operate in the movement and flow of water on earth. Natural law is to break boundaries and assert spontaneity over lines containing the flow. Nature does not brook inequality nor artificial divisions – these are human made to perpetuate the hold of the mighty few over the uninfluential many. If such a thing existed for a short while in nature, it would soon be changed to its opposite. Human made things on the other hand have a tendency to stop and remain where they stopped earlier because of specific pressures. The poet evokes nature to critique this phenomena so that humans learn to draw the right lesson from the world of nature. It is heartening to visualize breaking the banks and brimming over as a natural process. The question arises whether humans can in fact learn such a useful lesson from nature. The poet's answer, made through words of the child, is clearly asserted here. It is desirable to work for change, development and reorganization. The key words for the mission of change would indeed be taking risks and struggling. Thus far, shedding blood and struggling has remained confined to attaining what the poet calls "a palmful of water". For the child, the struggle is to be intensified further so that the small attainment is extended to cover the entire social scene. Is it possible? The question is left unanswered, but the suggestion is unmistakable.

It is fascinating that the poem offers a fine combination of the child's anger and the poet's sustained support for the cause of change. When the child says in the poem: "I spit on this great civilization. Is this land yours, mother, because you were born here." In the statement of the child the negation of supposedly "this great civilization" lets it be known that society in the existing form will not take far either the child or the mother, since things have stood still ever since they started blocking the path of progress, many, many centuries ago. In the question that follows, the query is worth deep consideration. The child is asked here whether being born at a place binds the person to it in terms of belonging. Conventionally, the place of birth makes it one's own, socially and emotionally. This is supposed to remain so even when the land does not yield any comfort and facility to the person born in it. The question raised thus is inevitable and is to be understood objectively. As if the child is to make further sure what he is saying, he asks his mother: "Is it (this land) mine/ because I was born to you? Must I call this great land mine, love it, / sing its glory?" We can take this to be the opinion of the writer who offers a wholesome critique of the existing system since it does not show any sensitivity towards its inhabitants, their needs and aspirations. It is difficult to sing glory of the land that the poet has visualized.

Sorry, mother, but truth to tell
I must confess, I wondered
Should I be born
Should I be born into this land?

Here a significant rhetoric is used by the poet to make a statement on the social divisions that exist today. It leaves one in no doubt that a shift in paradigm is the need of the hour. For evocation two expressions, “truth to tell” and “confess, I wondered”, turn our attention towards the sense of creative thought. No specific message comes from these except that the questioning requires long consideration. This paves the way to the statement in the mode of a rhetorical question, “Should I be born/ Should I be born into this land?” We call it rhetorical because the child is aware of the place where his mother lives and knows how the place is driven by problematic structures. This awareness is spread over the whole poem and gives it a rare power and consistency. The other view of a required picture is woven effectively into the poem. Finally, the query about being born also stands settled since an anguished comment on the world of the mother is attempted at length. The child would be born in this world and will work to meet challenges that his mother and innumerable other women faced since time immemorial.

4.10 OBSERVATIONS

The poem exposes the injustices meted out to the mother and the community she is a part of. The inequality talked of here lays emphasis on the economic deprivation – phrases like “dire poverty”, “need”, and “empty fists” substantiate this view. The poem impresses us by its uninhibited expression of resentment. Use of the child questioner adds intensity to the poem. The poet’s attitude to society is that of anger verging on hatred and complete rejection. Language in the poem is sharp and direct – it makes the comment on society pointed and incisive. The ending is powerful and it shows a vision of the world of hope and freedom.

The poem ‘To Be or Not to Be Born’ is presented from the point of view of a child. The stance of the poet is sustained throughout its length. It appears to be focused on the plight of the mother but later it extends its scope to cover economic reality and ideological problems. We are struck by the uncompromising stance of the poet expressed through the voice of the child. Finally the poem expresses anger with inequality and traditional thought.

4.11 LET US SUM UP

It is clear that “Yashodhara” has a wide-ranging social message. The Poem seeks to address the question of historicity of history and the space of women. The poem is a poignant tribute to Buddha’s wife and an attempt to understand and empathies with the experience of agony caused to her by husband’s departure. Our legends are full of such women. Other women like Sita from Hindu epic *Ramayana* have been written about at length. Bansode’s poem is a question as to why Yashodhara was forgotten. The writer is also keen to expose the socio-political reasons which must have created the amnesia about this legendary woman.

Unlike other Dalit writings where Dalit women are shown to face triple marginalization as they are oppressed on the basis of caste, class, and gender, this poem takes up a more fundamental question. Of late, there has been a surge in women writing protesting discrimination, oppression and injustices against women. There are a large number of women Dalit writers like Bama, Urmila Pawar, Baby Kamble and Sivakami, who brought Dalit texts into mainstream visibility. Hira Bansode has shown that women have contributed equally to the evolution of this world. She makes a strong case to perceive history with a nuanced perspective and explore that which has not been disclosed in a realistic way.

4.12 QUESTIONS

- 1) What do you think about the title and suitability of the poem?
- 2) “Hira Bansode makes a statement about the historicity of history through this poem”. Comment.
- 3) What does Hira Bansode mean when she says to Yashodhara...”you absorbed the dark”?
- 4) Write a short essay on the use of symbolism in “Yashodhara”.
- 5) Comment on the significance of the title, “To be or Not to be Born”
- 6) The poem “To be or Not to be Born” is not about the child but about the mother. Comment.

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