spatial remembrance that resists colonial mappings and instead reclaims Khonoma as a site of indigenous presence, resistance, and belonging. The events of the Battle of Khonoma are reconstructed from collective village memory, with an emphasis on how history is lived, felt, and passed down. This aligns with Jan Vansina's claim that oral tradition constitutes a valid and autonomous historical method, especially in societies where literacy was introduced late or through colonial coercion (Vansina *Oral Tradition as History* 27–29). The novel opens not with a colonial officer's logbook, but with a voice of cultural inheritance: "We will speak of those times. The words are still in our breath. The fire is not cold" (*Sky Is My Father* 1).

This metaphor of warm breath and fire recalls Walter Ong's assertion that in primary oral cultures, knowledge is "kept in active circulation" through speech, memory, and performance, rather than textual inscription (Ong, *Orality and Literacy* 34). The preface-like voice here operates as a ritual invocation, echoing oral traditions where the authority to recount the past is sacred and intergenerational. The narrative centers on figures such as Tikhü, the warrior who represents both the physical and symbolic resistance of Khonoma. These characters are not merely fictional but serve as mnemonic anchors, embodying the values and traumas that persist in Naga collective memory. As Vansina notes, oral history often remembers "what is relevant to present cultural and political identity" (96).

The novel is punctuated by ritual moments, funerals, warrior oaths, ancestral invocations that demonstrate how oral tradition is embedded in spiritual and ceremonial life. History is, thus, not linear or secular; it is cyclical, sacred, and place-bound. These features align with Ruth Finnegan's observation that in oral societies, the genres of oral history, myth, and ritual are not strictly separated but interwoven and performative (40–47). Finnegan's foundational work on orality foregrounds the complexity and sophistication of oral literatures. She observes that oral traditions are rich, performative, and deeply embedded in the social and historical fabric of communities. This perspective is crucial when approaching Kire's fiction, which reclaims Naga oral traditions not merely as remnants of the ancient time but as living epistemologies. In the novel, storytelling serves as a powerful medium for passing down cultural knowledge, values, and narratives of resistance across generations. Kire's incorporation

of embedded myths, ritualistic language, and dream sequences reflects Finnegan's view that oral literature is not a "primitive precursor" to written texts, but a vibrant and autonomous form of expression and meaning-making (*Oral Literature in Africa* 40).

Erased Stories and Living Memories

The narrative itself mimics the rhythms and structures of oral storytelling. The novel recounts the 1879 British invasion of the Naga village of Khonoma, but it does so not through an official colonial archive, but through the voices and memories of the villagers especially elders – who transmit history as lived and embodied experience. The communal retelling of the Angami warriors' resistance, where memory and myth blend, and individual heroism becomes part of a collective narrative. The narrator often uses phrases like 'it is said' or 'they remembered,' echoing the cadence of oral speech and signalling that the authority of the story lies in communal remembrance rather than written documentation. The community's rituals are not just cultural texture; they are acts of historical transmission. For instance, during mourning rituals, elders retell heroic tales, passing on historical memory. These performances turn the community into custodians of history, where communal validation replaces documentary proof. Kire's narratives blur the lines between history and memory, portraying rituals as living acts that recall and re-enact the struggles, resilience, and values of the Naga people. Through oral storytelling and ritual performance, the community continually reconstructs its past, making history a collective, participatory process rather than an official chronicle.

When the River Sleeps

Easterine Kire's *When the River Sleeps* follows Vilie, a reclusive hunter from the *Angami Naga* tribe, who sets out on a solitary and spiritual quest to find a mythical 'heart-stone' – a river-stone believed to be imbued with magical power when retrieved from a river at the moment it 'sleeps,' or becomes completely still. This novel explores the adventurous quest of a hero as a narrative framework that reflects various dimensions of human experience, distinct cultural landscape of Nagaland, where the realms of magic and reality seamlessly intertwine. Significant to this narrative is the belief in the coexistence

of the spiritual and human worlds—a core aspect of Naga culture that is vividly conveyed through the oral traditions passed down across generations is what Kire is exploring in the novel.

Intersection of Myth and Dream in the novel

In *When the River Sleeps*, Easterine Kire intricately weaves myth and dream to produce a narrative that is deeply rooted in indigenous Naga epistemologies. The novelmimics oral storytelling through its circular plot, digressions, embedded myths, and reliance on proverbs and dream sequences. This oral-formulaic pattern, as Ong theorises, promotes mnemonic retention and cultural continuity. The protagonist Vilie's journey is interrupted by tales shared by forest dwellers, monks, and spirits, echoing what Ong describes as a "homeostatic" narrative logic where stories evolve in response to the present (Ong 47). Vilie sets out on a quest to find the heart-stone, hidden beneath the bed of a mysterious river said to be asleep—a river believed to hold immense power and the promise of abundance. Stirred by strange and compelling dreams, he feels an irresistible pull to embark on this perilous journey, risking his life in search of the stone. They guide his decisions, warn him of moral danger, and test his restraint, aligning his actions with ancestral and spiritual laws rather than individual desire. Captivated by the river's mystical allure, he becomes deeply drawn to its hidden power and the secrets it holds.

> When the river is asleep, it is completely still. Yet the enchantment of those minutes or hours when it sleeps is so powerful, that it turns the stones in the middle of the river bed into a charm. If you can wrest a stone from the heart of the sleeping river and take it home, it will grant you whatever it is empowered to grant you. (*When the River Sleeps* 12)

Kire does not present myth and dream as escapist or fantastical; instead, they serve as cognitive and ethical tools that guide the protagonist's actions. For instance, Vilie's dream about the sleeping river becomes a spiritual quest, a retrieval of something sacred that symbolises inner peace and harmony with the natural world. The river itself, steeped in myth, is said to hold immense spiritual power when found in its sleeping state. This mythic quest is embedded in an indigenous cosmology where the land is not inert but sentient and sacred.

The novel's oral narrative structure - rich in folklore, proverbs, supernatural occurrences, and repetition mirrors what Walter J. Ong refers to as the characteristics of primary orality, where knowledge is shared through performance and embedded in communal memory (36-37). Kire's style, often nonlinear and episodic, reflects oral storytelling techniques, where digressions and spiritual interludes are as important as linear plot progression. This style aligns with Ngig) wa Thiong'o's notion of orature, where oral forms are not precursors to "literature" but represent alternative and equally legitimate literary traditions (15). In this context, Vilie's dreams are not symbolic in a psychoanalytic sense but are revelations with real-world implications, expressions of ancestral agency and cosmic order.

Collective Memory

Ruth Finnegan's analysis of oral genres in *Oral Literature in Africa* also informs a reading of *When the River Sleeps*. Finnegan emphasises that in oral cultures, performative storytelling is not about authorial ownership but about collective memory and participatory knowledge (40–47). Kire's use of shared myths such as the tiger spirit, the forest-dwelling guardian figures, and enchanted rivers positions her narrative within a tradition of communally held and orally transmitted knowledge. Vilie's survival depends on knowledge of medicinal plants, forest signs, weather, and animal behaviour all learned through lived tradition. Vilie's journey is not merely a personal quest but an act of performing oral knowledge transmission, where wisdom is accumulated through memory, experience, and ethical conduct. The learning process expresses the novel's broader epistemological intervention. By depicting knowledge as oral, relational, and spiritually grounded, Kire asserts indigenous ways of knowing that colonial systems sought to disregard. Vilie turned out to be a living repository of knowledge, indicating that in oral cultures, learning is not the accumulation of information but the cultivation of ethical and relational understanding. The story resists colonial-modern epistemologies by centering embodied, intuitive, and spiritual ways of knowing.

Dreams as knowledge

Dreams in the novel are not symbolic devices but sources of truth and action. When Vilie hears the river 'call' to him in a dream, it is understood not as

fantasy, but as communion with the spirit world, legitimising his quest. Vilie's dream of the river is a literal meeting with a spiritual being. The river 'sleeps' not as a poetic image, but as a living, intentional entity. Spirits of the forest, ancestors, and other entities communicate through dreams, guiding moral and physical survival. "He believed that the dream had not come by chance. It had chosen him" (Kire 17). Vilie's refusal to use the power of the sleeping river for violence or gain reflects a dream-informed ethics. Dreams in the narrative serve not only as revelations but they are tests of character, trials of moral integrity. He is repeatedly tested -will he exploit this sacred knowledge for self-interest? His dreams demand ethical control, not utilitarian action. The protagonist's true strength lies in his spiritual self-governance shaped by ancestral wisdom rather than in any magical ability. Kire highlights the meaning of interpreting dreams through the lens of indigenous cosmology. For the Angami people dreams are the signs from the creator deity Kepenuopfu for guiding messages.

River as ontological challenge to Western realism

The river is not a metaphor but a spiritual entity sleeping, alive, and possessing agency. In many Western literary traditions, natural elements like rivers are often used symbolically or metaphorically representing time, change, purification, etc. But in the novel, the river is not symbolic in that way. It is literally alive and spiritually sentient, rooted in the Naga animist cosmology, where nature and spirit are not separate. The river acts, chooses, responds, and withholds. It 'sleeps,' listens, tests human intention, and grants power only under ethically sanctioned conditions and refers to a real location believed to hold supernatural power when it is in a state of rest. It is a spirit-being, and its sleep is a real condition with consequences for humans. By presenting the river as a living agent, Kire shifts the novel away from Western realist or symbolic forms into a decolonial mode of storytelling.

> He saw the river once again. It was still, and a mist rose gently above it. The water glowed a silver white. This time, the dream was not just a dream. (*When the River Sleeps* 22)

The river becomes— a teacher (it reveals truth through dreams), a guardian (it resists unethical seekers), a witness (to violence, to change, to Vilie's growth),

and a participant in the unfolding story. In presenting the river as an animate actor, Kire not only challenges the objectification of nature in colonial-modernist thought but also restores Indigenous epistemologies wherein knowledge is relational, ethical, and mediated through spirit and dream. The river thus becomes both a geographical and ontological center of the novel; its sleep is not dormancy but a quiet assertion of power beyond human control. Vilie does not know the river in a Cartesian or empirical sense; he feels and remembers it through inherited belief systems and echoes of communal oral knowledge.

The river's ontological status reshapes narrative causality. The events do not unfold through rational sequence or human control but through spiritual readiness, dreams, and ethical comportment. For instance, the river 'reveals' itself only to Vilie because he approaches it with humility and restraint, indicating that access to knowledge depends on ethical alignment rather than rational inquiry. This way of knowing directly challenges realist epistemology, which honours reason, empiricism, and human authority.

Orality – As the Narrative Structure

Kire constructs the novel as an oral journey tale, complete with episodic structure, formulaic encounters, and moral testing. Vilie meets demonesses, hunters, strangers, forest spirits—each episode resembling the folktale format Finnegan describes, where "narrative progression is accretive and modular" (92). Repetition of motifs, phrases, and ethical dilemmas reflects the oral-formulaic tradition, where structure aids memory and transmission. Her narrative resists Western binaries of rational/irrational, real/fantastic, written/oral, and instead articulates a worldview where dreams, myths, and the land are interlinked sources of wisdom and power. Thus, *When the River Sleeps* exemplifies how orality can function as a living, decolonial epistemology that challenges Western literary forms and affirms indigenous subjectivity. This interplay of dreaming, place, and knowledge closely resembles what Walter Ong describes as oral cultures' emphasis on "empathetic, participatory knowledge" (Ong 45).

Conclusion

By foregrounding oral traditions, Kire's novel resists the erasure of indigenous knowledge systems by colonial and modernising forces. Her novels demonstrate how oral tradition functions as both a form of cultural resistance and a repository of memory. By weaving indigenous storytelling into her narratives, she preserves the unique heritage of the Naga people, empowers marginalised voices, and ensures that their stories endure in the face of change and historical amnesia. She retrieves and revitalises oral narratives, ensuring their survival in the face of cultural change and the decline of oral transmission. Kire elevates orality beyond folklore, framing it as an epistemological resistance that preserves Naga identity. Her novels demonstrate that stories are not merely artifacts but living systems of knowledge, where tellers and audiences co-create cultural survival.

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Exploring Intersectional Gaps in Gender Discourse : A Reading of Jacinta Kerketta and Nirmala Putul's Poetry

Deepshikha Kumari

Abstract

The feminist discourse often overlooks the layered oppression experienced by marginalised communities, including those based on race, class, ethnicity, disability, and trans identity. This essay examines the intersectional marginalisation faced by Adivasi women, one of the most excluded voices in the feminist analysis of patriarchal power structures. Despite being historically endowed with agency, women in Adivasi communities have become prey to modernity and subjected to both external socio-political structures and internal patriarchal hierarchies that have emerged due to contact with the non-Adivasi world in the process of progress. The essay reflects on the poetry of Nirmala Putul and Jacinta Kerketta as powerful narratives that expose these invisible spaces of oppression. To understand these intersectional gaps and the double marginalisation of Adivasi women within the gender sphere, the essay incorporates the framework of intersectionality, as conceptualised by Afro-American activist Kimberlé Crenshaw. It analyses the poetry of Putul and Kerketta as emerging women's voices of resistance from the community, challenging dominant narratives and highlighting grey areas within feminist and literary spaces. The poems also proclaim the resilience and agency of Adivasi women. The essay advocates for a justice-oriented feminist praxis that acknowledges the complexities of oppression and argues that these contemporary Adivasi women's narratives are crucial in expanding feminist discourse towards inclusivity.

Keywords: Intersectionality; Gender Gap; Adivasi women; Marginalisation; Resistance

Introduction

The poetry of Nirmala Putul and Jacinta Kerketta constitutes a significant site

of Adivasi resistance, exposing systemic exploitation and the sustained erasure of marginalised voices. As prominent contemporary Adivasi poets writing in Hindi, both authors powerfully engage with the socio-political realities affecting Adivasi communities today. By representing the lived realities of Adivasi women, their works illuminate entrenched forms of social, economic, sexual, and cultural exploitation. The poetic intervention functions not merely as testimony to oppression but as an articulation of resilience and resistance within Adivasi life.

Through a close reading of selected poems by Putul and Kerketta, this article examines the position and lived realities of Adivasi women within contemporary feminist discourse. It further explores gendered inequalities and the invisible spaces of marginalisation through the lens of artistic expression, particularly in the context of Adivasi women's struggles in India.

While gender discourse has evolved, mainstream feminist narratives often overlook the layered oppression faced by marginalised communities.

> Women scholars have not yet been able to carve out a niche where their position is secure. There is still a voice in the wilderness, a voice seldom heard even by women themselves. Moreover, it is not surprising that not a single woman scholar has ever tried to deal with the status of tribal women. (De xii)

It can be noted that although there are better research endeavours in the field of Adivasi studies, it lacks exploring the lives of Adivasi women, which needs particular attention due to the increased gender-based crises they are facing amidst modernity. De further elaborates that the tribal woman is constructed as a category or interest group perceived by policymakers primarily as a 'labour force,' 'victim,' or 'protester,' while tribal and non-tribal men increasingly reduce her to the status of a 'witch' or a mere 'sexual object,' respectively (xiv).

Empirical data also reflect the disproportionate vulnerability of Adivasi communities to varied assaults due to modernisation and development projects. As per a report on land dispossession, 40 percent of Adivasis have been displaced from their ancestral land due to a development project. Among the displaced population, the majority are women and young girls (Varughese and Mukherjee). In Adivasi areas, the problem of women and child trafficking has

increased recently due to developmental projects, land acquisition, and deforestation, causing the loss of livelihood and extreme poverty.

Additionally, the patriarchal influence in the communities has subjected women to domestic violence within the household, adding to the layered geometrical marginalisation.For livelihood, when women are forced to migrate, they end up being victims of various forms of exploitation of a sexual and financial nature, often inflicted by the agents. These women are mostly unprotected and underpaid. The systematic neglect in the case of Adivasi women's lives is seldom addressed in academic discourse.

The essay argues that the intersectional standpoint offers a crucial political and structural framework for analysing the complexity of Adivasi women's experience in India. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality refers to how multiple axes of identity, such as gender, caste, ethnicity, class, and location, interact simultaneously to produce unique forms of marginalisation.The intersections of structural inequality, cultural genocide, economic exploitation, and patriarchal violence shape the experience of Adivasi women. The essay establishes how the intersectional framework is particularly relevant for marginalised women's communities, highlighting the limitations of mainstream discourses and policy-making bodies in capturing the complexity of their lived experiences.

Traditionally, Adivasi women have been known for their autonomy and distinct identity. Unlike in patriarchal mainstream societies, gender relations within many Adivasi communities have historically been more egalitarian. Women like Sengi Dai are revered for their bravery and sacrifice in defending the ancestral land. Birsa *ulgulaan* (upsurge) is famous for the fierce resistance of many women who led from the front, suggesting the agency that Adivasi women carry within the community.

The unfortunate infiltration of patriarchal structures, mainly due to the influence of dominant (non-Adivasi) civilised systems, has led to the subjugation of women in these communities. Subsequently, discriminatory practices, violence, and gendered marginalisation have taken root even within Adivasi societies. In this context, both Putul and Kerketta reflect these external and internal oppressions in their poetry. Their work is an effort to expose the

patriarchal distortions entering Adivasi life and give voice to the 'invisible' forms of violence that occur at the intersection of being both Adivasi and female. Their works are not merely literary expressions but acts of resistance that question, challenge, and attempt to reclaim space for Adivasi women in a rapidly changing socio-political landscape.

In analysing the invisibility of marginalisation, Crenshaw's framework of structural and political intersectionality can be crucial. It helps to uncover the complex interlinkages of gender, ethnicity, and power that shape the experiences of Adivasi women vis-à-vis Adivasi feminist voices in contemporary discourse.

Intersectional Feminism

Intersectional feminism is a framework that analyses how different forms of oppression, such as gender, race, class, caste, sexuality, disability, and colonial history, interact and overlap to shape women's diverse lived experiences. Coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, the term emerged from Black feminist thought, and was critical of white, middle-class feminism that excluded women of colour. Crenshaw introduces intersectionality not as a new identity category but as a methodological lens to examine how structures of power intersect. According to her: "The problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference... but rather the opposite—that it frequently conflates or ignores intra-group differences" (Crenshaw 1242).

Intersectional feminism expands the scope of feminist analysis by refusing to treat gender oppression in isolation, emphasising how interlocking power systems create multiple, layered forms of marginalisation. Historically, the idea may be traced in the work of figures such as Sojourner Truth, Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, bell hooks, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, who exposed how race, colonialism, and class affect women differently. In postmodern discourse, intersectionality can be noted as an epistemological shift from identity to power. It challenges the post-modernists' tendency to dissolve identity categories in the name of fluidity and deconstruction. While postmodern theorists often emphasiseidentity's socially constructed, unstable, and fragmented nature, intersectionality insists that identity categories, though constructed, are not politically irrelevant. Kimberlé Crenshaw, in particular, argues that identities such as 'Black' or 'woman' must be understood not

merely as discursive constructs but as locations of structural power and social vulnerability. In doing so, the concept of intersectionality critiques postmodernism's abstract scepticism toward identity by grounding identity in material and lived experiences of oppression. Crenshaw states that "the most critical resistance strategy for disempowered groups is to occupy and defend a politics of social location," rejecting the postmodern urge to abandon identity in favour of total fluidity (1297).

In academic discourse, there have been certain objections to applying the frame in the context of third-world countries like India. Critics like Nivedita Menon argue that frameworks like intersectionality have been depoliticised and overshadowed by Western theoretical dominance. They are sceptical of its tendency touniversalise identity discourse. However, responses by Mary E. John and Meena Gopal rightly point out that intersectionality remains indispensable for recognising the layered, context-specific exclusions that Indian women—particularly Dalit, Adivasi, queer, and disabled women—face, which are often obscured by single-axis frameworks ("Re-thinking Intersectionality" 1-3). Jennifer C. Nash further adds to the argument by calling for an understanding of intersectionality not as a universal solution but as one among many analytical tools forged by women of colour to theorise subordination (Nash 4). Within this debate, the lived realities and literary expressions of poets such as Nirmala Putul and Jacinta Kerketta demonstrate the relevance of intersectionality in their creative voices. Their work reveals unique forms of exclusion based on interactions of gender, class, *adivasiyat* and state violence. Intersectional feminism thus functions not only as a critical theory but also as a political tool that demands more inclusive and justice-oriented feminist movements.

Mapping Intersectional Gaps

The tribal population of India is 8.6 percent, constitutionally recognised as the Scheduled Tribes (Census of India). The Adivasis are the oldest inhabitants of the Indian Subcontinent, but have not been granted the status of indigenous communities. This has been an integral part of their continuous political struggle. The Adivasis of India are known for their distinct features and worldview. Their social structure does not recognise any caste, class or other hierarchy.

Still, due to their different life from the mainstream civil world, Adivasis are racialised and treated as socially inferior within the dominant caste society. Adivasis are forest and mountain dwellers. Their lands are rich in natural resources, which have been the central cause of their marginalisation, dating back to colonial policies that dispossessed them of land and disrupted their economies. Laws such as the Forest Act (1864), Criminal Tribes Act (1871), and Land Acquisition Act (1894) transferred ownership from indigenous communities to the state. Post-independence legislation, such as the Bonded Labour Abolition Act (1976), the Prevention of Atrocities Act (1989), and the Forest Rights Act (2006), has had limited impact due to poor implementation (Krishnan). Human trafficking reflects their acute vulnerability. Jharkhand, with a large tribal population, has the highest out-migration rate in India. (Economic Survey, 2017; NCRB).

Adivasi women are the worst victims of displacement and trafficking. In 2022, over 6,500 trafficking victims were identified, 60 percent of whom were Adivasi women and girls. Around 200,000 Adivasi women from Jharkhand, Odisha, and West Bengal work as domestic workers in cities, often through exploitative placement agencies. These are on record, but the number could be much higher. (NCRB). Within their own communities, Adivasi women face limited access to land and decision-making. Practices like witch-hunting, polygamy, and domestic violence reinforce their subjugation. A particularly stark example of intersectional vulnerability is seen in uranium mining regions like Jadugoda, where locals are exposed to radiation through tailing dams and contaminated water, resulting in severe health hazards. (Mazumdar et.al.). While men work as miners, women in proximity to these men, doing chores like washing their clothes, are also exposed to radiation. The radiation exposure adversely impacts the reproductive system of women, causing miscarriages and other congenital disabilities. Such women are prone to be stigmatised as ill-fated women with bad omen or even branded as witches. In most cases, they are abandoned by their husbands and left to live in isolation and poverty.

Unfortunately, intersecting structures of oppression, grounded in colonialism, capitalism, patriarchy, and state neglect, constitute the lived realities of Adivasi women yet remain insufficiently theorised in mainstream media

discourse and sustained scholarly engagement. Justice frameworks must recognise this complexity. Policies or activism that treat them solely as 'women' or 'tribals' fail to address their actual conditions. The article argues that an intersectional approach is not theoretical but essential for equity, representation, and systemic change.

Poetic Voice of Resistance

Despite continuous systemic oppression, the Adivasi women have been assertive and played a significant role in the movements for land rights and self-determination. Even today, Adivasi women's resilience and participation in resistance movements against land alienation, state repression, and corporate exploitation are noteworthy in many states. In contemporary Adivasi poetry, the voice of activism is translated into creativity as the dry facts of victimisation often fail to create consciousness. Consequently, Adivasi poetic voices of resistance have emerged, and the poets are writing in the dominant language to reach a broader audience. Among them are poets like Nirmala Putul and Jacinta Kerketta, prominent Adivasi literary figures, who are not only writing about communities' century-old tales that survive amid oddities but also drawing attention to the conditions of Adivasi women who remain invisible in the struggle, both externally and within the community.

Both Putul and Kerketta strongly intervene in mainstream literary representations of Adivasi life, particularly of Adivasi women, who are frequently portrayed as innocent, ahistorical figures and romanticised for their proximity to nature. Such representations erase the material realities of labour, deprivation, and survival that structure Adivasi women's everyday lives. Far from being passive or carefree, these women are shaped by continuous physical toil. Both the poets critique dominant literary practices that ignore these conditions and instead derive aesthetic or voyeuristic pleasure from the sexualised Adivasi female body.

In "Adivasi Ladkiyon ke Baare," Putul condemns such representations as the outcome of a voyeuristic and exploitative imagination, exposing the ethical failure of mainstream literary practices. Her poem exposes the falsity of imposed identities and questions the ideological foundations of mainstream descriptions of Adivasi women. She writes:

ऊपर से काली
भीतर से अपने चमकते दाँतों
की तरह शांत धवल होती हैं वे
...
फसलों को रोपती–काटती हुई
गाती हैं गीत
भूल जाती हैं जिंदगी के दर्द...
किसने कहे हैं उनके परिचय में
इतने बड़े–बड़े झूठ? (*Nagade* 17).

(Dark from outside, /Yet inwardly as calm and white/As their shining teeth…/ Sowing and harvesting crops, /Singing songs, /Forgetting the pain of life…/Who has written/Such enormous lies/In their descriptions?)[1]

Through these lines, Putul dismantles romantic binaries that frame Adivasi women as primitive yet pure, labouring yet untouched by suffering, thereby reclaiming their lived complexity.

Similarly, Jacinta Kerketta's "Adivasi Ladkiyan" confronts the voyeuristic gaze that reduces Adivasi women to objects of sexual curiosity, even within ostensibly progressive literary spaces. She writes:

किसी आदिवासी गाँव से गुजरती कविता में
कुछ लोग ढूँढ़ रहे हैं
नदी में नहाती किसी आदिवासी स्त्री की नंगी पीठ... (*Ishwar* 116).

(*In a poem passing through an Adivasi village, /Some people are searching/ For the bare back of an Adivasi woman/ Bathing in the river…*)

Kerketta not only exposes the assumption of sexual availability imposed on Adivasi women but also articulates an act of resistance through poetic form. In a striking reversal, poetry itself becomes a tool of defiance against sexual and symbolic violence:

...कविता चलाती है उसकी पीठ पर हँसिया
तोड़ देती है उसकी गंदी उँगलियाँ
और चीखती है–
कविता में ढूँढ़ना बंद करो
आदिवासी लड़कियाँ। (117).

(*Poetry swings a sickle at those backs, / Breaks those filthy fingers, /And screams—/Stop searching for Adivasi girls in poetry.*)

This violent imagery signals the urgency of breaking hegemonic frameworks that define Adivasi identity from outside. Contemporary Adivasi women's poetry thus functions as a counter-discourse to mainstream stereotyping and patronising attitudes, foregrounding labour, resistance, and agency while demanding ethical modes of representation.

These poems reflect an intersectional feminist vision where gender, Adivasi identity, and labour cannot be separated. By challenging patriarchal and dominant literary gazes, Adivasi women poets reveal how creative spaces often repeat social inequalities. Their poetry speaks from lived experience rather than imagination alone. In doing so, it turns literature into a space of resistance rather than a mere aesthetic pleasure.

Nirmala Putul's poem "Woh Aksar Jo Tumhari Pakad Se Chhut Jata Hai" describes this layer of marginalisation, exposing the site of structural oppression within the feminist discourse. The poem serves as a medium to understand the need for a political intersectional framework to analyse the layers of women's issues missed in mainstream discourses on gender and identity.

एक स्त्री पहाड़ पर रो रही है
और दूसरी स्त्री
महल की तीन मंजिला इमारत की खिड़की से बाहर
झाँककर मुस्कुरा रही है।
ओ, कविघोष्ठी में स्त्रियों पर
कविता पढ़ रहे कवियों!
देखो, कुछ हो रहा है
इन दो स्त्रियों के बीच छूटी हुई जगहों में,
इस कहीं कुछ हो रहे को दर्ज करो
कि वह अक्सर तुम्हारी पकड़ से छूट जाता है।... (*Beghar*18).

(*A woman is crying out on the hill / And another is smiling / Gazing out from the window of / Her three-storeyed palace. / Oh, poets / Reciting*

poems on women / In your poetic gatherings! / Watch out, something is happening / in the space left between these two women. / Record this something somewhere happening, / for it so often slips out / through the grasp / of your carefully chosen words…)[2]

The lines highlight the unequal realities of women shaped by caste, class, ethnicity and geography. The contrast between a woman weeping on a mountain and another smiling from a palace window exposes how dominant narratives often overlook the complex experiences of marginalised women. Addressing male poets, the poem urges recognition of the spaces in between, symbolic of those excluded from both patriarchal and elite feminist frameworks. It calls for an intersectional approach that accounts for layered oppressions, emphasising the need to centre the voices and struggles of women at the margins.

Putul further extends the critique of dominant discourses by highlighting the neglect towards Adivasi women's lived realities. Portraying a woman planting rice with a child on her back in contrast to another engaged in political power struggles exposes the socio-economic and cultural gaps between the women of different classes and locations. The poem critiques this selective visibility within feminist narratives. Addressing both male writers and elite feminists, particularly those speaking on Adivasi identity, the poet questions their failure to include the voices of women whose labour and lives remain unseen.

ओ, स्त्रीविमर्श में शामिल लेखकों!
क्या तुम बता सकते हो
एक स्त्री पीठ पर बच्चा बाँधे धान रोप रही है
दूसरी सरकार गिराने और बनाने में लगी है।
ओ, आदिवासी अस्मिता पर बात करनेवाली झंडावदार औरतों!
इन दो पंक्तियों के बीच गुम हो गई उन औरतों का पता
जिनका नाम तुम्हारी बहस में शामिल नहीं है। (*Beghar* 18).

(*O, writers of feminist discourse! / Can you tell / A woman carrying a child on her back, planting paddy / While others busy toppling and forming governments. / Oh, flag-bearing women talking on Adivasi identity! / Spare a thought for those lost women between these two lines / Spare a*

thought for the women / whose names do not make it into your debates.)[3]

By questioning both patriarchal gatekeepers and the flag-bearing feminist actors, the poem reflects how intersectionality is often invoked but rarely practised. The lost women between these lines symbolise those excluded from mainstream debates, revealing the cracks between representation and reality.The poem calls for an intersectional feminist praxis that moves beyond tokenism to centre the experiences of those at the margins.

It is well-known that the tribal forest economy is primarily a women-led economy. Women are most directly connected to forest land for their livelihood and daily sustenance. However, rapid industrialisation and deforestation have severely impacted their socio-economic conditions. Traditionally, forest products such as brooms, mats, baskets, *datun* (natural toothbrush sticks), and leaf plates were in demand and sold by Adivasi women in local *haats* (markets). Today, these goods compete with mass-produced plastic alternatives that are more readily available and sold at lower prices in the capitalist market economy. As a result, the demand for traditional forest goods has sharply declined, and in many regions, their usage has all but disappeared. Even where these items are still sold, consumers are often unwilling to pay fair prices that reflect the hard labour involved in gathering raw materials from the forest and crafting them by hand. The rise of plastic culture not only poses serious environmental hazards but also breaks the economic backbone of women who have traditionally depended on these occupations for survival. The situation reflects a deeper political intersectionality. Although growing eco-consciousness has generated some demand for forest products labelled 'organic' and 'sustainable,' such demand remains limited. The resulting profits largely accrue to intermediaries, who purchase these products from Adivasi communities at meagre prices and sell them to large brands. Thus, the wages of these women remain incredibly low. Nirmala Putul, in her poem "Bahamuni," powerfully and ironically exposes this form of exploitation, which rarely receives attention in mainstream emancipatory or developmental discourses. To quote:

तुम्हारे हाथ बने पत्तल पर भरते हैं पेट हजारों
पर हजारों पत्तल भर नहीं पाते तुम्हारा पेट
कैसी विडम्बना है ये

जमीन पर बैठ बुनती हो चटाईयाँ
और पंखा बनाते टपकता है पसीना...
तुम्हारे करिये देह से टप–टप पसीना!
जिन घरों के लिए बनाती हो झाड़ू
उन्हीं से आते हैं कचरे तुम्हारी बस्तियों में? (*Nagade* 12).

(*On your handmade plates, thousands fill their stomachs / But even thousands of these plates cannot fill your stomach / What an irony it is / You weave the mats sitting on the floor / And the sweat drops / Drip off your dark skin / While making the fan / The brooms you make for those homes / Who sends the garbage to your colonies*.)

These lines are striking for the use of irony, where the stomach of countless people is filled on the leaf plates made by the local Adivasi women who are victims of poverty and prone to starvation. Women like Bahamuni in dire conditions make products of comfort for others, yet their work remains undervalued. The poem intersectionally examines gender based economic exploitation. It also highlights the commodification of the environment under market-oriented cultural capitalism. The poetic voice here is a vehicle urging a shift from exploitation to empowerment, where women like Bahamuni are no longer alienated from the fruits of their labour.

A recent report on the working conditions of Adivasi women highlights this stark reality: Adivasi women in the Bakura district of West Bengal who collect Sal leaves for the small-scale leaf-plate industry earn only 5 rupees for every 100 leaves (Gaon Connection). Their work involves spending long days in dangerous terrain to collect these leaves, which remain underpaid and unrecognised. Jacinta Kerketta also portrays this systematic exploitation based on gender, class, and ethnicity, emphasising the political failure to see through the intersectional gaps faced by the Adivasi community, particularly their women. Kerketta's poem "Kash Imli Khatti Na Hoti" highlights the interconnected identity between the Adivasi women and the forest. The poet reflects how their agency is interdependent and losing one is the cause of the erasure of the other. In the poem, a girl is a tamarind seller, which has been her traditional occupation. She picks up the tamarind and carries the basket full on her head to sell in the market, suggesting her socio-economic reality of hard labour.

With her cries, "Get tamarind for two rupees," the poet hints that the girl cannot sell five dona (leaf bowls) of tamarind. The passerby comes to taste it and ironically comments that it is too sour. The livelihood of the young girl in the poem amid the abundance of nature is under threat within the framework of capitalism. The system transforms the *imli* she collects into a marketable product where the cultural symbol is stripped off, and the worth of her product becomes a mere fraction.

वो लड़की
नंगे पाँव, सिर पर
इमली की टोकरी ढो कर
हाट की ओर जाती हुई।
बनाती है पाँच हिस्से
मुट्ठी भर इमली डालकर
सखुआ के पत्तों के दोनों में,
चिल्लाती है–
"दो रुपये में इमली ले लो!" (*Ishwar* 132).

(*That girl, / barefoot, balancing / a basket full of tamarind on her head, / walks toward the marketplace. / She divides it into five parts / Putting a handful of tamarind in / In each bowl of sal leaves, / Calls out— / "Get tamarind for two rupees!"*)[4]

In addition, the poem illustrates the simple and modest life of forest people. Their sustainable practice includes using *sakhua*leaves to package the product and passing knowledge to the next generation. However, the livelihood of the young girl in the poem amid the abundance of nature is under threat within the framework of capitalism.

Further, Kerketta exposes the patronising attitude of mainstream elite women towards the underprivileged and politically marginalised communities. She appropriately traces this to highlight the unheard and intersectional failure of elite voices of feminism. The girl in the poem finally sells off a dona of tamarind to a city woman who cannot control salivation, pity the girl and throws

two rupees towards her, making the girl look at the coin and ponder, "wish the tamarind were not sour!" Jacinta writes:

बहुत इंतजार के बाद
शहर की स्त्रियों का
झुंड उधर से गुजरा।
लार बचाकर
एक स्त्री ले गई
दोना भर इमली उठाकर,
जाते–जाते फेंक गई
बस, दो रुपल्ली।..
लौटते हुए हाट से
देखा मुट्ठी में दो रुपये।
सोचा–
"काश! इमली खट्टी न होती!" (*Ishwar* 132).

(*After a long wait, / a group of urban women / Passed by her. / Salivating, / One of the women / Took away a bowlful, / Throwing just a coin of two rupees / While going away. / The girl / Stared at the four left-out tamarind bowls / Earned only two rupees / By the evening. / On her way back from the market, / She looked at the coins in her fist / and thought / "Wish the tamarind! / Hadn't been sour!"*.)[5]

Through these works, poets like Putul and Kerketta bring forth unheard stories, subjectivity, and political failure in academic discourses, where gender issues are selective or leave the peripheral voices behind, eventually lost among the voices of the visible majority. The girl's poverty is not due to personal misfortune or individual tragedy. It is systemic failure that leaves Adivasi women in such a state of crisis. Thus, it critiques the invisibility of these women's struggles within economic frameworks and feminist discourses.

These intersectional gaps in the lives of Adivasi women can be further understood by analysing their position within their communities. The Adivasi worldview does not follow rigid hierarchical or hegemonic divisions that create social inequalities. Historically, women have held significant agency in decision-

making processes in these societies. However, the egalitarian value inherent in the Adivasi worldview has been increasingly disrupted and compromised over time due to the infiltration of outsiders or non-Adivasis (*diku*) into Adivasi regions. The infiltration occurred primarily for developmental projects and access to land and natural resources. As a result, previously alien to these societies, patriarchal norms have begun to take root. Customary laws, which once upheld gender equity, are being replaced by formal civil laws. Consequently, in many Adivasi communities today, women find themselves marginalised, deprived of rights over land or property and facing rising instances of domestic violence. "To the question of patriarchy in tribal society, it is pertinent to say that a tribal woman generally bears a double burden of patriarchal inscription on her body within the dominant-subaltern power contestation" (De xvi). This can be captured in the lines of Jacinta from her poem "Striyon Ka Ishwar":

पिता और भाई की हिंसा से
बचने के लिए मैंने बचपन में ही
माँ के ईश्वर को कसकर पकड़ लिया।
अब कभी किसी बात को लेकर
भाई का उठा हाथ रुक जाता
तो वह सबसे बड़ा चमत्कार होता।
धीरे–धीरे हर हिंसा हमारे लिए
ईश्वर द्वारा ली जा रही परीक्षा बन गई।
और दिन की ताकत
मैं ईश्वर के सहारे जीती रही
और माँ ईश्वर के भरोसे मार खाती रही।
मैं बड़ी होने लगी
और माँ बूढ़ी होने लगी।
हम दोनों के पास अब भी वही ईश्वर था।... (*Ishwar* 26).

(*To resist the violence / of my father and brother, / In childhood, I tightly clung / to my mother's God. / Gradually, every blow / became a test from God. / I survived each day / leaning on faith, / While my mother / endured*