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## Vol. XX, 2020

- ★ A CRITIQUE OF A FILM NAMED 'HIDEKO THE BUS CONDUCTRESS'
- ★ HOW ELECTIONS GOVERN PEOPLE
- ★ REGISTERING VOICE: WOMEN WRITING POETRY IN CONFLICT SOCIETIES
- ★ TIGER SIBLINGS AND THE IDU MISHMIS
- ★ CAN THE SUBALTERN PROTEST? TEA PLANTATION WORKERS OF ASSAM AND INDIAN NATIONAL MOVEMENT
- ★ 'DEVELOPMENT' IN THEORY AND PRACTICE : THE CASE OF INDIA
- ★ DEVELOPMENT AND WEAKER SECTIONS : UNDERSTANDING THE DYNAMICS OF DEVELOPMENT PARADIGM AND ITS IMPACT IN THE CONTEXT OF ASSAM
- ★ CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE ECOLOGICAL ABJECT : THE POLITICS OF THE ANTHROPOCENE IN GUN ISLAND
- ★ CHINA'S HUMANITARIANISM: AID, PANDEMIC AND FOREIGN POLICY
- ★ THE PROPAGANDA MODEL AND DEVELOPMENTS IN INTERNET AGE: AN ANALYSIS OF THE INDIAN POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT WITH REFERENCE TO ASSAM LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ELECTION, 2021
- ★ CLASS QUESTION IN THE WRITINGS OF BISHNU PRASAD RABHA
- ★ COMMENTARY ON THE DYNAMICS OF US-GERMAN RELATIONS : FROM 'GUARDIAN-WARD' TO PARTNERSHIP IN CRISIS?
- ★ THE NEO-LIBERALISM AND THE STATE : A DISCURSIVE FORMATION OF THE POST-LIBERAL INDIA
- ★ REVISITING AMARTYA SEN'S NOTION OF JUSTICE : A CRITICAL ANALYSIS
- ★ LANGUAGE AND GENDER: INTERACTION AND CONTESTATION
- ★ RE-VISITING THE IDEA OF POWER THROUGH NEHRU'S IDEALS OF INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY : A THEORETICAL ESTIMATE
- ★ ECOLOGICAL CRISIS OF LABOUR PROCESS UNDER CAPITALISM : A CRITICAL INTROSPECTION
- ★ THE CHINA FACTOR IN INDIA'S ACT EAST POLICY : IMPLICATIONS FOR THE NORTHEAST INDIA
- ★ STATUS OF PESTICIDES PRODUCTION, CONSUMPTION AND GOVERNMENT POLICIES IN INDIA
- ★ INDIA-MYANMAR STRATEGIC CO-OPERATION THROUGH NORTH EAST : BILATERALISM TO SUB-REGIONALISM
- ★ THE LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC STATE AND POLICE IN INDIA
- ★ POOR AND ELECTRICITY POLICY: AN ASSESSMENT IN ASSAM
- ★ AFGHANISTAN IMBROGLIO-OPTIONS FOR NEW DELHI

## **REGISTERING VOICE: WOMEN WRITING POETRY IN CONFLICT SOCIETIES**

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### **Abstract**

*Poetry has been a very powerful tool for registering voices of marginalised groups and communities. It has been used in feminist movements for the articulation and expressions of women's experiences of exploitation, violence and discrimination and also in recording resistances. For many women, writing — to be able to make oneself heard and visible through the act of writing and publishing poetry has been an empowering political experience. Here is a presentation of five poems by five women from different conflict societies of the world, each voicing their grievances through a poem, each grieving a loss through a poem, and each asserting one's identity through a poem.*

Poetry as a medium through which women register their voices against misogyny and patriarchal oppression has been in use and feminist poets like Maya Angelou, Maxine Kumin have been able to make substantial impact through the use of this medium. Consciousness-raising on issues that ranged from economic, political to education and social has been crucial in forming feminist thought. It has particularly been used in giving a name to the “nameless” forms of oppression —

oppressions that were previously relegated to the nonpolitical arena of the “personal”. Poetry till date has been used in raising consciousness to speak and inform of a wide range of exploitative practices and regimes. Poetry makes the inner world of “personal” experience available to the public for political discussions and exchanges. While poetry is often seen as a pure expression of personal feelings and emotions, it is argued; only very bad poetry does so. Good poetry, on the other hand, makes personal experience available to others by giving it an outward form (Reed, 2017). Audre Lorde in her essay *Poetry is not a Luxury* (1984) wrote, “For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into ideas, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought of. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives” (Lorde 1984: 57). Lorde, child of Jamaican immigrants, a working-class black woman, a mother, a lesbian, and a socialist, richly brings forth the necessity of taking poetry seriously within feminist and academic discourses. This makes essential addressing the ideas, attitudes and positions that are expressed, formed and circulated through women’s poetry.

Considering the relevance of poetry as a medium of communicating self-awareness, and self-consciousness, and of registering voice against oppressions experienced, I present here five poems by women who have experienced violence and resisted it in various ways, which includes placing their thoughts and experiences down in the form of poetry. The poems that I present here are written by women from conflict zones from different parts of the globe (El Salvador, Nepal, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka). Poetry that gives voice to gendered experiences in conflict zones is a distinct form of political activity for it foregrounds experiences that often goes unaddressed, unrecognised, and vices that are suppressed both by norms and political bureaucratic institutions. The politics in poetry, as a struggle for registering voices denied, extends not only the act of penning poetry down, but also in the act of publishing, exchanging, and sharing. Together they counter the systematic culture of silence imposed on women.

## Five Poems

### I Of Man

(Lil Milagro Ramírez, trans. Jessica Rainey. Reproduced here from  
Guernica 2020)

In despair  
a man prepares tomorrow's field.  
Let flags and doves fly  
from the smallest house,  
from the hardest heart.  
Distribute the seed, warrior,  
for the time to sow is here.  
We will sow  
by force if we must,  
we will plough the ever-fertile earth,  
we will scatter seeds  
across the widest furrow,  
we will sow.  
We will fight  
until lit up by smiles,  
until it is our destiny  
for hope to find peace,  
we will fight  
until we stand, and then,  
we will build,  
so we can live,  
can hand down  
the earth to our offspring.  
Clay will surface  
from far below  
and we will build

The poem, “Of Man” is by Lil Milagro Ramírez and translated by Jessica Rainey. Lil Milagro Ramírez is a poet and founder member of the Resistencia Nacional and was born in El Salvador in April 1946. At the age of nineteen Lil Maligro was recognised as El Salvador’s youngest female poet. She completed a law degree at the University of El Salvador but decided not to practice it. Instead she joined a revolutionary group in 1970. By 1971 Ramírez was completely underground and she had to struggle to continue writing. In her words:

“Many consider it impossible to balance being a revolutionary fighter with being a writer and poet. I went through that phase too, feeling considerable guilt when I was only writing. At such times, yes, I think you should give up the pen and take up the gun in defence of freedom. But once you’re on the right track, sure of your role and fulfilling what you believe to be your duty, then it is possible and valid to spend your free time writing poetry.” (Guernica, July, 2020)

The poem presented here was written around 1972. She was captured in 1976 and spent three years in jail until her death in 1979. Her anthology of poems was published posthumously by Cuadernos Universitarios, Universidad de El Salvador, in 2002.

## II

Who Will Stand Beside Me

(Kinjala trans. Pranika Koyu. Reproduced here from *Chronicles of Silence* 2019)

I was a thirteen-year old.

Wandering around the village market,

My eyes delighted in the glitters

I suddenly saw the army and police vehicles.

Fear gripped me and I wet my pants

The First thunder after that was in prison somewhere

'til today, when I look at my cheeks,  
I see the scar — a memory left by the police officer's boots.  
I know not of that police boots still has my skin meshed in it  
But my scar is here for me to look at everyday.

I menstruated in that prison cell for the first time.  
Even now, every month when my cycle begins  
And my vagina hurts,  
I wish to kill that demon.  
If only he was in front of me.  
Who should I share my pain with?

I listen to myself; I cry on my own,  
And I move on.

This poem "Who Will Stand Beside Me" was written by Kinjala (real name withheld) a survivor of sexual harassment and rape from the Maoist People's War (MPW) of Nepal. In MPW rape and other forms of bodily torture and humiliation was used by the state apparatus against the Maoist cadres, sympathisers and family members. Suspected sympathisers were stripped naked in front of the public, and were taken photographs in naked state to frighten the mass. In the book *Mahila Sahid Gaatha*, ANWA (Revolutionary) that gives a summary introduction to 946 women who died or were killed during the war, mentions that following their arrest, 48 out of 946 women were subjected to physical torture, repeatedly raped, or shot dead, either at their homes or after being taken elsewhere. To humiliate both men and women they are forced to strip naked and lie on top of one another. Women being urinated on when they asked for water, mocked for being hysterical if they collapsed due to torture or other reasons. In her essay, *Rape: An instrument of State Repression in Nepal*, Parvati (2006) elaborates on the ways in which rape was by the state apparatus to inflict suffering and humiliation

on the Maoist and their sympathisers. By referring to various such incidents of the People's War she brings to light how rape is used as a 'biological instrument in order to bolster patriarchal values and sexist ideology in order to reinforce masochism in armed force and to feminise the enemy' (Parvati, 2006: 111). She mentions how in Uwa, Rolpa district, four women were raped in 1998, in Harjung all available women including 12 years old Jasa Pun were rounded into a school and were rounded up and raped after forcing men to flee under the terror of guns by a police force of about 150.

The poem was published in *Chronicles of Silence: The Smoldering Embers* (2076 v.s.) published as a part of the Memory, Truth and Justice project which has 11 stories of conflict related sexual violence survivors. The poems are an outcome of a weeklong workshop with survivors and they wrote their experiences and emotions in the form of poetry.

### III

#### Unbind Me

(Irom Chanu Sharmila trans. Longjam Joychandra Singh. Reproduced here from *Fragrance of Peace* 2010)

unbind me  
from this chain of thorns  
that binds me in this narrow room  
for no fault of mine  
a caged bird

in this sinister prison cell  
myriad voices cascade  
no, not the garrulous chatter of birds  
nor the crescendo of merry laughter  
never a sweet song of lullaby

but the wailing of mothers  
their children ripped from their breasts  
women separated from their men  
the widows' lament of despair  
drawn by hands lads clad in olive green

i see a flaming ball  
a terrible face of holocaust following  
kindled by the spectacle of knowledge  
in the path of experiment

they turned to lotus-eaters  
slaves of hedon  
intoxicated  
their mind and intellect  
nipped in the bud  
while floating submissive in their revelry  
time and tide  
sweep away their wealth and honour  
far beyond  
the nine lofty ranges

its a boon for others far away  
smiling they reap the harvest  
helplessly watched  
by the impotent souls

life is precious  
only to depart too soon  
like a light which illuminates darkness  
let me plant the immortal tree  
sow the seed of ambrosia  
like a blood



let me wing to earth's every corner  
to reach the proximity  
where meets the living with the dead  
and sing the carol of humanity

unbind me  
remove this chain of thorns  
let me not deflect my course  
do not fault me  
this is the only desire  
of a caged bird

The third poem “Unbind Me ‘’ (Hooktokpiro Khongdagee Jhinjoorse) is written by Irom Chanu Sharmila known also as the Iron Lady of Manipur, and Mengoubi (The fair One). Irom is a civil rights activist, political activist and a poet who was on a hunger strike for sixteen long years demanding abolition of the draconian law Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958 from Northeastern states. The poem has been translated by Longjam Joychandra Singh and published in *Fragrance of Peace* (2010, 42-45) an anthology of twelve poems written by the Iron Lady of Manipur with an introduction by Laifungbam Debabrata Roy and an interview by Pankaj Bhutalia.

Irom Sharmila, demanded the lifting of AFSPA, 1958 that gives the armed forces wide powers to shoot, arrest and search in the name of “aiding civil power”. It was first applied to the Northeast states of Assam and Manipur and was amended to include other Northeast states of Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland. As per the law even a non-commissioned officer is granted the right to shoot, to kill based on mere suspicion, that it is necessary to do so in order to maintain public interest. With such powers conferred, enforcement of the law resulted in innumerable incidents of arbitrary detention, torture, rape and looting by security personnel. Its continued application has also resulted in numerous protests across the region. Irom Sharmila's hunger strike was one of the most

powerful ways of registering resistance against this draconian law. Irom started her fast two days after the Malom Massacre. On the 2nd of November 2000, a makeshift bomb exploded close to an army convoy passing a bus stop in Malom, Manipur. According to the soldiers the explosion was followed by gunshots and they returned fire. While none of the troops was hit, 10 Manipuri civilians were dead. Sharmila who was then working as an intern with a human rights group went on a hunger strike that continued for 16 long years until August 2016, when she decided to opt for parliamentary politics.

#### IV

##### Why Shall I Not Resist

(Kabita Chakma trans. Meghna Guhathakurta. Reproduced here from Guhathakurta 2001)

Why shall I not resist !  
Can they do as they please —  
Turn settlements into barren land  
Dense forests to deserts  
Mornings into evening  
Fruition to barrenness

Why shall I not resist?  
Can they do as they please —  
Estrange us from the land of our birth  
Enslave our women  
Blind our vision  
Put an end to creation.  
Neglect and humiliation causes anger  
The blood surges through my veins

Breaking barriers at every stroke  
 The fury of youth pierces the sea of consciousness.  
 I become my own whole self  
 Why shall I not resist!

This poem “Joli No Udhim Kittei (Why Shall I Not Resist)” is written by Kabita Chakma, a young activist and poet from Bangladesh belonging to the Chakma Community — an indigenous minority community. The poem was published by Narigrantha Prabartana Dhaka, a Women’s Resource Centre in 1992. Kavita Chakma is considered a powerful and courageous voice of resistance against forces threatening the survival of her cultural community. The english version of the poem presented here has been translated by Meghna Guhathakurta. According to Ahmed (2015), Kavita’s poem talks about the estrangement and enslavement of the Jumma people of Bangladesh. It speaks of the humiliation that women, particularly activist women were subjected to in the hands of the state. During the years of the insurgency rape and forced marriages were used as a tool of war. Women like Kavita stood witness to such tortures and horrors of war. While the insurgency must have come to an end the memory, the trauma remains and this poem by Kavita, according to Guhathakurta is an expression of resistance of Jumma women of more than a decade of militarisation in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (Ahmed, 2015).

## V

### The Unwritten Poem

(Captain Vaanathi, trans. by Meena Kandaswami. Reproduced here from Guernica 2019)

Write!  
 Write,  
 My poem

That I leave  
Without writing

I am unable to write  
The many, many thoughts that come...  
My gun is standing in the border  
I am unable to come away  
so, write,  
Write my unwritten poem.

Behind the fierce gun  
My body might be decimated  
But my emotions will not.  
They will make you think  
Then, write,  
Write my unwritten poem.

In our liberated land  
When our memorials are built  
They are not for your tears,  
They are not for your wreaths.  
They exist so that you stay  
Determined to breathing  
New life into our land.  
So, please write,  
Write my unwritten poem.

After my meaningful death,  
You will come to tour around  
The recognised nation of Tamil Elam.  
Then, my unwritten poem  
Will stand up in front of you

Look into my unwritten poem  
And you will see those who knew me,  
And those who understood me,  
And those who cared for me,  
And those who loved me,  
All of them

there, not only me,  
But all the martyrs  
Will see you, and  
Joyfully smile.

The fifth poem “The Unwritten Poem” was written by Captain Vaanathi, a cadre of the women’s wing of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) who was martyred on 11.07.1991 in the battle of Elephant Pass. Born as Patmasothi Sanmukanathapillai, she headed a unit of Female Tigers of the LTTE at the battle of Elephant Pass. The primary objective of the attack was to capture the government’s largest and well entrenched military complex. The complex which was a symbol of the government’s power and prestige is encased in massive chain-linked fences that overlap shatterproof plexiglass windows. Yet the LTTE cadres were able to punch corridors through the defence lines, forcing soldiers to abandon the complex.

Meena Kandasamy, the translator of the poem, in her publication *The Orders Were to Rape You* notes that Captain Vaanathi's poem is an intervention into the body of war poetry that traditionally exalts men and centre their experience including in the Tamil poetic tradition. Secondly, it alters our perception of the battlegrounds — smashing the stereotype that it is a male preserve — and it also dismantles the lazy, patriarchal belief that gallantry and valour are male, masculine traits. Female fighters used poems as a tool for political commentary and that far from being unwilling recruits, innocent recruits, helpless recruits, they were acutely aware of the macro-politics — that their armed struggle was taking place in the context of an imperialist world order, of powers and foreign nation's meddling in their affairs and that they were acutely aware of macro politics. Writing about Captain Vaanathi in the introduction to *Vanathiyin Kavithaigal*, an anthology of poems by Jeya wrote — “she stood as a woman and fought as a tiger” (Kandasamy, 2020). Her poems were published posthumously by the LTTE in December 1991.

These poems are testimonies to not just of the world of experiences they have had as revolutionaries, reformers, survivors of heinous crimes in conflict societies, as political activist and the like but these poems also furnishes evidence of their resistances, their dreams and desires and the voices that they have been able to create and represent through the very personal yet political activity of writing poetry.

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