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Poetess-Mother-Earth Mother: Solidarities and Intersectionalities in select Native American and Indian Adivasi Women's Poetry

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Abstract

The current trends in Indigenous literary scholarship in the West include trans-indigenous and inter-indigenous comparative studies of literature and art. In Western scholarship, trans-comparative frameworks have incorporated research on art and literature from indigenous communities in Americas, Australia, New Zealand, Africa and even parts of Asia. However, in the context of literary knowledge production of the tribal communities of India, such comparative frameworks do not find adequate focus in research. This paper is an attempt to focus on select indigenous women's poetry from the American and Indian contexts to argue for the validity and possibilities in comparative literary criticism. By reflecting on the imagery, cultural and philosophical contours, resonances and distinctions in the poetry of Joy Harjo, Louise Erdrich, Jacinta Kerketta and JoramYalam Nabam, this paper makes a case for recognizing the inter-poetic and trans-ethnic literary solidarities where the works of women writers can guide poetic and critical trajectories across two distinct yet interconnected cultural geographies.

Keywords: Adivasi, Native American, Trans-indigenous, Comparative Literature, Indigenous Poetics

Introduction

Tribal/ Indigenous research methodologies in the Indian context, as pointed out by Prathama Banerjee (2016), have relied majorly on ethnographic and anthropological discursive criticism, inadvertently imposing an a-historical identity discourse on the Adivasi subject. In ethnographic studies of tribal literature, often narrative complexities get undermined to serve generic purposes. In this manner, narrative and aesthetic agency of the Adivasi subject is replaced with cultural generalizations. In Indian literary studies, this tendency is painfully visible. Pedagogical and scholarly engagements with Adivasi literature are focused on locating literary texts in the ethnographic and political contexts of "conflict and violence", as has been the case with literature from Northeast India. This archival and representational approach, if it gives way to aesthetic and narratological approaches, bring questions of literariness, historiography, narrative, poetics and philosophies into the discourse of Adivasi literature. The kind of critical maturity as reflected in literary criticisms of Native American and Australian aboriginal literature is also needed in Indian literary criticism to do justice to Adivasi knowledge production. A trans-indigenous comparative framework can offer scope in this direction. Through this framework, women's poetry across and between indigenous traditions can highlight the inherent potential in developing new methodologies within the broader field of Adivasi studies. While the conceptual categories of 'woman', 'sisterhood' and 'indigenous' have been rightly criticized by indigenous feminist theorists as potentially reductionist, I propose that at the current stage of Indian literary criticism, these categories can yield positive results. Indigenous solidarities in literature are not limited to ethnographic constructs of 'indigeneity' but can, as this paper will illustrate, lead to cross-indigenous methodologies being explored and evaluated in parallel frameworks. Reading Adivasi and Native American poetry together can, through close textual criticism, lead to explorations of epistemic congruence and discursive and behavioral dissimilarities in the society's engagements with 'indigenous' subjectivities. This paper is an attempt to illustrate the relevance of trans-indigenous comparative frameworks in the study of Indian Adivasi literature.

The epistemological engagements offered by women's indigenous poetries has been well documented in north American indigenist criticism with the pioneering work of Paula Gunn Allen to the more recent work of Molly McGlennen (2014) arguing for trans-national indigenous women's alliances as the way forward. I begin by arguing for the validity of recognizing and incorporating trans-indigenous psychospiritual paradigms that draw upon the experiences of

indigenous spirituality for reading literature; especially poetry. This enables to engage with women's psychospiritual health, an aspect that has been consistently marginalized by colonial biopower and settler heteropatriarchal models of health and is being challenged by the work of public health theorists and sociologists highlighting the trauma, mental health status, alternative healing modalities, family structures and indigenous epistemologies in general (Cesario 2011, Czyzewski 2011, Sherwood 2013, Crowtherand Hall 2015). Reading indigenous poetry through the spiritual paradigm can be a step towards legitimizing women's psychospiritual health through women's writing itself. With poetry developing a theoretical bond with therapy, counseling and even palliative care and its importance having been recognized acutely during the recent pandemic (Xiang and Yi 2020), indigenous poetic expressions in the forms of chants, songs, rituals and their symbolism are being recognized as valid epistemological interventions in public health programs in the US (Desmarais and Robbins 2019). At this point, it becomes rewarding to credit the possibilities of inter-poetic indigenous expressions for exploring questions of indigenous transnationalism and global health governance in the discourse of public health (Morgensen 2014). In a recently published interview (17th April, 2021), Joy Harjo recounts the poems of Audre Lorde and Okotp Bitek as therapeutic for her personally, at a time when the pandemic has brought an end to many native cultural icons. In the Indian context, when indigenous communities have been struggling with issues of inclusion and representation, the pandemic has had significant impact with illnesses, limited health infrastructure and passing away of cultural icons of the indigenous communities.

For demonstrating the poetic and philosophical value of comparative literary criticism, this paper will highlight select poems of two Native American women poets and two Indian Adivasi poets. In the Native American context, the two poets selected are Louise Erdrich and Joy Harjo. The former is a celebrated novelist-poet, while Joy Harjo is a musician-poet-activist. In the Indian Adivasi context, the work of Joram Yalam Nabam, a writer-scholar from Arunachal Pradesh has been selected. Yalam is an award winning novelist and venturing into poetry writing recently. The other writer that this paper will engage with is poet-activist Jacinta Kerketta who writes poetry in Hindi and, like Harjo, is active in the digital media too. The work of these writers invites us to identify philosophical and poetic solidarities that compel us to look beyond Western literary paradigms to locate their work in perspective.

Trans-Indigenous Methodologies and Decolonial Literary Criticism

When read between and through cultural traditions, 'indigenous' experiences accumulate epistemological breadths that can contribute to challenging the dominance of global 'developmental' paradigms. A global indigenous philosophy can orient us to the common and shared ancestry of ideas and worldviews that shaped and continue to shape the experiences of individuals, communities, kinship structures, local governance and gender relations (Niezen 2003). Indigenous poets like Joy Harjo and Jacinta Kerketta among others, have been advocating a 'universal' approach to indigenous poetry and culture- an approach that need not be essentialist but progressive; not fossilizing culture but recognizing the evolutions and challenges of indigenous cultural expressions in the wake of changing realities. While reading the poetry of indigenous writers, one naturally recognizes an epistemological pattern that is composed of interpersonal subjectivity, communal identity, and reciprocity with nature. These commonalities are not themes of poems but life philosophies that shape the poetic expressions of indigenous writers across the world.

Developing an indigenous poetic framework is critical to studies of indigenous literatures so that clear paradigms of reading can be integrated with the reading and teaching of literature at large and critical evaluations of genres like poetry, novel and drama. These paradigms are needed to challenge Eurocentric literary paradigms where realism, epic, lyric, sonnet, absurd and other terms become the touchstones to examine and judge non-Western literatures. Postcolonial literary criticism often finds itself limited by critical approaches to literatures that have been primarily shaped by colonialism. For instance, studies of South Asian literatures cannot ignore the colonial contributions to documenting the literary historiographies and Oriental translations of ancient and medieval 'vernacular' literatures. When purportedly trying to challenge colonial literary approaches, scholars have to take recourse to frameworks and generic taxonomies created by the colonial knowledge project itself. As part of decolonial literary criticism, the so called 'fourth world' offers epistemological interventions in the debate itself. Literary studies can also look towards comparative criticism that debunks the generic walls of colonial historiographies and examines, for instance, the work of Native American poets and that of *Prakrit* poets or indigenous literature from India and the work of Latin American writers in comparative frameworks.[1] These leaps of comparative criticism can open philosophical and aesthetic paradigms of critical inquiry, offer newer analyses and promote intercultural inquiry

that is not content with political or ethnic definitions of 'indigenous', 'pre-modern', 'vernacular', 'liberal' or 'marginal' categorizations. Katherine Durnin (2011) has argued for the validity of reading indigenous and non-indigenous literatures in view of the recent debates and trends in comparative literary criticism. It is important to note that Louise Erdrich and Jacinta Kerketta have not only objected but also questioned being labelled as 'native American writer', 'woman writer' or' Adivasi writer' and argue instead that why such labels are not applied to mainstream writers as Brahmin or white male writers[2].

Trans-spiritual poetic studies offer a paradigm shift in classical comparative studies that have evolved out of philological, philosophical and aesthetic concerns in intercultural explorations. Orientalist investment in the enterprise has given way to postcolonial and decolonial approaches in comparative literary frameworks with the former locating colonization in ontological and the latter in epistemological coordinates. As the frameworks are reorienting to the contemporary cultural and ideological dynamics of intercultural studies, the paradigm of comparative indigenous studies invites us to explore shared histories of direct and hegemonic colonization and various distinct and interconnected dimensions of 'marginalization', not as static historical events but dynamic processes open to reversal as well as intensification. This paradigm also creates legitimization for women's indigenous experiences and expressions to be documented, published, circulated and analyzed as offering modalities of individual and collective healing. In Native American studies, trans-national and trans-indigenous methodologies are representing the third wave in Native American scholarship. Chadwick Allen (2012) too argues for the relevance of trans-indigenous methodologies that enables researchers to,

> …refocus attention on the enduring relevance of Indigenous personal and communal identities and to re-recognize that indigenous personal and communal identities, the particular connections they enable, and the diverse afterlives they produce have always held relevance beyond the level of the local. These indigenous identities, connections, and afterlives continue to hold such relevance today. They are likely to hold similar if not increased relevance into near and distant futures. (Allen 2012:241)

In postcolonial indigenist criticism, trans-cultural and inter-cultural studies have focused on first nations' literature across North America, South America, Africa and Australia. In the context of first nation people in India, comparative indigenist literary criticism seeks more critical investment. The need for decolonial literary approaches stem out of double

marginalization when the cultural capital of "first nations people within the third world" finds little critical currency.

The Language and Poetics of Indigenous Literature

In the context of native American scholarship, the relationship between language of literature and cultural sovereignty has been critically examined by writers and scholars such as Paula Gunn Allen, Simon Ortiz, Scott Lyons, Arnold Krupat and others while in the Indian context, the initiatives of authors like Ramanika Gupta and Ruby Hembrom, literary critics like Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, G N Devy and Avadhesh Kumar Singh in English, Anand Mahananda, Ganga Sahay Meena, Ramdayal Munda in Hindi, Motiravan Kangali in Gondi, Maipati Arun Kumar in Telugu and other scholars in Gujarati and Marathi have drawn attention to questions of orature, sovereignty and aesthetics in tribal literary expression[3]. Indigenous literary studies in the American context have moved from questions of sovereignty and authenticity, nationalism and trans-nationalism to inter- and trans- indigenous comparativist positions. In the Indian context, academic studies of tribal literature find concerns of sovereignty of religion and language, land resources and systemic marginalization, environmental philosophies and developmental demands *(jal, jangal, jameen*) occupying the focus presently.

Adivasi writing in India has been given the status of the third wave of subaltern studies, the first two being Dalit writing and feminist writing respectively. Indigenous literary expression is vibrant in Gujarati, Marathi, Telugu and tribal languages like Limbu, Bhilli and Gondi to name a few, with Hindi emerging as a major choice for indigenous expression[4]. In the backdrop of a growing linguistic imperialism shaping a certain version of Hinduism in current Indian sociopolitical life, the choice of writing in Hindi appears as a political act of 'mainstreaming the marginalized'.

The critical debates on Adivasi writing have predominantly focused on the question of authenticity and representation (*anubhūti/sahanubhūti*) regarding who writes about indigenous life and who has experienced or not experienced indigenous philosophy (*ādivāsidarśan*). In reading indigenous literature, recognizing and carving a critical space for indigenous literary criticism and theoretical frameworks could orient the discourse towards philosophical and aesthetic quotients of the texts too; delimiting their potential and recognizing the spiritual and transformative power that lies therein. Cultivating indigenous literary frameworks and exploring literature through these lenses can go a long way in challenging the epistemological authority of

western literary theorization, applied almost universally on all literature. While critics like Marie Battiste, Renate Eigenbrod and Joanne DiNova have advocated the need for cultivating indigenist literary criticism as actual postcolonial intervention in indigenous studies; in the Indian context, literary criticism is still at a nascent stage in theorizing on indigenist expression (Durnin 2011). Though K Ayyappa Paniker (2003) in *Indian Narratology* has included a chapter on 'Tribal/Folk Narrative', his analysis of the narrative mode of tribal literature focuses on folk tales, simple songs and the absence of "grand narratives" in tribal literature. While he rightly points out that the overt emphasis on the written form fails to do justice to the aural quality of tribal literature, yet he doesn't offer any deep engagement with these narrative practices, something that can be theorized upon like "onomatopoetics", "fable-theology", or "holophrasticism" (Marieke Neuhass 2015). Avadhesh Kumar Singh (2012) points to the Western tendency that becomes an extension of colonial anxiety, while Lalita Pandit (1996) offers rewarding indigenous comparative frameworks for reading literature through, say, Japanese concept of *sabi* and Indian theory of *dhvani* in reading ancient Egyptian poetry. In an article written in Hindi, Ashok Singh (2008) highlights the absence of serious critical engagement with Adivasi literature in India. He points out that among other things; a challenge that emerges in literary criticism of tribal writing is the absence of trans-indigenous literary frameworks and linguistic cross-pollination. He observes:

> [Another problem is that] while it is a well-known fact that the literature of any language prospers only when it has deep relations with the literatures of other languages, when it possesses an expansive vocabulary and along with an empowered and self-sufficient media, it possesses a vibrant social and cultural tradition. But our tribal literature has still not been able to cultivate these kinds of relationships with other literatures. (Singh: 2008)

The concept of *dhvani*(or suggestion) in Sanskrit poetics, for instance, can help in locating the interrelationship between language, poetic structures and meaning beyond the associative or symbolic stage. The stages of *abhidhā, lakshanā, vyanjanā* and *dhvani* point to multilevel relations between words and meaning, and kinds of *dhvani* or suggestion as emanating from *vāstu* (object), *alankār* (metaphor) or *rasa* (spiritual-emotional aesthetic state) enable us to read poetry in psycho-spiritual frameworks. The poetry, chants, utterances, sounds and ritualistic use of language in indigenous literature expect the reader to recognize that language performs more

than denotative or symbolic role; it can be suggestive when the utterance itself becomes knowledge, and words get charged with energy. In the chants of indigenous healers for instance, language assumes more than a performative role, it becomes *aparā* (transcendental) where communication happens at higher levels of consciousness, words no longer denote or signify objects but 'become' spirits or deities themselves. This is clearly evident in the cosmological chants in shamanistic ceremonies where topographical sounds and names summon or even become the deities themselves. The poetry of indigenous poets demands such readings where the reader is able to transcend spatial and temporal limitations through the language itself. Brown (2009) refers to the power of 'naming' in Erdrich's novels as her 'onomastic mysticism' where names and naming become words and acts of connection, possession and even transgression. Words suggest or invoke psychospiritual states of consciousness, an ability that *dhvani* postulation recognizes as embedded in poetic (creative) language. Classical Sanskrit poetic frameworks recognize the role of the reader as a participant, a *sahrdaya* in the act of reading. The concept of *sahrdaya* (literally 'one with heart') focuses on the reader's active role in the aesthetic process where she brings her consciousness to the psychospiritual level of *sādharanikaraṇa* where the individualization gives way to universalization, not a cultural but a psychoemotive act. This process recognizes the involvement of the composer/writer and the reader in the aesthetic process of transformation of consciousness, where the ego is freed of mundane attachments and the reader is capable of experiencing oneness with the desired psychoemotive state of the aesthetic work.

The reader's engagement in the Indian conceptual aesthetic framework draws our attention to the way in which indigenous poetry can be read to explore affective solidarities, emotive-cognitive intersectionalities[5], feminist affective poetries, everyday aesthetics[6] and indigenous symbolisms among other emerging domains of inquiry. Exploring the theories of rasa and dhvani, in critical readings of Adivasi poetry can, for instance, turn literary criticism away from the polarization of "margi/desi" dichotomy that has resulted in associating Sanskrit-classical-Brahmin with "literariness" and dialect-vernacular-Adivasi with "archiving/utterance" as literary epistemologies[7]. This polarization divests indigenous literary expression of any value beyond the dialectics of marginalization wherein the process of marginalization is reduced to a static aggregate of economic and social factors. As the worldviews or *darśanas* of the indigenous peoples include relationality, reciprocity and ethical commitment to the earth and trans-human

world, reading poetry can become an active participation in the cosmological awareness and trans-human action. This will naturally challenge the androcentric readings and engagement with environment and necessitate an experiential ecological aesthetic that can be imbibed, imitated and even personalized in daily actions and choices. The dominant debates on authenticity of experience and the validity of expression [8] can be channelized to include concerns of transformative reading, an act that can restore the human experiential and narrative imbalance in the context of mainstream and marginalized writing.

Great Mothers and Mother Earth: Motherhood as Psychospiritual Motifs

In this comparative framework lies the possibility of recognizing indigenous feminist spirituality that is distinct from doctrinal spirituality informed by the world religion paradigm of monolithic and organized structures of thought. In this indigenous feminist spirituality, the spiritual experiences of women can be recognized in their intimacy and privacy with psychic transformations, emotional upheavals and corporeal manifestations without the dichotomies of sacred/profane, public/private and reason/ emotion, a post Enlightenment baggage that we have carried for too long. This freedom from dichotomies will also bring about another necessary freedom that is crucial to any propositions of interspiritual sisterhood- the differences of nationality, ethnicity, colour, and language.

The poetry of Louise Erdrich and Jacinda Kerketta must be read together as their poetic is shaped by indigenous spirituality and is deeply linked to their self-fashioning as contemporary women writers. The indigenous poetic that is striking in their verses- from the titles to the endings- doesn't allow normative cultural sanitization as it insists upon establishing and maintaining a distinctiveness that is slippery and therefore difficult to cleanse. This distinctiveness is created with evoking spiritual escapades, ancestral history, topographical passion, communal security and animistic force. Kerketta (2020)[9] says:

> Dakota Native Americans say that 'nation' means for them, 'the way of living'. They learn this way of living from nature. In this way of life, one bears the honest responsibility of ensuring that not only he or she but others are not deprived of resources, as this worldview doesn't see human as the center. The human stands along with everything else in nature, circumscribed in a circle. In shouldering one's responsibility in contributing to the balance in nature, the life philosophy of Native Americans is not different from the life philosophy of indigenous communities (tribals)

> in India. They are still fighting for the rights to hold their ceremonies of bringing home the souls of their forefathers who were killed in the conquest and robbery of their lands. The philosophy of indigenous people is the same around the world. This is the philosophy of co-existence.

Kerketta, a young poet-activist who belongs to the Adivasi (literally meaning 'ancient dwellers') community in eastern India, writes about alienation, struggles of economic and cultural marginalization of adivasis in India, the onslaught of dominant bourgeois Brahminical discourse and also the joys of natural harmony and communal life among her people. Her poetry is in Hindi and has been translated and published in a bilingual edition titled *Angor* (meaning 'ember').

In a powerful poem originally titled '*Saranda ke Phool*' (The Flowers of Saranda), while evoking the onslaught of man and machine in the forests, she establishes the natural rhythm of flowering as a counter to human destructive actions of plunder in the name of development.

The spade, the pickaxe, and a few hands
Shed silent tears in a corner.
And begin digging the grave
Of their own rage
At the behest
Of some scribbled page.
Just then the perfume
On the sly
Strikes at the stench
Of the machine and dynamite,
And steals away in silence
Into every blossom of the forest.

Aflame with passion and new hope,
The next dawn brings forth
Another sweet blossom
Somewhere in the bosom of Saranda.
('The Blossoms of Saranda')

This poem derives its title from the Sal forest of Saranda in Jharkhand, eastern India. This region has been the victim of deforestation in the name of development and unplanned urbanization. The poet effortlessly evokes the power of nature's rhythm to counter human artifice and reiterates it with an intimate sensuality that appears available only to those who are committed to it. The 'perfume on the sly/ strikes at the stench/of the machine and dynamite' before slipping away to penetrate every blossom of the forest. The flowers in Saranda forest hold the fragrance in their blossoming, a process that repeats itself with a natural rhythm, juxtaposing it with the unnatural and disruptive cacophony of 'machine and dynamite'. The flowers will blossom because they want to, and though irritated undeterred by the anthropocentric actions. The indigenous religion paradigm (Maarif 2019:105) does not recognize a triple-fold hierarchy between divine/man/nature but, a lateral harmony between different subjectivities of human, natural and divine aspects of life. An essential aspect of this paradigm is the recognition of responsibility, ethics and reciprocity in intersubjective relationality between human and other personhoods. In these lines from the poem, the poet has lent a natural subjectivity to the fragrance of the forest- a personhood with a relational subjectivity, not an objective fixity like the machines and dynamite. The spades and pickaxes along with the hands that used them to fell trees 'shed silent tears' in a corner, weighed under guilt, shame and helplessness. These subjectivities exist in contexts of relations- between the hands that wield the axe, helpless and forced to do it because of poverty and unemployment and the confident 'perfume' that waits for the right moment to stealth away into all the blossoms of the forest. The poet is a subject too; not merely a distant witness but a participant and partaker of this nature's act of defiance. The indigenous sensibility is located here- between subjectivities and their relationalities.

This poetic is also shaped by psychospiritual alienation that lends the pathos to indigenous literature all over the world. The ruptures in the psychospiritual fabric of indigenous lives in different parts of the world come from the dominant discourse of 'man and machine'. Modernity that emanated out of hermeneutics of suspicion has created epistemic blocks that refuse to admit indigenous spirituality in inclusive terms. Histories of imperialism and mercantile capitalism deepened the cracks with doctrinal and hierarchical world religion paradigms that ended up fossilizing indigenous spirituality to curios and infantile status in determining transformative and rational potential of knowledge.

Women's selves are further marginalized due to the inherent linkages between institutionalization of religion and patriarchy. The consistent obfuscation of ancestral ties and wisdom from the vocabulary of knowledge has deprived women of spiritual motherhoods and social sisterhoods as well as kinships that can challenge meta-narratives of consumerist capitalism and environmental degradation thus forgoing distinct cosmovisions and programmes for social justice (Marcos 2009). This alienation is clearly perceptible in the experiences and expressions of psychospiritual aspects of motherhood. Since the early modern insistence on Protestantism has shaped clinical approaches to motherhood, the labyrinthine layers of conception, carriage and miscarriage, birthing, nursing and caring have been divested of their psychospiritual and emotional bearings. A reorientation of poetic through indigenous wisdom and expression can point to intuitional and atavistic aspects of women's universal experiences thereby allowing for suprarational and interspiritual communication between women who find themselves caught between emotional traumas and artificially generated spiritual desiccation. In the following lines from Joy Harjo's poem, the persona of the mother reclaiming her ancestral ties beyond human form and teleological time, evokes a sense of universal motherhood:

What I am telling you is real and is printed in a warning on the
Map. Our forgetfulness stalks us, walks the earth behind us, leav-
ing a trail of paper diapers, needles, and wasted blood.
An imperfect map will have to do, little one.
The place of entry is the sea of your mother's blood, your father's
Small death as he longs to know himself in another.
…
You will have to navigate by your mother's voice, renew the song
she is singing.
('A Map to the Next World')

The assurance of the mother's voice in this poem cannot be described as the assurance of any specific individual but it is the collective voice of all mothers to all their daughters as they teach them to navigate through the phenomenal world and beyond. This assurance is palpable in indigenous poetry across cultures as it is a direct result of communal and ancestral kinships and sharing of resources and challenges. The discursive constructions of 'motherhood' point to striking differences in indigenous and modern worldviews. In the availability of communal

networks of kinship and solidarities, motherhood acquires a mutually shared role with the focus on feminine knowledge, generational wisdom, recovery and resistance (Lavell-Harvard and Anderson 2014). In the modern worldview, individualism and scientific determinism often create isolation, anxieties and apathies leading to the motherhood experience becoming traumatic in multiple ways for women. Indigenous cosmologies and cosmokinships decategorize ideas of womanhood and offer flexibility that liberal modernity is incapable of. Paula Gun Allen in *The Sacred Hoop* (1987:p.47) points out this difference clearly:

> Pre-Conquest American Indian women valued their role as vitalizers. Through their own bodies they could bring vital beings into the world- a miraculous power whose potency does not diminish with industrial sophistication or time. They were mothers, and that word did not imply slaves, drudges, drones who are required to live only for others rather than for themselves as it does so tragically for many modern women"

The artificial nature of modernity is brought out in words as 'paper diapers', 'needles' and the wasting of motherhood as 'wasted blood', juxtaposing natural motherhood with paper-and-plastic motherhood. Embedded in these lines is also the pathos of broken and incomplete maps-metaphors for spiritual and psychical knowledge that mothers in aboriginal or tribal communities consider their treasure as well as responsibility of passing down. This poem can be read as a call for preserving and sustaining native knowledge traditions, not allowing the children the apathy of forgetting. In her cosmovisionary description, the mother in the poem says,

You will travel through the membrane of death, smell cooking
from the encampment where our relatives make a feast of fresh
deer meat and corn soup, in the Milky Way.
They have never left us; we abandoned them for science

These lines are infused with guilt and longing, desperate cries for reclaiming memory that no science can preserve. Indigenous aesthetic and spiritual sensibilities as much as political worldviews are deeply shaped by the experience of subjective as well as systemic alienation and cultural and spiritual amnesia for indigenous peoples.

Women and Cultural Geography of the City

The fiction and poetry of Erdrich and Harjo as well as the poetry and prose of Adivasi writers in India reflect urgent concerns with the threat of cultural amnesia in the context of unplanned

and aggressive urbanization. Christopher B. Teuton (2009) points to the dialectics between 'Symbolic Center' and 'Symbolic City' as informing the symbolic geography of indigenous literature. The "Symbolic City is the literal and/or figurative cosmopolitan space in which the dominant values of Western colonial culture are manifested and privileged"[10]. In the poetry of Kerketta, the 'city' becomes a symbolic space of greed, loss of empathy and reciprocity and ultimate destruction, values of modernity that threaten the 'Symbolic Center' of Adivasi life. It is no longer a determinable spatial territory but an indeterminate psychic space that threatens the fine balance between topography, memory and behavior. The city alienates, appropriates and judges, it perplexes the determinedly 'articulate kinswoman' "who is so well grounded in the language of her Symbolic Center that she may engage and learn about the Western world of the Symbolic City without the fear of losing her voice"[11]. In a poem titled 'O City', the articulate kinswoman rhetorically asks the 'city' if it ever feels the same homelessness and alienation that it's very existence is predicated on:

Leaving behind their homes,
their soil, their bales of straw,
Fleeing the roof over their heads, they often ask,
O city!
Are you ever wrenched by the very roots
In the name of so-called progress?
('O City')

Where does one turn to from this apathetic city? The poets turn to memory, to spiritual communication that rejects teleology or anthropomorphism, becoming the voice that remembers. The poet becomes the bridge, the shaman who calls back the spirits as memories and transcends her own anthropocentric and even gynocentric limitation by surrendering individual identifiers. The poet is no longer a woman or a man, she is the custodian of communal voice, a collective sensibility, the only support that an individual needs in crisis.

In an untitled poem by JoramYalam Nabam, the verse reads as:

I said I will shred them to bits
They, who try to steal from us the jewels of our ancestors
A voice came from the sea
No…not at all

This is not our way at all
Shredding to bits is not the nature of the heart
You step into the waves and
Select pearls in sea-shells
Look for the footprints of beloved ancestors
Steal the hearts of the thieves themselves
I am in love with that voice
That's why I began to listen to the song of silence[12].

In the following lines, Jacinta Kerketta promotes an adolescent girl to emotional motherhood through a relationship of compassion between her and an old man:

Traversing the breadth of a road,
A daughter crossed in a way untold
The path over to motherhood.
And then she saw as clear as day,
For being a mother, there is no age.
Can one ask the Mother Earth,
What is the age for motherhood?
('The Age for Motherhood')

There are motherhoods that exist on levels beyond the corporeal and there are mothers in/and daughters who are not limited to individualized personhoods, battling alienation and survival. As in Harjo's poem where the poetic persona connects human and other species and celestial beings in a relationship of reciprocity and sustenance, in the above poem, a daughter transforms into her own mother, then mother to her grandfather and in the closing lines, a daughter to mother earth herself. This ease and natural force of form shifting comes from indigenous epistemology that does not locate or limit personhood in the human alone. Communication exists at multiple levels; it takes only a blocking away of machine noise to be able to hear it.

This motherhood possesses emotional and spiritual power, something that is exemplified by the endurance, anger and renewing force of mother earth. At this stage, it is important to take note of the contesting theories of mother-nature complex, some essentializing womanhood to a global motherhood (Reuther 2001, Shiva 1989, Merchant 1996) while others insisting on cultural nuances and contextual understandings of motherhood lest the associations become limiting for

recognizing agencies of women's selves (Mac Gregor 2006). The argument that cultural specificities need to be honored in proposing motherhood as a universal experience of womankind, registering the presence of men as cultural and spiritual companions in shaping femininity and motherhood can add value to the approach. Theoretical propositions about motherhood need not be oblivious to the roles, relationalities and expressions of men's experiences as this may lead to an exclusivist and often reductive understanding of motherhood as a function of sexual and gender performativity. In Harjo's poem, the mother remarks first on the suffering and loneliness of the father, while in the above poem, the old man brings vulnerability to the young girl and it is his physical weakness that enables emotional growth in the girl. Literature offers us natural and metaphoric dialogue as fundamental to how a human being negotiates with the world. Metaphorical understanding of motherhood could delimit the intellectual quandaries of whether motherhood is a reductive idea or whether it is culturally and politically constructed. Acknowledging androcentrism and capitalist consumerism as discursive problems need not exclude men's selves and communal identities from progressive discourses. Indigenous experiences are not monochromatic but do share resonances of inter-gender and inter-people relationalities, because as cultures negotiating premodern knowledge with modern lifestyles, the common experiences of alienation, irony and loss remain consequences of neo colonial strategies. Kerketta's people in eastern India and Erdrich's community in North America thrive on cultural specificities but face daily challenges that are common side-effects of developmental goals and capitalist fantasies.

Indigenous worldview offers another important perspective on motherhood- spatial and communal continuity. By recognizing motherhood as a natural phenomenon and a mother as a part of that phenomenon, this worldview frees women from guilt, anxiety and alienation that are effects of individualism[13]. The natural spaces become participants and bearers of the experiences of women in motherhood at all stages- fields, homes, forests, mountains, groves and river beds are often sites of and partners in childbirth. In native literatures, rivers and trees and vines do not occupy a hierarchical space of nature below man below divine but are beings that are engaged in relationships with human beings at multiple levels. While recognizing indigenous paradigms as reciprocal and participatory, it is valuable to recognize the validity of native (American) cultures as enabling this paradigm (Gaard 1993). This is particularly important as there is a tendency to

appropriate indigenous cultural and poetic idioms and employ them to the service of the culture industry promoting "adivasi dance"[14]or "sweat lodges".

EcoSpiritual Solidarities Negotiating with Institutionalized Religions

The poems of Erdrich and Kerketta explore the contradictions created by the artificial collision between natural spirituality and institutionalized religions as Christianity and Hinduism. In Jharkhand, the indigenous communities have been demanding the creation of a separate code called *Sarnā Ādivāsī Dharma*, literally meaning Sacred Forest Indigenous Religion. The state legislative assembly passed a resolution for adopting this code, an attempt that has been appreciated as a step towards validating indigenous cosmology [15] . However, the Union government is yet to recognize it as a valid religion in India. The demands for separate religious identity are politically connected with issues of ethnic recognition, land rights and demographic concerns. The demand for validation of indigenous spirituality has met with political resistance and epistemological challenges questioning the basis for demanding distinct spirituality when Hindu practices like the worshipping of the *bargad* (banyan) and *peepul* (sacred fig) trees are common to Hindus everywhere and adivasis in India. These philosophical quiddities have to be seen in the light of growing religious fundamentalism in India where religious and political ideologies are overlapping in an alarming manner every day. The ecological consciousness of Adivasi religion, while being recognized as valid worldview, however doesn't find a place in the world religion paradigm that insists on the hierarchical structure of divine-human-nature. In the context of North American religious life, this is the same pattern that one sees with respect to indigenous cosmology and Christian frameworks of theology and public life.

Louise Erdrich highlights the ironies and contradictions in Christian (Catholic) and Native American epistemologies but insists on identifying universal resonances in the human experience. Her poetry does not hold reactionary ridicule or angry rebuttals of non-native cultures and worldviews. Instead, she incorporates the non-synchronous elements of religion, spirituality and culture as poetic contours. Frances Washburn (2013) says that Erdrich's poems "do not seem to indicate conflict between Indian/Catholic worldviews, but rather, an objective acceptance of both", while María Porras Sánchez (2019) comments "[In a similar way,] her approach to spirituality seems to be syncretic, an attempt to bring together Native and Christian faith"[16].We see Kerketta's poetry doing something similar. Her poems project the pathos that is born of institutional oppression and neglect, yet her poems do not emanate binaries of

'indigenous truths' vs 'non-native lies'. Her poems are conscious of the stark differences in indigenous and urban worldviews and practices, but these differences are not attributed to human agencies of malice and depravity but to a spatial and psychological helplessness. The city is a place of spiritual desiccation and ethical corruption yet it is not owed to the essentially depravity of non-indigenous people but to systems of exploitation and dehumanizing greed born of capitalist neocolonization. These are the forces that get adivasis or poor migrants to pick up the axe against their own trees, when "the spade, the pickaxe, and a few hands/Shed silent tears in a corner" at the behest of a written order on a page. The titular poem 'Angor' establishes the twin possibilities of *angor* (embers) - the power to burn and the power to share resources:

In cities, a piece of coal
Burns, burns…
And then is reduced to ash and cinders.
In villages, an ember
Goes from one stove
To the other
And a fire in every household kindles

Conclusion

Contemporary trends in indigenous literary studies have developed methodologies that point to trans-indigenous as well as inter-indigenous poetic and philosophical communications. The current global health crisis has highlighted the fundamental fissures and cracks in the edifice of modernity and progressive history that have manifested as phobias, stigmatization and failure of inter-personal relationships. If not now, there will be more urgent times to force the world to take cognizance of indigenous worldviews and implement them in day to day personal practices and public policies. Jacinta Kerketta, in a recent social media post, has highlighted this grave concern:

> At times like these, when *Ādivāsī* culture and beliefs are facing attacks from all four directions through all organized religions, the *Ādivāsī* people in Chattisgarh are holding on adamantly to their beliefs in the powers of nature and are fighting to protect it. They believe that with the destruction of forests and nature, the *Ādivāsī* society will get destroyed too. Only a few *Ādivāsī* who are caged in high rise flats in the cities will be

left but with no way home. Their generations will keep paying installments of the market and will live in torment amidst crowds. Those who are digging up the graves of their generations along with digging up the earth, will one day come running for *Ādivāsī* ways of living. Their main issues will focus on planting more trees, saving the mountains and rivers (as is evident already). We should return to our roots and come together to protect them before it's too late[17].

As I conclude this paper, India is being ravaged by the second wave of the pandemic, highlighting cracks in the glossy sheen of urbanization. Cities are crumbling under the weight of corpses demanding spaces and resources for burials and cremations. The unsustainable developmental paradigm is now being forced to reckon with the ugliness of dishonorable burials and clumsy cremations. I deem it apt to share the following lines from a poem by an ethnically non-indigenous poet Rupam Mishra, whose words remind us to look for indigenous worldviews and not ethnicities in reading poetry.

The corpses were of human beings and human beings were responsible for them being there.
But, the burden was carried by hapless, wounded rivers.
…
Rivers, you are not alone in despair.
This is the invisible turn of a convenience-heavy civilization.
None is able to find the way back from this turn.
('The Burden of Rivers'[18] by Rupam Mishra)

Even as we explore and argue for native American and Indian Adivasi poetic criticism, Vandana Tete, a tribal poet from eastern India has been invited to 'Poetry and Paint Night' organized by Harvard University on April 30, as Jacinta Kerketta has been a part of joint reading forums on indigenous poetries in USA in the recent past. The *Chotro*[19]project conceived jointly by the Bhasha Research and Publication Centre Baroda and the European Association for Commonwealth Language and Literature Studies with the impetus of G N Devy has been working to bridge the artificial bourgeois gaps between indigenous literary and cultural traditions around the world .These practical interventions guiding theory is the natural way forward in demonstrating and guiding us in recognizing natural solidarities and theorizing on them in scholarship on literature, art and culture in the present times[20].

Notes

[1] It can be rewarding to explore spatiality in cultural geography while reading "reservations" and forced migrations in American Indian writings and the literature of/about nomadic tribes of India. The indigenous peoples on two ends of the globe share histories of territorial marginalization and forced displacement and criminalization as results of colonial supremacist policies. Similarly, ecospirituality in Prakrit and Apbhramsha poetry can be read alongside indigenous poetries. In the context of Indian Adivasi literature, the work of Mark Bender (2012) is inspiring wherein he compares ethnographic poetry from northeastern India and southwestern China.

[2] Erdrich in an interview with Wong, Chavkin and Chavkin quoted in Hanson, Melanie A. 2008. 'To Sew is to Pray': Disgorging the Speech of the Creator' in Sawhney (ed.), *Studies in the Literary Achievement of Louise Erdrich, Native American Writer: Fifteen Critical Essays*, 166-167. New York: The Edwin Mellen Press.

[3] Some recent studies that have included literary criticism of Adivasi writings from the standpoint of language and ethnicity, narrative strategies in prose, performance traditions and contemporary methodologies like ecocriticism, cognitive linguistics and subaltern studies include '*Lo(k)cal Knowledge: Perceptions on Dalit, Tribal and Folk Literature'* by Anand Mahananda .2013. Dialogue: A Journal Devoted to Literary Appreciation, vol. XII, no.1, 105-107; *Contemporary Adivasi Writings in India: Shifting Paradigms* edited by Rajshree Trivedi and Rupali Burke .2018. Chennai: Notion Press; 'The Poetics and Politics of Migration: A Study of Selected Works of Hindi Dalit and Tribal Women Poets', by Anjali Singh.2018. *Contemporary Voice of Dalit*, vol. 10, no. 2, DOI 10.1177/2455328X1878728. These works, while trying to incorporate theoretical paradigms of cultural studies, subaltern studies and ecocriticism, yet they don't attempt to go beyond political and ethnographic paradigms to launch literary engagements with Adivasi literature itself.

[4] For a discussion of Hindi writing and publishing by Adivasi writers, scholars and publishers, see Heinz Werner Wessler, "'From Marginalization to Rediscovery of Identity: Dalit and Adivasi Voices in Hindi Literature", *Studio Neophilologica*, 2020. vol. 92, no. 3, 1-16. DOI: 10.1080/00393274.2020.1751703.

[5] The work of Patrick Colm Hogan is particularly notable in exploring Rasa-Dhvani models of aesthetics for contemporary studies of cognition and emotion. See Hogan, Patrick Colm. 2003. *Cognitive Science, Literature, and the Arts.A Guide for Humanists*. London: Routledge.

[6] H M Tapaswi has drawn attention to classical Indian aesthetics and the limitations of theoretical studies when the aesthetics of everyday cultural lives are overlooked. He explores the classical concepts of 'saundarya' in Indian aesthetics, and the contemporary theories of 'everyday aesthetics' to highlight how the classical notions can be reassessed rather than uncritically applied to analyze the 'culturally embedded indigenous experience' of folk art practices in India. See Tapaswi, HM, 'Everyday Aesthetics in Indian Cultural Communities', *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 11(3): 1-12.

[7] In Dalit literary studies, aesthetics has emerged as an independent field of enquiry with scholars insisting that Dalit aesthetics is fundamentally opposed to Brahmanical aesthetics as represented in Sanskrit literary theories (Limbale, Sharankumar. (2004). *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations.* Kolkata: Orient Blackswan. This is an important rider with classical theories, which can become tools of further marginalization when imposed ideologically on Dalit or Adivasi literary expressions. It also remains true that theories need to be revisited and reinterpreted, expanded and assessed, as is already happening with Sanskrit literary theories in relation with contemporary frameworks of affect studies, cognitive emotion studies, inter-cultural poetics and others.

[8] For insight into Adivasi scholars' views on authenticity, see Armin Chiocchetti, "*Ekduniyā alagsī Narrative strategies and Adivasi representation in the short stories of Vinod Kumar";* 19-23. Thesis, Uppsal Universitet. https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1336590/FULLTEXT01.pdf accessed on 1/3/2021.

[9] Jacinta Kerketta, "Sah-Astitva Bodh Par Kendrit Hai Duniya Bhar Ke Adivasi yon Ka Jeevan Darshan" ("The Worldview of Adivasis Everywhere Rests on the Notion of Co-Existence"), *PrabhatKhabar,* 12.6.2020, p. 9.Translated from Hindi by Namrata Chaturvedi.

[10] Teuton, Christopher B, 'The Cycle of Removal and Return: A Symbolic Geography of Indigenous Literature', *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies* XXIX, 1&2 (2009), p.49.

[11] Teuton, 'The Cycle of Removal and Return', p.60.

[12] https://samkaleenjanmat.in/poems-by-joram-yalam-nabam/ accessed on 8/4/2021. Translated from Hindi by Namrata Chaturvedi.

[13] L Maracle .1996. shares the native spiritual feminist understanding of motherhood in her academic memoir titled *I Am Woman,* Vancouver: Press Gang.

[14] Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar in his collection of short stories titled *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* (2015) points to the cultural appropriation and abuse of the indigenous bodies as dolls of entertainment, fossilized samples of a dying culture and cheap physical and sexual labour.

[15] https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/governance/sarna-dharam-code-of-adivasi-identity-and-eco-nationalism-74569 accessed on 2/3/2021.

[16] https://www.thelily.com/us-poet-laureate-joy-harjo-reflects-on-the-lessons-rituals-and-gifts-of-the-pandemic-year/ accessed on 19th May 2021.
https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/world/covid-19-impact-tribal-elders-are-dying-from-the-pandemic-causing-a-cultural-crisis-for-american-indians-6337981.html accessed on 19th May 2021.

[17] Jacinta Kerketta .2019. "Jharkhand Mein Chal rahi hai Sarhul Ki Taiyari" ("Preparations are going on in Jharkhand for Sarhul"), Facebook, 4 April, https://www.facebook.com/jacinta.kerketta.7 Accessed on 8 April 2021.Translated by NamrataChaturvedi.

[18] Rupam Mishra .2021. "Nadiyon ki Zimmedari" ("The Responsibility of Rivers"), Facebook, 12 May, https://www.facebook.com/rupam.mishra.900388.Accessed on 16 May 2021.Translated by NamrataChaturvedi.The context for this poem is the ongoing pandemic in India and the recent incidents

of Hindu bodies being thrown into the holy river Ganga by people unable to find space or resources to arrange for cremations as the death toll is unmanageably rising.

[19] For details of the project and its activities, see Geoffrey V Davis, CHOTRO: LEARNING FROM THE INDIGENOUS, *Indo@Logs*, Vol.6, 2019, pp.13-27 available at file:///C:/Users/Administrator/Downloads/353591-Article%20Text-508960-1-10-20190409%20(1).pdf.

[20] Joshua B Nelson (2014) has highlighted the problematics in the idea of "indigenity" when applied to global solidarities, yet he argues that the present state of scattered knowledge organization and politico-ethnic impasses among indigenous peoples makes it even more urgent for indigenous peoples to reach out to each other and forge and test solidarities at political, cultural, literary and spiritual levels.

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