

Inqilab

Exploring the Expression of Rebellion and Revolution Through Literature

आज कहेंगे दिल का फ़साना
जान भी ले ले चाहे ज़माना¹

¹Translations: Today I will tell the story of my heart/ Even if the world robs me of my life
Lata Mangeshkar, *Pyaar Kiya Toh Darna Kya* (Nushad, 1960)
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TdOS-0sIW-Y>> [Accessed 28 August 2019].
This song is the original inspiration behind this dissertation

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Chapter 1

Introduction

"Whatever our personal weaknesses may be, the nobility of our craft will always be rooted in two commitments, difficult to maintain: the refusal to lie about what one knows and the resistance to oppression."²

Every writer at some point in time has attempted to answer the inevitable question 'why write?', and every single one has emerged with a different reason. One among many, as Albert Camus observed in his speech, is to tell the truth about reality and to resist the attempt to silence or subdue a group of people by another. This dissertation will focus on such writings that endeavour to comprehend the oppressive reality of marginalized communities and write to combat the state powers that have suppressed them for centuries. My understanding of state originates from Louis Althusser's essay 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses'³ who proposes that the state is formed of two components- Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) and Repressive State Apparatuses (RSA). The RSA consists of institutions like the army, police and other disciplinary powers that use physical force to maintain dominance of the ruling class. The ISA is formed of institutions like religion, education, and political to exercise control over the population and propagate ideologies that ensure the survival of the ruling class. A combination of these hard and soft powers has been used by the ruling classes to sustain a sense of power over the citizens and repress any voices of dissent that threaten their dominion. My idea of power

² Albert Camus, *Banquet Speech* (Stockholm: Nobel Prize in Literature, 1957) accessed at <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1957/camus/speech/>

³ Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' in *Theoryisms* (New Delhi: Worldview Publications, 2015) pp. 33-89

stems from Michel Foucault's⁴ theory of the relationship between power and knowledge which assumes that knowledge is the currency of power. This dissertation will extend this concept to demonstrate the way in which specific knowledge generated by the state to oppress specific groups is challenged by authors of the marginalized communities by writing narrative of the silenced and giving voices to their struggles that ultimately questions the pre-existing narratives. I discuss in length the writings of three authors belonging to marginalized groups whose oeuvre is concerned with the lives of their communities and the way they use their words to subvert narratives of oppression and discrimination.

This dissertation is a discussion of Meena Kandasamy's collection of poetry titled 'Ms Militancy', poems of Ahmed Fouad Negm, and Kendrick Lamar's song titled 'Alright'. These writings are manifestations of political literature which I elucidate through Jacques Rancière's *The Politics of Literature*⁵ which questions the Platonic view that "artisans do not have the time to do anything other than their work" and their schedules prohibit them from taking part in any "political activity." Rancière proposes that politics of literature begins when "those men and women who do not have the time to do anything other than their work take the time they do not have to prove that they are indeed speaking beings, participating in a shared world." Meena Kandasamy, Ahmed Fouad Negm, and Kendrick Lamar prove they are indeed "speaking beings" through their work that is dedicated to vocalizing the unspoken tales of suffering, discrimination and hope exhibited by marginalized communities. Their work exhibits an ability to not only rebel against oppressive powers but also to sympathise with their respective communities which is a crucial part of political poetry as substantiated by Reginal Gibbons⁶ commenting that

⁴ Michel Foucault, 'Truth and Power' in *Theoryisms* (New Delhi: Worldview Publications, 2015) pp. 154-189

⁵ Jacques Rancière, *Politics of Literature* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011) p. 4

⁶ Reginald Gibbons, 'Political Poetry and the Example of Ernesto Cardenal' in *Politics and Poetic Value* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1987) pp. 277-300 p. 292

"totalizing powers, such as those of governments and bureaucracies, must be blind to the feelings and sufferings of others in order to function; they fail to respond to individuals except as antagonists whom they would distract, co-opt, suppress, or destroy. The rhetoric of poetry, in this context, is inherently critical; and its essence is a kind of quicksilver gleaming that cannot be eradicated."

Chapter 1 is a closer look at Kendrick Lamar's song 'Alright' that became popular in the United States during the Black Lives Matter protest in the 21st century. I decided to include this song because it invokes traditional as well as modern modes of expression utilized by the African-American community. It fuses the genre of spoken word poetry with rap music to create a panorama of the life and struggles of his community while also giving a message of hope to his people and of rebellion to the institutions that suppress them. This chapter refers to news reports and articles published in recent times to gauge the social appeal of Kendrick Lamar and to understand the way the community co-opted his song as a voice of their own. Chapter 2 is a discussion of Ahmed Fouad Negm who became the voice of revolution in Egypt through his political poetry. This chapter comments on the intrinsic artistic quality of his poetry and studies how the performance of his poetry by protestors in Egypt led to a revolution. This chapter will refer to several online news reports and opinion pieces to understand and reflect on the social influence of Negm's work. Chapter 3 is an exploration of Meena Kandasamy's poetry collection titled 'Ms Militancy' which revolves around themes of feminism and caste oppression. It will demonstrate the way in which Meena Kandasamy subverts mythological tales that advocate suppression of Dalits and woman, and further addresses the question of Dalit women who are doubly marginalized in the Indian society.

While their poetry has distinctive flavour, Lamar, Negm and Kandasamy are uniform in the way they channel the oppression their communities face and the way their work violates the traditional aesthetics of their respective artforms. Moreover, all the three artists hail from marginalized communities in their respective geographies- Lamar belongs to the African-American community in the United States, Negm to the working class in Egypt, and Kandasamy to the Dalit community in India. Their position in the society plays

an instrumental part in their understanding of the world as well as our understanding of their work. Thus, this dissertation attempts to give equal importance to their work as well as their community which, as demonstrated in each chapter, is integral in realizing the way they rebel against the state and revolutionize the narratives of the subaltern.

CHAPTER 2

We Gon' Be Alright

"You might not have heard it on the radio all day, but you're seeing it in the streets, you're seeing it on the news, and you're seeing it in the communities, and people felt it."

-Kendrick Lamar⁷

In July 2015, thousands of activists and supporters gathered in Cleveland, USA, for the first Black Lives Matter conference. After the attendees left the Cleveland State University campus, a 14-year old was arrested by the police on the grounds of intoxication. The police alleged that the teenager was too inebriated to be conscious of the surrounding. The arrest caused an unrest amongst the witnesses and soon developed into a protest where people demanded the release of the teenager. A significant number of individuals belonging to the black community were unjustly shot⁸ by the police throughout the country which only fuelled the unrest in the crowd regarding the safety of the arrested boy. As the voices of the crowd got louder, the police officers decided to pepper spray them in order to establish control. However, the crowd roared louder with the chants of "we gon' be alright" from

⁷ Andrew Barker, *How Kendrick Lamar Became the Defining Hip-Hop Artist of His Generation* (Variety Magazine, 2017) accessed at <https://variety.com/2017/music/features/kendrick-lamar-career-damn-to-pimp-a-butterfly-1202619725/>

⁸ 17-year-old Antwon Rose (2018), 12-year-old Tamir Rice (2014), 25-year-old Freddie Gray (2015), Eric Garner (2014) whose last word "I can't breathe" became a haunting cry of many Black Lives Matter protests, among many other. Simply typing police brutality on the internet will result in an extensive list of lives lost.

Kenrick Lamar's album *To Pimp A Butterfly*⁹. Kendrick Lamar's lyrics gave voice to the protest seething in the crowd against the state¹⁰ and its continuous attack on their community.

Kendrick Lamar's song 'Alright' rapidly became the anthem of the Black Lives Matter movement as protestors across the United States chanted it at various protests. While the message of hope remains central to it, the song exteriorizes the realities of living as a Black American in the present-day United States. 2015 saw the zenith of brutality, violence and hatred towards Black Americans by various institutions of the state. Kendrick Lamar's oeuvre actively voiced the violence and engaged with the lives of African-Americans in the urban ghettos. Consequently, his content became increasingly popular amongst the Black community and established a connection with them. This chapter will explore Kendrick Lamar's music track 'Alright' as an expression of dissent in the African-American community towards the state and its institutions, specifically law enforcement. Through its narrative, the chapter will analyse Kendrick Lamar's position as an individual artist and the way in which his work functions as a merging point of the collective conscience, a mouthpiece for rebellion, and provides an opportunity for redemption to the people of his community. It will also study the use of imagery and language specific to the African-American community in order to highlight how the work imbibes its culture and background.

The song begins with a spoken word poetry where Kendrick Lamar makes reference to his career trajectory. The poetry consists of personal confessions that he believes will serve as a cautionary tale for the youth listening to his work. He mentions how he was "misusing your [his] influence" and "abusing my [his] power". He directly addresses how

⁹ Kendrick Lamar, *To Pimp A Butterfly* (Aftermath Entertainment, Interscope Records and Top Dawg Entertainment, 2015)

<<https://open.spotify.com/album/7ycBtNsMtyVbbwTfJwRjSP?si=YYqO8xjuRt-FZJs-dl4EVA>> [Accessed 12 July 2019].

¹⁰ State as defined in the introduction Chapter 1

sudden fame misguided him and ultimately plunged him into depression. He later says that he "kept running" not only from himself but also from his "foundation". Lamar's words establish the conflict in his life that raises vital questions about his roots and upbringing.¹¹ He closes his poetry with the acknowledgement of a "war" he was fighting in his world and his "loved ones" battling "the continuous war back in the city." The fact that he mentions how his war "based on apartheid and discrimination" is different from the war his family is struggling with in his city serves two functions. Firstly, it creates a distance between him and his "foundation" that enables him to have an objective view on the realities of his community which consequently gives him a narratorial advantage. Secondly, the very fact that there is a war in his present world as well as in the world he comes from elucidates how the life of African-Americans is conflicted in modern America despite the advancement they make in their lives. While the war "back in the city" is mostly against crime, money and unemployment, Lamar's fight in the world of fame is against "apartheid and discrimination". His poetry establishes a context for the rest of the piece that further highlights the realities of African-American lives and also gives it a confessional touch with Lamar confessing to his own shortcomings and struggle with depression. As an artform, spoken word has always held social currency in the African-American context. Clarence Major notes that "the spoken word is closer to the black cultural tradition than the printed word." He further claims, about the African-American language, that "our language is born

¹¹ A majority African-American community in the US resides in urban ghettos and has faced continued political, economic and social exclusion due to which they are faced with high rates of unemployment and impoverished living conditions. Paul D. Irwin in his case study "Learning from the American Ghetto: A Comprehensive Analysis of African American Inner Cities" published in *Agora Journal of Urban Planning and Design* (2011) argues that "social exclusion and economic isolation lay the foundation for the formation of ghettos. Ghettos should not be viewed simply as places of poverty; rather, social and economic conditions should be understood as a result of historical causation and racial segregation"

of sound clusters as opposed to Shakespeare's which derives from the nexus, sight." Spoken word or any kind of verbal artform allows the artist to develop a tonal expression that compliments the emotions they want to portray. In his poetry, Lamar maintains a grim tone that underlines the gravity of his words. The poetry is interspersed with pregnant pauses that allow the listener a space for reflection and Lamar to add a dramatic effect to the imagery invoked. Lamar's grim voice coupled with theatrical pauses emphasises the confessional nature of the poetry and empowers it as a cautionary tale.

Lamar switches his tone and form of expression throughout the song that correspond to the different aspects of his narrative. His lyrics combined with his rhythmical approach form a pattern and tone that compliments the underlying softness of the message of hope his song portrays. At the same time, the intermittent sections of fast-paced rap heighten the aggression and violence in Lamar's narrative. The first verse consists of three sets of lines- an octave followed by two quatrains- each of which is set to a different rhythm. The octave follows a steady rhyme scheme where not only the words but the way they are said create similar speech-sounds. Let us consider the first four lines

*Uh, and when I **wake up**
I recognise you're looking at me for the **pay cut**
But homicide be looking at you from the **face down**
What MAC-11 even boom with the **bass down?***

The ending phrase of the first two and the last two lines rhymes with each other and Lamar breaks the beat at the end of the phrases which accentuates the rhyming pattern. The punctuations also play an instrumental role as each comma and line break makes a full measure. However, in the following quatrain, the flow of the lyrics becomes more fluid with enjambments which facilitates the semiotics of the lines

*Twenty of 'em in my Chevy, tell 'em to come and get me
Reaping everything I sow, || so my karma comin' heavy
No preliminary hearings on my record*

I'm a motherfucking gangster in silence for the record, || uh

In this first quatrain, Lamar only breathes twice (which I have marked with ||) consuming more words per beat than the preceding octave. The contraction used in the lines, such as "em" and "comin", also contribute to the flow of the lyrics by reducing the stressed syllables in the sentences. Consequently, an aggressive tone is created which highlights the violence he describes in the lines. In the last quatrain of the verse, the words as well as beats per measure are reduced which provides a steady rhythm to the entire section. Even the rhyming pattern is distinctive from the octave and the earlier quatrain making the entire verse an eclectic mixture of beats and rhythms. The last three lines of the quatrain are rhymed with the same ending speech-sound

Tell the world I know it's too late
Boys and girls, I think I gone **cray**
Drown inside my vices all **day**
Won't you please believe me when I **say**

The subtle rhythm which follows the musical count of 1-2-3-4 ,with two beats every count, in the last quatrain not only undercuts the depth of the downward spiral Lamar feels being surrounded by vices but also presumes the softness of the pre-chorus it is followed by. Interestingly, the entire verse is accompanied by jazz inspired music with soft humming in the background disrupted by low reverberating beats of the cymbal. The music forms a major part of the entire "groove" or the "feel of music while perceiving"¹² the song since it syncs with the ultimate hope that Lamar disseminates through the recurring chant of "we gon' be alright". Furthermore, duplicating the pattern of each verse which consists of differently rhymed lines set to distinctive beats and cohered by the soft jazz music, the entire track is a collection of various different forms of song bound together by the music

¹² Oliver Kautny, 'Lyrics and flow in rap music' in The Cambridge Companion to Hip-hop (Cambridge University Press, 2015) pp. 101-117 p. 103

and a cyclic pattern. It begins with a spoken word poetry, followed by the twice repeated set of verse, pre-chorus and chorus which are rapped, with a penultimate section that is sung in a jazz-inspired swaying and smooth tone, and finally ends with the same spoken word poetry performed at the beginning. The cyclic structure, as a result, bestows the song a uniform quality which reaffirms its semantic understanding.

Lamar's semantics are a combination of aggression and hope. The pre-chorus reads "we been hurt, been down before" which is testament to the continued brutality his community faces from institutions of the state. Quoting the FBI statistics, The Washington Post reported that "hate crimes in America rose 17 percent last year, the third consecutive year that such crimes increased," while also claiming that "more than half of hate crimes, about 3 out of every 5, targeted a person's race or ethnicity."¹³ At the same time, social media has been flooded with videos of police brutality against specific communities which has rendered the Black Lives Matter movement, founded in 2013, a new force. In such times of bleakness, Lamar's words resound like a strong ray of hope and gave the struggle a communal voice "when reminding the authorities and the watching world that we can survive this, too- what more timely, relevant chant could there be?"¹⁴ However, despite the recognition of the institutions being against them making the fight for survival more strenuous, Lamar comes out with a chorus that is essentially hopeful in its sentiment. The chorus is a repeated chant

¹³ Devlin Barrett, *Hate crimes rose 17 percent last year, according to new FBI data* (Washington Post, 2018) accessed at https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/hate-crimes-rose-17-percent-last-year-according-to-new-fbi-data/2018/11/13/e0dcf13e-e754-11e8-b8dc-66cca409c180_story.html

¹⁴ Aisha Harris, *Has Kendrick Lamar Recorded the New Black National Anthem?* (Slate, 2015) accessed at <https://slate.com/culture/2015/08/black-lives-matter-protesters-chant-kendrick-lamars-alright-what-makes-it-the-perfect-protest-song-video.html>

Nigga, we gon' be alright
Nigga, we gon' be alright
We gon' be alright
Do you hear me, do you feel me?
We gon' be alright

The lines carry special stresses on "gon" and "alright" that substantiate the primary focus and intention of the song. The deep stresses further transform the chorus into an appeal from Lamar to his people which announces that despite the state's institutionalised violence against them, they will survive and thrive.

Lamar's appeal to his people is supported by the use of colloquial terms and landscapes populated by Black Americans. He refers to the police as "po-po" which is a colloquial term in African-American vernacular. He raps

Nigga, and we hate po-po
Wanna kill us dead in the street fo sho'

The existence of contracted phrases like "fo sho'" which form an integral part of the vernacular add to his relatability within the community. Oliver Kautny comments that the inclusion of phrases in rap lyrics is a "special form of African American rhetorical gesture, called Signifyin(g)."¹⁵ When phrases that are exclusive to a community are incorporated in a work, it alludes to a specific hermeneutic circle belonging to that particular community. It allows for meaning and values to proliferate that are shared by people belonging to the same community without interference. In this context, it is also crucial to notice the use and implications of the word "nigga"¹⁶ in the lyrics. Lamar's lyrics and of many hip-hop artists have co-opted the term to refer to each other and now forms a part of their daily

¹⁵ Oliver Kautny, *Lyrics and flow in rap music*, p.102

¹⁶ The term was used as a racial slur and is now considered a racial insult when used by people of other races to refer to the black community.

vocabulary. The embracing of a derogatory term and co-opting it as a referential term in the African-American hermeneutics designates it a meaning which is untouched by white privilege and eliminates the intended hurtful sentiment.

With the use of specific imagery and phrases, Lamar creates a space for Black language, meaning, and knowledge to prosper. Consequently, he curates a knowledge and awareness of a community that has either been excluded or described in depreciative terms in the mainstream culture. Travis L. Gosa discusses the coining of the term “the fifth element of hip-hop” by Afrika Bambaata, founder of the influential organization Zulu Nation. The fifth and the core element of hip-hop culture according to him is knowledge. He says that “knowledge of self” refers to the Afro-diasporic mix of spiritual and political consciousness designed to empower members of oppressed groups.”¹⁷ He claims that hip-hop in the starting first decade (1973-1982) was fundamentally a party culture but soon evolved into a conscious attempt of self-expression and ultimately into a political statement made by artists inspired by the streets they lived in, circumstances that forced them to react and institutional oppression that catapulted them into rebellion. Similarly, the narrative Lamar vocalises is inspired by the oppressive exercise of power by the state and he realigns his artistic calibre with the struggle of his community to revolt against it. Such a knowledge of the subaltern and alternate narrative from the perspective of marginalised groups has political repercussions. Tricia Rose in her essay *Prophets of Rage*¹⁸ notes that “rap’s contestations are part of a polyvocal black cultural discourse engaged in discursive “wars of position” within and against dominant discourses.” The mainstream media has always engaged in villainising the black community and the institutions of state have exerted social, ideological and material domination over marginalised community by silencing their voices. Meanwhile, contemporary rap culture

¹⁷ Travis L. Gosa, ‘The Fifth Element: Knowledge’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Hip-Hop* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) pp. 56–70

¹⁸ Tricia Rose, *Prophets of Rage* in *Black Noise* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1994) pp. 99-145

constructed of alternate narratives that exteriorise the brutal reality of lives of African-American community and the rage in them to rebel against various manifestations of power is a conscious political endeavour to oppose all forms of oppression. Artists from the black community serve to invert the hegemonic discourse and tell compelling stories of the other side, the oppressed that has been trying to find a voice.

Since Lamar's aesthetics and semantics are socially embedded, the participation of the community becomes imperative in developing a political inertia against the repressive forces. Richard Iton comments that "for African Americans, partly because of their marginal status and often violent exclusion from the realms of formal politics, popular culture was an integral and important aspect of the making of politics." Thus, the chanting of 'We Gon' Be Alright' carried social power that empowered a community to voice their sentiments and make themselves heard in the mainstream culture. With the act of performing, Lamar's 'Alright' achieves another level of awareness rather than simply documenting the history and the present state of violence in his community. The protestors and supporters of the Black Lives Matter movement adopted it as a voice of their own and made it a means of expressing the revolutionary spirit of their actions. The political message conveyed through the lyrics culminated in an act of communal catharsis as people realised the underlying message of hope in Lamar's words. Desire Thompson¹⁹, a journalist for the Vibe magazine, documented the spirit of catharsis throughout the community

I do remember the negro spiritual that took place when "Alright" oozed through the speakers. We stayed low, knees bent, enthralled in the rapper's verses and jumped up the low-ceiling heavens in unison once the chorus dropped. ... It was a commanding moment because we all felt the pain and empathy, we had towards those who perished at the hands of police. The pain didn't go away so chanted "we gon' be alright," eyes shut tight with fists in the air.

¹⁹ Desire Thompson, *How Kendrick Lamar's "Alright" Became The Anthem To Civil Unrest In 2015* (Vibe, 2015) accessed at <https://www.vibe.com/2015/12/kendrick-lamar-alright-protest-anthem-2015>

The feeling of comfort Lamar's lyrics induced and the shared chanting of "we gon' be alright" enabled a communal outpouring of emotions²⁰ that symbolizes communal resistance, empowerment and catharsis. This action can be interpreted as a ritual where the chant functions as a means of rebellion as well as purification. The recurring mentions of god and praying in the song accentuate the ritualistic nature of the chorus. While discussing the beliefs of British and South African social anthropologist, Max Gluckman, José Santos suggests that in such cases "rituals act out social inequalities as well as provide outlets for releasing held-up tensions."²¹ The act of communal chanting functions as a cathartic release wherein the people indulging in the action are able to purge their frustration and anger towards the oppressive forces. It further advances communal bonding and allows people to join hands and raise their voices together against the

²⁰ I am immediately reminded of Baby Suggs from Toni Morrison's novel called *Beloved* (1997). A former slave, Baby Suggs, conducted church-like gathering for other freed slaves who were still recovering from the horrors of slavery and physical as well as psychological violence. She instructed them to laugh, cry, sing and dance without inhibitions and embrace their bodies with love. "And O my people, out yonder, hear me, they do not love your neck unnoosed and straight. So, love your neck, put a hand on it, grace it, stroke it and hold it up," she told them. Her communal celebration of bodies and emotions of the former slaves momentarily disrupted the hierarchy of the world as the slaves mocked the authority of the masters who despised and mutilated them. The gatherings provided them a cathartic experience where they let out their cries and joys and got a chance to embrace themselves as individuals and not as slaves.

²¹ Dr. José De Paiva Santos, 'The Representation of Rituals in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Community, Resistance, Empowerment' in *Scripta Uniandrade*, Vol. 16, N. 2 (2018), p. 314-329

perpetrators of discrimination and violence. Max Gluckman coined the term “rituals of rebellions”²² to refer to rituals that cause social disruption through which “hierarchies are both mocked and called into question.” The 2015 protest was one such ritual of rebellion where the conglomeration of supporters of the Black Lives Matters movement questioned the state on its failure to protect its people and while chanting “we gon’ be alright” mocked the authorities on their defeat in suppressing their voices and spirits.

Dorian Lynskey in his book *33 Revolutions Per Minute*²³ propounds that “the point of protest music is not to shift the world on its axis but to change opinions and perspectives, to say something about the times in which you live, and, sometimes, to find that what you’ve said speaks to another moment in history.” The chanting of Lamar’s song added to the furore of protests going on across the United States and created an effect that alluded to the influence of songs like Billie Holiday’s *Strange Fruit* that spoke against lynching, Nina Simone’s *Mississippi Goddam* created in response to the murder of Civil Rights leader Medgar Evers, James Brown’s *Say it Loud – I’m Black and Proud* which is regarded as an anthem for black pride and Public Enemy *Fight The Power* that promoted revolutionary sentiments against oppressive institutions. Kendrick Lamar’s work added to the oeuvre of powerful voices that opposed the state and its institutions while simultaneously creating a census amongst the listeners that consolidated the movement for liberation and protection of the black community from social, physical and emotional violence. Musicians with strong voices, in this way, serve the function of organic intellectuals in the society they belong to. According to Antonio Gramsci²⁴, organic intellectuals are individuals a class produces organically who are responsible for creating

²² Dr. José Santos, ‘The Representation of Rituals in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*: Community, Resistance, Empowerment’, p.323

²³ Dorian Lynskey, *33 Revolutions Per Minute: A history of protest songs* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010)

²⁴ Antonio Gramsci, ‘The Formation of Intellectuals’ in *Theoryisms* (New Delhi: Worldview Publications, 2015) pp. 15-30

awareness in a society about its own function through the use of ideological apparatuses like the media. Radical rappers writing protest rap fit into Gramsci's idea of organic intellectuals who speak for the subaltern²⁵ and are responsible for the "insurrection of subjugated knowledge"²⁶ into the mainstream culture. Organic intellectuals articulate knowledge by surveying culture, language and emotions of a society and create coherent expression of the same that the society could not do itself. Similarly, Lamar created an expression of rage and rebellion in his music by assimilating the conditions of his people and a communally felt need of change in their conditions. For instance, in the second verse he says

*I don't talk about it, be about it, every day I sequel
If I got it then you got it, Heaven, I can reach you
Pat Dawg, Pat Dwag, Pat Dwag, my dog, that's all
Bick Back and Chad, I trap the bag for y'all
I rap, I black on track so rest assured
My rights, my wrongs; I write 'til I'm right with God*

The first two lines reaffirm the cautionary nature of his song to retract from allowing excessive material motives to corrupt their existence. In the following lines Lamar mourns the loss of friends and creates a space for his listeners to remember as well as mourn their kin who lost their lives to state brutality. In the final line, he embraces his vices and pledges to write till he cleanses his conscience which corresponds to the act of catharsis his lyrics permit.

In the wake of rising police violence and hate crime against the black community in the United States, Kendrick Lamar's 'We Gon' Be Alright' is a roaring voice of rebellion.

²⁵ Subaltern, as Gramsci used it, means the class of individuals who are under the hegemonic control of a ruling class

²⁶ J. M. Spencer, 'The Emergency of black and the emergence of rap' in *Black Sacred Music: A Journal of Theomusicology*, Ed.5 (1991) 1-11

While Lamar's work can be individually appreciated for its intrinsic creative quality and the effective use of beats and rhythms coupled with powerful lyrics, the true achievement of 'Alright' remains in its social influence and the popularity it found amongst the protestors on streets to channel their emotions and feelings. The political message weaved in the lyrics and the act of performing it functions as a rebellion against the Repressive State Apparatuses and further destabilised the power-knowledge dynamic in the United States. By generating knowledge of the subaltern and the oppression it faces, Kendrick Lamar challenged the discourse of the state and through the embedded message of survival²⁷ questioned the ability to suppress the voices of the margins. The next chapter will continue these thematic concerns of expressing rebellion and revolution through poetic means.

²⁷ Theme explored elaborately in Chapter 4

Chapter 3

Bread, Freedom, and Social Justice²⁸

*The brave man is brave
 The coward a coward
 Come down with the brave
 Come down to the square
 -Ahmed Fouad Negm*

Merit Publishing House has been the epicentre of intellectual activity and political debates in Egypt ever since its opening in 1998. The publishing house is confined in a debilitated building and its founder, Mohamed Hashem, employs the limited resources he has in bringing marginal voices into the literary circuit. He has come under attacks from the government for his public support of protests against the repressive governments. Like the undying commitment of the people to save their fate, Hashem is committed to his cause commenting that "yes, we have poverty and limited resources. But we also have the future."²⁹ The future he refers to encompasses various revolutions in Egypt like the Kefaya movement in 2004, the Youth movement in 2008, and the protests against former president Hosni Mubarak. Among the many left-leaning intellectuals and protestors who visit his office, the most famous and loved was Ahmed Fouad Negm, an Arabic vernacular poet, popularly called the 'voice of the people' in Egypt. Ahmed Fouad Negm played an integral role in the Tahrir Square Revolution in 2011 against the oppressive government of Hosni Mubarak. Thousands of citizens marched to the square chanting the words of Ahmed Fouad Negm – "*come down with the brave/ come down to the square.*"

²⁸ The main motto of 2011 Tahrir Square protests

²⁹ Jack Shenker, Pioneering publisher reshapes Egypt's literary landscape (The Guardian, 2010) accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/apr/30/egypt-pioneering-publisher-change-literary>

This chapter will analyse the poetry of Ahmed Fouad Negm³⁰, namely 'Who Are They and Who Are We?'³¹, 'What's Wrong with Our President'³² and 'The Strike'³³. This chapter will engage in a critical study of the language and form of the vernacular poetry and explore the way its attributes answer to the political crisis in Egypt. It will also study the process of formulation of national thought through Negm's poetic oeuvre and how the act of performing his poetry led to tangible changes in the society as well as the in the political governance in Egypt.

Ahmed Fouad Negm, one amongst his seventeen siblings, was raised in an orphanage and went on to work as a labourer for many years of his life. Negm survived the regime of three Egyptian presidents- Gamal Abdel Nasser, Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak - and was prosecuted multiple times during their reigns for the strongly opinionated pieces he wrote against state oppression. Due to his humble roots and years lived as a part of the working class, Negm formed a deep understanding of the hardships of a common man and the effects of the state's oppression on its citizens. Egypt had been under the Emergency Law since 1981 till its suspension after the 2011 Egyptian Revolution. Under the Emergency Law, constitutional rights were suspended, police brutality was on the rise, and large number of people were imprisoned without a fair trial.

³⁰ Negm's poetry was circulated majorly through oral means due to ban on publishing radical literature, as a result few documents of his poetry exist. Due to oral means of propagation, it is difficult to know the actual dates of his composition as well. Moreover, he wrote in vernacular Arabic and remained untranslated until active scholars of Arabic poetry started translating his poetry and publishing them. In this essay, I use translation by Dr Walaa Quisay, DPhil at University of Oxford. Her translations can be accessed here <http://revolutionaryarabicpoetry.blogspot.com/>

³¹ Ahmed Fouad Negm, *Who Are They and Who Are We?* trans. by Walaa Quisay (2011)

³² Ahmed Fouad Negm, *What's Wrong with Our President?* trans. by Walaa Quisay (2011)

³³ Ahmed Fouad Negm, *The Strike* trans. by Walaa Quisay (2011)

The government also banned communal gatherings to disable any form of public protest to take shape in the country. However, Ahmed Fouad Negm continued to write after his first collection of poetry 'Pictures from Life and Prison' that was published while he was still in jail in 1959. His poetry sympathized with the common people and looked at the rich and powerful with scrutiny and contempt. In his poem written 'Who Are They and Who Are We?' Negm establishes his position as a part of the majority working class referred to as "we" in the poem against "they" who are the ruling classes that exploit their positions of power. Negm writes,

*They are the princes and the Sultans
They are the ones with wealth and power
And we are the impoverished and deprived*

He emphasises on the sharp contrast between the two classes by juxtaposing two extreme states of living conditions. While the princes have the privilege to luxuriate in the presence of "wealth and power", they are only able to do so at the expense of the common people who are "impoverished and deprived." Having lived his life in extremely poverty and at most times fleeing from the police, Negm felt strong about the condition of his people and never refrained from pronouncing it in his work. Even in his poem 'What's Wrong with Our President?' he writes,

*In faith and good conscience
He only starves you so you'd lose weight
O What a people! In need of a diet*

In this poem written about Hosni Mubarak, Negm uses satire as a technique to accentuate his opinion on the repressive policies Hosni Mubarak employed during his rule. The sharp political satire supplements the juxtaposition he used in the earlier poem to contrast the situations of the two classes. He further says that "their job is only to stuff their guts" while the common man engages in a war to fight for his rights, as he summarises

We are the war, its stones and fire
We are the army liberating the land
We are the martyrs
Defeated or successful

Through his oeuvre, Negm produces a knowledge of the subaltern. As a result of widespread censorship and restrictions on public movement in the country, the reality of the common man was not popular knowledge. The government engaged in advancing their own motives and maintaining its dominion over the state while overlooking the wellbeing of its people. In these circumstances, Negm's poetry compiled the experiences of the people suffering from the state policies and dying at the hands of the state for resisting its oppressions. His poems contributed in the formation of a nationalistic thought in the common masses based on their experiences, struggles and hope. The nationalism he helped construct gave voices to the suffering citizens in their own language and was centred around their demand of 'bread, freedom and social liberty'. Moreover, his message was rapidly propagated to the audience through verbal³⁴ means as Negm often appeared in discreet gatherings where he sang his poems along with Sheikh Imam, a blind oud player. Joel Beinin notes that Ahmed Fouad Negm's poetry "articulated a radical alternative to the policies of the Nasser and Sadat regimes and called on the popular strata to rally around the program."³⁵ Negm's position in the community he wrote about also becomes fundamental in validating the knowledge of the subaltern he produced. In both of his poems, 'Who Are They and Who are We?' and 'What's Wrong with Our President,' his use

³⁴ Many of Negm's poetry was spread in Egypt through song and through his performances in gatherings and during protests where he sung his words along with his friend Sheikh Imam

³⁵ Joel Beinin, 'Writing Class: Workers and Modern Egyptian Colloquial Poetry (Zajal)' *Poetics Today*, Vol. 15, No. 2, *Cultural Processes in Muslim and Arab Societies: Modern Period II* (1994), pp. 191-215 accessed at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1773164>

of the subjective "I" and "we" is important to note. In the first poem, Negm's identifies with a communal "we" that refers to the people who suffer the dictates of the state. Negm's background and upbringing make him organically a part of the working class. Hence his relationship with the people he writes about and having lived under the same conditions as them, make Negm a believable spokesperson of their grievances and demands for liberty. On the other hand, in the latter poem he assumes the position of a narrator who expounds the malpractices of the president to his people and takes responsibility of the words he writes- "I never fret, and will always say/ a word, for which I am responsible." As a poet and someone who people trusted, Negm becomes a reliable narrator to create awareness in people about their circumstances and produce meaning of their reality. The knowledge he generates of the subaltern emerges from his ability to observe the subaltern from within its realm and outside of it as a narratorial presence.

Negm's decision to write in colloquial vernacular Arabic is another reason his poetry serves as a genuine expression of the common people. He used the dialect that most Egyptians spoke in as opposed to literary Arabic which was the default choice for most poets writing in Arabic like Ahmad Zaki Abu Shadi and Yusuf al-Khal. It helped him reach out to the audience he identified with and the people he was writing about since the vernacular was "used in genres addressed to a broad public such as folk poetry, epic poetry, laments, elegies, love songs, and poems of political protest."³⁶ The literary term for the poetry Negm wrote was *zajal*³⁷ and it was appropriated as a literary form through his work due to its popularity. Joel Beinin comments that the *zajal* "identified with populist Egyptian patriotism and comprising a poetic anti-canon which, through its language, subject matter, and mode of publication, constituted a discourse of popular opposition to

³⁶ Shawkat M Toorawa, 'Poetry' in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Arab Culture*, *Cambridge Companions to Culture*, ed. by Dwight F. Reynolds (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) pp. 96–111, p.3

³⁷ Colloquial Arabic poetry in strophic form. It began as an oral artform and was appropriated by the Egyptian nationalist literati in the nineteenth century.

the hegemonic form of Egyptian national literary culture expressed in standard Arabic."³⁸ The poets writing zajals often wrote about the lives of the working class and highlighted their engagement with the world around them. On the other hand, literary Arabic poetry flourished in the artistic world due to its sophisticated style and gained popularity with the regimes due to the lack of radical subjects it explored. Zajals were also dismissed by Muslim scholars and nationalists in the Middle East because the choice to write in vernacular Arabic threatened the linguistic unity of the literary circle and was considered a "perversion of the language of the Koran."³⁹ As a consequence, zajal poets were able to establish an anti-canon that was majorly political in spirit, from its language to its subject matter, and was often "perceived as a political act associated with a nationalistic program of populism, anticlericalism (though) not irreligion, and local Egyptian patriotism, as opposed to Pan-Arabism."⁴⁰ The anti-canon focussed on the local landscape that was being violated, materially and emotionally, by the ruling classes.

The most important attribute of a zajal is its subject matter. Through radical subjects, the poets were able to engage with the politics of the nation and attack it on its shortcomings. As a result, the political message often took precedence over the form of the poem. Joel Beinin propounds that "these poems violate the traditional norms of Arabic poetry by subordinating their language and meter to their political message, a serious artistic flaw according to elite aesthetics." Negm's poem 'What's Wrong with Our President' follows no regular meter or rhyming pattern and solely focuses on the message he wishes to propagate.

That the president is a compassionate man

³⁸ Joel Beinin, 'Writing Class: Workers and Modern Egyptian Colloquial Poetry (Zajal)', p. 191

³⁹ Joel Beinin, 'Writing Class: Workers and Modern Egyptian Colloquial Poetry (Zajal)', p. 192

⁴⁰ Joel Beinin, 'Writing Class: Workers and Modern Egyptian Colloquial Poetry (Zajal)', p. 193

*Constantly busy working for his people
 Busy, gathering their money
 Outside, in Switzerland, saving it for us
 In secret bank accounts
 Poor guy, looking out for our future
 Can't you see his kindly heart?*

Despite lacking the poetic technicalities, the employed technique of political satire serves an important function in understanding the effect of the poem. Negm's political satire is induced with humour that ridicules a figure of great prominence in the country. Through his satire, the real face of oppression inflicted by the state and the unjust distribution of resources by the government is supplemented with an element of humour that allows the audience to not fear but laugh at a figure of power. For instance, in the line "poor guy, looking out for our future" Negm painted a picture of the president laundering the citizens' money only to save it for them. The satire and ridicule in this image functions on two levels. It states the problem but in a way that the audience can laugh while registering it. It reduces the president to an unassuming figure who is incapable of realising that his people are able to identify his corrupt practices. Similarly, he addressed the problem of growing unemployment in his poem blaming the president for it while also absolving him of the blame in a humorous play of ideas.

*You talk of unemployment
 And how conditions have become dysfunctional
 The man just wants to see you rested
 Since when was rest such a burden???*

Negm accuses the people of ignoring the "compassionate" man the president is while implying the absolute opposite which further complements the hilarity of the imagery. Elliot Colla implies that "the act of singing invective that satirizes feared public figures has an immediate impact that cannot be explained in terms of language, for learning to laugh

at one's oppressor is a key part of unlearning fear."⁴¹ Negm's poem thus empowered people to rally around the idea of liberty that leftist intellectuals in Egypt supported and protested for in the country by reducing the former president, Hosni Mubarak, to a laughable figure.

Negm never identified with the literary intelligentsia or intellectuals but with the leftists, students and the working class who were "at the periphery of an Egyptian cultural scene that was initially reluctant to critically engage with this radicalizing variant of vernacular poetry."⁴² The cultural scene was transformed by vernacular poets like Negm whose poetry influenced the poetics of dissent in Egypt. Through his poetry the marginalized voices in the society found representation and acknowledgement in the mainstream culture. His poetry found an appeal amongst the disenfranchised groups who were "united by an unwavering belief in the power of the masses and the spoken word to induce change."⁴³ Since the publication of radical material was censored in the country and majority of the population suffered from extreme poverty, Negm's poems found a different medium of propagation- song. Shawkat M. Toorawa comments that "song has been inseparable from vernacular poetry and some of the most famous vernacular poets owe a large part of their renown to musical versions of their work."⁴⁴ Negm's poems were given a musical rendition by Sheikh Imam, an Egyptian blind singer. Sheikh Imam's music, owing to its political nature, was banned across the country and was mostly circulated by hand by his followers. Negm and Imam's duo became increasingly famous in

⁴¹ Elliot Colla, 'The Poetry of Revolt' in *Dawn of the Arab Uprisings: End of An Old Order?* (Pluto Press, 2012)

⁴² Zeina G. Halabi, 'The literary lives of Umm Kulthūm: Cossery, Ghali, Negm, and the critique of Nasserism' *Middle Eastern Literatures* 19:1 (2016) 77-98, p. 88

⁴³ Zeina G. Halabi, 'The literary lives of Umm Kulthūm', p. 88

⁴⁴ Shawkat M Toorawa,, 'Poetry' in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Arab Culture, Cambridge Companions to Culture*, ed. by Dwight F. Reynolds (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) pp. 96-111

the 1960s and 70s when they held secret gatherings attended by students, leftists and their followers amongst the common population of Egypt. During the 2011 protests, the people chose his poetry as a medium of expressing their demands and grievances. The act of performing poetry became an integral part of understanding its semantic meaning as well. While Negm's poetry is inherently radical, it realized its full potential when the Tahrir Square resounded with the chants of angry protestors expounding their discontent with the president and dissent from his oppressive policies. Mazen Maarouf notes that "the protestors are now the medium of the poem. In the street nobody is silent, nobody is whispering the poem. They chant it defiantly."⁴⁵ The act of performing poetry agitates emotions and is capable of producing tangible reactions from the opposite side. Anna M. Agathangelou explains that "the act of struggle poetry can trigger violent reactions from those who hold power, just as the eroticism of a single moment can turn violent because of the existence of instabilities in a racially, sexually, class and regionally hierarchized world order."⁴⁶ As in the case of Tahrir Square protests where the protestors were physically attacked by the police forces with pellet guns, gas bombs and batons. The act of performing poetry communally in a public space posits a threat to the state due to the fact that during any protest the hierarchal order is suspended⁴⁷. The protestors are able to voice their concerns and demands despite the fear of attack from the oppressors. The oppressors, on the other hand, are bound by their primary duty to protect the people it is constitutionally responsible for and also to avoid the risk of seeming threatened by a

⁴⁵ Mazen Maarouf, *Poetry of Revolution* (Aljazeera, 2012) accessed at

<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/08/201283014193414611.html>

⁴⁶ Anna M. Agathangelou, 'Making Anew an Arab Regional Order?' in *On Poetry, Sex, and Revolution, Globalizations*, 8:5 (2011) 581-594

⁴⁷ Much like a carnival where 'what is suspended first of all is hierarchical structure and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety and etiquette connected with it — that is, everything resulting from socio-hierarchical inequality or any other form of inequality among people (including age)'.

collective of unarmed civilians. Protests, thus, give people the power to break through the semiotic relationships of hierarchy and show solidarity of purpose through visual and aural means. In his poem 'The Strike' Negm appeals to his audience to unite and speak against their oppressors.

*Chanters of the town
Come, chant of our town
We are here
Loyal as always to the promise*

Negm, having been a part of various revolutions throughout his life, was conscious of the power of the masses. His poems often addressed his loyal audience who were seeking for solutions to their troubled life under the regime of repressive governments and Negm's poems provided a creative solution for a political problem. However, it was the way in which his poetry brought people together in communal chants of his work that lead to tangible changes in the ruling of his country. The Tahrir Square protests lasted for eighteen days and led to the resignation of president, Hosni Mubarak. It was the extensive size of protests at the Tahrir Square that established the power of the people in Egypt who were given a voice by poets of protests like Ahmed Fouad Negm. His poetry and its musical renditions that were chanted during the protests was "a crucial activity and process itself, posited by the power of present demands in social and material life. Such songs. Slogans, etc., rouse the people to movements of transformations."⁴⁸ His poetry, essentially, was a call to arms for the people of Egypt to resist the oppression they were subjected to under the Emergency law imposed by the governments and to formulate a revolution of the people, by the people and for the people to overthrow their oppressors and create an alternative narrative for themselves. Anna M. Agathangelou propounds that "the (un)making of dominant understandings and practices of the revolutions have opened up

⁴⁸ Anna M. Agathangelou, *Making Anew an Arab Regional Order? On Poetry, Sex, and Revolution, Globalizations*, 8:5 (2011) 581-594

the space for us to think anew global transformation, telling us that another world is imminent."⁴⁹ Negm's poem 'The Strike' possess the same ability to imagine a world capable of change and a collective of people working together to bring about the said change. He says,

Each day
We open doors
And each day
We destroy obstacles
Each day
We set up buildings
Each day
We remove rubble
Each day
We're impregnated with chants
Each day

The image of opening "doors" and destroying "obstacles" hints at a change that happens everyday people get together to voice their emotions. Negm was aware that change can only happen when people will stand in solidarity with each other and hence he called out to them throughout his poem to "Unite! Unite! Unite!" in order to improve the conditions of his beloved "town." His poetry explicitly states his belief that in order for a revolution to succeed, the people of the country need to embrace their power and rally against the oppressive forces.

Throughout his poetry, Ahmed Fouad Negm shows a clear understanding of the corruption haunting his country and the sufferings of his people. His poetry despite attacking the bureaucracy and the ruling classes, is essentially addressed to the public in order for them to realize the violations they are subjected to. It was the directness of the

⁴⁹ Anna M. Agathangelou, *Making Anew an Arab Regional Order? On Poetry, Sex, and Revolution, Globalizations*, 8:5 (2011) 581-594

message that his poetry contains that led Negm to become the voice of the revolution in Egypt. Mazen Maarouf, who participated in the revolution in Egypt, wrote about the effect Negm's poetry had on not only his but also on the succeeding generations. In an article titled "Poetry of Revolution"⁵⁰ he wrote "Negm was arrested by many Egyptian regimes - mainly over the political poems that stuck so effectively in the minds of successive generations that during the Egyptian revolution they first gave the demonstrators their voice." His poetry is strongly worded and defiantly accuses the state of its villainy. The Egyptian government started losing its credibility within its citizen during the 1950s when the "sultans" began gaining excessive power and the divide between the rich and the power widened. The police, under the Emergency Law, acquired unrestricted jurisdiction and imposed a ban on the civil rights of the citizens, making them unheard and unseen. The protestors and the messengers of dissent were villainized and treated with violence. Shawkat M. Toorawa explains that "the rulers could imagine only the model that reproduces the world-as-imposition, according to which disenfranchised people are to act as a herd of sheep⁵¹ ... or as trapped ants and rats,"⁵² arresting the rebels and censoring poetry that spoke truths about the true circumstances of the state was a vehicle for them to suppress any thoughts of a revolution. However, the Egyptian revolution inspired by radical poets like Negm portrayed the image of defiant and fearless people who rallied on streets for their rights, an exact opposite of the image the rulers expected in order for them to maintain their reign. Negm's contribution, thus, reached beyond the bounds of artistic brilliance and brought about tangible changes in the political landscape of Egypt.

⁵⁰ Mazen Maarouf, *Poetry of Revolution* (Aljazeera, 2012) accessed at

<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/08/201283014193414611.html>

⁵¹ As echoed by Reginal Gibbons who said the state is characterised by its inability to sympathise with its subjects

⁵² Toorawa Shawkat, 'Poetry' in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Arab Culture*, *Cambridge Companions to Culture*, ed. by Dwight F. Reynolds (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) pp. 96–111

Ahmed Fouad Negm's poetry challenged the ideological as well as repressive state apparatuses by appealing to the collective conscience of his readers (also, listeners) and led them to a revolution. His poetic ability interfered with the politics of the state by creating an awareness of the working classes that faced the brutalities incurred by state power and stirring them to fight for their rights. Meena Kandasamy, in the next chapter, possess the same ability to unmute the subaltern and rewrite history to change the concurrent discourse in India.

Chapter 4

Educate, Agitate, Organise⁵³

"All my women militate. They have bombs, they belittle kings. They take after the sun, they take after me."⁵⁴

The Indian social and political landscape has been raging with storms of protests from the silent subaltern in the society. The Dalits⁵⁵ have been protesting for years to claim their place in the social landscape after being discriminated against for centuries based on a religious code of hierarchy. 20th century India saw major Dalit uprisings where men and women belonging to the lowest rung of society took to the streets to voice their dissent to the political, social and religious institutions and were accompanied by various student protests across the country. The protests were a far cry for the Dalit community to organise their collective, educate each other of their past struggles and agitate against the unfair treatment they have been meted with since the beginning of time. Dalit literature was the first step in creating a semblance of consciousness, specifically Dalit consciousness, in the community and encourage them to embrace their identities, their

⁵³ This slogan was coined by Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar, who was the first Dalit activist who advocated the formation of a casteless society. This slogan has since been used in the Dalit community to sensitise and organise their people for a collective movement for liberty.

⁵⁴ Meena Kandasamy, *Ms Militancy* (New Delhi: Navayana Publishing, 2010) p.8

⁵⁵ The Hindu society is divided into four different sects called caste. It is believed that of the four castes- Brahmins originated from the God's head, Kshatriyas from God's hands, Vaishyas from the thighs and Shudras from the feet and then come Dalits who lie below his feet. Dalits were labelled "untouchables" and continue to be harassed in the society along with the Shudras.

culture and rituals. Dalit literature emerged as a strong autobiographical voice where writers from the Dalit community wrote extensively about their experiences of caste and discrimination in a highly polarised society. Their autobiographical accounts served a revolutionary function in mainstream literary culture by exposing voices of artistic calibre and rebellion from a community that was branded “untouchable” and treated like slaves throughout their existence.

As the Dalit movement for recognition grew in the country, their literature became increasingly experimental and dissident in nature. Meena Kandasamy, a Dalit poetess, became the face of the new Dalit literary movement with her collection of poetry, *Ms. Militancy*. Meena Kandasamy identifies as a feminist Dalit social activist and writes extensively about caste oppression, gender discrimination and violence. Her poetry expresses a strong rebellion against religious myths that advocate the hierarchal order and patriarchal beliefs. She employs ancient myths and mythological figures to subvert the dominant narrative that is responsible for the persistence of a biased and discriminatory society. She presents a dramatic retelling of history through her poems that indulges in the voices of the subaltern while overturning the dominant narrative to empower them. This chapter will discuss Meena Kandasamy’s poetry collection and how it subverts classical myths, writes an alternate history, and presents a sharp commentary on caste oppression in the Indian society.

The Indian mythology consists of strict dictates for women to follow in their lifetime as daughters, wives, and mothers. The mythology functions on a lineage of patriarchy where women only exist as a secondary being to a man and their lives should be devoted in the service of first their fathers, then their husbands and finally their sons. In a religious text titled *Manusmriti* written by sage Manu, there are rules of behaviour such as “a virtuous wife should constantly serve her husband like a god, even if he behaves badly, freely indulges his lust and is devoid of any good qualities.”⁵⁶ He further mandates that a

⁵⁶ The Laws of Manu, trans, by Wendy Doniger with Brian K. Smith (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1991) p. 5.144

woman should never be independent and live her life as a subsidiary in any dynamic. *Manusmriti*, that is still followed in the traditional Indian society, further degrades the position of women belonging to a lower caste. The holy scripture banishes the entire community of lower caste women from mythological history⁵⁷ and states that

not a single story mentions a Shudra woman as the wife of a Brahmin or a ruler, even in extremity. Twice-born men who are so infatuated as to marry women of low caste quickly reduce their families, including the descendants, to the status of Shudras. A Brahmin who climbs into bed with a Shudra woman goes to hell; if he begets a son in her, he loses the status of Brahmin. No redemption is prescribed for a [twice-born] man who drinks the saliva from the lips of a Shudra woman or is tainted by her breath or begets a son in her.⁵⁸

Thus, Meena Kandasamy writing as a consciously Dalit women poet becomes an act of rebellion in a caste-obsessed society where religious authority belongs exclusively to upper class male members. Her poetry challenges the narrative of godly women whose alleged devotion towards the men in their lives has been used to confine women in subdued roles. Moreover, the subservience expected from women is validated through the role of mythological women whose submissiveness to the men has been elevated to a saintly quality. Gopal Guru, an eminent Dalit author and political scientist, writes

the tactical elevation of women- that 'behind every successful man there is a woman'- also suggests an ideological construction that often naturalises the survival status of women. Thus, raising woman to mother India tends to wrap their servility within a nationalist frame, while elevating them symbolically to the status of Annapurna (goddess of bounty) and Laxmi (goddess of wealth) is a smart move to achieve women's acquiesce to patriarchal domination over bounty and wealth.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ The latter part of the essay describes this mythological history and its importance in the Indian culture and politics

⁵⁸ The Laws of Manu, pp. 16-17

⁵⁹ Gopal Guru, 'Rejection of Rejection' in *Humiliation: Claims and Context*, ed. by Gopal Guru (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 216

Indian women are treated like goddesses in domestic as well as social sphere as providers of life-sustaining services while in reality they lack all agency in their lives. Even the great Indian goddesses like Sita, Draupadi, and Kannagi, who are often quoted as a hallmark of how a woman should be, ultimately fell prey to patriarchy. Meena Kandasamy uses the figures of all these mythological women and subverts their narrative in her poems. In her poem 'Celestial Celebrities'⁶⁰, she writes about goddesses who were sent from heaven to earth not to guide and protect mankind as religious texts profess but because they were strong-willed women who never feared to exercise their agency.

*because they held the magic key
to corridors of power
because they were fond of running off
and running away
the rivers⁶¹ here bear the names
of fallen women exiled to earth
when the heaven found them
too bloody hot to handle*

She gives voices to her female characters who served as silent muses throughout historical texts written about them. In 'Celestial Celebrities' she celebrates the rebelliousness of goddesses who in her words "has established a reputation for being wild and unrestrained and indiscriminate." In 'Random Access Man'⁶² she rewrites the story of Sita, the goddess was abandoned by her husband despite having proved her loyalty to him. In her world Sita is not a submissive wife who patiently suffered the abuse she was subjected to her husband, who according to mythology was the most righteous man on earth. She

⁶⁰ Meena Kandasamy, *Ms Militancy*, p. 16

⁶¹ All the Indian rivers are named after Indian goddesses who are traditionally believed to have been sent from heaven

⁶² Meena Kandasamy, *Ms Militancy*, p. 46

reimagines Sita as a woman conscious of her agency who not only recognises the flaws in her husband and her own unfulfilled desires but also takes action to appease her condition.

*Sure that he would never come
she sent her dickhead husband
on a wild-goose chase⁶³---Get me
the testicle of a golden deer,
she said, get me its musk
so we can rouse your manhood.*

Both these poems rebel against the dominant historical documentation where women acted as mute spectators witnessing men write their stories, as Penny Murray observes "man creates, woman inspires; man is the maker, women the vehicle of male fantasy, an object created by the male imagination, incapable of any agency herself."⁶⁴ Contrastingly, Meena Kandasamy unmutes her muse and actively engages in her actions. She writes her history in her words and through her actions that do not subscribe to the patriarchal code of conduct.

Meena Kandasamy's primary tool of rebellion is reclaiming female sexuality and the ideas associated with it. All mythological female figures have been represented as sexually docile in their relationships with men chosen for them while they remain oblivious to their desires. Indian scriptures equate a woman's honour with her sexuality stating that a woman should not indulge in exploring her sexual desires and remain faithful to one man all her life. Meena Kandasamy's women break free from such dictates and are ferociously

⁶³ A revision of the mythical tale where goddess Sita sent her husband, Lord Ram, to hunt a golden deer she spotted in the forest while they were in exile. Sita is believed to have been entranced by its beauty.

⁶⁴ Penny Murray, 'Reclaiming the Muse' in *Laughing with Medusa: Classical Myth and Feminist thought*, ed. by Vanda Zajko and Miriam Leonard (Oxford Scholarship Online: 2010), p. 2

sexual. She addresses her poem 'Backstreet Girls'⁶⁵ to the "moral police" and speaks about women who make active decisions about their sexuality themselves without the interference of a patriarchal dictate. She writes

*There will be no blood on our bridal beds.
We are not the ones you will choose for wives.
We are not the ones you can sentence for life.*

She brings forth women who have "self-love" on their minds and are not afraid to express their sexuality. In her poem 'Ms Militancy', she converts the sexuality of her subject into a weapon. She plays on the mythical story of Kannagi who avenged her husband's assassination by the king by chopping off her breast and cursing the kingdom which later turns to dust.

*Vending vengeance, she made a bomb
of her left breast and blew up the blasted city.
Long after that land had turned to ashes,
the rest of her plucked breast bled.*

'Ms Militancy' transforms a woman's body and her sexuality into an effective tool to resist patriarchal notions of the female body. She challenges the popular telling of myths that have served as a "space for the projection of male fantasies, and as a site of androcentric self-valorisation."⁶⁶ The female body is reclaimed through her writing as a celebration of "militancy" against the mythical tales and scriptures that arrest its sexuality.

Kandasamy further elaborates upon the caste struggles and prejudices that exist in the society. In her poem titled 'Emergency' she presents a sharp commentary on the

⁶⁵ Meena Kandasamy, *Ms Militancy*, p. 36

⁶⁶ Rajeshwaru S. Vallury, *Surfacing the Politics of Desire: Literature, Feminism and Myth* (London, England: University of Toronto Press 2008) p. 5

discrepancy in the professional lives of upper and lower caste women. She begins her poem by quoting Alfred Tennyson "cannon to the right of them,/cannon to the left of them,/cannon in front of them" and uses his words as an allusion to the lives of female doctors belonging to lower castes working in rural India. She creates a scene of protests against the reservation system in education with women on the streets facing "water cannons", "tear gas shells" and "lathi charge." She elucidates the contrast between the lives of these women and their counterparts working in villages

*Moving on to 24-hour news channels
health divas empty out the hospitals.
But elsewhere, their lowercaste sisters
continue their professional practice.*

She goes on to create an extensive list of women doctors working in villages who work in suboptimal conditions to make a living and are often paid in "in rooster, or on hungrier days, in goats." Her poem calls out the privileged upper caste professionals who are heard on national channels while their lower caste struggle to make a living in the same profession. Her commentary arises from the prejudices lower caste professionals face in urban setups where they are denied opportunities due to their caste. The reservation system that was introduced to bridge the gap⁶⁷ between the resources and representation of lower caste individuals in order to provide them equal opportunities in the education system has faced backlash from individuals from upper castes who believe their counterparts are receiving undue advantage in the system. However, their belief is flawed since lower caste individuals continue to be harassed in educational setups, if they manage

⁶⁷ The reservation system in India offers a specific number of places in educational as well as some government institutions to compensate for the lack of resources available to the lower castes and Dalits. Due to social ostracization prevalent throughout centuries, they continue to live in ghettos, most of them struggling with poverty, and hence are deprived of the resources available to upper caste members.

to secure a place for themselves, they are still deprived of equal opportunities in professional workspaces and they are forced to work in unyielding circumstances for insufficient income. Her poem calls out the flawed interpretation of the reservation system by the privileged sects of society and presents the reality of working conditions of lower caste professionals. Furthermore, in her poem 'One-eyed'⁶⁸ she alludes to the ancient practice that disbars lower caste individuals from drinking from the same water resource as an upper caste individual. She writes

*the pot sees just another noisy child
the glass sees an eager and clumsy hand
the water sees a parched throat slaking thirst
but the teacher sees a girl breaking rule
the doctor sees a medical emergency
the school sees a potential embarrassment*

She recounts an incident where a girl is punished for drinking out of the same pot as the rest of her classmates. She is physically punished as a result of which "light [is] slapped away" from her left eye. Her story is one among many where Dalits have been punished for using the same wells, pots or taps being used by upper caste communities in the same villages.

Meena Kandasamy, furthermore, uses language, form and tone of the poetic tradition to her advantage. She uses terse sentences that accentuate the effect of the myths she rewrites and the realistic portrayal of lower caste life she demonstrates. Throughout her collection she experiments with the poetic form which syncs with the new myths she introduces in the world. It also violates the traditional Hindu aesthetics that have been advancing the prejudice in the society against the lower caste community. Jaydeep Sarangi opines that "Dalit poetry in India is structurally alternative to the models prescribed by traditional Hindu aesthetics precisely because they are literatures of

⁶⁸ Meena Kandasamy, *Ms Militancy*, p. 41

sociological oppression and economical exploitation. It is subversive, or assault to anthropomorphic practice of casteism in India.”⁶⁹ For example, her poem ‘Celestial Celebrities’⁷⁰ follows a peculiar indentation pattern that creates an interesting visual shape

because they never cared
 who left sediments inside them
because they looked forward to going down
 when an opportunity presented itself

Another example of her defying the traditional indent pattern to create a visual impact is her poem ‘Moksha’⁷¹

<i>dharma</i>	<i>artha</i>	<i>kama</i>
<i>word-plowers</i>	<i>war-mongers</i>	<i>womb-raiders</i>

While the form is rebellious and experimental, her use of alliterations provides a semblance of rhythm to her poems. The use of “because they” as a recurring phrase in ‘Celestial Celebrities’ and the alliteration created with “word”, “war” and “womb” in ‘Moksha’ imparts a rhythmic quality to the poems. While in the first poem the recurring phrase strengthens the attempts to establish the strong characters of women sent down from heaven, in the second poem the alliteration stresses the continued oppression that the holy texts enable against the Dalit community. Kandasamy’s poems also portray a sense of carefully selected vocabulary that complements Dalit aesthetics. She uses terse sentences ripe with aggressive words like “bloody”, “slut”, “bitch” and “dickhead” that complement the

⁶⁹ Jaydeep Sarangi, ‘Metaphors of Conquest: Towards the Aesthetics of Dalit Feminism through select Texts and Contexts’, *Contemporary Voice of Dalit* 10.1(2018) 77-83, p.

⁷⁰ Kandasamy, *Ms Militancy*, p. 16

⁷¹ Kandasamy, *Ms Militancy*, p. 32

descriptions of sexual and physical violence she discusses in her poems. She provides graphic descriptions of women indulging in their carnal desires and the act of copulation, for instance in 'A Cunning Stunt' she writes

*cunt now becomes seat
abode, home, lair, nest, stable
and he opens my legs wider
and shoves more and shoves
harder and I am torn apart*

Her female centric sexual vocabulary challenges the phallogentric language of traditional texts where a woman's viewpoint is always absent. In her prologue titled "should you take offense" she asserts that her "language is not man-made; it is beyond the while hot rules of your seminal texts" and further says that it is "dark and dangerous and desperate in its eagerness to slaughter your myths"⁷² which corroborates the aggressively feminist vocabulary she employs. Additionally, her eccentric line breaking techniques add more character to her poems. Her sentences are free-flowing and create enjambments. All the poems quoted in this essay have run-on sentences without punctuation marks which exposes them to multitudes of meanings. Meena Kandasamy uses enjambments efficiently to introduce multiple ideas in her poems while also allowing the reader to interpret them in their subjective ways. Her line breaks are also sudden and abrupt which gives her poems a rebellious dynamic quality and assist her in deconstructing the traditional modes of representing women, sexuality and caste oppression. Suranjana Bhadra rightly notes that "the predominance of semiotic flux makes the language of poetry fluid, poetic and

⁷² Kandasamy, *Ms Militancy*, pp. 8-9

subversive thereby prefiguring a social change. Such distorted language breaks the conventional mode of language structure employed for the representation of women."⁷³

Meena Kandasamy's unconventional poetic techniques coupled with her attempt to subvert phallogentric myths and languages becomes symbolic as a rebellion in a society largely founded upon myths and traditions that arise from them. Myths have played an important part in documenting Indian history. Levi-Strauss⁷⁴ in his book 'Myth and Meaning' explains that history is made of rearranging mythological units. Through various permutations and combinations of mythological stories, history can be manipulated to ensure the ideological domination of the ruling classes. His opinion that documenting myths to form historical material being taught in schools which consolidates political, cultural and social beliefs becomes relevant in the Indian society which has a heavy religious influence⁷⁵ on its ideologies regarding social and political life. Indian history has long been biased towards the upper caste communities, specifically their male members. It favours the unfair treatment of the lower castes and women subjecting them to crude forms of maltreatment.⁷⁶ Furthermore, the women belonging to lower castes become

⁷³ Suranjana Bhadra, 'A 'Space' of One's Own: Exploring the Language of Resistance in Select Poems of Meena Kandasamy' in *PostScriptum: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Literary Studies*, 01 July 2018, Vol.3(ii), pp.93-100, p. 98

⁷⁴ Claude Lèvi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning* (Toronto, Ontario: University of Toronto Press, 1978), pp.34-43

⁷⁵ Indian political scenario is intrinsically linked with religion. Mahatma Gandhi, who is called the father of the nation in India, was of the view that "Politics divorced from religion has absolutely no meaning" and his idea continues to prevail in contemporary India

⁷⁶ In ancient India Dalits were made to walk bare feet in the colony of upper caste communities, they even had to erase their feet imprints as they walked, if any Dalit recited religious verses, hot molten lead was poured in their throats and many such practices were prevalent. In contemporary India, the practices have become

doubly marginalised- first, as part of the unfavoured community of Dalits and second, as a part of the unfavoured gender. Meena Kandasamy's revision of history which tells the story of the downtrodden and subverts the dominant narratives becomes a significant attempt in rebelling against patriarchal upper caste narratives. She constructs a history that militates against misogyny and is untouched by patriarchy as she announces in her poem 'Prayers to the red slayer'

*shouting slogans, and if you are ever called
to pose for the camera, or give interviews,
drop that pen and stop writing our story
as if it were your own.*

She invokes Indian god Brahma in the poem who is believed to be the creator of the universe in Hindu mythology and the writer of all history. She challenges his narrative of the world and reasserts that women are capable of telling their own stories.

Meena Kandasamy's social and political commentary through her poems dispenses two important functions in the ongoing protests in India. Firstly, her poetry generates awareness of the Dalit women struggle and collects narratives that recount instances of oppression and discrimination. Consequently, her poetry fuelled the social movement going on throughout the country to reclaim the public spaces that had been denied to the lower caste community and the stern boundaries that caged their women. Aparna Vyas⁷⁷ postulates that

institutionalised as majority of the Dalit community is forced to serve as manual scavengers, despite it being forbidden in the constitution of India.

⁷⁷ Aparna Vyas and Minati Panda, 'Reification of Collective Victimhood: Dalit Narratives, Social Repositioning and Transformation', *Psychology and Developing Societies*, March 2019, Vol.31(1) 106-138, p. 107

the narratives of collective assertion have contributed immensely in preparing the ground and sustaining the spirit of social movements among the marginalised and stigmatised communities for many decades. These metamorphose the feeling of anguish into anger against caste, religion or ethnicity-based oppression in the collective struggles by the affected marginalised communities.

Meena Kandasamy's accounts of vigorous rebellion affected the social landscape and are further substantiated by Vyas's view. Secondly, her writings can be interpreted as an "act of survival." Her poetry recognises the violence in history towards her community, deconstructs the myths that validate said violence and reinterprets history to assure the communal survival of her kind. As echoed by Adrienne Rich who writes that "until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male dominated society."⁷⁸

Meena Kandasamy is a keen observer of the Indian community. Her work reflects a comprehensive understanding of social oppression suffered by the members of the Dalit community and exerts potential to recreate the history of the subaltern. Nimmi Gowrinathan⁷⁹ poetically describes Meena Kandasamy in her essays remarking that "when others are distracted, Kandasamy is watching closely. She offers a political position that does not simply footnotes the role of culture but exposes it as it protects perpetrators of violence, punishes protestors and entrenches political agendas." 'Ms Militancy' portrays Meena Kandasamy's poetic ability to not only observe but also destabilise patriarchal and oppressive narratives that have been manacled women, specially doubly marginalised women, in strict gender roles and regulations. Her poetry is rebellious as well as

⁷⁸ Adrienne Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision', *Women, Writing and Teaching*, October 1972, Vol. 34 (1) pp. 18-30, p.18

⁷⁹ Nimmi Gowrinathan, 'Resisting Misogyny and Caste: The Writings of Meena Kandasamy' in *ANTYAJAA: Indian Journal of Women and Social Change*, Vol.1(1) (2016) 110-113, p. 111

revolutionary in the Indian literary, social and political circle as it vocalises the centuries old discrimination and struggle of the lower caste communities to attain recognition in the mainstream society and at the same time overturns the historical narrative to support their movement for liberation from the oppressive system.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

A cumulative understanding of Lamar, Negm, and Kandasamy's work reflects the ability of political poetry to disrupt the persisting political practices of the states whose institutions are engineered to silence dissident voices in order to maintain their ideological and physical domination. All the three artists are effective critics of the state, its practices and propagandas which can be understood in terms of rebellion and revolution. Kendrick Lamar rebelled against dominant discourse in the United States that criminalised the black community and reinstated institutionalised violence towards them specifically in the form of police brutality. Furthermore, the communal chanting of his song accentuated the rebellion with protestors believing his words and his message of hope. He revolutionised the role of popular music in contemporary American culture as a constructive force that generates knowledge about the marginalised status of the black community and a tool to express dissent by people on streets seeking their rights. On the other hand, Ahmed Fouad Negm adopted the vernacular language and aesthetics in his poetry that stands in opposition to traditional Arabic poetry to authentically represent the anxieties of the working class in Egypt. His readers and listeners took equal part in realising the revolutionary potential of his work when they chanted his words during the Tahrir Square protests. He inspired physical reaction through his work which substantiates John Gardner's belief that "literature can turn an event towards its own political ends, giving it momentum and potentially transforming it into activity that can overcome political inertia. In short, poetry can do work."⁸⁰ The physical manifestation of both, Lamar and Negm, on the streets threatened the Repressive State Apparatuses and led to the destabilisation of the power relations in the society. Further continuing the revolutionary spirit, Meena

⁸⁰ John Gardner, 'Introduction: The Radical Ladder' in *Poetry and Popular Protest* (USA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) p. 2

Kandasamy's poetry vocalises the reality of the Dalit community, specifically Dalit women. Her poetry rebelled against patriarchal narratives that caged women and myths that supported the oppression of lower caste communities by the upper castes. Her revision of history is a revolutionary act in itself due to her position as a Dalit woman writer as both, Dalits and women, are prohibited to engage with religious myths and tales. Additionally, she revisits mythical tales in a way that reprises the role of women as rebellious and ferocious figures that resist patriarchal ideas. Her revision challenges the Ideological State Apparatuses and weaves the marginalised into the history of the state while they were constantly excluded from the state's version of it. Therefore, all of them are potent voices who write not only to resist various forms of oppression but also revolt against institutions that perform the act of oppressing.

Throughout their respective work, Lamar, Negm, and Kandasamy exhibit a revolutionary potential to transform oppressive aspect of power into an opportunity to act. With the act of writing and critiquing the state, they propagated a call for action against it. This transformation invokes Foucault's contention that power is not only oppressive but also productive. It is productive due to its causal relationship with revolt according to which the violent exercise of power in a community that is made aware of the unfairness of the oppression they face results in a retaliation through protests, revolts and collective actions. These narratives of the subaltern, further, allows the communities acknowledge and a window to establish their identities and existences in discourses that have treated them as subjects to be oppressive in order to demonstrate control. The moving imagery of struggles and protests that these works portray enable the communities to embrace their history and then take part in the making of the future of their respective landscapes.

A study of voices like Lamar, Negm and Kandasamy essential in the contemporary world where power and knowledge share a close relationship. The possession of knowledge affords one the luxury of power. In the present world where an era of post-truth⁸¹ is on

⁸¹ Consider present day India where the government, having recently suspended the independent status of Kashmir, continues to tell the world that the people of Kashmir are

the rise and information is being manipulated to suit the interests of the ruling classes, knowledge of the oppressed groups created by artists allows for an understanding of marginalisation wherein state's ideological manipulation is exposed. As popular information circulated in the mainstream culture becomes increasingly malleable, the narratives of suffering and revolt assume an important role of carving a space for the lives on the margins who continue to be oppressed and silenced. In times where states across the globe cling to power by forces of manipulation, it is the writers like Lamar, Negm, and Kandasamy who uphold the contention of Albert Camus about the responsibility of a writer to present authentic narratives and revolt against oppression of all kinds. Their role becomes pivotal in creating societies that are inclusive and provide equal opportunities to its citizens regardless of their race, class, caste or gender. Finally, through this dissertation I reinstate the ability of literature, in its various forms, to be a valuable expression of rebellion and revolution in marginalised communities, its value in providing recognition of struggles, and ultimately its potential to create social change by defying traditional representations of the subalterns while also rewriting empowering narratives of their own.

happy and content with the decision while it suspended basic rights of the people in the state where people are facing indefinite curfew, banned communication services, and extreme shortage of food supplies.

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