

Language of Assertion in the Discursive Formation of Aboriginal and Adivasi Consciousness: Reading Identity Politics in Select Poetry of Oodgeroo Noonuccal and Parimal Hembram

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Abstract

Indigenous writings across the globe have a lot of issues in common as the indigenes are the most vulnerable part in any nation of the world. Such writings often deal with the irreparable losses these people suffer due to various types of dispossession—be it socio-cultural, spatial or linguistic—in the wake of British imperialism. The present article proposes to read the poems of Oodgeroo Noonuccal from Australia, and Parimal Hembram from India in terms of a shared sensibility of justice for their respective communities articulated through a bold and dissenting language of affirmation which is conducive to the construction of a counter-hegemonic discourse of defiance to combat the severe damage to the indigenous ontological system rooted in their distinctive cultural ethos. It specifically seeks to explore the poetics of protest in the use of the language of self-assertion and dauntless resistance as part of the struggle for the reclamation of indigenous rights in the face of forced displacement, cultural dispossession, linguistic imposition, strategic erosion of inheritance and abject subjugation of the tribal and aboriginal population in India and Australia as represented in Oodgeroo Noonuccal's poems in her volume *We are Going* (1964), and Parimal Hembram's book *Fight for Existence* (2022) comprising the English translation of the author's Santali poems. The poems in both volumes are remarkable for their deployment of a formidably assertive language, infused with a defiant and provocative tone, promoting a strong aboriginal and Adivasi consciousness and seeking to spur their people into immediate action for the restoration of rights and social justice.

Keywords: Assertion, Discourse, Dispossession, Identity, Language, Rights

Indigenous people are the most vulnerable section of the society in any part of the world. They experience blatant violations of human rights in almost every field of

life. With all the governmental policies and judiciary amendments to ensure their rights and improving their living standard, they still face socio-cultural ostracism with severe identity crisis in the modern nation states. Several times they have been the victims of state-sponsored violence for the interest of the mainstream society. Indigenous writings across the globe also have a lot of issues in common, and land and forested environment are, perhaps, the most important points in this regard. Such texts particularly focus on the complex web of relationship of the indigenous people with the place of their origin. Land is the primary marker of identity for the aboriginal and the tribal people. Indigenous writers portray the irreparable loss of their connection with the forested land in the wake of the British imperialism which, other than causing socio-political colonisation, also resulted in severe damage to the indigenous ontological system rooted in their distinctive cultural ethos. In most cases the colonial masters have either totally uprooted the indigenous population from their land or badly impaired their spiritual tie with the land. The aboriginal people in Australia experienced great existential threat posed by the British imperial policies following the arrival of the white settlers in Australia which was projected as *terra nullius*¹ by the newcomers. In India, despite the existence of several tribal communities with their unique cultural nuances and distinct socioeconomic problems, they all share a common history of displacement, dispossession and injustice both before and after the Independence of India.

The present article is an attempt to read the poetry of two indigenous writers, namely, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, an Australian aboriginal poet, and Marshal Parimal Hembram, an Indian tribal poet, in terms of a shared sensibility of justice for their respective communities articulated through a bold and dissenting language of affirmation which is conducive to the construction of a counter-hegemonic discourse of defiance to combat the irrevocable damage to the indigenous ontological system based on their unique cultural ethos. The dispossession of the Australian aborigines and the deprivation of the Indian Adivasis are both part of the global discourse of oppression, suffering and human rights violation. Besides, the declaration of casteism as a form of racism by the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in 2002 (CERD 2002) has made both the aboriginal and tribal writings a part of the greater transnational discourse of human rights and resistance. The politics of identity and representation is a contested terrain in the discursive formation of aboriginal and Adivasi consciousness vis-a-vis the historical suppression or deliberate distortion of the indigenous voices. The article embarks on a critical exploration of the language of assertion in the poetry of these two trailblazing indigenous writers, probing the deft deployment of language as a potent tool to expose various types of exploitations suffered by their communities and raise a voice of protest for the crucial task of empowerment, self-representation, political

visibility and resistance, rather than accepting the domination with the helpless resignation of a pathetic victim. The reconstruction of indigeneity in the process of complex negotiations of the identity politics through the counter-hegemonic force of such agential attitudes—navigating the fraught terrain of collective trauma, ongoing struggle, cultural memory and ancestral tie—is instrumental in dismantling the dominant discourse that seeks to erase their presence from their ancestral lands.

The present study adopts an analytical research methodology. It incorporates the textual analysis, thematic analysis, discourse analysis and the analysis of relevant literary tropes and stylistic devices along with a comparative, cross-cultural perspective as parts of the study. Although there are no dearth of critical attentions to the problems of the Australian aborigines and the Indian Adivasis, the attempts to make comparative cross-cultural studies of the works of the writers from different indigenous communities across the world are still very few and far between. The crucial dimension of aligning the different, otherwise geographically wide apart, communities in terms of a broader transgeographical discourse of human rights violation along with the discursive formation of aboriginal and Adivasi consciousness and identity through the use of a powerful language of assertion—the crux of the present study—is hardly explored so far. The present research is particularly focused on the indigenous issues in Australia and India, although it is possible to broaden the discussion to incorporate the similar issues from the indigenous communities of Africa, New Zealand and other parts of the world. However, such a vast and comprehensive reading is beyond the limited scope of the present article.

Oodgeroo Noonuccal is a pioneering figure in the history of Australian literature and Aboriginal activism. A champion of aboriginal rights, Noonuccal has created a literary legacy that amply testifies to her whole-hearted dedication to the difficult task of regaining rights and restoring dignity of the people of her community. The publication of her epoch-making book of poetry *We Are Going* (1964) has brought the aboriginal experiences and struggles to the forefront. The poems contained in the book are remarkable both as literary masterpieces and clarion call for direct confrontation and political activism. The use of language is particularly worth analysing in her poems to understand the poetics of assertion, protest and resistance to contest and overthrow the established colonial narrative of White supremacy that legitimizes the non-entity status of the aboriginal people in Australia. The language of self-affirmation and political reclamation for the lost rights and denied entitlements with firm advocacy of pride in celebrating the cultural legacy and declaring the ancestral inheritance is infused with an unwavering candour of expression, bespeaking the enduring power of the poems.

An unmistakable note of assertion resounds throughout the poems in *We are Going*. The poet time and again makes resolute affirmations of the aboriginal rights, offering a defiant rejoinder to the colonial discourse of domination. Far from being helpless lamentations in the face of oppression, her poems are rather marked with a triumphant tone of pride for their aboriginal cultural heritage, averring their rights to equality and justice. “Aboriginal Charter of Rights,”² the very opening poem of the book, is characterised by the use of assertive language, making a direct demand for equality and justice. The poem proceeds through the anaphoric repetitions of certain words and expressions at the beginning of successive lines creating a sense of tremendous urgency for the restoration of lost rights through the overhauling of the established structure that smacks of vicious hierarchy—

Give the deal you still deny us,
Give goodwill, not bigot bias;
Give ambition, not prevention,
Confidence, not condescension;

Give incentive, not restriction,
Give us Christ, not crucifixion. (Walker 36)

The poem is structured around a concatenation of binary oppositions, e.g. 'black advance' versus 'white ascendancy', 'equals' versus 'dependants', 'help' versus 'exploitation', 'freedom' versus 'frustration', 'control' versus 'self-reliance', 'independence' versus 'compliance', 'self-respect' versus 'resignation', 'fellowship' versus 'favours', 'encouragement' versus 'prohibitions', 'homes' versus 'settlements' and 'missions', 'love' versus 'overlordship', 'welcome' versus 'aversion', 'choice' versus 'coercion', 'status' versus 'discrimination', 'human rights' versus 'segregation', 'proud' versus 'colour-conscious', 'goodwill' versus 'bigot bias', 'ambition' versus 'prevention', 'confidence' versus 'condescension', 'incentive' versus 'restriction', 'Christ' versus 'crucifixion', 'neighbours' versus 'fringe-dwellers', 'mates' versus 'poor relations', 'citizens' versus 'serfs', and 'native' versus 'aliens', etc. They are expressed through a series of imperatives, throwing straightforward challenges to the beneficiaries of the prevalent structure of various hierarchies—be it socioeconomic, political, cultural or religious. The emphatic use of such repetitive expressions as 'we want hope' and 'we want freedom' highlights the absolute necessity of the fundamental aboriginal rights in Australia. Besides, the use of collective 'we' is also important in the context of any aboriginal issues as it positions the 'community' over the 'individual'. Emphasising the responsible task to be performed by an aboriginal writer for his entire community, Denis Walker, the son of Oodgeroo Noonuccal and an activist of repute, says in *Aboriginal Writing Today*³:

Aboriginal writers have a responsibility here, a very important responsibility, to take that message, not only to white people but to Aboriginal people as well, so

that we can foster within our own communities a very important concept. That concept is that if we are going to survive, we are going to have to do it as a community, we are going to have to do it as a nation and not as individuals. (D. Walker 53)

Actually the deprivations and discriminations faced by the aboriginal people are the problems of an entire aboriginal community rather than that of any individual or a particular family. So, the repeated use collective pronoun 'we' serves to promote the collective claims of the aboriginal people. The collective force accumulated through the successive placements of such declarative expressions as "we want hope", "we need help" and "we want freedom" explodes the stereotypical image of the aboriginal people as helpless, pathetic victims and abject sufferers in a social structure dominated by white supremacy and refashion them as active agents who can fight for their rights. Besides, the poem's use of inclusive language, as in "Let's forget the old-time slavers" (Walker 36) is also crucial for building solidarity among the aboriginal people as an important step towards the formation of aboriginal identity. The poem's invocation of universal values such as 'brotherhood' and 'hope' strategically aligns the aboriginal struggle for rights and recognition with global human rights discourses, especially the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.⁴ By embracing these shared human aspirations, the poem underscores the fundamental humanity and dignity of the aboriginal Australians, situating their plight within the broader context of international human rights. On the other hand, the poem's explicit rejection of 'racialism' and 'white ascendance' in such lines as "We want hope, not racialism, / Brotherhood, not ostracism, / Black advance, not white ascendance" (Walker 36) constitutes a direct challenge to the entrenched systemic racism that pervades Australian society. This critique targets the very foundations of colonialism and its ongoing legacies, including the power structures and ideologies that perpetuate racial inequality. By situating Aboriginal demands within the larger context of universal human rights, the poem powerfully asserts the inherent dignity and worth of Aboriginal people, while also highlighting the imperative for systemic change and reconciliation.

The poem also raises voice against colonialism and the practice of slavery in Australia as these are primary hindrance in the path of equality. So, the poet says: "Free us from a mean subjection, / From a bureaucrat Protection. / Let's forget the old-time slavers" (Walker 36). She is also not supporting any condescending attitude from the white masters. Rather she wants proper education and fellowship so that they could stand on their own foot firmly without being dependent on any favouring aids from others: "Give us fellowship, not favours; / Encouragement, not prohibitions" (Walker 36). Here Noonuccal's preference for 'fellowship' to 'favours' parallels Mudrooroo Narogin's observation on the

aborigines being infantilised under the patronising gaze of the white benefactors and forced into a childlike role of dependency:

The existential being of the Aborigine in Australia has been seen by some white writers to be akin to that of a child, but it is Aboriginal writers who seek to explain this result as stemming from a paternalist attitude which forced the Aborigine into the attitude of a child asking for help from a benign white person. Under the gaze of 'the other', the Aborigine became as a child. Unable to help himself, he sat waiting for the kind adult to offer succour, and this was often forthcoming. (Narogin 11)

Such favouring attitude of the white master only serves to undermine aboriginal agency, perpetuating their subordination. Noonuccal's poem can be read as a powerful statement of resistance against this kind of paternalistic attitude that has historically characterised White-Aboriginal relations, reasserting aboriginal identity based on equality, due respect and proper recognition. The poet also does not hesitate to expose the double standard of the Christian missionaries⁵ who used to preach about the abstract notion of salvation, the values of equality, human dignity and justice for all following the teachings of Jesus and thereby trying to convert the natives with the temptation for a better standard of living, while in reality maintaining the social hierarchy based on racist discriminations against the black people who were treacherously made to always bleed with the pangs of a marginal existence – a suffering shared by crucified Christ:

Give us Christ, not crucifixion.
Though baptized and blessed and Bibled
We are still tabooed and libelled.
You devout Salvation-sellers,
Make us neighbours, not fringe-dwellers ;
Make us mates, not poor relations. (Walker 36-37)

Through a nuanced interplay of metaphor and allusion, the poem crafts its message of resistance with a rich texture of meaning that pulsates with a powerful sense of moral authority, rendering it both poignant and persuasive and compelling the readers to confront the depth of injustice. Particularly significant is the metaphor "Grip of hand, not whip-hand wardship" (Walker 36). With a view to drawing attention to the fundamental nature of the relationship between Aboriginal Australians and the state, it juxtaposes two contrasting forms of interaction between the native people and the administration through a metaphorically rich language. The imagery of the "grip of hand" constructs a gesture of friendship and amicability, evoking a sense of easy reciprocity, spontaneous support, strong solidarity, and true empowerment, throwing into sharp relief the idea of brutality, control, forced labour, serfdom and the coercive nature of colonial power dynamics—the offshoots of colonialism—conveyed through the image of "whip-hand wardship." Such lines seem to anticipate the

post-activism stage in aboriginal history around 1988 when the focus of the aboriginal writings was more on mutual understanding and acceptance between the aboriginal people and the white settlers rather than the celebration of separate identity in the context of a multicultural Australian society. The contrastive juxtaposition of such metaphors serves to point out the necessity of restoring the autonomous agency, dignity and freedom of the aboriginal people in Australia through a radical revamping of the prevalent parameters of relationship between the indigenous communities and the white rulers. The comment of Mudrooroo Narogin regarding the shift towards a more accommodative approach in aboriginal literature is worth citing here:

This was clearly seen in 1988 when two hundred years of white rule was celebrated. Some Aboriginal writers saw the year as an opportunity to forge links between the Aboriginal minority and the white majority. The poster for the Aboriginal day celebrations (NAIDOC) bore the slogan 'Come and Share Our Culture'. Any separatist sentiments were downplayed and there was a return to a call for understanding such as we find in the poems of Oodgeroo Noonuccal dating from the first rise of Aboriginal literature in the early sixties. (Narogin 14)

The allusion to Roman Pontius Pilate⁶, that paradigmatic figure of moral abdication and judicial complicity, enriches the poem's critique of colonialism with a richly textured layer of historical depth and moral complexity. The poem subtly lays bare the darker aspects of colonialism by invoking the spectre of Pilate with a looming sense of moral vacillation and imperial culpability, whose notorious verdict consigned Jesus to the cross. The cultural memory of Pilate's infamous act serves to unearth the bias in a system that has always privileged power and interest over principle and justice. The historical allusion likens the White authority in Australia to Pontius Pilate, making a parallel reading between the sufferings of Christ and those of the aboriginal people under colonial administration, highlighting the complicity and moral accountability of the colonisers whose exploitative policies and discriminatory practices against the native folks amount to a form of spiritual or moral crucifixion. It also points towards the colonial hypocrisy of professing to have brought the Christian values of equality, brotherhood and justice in the lives of the aboriginal people on one hand and practising ostracism and oppression against them on the other. The archetypal image of betrayal and suffering faced by Christ serves to situate the aboriginal experiences of suffering in the face of imperial betrayal within a universal narrative of injustice, helpless suffering and righteous indignation, underscoring the seriousness of the predicament of the aboriginal Australians.

An important aspect of Nunooccal's poem is the evocative use of language for a lost way of life. The poem 'No More Boomerang' is remarkable for its satiric tone to represent the displacement of aboriginal culture by the hegemonic forces of Western modernity:

No more boomerang
No more spear;
Now all civilized
Colour bar and beer. (Walker 32)

These lines contrast the traditional aboriginal practices with their colonial replacements, uncovering the stark realities of cultural displacement and disappearance of traditional aboriginal ways of life. With devastating simplicity, the poem juxtaposes the indigenous cultural practices of pre-colonial Australia ("boomerang" and "spear") with the degenerative, restrictive and segregating impacts of colonialism symbolised by 'Colour bar and beer.' Such iconic aboriginal cultural symbols as "boomerang" and "spear" evoke a world of traditional knowledge system, inherited skill, and cultural heritage intrinsically linked with the ancestral land, the bond of kinship, and a sense of belonging to the breathing and throbbing reality of a community life. Conversely, the image of "colour bar" indicates the alienating influence of a racist social structure that was imposed on the aboriginal society following British colonialism and the reference to 'beer' symbolises the deadening impact of the assimilationist policies of the White administration, leading ultimately to the brutal disruption of aboriginal culture with the forced imposition of an alien and oppressive system. The expression "Now all civilized" is quite ironic as it suggests that the idea of 'civilization' promoted by the colonial ruler is based on the evisceration of aboriginal culture with the imposition of European values. The bitterly sarcastic tone used here serves to expose cultural genocide perpetrated by the imperial forces in Australia in the name of bringing 'civilization', also offering a biting critique of the colonial narrative of 'white man's burden'.⁷ The structure of anaphoric repetition of 'No more' followed by the reference to a traditional Aboriginal cultural practice and then its modern colonial counterpart produces a rhythmic lament, emoting the tension of a cultural collision and evoking the pain at the realisation of a profound cultural loss and dispossession, underscoring the imperative of reclaiming and preserving aboriginal culture by forming strong resistance against the ongoing legacies of colonialism responsible for the demolition of a eco-friendly and sustainable aboriginal way of life.

Similarly, the poem "We Are Going" also protests against the strategic erasure of the aboriginal culture which is now lying like a ravaged remnant following the traumatic legacy of the vicious colonial encounter in Australia. The devastating impact of colonialism is represented from the very beginning of the poem through the disturbing image of a 'semi-naked band subdued and silent'. It clearly shows how the once beautiful and flourishing aboriginal culture has been reduced to a mere shadow of its former self with the native inhabitants completely dispossessed and subjugated, and their ancestral land totally despoiled. The image of the "notice of estate agent" displaying "Rubbish May Be Tipped Here"

(Walker 78) is a potent symbol of colonial contempt for the native people and absolute disregard for their cultural heritage, showing the gradual dispossession and displacement of the aboriginal people through the forced imposition of an alien system of land ownership. The following lines—

The scrubs are gone, the hunting and the laughter.
The eagle is gone, the emu and the kangaroo are gone from this place.
The bora ring is gone.
The corroboree is gone. (Walker 78)

are a heart-wrenching lament for the loss of a way of life—a poignant reminder of the cultural despoliation consequent upon the colonial interventions. The final line of the poem "And we are going" (Walker 78) is a haunting threnody for a dying culture. The use of the present continuous tense 'are going' is a technical tour de force rendering the implication of a cultural genocide all the more poignant with the suggestion of an inexorable desiccation of the cultural vitality in an unremitting process of incremental extinction of the least trace of aboriginality from the land of Australia.

However, the poem does not stop at mere lamenting over the loss, it also asserts the intricate web of relationships between the Aboriginal people and their cultural past. The memory of the past has a crucial role to play in the process of consolidation of the image of the self and formation of identity of one who has been long dissociated from his own culture through the forced imposition of an alien culture. "The past figures importantly," as Dennis Walder aptly puts it in his book *Postcolonial Nostalgias: Writing, Representation, and Memory*, "in people's self-representations in general, because it is through memories of the past that we represent ourselves to ourselves..." (Walder 35). Underscoring the significance of the past in the context of colonial encounter, Fanon says, "Perhaps unconsciously, the native intellectuals, since they could not stand wonderstruck before the history of today's barbarity, decided to back further and to delve deeper down; and, let us make no mistake, it was with the greatest delight that they discovered that there was nothing to be ashamed of in the past, but rather dignity, glory, and solemnity" (Fanon 210). Elleke Boehmer also points out how the colonial subjects often "attempted to find and describe networks of racial and ancestral affiliation, to unearth generational memory" (Boehmer 182) as an important way to heal the cultural rift caused by the colonial encounter.

Noonuccal makes a powerful affirmation of the aboriginal identity, which is more collective than individual, through the anaphoric repetition of 'We are', underscoring the strong connection of the aboriginal people with their land and tradition:

We belong here, we are of the old ways.
We are the corroboree and the bora ground,

We are the old sacred ceremonies, the laws of the elders. (Walker 78)

Here the allusions to the 'corroboree'⁸ and the bora ground⁹, 'the old sacred ceremonies,' and "the laws of the elders" evoke a rich cultural heritage profoundly embedded in their ancestral land and the community culture. The poet also challenges the dominant discourse of colonialism that always seeks to promote the image of the aboriginal people as outsiders in their native place by averring their original right to belong to the land: "We are as strangers here now, but the white tribe are the strangers. / We belong here; we are of the old ways" (Walker 78). The enumeration of cultural practices and traditions – the corroboree and the bora ground, 'the old sacred ceremonies,' and 'the laws of the elders' – serves as a powerful assertion of Aboriginal cultural heritage, underscoring its significance and value in the face of colonialism's attempts to erase it. Again, the allusions to 'Dream Time'¹⁰ and 'tribal legends'¹¹ evoke aboriginal spirituality, especially the aboriginal myth of genesis and other stories associated with their history which are beyond the comprehension of the White masters with their Western education and scientific thinking. Such references serve to solidify aboriginal identity by reasserting their rights to own and belong to the land they inherited from their ancestors. The nostalgic hearkening back to their ancestral past accompanied by all the paraphernalia of a bygone mode of existence in "We are the past, the hunts and the laughing games, the wandering / camp fires" (Walker 78) immediately leads to the identification of indigeneity with the unfiltered energy of the elemental forces through the use of certain vivid nature imagery in

We are the lightning-bolt over Gaphembah Hill
Quick and terrible,
And the Thunder after him, that loud fellow.
We are the quiet daybreak paling the dark lagoon.
We are the shadow-ghosts creeping back as the camp fires burn low.
We are nature and the past . . . (Walker 78)

The idea of interconnectedness of all living being as implied in the aforesaid lines is an essential part of the aboriginal ecosystem rooted in their indigenous cultural ethos—a strong testimony to the unbreakable bond of these primitive tribes with the land and the environment.¹²

Parimal Hembram, also known by his penname Marshal Hembram, is a versatile and prolific writer, adeptly navigating both Santhali and Bengali languages to craft a literary oeuvre that is at once poignant, powerful, and provocative. A creative writer, literary critic and scholar par excellence, he has contributed quite significantly to the domain of Santhali literature and linguistics, exploring the nuances of tribal experiences of marginalisation, their struggles for rights and the growth of Adivasi consciousness for the formation of indigenous identity. The

fictions and poems written by Hembram dwell primarily upon the social problems faced by the tribal people, highlighting the complex web of exploitations spread by Dikus (non-tribals). The fresh charm and raw vigour of his writings ensue from the direct experiential knowledge of the community closely related to the collective memories and struggles of the Adivasis for survival. He often creates characters who belong to a specific tribe inhabiting the rural areas and suffering regular deprivations at the hands of the powerful outsiders. History and legend run hand in hand in the works of Hembram, particularly in the way he portrays the Santhal Hul or Insurrection of 1855-56 as a milestone in Adivasi history. His plays often take resort to satire to denounce the forces of oppression embittering the lives of the Adivasis, while his broader literary corpus documents the pathetic sufferings and tremendous struggles of the tribal people of Eastern India.

Hembram belongs to a distinctive group of authors who have pioneered the genre of protest narrative or resistance literature in Adivasi literature. An unabashed depiction of social injustices and cultural hegemony perpetrated against the tribal population and the subsequent counter-hegemonic response from the oppressed characterise such writings. Despite the representation of the plight of these marginalised people by such writers as Mahasweta Devi, who approach the subject from the limited position of a 'sympathetic outsider', Hembram's writings provide the insider's perspective conspicuous for the unmediated intimacy of first-hand experiences and the intensity of expression that can spur his people into revolution. The poems contained in his widely acclaimed book *Fight for Existence* (2022) display a unique skill in the use of language which is quite simple, straightforward, assertive and confrontational, challenging the dominant narrative with formidable resistance.

Representation of the searing problem of acute starvation and suffering from hunger is an important dimension of the poetry of Parimal Hembram in particular and Adivasi literature in general. The curse of poverty and the resultant lack of food show the existential crisis of the marginalised communities in the Indian society. Such a predicament is the outcome of historical injustice, economic exploitation, social segregation and cultural ghettoisation against the indigenous communities. Many poems in Hembram's book *Fight for Existence* deal with the torment of the pinching stomach inside the empty belly and the struggle of the Adivasis for survival. In this context, Parimal Hembram's poem 'Famine' is worth mentioning. The contrapuntal presentation of the indigence of the indigenous people, as in "Fasting / Both in morning and evening" (Hembram 23), and the affluence of the landlords, as in "The house of landlord is / Full of bags of paddy" (Hembram 24), offers a biting critique of the stark economic disparity and various exploitative policies practised against the wretched tribal people in India to keep them in a state of perennial penury. The line "The hungry people / Are

sharpening weapons to live" (Hembram 24) is a masterful articulation of resistance, underlining the utter desperation of the tribal folks to fight for their very survival. The momentum gained through the bold claim of Adivasi rights in the erotesis in "What kind of right is this?" (Hembram 24) finally leads to the dauntless declaration of equality and justice through solidarity in the society:

If we have to live
We all will live
If we have to die
We all will die
We don't fear any more. (Hembram 24)

A more prominent call for direct confrontation is offered by the figure of the hunger-stricken Santal in "The dry oven laughs Ha Ha": ". . . if you intend to live prepare for the fight, take up any arm. . . uproot those venomous teeth of the dry oven with the crowbar like dry clay" (Hembram 22). The all-consuming nature of hunger is presented in the poem "Otherwise I will devour the map" through the imagery of hunger for a morsel of rice spinning within the empty belly. The turmoil inside the body in a state of complete starvation makes the poet realise the waste of all the possibilities of life: "The dream of a life gets burnt" (Hembram 29) and provides the spark for fighting back in an attempt to dismantle the prevalent structure of hierarchy created by the privileged section of the society to maintain the status quo:

Give them to us – Gentleman
Yes – you have to give us all these
Otherwise I will devour the map
Of your country. (Hembram 29)

A strong assertion of the speaker's basic needs and rights is made through the use of the imperative sentence structure in "Give them", underscoring a sense of urgency, entitlement and determination of the speaker to claim what they really deserve. The repetitive use of the word "Gentleman" like an insistent refrain all through the poem is a clever rhetorical device to bring home the discrepancy between the destitution of the Adivasis and the opulence of those in power.

In another poem entitled 'Procession' the poet shows the pathetic consequence of protest in the face of the ruthless power of oppression. The poem opens with the visual image of march in procession of the marginalised people in demand of their rights, a collective act of affirmation and defiance against exploitations and injustices. The line "The hunger march / March to live" (Hembram 25) indicates that the have-nots are united to demand food, the most fundamental right of a human being for survival. The description of slogan as a clarion call for "The right of the man" (Hembram 25), pervading the air and reverberating in every direction, is a masterful stroke of poetic craftsmanship, underscoring the sense of

collective purpose and unyielding solidarity that animates the protesters. But there is a sudden dramatic turn in the tone of the poem with the unleash of brutal violence on the protest march in "Bang! Bang! Bang!" (Hembram 25). The disturbing auditory image of 'painful groan' and the visual image of 'festoon is rolling on the ground' represent the violent assault on the protesters and the consequent dispersal of the crowd. The ultimate strangling of the dissenting voice is represented in the eerily disturbing final image of the procession floating in a pool of blood. The fragmentation of the slogan into individual letters ("T-h-e-r-i-g-h-t...o-f...t-h-e...m-a-n...") is a haunting representation of the destruction of the protest march. The use of ellipses (...) to disjoint the letters produces a sense of dismemberment, underscoring the idea of the protest getting brutally disrupted. The thundering call for protest is now reduced to the agonising helplessness of a mere whisper. The slogan, once a symbol hope and resistance, is meted with violent reality of bloodshed and extreme brutality with the voice of assertion getting strangled by the crushing weight of oppression.

Another significant issue in tribal literature is the loss of land rights and the threat of eviction faced by the Adivasi communities. The result is a grave existential crisis for many tribal societies which have inherited the land of their dwelling from their forefathers naturally with a strong sense of belonging created through complex webs of cultural memory, traditional practices and communal ties. The encroachment of dominant forces, whether through the system of colonial modernity, state-sponsored development projects, corporate interests, or other forms of exploitative mechanism, has led to the displacement and dispossession of many indigenous communities in India, jeopardising their distinct ways of life. In the poetry of Parimal Hembram, these issues are brought to the forefront, offering a powerful representation of the struggles of tribal people to claim their inherited rights to their ancestral lands, bringing out the tensions between the Adivasi sense of belonging rooted in their traditional land rights and the forces of oppression that seek to dispossess them. Through a close reading of Hembram's work, this article examines the ways in which tribal poetry can serve as a powerful tool for resistance, activism, and social change.

The existential crisis consequent upon forced eviction of the tribal population is dwelt upon in Hembram's poem "I must Pick up the Bow." The poem opens in a dramatic manner with the sudden outburst of threat to the tribal rights of belonging encapsulating the tension ensuing from the encounter between the Adivasis and the forces of modernity:

You tell me, screaming,
That this nurtured plot of land,
this pond, this farmhouse
you tell me, these are not mine? (Hembram 21)

The initial tone of threat is further increased with the imagery of 'blazing eyes' in the following stanza representing the coercive forces of exploitation: "You order me, with blazing eyes, / to leave all this / and go away ..." (Hembram 21). However, the poet confronts these threats with a calm but determined resistance by enumerating various aspects of the primitive web of connection of the tribal people with the environment and the land predating the colonial encounter:

But this was the land of legends.
The land of thick jungles, a desolate land of trees and vines.
We worked hard to clean it up
to make it liveable
and lived happily. (Hembram 21)

Here the evocation of the dedication, effort and toil once required for the preparation of a habitable land is an unequivocal testament to the collective rights of the indigenous people to their place of living and the surrounding environment—a phenomenon that cannot be understood from the perspective of modern system of individual land ownership. The expression "this nurtured plot of land" is a telling trope that not only suggests the physical process of making a wild land cultivable but also the subtle cultural process of a place transforming into a palimpsest of spiritual significations by getting suffused with the weight of age-old traditions and time-honoured cultural memories. The tension of confrontation between the opposing forces of tribal rights on one hand and the hegemonic oppressor on the other, built throughout the poem via various arguments in support of the natural rights of the indigenous population, rises to a crescendo in the concluding line of the poem offering a calm but resolute resistance to the coercive forces: "then, well, I must reach for my bow and arrow" (Hembram 21). Here the images of 'bow' and 'arrow' are particularly worth commenting upon as the poet seeks to withstand the onslaught of the oppressor by taking resort to indigenous system of resistance rooted in their traditional knowledge and cultural heritage.

Thus, a close reading of Parimal Hembram's select poems reveals a nuanced portrayal of the tribal experiences, oscillating between the stark depiction of excruciating pain and extreme suffering and the nascent spark of protest. Through his works, Hembram masterfully chronicles the growth of Adivasi consciousness as the poet's words become a clarion call for resistance against the forces of oppression. The language of self-assertion, protest and resistance that animates Hembram's poetry is characterised by its unwavering directness, unadorned simplicity, and unyielding power. The poet's adept application of imagery, metaphor, rhetorical devices and intonational modulations create a sense of urgency and desperation, underscoring the speaker's unflinching conviction that their fundamental rights and needs must be acknowledged, provided and respected. His poetry is a powerful testament to the struggles of the deprived and

the dispossessed and a compelling affirmation of the human spirit's capacity for resilience, resistance, and defiance in the face of adversity, brutality and violence.

A parallel reading of the poetry of two eminent literary figures, Oodgeroo Noonuccal from Australia and Parimal Hembram from India, reveals a remarkably shared sense of justice for their respective communities despite the differences in their distinct cultural and historical contexts. Such a study, however, is not meant for, to use the words of Mudrooroo Narogin, making "an identification with, but an elucidation of those problems we have in common" (Narogin 23). A profound symbiosis emerges in terms of common, if not identical, thematic concerns, stylistic devices, rhetorical strategies, and socioeconomic, political and cultural positioning, removing geographical divides with a global dialogue of indigenous resistance and identity politics. The discursive nexus converges them in a powerful dialectic, situating them within a transnational topography of indigenous resistance and self-affirmation. The shared history of colonial violence and ongoing neocolonial exploitations construct a critical bridge between the two poets both of whom take resort to poetry as a tool to record the existential predicament of displacement and dispossession while asserting the resilience of their respective communities. For instance, Noonuccal's imagery of the "bora ring" being overtaken by "white men hurry[ing] about like ants" (Walker 25) in "We Are Going" parallels Hembram's evocations of Adivasi lands and forests being encroached upon by mining companies or urban expansion in "I must Pick up the Bow", leading to the loss of their ancestral inheritance. Their poetry becomes a repository of collective memory, preserving the annals of their communities against the intruding forces of colonialism and its lingering aftermath. They both act as, to borrow the phrase of Pramod K. Nayar, "claim narratives" (Nayar 256) in verse form as they make claims of collective cultural trauma and demands for lost rights and justice of their communities, presenting a comparative history of abjection and resistance for a better understanding of the politics of identity formation of the indigenous people in a global context. Bridging the chasm of geographical and cultural differences, their works reveal a common commitment to assert the dignity and rights of their communities, and to nullify the structure of the dominant discourse that has always sought their extinction through eloquent articulation of their inherited right to belonging. This article has attempted a thorough understanding of the role of language to express the shared concerns and strategies of resistance constructed through a distinct poetics of protest which is more collective than individual. It has also sought to underscore the significance of language in indigenous poetry as an important site of cultural negotiation, political intervention and critical inquiry with respect to its crucial role in the germination and emergence of collective indigenous consciousness through the building of a strong network of solidarity among these people, testifying simultaneously to the

transformative potential of language for the creation of a more egalitarian society based on the principles of equality, justice and fellow feelings through a complete knock down of the prevalent power structure.

Notes

1. It is a Latin term that literally means 'nobody's land' or 'a land belonging to no one'. This idea was misleadingly used to justify colonisation and eviction of the indigenous population from their place of origin by the British imperial forces, especially in Australia.
2. This poem was prepared and presented to the 5th Annual General Meeting of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, held in Adelaide, Easter 1962.
3. It contains the papers from the First National Conference of Aboriginal Writers held in Perth, Western Australia, in 1983.
4. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) is an international document prepared by a United Nation committee and accepted by the United Nations General Assembly during its third session on 10 December 1948 at the Palais de Chaillot in Paris to ensure the rights and freedoms of all human beings. It is a milestone in the history of human civilisation.
5. The Christian missionaries in Australia played a complex role in the lives of aboriginal people, often alluring the native with the absurd promise of salvation and certain material benefits. Actually, they were part of the assimilationist policies of the White administration (for details, see: Swain, 1988).
6. Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor of Judea from 26 to 36 AD, who played a pivotal role in the trial of Jesus Christ. According to the New Testament, he ordered Jesus' crucifixion in spite of finding no fault in him, succumbing to pressure from the Jewish leaders and crowd. Pilate's actions symbolize the complex dynamics between Roman authority and Jewish religious leadership during that period.
7. In postcolonial literature, it refers to the perceived responsibility of imperial forces to civilise and modernise non-European societies through colonisation. This idea was popularized by Rudyard Kipling's 1899 poem, which promoted colonialism as a benevolent endeavor. However, the concept has been widely criticized for its condescending undertone and racist implications (for details, see: Easterly, 2006).
8. A corroboree is a form of traditional aboriginal dance, a ceremonial gathering or assembly to celebrate important events.
9. Bora ground is a sacred site in aboriginal culture. The traditional ceremonies like the ritual of coming of age are celebrated here. A Bora ring is also a sacred site in aboriginal culture. It is constituted of earth and stone on the Bora ground.

10. It refers to the beginning of time, the moment of genesis which is in everlasting existence in aboriginal conception.
11. It refers to the various lores and tales transmitted orally in aboriginal society and containing the essence of the aboriginal worldview.
12. Writers like Judith Wright have also explored the theme of oneness of the aboriginal people with their environment in poems like “Rain Forest” and “Eroded Hills”.

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