

**Challenging Traditional Norms: Ecriture Feminine in the Selected Poems
of Malathi Maithri and Kutti Revathi**

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Preface

Écriture féminine is a concept which focuses on the feminine style of writing. It emerged from the famous essay *Laugh of the Medusa* written by Helene Cixous. French feminist Helene Cixous was influenced by postmodernism, psychoanalysis and figures like Simone de Beauvoir and Derrida. Écriture féminine challenges traditional norms and phallogentrism. Cixous yearns for a feminine language that can liberate women and enable them to understand the possibilities of the female body. Malathi Maithri and Kutti Revathi subscribe to écriture féminine exhibiting sexuality, identity and are poets from Tamil literature

The dissertation titled “Challenging Traditional Norms: Écriture Feminine in the Selected Poems of Malathi Maithri and Kutti Revathi” is divided into three chapters. The first chapter deals with an introduction to French feminism and theorists related to écriture féminine. It also offers a brief history of Tamil literature. The second chapter deals with the selected poems of Malathi Maithri and Kutti Revathi, elucidating how the poets exhibited women’s sexuality, identity and creativity, distorting conventional norms, through their poems.

The third and final chapter concludes the project with a brief summary of the project, analyzing the applications of the theory in the patriarchal structure of Tamil society.

Chapter One

Introduction

French feminism became crucial in the history of feminism, marking the beginning of the first wave of feminism in the modern world. French feminists envisioned a world where women and men enjoy freedom and equity, equally. The history of French feminism traces back to the historically significant French revolution that demanded for liberty, equality and fraternity. Along with the revolution many movements took place for achieving the rights of women. French philosopher Marquis de Condorcet's ideas - support for a liberal economy, constitutional government and equal rights for women and people of all races - were ground breaking and it influenced many social thinkers. The Fraternal Society of Patriots of Both Sexes, Defenders of Constitution, a French revolutionary organisation, founded in 1791, expected freedom of women and their active participation in politics. Society of Revolutionary Republican Women, founded in 1793, argued for gender equality which was neglected by French revolution. Helena Maria Williams (a British novelist and translator of French-language works), Mary Wollstonecraft (the famous British writer), Olympe de Gouges, Constance de Salm, wrote influential works exposing the dominance of patriarchal structure and demanded right of women to vote (suffragette movement).

Socialist movements that took place in the first half of the 19th century influenced feminist movements and it resulted in abundant literary activity. The primary focus of the feminists was to ensure sexual freedom and democracy. In 1871, Paris Commune, a revolutionary government seized

power in Paris. As a part of this, a union of working women, Women's Union for the Defense of Paris and Care for the Wounded, was established. Elizabeth Omtrief, a young Russian woman, Nathalie Lemel, Aline Jacquier, Blane Lefebre, Marie Leloup, Aglae Jarry, Madame Collin, Adele Gauvain were the members. They demanded for gender equality, education for women, abolition of prostitution etc. (Krall *Feminists in the city*)

If a history of France since 1789, were to be written dealing only with inconsistencies of revolutionary moments, the question of women would be the largest chapter, and it would show how these movements have always found the way to drive half their troops over to the enemy troops who had asked for nothing more than to fight at their side. French Union for Women's Suffrage (UFSF), formed in 1909, fought for the right of women to vote. UFSF was founded by a group of French feminists including Jeanne Elizabeth Schmanh, a French noblewoman. Eventually, after the political and socialist approaches, French feminism was influenced by various schools of thoughts like Marxism, Psychoanalysis and post-modernism. Twentieth century feminists focussed more on the psychic structures and investigated how patriarchy structured the society mentally. Psychoanalytic approach towards the injustices that women suffered opened new realms of protest, especially through literature. Their primary intends was to expose how the dominant society manipulated the individual as a part of social change. Simone de Beauvoir, Michele Le Doeuff, Colette Guillaumin, Monique Wittig, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Helen Cixous are some of the important figures in the history of French feminism. (Mambroll *Literary Theory and Criticism*)

Simone de Beauvoir, undoubtedly the most important figure in French feminism is best known for her revolutionary work *The Second Sex*. She was an existentialist philosopher, social theorist and also a novelist. She tried to expose the problems inherent within patriarchy and capitalism. French Women's Liberation Movement was launched in 1970 and Beauvoir signed the Manifesto of the 343 for abortion rights. *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947), the novel *The Mandarins* (1954) and *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* (1958) are her other important works.

In *The Second Sex*, which is considered as the bible of contemporary feminists, Simone de Beauvoir attempts to explain how the dominant class oppress women by attributing certain traits and portraying them as the other, which is completely opposite to men. Women were considered as mere objects, incomplete and weak whereas men, complete, essential and strong. She remarks:

Woman? Very simple, say those who like simple answers: she is a womb, an ovary; she is a female: this word is enough to define her. From a man's mouth, the epithet "female" sounds like an insult; but he, not ashamed of his animality, is proud to hear: "He's a male!". The term "female" is pejorative not because it roots woman in nature but because it confines her in her sex, and if this sex, even in an innocent animal, seems despicable and an enemy to man, it is obviously because of the disquieting hostility woman triggers in him. (41)

By asking the question "Are there women really" (41), Beauvoir intends to say that the submissive, coy, dutiful, other 'woman' is the construct

of the patriarchy. Her primary focus was to create a space for woman, to identifying herself, her identity, potential and purpose.

Belgian born French feminist; Luce Irigaray was influenced by Simone de Beauvoir. She was also a linguist, psychoanalyst, cultural theorist and philosopher. She particularly was motivated by Beauvoir's idea of woman being considered as other in the western dominant culture. She stood for the liberation of women by pointing out that they are not the opposite of man but the negation of man. Her famous works are, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974), *This Sex Which is Not One* (1977), *Elemental Passions* (1982).

Luce Irigaray criticized words of philosophers and critics. She enabled the readers to understand how the western culture repressed women through literary works. She is one of the first feminist thinkers to work on women's sexuality, exposing how and why men's disgust towards it grew. Irigaray's work, *This Sex Which is Not One*, has influenced many writers and feminist thinkers to consider the sexuality of woman, which is unique from man's, in their works.

Another important contemporary French feminist who focussed more on language is the literary critic, semiotician, psychoanalyst and novelist, Julia Kristeva. Her feminist semiotic theory focuses more on the abject, distinction between subject and the object or between self and other. Her important works are, *Powers of Horror* (1980), *Tales of Love* (1983), *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (1987).

Kristeva has been regarded as one of the key proponents of French feminism. Her spectating upon the politics of language enabled her to bring out the hidden meanings inside literary works. She encouraged women to view

things through the lens of history and their own psychic experiences. Her attempt to reveal the hidden agenda of the traditional discourses of maternity could be seen in her work, *Tales of Love*. In her opinion, the hierarchy evident in the society emerged as a part of female subjugation, done by the totalitarian, hetero-normative society.

Helene Cixous, French feminist writer, poet, playwright, philosopher, literary critic and rhetorician is considered as one of the mothers of post structural feminism, along with Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva. She has published more than 70 works including fiction, poetry and journals. Her ground breaking article *The Laugh of the Medusa* was published originally in French in 1975, in a special issue of L'Arc magazine devoted to Simone de Beauvoir and the women's movement.

As evident in her works, Jacques Derrida, psychoanalysts Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan has influenced her. Sigmund critically evaluated how Freud explained one's sexual identity and development of mind. She questioned Oedipus complex and tried to break the phallogocentric approach she found in Freud's theories. She along with Luce Irigaray derived the term Phallogocentrism, the combination of the words phallogocentrism and logocentrism, combining Derrida's and Lacan's theories. Cixous investigated how an individual's sexuality is connected to language. She believed in the way of communication and explained it in her works, incorporating views of her contemporary theorists. She explored the relationship between language and female sexuality, in connection with psychoanalysis in her work *The Laugh of the Medusa*. Her other important works are *The Exile of James Joyce*

(1972), *The Newly Born Women* (1975), *The Book of Promethea* (1983), *Coming to Writing* (1986), *Stigmata: Surviving Texts* (1998).

“The social script depends upon gendered binary oppositions which relegates the feminine to the role of the Other, or the negative, in any hierarchies which society constructs” (Wortmann *Grin*).

Coming to Writing: and Other Essays, *The Newly Born Woman* and the essay, *Laugh of the Medusa*, are her attempts to discover a way of writing, free-flowing, beyond certain boundaries. Through, *The Newly Born Woman*, Cixous and Catherine Clement assert that thought has always worked through binary opposites. The hierarchy has always valued male and considered maleness as active and femaleness as passive. Cixous analyses the absence of woman in philosophical models and envisions a world, a new framework of liberation, without logocentrism and phallogentrism. She also explores bisexuality, a means to destroy the unitary sexual identity, in this text. She yearns for rewriting histories and stories with a new language. Cixous coins the term *Ecriture Feminine* translated as feminine writing or women’s writing. This theory arose from her deconstructive and psychoanalytic reading of the western society she discusses in *The Newly Born Woman*. She rejects the labels feminist and lesbian. Theory of *écriture féminine* first developed in *Laugh of the Medusa* urges women to write their bodies and destroy phallogentric attempts of subjugation. The Greek myth of Medusa, castration, lack, phallogentrism and *écriture féminine* are the major topics she focuses in this essay.

Medusa, one of the unfortunate divine figures in the Greek mythology was once the most beautiful of the three Gorgons. She was a mortal unlike her

sisters and her hair was considered as the most wonderful of all her charms. According to the myth, when Medusa had an affair with the sea god Poseidon, goddess of wisdom, Athena, took away her beauty, punished her, turning her hair to snakes and her skin to greenish hue. She was cursed that anyone who stares at her will turn into a stone. She was killed by Perseus, who used a mirror to escape her wrath. According to many versions of the myth, Perseus cut off her head and affixed it in his shield to fight enemies. Thus, Medusa prompts an ugly terrifying image that forces readers to interpret her as a symbol of female powerlessness. (*Greek Mythology*)

R. C. Berry in his *Set in Stone* (2010) retells Medusa's story, shifting it from the male-dominated narrative. He posts critical questions about why Medusa is portrayed as a mortal and how she transformed into a threat for mighty gods and heroes. The science fiction, *Medusa Uploaded* (2018) by Emily Devenport, fantasy series *Sweet Venom* (2011) by Tera Lynn Childs, coming of age memoir *Medusa: Reflections of an Angry Black Girl*, by Coffy Davis, address the themes of Medusa's story in widely different ways. In, *The Medusa Reader*, Marjorie Garber and Nancy J. Vickers assembled seventy-three references to Medusa in the world literature. They note that, "The most canonical writers have invoked her story and sung both her praise and her blame". Medusa's myth is widely used by poets, anthropologists, psychoanalysts, painters and political theorists. More often, Medusa is represented as a terrifying figure. (Wenstrom *BOOK RIOT*)

Medusa's Head, by Sigmund Freud, which was published after his death, associates Medusa with castration and decapitation. She was represented as a symbol of terror and ambiguity. She invoked a fear of

castration or becoming like a woman, in the minds of men, that often forces them to completely neglect feminine sexuality. His concept of castration complex in association with male gaze was later criticized by analysts and feminist critics.

Cixous rejects this and criticizes Sigmund Freud. Medusa's snaky hair, is interpreted both as representation of phallus and of pubic hair. This according to Cixous is a symbol of castration, especially because Perseus appropriated her body to use it for his own benefits. The laugh in the title of the essay represents laugh of rebellion. Cixous considers Medusa as harbinger of change, the guard of a new feminine voice unaffected by the authoritative phallogocentric approach. She calls upon powerful women to alter history. Cixous affirmed that woman's difference from man is both sexual and linguistic. In order to identify her true self, which could be revealed through understanding her own body, women must write themselves.

Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement. (Cixous 875)

Woman's body, sexuality, identity and creativity are nebulous terms which are related to each other but confined in the mesh of phallogocentrism. At the very onset, Cixous brings out the prime argument of her essay by challenging phallogocentric approach. For centuries, woman's body was kept away from her. She wants women to write about themselves and about their

body in general. The fatal goal of the male supremacy was to confine women with its shackles. She rejects past and makes a plea to women, to start writing their own body, their self and change the future. *Écriture féminine* helps its disciples to write and read everything that was repressed, obscured or unacknowledged in literature. The aim of the discourse as pointed out by Cixous is “to breakup, to destroy and to foresee the unforeseeable, to project” (875). It could be achieved only by breaking phallogentrism.

Cixous as a poststructuralist dismantles phallogentric society. She calls each woman “an unacknowledged sovereign” (876). But they are unaware about their potential, their infinite strengths because the society attributes them certain roles of adjusted daughters and wives upon them. In order to free herself from this claustrophobic atmosphere, women must write themselves, embracing urges and drives of their body rather than adjusting with the disguise of ‘good woman’.

And why don’t you write? Write! Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it. I know why you haven’t written. Because writing is at once too high, too great for you, it’s reserved for the great – that is, for “great men”; and it’s “silly”. (Cixous 876)

She hopes that the female – sexed – texts will break phallogentrism. The benefactors of the phallogentric society will be scared and might try to categorize women writers as “witches” and “little girls”. She denotes the frozen existence of women who are repressed and asked to keep their potential inside, with the term “frigidified”.

According to the myth, after she was punished by Athena, Medusa fled to Africa. Snakes fell from her hair and that is how Africa became infested by so many poisonous snakes. Cixous compares Africa with woman. Male supremacy considers both Africa and woman as they can colonize and invade. They view woman as a dark continent they can penetrate. But by claiming the female body and breaking stereotypes, women can understand their true potential. African continent is dark and dark is considered dangerous. Likewise, woman's sexuality, dark and unexplored scares men.

As soon as they begin to speak, at the same time as they are taught their name, they can be taught that their territory is black: because you are Africa, you are black. Your continent is dark. Dark is dangerous. You can't see anything in the dark, you're afraid. Don't move, you might fall. Most of all, don't go into the forest. And so we have internalized this horror of the dark. (877)

Men made women to hate themselves, especially their body. Antinarcissism as Cixous explains in her essay, weigh women's worth by the standards created by men. The arrival of New Woman will liberate women from the confinement created by men. Lack of proper representation of women in literature helps Cixous to understand that language is a medium strictly controlled by males. The "libidinal economy" which Freud characterized as inherently masculine, suppressed the presence of women in literature. Women were not given space to voice their needs and ideas, because the whole history of writing is characterized by the phallogocentric

tradition. She calls it self – admiring, self – stimulating, self – congratulatory phallocentrism.

Cixous observes that unlike novelists, poets on rare occasions have captured the true strength of women. Feminine features, according to Cixous, are more accommodated by poetry. The innovative writing of women could be viewed as a protest against the traditional norms and structures proposed by men. It will bring transformation in two levels. By writing herself, woman could be able to return to their body which was kept away from her. The new woman has to stand her ground and claim her space by killing the false woman.

Write yourself. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth. Our naphtha will spread, throughout the world, without dollars – black or gold – nonassessed values that will change the rules of the old game. (880)

Cixous believes that the construction of the feminine texts will destabilize the masculine dominant style. It should be against the binaries of masculine/feminine or logic/illogic. Then only the writing forms an antilogous weapon that makes her both the giver and the taker at the same time. The feminine texts will open up a new space different from the symbolic space which is a space of silence and guilt. She affirms that the inherent maternal goodness in female characterize their writing also. Women's speech is inextricably linked to their bodies. It has a connection with music and poetry. It is influenced by the first ever song of love a woman heard from her mother. Although the phallic mystification corrupted the relationship a woman and her

mother shares, she is undeniably linked to her mother. The goodness of her mother's milk is what makes her to write with the white ink. Mother possesses the ability to look after her child without the help of its father. The white ink represents the purity of her love. Conceiving, nurturing and giving birth are all biological processes. According to Cixous, this also happens in writing. The process of childbirth and the process of writing are directly connected. The female libido is viewed as a threat. But it will produce far more radical effects of political and social change than some might like to think. It is unrestricted and sophisticated that the male libido. And that is why it is impossible to define the feminine practice of writing.

It is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded – which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. But it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system; it does and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philosophico-theoretical domination. It will be conceived of only by subjects who are breakers of automatisms, by peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate. (883)

The concept of bisexuality for Cixous is not just a simple merging of the genders. Bisexuality is plural, playful and polysemous. Women are expected to be closer to a bisexual subject position than men. They are trained from birth to be part of the phallic monosexuality. Women, according to Cixous, are liberated beings. They are not at all concerned about their identity around the phallus. But they have always been identified in terms of the lack.

Cixous's concept of bisexuality is different from traditional bisexuality that engendered castration anxiety in men. A woman could be more bisexual than a man because without foregoing his phallogocentric masculine identity he cannot become bisexual. She claims that male writing cannot be bisexual whereas feminine writing is bisexual and can address both men and women. Instead of bipolarity Cixous suggests bimodality.

She criticizes Freud for his faulty analysis of female sexuality. She says that his skewed portrayal of female as the impenetrable other, reinstated male view more emphatically. His psychoanalytic theories were the same with other human sciences. Freud was just reproducing masculine view. She presents Freud's Dark continent as a masculine construct. Speaking about the phallogocentric structures inherent in the language, she asserts that women are silenced. Their sex is an abyss, a mysterious dark room, an unexplored yet claimed country.

Cixous credits Jean Genet, James Joyce and Gerard Genette as three key figures of *écriture féminine*. Cixous claims that *écriture féminine* is not only a place for women writers but also for male authors that deviate from the masculine language which is the father tongue. Female representation in the works of James Joyce and Gerard Genette did justice for women. *Funeral Rites*, novel by Jean Genet explored femininity. Likewise, Cixous wants women to denounce father tongue and to adopt a new explosive, disruptive and impassioned form of language, that would allow free expression. Cixous mentions Freud's well known patient Dora. Dora is the pseudonym given by Freud to a patient he diagnosed with hysteria in 1900. Her life became miserable when her father began an affair with Fran K. Fran K's

husband Herr K tried to make several sexual advances to her. Freud attributed the cough that led to her loss of voice as Dora's repressed feelings. Cixous questions Freud's claims that he presented in *Fragments of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* (1901). She urges women to speak and overcome the fear. She calls Dora as the true mistress of the signifier.

Writing is an act of rebellion. French word for flying and stealing is the same. Therefore, Cixous argues flying is a woman's gesture and it also means stealing away. Flying above the accepted verbal and physical boundaries is what Cixous intends here. Only women know what it means to be caged and trapped in an alien territory. A true feminine text is more than subversive and like a volcano, it will bring about an upheaval of the traditional order and shatter false truth. She also berates Nietzsche, whose name is often seen as synonymous with misogyny.

Women should not be treated as a creature or as a sexual production for men. Now everything is changing and women are equal as men. The phallic period which Freud said, a dream which was dreamed by the male and women supported through their silence, has come to an end. She counters Freud's theory of penis envy by pointing out that in the realm of maternal feminine there is no phallus to centre identity. There is a cosmic superiority in women's sexuality in comparison to phallic single mindedness. Her libidinal possibilities are not confined by the idea of phallus. The new female will be revolutionary by aiding empowerment through the acceptance of women's sexuality and practicing body autonomy. Woman will write the pre-symbolic language of the mother, writing their torrential sensations, their exceptional, multiple erogeneity. Woman's inexhaustible desire does not represent a lack,

says Cixous criticizing Lacan's theory of Lack that propose woman's desire for the masculine body initiates from the lack of penis. She disparages both Freud and Lacan. She also mocks women who still remain proponents of the masculine language and sees them as hampering the arrival of the new woman. When women write, the act of writing or proclaiming the body will bring out all they never knew they could be, leading them to untiring, tenacious and never-ending search for love. "In one another, we will never be lacking" (893), proclaims that womankind will never be under the masculinist, phallogocentric values anymore and in fact they are not lacking anything at all. A more than two-thousand-year literary tradition could be traced in Tamil literature. Even ancient stages of evolution are evident in the maturity of the oldest existing works. The majority of Tamil authors are from South India including Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Sri Lanka. It is characterized by the social, economic, political and cultural trends of the history of Tamil Nadu. Tamil is a Dravidian language and one of the oldest in India. Ancient Tamil literature can be divided into 3 sections, namely the Sangam Period, Ethical Literature Period and Period of Old Epics.

The Sangam period, which consists of some of the early existing Tamil literature, deals with a variety of subjects such as governance, love, war, mourning and trade. However, most of the literature of this period has been lost. The literary works currently available from the Sangam period are only a small part of the entire Tamil literature created during this Golden Age of Tamil. During this period Tamils were dominated by the Chera, Chola and Pandia dynasties. The available literary works are chronologically divided into three segments, including a major 18 anthology series consisting of eight

anthologies and ten idyllic. *Tolkappiyam*, one of the significant texts of this period, is a study of grammar, rhetoric, phonetics and poetics. It is a classification of animals, habitats, plants and humans, that actively discusses human emotions and interactions.

Didactic or Ethical Literature period which came after 3 centuries after Sangam age, witnessed the mutual co-operation between Tamil and Sanskrit, the two main languages of the era. Various concepts and words related to religion, philosophy and ethics have been borrowed from each other and exchanged between these two major North and South Indian languages. During the year 300AD, Buddhist Kalabhra dynasty had a great influence on the Tamil country. In addition, Buddhism and Jainism have undergone rapid development in the region and throughout the country. In their works many scholars and authors have created ethical and moral literature that reflects the austere beliefs of their religion. Thiruvallvar's *Kural* is probably the best-known ethical literature of the era and is a comprehensive handbook of ethics, community and love. The book contains 1330 kurals each divided into 10 kural chapters. Other famous literary works from the lessons of Tamil literature are *Nalatiyar*, *Iniyavai Narpathu*, *Karavali* and *Inna Narpathu*. The popular Jain texts *Nalatiyar* and *Pazhamozhi Nanuru* consist of 400 verses, each quoting a proverb in an illustrated story. In the 17th century, the suppressed Hindu sects revived and they were able to produce various Saiva and Vaishnava literary texts.

Cilappatikaram is one of the finest works produced during the Period of Old Epics. It is believed to be penned by the sibling of the Senguttuvan, the Chera king, Ilango Adikal. It is an outstanding work providing a vivid and

unique depiction of the country of ancient Tamilakam. *Manimekalai* produced by Sattanar, a contemporary of Ilango Adigal was also rooted in Buddhist philosophy. It comprises of explanations of logical fallacy, believed to be based on *Nyayapravesa* written by Dinnag in the 5th century. *Perunkathai*, *Valayapathi*, *Kundalakesi* are other important works.

During the middle ages, the Tamil nation was ruled by the imperial Chola dynasty and was under a single administration. Between the 11th and 13th centuries the Chola dynasty ruled the apex with minimum foreign aggression. The religious norms and principles were based on Vaishnavism and Shaivism. Nambi Andar Nambi's *Tirumurais*, Sekkilar's *Periyapuranam*, *Ramavatharam* by Kamban, are some notable works of this period.

Avvaiyar is one of the most famous female names in Tamil literature. It was the title of more than one female poet of Tamil literature. First Avvaiyar is believed to lived during the Sangam period. She is expected to be the author of 59 poems in the *Purananuru*. Avvaiyar second lived during the tenth century. She is often considered as an old intellectual, writing many poems and literary works including Avvai Kural, comprising 310 kurals in 31 chapters. The third Avvaiyar wrote mainly for children lived during the 13th century. Her most notable works are *Athichoodi*, *Konraiventhan*, *Mooturai*, *Nalvali* and *Vinayagar Agaval*. Ponmudiyar, Velli Vitiyar are other important female authors of Sangam age. It is believed that Tamil literature had over 25 Vedic poetesses and over 25 Sangam poetesses.

Modern era of Tamil literature began during the 18th century. Tamil society was deeply influenced by the western philosophy of thought and also by the colonisers. Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai, U.V. Swaminatha Iyer,

Gopalakrishna Bharathi are some prominent modern writers in Tamil. Siva Sundhari, C. S. Lakshmi, Anuradha Ramanan, Indira Soundarajan, Vasanthi, Thilagavathy are popular female writers of this period. C. S. Lakshmi, popularly known under the pseudonym Ambai, is considered to be the first modern feminist writer in Tamil literature. (*Indianetzone.com*)

During the Sangam age, women got chance to be part of the administration. As we compare with other periods, Sangam age women were treated equally with men and they got opportunity to study literature music and drama. They were trained to be singers, dancers and musicians. However, the patriarchy was dominant, forcing many rules and regulations upon women. The concept of 'loyal woman' became prominent during this period and loyal woman worship also started. After Sangam period we could see a decline of the reputation of women in the Tamil society as well as their literary contributions. Even though there are some isolated female voices in the Tamil history, no one had the audacity to articulate about female sexuality and its possibilities. According to the historical accounts, severe punishments were meted out to those who dared to voice such matters. Women were suppressed and had to live according to the norms and regulations put forward by the heteronormative society. Men wrote about their sexual desires composed feminine sexuality for women, without concerning their body. But, writing their body, sexuality and identity, in their poems, four female writers have already marked their place in the long history of Tamil literature. They are, Malathi Maithri, Kutti Revathi, Salma and Sukirtharani. The bilingual collection of poems edited and translated from the Tamil by Lakshmi Holmstrom, prove how these poets raise their voices for the voiceless women.

Malathi Maithri is a Tamil poet, activist and a feminist. She is recognised as a distinguished Tamil poet and has been contributing to literary magazines with her poems and articles since 1988. Women's sexuality, identity and individuality are explored in most of her poems.

Malathi Maithri was born on 1968, in Puducherry, Union Territory of India, in a fishing community that supported women to be mentally strong and independent. She was the eldest of six and did her best to admit herself as well as each of her siblings to the school. She completed her higher secondary education and attended a tailoring course that later helped her to be financially independent. She was inspired by well-known Tamil writers like Periyar, Jayakanthan, Janakiraman and Marxist as well as DMK literature. Her publication came in 1988. Later she published three books of poetry and a collection of essays and journalistic articles.

Profoundly infatuated with water, Malathi Maithri has taken water as the title and love theme – indeed, the very subject – of two of her three poetry collections. Using language, she has attempted the aesthetic exercise of channelling water's natural dramaturgy into poetry. This strategy, she believes, makes possible the effort, manifest in her poem, to obliterate gender identity. (“Malathi Maithri” *Poetry International*)

Malathi Maithri's poetry implicates gender issues. Through her poetry she showcases the deeper relationship between a mother and her child. She exhibited the wide, fluid and boundless realm of woman's sexuality, leading

many other women writers to this untrodden path. She addresses sensitive issues like caste and religion-based oppression, political manifestation of women's rights, unrealistic portrayal of woman in mythologies, folk literature and oral traditions. She believes that it is high time to create a female language to identify all these injustices towards women and recreate a world of feminine nature to establish women's identity, sexuality and femininity. Exploitations continue to enslave female body. Therefore, she suggests breaking out of the corporate culture. Her and her contemporary poet's efforts have opened a new space for young writers to claim their body through writing. She faced many threats in relation with her direct portrayal of the female body but she believes it has helped many to understand their body as well as their literature. Most of her poems re-reads myths with the lenses of modern feminism and thereby claims justice to those mythological characters.

Dr. S Revathi popularly known as Kutti Revathi is an Indian lyricist, poet, Siddha doctor and activist. She has published six poetry collections, journals and articles. She is also the editor of *Panikkudam*, the first Tamil feminist magazine.

Her women centric writings gained immense popularity. Her second publication *Mulaigal* (2002), stirred controversies from the conservative Tamil society. She faced multiple consequences including, obscene calls, letters and even life threats. *With Words I Weave My Body*, is an essay written by the author in response to the controversies. In her essay she explains how women's body must be treated. She wants the society to consider it as a living entity, not as a commodity. Like her contemporaries, she too believes in the

usage of a new language to create a new world for women. She treats language as a means to loosen the boundaries that have shrunk a woman's body.

Kutti Revathi was born in an extremely poor family. She had a special love for Tamil literature from childhood itself. Her father bought books for her and supported her to study as much as she wanted. She studied Siddha medicine, but again turned back to literature. Her first poetry collection, *Puunaiyaipol Alaiyum Veliccham*, was published in 2001. *Mulaigal* (2002), *Thanimaiyin Aayiram Irakkaigal* (2003), *UdalinKadavu* (2006), *Yaanumitta Thii* (2011), *Maamadha Yaanai* (2012) are her other works. She also wrote critical articles on portrayal of women in films. She received many awards including, Audi Ritz Icon Award in 2011. Kutti Revathi's poems are more erotic in nature. Using beautiful imageries, she demonstrates how the natural landscape is connected with the female body. Most of her poems address themes like love, body, sexuality, femininity and identity. Kutti Revathi grew up in a natural environment surrounded by mountains. Tiruverumpur town, the school Y.W.C.A. and teachers there influenced her. She learned all 1330 Thirukkural. She was also fascinated by the Erumbeeswarar temple near her home. All these memories of her childhood are reflected in her works. Her understandings about the Siddha medicine equipped her to envision a world beneficial for women by exhibiting unexplored parts of the body. She was always driven by the scientific and theoretical articles in the Siddha tradition.

It could be said that Kutti Revathi is deeply influenced by that strain of Siddha thought which claims that our bodies are ourselves: it is through the body that we understand the Natural world, gain knowledge of ourselves, and achieve a

connectedness with the universe. Perhaps it is this that drives her to call for a much more nuanced language in the current debates on sexuality and politics of the body. (Holmstrom 24)

Lakshmi Holmstrom was undoubtedly the best anglophone translator India has ever had. She was a literary critic, and translator of Tamil fiction into English. She has translated short stories, novels and poetry of major writers in Tamil such as Ashoka Mitran, Sundara Ramasami, C.S. Lakshmi, Iyamam, Bama, Pudhumaipithan, etc.

Holmstrom was born in a Christian family on 1st June 1935 in Salem, near Bangalore. Her father, Paul David Devanandan was a theologian. However, she lost her faith in her school days. Her mother committed suicide when she was only two years old. Her father soon remarried, making her childhood miserable. She did her undergraduate degree in English literature at Christian College, University of Madras. There she found her future husband in Mark Holmstrom. She obtained her postgraduate degree from St Hilda's College, University of Oxford. She completed her DLitt on R.K. Narayan and it helped her to shift her interest to Indian literature and translation. After marriage, in 1960, Holmstrom and her husband went to New York, where she worked as a librarian at the Indian consulate general. They came back to the UK after two years and Lakshmi taught as a schoolteacher for almost seven years in Norwich. From 2003 to 2006, she became the first Royal Literary Fund Fellow specialising in literary translation. She became one of the founder-trustees of South Asian Diaspora Literature and Arts Archive (SALIDAA). In 2011, considering her services to literature she was appointed as Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE). She has won a number

of awards including, Crossword Award in 2000, the Iyal Award from Tamil Literary Garden 2008, the Crossword Hutch Award in 2007. In a Time of Burning, a translated work of Sri Lankan poet Cheran won an English PEN award.

Lakshmi Holmstrom found her life's purpose during her early fifties, translating Indian, specifically Tamil literary works. Through, *The Inner Courtyard: Stories by Indian Women*, her first edited work, an anthology of 18 short stories by Indian women writers, she curated women-centric stories of different women possessing different identities, exhibiting her obligation towards feminism. She was very much concerned about the individuality of the author and avoided foreignization. She was adamant to extract the right sense of the words when rendering Tamil into English. She believed in the universal structure of language, even though one language does not move into another automatically. Holmstrom, in an interview for the Hindu Times in 2013 talks about the importance of feminism and the changes she considers valuable in the Tamil women's literature.

Chapter Two

Analysis of Selected Poems

“Bhumadevi” by Malathi Maithri has a feminine structure and tone that envisages a discrete mother Earth in the minds of the readers. It becomes the celebration of femininity by exploring the undeniable connection between the Earth and womanhood.

Interestingly, the title “Bhumadevi” is the blending of the Sanskrit words ‘Bhu’ which means ‘the Earth’, ‘Ma’ which means ‘to make, produce and create’ and ‘Devi’ which means ‘Goddess’. It might be also the implication of the Hindu Goddess ‘Bhudevi’, popularly known as ‘Vasundhara’, who is the personification of the Earth. Many south Indian temples worship Bhudevi, praising her as that which holds everything.

The structure of the poem contributes to the overall beauty of the poem. It begins from the conversation of a mother and her daughter. The child wonders about the stretch marks on her mother’s stomach. They appeared like wind markings on a sandy beach. By stroking mother’s long fine hair from her upper belly and looking bewildered at the stretch marks like footprints of a baby crab, she asks her mother how she gave birth and survived.

Her mother belittles her doubt and says that there is nothing marvellous in it. She asks her to think about her granny’s granny, who gave birth to the entire world. She is referring to the Earth, pointing out the connection between the Earth and women. The child falls asleep thinking about her grandmother giving birth to the entire world like a hen laying an egg. The last four lines explain how women and ‘mother Earth’ functions. It

could be also considered as the different emotions that women go through during the process of childbirth.

The poem opens to the possibilities of Bhumadevi, such as endurance, patience, reproduction, and destruction. Traditional writers often compared the Earth with women, without accepting these capabilities in women as a virtue. Their primary focus was not to showcase the uniqueness of women, but to praise the Earth, comparing it with few features of women and thereby glorify motherhood and other expected roles, to make women act according to the patriarchy's whims and fancies. Amid from the patriarchal portrayals that used women to exhibit the Earth, Malathi Maithri uses the Earth to exhibit women, their uniqueness and elegance, with the help of powerful imageries drawn from the nature itself.

The poet makes the readers empathize with the process of childbirth. According to the mother in the poem, there is nothing marvellous in it. But, diligently and indirectly, the poet asserts that, if one can feel, one understands. Here, the mother is not only educating her daughter, but the reader also. Initially, the daughter becomes the representation of the young generation, deeply troubled by the assimilation of the concerns of the patriarchal social structure, about the process of childbirth, especially. Writings often portrayed childbirth allegedly and this resulted in people misinterpreting it in many ways. Poet's idea about the process of childbirth is beyond all this. According to her women is entirely different from man's assumptions. She could be the snowstorm or the exploding volcano, raging wave or the joyous stream, the feasting forest or all at the same time.

Malathi Maithri's poem "Cast Away Blood" leaves a chill in the minds of the readers. She brings together temple and blood which were intentionally kept apart. The poet raises her voice against the social taboo that confined women mentally and physically, through this poem.

The poem is based on the myth of Madurai Meenakshi, who is said to be the reincarnated form of the Hindu deity Parvathy. The poem is set on the Madurai Meenakshi Temple that beholds a history of more than 3500 years. Pandya king, Malayadhvaja, hoped for son. He prayed for a son and did many offerings but was 'blessed' with a girl. His daughter Meenakshi was born with three breasts. According to the myth, gods told the king not to worry and raise the child as a warrior. They promised him she will lose her third breast once she finds the love of her life. Meenakshi after several years proved herself as a warrior and conquered armies in all directions. She confronted with Lord Shiva while she was in the north. One of her breasts fell when she met him, and the prophecy was fulfilled. Meenakshi temple in Madurai became the prime example of Dravidian architecture. It is covered almost by 1500 painted sculptures and numerous towers that embodies the artistic and religious tradition of southern India. The temple was constructed focussing keenly on vastushastra. More than 20,000 people visit the temple per day to worship Madurai Meenakshi. The deity is shown in green colour holding her pet parrot, which is the symbol of love and lust. The sacred water tank, gate, towers, ancient walls painted with gods and demons, the crowd, altogether create a mystic effect blended with holiness. (Seshadri *Livehistory India*)

The full moon clings precariously to the flagpole. The parrot evades Meenakshi's hands and flies away. In the first stanza itself the characters, the

full moon, the parrot and Meenakshi are introduced. Apart from the expressed meanings, these characters share innate meanings also. Meenakshi follows her parrot and reaches the temple. Suddenly she feels a shudder and thrills, because of menstruation and the blood started seeping against her thighs. She walks through the holy inner place following the parrot and reaches at the Golden Lotus Tank. She slips off her underskirt and rinses it in the holy water. Suddenly she remembers something. The moon in the tank started reddening, which makes the parrot to summon Meenakshi, as if she has done something wrong.

Malathi Maithri raises her voice against tradition that worships a woman deity and never allows women to enter the temple during menstrual days. In many parts of India according to Hindu faith, menstruation is considered impure. The poet is frustrated by women being prohibited from participating in normal life while menstruating and effortlessly brings together the temple and blood. The clash between the temple and blood is actually the clash between tradition and a biological condition. The full moon in the poem is the representation of traditions and conventional norms. Full moon is when the sun appears exactly opposite to the moon. Meenakshi is the representation of women. The parrot becomes the tool of the poet, the bridge between temple and blood.

There are many myths and misbeliefs that confine women from leading a natural social life. They are kept apart from entering the kitchen, touching the holy text, food items etc. The poet exhibits this in her poem. Ironically, even the goddess cannot enter the temple, named after her and worships her during her menstrual days.

“Empress of Words” by Malathi Maithri focusses on three-women poets of different times. They became subjects of controversies particularly because of their selection of themes. The poet calls upon three poets, places herself among them and creates a sense of mental bonding. Sappho, Velliviidhi and Sylvia are the poets that she mentions here.

The poetess Sappho was a Greek poet from the island of Lesbos. She was considered as one of the greatest lyric poets. ‘Her voice is unique’ says Jonson. Plato called her ‘the tenth muse’. Her life became a subject for furious controversies due to her sexuality. Legend says that early church burned her works. A theologian famously called her “a sex crazed whore who sings of her own wantonness” (“How gay was Sappho” *NewYorker*). Sappho could be considered as a feminist heroine and gay role model at the same time. Judith Butler once said that “as far as I know, there was only me and a woman called Sappho” (*NewYorker*). Sappho’s surviving poems focus on women and their relationships. Even the word lesbian comes from Sappho’s native place Lesbos.

The poem “Empress of Words” begins with the poet’s admiration of Sappho. She empathizes with Sappho and imagines that Sappho might have suffered from her lover departing. Horses’ hooves and the dust they raised died away. Sappho stood there full of grief thinking only about her beloved. Poet says that Sappho might have lost herself because of the pain. Drinking a jar of wine and listening to the flute song, she stands alone in an olive grove on a mountain slope. Sappho’s homosexual interests were not acceptable for the society, but the poet consoles her and listens to her grief. (Mendelsohn *The New Yorker*)

Malathi Maithri picks another woman poet, this time from the Sangam age. Sangam literature is the earliest writings in Tamil language from the first to fourth century. Sangam writings were extremely religious, giving importance to love, heroism and praise of kings. *Velliviidhi*, also known as *Velliveethiyar* was a poet of the late Sangam age. She wrote about female sexuality, women's dreams and the need to destroy the confinement created by men. She wrote eight verses in *Kurunthogai*.

Malathi Maithri reconstructs Velliviidhi's verses from *Kurunthogai* 5, what the heroine said to her friend (*Wild Girls Wicked Words* 185), that discloses the heroine's affection to her friend and the sorrow evolved due to separation. Malathi Maithri uses the terms Punnai trees and herons in her poem. She also says that White herons do wrong by swallowing pregnant catfish. Here herons become the representation of toxic men and the term pregnant implies that the catfish is female. She says that together we could chase away the herons by the sluice where the silver carp leap. She offers a hand of friendship and shows her admiration by saying that she wishes to lie upon Velliviidhi's lap, listening to Yaazh and faceless music. Once again, she warns that white herons do wrong by swallowing pregnant catfish.

American poet, novelist and short story writer, Sylvia Plath is credited with advancing the genre of confessional poetry. She focussed predominantly on the injustices created due to sex-based roles. Plath's poetry is often associated with the confessional movement and are compared to the works of poets such as Lowell and fellow student Anne Sexton. Her infamous poem "Daddy" became very much controversial, and it signified her relationships. Her troublesome childhood made her narcissistic, eventually making her a

major source of controversy. She questioned different familial roles attributed to women by the patriarchal social structure. Plath was only 30 years old, when she killed herself after multiple suicide attempts, by sticking her head in an oven, in her London home.

Malathi Maithri presents Sylvia as her equal in this poem. Her words hint Sylvia's life and tragedies. Throughout her life she faced problems due to the dominant attitude of men. According to the poet this felt like thrusting her gloveless hands into the pockets and standing without knowing the compass points. She went looking for wine shops and came back with sleeping pills. The poet is waiting for her with kisses listening to the faceless music coming from a distant violin.

In the second last stanza, the poet calls upon all her predecessors, equals, from time driven by death to create with words a castle surrounded by moat. She talks about creating their own language. Language that is different from the language of men. She marks how her predecessors sacrificed their lives in order to create that "castle". They were frequently criticised by the society. They became subjects of controversies that tore their lives. Many of the women poets were erased from history particularly because of their sexuality and selection of subjects and themes in their works. That is why it is necessary to surround the "word castle" with a moat.

In the last stanza of the poem, the poet explains about features that they all share. Their poems were full of dreams and desires because it was created in the midst of solitude, denser and more mysterious than a forest. She calls them the "Sovereign Queens of Words". Malathi Maithri wants the writers to

weave with their bodies, with the words of protest and conflict, a blanket against the cold, the cold that disturbs women since their origin.

“Consumer Goods” by Malathi Maithri try to break idealised female traits. She condemns consumer products and beauty consciousness that deceive women by making them think that they should have fair feminine physique.

Men imagined that women should have several qualities. Certain qualities that define women. A great deal of writing about this subject could be seen in English literature. Writers treated this subject humorously as well as seriously and theologically also. Sophie a character in Rousseau’s *Emile* is an example of perfect wife. Sylvia from “Who is Sylvia” *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, by Shakespeare could be cited as another example. Urbanisation and globalisation made significant impacts during the course of time and eventually the concept of beauty of women also changed.

The poet mitigates the current idea about a perfect lovely woman. An ideal woman must have a fair and lovely face. She must be using Clinic plus as shampoo and Lux as soap for skin like silk. Eyetex for eyes and Emami for lips, Lakme for nails are some general trends that we see nowadays. Jewels must be bought from Lalitha. Clothes from Nalli and dowry from Saravana.

Women may or may not be using these products but what the poet intends here is to tell the society that they must accept her the way she is. There are many consumer goods available in the markets that are termed as exclusively made for women. These products target women by creating a sense of utopian female body by intentionally using models with idealised feminine features. It will confine women mentally and periodically making

them submissive because of not being able to have that ‘idealised female body’. Bodies that are fat, skinny, black, are widely ill-treated by the supposed fair society.

Malathi Maithri moves further and talks about a lady she saw at the street. She is not using any of these products. She never chooses a different form or colour each day like the privileged people. Even though her princes appear before her holding her biriyani packet at the middle of the night. The poet envisages a different picture of a lady singing all day and minding her own business with the tunefulness of pebbles rattling in a cup. She is also a woman. One who sits at the street’s verge scratching her head full of lice. The societal perception of a woman is questioned through this poem. It challenges tradition, consumerism and the concepts of beauty and love.

“Demon language” by Malathi Maithri is based on the myth of Karaikal Ammai. Through this poem she finds connections between language of woman and language of demon. The poet yearns for a language different from men and writes inspired by the life of Karaikal Ammai who once wrote in women’s own language and faced a number of consequences.

The poet goes directly into her topic by saying that demon’s features are all woman and the same way, woman’s features are all demon. Unfortunately, the demon language is poetry and its features are all saint. She wants a different language and asks to become a woman, a poet and a demon. Because in her opinion it is the language of liberty. Niili, also known as Karaikal Ammai, might be wicked for the world but she is the symbol of truth and freedom.

Karaikal Ammaiyar was a bhakti poet and saint. She is considered as one of the greatest figures of early Tamil literature. She lived during the sixth century and is popularly known as one of the sixty-three canonized saiva saints, a group of saints devoted only to the Hindu god Shiva. A male court minister of the twelfth century, Cekkilar, made her popular by portraying her life. There are also film adaptations of her story, and this shows the influence of her writings. According to Cekkilar, Niili was born in south India as the beautiful daughter of a wealthy merchant, who was an ardent believer of Lord Shiva since childhood. This became crucial in Niili's life as she also became a believer of Lord Shiva, and remained the same, even after marriage. One day her husband sent two mangoes to their home. She gave one of the mangoes to a Saiva tramp who came at their house. When her husband came, she gave him the another one. He then asked for the second mango. Niili got panicked and prayed to Lord Shiva and by miracle another mango appeared in her hand. The sweetness of the mango made her husband to ask her where was it from. Niili told him what happened and her husband asked her to get another mango in the same way. To his surprise another mango appeared in her hands and soon it went vanished as he tried to touch it. This made her husband to leave her thinking that she is a Goddess. He married another woman and began to worship Niili.

This story came out more than 500 years after Niili's life.

Unfortunately, it is not her poetry that is popular, but a story that hints patriarchy's stubborn want of hierarchical order in marriage, that gives upper hand only to men. Karaikal Ammaiyar was a great beauty at her time. She willingly disposed it in order to be the worshipper of Shiva. She became the

first to write poetry devoted to Lord Shiva. She describes herself in one of her poems as:

A female ghoul with withered breasts, bulging veins,
hollow eyes, white teeth, shriveled stomach,
red hair, two fangs,
bony ankles, and elongated shins,
metery, howling angrily.

This place where my Lord dances in the fire with a cool body,
His streaming hair flying in the eight directions,

Is Tiruvalankatu. (Karaikal Ammaiyar *Shaivam*)

Karaikal Ammai's early attempt was to construct a community only devoted to Lord Shiva. Many of her poems reveal this and they seek to withdraw from the domestic world which is supposed futile. In her work, *Siva's Demon Devotee*, Elaine Craddock discovers how Karaikal Ammai's works presents her sexuality and identity, influenced by her divine relationship with Lord Shiva.

In her poetry Ammaiyar is always Siva's pey devotee, a status that she considers the most exalted status of all. Ostensibly she is still female, yet for Siva's ghouls gender is irrelevant. The pey status is open to everyone, regardless of gender or caste status. (Craddock 72)

Malathi Maithri shows how poetry of Karaikal Ammai opens a brand-new space for women. The patriarchal social structure tried to chain her as a local goddess and they worshipped her because her beauty fit into their imagination of idealised female figure. Her husband represents the

phallogocentric society which never wants woman to be powerful or equipped with certain skills that may liberate her from domestic roles or petty chores. Karaikal Ammai chose the demon's language and preferred to be a demon's devotee rather than worshipped by the society that may confine her within their limited space. She chose demon's language which has no gendered perceptions or norms and has no male female difference.

Kutti Revathi focuses on women's body and uses it as a weapon against the patriarchal Tamil society through the poem "Mulaigal" (breasts). This poem became a subject of wider controversies but got acclaimed by feminists all over the world. Tamil patriarchal society became furious after the publication of this poem and accused the poet as a sensationalist and explicit.

The poet begins the poem by comparing breasts as bubbles rising in wet marshlands. Body could be said as wet marshland and breasts as the projection of the female body, its way of communication with the outer world. She watched her body in amuse during youth and guarded it like all other women. Their gradual swell and blooming happened during the end of her youth's season. She communicated with her breasts and sang songs alone, about love, rapture and heartbreaks. When her body evolved during different seasons they never forgot or failed to bring arousal. The poet remembers how her body functioned in different seasons. During penance (might be referring to menstruation) they swelled straining to break free and during sexual intercourse they soared recalling ecstasy of music. When hugging someone they preferred distilling the essence of love and in the course of childbirth, they turned blood to milk. Breasts appeared to her like two teardrops that

never stops flowing, never could be wiped away, because of an unfulfilled love.

Kutti Revathi breaks conventional norms and shows courage to talk about breasts, which is considered as something that should not be talked directly or portrayed artistically. Female body parts are considered to be highly sensitive. Tradition represents breasts as sexual objects and means of feeding new-born children. Even though chest and breasts are somewhat the same, breasts are widely de-emphasised by the society. Many derogatory terms are used to refer breasts. Usage of the term man-boobs could be read along with this. Patriarchy never wants to see feminine features in a man because they believe masculine is better and therefore authoritative than feminine. Kutti Revathi critically evaluates this notion in her poem without directly resisting or citing traditional figures or stories. According to her breasts are not only mere sexual objects but a key to liberation. The objectified female body is supposed to cover or protect their breasts from men. Eventually women fail to identify the features of her body. They are forcefully distracted from selflove, homosexuality, needs and possibilities of her body. Kutti Revathi wants women to identify their own body. Breasts become the representation of the body that has intrinsic value and beauty. Value and beauty beyond sexual objectification. It tells the stories of love, friendship, music, pain, etc. Breasts could be regarded as the identity of female body entirely different from the connotation given by men. Kutti Revathi's use of words and powerful imageries may disturb an ordinary reader. But it becomes an undeniable voice of rebellion. The poet clearly rejects the identities given by men and creates her own identity.

Kutti Revathi's poem "Suicide-soldier" may evoke different emotions in the minds of the reader. It talks about Selvi, a suicide soldier who is selected for a mission to assassinate people. This poem dwells on how women are manipulated or distorted by the society.

Initially carp-eyed Selvi is introduced by the poet. She prepares for a suicide mission by casting aside the clothes and locks them away. Poet felt like it was her original body. Nakedness is the dress she wears now and then she proceeds to assemble her uniform, weapons and suicide belt. All these equipment has become her body now. In the second stanza poet talks about the horrors before a bomb blast. There are only fifteen minutes left in her life, in the crawling palanquin of life. The leader commands and she behave as he directs her to. It made her heart a bomb. She entered the wedding hall. All the people there were busy, changing places, restless, implying a typical marriage hall. The poet carefully narrates Selvi's steps as she enters into the last quarter minute of each person's life at the wedding hall. She holds her breath and screams. Before she knew blast photographs captured her shocked face and after that her body burst apart roaring. It was reported that thirty people were killed in the blast. Selvi represents women all over the world. Everywhere they are easily manipulated by the men and are always blamed as the weak, fragile and as the other. Men always seek for fragility in women and they appoint photographers or certain tools to capture this side of them in order to attain upper hand or authority over them. This phallogocentric approach of men to conquer the minds and body of women is challenged by Kutti Revathi.

Tamil name Selvi refers to a happy prosperous daughter. Several instances within the poem helps us to understand that Kutti Revathi indirectly

criticizes the process of marriage. Tamil patriarchal society condition women to be its puppets. Women are objectified and are declared as something that should be protected. Marriage becomes a process in the woman's life where her father transfers his authority over the daughter to his new son in law, completely neglecting her identity and choices. The line 'Cast aside your own clothes and lock them away', shows how the bride is presented as an exhibition property. She has no choice but to neglect traditional clothes and ornaments and has to leave her identity behind, wearing the uniform like all other woman does at their wedding. Her heart becomes a bomb when she sees 'the web held between his two hands'. The web here signifies the wedding chain which is used to 'tie' the rest of woman's life with the groom she might not even know or likes. As Selvi enters the wedding hall people began to change places as they were getting ready to watch some spectacle about to happen soon. Women are manoeuvred by the society and are appropriated to perform certain roles enforced upon them. Marriage is one example. According to the Indian tradition women are submissive, passive, docile, timid, coy, etc and therefore she must be taken care of. Many issues related to marriage such as marital rapes, issues related to dowry, suicides are heard all over the country but the society never tries to open up their eyes. That might be the reason for the poet to present marriage as same as suicide.

Kutti Revathi particularly focusses on the body throughout the poem. It talks about many sensitive topics such as female sexuality. Identity, objectification and male gaze. Women's own body is restricted from her. Through concepts like romanticised motherhood and idealised homemaker or

wife and by tools like marriage and ritualistic performances, female body bursts apart without knowing its potential.

“Stone Goddesses” by Kutti Revathi discusses how men looks at the sculpture of the female goddesses at the temple and try to imbibe sexual pleasure. She elucidates the divinity of the sculpture and shows how she feels about the life it has because of it.

The sculpture was once a stone. She peeled away her skin and came to life, but is shy because of the light. She attains a dark shape hiding behind the curtain of shadows. The poet says that time has cursed her so that she cant’s move and has to face the rain and the wind and bear remaining of bats. Sculptures that hold a divine presence within it, may walk as goddesses, if they are not pestered by man’s gaze, in the ruined halls or in the recesses of tall temple towers. Once they feel the scent of man they decline to mere corpses.

Intimate scenes or naked body could be seen etched in temples or museums all over India. The history of Tamil Nadu dates back to 6000 years. It is divided into the Ancient, Medieval and Modern periods. Tamil culture, which evolved with the influential contributions of Sangam age, Chola period, Pandya revival, exhibits its unique sense of art, with some greatest sculptors they had. Each and every temple in Tamil Nadu holds many imprints of the past, such as sculptures, paintings, drawings, and many among these erotic portrayals has become icons of Indian heritage. But, nowadays, a sexual expression or portrayal is considered vulgar and people contempt these works with extreme disapproval. Unfortunately, the Indian conservative minds focus more on essence of female sculptures rather than the male sculptures.

Kutti Revathi mitigates the conservative tendency to decline the sense of divinity and love, embodied by the sculptures to just sexual imaginations of a human mind. She criticizes male gaze that may even destroy the life in those goddesses turning them into mere sexual objects and portrayals.

“Childbirth” is a short poem by Kutti Revathi that focuses on the feminine process of childbirth as well as writing. She hopes for a productive tomorrow where many women writers like her, seize their ability to write by portraying the possibilities of female body by simply writing themselves.

The poet compares herself to a robust banana tree. It never wanted shade and grew stronger day by day. The banana tree flowered and was ready to fruit but it was felled by the sickle of someone and was torn apart. But at the same time, at the bottom of the tree, young banana trees came up holding their mother’s majestic crests.

The poet seeks feminine elements from nature to express her feelings about the process of childbirth. Her body was complete without the presence of a male. According to the tradition male body is supposed to complete the female body or vice versa. But here, the male body did not complete her, instead broke her mentally and physically. The vigour and ardour she felt once was lost.

Kutti Revathi uses powerful imagery to exhibit how she became a revolutionary figure by upbringing new body writers. The poem could also be read as a description of poet’s life. She never wanted the approval of the critics and never thought of hiding to some shades in order to escape from their constant attacks. However, some controversies might have disturbed her, and this makes her to talk about the ‘sickle’ that felled her. The sickle refers to

multiple ideas like physical or mental torture by the male, male genitals and language of men. The concept of castration comes here. Kutti Revathi rejects phallogocentric perspectives and talks about a new world opening after her torn apart body leaves where women may rise claiming their own body rejecting male perceptions, wearing majestic crests remembering the poet's contribution.

Unlike her other poems, the "Fiends That Fetter Us" by Kutti Revathi offers a direct attack on the history of male dominance that suppress and fetter women. The poem addressed to all women in the world, provides a guideline, how to use their body against the suppressers.

Kutti Revathi calls upon her sisters and suggests that many more breasts are to be moulded as if from clay. She creates a sense of suspense that may encourage the readers to read till the end. She talks about how the woman's body is treated in the present era. Their breasts are bitten off by stones and tips of knives. These breasts that are like the grain that feed them have no fences and many trespassers interrupt those private spaces. Birds of prey begins to root in this soil and consumes their sunshine and breath. Even an old woman's arid breasts, hanging low and knocking against the chest, are affected by the fiends that fetter them. And the human history seems like the same fiends to her that consumes their freedom. Therefore, she asks her sisters to see the possibilities offered by the breasts. Those breasts are actually freshwater ponds to drink water from. They should not end like unending misery and for at least a day the poet wants her sisters to make those breasts stones, a weapon against the structure. She wants them to use those stones in

slings and hopes to wander holding their pride like sunshine, with a solitary feeling of the breasts.

Kutti Revathi's way of presentation may evoke multiple critical responses. But it becomes the manifesto of new body writers all around the world. She skilfully opens a portal for the claimable identity of women engaged through the upbringing of self-expression. Kutti Revathi challenges the patriarchal society and calls their ways of sustaining dominance as fiends that restricts women from liberty. Breast becomes the weapon of the woman to fight against those perceptions generated by the dominant male culture.

In India women has to face a lot of issues such as gender discrimination, harassment, sexual abuse and dowry related harassment etc. These innumerable challenges that they face are some fiends that becomes an impediment in their way to liberation. Molestation through sight, by speech or manhandling also takes place these days. However, the indifferent behaviour of the phallogocentric world that makes way for all these harassments could be said as the major evil among all. Objectification, appropriation, male gaze, romanticising gendered roles, creating utopian feminine models etc. could be said as the actual fiends that restrict women entirely.

That's why the poet asks her fellow beings to create a new sense of female identity by deriding the authority. Breasts could be said as the symbol of feminine body. While the concept of lacking phallus engulf women's psychological realms, Kutti Revathi finds the breasts as the distinct identity that may become woman's vehicle for the journey towards a world without authoritative indecency. Women must claim their body by accepting breasts a symbol of freedom, not as a symbol of submission. They must protect their

'grains that feeds' them, breasts, not like men do thinking it as something that should be protected but like a weapon, a symbol of feminine liberation, that could be taken away from them by the false conceptions and ideologies of male dominance. They must understand breasts like freshwater ponds offering soothing and refreshing properties. These breasts or the female body could be used as a weapon to destroy the fiends that not allow them to carry their sun above them.

Chapter Three

Conclusion

Ecriture feminine have greater relevance in the present scenario. We are living in a century where women's sexuality, identity and body are widely discussed. French feminist Helene Cixous's essay, *Laugh of the Medusa* has become a manifesto for the modern feminist thinkers. It encompasses the message of claiming the feminine body through writing the body and thereby creating a new language for the 'new woman'. A broad vision about the female sexuality is addressed throughout the essay. Breaking phallogocentric notions and stereotypical roles and creating a new realm of femininity is the major aspect of ecriture feminine. But we require more theoretical and philosophical understandings to achieve this space.

The study establishes the less explored understanding of two female poets of the Tamil literary tradition in relation with the western philosophical and psychoanalytical thought of women's body writing. The chapters help in demonstrating how these poets imbibed the concept of ecriture feminine and placed it in a much conservative and patriarchal literary tradition of Tamil Nadu. Throughout the history of Tamil literature, engaged by writers from Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka, no poets dared to directly talk about the female body or analyse it as a door to greater possibilities. This much acclaimed and equally controversial thought of the second-generation feminist writers of Tamil literature, Bama, Salma, Kutti Revathi, Sukirthamani, Malathi Maithri etc. is characterised by the concept of ecriture feminine that evolved in the French feminist history. These writers, especially Malathi Maithri and Kutti Revathi, understood the importance of claiming their own body through

writing. The fundamental connection between the female body and writing is exemplified through this study. However, gender politics, women's identity, her connection with the nature, mother, child and beloved, as exhibited by these poets through their poems, cannot be fully interpreted through just these ten poems.

By presenting a brief history of French feminism and the theory of *écriture féminine* that first came in the essay *Laugh of the Medusa*, in the first chapter, various possible interpretations and perspectives are introduced. French revolution that channelled a drastic change in the world history became crucial in the formation of French feminist thought also. Starting from the protest for fundamental rights of women, by multiple organisations, French feminism took a literary turn, questioning gender roles and claiming sexual identity, rather than just demanding for gender equality and right to vote. Mary Wollstonecraft, Olympe de Gouges, Helena Maria Williams contributed to feminist literary thought and influenced many feminist writers to write and acquire their own space in the patriarchal society. French feminism evolved as a literary movement, insisting and inspiring women to liberate themselves from the clutches of the patriarchal society.

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* made her the mother of modern feminist thought. Women writers considered her as their idol and studied and analysed topics discussed in her magnum opus from a wider perspective. She ridiculed, women being portrayed as mere objects, incomplete and weak in, popular literature. Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Helene Cixous, another generation of French feminists followed the path of Simone de Beauvoir. They were also influenced by post-modernism, post-colonialism, psychoanalysis,

Derrida, Freud, Lacan and other school of thoughts. Conglomeration of all these resulted in the formation of many concepts and theories. *Ecriture feminine* or Women's writing could be understood as one among them. Cixous critically evaluates male centered literature and suggests a women centered writing could effectively break all the stereotypes. She re-reads the myth of Medusa, explains how Medusa's body was appropriated by the male dominance. This tendency is relevant in the present scenario also. She understands women's difference from man is both sexual and linguistic. By dismantling the phallogocentric society, Cixous hopes that a new kind of woman will rise against all odds and her female-sexed-texts will exhibit woman's sexuality and identity. She considers women's body as a dark continent less explored and feared by the phallogocentric society. Woman always evoked castration fear in men that is what makes them to restrict her from writing her body. According to Cixous this is a crime committed by men over women. Concept of bisexuality as explained by Cixous is a remedy she suggests to understand femininity. Feminine writing is bisexual. Penis envy, castration fear, phallogocentric and phallogocentric approaches are other concepts Cixous critically evaluates along with theories put forth by Freud and Lacan. *Ecriture feminine* or women's writing is an act of rebellion, a rebellion against the social structure, traditional beliefs and customs. There are multiple examples of *écriture féminine* in the history of English literature but it evolved as a theory only after the first half of the twentieth century.

The first chapter also provides a brief history of Tamil literature, which is also characterised by patriarchal dominance. As we trace history, women were provided education during its golden age, the Sangam period, their

writings were intentionally destroyed later. Surviving texts of female authors during this period mark their excellence in writing. Modern feminism evolved in Tamil literature during the late eighteenth century. Malathi Maithri and Kutti Revathi are two distinguished figures in Tamil literature. Their poems have crossed cultural, social and linguistic boundaries. They focussed on gender identity and exhibited feminine body and its possibilities through their poems. Phallogocentric approach in the Tamil literature is questioned by both these poets. While Malathi Maithri focus on the imagery of river, sea, relationship between mother and child, Kutti Revathi imagines and depicts the body in a constantly intriguing and refreshing manner. Kutti Revathi's poems are more erotic. Consciously or unconsciously both these poets subscribe to the theory of *écriture féminine*. Illustration of femininity through unusual and luminously beautiful imageries makes these poets break traditional norms and regulations.

Poems that talk about the body or proclaim sexual desires are often termed as confessional poetry. *Écriture féminine* is much higher than confessional poetry, referring to the uniquely feminine style of writing. Poets like Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Kamala Das practised *écriture féminine*. Similar enthusiasm towards women-centric poetry could be seen in Malathi Maithri and Kutti Revathi. Like their foremothers, they were also criticized by the male-centered society. Their poetry deciphers the beauty of femininity. It encompasses, highly charged love poetry, inevitable critique of the traditional norms, unique portrayal of relationships etc.

The second chapter analyses the selected poems of Malathi Maithri and Kutti Revathi with the theory of *écriture féminine* which is the basic

theoretical framework through which the study was fruitful. Malathi Maithri's poems "Bhumadevi", "Cast Away Blood", "Empress of Words", "Consumer Goods", "Demon Language" are based on entirely different themes. Mother-daughter relationship is the central theme of most of her poems. "Bhumadevi" envisages a discrete mother Earth and mother-daughter relationship.

Comparing the poem with the inherent maternal goodness elucidated by Cixous draws out the intention of the poet. Julia Kristeva's concept of Chora is centered on the mother. The pre-linguistic, pre-oedipal 'semiotic' is controlled by the father centred logical language, the 'symbolic'. The mother-daughter relationship in the poem could break all authorities and order. The poem becomes an example for *écriture féminine*, rejecting traditional conventions and norms and envisioning a new world of a new woman, as the mother educates her daughter to claim her identity by understanding female sexuality.

"Cast Away Blood" re-reads the myth of Madurai Meenakshi and re-tells it by connecting temple and blood which were kept apart intentionally. *Écriture féminine* insists woman to write herself. To write her body, her identity and conditions like pregnancy and menstruation. The poem dwells upon the stereotypical roles attributed to women. By addressing misinterpretations indirectly, Malathi Maithri demonstrates how *écriture féminine* liberates women.

Her "Empress of Words" is different from other poems. The poet claims Sappho, Vellividhi and Sylvia as her foremothers, role models and equals. Like Medusa's head, Sappho's, Vellividhi's, Sylvia's works are appropriated by the male dominance. Religious and social conservatives criticized Sappho and called her an explicit. Vellividhi and Sylvia Plath had

to face similar brutal prosecutions of the society. Cixous wants women to consider *écriture féminine* as a rebellion. Malathi Maithri adheres to this thought and strengthens her readers to follow the path of their foremothers. She creates an internal bonding with these poets. Writing sexual preferences and desires might have been a serious issue in the past but now the world has changed. She calls upon women writers to seize this opportunity.

“Consumer Goods” breaks phallogentrism, that considers women as submissive, coy and weak. The phallogentric society always wants women to be the ‘other’. They construct ideal women to subjugate women. Malathi Maithri breaks this notion. She dismantles the ‘perfect lovely woman’ and asks women to understand their intrinsic beauty. Women should rise above the societal perceptions by understanding what the society expects her to be.

Demon Language focuses on the myth of Karaikkal Ammai. Language of woman is treated as the language of demon. Concepts of penis envy and castration fear could be placed here. Women’s language as explained by Cixous in her essay is like a dark continent that is less explored. No difference could be traced when it comes to Tamil literature. Once again, the poet dismantles female traits composed by men. According to her demon language is above understandings of men because it has no gendered perceptions or male, female difference.

Kutti Revathi’s poems address the arena of the body. Her poems are often questioned by men and women, setting themselves as the protectors of Tamil culture. Kutti Revathi’s poem “Mulaigal”, stirred controversies all over Tamil Nadu. People regarded her as a sensationalist and explicit. Like her foremothers, Kutti Revathi breaks conventional norms and talks about breasts.

This is the basic postulation of *Écriture féminine*. She writes herself and opens a new realm different from phallogentric conceptions. Breasts tell the stories of love, friendship, music, pain etc. but for the male dominated society it is just a sexual object. For the poet breasts become her identity. Language of men, confine breasts, the symbol of the female body and treat it as mere sexual objects whereas language of women, destroy stereotypical notions and liberate it.

She criticizes the concept of ‘Selvi’ or a happy prosperous daughter. Appropriation of the female body could be seen here also. In this poem, she treats marriage as a tool of the patriarchy to commodify femininity. Objectification and male gaze are other themes the poem deciphers. Tamil tradition could be cited as an example for patriarchal society. Customs and practices related to Tamil tradition confine women mentally and emotionally. Female body bursts apart without knowing its potential because of this. A similar kind of representation of the dominant male structure could be seen in “Stone Goddesses”. Considering women as mere sexual objects, relating her only to sexual and lustful instances are the tendencies she rejects through this poem. Divinity and love embodied by the sculpture are neglected. Even the sculptures were not allowed to exceed their authority.

Cixous compares the process of childbirth with writing. Likewise, Kutti Revathi connects childbirth and writing in the poem “Childbirth”. *Écriture féminine* is a practice that can liberate women. It is characterised by the inherent maternal goodness, completely in contrast with phallogentrism. It is the language of the future generation. Kutti Revathi transforms herself as a channel through which this new language could be unlocked. Obscene letters,

calls and threats like sickles might have felled her emotionally, but in the near future her 'children' could be able to write themselves without fear.

"The Fiends That Fetter Us" is a comparatively new poem by the author. She directly attacks patriarchy and suggests women to use their body against the suppressers. It could be said as the poetic version of Cixous's *Laugh of the Medusa*. Birds of prey could be the symbol of the phallogentric society, constantly consuming and appropriating the female body. The poet calls upon her fellow writers and sisters to use their body as a weapon against the authority. Men dominate women mentally and physically. Female body should rise against all odds to understand the intrinsic beauty it possesses. It is important to analyse the individuality of both the poets. Even though they subscribe to *écriture féminine* their poems are entirely different. This proves the argument of Cixous that a language different from the father language can open up a new world entirely distinct from the conventionally constructed world. Their poems are characterized by the exceptional backgrounds they come from. They explore femininity based on their own experiences. Kutti Revathi makes use of her understanding about the female body she studied in Siddha tradition in her poetry. Poetry becomes a medium through which she communicates with the outer world.

Malathi Maithri and Kutti Revathi explore the marginalised world of women through their poems. They exhibit a revolutionary doggedness of depicting womanhood, even though the 'protectors' of Tamil culture discern them as self-revelatory and explicit. The concept of *écriture féminine* is justified by these Tamil poets. They challenge phallogentric notions and inspires women to write feminist body poems without bothering the

mainstream literature. Their poetry transverse boundaries, exploring unexplored 'continents', evoking aesthetic pleasure. *Ecriture feminine* is the language of the 'new woman'. It is the key to liberation, to unravel untrodden paths and poets like Kutti Revathi and Malathi Maithri has already begun it in Tamil literature. They empower their sisters to recognize their space and to be more productive in contrast with the relatively meagre output of women in literature since classical times. These poems revolving around the concept Cixous's *écriture féminine* proclaim the unique body of women, their sexuality, identity, creativity and intrinsic beauty. Through the celebration of the body the poets distort the monolithic phallogentrism.

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