

High Impact Factor 8.1458 ISSN



Vol. 12, No. 2



**Double-blind
peer reviewed**



GENERAL IMPACTFACTOR

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Page 74-91

When Freedom is the Ultimate Value: Women Poets Divided by Space and Time

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Abstract: This paper attempts to strike a comparison between the articulation of select women poets who are separated by space and time but united by the desire for freedom. Both *The Therigatha*, a collection of poems by the early Buddhist nuns called *Theris* and *Wild Words: Four Tamil Poets*, a collection of twentieth-century feminist poetry by Tamil women, offer an insight into the dynamics of patriarchal oppression of the female body and its rebellion, through different ways, albeit differentiated by vast stretches of history and time. Female body and sexuality and its intersection with identity, politics, religion and caste, as treated within the cultural context of their times, is at the core of the discourse. These poems focus on the body's resistance to the cultural norms of the times, be it the strictly religious setting of the Buddhist *Sangha* of the 6th Century CE or the Tamil social context of the 20th Century CE. These poems, when analysed through the lens of intersectional feminism, throw light on the lived experiences of women against the background of the perennial Nature-Culture debate informing the ethos of the Indian subcontinent.

Keywords: female body, sexuality, religion, caste, rebellion, articulation.

*“When freedom exists, why would anyone want
imprisonment and execution?”*

Therigatha

The Indian subcontinent is known for its strange mix of materiality and spirituality. It occupies a unique stature in terms of coalescing variables of gender, caste, class, and

religious divisions into its societal matrix. At one end of the spectrum, we find consistent articulations for social justice and change. In contrast, at the other end, discourses show a blind conformity to age-old notions of tradition and culture among distinct groups. Across centuries, we notice curt and evocative expressions in the form of literature addressing the ambivalence shown by the value-ridden Indian society. One such voice is that of *Therigatha*, included in the Pali Canon of Theravada Buddhism, an early Buddhist text ascribed to women converts to Buddhism, women from different strata of society, placed around the 4th and 5th century BC. Another voice, far removed from these ancient times and into the twenty-first century, is the poetry of feminist poets of Tamilnadu, a southern state of India.

Separated by time and geography, women in *Therigatha* and the women in *Wild Words* engage with themes of embodiment, body sexuality, and individuation in starkly diverse ways. These narratives exhibit similarity in their reclamation of agency while they seemingly differ in their acceptance or neglect of their bodies. What does a closer look entail? This paper offers a comparative study of some poems from the *Therigatha*, written by bhikkhunis, the female Buddhist renunciants and select poems of Kutti Revathi and Sukirtharani, the feminist poets of Tamilnadu who vociferously struggled against the casteist patriarchy with their unprecedented writing. Comparing these poets who belong to two vastly disparate centuries offers a nuanced look at the evolution of the patriarchal system over the centuries, the perspectival changes in women's outlook on their lives and how they foreground their lived experiences. The status of women, from being a silent witness to all societal and cultural invasions on their bodies and sexuality to being agents of change and resistance, is analysed. What do these expressions say about the socio-cultural contexts, and how does it change their lived realities for the better? What are the commonalities

and differences in the perception of these women, and how do they negotiate their identity in their contexts through their practices and expressions? Is there any notable change in the patriarchal worldview over the millennia? This paper seeks to answer these questions.

The nature-culture debate in Body and sexuality studies is a long-standing one. Sparked by Sigmund Freud(1905), who was one of the first to examine human sexuality as unconscious libidinal drives that affect the behaviour and character of an individual, many theorists from Michel Foucault(1978), Levi- Strauss (1969), Shulamith Firestone(1970) Judith Butler(1990), Gayle Rubin(1975), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990)Nancy Chodorow (1978) to Anne Fausto-Sterling(1985)(2000) have unequivocally maintained how the body and sexuality of an individual are moulded as much by social, cultural and historical factors as by biological factors. The centrality of power, discourse, cultural conditionings, and the reproduction of socially gendered roles have a profound impact on how one perceives one's body and sexuality. As Elizabeth Grosz puts it succinctly throughout her work: The body is never simply a biological entity but always a cultural, social, and political phenomenon. (Grosz, 1994)

Intersectional feminism offers a lens that helps one gauge the impact of the convergence of multiple discriminations at work. Here, gendered experience is intertwined with categories of religion, caste and social class. The theoretical framework accounts for the exploration of agency and resistance in women subjugated by monastic religious structures and who, in turn, exert their spiritual autonomy. As Susan Bordo (1993) argues: "The body is a site of discipline, but also of resistance to discipline. It is an arena where social norms are enacted, enforced, and sometimes transgressed." This transgression is also very much evident in the poems of Tamil feminists, who also bring the play of caste identity into their collective trauma. Buddhist notions of body and sexuality are linked to

the central Buddhist doctrine of renunciation, impermanence and the non-self, and so, these poems from *Therigatha* are shaped by a tension between embodied sexual experience and the need to transcend bodily desire. In traditional Tamil poetry, on the other hand, women are always depicted as the beloved, or a mother or a seductress. All these images are meant to satisfy the cultural demands of being a second fiddle to the male counterpart. Women's voices are either submerged in a plenitude of male voices or are couched in "beautiful" poetic terms.

The *Therigatha*

An intriguing ambivalent attitude is exhibited towards the feminine and women in the early Buddhist tradition. There seems to be a lack of clarity regarding biological sex and social gender. This is very well reflected in Buddhist literature as well. Alan Sponberg categorises the multivocal attitudes to women in Buddhism into four: 1) Soteriological Inclusiveness: characterised by the notion that one's sex or caste or class is never a barrier to spiritual liberation, here, women are free to pursue their spiritual goals as freely as their male counterparts. 2) Institutional Androcentrism: With the institutionalisation of Buddhism after Gautama's death, certain precepts regarding the entry of women into the institution were put in place. This naturally tended to be in line with the preservation and reinforcement of the social standards of male domination and female subordination. 3) Ascetic Misogyny: An attitude distinct from all others in stereotyping women as the root of all evils, of impurity, ruin and destruction. Relatively aggressive and hostile, this fear of the feminine portrayed women as the snare of Mara, the incarnation of evil. 4) Soteriological Androgyny: An overarching ideology that places both masculinity and femininity as dialectically interactive modes that are in mutual

complementarity to each other and serve as the foundation of existence itself.

In the poems of the first Buddhist women written two millennia ago, we find instances of women's lives overhauled by the spiritual turn of events. These women were once ordinary women who conformed to the stereotypical roles of being wives, concubines or daughters of male patriarchs. Some were rich belonging to the royal family or upper strata of society, others belonged to the lower rungs, they were servants or prostitutes, women who had no voices, whatsoever. Thus, *Therigatha* offers us a glimpse into the lives of women of all class and caste distinctions of ancient India. Their expressions are poems of self-transformation, a moment through unbearable suffering to liberation through renunciation of the body. Eventually, all poems in the *Therigatha* are announcements of freedom, the joy and the strength of being free. In addition to being historical documents, they tell us about the minimal change in the gaze accorded to the female body by the patriarchy, even though centuries have gone past. In her study of the 6th-century Tamil poem *Manimekhalai*, Paula Richman argues how the rhetoric of gender in literature changes from stereotypical representations of women into transcending gender in the context of the enlightenment of the Buddhist nuns. In a strictly patriarchal order, these women take the path of liberation as the sole method to escape the suffering inflicted on them.

Kisagotami and Patachara represent two bhikkhunis who choose to free themselves from the cultural matrix, which regards women who lost their sons as someone "who ate her dead sons" (Poems 74). They form a community among themselves and support each other through the trauma, showing another road, one that gives them meaning in their otherwise despised existence. Disillusionment greets them after years of trials inside a thankless and burdensome

marriage ordained by societal norms and the intense emotional tribulations of losing their children to death.

While the nuns followed a monastic path of abandoning domestic life, it was the bondage of servitude, not the daily experience of living, that they left behind. For Patachara, there was no need for a bodhi tree; her mind was set free from suffering, and she entered enlightenment right in her hut after the mundane act of putting out her lamp. (Liang n.d.)

Suffering becomes the crucible in which they melt down, burn away their past and rise as enlightened beings. These women see through the hypocrisies of the patriarchal society just as they see the impermanence of worldly life. Kisagotami points out:

“Now I am someone with depravities’ darts cut out,

With the burden laid down

Who has done what needs to be done” (Poems, 223-26, pp.53)

Similar is the case of Vassethi and Sundari, who find inspiration in the life stories of Kisagotami and Patachara. In the presence of an enlightened bhikkhuni, these women “split open the mass of internal darkness”(48). They find strength in spirituality and consolidate themselves as a community, weaving a history of women's solidarity and guiding the next generations of similar women trapped in the system.

Apart from the domestic responsibilities, the women confess in these poems about the urges of the senses. By the Buddhist tradition of renunciation, these women see the “depravities that ooze from within”(83) as a trap set by ‘Mara’, the personification of death and evil and the tempter who seduces

the ‘theris’ to catapult them down from their august achievements. Theris like Sela, Chala, Khema and Siha (23) even attempt suicide overwhelmed by the desires of the body. Here, Mara could be interpreted as the male gaze on the female body, the cultural stereotyping of women as sexual objects, and give us information about how women historically have succumbed to this fantasised version of the female body and sexuality. Ambapali is an example of such a manipulation by the patriarchy. Desired by many men and known as the ‘beautiful Ambapali’, she is made a prostitute by the authorities, saying, “Let her belong to everyone” (136). Ambapali describes her journey from complete identification with the beautiful image of her body, a body prone to seduce men and her dis-identification with her bodily image post-enlightenment.

Transgressing the cultural norms, bhikkhunis openly give up their sexuality and are not ready to be seduced as they surrender to a new value system espoused by Buddha. They give up their roles to be ordained to a higher reality. As they renounce their past life, they shun their moral corruptions conditioned by the cultural world, all that holds them back and enter into a new world of spirituality. Women’s divinities immediately become sexless ((Upadhayay, 2020) when they trod the path of spiritual attainment. They are not considered evil anymore but are accepted as guides by their family and community members, even by male members. They garner an identity that they are not allowed within the rigid patriarchal confines of conjugalit.

20th Century Tamil feminist poetry

Tamil feminist poetry has its roots in the *akam* and *puram* poetry of the Sangam period, which aligns with the *Tholkappiyam, a textbook on Tamil Poetics*. Quite contrary to the male perspective of objectification and sexualisation of

women's bodies enshrined in these poems, a new female angle was given by writers Ambai, Sivakami, Salma, Bama, and Malathi Maitri, to name a few. They, through their writings, subverted the established order, challenged patriarchal notions regarding female experiences, and gave vent to their most profound feelings of resentment and rebellion. Drawing on Dalit literature, the intersections of caste, class and religion with gender explored through these works unearthed many repressed ghosts hidden deep beneath the female experiences. The very nature of their work was destabilising the societal order, thereby raising many eyebrows and vilifying them as "immoral women" who were bent on desecrating the Tamil culture. Despite all the backlash, these women poets, including Kutti Revathi and Sukirtharani, broke through the age-old reticence of women in describing matters relating to body and sexuality. The translator of *Wild Words: Four Women Poets*, Lakshmi Holmstrom, makes a pertinent note about the poets and obliquely about the cultural context, which is essential to quote at length. She opines:

It is perhaps helpful to remember that the traditional values prescribed for the "Good" Tamil woman were accham, madam and naanam (fearfulness, propriety, modesty or shame). Our poets have chosen, instead, the opposite virtues of fearlessness, outspokenness and ceaseless questioning of prescribed rules. ...they have claimed as their foremothers, role models and equals Avvai, Velliviidhi and Sappho; Anna Akhmatova, Sylvia Plath and Kamala Das. And Eve, above all, who defied divine authority to pluck the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. (104)

In alignment with her knowledge of the Siddha system of medicine (a naturopathic system of alternative medicine in India), Kutti Revathi aspires to assert the centrality of the

body and its interconnectedness to Nature and the Universe at large. This is posited against the rigid cultural and societal baggage and constant demands from the female body. In her poem *Breasts*, which created an outrage among the traditional mindsets, she points to the organic existence of the breast in the human body. They distil love, milk, blood and tears, the co-relatives of all human emotions- lust, love, maternal warmth, suffering and intense sorrow.

*“Breasts
are bubbles rising in wet marshy lands
As they gently swelled and blossomed
In due season, at Time’s Edge,
I watched over them in amazement”* (“Breasts”, Wild Words, 58)

These lines resonate with all girls at puberty and the association of their feminine identity with the breasts; the amazement gradually wanes to shame at the patriarchal gaze as she is distanced from her body image. The poet further reiterates:

*“They have never forgotten
To enthuse the seed-beds
of all my changing seasons”* (58)

They change with the ever-changing seasons but are always with the person. The body and the seasons are interconnected, one enthusing the other, reflecting each other like the mirror, like the river. They are corporeal, transient, and made of earth. There is a sense of awe and wonder at the swelling and blossoming of the breasts following the seasons. One cannot think of a better symbiotic connection other than with the body and the universe, a natural and biological connection that stands against the societal inhibitions and restraints put on it. Set free from the shackles of the outward clothing of culture, it reunites with the earth, its seasons and its natural flow.

The poem '*Rain River*' uses the image of "red earth and pouring rain" and interacts with a reference from an *Akam* poem of Sangam literature from the second century AD. In the act of lovemaking, the lovers transform into time and season: intense images of nature's action are plenty, its force, pull, fierceness, whirling, and tossing packed into the sea, offering a glimpse into the ferocity of nature itself.

*"You are the hastening of time;
I am the blossoming season"* (*Wild Words*, p.60)

Here, the bodies lose their individuality and identification with the cultural conditioning. They are let loose and are free to embrace because there is no other way of bringing this chain of events to a climax and, thereby, restoration. In contrast to the stereotypical images of a dominant male and a submissive female in sexual union, these lines reveal the agency and the participation of the female counterpart as they both traverse the boundaries of pleasure. The poem vehemently subverts the conventional dictum of passive women being fertile lands on which men sow seeds in the act of copulation.

Sukirtharani's poems are bound in forceful imagery of nature: the mountains, the river, the trees, the tiger, and the volcano all converge into one thing – her body, lying still. The body is felt as a whirling vertex agitating the earth. There is a strong sense of oneness with the universe. At the same time, the opposites blend harmoniously in her line, hollows and cliffs, day and night, heat and coolness, which are very much characteristic of the Yin Yang nature of the universe. There is no mention of the culture or its precepts. The body is unmindful of them. It flows on its own, following nature's rhythm. Paradoxically, this still body becomes a site of resistance, redefinition and empowerment. We see this still site in her poem "My Body", where a Dalit woman's body is being violated just as a deer is hunted out in the forest

ferociously, brutally by a tiger. The poet claims: “In the end, Nature becomes my body, lying still”.(Sukirtharani, “My Body”, p.83)

In the poem “Nature’s Fountainhead”, the oneness of the person is disturbed by the violence of the ‘other’. Here, you see the other setting off an attack on the land, and the images of control, domination, and premeditated violence take over the scene. The poem provides some stark contrasts. The whole motif is centred on destruction and domination by the other and resurrection of the self. The immense possibilities of life extend itself before impending death. As the eternal source of life - energy, the “I” in the poem inundated the other as a river in sudden flood, never to be confined, becoming the elements of nature, free and untamed. The tamer is subdued in the process as his intentions of domination become trite and meaningless. The lines within the quote “I myself will become earth, fire, sky, wind, water, the more you can find me the more I spill over (85)” strongly reminiscent of Maya Angelou’s *Still I Rise*.

Kutty Revathi and Sukirtharani, through invoking a natural body, identify themselves with the universal principle. In doing so, they rise against the constructed world of social mores and decorum, splits the veneer of civilisation and stands boldly naked in front of the world as an organism. This is the way to freedom, a self-willed act. After renouncing the age-old values and veils that hide the woman’s body, we see the body pristine in its natural surroundings, the same in which organisms thrive. The poem, “The Last Kiss”, conjures up the image of the Garden of Eden and the forbidden fruit and explores a similar garden in which the lovers are in their elements and gracefully partake of the bliss of the union without any cultural baggage of shame and guilt. There is an absolute abandonment of the need for societal approval and acknowledgement. These women inhabit a wild, fiercer realm

of elemental life. Here, pleasure and pain occupy their proper places and balance each other out, as Kutti Revathi suggests:

*“from the press of an embrace,
they distil love;
from the shock of childbirth,
milk, flowing from blood” (“Breasts”, p.59)*

These Tamil poets emphasise how caste is marked on their bodies and adds to additional layers of repression and invisibility. It forms the ideological basis for control and domination in the Hindu social order (Banerjee & Ghosh, 2019, pp. 5–6). Kutti Revathi notes how a woman's body is used as an instrument to keep the caste practices alive.

Over centuries, women have not been allowed to utter a word in public, not to learn anything, celebrate their sexuality and body – not to perceive themselves as human beings at all. It is very much a strategy of men of the upper caste who are very used to inculcating Hindu values and practices into the people of the soil. (Language.Kutti Revathi | Spark, 2012)

Sukrtharani, in her poem “I speak up bluntly,” speaks about how she, as a child, always tried to hide she was born into a Dalit family in her town, in her classroom, silently suffering the fate of the downtrodden in India. Towards the end, she builds resilience by speaking up before society, saying, “I am a *Paraichi*” (79). Mangalam, in her study on Sukirtharani, points out: “The affirmation of *Paraiyar* as a term of resistance and interrogation of dominant groups’ vocabulary brings together questions of language, identity and affinity with land that figure repeatedly in Sukirtharani’s poetry” (78). Thus the Dalit feminist standpoint on the rebellious female body is a double-edged sword, one which strikes back at patriarchy and casteism with equal vigour. However, it is not

without the attendant trauma markings on the female body. It is not an easy affair for women to break out of the taboo shell of one's own body.

Conclusion

As opposed to the female body being considered the embodiment of beauty and evil by the patriarchal gaze, the poems of the early Buddhists and the Tamil poets conceive it as an intellectual and organic space. Throughout the poems of the *Therigatha*, we find references to the conventional description of the female body as beautiful, adorable and subject to the male gaze. Yet, in the articulation of the enlightened women, there is the acceptance of their bodies in their decrepit and destitute states. The decoration of the body to meet the demands of the societal gaze is no longer a concern for the bhikkhunis as they move up into a higher reality. In this reality, they are individuals pursuing a goal that gives meaning to their lives. What the bhikkhunis overthrow or ignore is the cultural sheaths attached to the body and not the biological body, for they look at the body as a vehicle for liberation. Opposing the privilege that the patriarchal system accords privilege to the young, beautiful female body, the body in its infirmity and senescence during the advanced ages is equally celebrated. Ambapali's verse shows this convergence as she describes:

*“Once my body was beautiful,
like a polished slab of gold,
now it is covered
with very fine wrinkles.
It’s just as the Buddha, the speaker of truth, said,
nothing different than that.” (63-64)*

On the other hand, the Tamil poets come out of the cocoons spun by the cultural and social world and find a new language,

an *écriture féminine*, “a language still afloat in the womb... which no one has spoken so far” (Sukirtharani, *Infant language*”,77) to relate to their biological body, the desires of the body and its interconnectedness with other lives around it and to the Nature itself. They respond to the natural desires of their body, celebrate them, give them ample expressions. They also break the taboos around the female body and sexuality as part of the age-old caste and religious attributions. The articulations reveal the continuing systemic oppression of the patriarchy throughout centuries, nevertheless, it shows the constant rebellion of the female and a transformation in their attitudes making them bold to voice opinions as they steadfastly strive to reclaim agency. Both these are bold attempts at self-realisation and metamorphosis and a journey towards finding freedom, the ultimate value of human life and in their journey, though divided by space and time, the *bhikkhunis* and the Tamil feminist poets forge a community of inspirational women among themselves.

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