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# Echoes from the Forest: The Unbreakable Spirit of Adivasi Women in Nirmala Putul's Poetry

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## Abstract

*Tribal literature remains an underexplored vital part of Indian literary discourse, reflecting the struggles, resilience, and identity of indigenous communities. Nirmala Putul, a celebrated Santhali poet, captures these themes in *What Am I To You?* and *Adivasi Woman*, both of which dismantle the stereotypes of tribal women as submissive or passive. Instead, Putul presents them as self-reliant, laboring figures deeply connected to their land and cultural traditions. This study employs a feminist and postcolonial analytical framework to explore how Putul's poetry critiques gender-based oppression and silencing of Adivasi voices. By closely examining the poetic devices, cultural references, and resistance narratives in her work, this paper reveals how Adivasi women assert their agency despite historical marginalization. The research aims to highlight the role of tribal poetry in reclaiming indigenous history and strengthening feminist discourse within marginalized communities. Putul's poetry stands as a testament to the power of literature in preserving cultural identity and challenging societal hierarchies.*

**Keywords:** Adivasi Voices, Indigenous History, Marginalization, Stereotypes.

## Introduction

In the peaceful villages and dense forests of India's eastern tribal belt, the voices of Adivasi women are often unheard. Mainstream literature rarely reflects lives, struggles, and realities like theirs. But it's the mighty Santali poet Nirmala Putul, who reveals these faceless and nameless stories. Through her poems she gives voice to the voiceless, specifically the Adivasi women who in silence fight against social neglect, oppression, and invisibility. In part, this paper focuses on two of her potent poems, *Adivasi Woman* and *What Am I to You?*, to understand how she captures the gritty challenges and indomitable strength of indigenous women. Along the way we discover the Santali community, its rituals and the challenges of its women.

### **Tribal Identity: An Insight into the Santali Tribe**

India's secondlargest tribal community, the Santali are spread across Jharkhand, Odisha, West Bengal, Assam, and Bihar. They speak the Santali language, which belongs to the Austroasiatic family. Santals tribe has had a deep connection with nature. They live in harmony with the land, rivers, and woods and depend on manual labor, and farming. Their culture is rich with oral traditions, music, dance, and ceremonies. This dance is much celebrated at occasions and festivals like Sohrai and Baha with singing and lively drumming. The people worship nature, and their deities are often spirits of the land. Despite having a rich cultural heritage, Santali people in particular women are being exploited, deprived of healthcare and education, and evicted due to mining and mining based industrialization.

Women play a crucial role in the Santali community. In addition to working in the fields, gathering firewood, cooking and raising children, they often do more for the family than is recognized. But their stories tend to be pushed aside. Nirmala Putul, herself a Santali woman, is not going to let those voices be silenced. In her poetry, we acknowledge their suffering, their fortitude, their resilience.

### **What Am I to You?: The Unseen and Unheard**

Nirmala Putul asks in her poem What Am I to You? that resonate with women everywhere, particularly those who are underrepresented. It has a tone of calm rage, and introspection. Though the speaker does not raise her voice, her calm questions are devastating, “What am I to you? A pillow to lay your weary head? A clothesline to dry your weariness?” These metaphors illustrate just how women are often rendered as subordinate objects. All of the ways how she uses meup not related, not used, and empty. She is a ball, a diary, a wall, a hook and a sheet. These images do not depict equality or love. Each reflects a lopsided relationship in which the woman gives and gives with no respect in return. And the woman she never becomes a person with her own desires she learns about just a destination to return to and a repetition to write in. This is, in many ways, true of indigenous women, they work through everything, care for everyone and are not given a voice. “Why? Tell me, what am I to you?” This isn't just a question for a spouse or relative. It is a social question. At least Adivasi women rarely get recognized despite their long contribution to families, agriculture and forests. That latent annoyance comes out in this poetry.

### **Adivasi Women Strength in Survival**

Adivasi Woman is a power assertion, even if What Am I to You? is a call for acceptance. In this case, the speaker doesn't call anyone out. She makes no secret of who she is. “I am not a pile of ashes, scattered by the winds of time. “I am the fire itself, flickering in the woods of my forefathers.” Nirmala Putul depicts the strength of Adivasi women as much as their pain. The poem goes on with striking imagery of hard work, “My hands, roughened by toil, have built homes, carried harvests, wiped the sweat of men who forget my power.” There is something so potent about these lines. She has hands that are not pampered or gentle, but laborer's hands. She sustains, carries, builds. But her strength is forgotten through all this. She doesn't stop, though. She continues to work. From this place, her dignity.

The poem ends with an unambiguous statement: “I am an Adivasi woman not to be erased, not to be broken.” Doubt is not an option. Her strength is in being who she is. She has connections to the land, her ancestors, and her community. She persists despite the backlash and lack of attention.

### **The Two Poems: Pain and Power**

Adivasi Woman and What Am I to You? each presents many facts of the same reality. The woman in the first is seeking value. In the latter, she knows her worth already. Collectively

they chart the entire journey of Adivasi women from invisibility to owning their identity. The second poem starts with emotional neglect. It shows how women are often treated as functional objects rather than as human beings. It speaks to how painful it is to be invisible in your own life. Especially for indigenous women, who are often dismissed by our culture, by the media, by governments and by their own families.

The second poem focuses on the physicality of war. It also talks about women work every day, including harvesting food, building houses, and feeding families. Yet Putting makes them fighters, not victims. They're not broken. They never give up. The tone changes as well. Approachable, probing and melancholy is *What Am I to You?* and in Adivasi women it depicts women as proud, confident, and fearless.

### **The Bigger Truth: The Lives of Tribal Women**

These poems are about a group, not just individual thoughts. This was the context in which Adivasi women in India were struggling. Mining companies often snatch their land away. Driven to move to urban centres where they work as house servants, often for little pay and suffering abuse. Their traditions and dialects are disappearing. Newspapers and schoolbooks seldom mention them. They live in spite of this. They fight back. They protest when their forests are cut down. They lead campaigns to protect the land and water. They pass down their stories and language to their children. Putul channels this strength in her poetry.

By employing ordinary imagery, including broken hands, firewood and drumbeats, she extends an emergence of connections to the real life trials of indigenous women. She doesn't make them feel romantic. She renders them as they really are full of suffering, love and ferocity.

### **Methodology**

This paper unpacks Adivasi women's lived realities in Nirmala Putul's poetry through the lens of qualitative, interpretive literary analysis. By analyzing the poems *What Am I to You?* and *Adivasi Woman*, focusing on the experiences of women in relation to work, marginalization and resilience.

To understand how gender and indigenous identity intersect within these works, the analysis is framed through a feminist and postcolonial lens. This study listens to these poems as lived narratives that resound from the grassroots, rooted in both personal voice and common experience, rather than as abstract literature. In addition to metaphors and structure, the poetry language is studied for its emotional undertones, protests, affirmations and silences.

This is complemented by a secondary research on the Santali tribe and the socioeconomic challenges confronted by Adivasi women. Sources include ethnographic studies, academic papers, and articles that provide political and cultural context. This anchors the analysis beyond the realm of symbolism and into the realm of social truth by locating the poetry within the actual conditions they describe. The goal is to respond to the poems as expressions of resistance, identity, and survival, not to study them analytically. This is an attempt to give a platform to the voices Nirmala Putul raises, the voices that are audible, at least in half-whispers, if at all.

### **Conclusion**

Nirmala Putul's poems are not only beautiful, they are necessary. They tell of women who have been neglected too long. *What Am I To You?* discover the unanswered silent questions. Their strong statements are not escapable these days. In various forms, both poems echo this paper's title: *Echoes from the Forest: Adivasi Women's Unwavering Spirit*. These are the echoes of drumbeats at night, lilts of dying tongues, and footsteps crossing from long distances. These are the sounds of survival.

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