

The Essence and Appearances of Indigeneity:

Politics of Tribal Images and Subaltern Consciousness of Women Tribal Poetry

Anup Kumar Bali

Abstract

Tribeness (tribal-as-her-essence) of tribal or indigenous society illuminates itself in its own specificity. In accordance to variations of tribal societies spread all over the Indian subcontinent, the specificity of tribal society demarcates and highlights itself in a spatial, temporal and in a socio-cultural structures of respective tribal society. Santhal tribal women poet Nirmala Putul, through her poems unveil the politics of tribal image-formation in postcolonial discourses and at the same time subaltern consciousness of her poetry also renders the exploitation of tribal women labour and her pain of migration by demarcating the specificity of tribal women while questioning the upper caste, upper class tendencies of feminism. Through this research paper I intend to reveal the politics of these 'mainstream' and dominant discourses in reference to poetic endeavors of Santhal women's poet Nirmala Putul. In addition to this, this paper will reflect upon the limits of identity politics in context to Putul's Poetry.

Keywords: *Tribeness, Tribal images, Women's writing, Specificity, Antagonism, Feminist Standpoint*

Introduction

Tribeness (tribal-as-her-essence) of tribal or indigenous society illuminates itself in its own specificity. In accordance to variations of tribal societies spread all over the country, the specificity of

tribal society demarcates and highlights itself in a spatial, temporal and socio-cultural structures of the respective tribal society. Hence tribal or indigenous society is not a homogeneous entity; rather these societies are diverse on many levels. These diversifications are irreducible to other appearances and dominant perceptions, but dominant ideological discourses endeavor to captivate tribeness into appearances of tribal-images. Through this research paper, I intend to reveal the politics of these 'mainstream' and dominant discourses with reference to poetic endeavors of Santhal women's poet Nirmala Putul. This paper is divided into three parts. The first part of this paper reflects on the politics of tribal-images of dominant discourses, the second part deals with the subordination of women and specificity of feminist struggle in the context of Nirmala Putul's poetry and the third section deals with the subaltern consciousness embedded in her poetry.

Essence and appearances of indigeneity

It would be significant to reflect on the dynamics of apparent manifestation of tribal-images which conceal and repress tribeness (tribal-as-her-essence) of contemporary societal processes of indigenous society in the Indian subcontinent. Hence, the antagonistic relationship between the essence and appearance of indigeneity is imperative to comprehend the global capital interventions in these societies. In this section, I intend to reflect upon dominant ideological discourses which captivate tribeness into appearances of tribal-images. In this way, this paper is an attempt to exhibit the inconsistency and antagonism between the essence of tribeness and assumes tribal-images as a reflection of dominant ideological discourses. It would be significant to look into Marx's pertinent insight in context of essence and its appearance. 'All science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided' (Marx 2014, 817). Here essence doesn't refer to some transcendental categorization. German philosopher Theodor W. Adorno reversed the directional tendency of relationship between essence and appearance in his *Negative Dialectics*, when he writes 'essence can no longer be hypostatized as the pure, spiritual being-in-itself. Rather, essence passes into what lies concealed beneath the façade of immediacy, of the supposed

facts, and which makes the fact what they are' (Adorno 2004, 167). Hence, this paper endeavors to envisage the essence of 'tribeness' against the 'mainstream' ideological maneuverings of dominant discourses which reduces tribal merely into images: tribal-images. The task of unveiling these images at the same moment is a task of revealing the ideological functionality of dominant discourses while conjuring the tribeness of indigenous world. Adorno reveals the ideological functionality of appearance as mischief-making law of 'unessentiality'. He writes, 'Essence is what must be covered up, according to the mischief-making law of unessentiality; to deny that there is an essence means to side with appearance, with the total ideology which existence has since become' (Adorno 2004, 169). The image formation of tribal or tribal society – a society which in a way remained untouched from modernity – through modern 'mainstream' tending towards the irreversibility of modernity while putting the traditional and frozen image of the tribal. This image-formation is what the politics of modernity while rendering tribal as an oppressed and marginalized one, underlines the necessity of her subsumption into 'mainstream' society. Whereas on the other hand, post-Marxists in their extreme romanticism, while proposing tribal societies as constitutive outside from the circuits of global capital establish these societies as a model for egalitarian society. In this process, the contours of tribal-image that they put forward seems more mythical than real. In one way, these tribal-images give a wholeness to the lack of a post-industrialist human, the lack which has been created by capital. This desire for wholeness of the post-industrialist subject implies his internal cracks and voids as his own deficiency which he fills with the image of tribal. Hence, post-industrialist subject through this tribal-image wants to give 'wholeness' to the deficiency in his own gaze. This desire for 'wholeness' explicitly renders capital as a totalizing subject in this era of dictatorship of neoliberal capital. The dynamicity of capital in this process makes the oppressed and marginalized communities a commodity in the proper form of their images. Cultural theorist Rey Chow writes while emphasizing this point:

I want to highlight the native - nowadays often a synonym for the oppressed, the marginalized, the wronged - because I think that the space occupied by the native in postcolonial discourses is also the space

of error, illusion, deception and filth. How would we write this space in such a way as to refuse the facile turn of sanctifying the defiled image with pieties and thus enriching ourselves precisely with what can be called the surplus value of the oppressed, a surplus value that results from *exchanging* the defiled image for something more noble? (Chow 1993, 30)

Consequently, in Modern and Post-Marxist discourses these tribal-images move like a commodity. The socio-economic process of tribal society, which in a way is a remainder of capital, is a difference-in-itself. This difference-in-itself is actually a withdrawal from its subsumption to mainstream modernity (Ghosh 2016). So, modernity, on the one hand, wants to subsume it, whereas on the other hand post-Marxist discourse glorifies it as a non-subsumptive model for an egalitarian society for their project of post-capitalism. Both the formulations overlook the dynamicity of capital as a moving contradiction which takes the commodity out from its very remainder. Capital as a totalizing subject makes the image of representative of this process (tribal) a commodity. Hence modernist and post-Marxist discourses put forward the specific image of tribal according to their politics, but both of these discourses want to captivate the tribeness – which is inimitable – into some appearance. Consequently, the appearance of tribal which comes forth in these processes actually becomes a commodity, with surplus value attached to it. Chow calls it the surplus value of the oppressed. She writes while addressing this point, 'As such, the 'identity' of the native is inimitable, beyond the resemblance of the image. The type of identification offered by her silent space is what may be called symbolic identification' (Chow 1993, 36). Santhal tribal poet Nirmala Putul unveils the politics behind these image formations of the tribal. One by one she attacks these diverse images while asserting specific subjectivity of tribal struggle. At one place, she unveils the agents of these image formations in these words:

They who capture
Our naked-semi-naked photographs
And
In the name of our culture
Trade our lands

Strip us of our clothes in debates (Putul, Nagaade Kee Tarah Bajten Hain Shabd 2012, 53)¹

Here Putul reveals the politics of tribal image formation by attacking it – the process which makes the tribeness ‘naked’ through her very image. Chow writes precisely to address this point:

As such, the 'native' is turned into an absolute entity in the form of an image..., whose silence becomes the occasion for *our* speech. The gaze, of the Western scholar is 'pornographic' and the native becomes a mere 'naked body' in the sense described by Jameson. Whether positive or negative, the construction of the native remains at the level of image-identification, a process in which 'our' own identity is measured in terms of the degrees to which we resemble her and to which she resembles us (Chow 1993, 34).

In her poetry, Putul breaks all the mythical images of tribal. She overtly attacks the strategic politics of nation-state which maintains the deprivation of tribal by the culturisation of tribal world-vision and her life (Banerjee 2010).

In the republic parades of Delhi
You have been showcased
With your tribe many times
But did any bird named republic

Ever sits on the parapet of your home (Putul, Nagaade Kee Tarah Bajten Hain Shabd 2012, 20)

Here, the question arises as to why the project of modernity wants to limit the image of tribeness into culturisation? Is it through the mask of culturisation of tribal, Indian modernity wants to hide internal cracks of capitalism by putting the emerging image of tribal as an ‘alternative’ of capitalism? Or is this image just a superficial critique of western capitalist modernity by retaining Indian modernity within the demarcation of global capitalism at the same moment? Dr. Prathma Banerjee writes confronting such questions:

¹All the poems of Nirmala Putul used in this paper are translated by me.

Indian politics, therefore, have strategically worked to culturise the 'tribe', such that adivasi political agency is always already made to appear as adivasi cultural habit. It is only through such a culturisation of the ethnos, arguably the other side of the story of anthropology's ethnologisation of culture, that India is able to own up the 'primitive within' and posit her as the seemingly final moment of critique of western capitalist modernity (Banerjee, *The curious double-bind of the Indian adivasi* 2010, 125).

In another poem while addressing the historical tribal place 'Santhal Pargana', Putul describes metaphorically the frozen and defunct appearances of tribal culture which nation-state uses for its project of culturisation of tribe. She writes:

'It' has been transmogrified,
Bow and arrow, Madol, Karen drums, flutes
Folk-museums are collecting all these
Loaded in dead cart of time.

...

...

It's not left out in
Santhal-Pargana
As much as

The fable of its culture exists. (Putul, *Nagaade Kee Tarah Bajten Hain Shabd* 2012, 26-27)

Banerjee explicitly shows that it is precisely the continuation of colonial political strategy in post-colonial Indian state which manifests political alterity of tribal in culturist expression. This culturist expression of Indian state constitutes the culturisation of tribe, which conceals the political agency of the tribal through its very form. Banerjee writes while elucidating this point:

My argument is that Indian historical and political discourses explained the so-called 'primitive's' political alterity through what can be called a 'culturisation of 'tribe' – with grave implications not only for adivasi

politics but for Indian politics in general. In our contemporary common sense – if labeling something as political is to impute it to a conscious agency and contingent positioning, to gloss it over as cultural immediately erases this aspect of social-conciseness. (Banerjee 2010, 131)

It is explicit that it was precisely the politics of modernity in postcolonial Indian state which foregrounded the tribal image as ‘primordial rebel outside of capitalist modernity’ (Banerjee 2016, 132). Historians also reveal that this political maneuvering of modernity by showing the image of tribal as ‘constitutive outside’ from temporalizing logic of global modernity render the modern recognizable as modern in the first place (ibid, 147). In this task of projecting tribal as ‘constitutive outside’ of global modernity, Banerjee argues, culturisation of tribe was concomitant. She writes while explaining this:

My point is to note how in colonial/postcolonial India, it is precisely discourses of history and politics, and not, ethological discourses per se, which sought to culturise tribes. I have already mentioned how Indian nationalism incorporated the ‘tribe’ in its literary articulations, while denying ‘tribeness’ itself in its political-historical narrative – thus, creating ‘culture’ as that residual space where the local and the non-modern could be conserved for purposes of symbolic mobilization in its negotiations with the modern west (Banerjee 2010, 131).

In reference to this ‘constitutive outside’, post-Marxists emphasize upon the reconstruction of tribal societies while putting the specific image of tribal. In her poem, Putul also questions the truth of tribal-image created by post-Marxists. While envisioning tribal society as constitutive outside of the circuits of global capital these post-Marxists prepare such a network of their reconstruction which undoubtedly is an institutional extension of the logic of global capital. The same thought coincides in the work of Dr. Anup Dhar and Dr. Anjan Chakrabarti’s Post-Marxist formulation of the *World of Third*. In their recent book, *The Indian Economy in Transition: Globalization, Capitalism and Development* along with

co-author Dr. Dasgupta they write, 'The heterogeneity and complexity of world of third implies that it must be seen as *ex ante* empty space, a 'hollowed out void', **an outside to the 'circuits of global capital'.....'** (Chakrabarti, Dhar and Dasgupta 2015, 85) (Emphasis added). In his recent paper *The Real (of) Marx*, Dr. Dhar explicitly links this formulation of *World of Third* to adivasi world. He writes while emphasizing this point, 'This leads me to re-conceptualize the hitherto underdeveloped adivasi world as marked by the expanding plateaus of the circuits of global capital and world of third as the non-capitalist *outside* to the logic of globalizing circuits; where non-capital is also the condition for the birthing of the post-capitalist *subject*' (Dhar 2017). This is precisely an inherent contradiction of this thought that it needs proper financial support from the players of global capital for its implementation on ground. For retaining this image of tribal and tribal society as an outside of capital and hence for its reconstruction, global capital on its own spread the networks of diverse institutions in the name of community-economies. This discourse in its implementation as 'Action research' in corporate funded M.Phil. development practice program at Ambedkar University Delhi contradictorily ensures the intervention of global capital in an indigenous world through CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) and NGOs. While showing the interventions of these NGO's through CSR, Putul shows the

²Dr. Dhar, Dr. Chakarbarti along with co-author Dr. Cullenberg explain in their earlier book, *World of The Third and Global Capitalism* that the *world of third* (WOT) as (constitutive) outside of the circuits of global capital and while formulating the capitalist hegemony through Lacanian approach they explicate, the foreclosure of WOT secures through a process of third worldization (Chakrabarti, Dhar and Cullenbarg, *World of the Third* 2012, 198). This third worldization, according to them is precisely the hegemonic rendition of global capital. Hence, they envision the camp of WOT in those activities, practices and social relationships which is disconnected with the circuits of global capital (ibid). In their above-mentioned recent book, along with co-author Dr. Dasgupta, they show the 24 class-sets which render diverse class sets encompassing from capitalist, feudal, slave, communistic, independent and communist class processes. They show that only class set {5, 17} are consistent with *capitalist enterprise*, which can take state or private forms (Chakrabarti, Dhar and Dasgupta, *The Indian Economy in Transition: Globalization, Capitalism and Development* 2015, 152). According to them, WOT is an overdetermined space of class and non-class processes that procreate *outside* the circuits of global capital and hence they show WOT as a decentered, disaggregated and internally differentiated world (ibid, 245).

inconsistencies and contradictions of this kind of assumed images of tribal society by post-Marxists. Putul writes:

There are so-called social workers
As germinating unwanted plants in existing organizations
For their betterment

There are officers, there are spoons, there are contractors, and
there are mediators

And all of them

While holding colorful bottles in their hands

Are making policies on roundtable (Putul, Nagaade Kee Tarah
Bajten Hain Shabd 2012, 26-27)

Through her poetic commentary, Nirmala Putul not only questions the policy making of post-colonial Indian state which produces and maintains the image of tribal as a 'constitutive outside' from the temporalizing logic of global modernity but it also unravels the discursive maneuverings of post-Marxists which projects the image of tribal as a subject of post-capitalist society. Hence, Putul in her poetry unravels the politics inherent in tribal images. She breaks all the mythical and assumed images of tribal while asserting the essence of tribeness.

Women's writing as intervention: Subordination of women and specificity of feminist struggle

The literary praxis offers the politics of singularity within the ambit of its own specificity. This singularity is the truth of literary art. According to contemporary French philosopher, Alain Badiou, the truth is immanent and singular within art. He envisages the truth of art, which according to him is irreducible to other truths. 'This also means that art, as a singular regime of thought is irreducible to philosophy' (Badiou 2005, 9). Therefore, in light of this Badiouian thought it would be significant to reflect upon the politics that is immanent and singular to the work of art. Hence, I would like to emphasize upon the politics inherent in literature which manifests itself as literature in politics.

This idea of literature in politics becomes more pertinent

when we look into the women's writing in contemporary Indian literature. Here, it would be significant to look into the specificities of women's writing. In this direction, it is important to reflect how women's writing organizes its praxis by accommodating diverse challenges, immediacies and contingencies? What are the nature of all these? How the women's writing portrays the hopes and despairs of women-subject? And finally, how the contemporary women's writing while emancipating women from the illusionary assurances of patriarchy in what way it makes her emancipatory consciousness accentuate and potent? In this process, it would be relevant to reflect how women's writing makes its place within the literary society. Telugu Poet Vasantha Kannabiran expresses her concerns in context of above-mentioned questions in these words:

It will be authentic to write only as a woman. Sometimes, it's wrong to write like a woman. If you're able to speak in an authentic women voice, it may be considered real but then it becomes second-rate poetry. If you speak like a man, that is, in a serious intellectual and theoretical tone, it's become harsh. Why does this happen? If women write in a serious manner, it's looked as an act of protest..... If women write poetry about abortion and child-birth, not in a camouflaged way and in a way which is not uncomfortable to any one as male culture does, but by bringing them to the fore, with all the pain, suffering and complexity of the experiences, and also write about women who are caught in the illusions created by patriarchy and its fantastic stories and finally about the reality that creates in them a sense of hopelessness, such poetry is cast aside as bad poetry and made unavailable (as cited in Shridhar and Uma 2001, 236-237).

Above quote explicitly reveals the dilemma of women writers which they confront and struggle within their creative processes. Women writers have to unveil these mysteries of patriarchy in a continuous process by unfolding the layers of an internalized history which makes them a woman and consequently subordinates them within patriarchy. Actually, the struggle of a woman writer precisely is with the dominant historicity of ideological patriarchal

order which in its conservative sense tries to prove women as inferior to men whereas on the other hand it shows women as a subject of men implicitly in a liberal sense. English feminist poet Rukmini Bhaya Nair put forward the need of investigation of this internalized history and history of sensibility for feminist poetry. She writes:

The more personal a poem is more likely is to be political. Feminist poetry, that is, commits itself to an investigation of an internalized history – the history of sensibility. And it does so by insisting, perversely yet logically, that in any study of emotional resonance nothing can be more political than examining the dirty linen or ubiquitous dhobin's bundle, if you like, of the personal (Nair 2001, 195-196).

This quote on the one hand echoes the spirit of the famous slogan of feminist movement; personal is political, clearly is not at all self-obsession. And on the other hand, it explores the politics of personal dimensions within feminist poetry. Hence, it is a consequential necessity for feminist intellectual and litterateur to behold every processual activity of patriarchy suspiciously and at the same time to investigate it thoroughly. Because it is precisely this processuality of ideological patriarchal order which subordinates the women within the ambit of patriarchy. This subjugation of women-subject is common to entire women population of society despite the segmentations of classes, castes, religion, region and so on. English literary critic M. Shridhar and Alladi Uma writes while alluding towards this in context of a book of Telugu poems by women poets. They write:

We begin with a consideration of perhaps the most conspicuous of themes – subjugation of women. Each poet while voicing her dissatisfaction with the patriarchal system is aware of both the similarities and uniqueness of experiences. While a poor women, an illiterate, a middle class housewife, a working women, a rich women and a prostitute may all be trampled upon and lose their life, yet their experiences and responses may vary. (Shridhar and Uma 2001, 237)

In this way, through the process of subjugation of women within

a patriarchal society and their struggle against this subjugation, women establish themselves as a political identity. This political identity struggles for the emancipation of the subjugated gender within the structural discrimination which is fundamentally premised on division of labour on the basis of gender. While pointing towards this basic division based on gender, feminist thinker Luce Irigaray writes, 'Marx defined the origin of the exploitation of men by men as the exploitation of women by men, and he affirmed that the first human exploitation stems from the division of labour between men and women' (1991: 167). In this way, the patriarchal social norms regulate this gendered division of labour in such a way that patriarchal ideological apparatuses make women its subject through diverse socio-cultural mediations. These socio-cultural mediations through which women become the subject of patriarchal ideology also reflect the segments of many other aspects of identities which a woman-subject shares in the ongoing process of reproduction of her social-relations. Hence, women as a political identity is not the homogeneous entity, rather there are different subject-positions internal to the woman-subject, such as class, caste, religion, region and so on. Hence, these segmentations explicitly show the diverse subjects-positions that women-subject holds in a social process. In this way, the functionality of women's writings in politics unfolds the diverse antagonisms and overcoming of those antagonisms in a perpetual process of identity clashes. Hence, the women's question in Indian society is unlike western feminist discourse because of the interaction and antagonism of diverse subject-positions within the identity of women-subject. Consequently, the feminist standpoint confronted on one hand with Dalit feminist standpoint and on the other hand diverse interpretations of feminism come into existence. These differences reflect the specificities of oppression and exploitation related to these very identities.

Does Nirmala Putul's poetry by unfolding many layers of women-struggle discover any specificity, which we can call specificity of women-identity? Such domain of specificity of women's life despite the internal segmentations of labour, offers the possibility of its political generalization. This generalization of women-struggle is the fundamental premise of feminist struggles and movements, where feminist politics investigates the historical

politics of perpetuating a woman as inferior and retaining her subordination under patriarchy. This investigation not only reveals the history of patriarchal ideology – which makes a women-subject and subjugates her under patriarchy – but also by establishing many examples of feminist struggles it writes the processuality of feminist history by infinite constellations of struggles for women emancipation. This processuality of history of feminist struggle comes into being only by dissecting the hegemonic patriarchal history which subjugates women. Mobilized by the consciousness of feminist politics, women’s writing as artifact is evident of truth-procedurality, which in its moments of incarnation unveils the internalized history of patriarchal ideology by intense analysis. Nirmala Putul in her poetry beautifully captures the processuality of feminist-history while chopping the hegemonic patriarchal history. Putul writes:

Bereft of our place in history,
We shall write our own,
Our history
Shall be unlike those written thus far,
We shall write our history with blood
Not with tears
.....
.....
The tinkling of our bangles and jingling of our anklet,
Will sound the bugle of revolution,
Beyond all geographical barriers,
We would have arrived at those corridors of history,
And would mark our presence (Putul, Beghar Sapne 2014, 74)

Feminist thinker Nivedita Menon reflects upon these contours of feminist history. She writes, ‘Feminism is not an organization that one formally joins, and it can never be an isolated achievement of individual women. To be a feminist is to feel part of the history that has produced us...’ (Menon 2012, ix). Both the versions of history are explicit in Putul’s above mentioned poem and Menon’s above quote; on the one hand, patriarchal history subjugates women by making them women and on the other hand the history

of feminist politics is written by chopping the patriarchal history. The experience of writing her own history while chopping the hegemonic history for her own struggle is the material reality of a woman's-life; material reality, where she finds the history of her existence in the specificity of her experience. Hence it is pertinent here to emphasize, women-subject should be discerned within the specificity of experience of womanhood and not as the image of some hegemonic intervention. In addition to this, Putul unveils the patriarchy while rejecting the patriarchal image of women by asking the definition of womanhood (woman as her own essence) from patriarchy itself:

Are you aware of,
The grammar of all the relations of a woman?
Can you tell,
The definition of womanhood,
looking at a woman through her eyes (Putul, Nagaade Kee
Tarah Bajten Hain Shabd 2012, 8)

In contrast to this she also portrays the irony, when women become accustomed to patriarchal ideology while looking herself through male gaze on the other extreme. She writes:

What an irony!
That we are accustomed congenitally,
To look at our own life
With a standard man's eyes (ibid, 9)

Putul envisions women-emancipation in the historical defeat of patriarchal women's-image in the continuation of dialectical struggle between above two experiences infinitely.

I want to break free from my clan/caste,
Looking at me through my own eyes! (ibid)

Above mentioned lines from her poetry are the specificity of her womanhood. The political assertion of her poetry envisages the essence of womanhood. She shows us the contrast which shows how the essence of being a woman gets excluded from the captivation of patriarchal women-image. Feminist politics writes

its history while chopping or dissecting the patriarchal history with the generalization of this excess of womanhood from appearance of patriarchal women-image. Feminist politics locates the specificity of women-identity precisely by the distinction between essence of womanhood and the appearance of patriarchal women-image. In this regard, the woman experience of Putul's poetry seems the objective women experience only because of this specificity. Needless to say, though, but this objective experience implies the specificity of women-life, which is not only Putul's truth rather it is a truth of all the struggling women against patriarchy. Putul strings this experience through her poetry like this:

Every day in her fantasy,
At the same instant,
Every restless woman seeks herself,
A land beyond home, love and caste
For her own! (ibid)

She reveals many more images of oppression of women, where she illuminates the diverse aspects of specificity of womanhood while asserting her existence before men and questions him:

Who am I to you?
A diary?
Scribbled whenever wished,
A dumb standing wall
Struck with a nail,
Whenever you felt like!
.....
.....
Why so silent?
Tell me
Who am I to you?? (ibid, 28-29)

It is precisely the peculiarity of Nirmala Putul's literature that it not only illuminates the tribeness but it also envisages womanhood in its intense depth. In the direction, she also unravels the homogeneity of women-identity precisely to bring the essence

of tribal-women in her poetry. Hence, the politics immanent in her poetry demands the specific recognition of tribal women while shattering the homogeneous women-identity. In this process, her poetic endeavoring offers the possibility of a tribal feminist standpoint. Hence, it highlights the necessity of a specific struggle for tribal society on one hand and specific struggle of tribal women on the other. Consequently, there is antagonism with 'mainstream' society and non-tribal women-identity in Putul's literature. On one hand, antagonism with 'mainstream' society renders in these words:

You have words, logic and intellect
You have entire system in your hands
You can belie truth by repeating it again and again
You can reject my everything in a sentence (ibid, 95)

Whereas on the other hand the antagonism with non-tribal women (especially economically well off upper caste women-identity) incarnates in these words:

Once again
We will assemble in a huge conference room
Among hired crowd
Once again
Snob nosed half sleeved sari wearing women
Will lead our procession
And will be seated on stage before us
In the name of representation (ibid, 60)

Now the striking point is to look in what way we envision these antagonisms within the context to their specificities? Does mutual antagonism among identities while manifesting their oppressions and exploitations offers any other alternative political struggle? Is tribal women-identity while demanding its specific recognition within the ambit of women-identity offers the politics of unity or is it elucidating the need for new imagination of politics of infinite specificities? Does the politics of unity not subsumptive in one sense; the subsumption of tribal women experience in the abstraction of women-identity? Does Nirmala Putul's poetry offer any possibility of politics beyond this subsumptive politics of unity?

Is it productive in order to comprehend the tribeness embedded in womanhood of Putul's poetry?

Subaltern consciousness of women tribal poetry of Nirmala Putul

It would be significant to ponder upon how the specificity of tribal women has been depicted in Putul's poetry. How the images of tribal women's life underlines the specificity of tribeness in it. In a poem *Aadiwasi Striyaan*, Putul portrays tribal women in these words:

Their world is limited

To extent their eyes can see

They don't know

There are many worlds just like their own world

Which are included in this world (Putul, Nagaade Kee Tarah Bajten Hain Shabd 2012, 11)

Putul's poetic oeuvre evidently exhibits that how subalternity makes its place within the 'mainstream' literary society. In this direction Putul explicitly asserts her politico-aesthetics through her poetry. In this situation, it would be significant to reflect whether criticality of mainstream literary discourses is adequate enough to represent the tribeness or femininity of tribal women poetry? Hence, the inevitable question is how we look into the tribal women's poetry of Nirmala Putul? Whether the tribal perspective or the feminist perspective is better to look into her poetry? At the same time the other question also arises; whatever the perspective would be, in what ways we contextualize it? Is this contextualization of perspective located within the criticality of 'mainstream' literary discourse or Nirmala Putul's poetry itself offers us some perspective to investigate her poetry? In this section I intend to reflect upon this perspective or politico-aesthetics of Nirmala Putul which is what the subaltern consciousness that illuminates in her poetic endeavors. Here, it is important to look into the conception of subaltern before I proceed further with Putul's poetry. Gramsci's understanding of subaltern is quite distinct. Marxist thinker Marcus Green explicitly states that 'Gramsci lays out his 'methodological

criteria' for the historical research of the subaltern in six steps or phases, each step indicating an area in which the integral historian should study the subaltern' (Green 2016, 15). These six phases through which Gramsci wants to comprehend the historicity of subalternization and revolutionary overcoming of subalternity with counter-hegemonic struggles ensures the dynamicity of subalternity itself. This historicity or historical trajectory envisioned by Gramsci 'represent the phases in which a subaltern group develops from a 'primitive' position of subordination to a position of autonomy' (Green 2016, 16). Hence, Gramsci was interested to trace the revolutionary generalization of subaltern subjectivity within the trajectory of development of subaltern consciousness within these six phases. Gramsci writes while emphasizing this point, 'The historian must record, and discover the causes of, the line of development towards integral autonomy, starting from the most primitive phases' (As cited in Green 2016, 16). In this way, Gramsci's understanding of subaltern is quite different from Spivak's understanding of subaltern. For her, representation and organization are important keys for subalternity and once they are achieved the subaltern cease to be subaltern (As quoted in Green 2016, 31). Hence, from Spivak's perspective Putul's poetic-endavors are not embedded within subaltern-consciousness, whereas Gramsci's dynamic conception of subaltern, adequately contextualizes Putul's poetry as a counter-hegemonic endeavoring for a revolutionary generalization. Fourth, fifth and sixth phase of subalternity is extremely important from this lens. Green explains this while writing, 'Fourth, the subaltern group realizes that the new social formations, parties and institutions do not account for its need so it forms its own organizations, such as trade unions. Fifth, the subaltern group organizes a political formation that represents its concerns, expresses its autonomy and its will to participate in the established political framework' (Green 2016, 16) Here we can clearly see Putul's politico-aesthetics in the form of poetic-endavoring intervenes in dominant and 'mainstream' literary discourse with her specific subjectivity of being a tribal woman.

In another poem, Putul with her intense metaphors reveals the exploitation of tribal women's labour by mainstream society in the series of contrast of images between labour and appropriation of

labour. She writes:

Thousands satisfies their hunger on the leaf-plates made by
your hands

But these thousands leaf-plates do not keep you from hunger

The irony is

While you sit on the ground to weave mats,

The sweat drips from your cracked body

While you make hand-fans

.....

.....

You don't know

How your things get reached to Delhi

Whereas even Dumka is much far away from your world as
of now! (Putul, Nagaade Kee Tarah Bajten Hain Shabd 2012, 12-13)

In this direction, Putul's poetry questions above-mentioned post-Marxist thought which assumes tribal society as outside of circuits of capital. Putul's poetry elucidates the role of unproductive labour with the growth of productivity and capital accumulation which functions in the totalizing structure of capital. Now it is important to ponder upon how this unproductivity in its functionality structures the productivity. The growth of productivity through unproductive labour is actually the free play of capital in structured totality of social labour. Post-Marxists ignore this point; however in this process, the unproductive labour – despite as a remainder of capital – totalizes the structure of social labour and hence stimulates the rate of productivity and surplus value. Marx calls this apparently unproductive labour, 'industrial reserve army' (594) in volume one of *Capital*. Marx writes while indicating this point, 'Increase of variable capital, in this case, becomes an index of more labour, but not of more labourers employed' (ibid, 595). Hence, it is explicit that this unproductive labour qua Industrial reserve army ensures the continuation of exploitation of labour within the totalizing structure of capital. Consequently, capital perpetuates its free play according to its interests. Marx writes, 'We have further

seen that the capitalist buys with the same capital a greater mass of labour-power, as he progressively replaces skilled labourers by less skilled, mature labour-power by immature, male by female, that of adults by that of young persons or children' (ibid). This precarity is much explicit in the context of tribal-identity in Putul's poetry. She writes:

It is hard to get work these days
So that I can run my household
No one buys leaf-plates and bowls
And not even mats and other things.

.....

.....

You know the conditions of brick furnace
How clever furnace owner is
Still he gives five rupees to transport hundred bricks

In place of daily wage. (Putul, Nagaade Kee Tarah Bajten Hain Shabd 2012, 44-45) 45)

Here, Putul depicts the anguish of tribal women whose husbands have migrated to some other city in search of work. She also portrays the experience of migrated tribal women in these words:

Where are you in Delhi?
In which corner of Delhi?
Mayur Vihar, Punjabi Bag or in Shahdra?
Are you sales girl
In any shop of Connaught place
Or
Packer in some herbal company?
Where are you Maya?
Where are you?

Wherever you are, are you alright or
Has Delhi devoured you? (Putul, Apne Ghar Kee Talash Men 2004, 31)

In this way, Putul's poetry elucidates tribeness embedded in

womanhood. On one hand, she asserts her women subjectivity whereas on the other hand she portrays the sigh of tribal women. Her poetry inspires us to put a question that is the subsumption of one specificity by another abstract identity doesn't indicate the establishment of relationality and consequently the exchange-principle which constitutes the reified social relations. Feminist thinker Nancy Fraser is quite right by making a point when she rejects both; politics of redistribution and politics of recognition because of their subsumptive reductionism. She put forward the idea of bivalent collectivities, she writes while making her point, 'Bivalent collectivities, in sum, may suffer both socio-economic maldistribution and cultural misrecognition *in forms where neither of these justices is an indirect effect of the other, but where both are primary and co-original*. In their case neither the politics of redistribution alone nor the politics of recognition alone will suffice. Bivalent collectivities need both' (Fraser 2008, 10). But while critiquing both of these politics, Fraser upholds the functionality of intersections which is fundamentally constitutive of exchange-principle of capitalist social order. She writes, 'After all, gender, 'race', sexuality and class are not neatly cordoned off from one another. Rather, all these axes of injustice intersect one another in ways that affect everyone's interests and identities. No one is a member of only one such collectivity' (ibid, 14-15). Above quote explicitly reveals Fraser's understanding of class as any other identity and not as process. Hence, she is looking for possibility in intersectionality. Contemporary Marxist thinker and activist Pothik Ghosh, writes while explicating the problems of these kinds of explication of class, 'Today, class is no longer a dynamic social category that keeps renewing itself in a process of historical-material becoming by unlocking the critical energies immanent in every social moment of historical motion. It is, ironically enough, a sociologised concept harking back to the post-industrial revolutionary universe of 18th-19th century Europe; a positive ontology among many others' (Ghosh, *In Search of Class* 2010, 32). At this point the question arises whether the relationality among identities is inherent in intersectional social structures? Is there any possibility of non-relational relationality as well? While underlining the need of dynamic conception of class as process, Ghosh makes a pertinent point which reflects the problem of abstraction of specific concrete

material realities by identitarianized conceptions in the very roots of capitalist social order itself. He writes:

These varying ontologies (or subjectivities) – which are held together by the hierarchical rules of some sort of social contract into a stable and supposedly stabilizing civil society – are reified moments of the process of the historical becoming that are abstracted and alienated from one another, thanks to the fundamentally competitive ethic of capital. It is this ideological impulse – which has permeated all the nooks and crannies of human existence with the ascendancy of capitalism – that has disrupted the non-identitarian flow of a pre-capitalist order by territorializing the various spatio-temporal moments of the flow and freezing them into identities. (Ghosh, *In Search of Class* 2010, 32-33)

Marxist thinker John Holloway states that ‘Capitalism is the ever renewed generation of class, the ever renewed class-ification of people’ (Holloway 2005, 142). This classification is the classification of social labour which constitutes identities and subject-positions. In this way, the interaction and antagonism of diverse subject-positions within the identity of women-subject is precisely the interaction and antagonism between specific concrete material experiences of womanhood and abstract women-identity; abstract cognition of ideologization. Consequently, the fundamental feminist assertion confronted on one hand with tribal feminist assertion and diverse specificities on the other hand, struggle continually for the specific recognition of their specificity within the abstracted specificity of women-identity. These differences reflect the segmentations of oppression and exploitation related with these very specificities which ultimately get reduced to abstract notion of homogeneous identity. Undoubtedly, to bring these differences into some sort of unity inevitably transforms to some kind of subsumptive reductionism, whether it is class reductionism (class as a sociological identity) or caste reductionism. This complexity demands the nuance comprehension of dynamicity of identity within infinite specificities of infinite subject-positions in disruption and overcoming of identities like a moment or node in perpetual process. What could be the political expression of these

specific struggles other than presumptive politics of unity? It is significant, through her poems, Putul while continually asserting her specificity against patriarchy and abstract totality of abstract identity offers us an understanding about the generalization of political struggle beyond the presumptive politics of unity. Her literature gives us a glimpse of these generalizations. She writes:

Stand against the darkness of your own
Stand against the conspiracy behind you

Stand wherever you are

As the hurricane stands from the storm

As the repressed spark stands from the ashes (Putul, Nagaade Kee Tarah Bajten Hain Shabd 2012, 14, Emphasize added)

Conclusion

At this point it is important to look into the sixth phase of subalternity, as Putul in her poetry emphasizes on specificity of tribal and tribal-women identity. 'Sixth, the subaltern group realizes its interests will not be met within the current socio-political system so it organizes its own social and political formation that will eventually replace the existing one' (Green 2016, 16-17). Now the striking point is to look that in what way we envision these antagonisms in above-mentioned poem within context to their specificities? Does mutual antagonism of identities while manifesting their specific exploitations and oppressions offer any other alternative of political struggle? And how it is related to sixth phase of subalternity? What could be the political expression of the specific struggles which Putul's poetry narrates? It is significant, through her poems, Nirmala Putul while continually asserting her specificity of subaltern subjectivity against dominant norms of 'mainstream' society which wants to appropriate, assimilate and subordinate indigenous world into the project of modern nation-state and she also struggles against the dominant ideological maneuverings of captivating tribeness into the spectacle of *post-capitalist* subject while spreading the diverse networks of global capital interventions into indigenous society. In the above-mentioned poem, she clearly emphasizes upon the specificity of the struggle according to reality of specific oppression. Ergo, she

inspires us to get a stand from the very specificity which we belong to. In this specificity, she envisions the revolutionary generalization emerging from lapsed but glorious past revolts of indigenous people. In the poem, *Main Chahti Hun*, she metaphorically portrays the revolutionaries of indigenous struggle. She writes:

I desire –
Many a Birsa Mundas will rise up
From the land of my words

I desire to witness –
The firmly standing palm trees around me
Transforming into Sido-Kanho

I desire to see –
As Tilka-Manjhi bulge out
While chopping the chest of mountain
From his silent grave (Putul, Nagaade Kee Tarah Bajten Hain
Shabd 2012, 92-93)

The relation of lapsed revolts of repressed past to the upcoming revolutionary possibility is much explicit here. In *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Walter Benjamin explains this relational of past or what has been with now time in XIV thesis. He writes:

History is the subject of the structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now [*jetzzeit*]. Thus, to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with the time of the now which he blasted out of the continuum of history. The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome incarnate. It evoked ancient Rome the way fashion evokes costumes of past...; it is a tiger's leap into the past. This jump, however, takes place in an arena where the ruling class gives the commands. The same leap in the open air of history is the dialectical one, which is how Marx understood the revolution. (Benjamin 2007, 261)

In Putul's poem we envision this desire of repetition of lapsed revolt for the redemption of lapsed revolution during the process of revolutionary generalization. The politico-aesthetics of Nirmala

Putul marvelously weaves together the images of striking words and the revolutionary generalization as people capturing streets. In her above-mentioned poem while connecting contemporary revolutionary possibility to lapsed revolts of tribal people she proceeds for overcoming the subalternity and the exploitation, oppression and repression that subalternisation is constitutive of. Putul writes:

I desire
My words to strike like
Drums
And people capture the streets

While coming out from their homes (Putul, Nagaade Kee Tarah Bajten Hain Shabd 2012, 93)

References

Adorno, Theodor W. (2004) *Negative Dialectics*. Translated by E. B. Ashton. London: Routledge.

Badiou, Alain. (2005) "Art and philosophy." In *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, 1-15. Translated by Alberto Toscano. California: Stanford University Press.

Banerjee, Prathama. (2010) "The curious double-bind of the Indian adivasi." In *Subaltern Citizens and Their Histories: Investigations from India and The USA*, 125-141. Edited by Gyanendra Pandey. Oxon: Routledge.

—. (2016) "Writing the Adivasi: Some historiographical notes." *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 53(1): 131-153 .

Benjamin, Walter. (2007) "Theses on The Philosophy of History." In *Illuminations*, 253-264. Edited by Hannah Arendt. Translated by Harry John, New York: Schocken Books.

Chakrabarti, Anjan, Anup Dhar and Byasdeb Dasgupta. (2015) *The Indian Economy in Transition: Globalization, Capitalism and Development*. Delhi: Cambridge University Press.

Chakrabarti, Anjan, Anup Dhar and Stephen Cullenbarg. (2012)

"World of the Third ." In *World of The Third and Global Capitalism*, 175-199. Delhi: Worldview Publications.

Chow, Ray. (1993) "Where Have All the Natives Gone? ." In *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies*, 27-54. Edited by Angelika Bammer, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Dhar, Anup. (2017) "JNU Philosophy Colloquium: Workshop "Identity and Void", Anup Dhar on "The Real (of) Marx"." Youtube Video, 1:01:31. "Babu Thaliath," July 17, 2017. <https://youtu.be/OQBq282qPsW>.

Fraser, Nancy. (2008) *Social Justice in the age of Identity politics*. New Delhi: Critical Quest.

Ghosh, Pothish. (2010) "In Search of Class." In *Insurgent Metaphors: Essays in Culture and Class*, 31-42. Delhi: Aakar Books.

—. (2016) "Radical Notes." *Marx's critique of political economy and the problem of revolutionary subjectivity* . October 27, 2016. <https://radicalnotes.org/2016/10/27/marxs-critique-of-political-economy-and-the-problem-of-revolutionary-subjectivity/> (accessed January 8, 2020).

Green, Marcus. (2016) *Gramsci Cannot Speak*. New Delhi: Critical Quest.

Holloway, John. (2005) "The Critical-Revolutionary Subject." In *Change the World Without Taking Power*, 140-154. London: Pluto Press.

Irigary, Luce. (1991) *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*. Translated by Gillian C. Gill. New York: Columbia University Press.

Marx, Karl. (2014) "The Trinity Formula." In *Capital: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production Volume III*. 814-831. Edited by Frederick Engels. Translated by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling. New Delhi: LeftWord Books.

—. (2014) "The General Law of Capitalist Accumulation." In *Capital*:

A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production Volume I. 574-666. Edited by Fredrick Engels. Translated by Samual Moore and Edward Aveling. New Delhi: LeftWord Books.

Menon, Nivedita. (2012) "Introduction ." In *Seeing Like a Feminist*, VII-XII. New Delhi, Haryana: Zubaan books, Penguin India.

Nair, Rukmini Bhaya. (2001) "The Testament of the Tenth Muse: A Perspective on Feminine Sensibility and Sexuality among Indian Women Poets in English." In *Indian Poetry: Modernism and After*, 193-223. Edited by K. Satchidanandan. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi.

Putul, Nirmala. (2004) *Apne Ghar Kee Talash Men*. New Delhi: Ramnika Foundation.

— . (2014) *Beghar Sapne*. Haryana: Aadhar Prakashan.

— . (2012) *Nagaade Kee Tarah Bajten Hain Shabd*. Translated by Ashok Singh. New Delhi: Bhartiya Jnanpith.

Anup Kumar Bali is pursuing his PhD in Literary Art at the School of Culture and Creative Expression, Ambedkar University Delhi.