

## **To Mother**

### Table of Contents

- [To Mother](#)
  - [The poet, the original language of the poem and the translator](#)
  - [A short note on translation and languages in India](#)
  - [The original Kannada poem and its translation in English](#)
  - [Reading of the poem in Kannada and English](#)
  - [Detailed interpretation of different stanzas](#)
  - [Ways of Reading](#)
  - [Grammar – Personal Pronoun](#)
  - [Personal Pronoun and the theme and structure of the poem](#)
  - [Evaluation and sample exercises](#)
  - [Project work](#)

To Mother

**B.A. Programme Stream 'A'  
Course in English Ist Year  
Understanding Poetry III :: "To Mother"**

**Fellow Name:**

**Dr. Vibha Singh Chauhan, Associate Professor  
Department/ College: Zakir Hussain College, University of Delhi**

**Reviewer Name:**

**Dr. Rajiva Verma, Advisor, ILLS SDC  
Department/ College: South Campus, University of Delhi**

Teaching poetry is as much of a creative activity as writing it. Every new reading and every new reader brings to it different meanings and interpretations. Therefore any attempt at evolving systems and methods of teaching poetry can at best be tentative - almost lying in wait for newer and perhaps contradictory interpretations. So, what follows may be

seen as a personal approach to understanding a poem that could be enriched by inputs from both teachers and students. In fact, one of the big advantages of 'E-teaching' happens to be the limitless possibility of changing and evolving the teaching and learning content.

The poem "To Mother" connects poetic imagination and articulation with social discrimination against women. The interpretation here attempts to focus on both these issues. Besides that it also attempts to integrate some aspects of language learning with the poetic vision. It does so by organizing the teaching content under sections which should be considered as flexible rather than rigid. These are as follows:

The poet, the original language of the poem and the translator

## I. The poet, the original language of the poem and the translator

### The Poet

**S. Usha** is a senior Kannada poet who has been writing for many years. She uses many myths and legends in her poems. S. Usha writes both short and long poems which have an intensity of thought. Her feminist voice is mature and not just shrill. Usha is never over-excited in her poems. There is a definite sense of rhythm in her poems though they are in free verse. [CONNECT TO - <http://sotosay.wordpress.com/2006/09/05/contemporary-kannada-poetry-ii/> FOR MOREINFORMATION].

PHOTOGRAPH OF THE POET S. USHA TO BE INSERTED HERE. (Poet has been requested to send a photograph)

### Kannada, the original language of the poem:

**Kannada** is one of the major Dravidian languages of India, spoken predominantly in the southern state of Karnataka. It is the 27th most spoken language in the world, with native speakers called Kannadigas numbering roughly around 35 million. It is one of the official languages of India and the official and administrative language of the state of Karnataka.

The first written record in the Kannada language is traced to Emperor Ashoka's Brahmagiri edict dated 230 BC. At present, a committee of scholars is seeking a classical language tag for Kannada based on its antiquity.

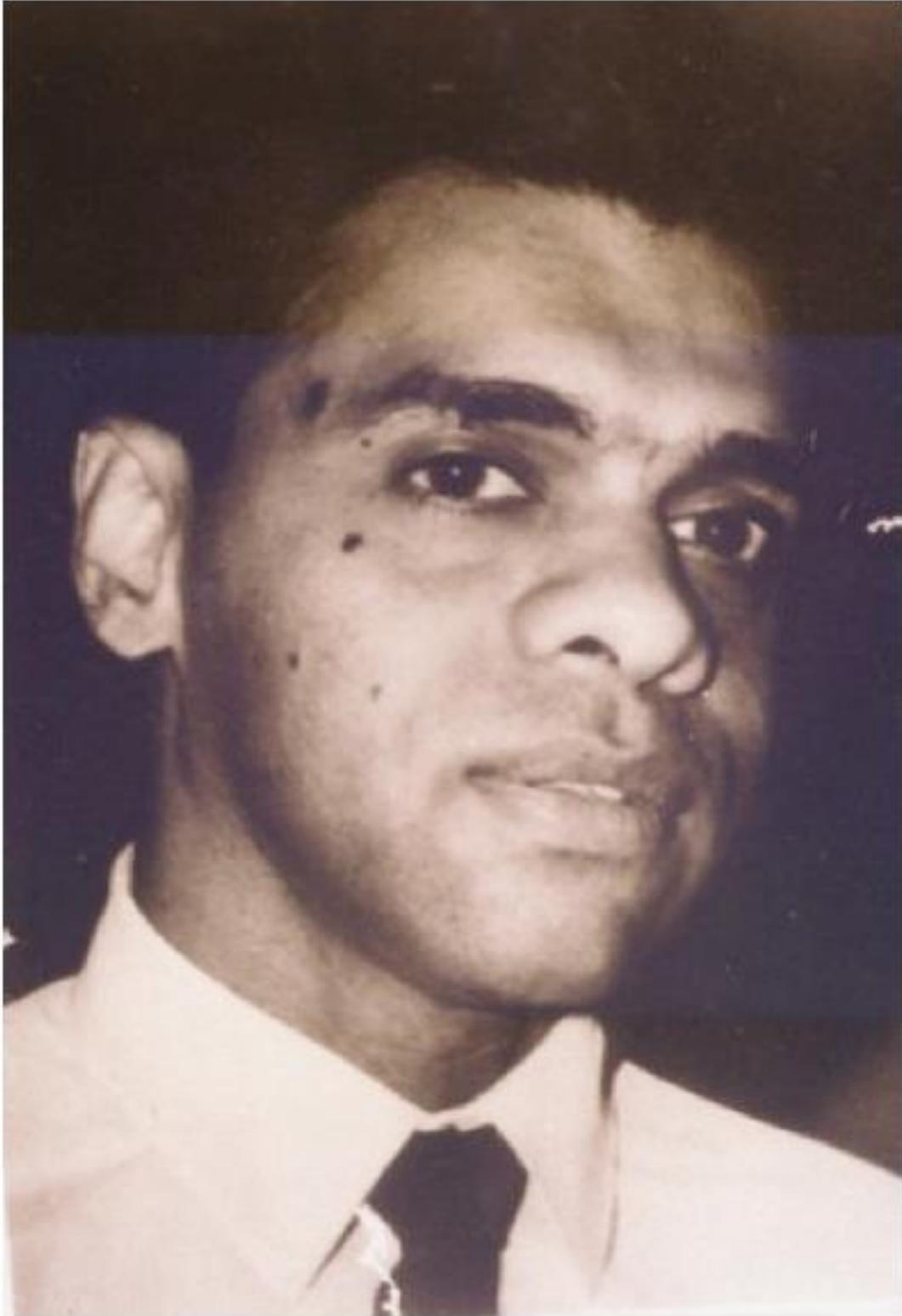
The Kannada language is written using the Kannada script. The other native languages of Karnataka, Tulu, Kodava Takk and Konkani are also written using the Kannada script. India's highest literary honor, the Jnanpith awards, has been conferred seven times upon Kannada writers, which is the highest for any language in India. [MATTER TAKEN FROM <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kannada>. GO TO THE SITE FOR MORE INFORMATION].

### **The translator:**

The poem "To Mother" has been translated from Kannada into English by A.K. Ramanujan (1929-1993)[HYPERLINK - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A.K.Ramanujan>].

He was an eminent scholar of Indian culture and literature and had mastered many languages like English, Tamil, Kannada, Telugu and Sanskrit.

(LINK FOR A.K. RAMANUJAN'S PHOTOGRAPH)  
<http://www.kamat.com/kalranga/kar/writers/6293.htm>



(1929-1993)

A short note on translation and languages in India

## **A short note on translation and languages in India**

India is a country of diverse living languages, literatures and cultures. Article 342 and the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India now identifies 22 languages as 'official' and lists more than 1652 languages as 'mother-tongues'

[HYPERLINK:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Languages\\_of\\_India](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Languages_of_India))([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/official\\_languages\\_of\\_india](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/official_languages_of_india))

While several languages have a written script and a developed literary culture, there are many others that have for centuries existed only in their spoken form. Many of our adivasi languages for instance, fall in this category. Their orality, regional insularity and the prejudice in favour of the written word has led to a neglect of these languages and the rich literature, philosophy and culture they carry within them. The advance in technology should now be used positively to make it possible for us to study and reserve these languages and the cultures they embody.

A multi-layered linguistic map of India shows the diversity of languages and scripts in the country

[FOR MAP AND MORE INFORMATION CONNECT TO  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Languages\\_of\\_India](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Languages_of_India) ]



The presence of such a large number of languages in India establishes the significance of translation as an activity that is not just desirable but inevitable. While it is true that it is impossible for any one of us to learn all the languages in India, almost all of us know more than one language without consciously trying to learn them and we quite naturally shift from one to the other, depending upon the occasion. Nonetheless, it is impossible for any single individual to learn all the languages in India and translation becomes the vehicle for us to travel from the culture of one language into another. Each language however, has its own cultural specific connotations and it is a challenging task to carry these to another language. Translation provides not just an opportunity to read the literature of a language we may not know but also familiarizes us with its culture.

The original Kannada poem and its translation in English

1. **The original Kannada poem and its translation in English**

**To Mother**

Mother, don't please don't,  
don't cut off the sunlight  
with your saree spread across the sky.

Don't say: You're  
seventeen already,  
don't flash your saree in the street,  
don't make eyes at passers-by,  
don't be a tomboy riding the winds.

Don't play that tune again  
that your mother,  
her mother and her mother  
had played on the snake-charmer's flute  
into the ears of nitwits like me.  
I'm just spreading my hood.  
I'll sink my fangs into someone  
And lose my venom.  
Let go, make way.

Circumambulating the holy plant  
In the yard, making *rangoli* designs  
To see heaven, turning up dead  
Without light and air,  
For God's sake, I can't do it.  
Breaking out of the dam  
You've built, swelling  
In a thunderstorm,  
Roaring through the land,  
Let me live, very different  
From you, Mother.  
Let go, make way.

### **Reading of the poem in Kannada and English**

After this first reading of the poem in English the students are expected to grasp the basic theme of the poem. A few general questions posed for the students could assist them in thinking about it. Some of these could be like the following:

- What is the poem about?
- Why do you think the poem is called "To Mother"?
- Whose voice do we hear in the poem?
- Is there any change in this voice as the poem progresses?
- Do you think that the poem reflects some specific problems in society?

Detailed interpretation of different stanzas

### **Detailed interpretation of different stanzas.**

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Each stanza could be read and interpreted in detail.

### Stanza - I

Mother, don't please don't,  
don't cut off the sunlight  
with your saree spread across the sky  
blanching life's green leaves.

The first stanza has three dominant **images** – sunlight, saree, green leaves/plants. An image may be understood as a 'pen picture' or use of words to create objects that we may visualize in our mind's eye. These objects however represent meanings that may be different from what they physically represent e.g. it is a common technique in cinema to show an ill man in one shot and a lamp being extinguished in another to show his death. When we see these two shots together we are able to perceive the fact of the death of the character without being told about it. The lamp being extinguished thus becomes an image of death. Similarly, the sunlight, saree and green leaves/plants represent ideas that go beyond their physical aspects.

The imagery in a poem may also make use of **metaphor** or **simile**.

Metaphors and similes are used by poets to visually communicate an idea to the reader. They are often mentioned together as examples of rhetorical figures. Metaphor and simile are both terms that describe a comparison: the only difference between a metaphor and a simile is that a simile makes the comparison explicit by using "like" or "as." The Columbia Encyclopedia, 6th edition, explains the difference as:

*a simile states that A is like B, a metaphor states that A is B or substitutes B for A.*

According to this definition, then, "You are my sunshine" is a metaphor whereas "Your eyes are like the sun" is a simile. [FOR MORE

INFORMATION CONNECT TO - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metaphor>]

**Symbols** are objects, characters, or other concrete representations of ideas, concepts, or other abstractions. For example the picture of a skull means danger. [FOR MORE INFORMATION CONNECT TO - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symbol>].

The first symbol in the poem is that of the saree cutting off the life-giving sunlight, causing the green leaves of a plant to wilt. The saree gets connected not only to the mother in the title but also to generations of patriarchal tradition and convention in India that discriminate against the woman and her growth and evolution into an independent person.

An interesting fact is that it is not a man but the mother - a woman herself - who attempts to impose patriarchal norms on her seventeen years old daughter. We can understand and appreciate the significance of this fact only if we differentiate between the concepts of **biological sex** and **gender**. While sex is something biological - given at birth - gender roles are created through generations of social conditioning that determines norms, morality, social etiquettes and social roles of individuals belonging to different sexes. These social norms are inculcated not just by men but by the women too.

**Simone de Beauvoir** is one of the early thinkers to discuss this concept of social conditioning in detail.

**Simone de Beauvoir** (*pronounced* [simɔ̃də bo'vwɑʁ] in French) (*January 9, 1908 – April 14, 1986*) was a French author and philosopher. She wrote novels, monographs on philosophy, politics, and social issues, essays, biographies, and an autobiography. She is now best known for her metaphysical novels, including "She Came to Stay" and "The Mandarins", and for her 1949 treatise "The Second Sex", is a detailed analysis of women's oppression and a foundational tract of contemporary feminism.

[FOR MORE INFORMATION CONNECT TO - [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simone de Beauvoir](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simone_de_Beauvoir) ]

In male-centered, patriarchal societies these societal norms work in favour of the male and discriminate against the woman. What this also manages to do is to create mindsets of both men and women who

inculcate these norms and become the means of reproducing these in society.

The mother addressed in the poem is also one such woman who attempts to bring up her daughter according to the patriarchal norms that she herself has grown with. It is generations of gender conditioning that the speaker protests against in stanza III when she talks about her mother's mother, "her mother and her mother."

The poem thus tries to establish that a woman may be repressed not just by the man but by another woman too. What therefore a woman has to fight against is the prevailing patriarchal setup and not the male. It is in this context that the title of the poem "To Mother" also becomes significant. It is the mother who spreads her saree and stops the sunlight from reaching the plant, representing the young girl. The **saree** then becomes a symbol of the woman as well the patriarchal norms that become a hurdle in the process of the young girl's growth. It also becomes a symbol of stopping her natural growth because it stops the rays and light of the sun from reaching her. The **sun** is a symbol of nature and the **light of the sun** may be seen as a symbol of life as well as knowledge destroying physical as well as mental darkness. This also makes clear the opposition that exists between nature and nurture, with the mother trying to keep away from her daughter those natural aspects that may make her growth unruly and wild, against social expectations, even though the daughter's growth may get stunted.

### **Stanza - II**

"Don't say: You're seventeen already,  
don't flash your saree in the street,  
don't make eyes at passers-by,  
don't be a tomboy riding the winds."

This stanza articulates the patriarchal norms of coyness, timidity and self-effacement that the patriarchal system expects the seventeen years old girl to inculcate within herself. The responsibility for this is given to the

family, especially the mother.

The term 'tomboy' may be seen as a woman violating the gender role of the woman and stepping into the exclusive domain of the male.

### **Stanza - III**

Don't play that tune again  
that your mother,  
her mother and her mother  
had played on the snake-charmer's flute  
into the ears of nitwits like me.  
I'm just spreading my hood.  
I'll sink my fangs into someone  
And lose my venom.  
Let go, make way.

Three aspects could be considered in this stanza:

- the conditioning of societal norms over generations
- the image of the snake
- the issue of translation

The young girl asks her mother not to repeat the tune that has been sung to women over generations. The tune clearly refers to the repetitive, rhythmic and ritualistic repetition of patriarchal norms that generations of women have grown up listening to. The young girl says that this tune has been played on the 'snake-charmer's flute'. The image is of the music

from the 'snake-charmer's flute' charming the snake to such an extent that it forgets its basic nature, its venom, its strength, and begins to sway to the same music for the benefit of others. The young girl however, says that the tune will have no impact on her because she is a 'nitwit' or an idiot.

It is possible that she is called a 'nitwit' by others who think that she does not follow the expected social role because she does not have the ability to do so. This also raises the issue of normative and deviant behaviour, questioning the very concept of what is 'normal'. Is it normal to be natural? To what extent should/can the natural be re-shaped? What are the various ways in which this is achieved in society? This issue has been discussed by various thinkers too.

**Foucault** is one of the most well known philosophers of modern times to have discussed this in detail.

**Michel Foucault** (*pronounced [miʃɛl fuko]*) (*October 15, 1926 – June 25, 1984*) was a *French philosopher, historian, critic and sociologist*. He taught at the *University of California, Berkeley*.

*Michel Foucault is best known for his critical studies of various social institutions, most notably psychiatry, medicine, the human sciences, and the prison system, as well as for his work on the history of human sexuality. Foucault's work on power, and the relationships among power, knowledge, and discourse, has been widely discussed and applied [FOR MORE INFORMATION LINK TO - [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michel\\_Foucault](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michel_Foucault)].*

The young girl goes on to say that she will spread her hood like a snake when she hears the age-old tune of social expectations but instead of dancing to the tune she would attack 'someone' and 'lose her venom'. She believes that everybody around her is conspiring to break her and fit her into the patriarchal value system and so even if she attacks 'someone' at random, that person would be one of the conspirators. It is only when she is able to attack and resist these forces that she will 'lose' her 'venom' - her anger and her aggression.

The original language of the poem is Kannada and the term 'snake

charmer's flute' is a translation of the original term used for the instrument. In Hindi, it is called "been".

The term 'flute' brings to the mind an image that is very different – called 'bansuri' in Hindi. The pictures which follow show the difference between the Indian flute 'bansuri' and the 'been' that is called the 'snake charmers flute' in the poem.

### **The Indian Bamboo Flute**



Photograph of an 8-holed bamboo [PHOTOGRAPH FROM [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/51/Indian\\_bamboo\\_flute.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/51/Indian_bamboo_flute.jpg)]



Various type of flutes being sold by a boy in a local market in [Bangalore, India](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:The_Flute_seller.jpg) [PHOTOGRAPH FROM [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:The\\_Flute\\_seller.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:The_Flute_seller.jpg) ]



Snake charmer in [Jaipur \(India\)](#) in [2007](#) [PHOTO TAKEN FROM [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Charmeur\\_de\\_serpents\\_à\\_Jaipur\\_%282007%29.JPG](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Charmeur_de_serpents_à_Jaipur_%282007%29.JPG) ]

The example also draws our attention to the fact of impossibility of

culturally loaded facts or feelings being transferred to a language from a very different culture. However, despite that, translation is an essential literary need in a country like India with many languages. Even in the present case, many of us who do not know Kannada, would not have been able to read and appreciate the poem.

*(The resources present amongst the students could be utilized here. If there is a student in class who knows Kannada, she could be asked to tell others the original Kannada word for 'snake-charmer's flute' and then see if it can replace the translated phrase. It could also be discussed why the term rangoli has been used in the original in the last stanza. Also the point about putting the term rangoli in italics may be discussed).*

The last line of the stanza "Let go, make way" is repeated at the end of the poem. This will be - discussed later.

#### **Stanza - IV**

Circumambulating the holy plant  
In the yard, making *rangoli* designs  
To see heaven, turning up dead  
Without light and air,  
For God's sake, I can't do it.  
Breaking out of the dam  
You've built, swelling  
In a thunderstorm,  
Roaring through the land,  
Let me live, very different  
From you, Mother.

Let go, make way.

The 'holy plant' is the tulasi that is traditionally worshipped by women in Hindu households. Its presence in the poem indicates how gender roles and norms are reinforced through religion. The worship involves a ritual that has come down the ages and is strengthened by the belief of it resulting in bliss after death.

The lines

"turning up dead  
without light and air"

are somewhat ambiguous. It could be understood as a rejection by the young girl of the concept of heaven after death. What she seeks is the 'light' of the sun and the 'air' of freedom where her self can take shape, and not redemption after death in an unknown realm.

Unlike the women in the generations before her, the young girl refuses to chase the dreams of heaven after death. Instead, she wants to destroy all the hurdles that have been created by generations of patriarchal system and like a raging river in its natural fury, break through the dam of conventions created by human society. Like the river in its natural form, the young girl will discover her natural strengths, break through social barriers and live a life very different from her what her mother and her mother has had.

The last line of the poem - "Let go, make way" - is a repetition of the last line of the earlier stanza. However, the moods expressed at these two points are completely different. In the earlier instance, the young girl is "just spreading her hood" and is still engaged in the struggle to establish her space. Her words, "Let go, make space" almost creates the impression of her trying to elbow out of the chains of patriarchy that surround her. By the time she reaches the end of the poem, she seems to have already destroyed these same structures as she surges on like a

river with all its destructive force and her words "Let go, make way" are more like a warning to all around her to save themselves from her irrevocable advance.

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## Ways of Reading

A text may be read in more than one way, depending on the emotional, mental inputs and experiences of the reader. For instance, readers of this poem who may be aware of the Indian social condition may read an additional meaning into the first stanza. The absence of sunlight connotes death and the image of life being cut off may bring the image of female infanticide or dowry deaths of women in India.

The bad record of gender ratios in India indicates gross violation of women's rights. Even science and technology has been misused for selective abortions of female foetus. In some states the sex ration of girls to boys has dropped to less than 800:1000 and may be seen as a manifestation of violence against women and their **Human Rights** (Universal Rights to which every person is entitled because they are justified by a moral standard that stands above the laws of any individual nation, best enunciated in the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" adopted by UN General Assembly Resolution 217 A (III) of 10 December 1948. [FOR MORE INFORMATION CLICK ON [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human\\_rights](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_rights)]

It is estimated that:

- A dowry death occurs in India every 93 minutes
- About 10,000 girl children are murdered by female infanticide every year.
- A woman is battered somewhere in India every 15 seconds (UN Statistics)

## Dowry Prohibition Act

Article in *Time* magazine quoted that deaths in India have increased 15 – fold since mid-1980s from 400 a year to around 5,800 a year by the end of the 1990s. (Is this a result of more dowry deaths or that of more reporting?) This is besides the women who are left maimed or scarred.

Some quote 25,000 as this figure, with about 15,000 deaths.

[FOR MORE INFORMATION ON THESE ISSUES CLICK ON THE FOLLOWING

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Female\\_infanticide](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Female_infanticide)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bride\\_burning](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bride_burning)

There has however been some positive Acts and laws that have been introduced in India. A few important ones are :

- 1961 – Anti Dowry Law
- 1983 – Domestic violence punishable by law.
- 1992 – 73<sup>d</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> amendments formally instituted reservation for 1/3 women's participation in local level democratic institutions.

(These issues may be debated by the students).

Grammar – Personal Pronoun

**Grammar – Personal Pronoun** [HYPERLINK:  
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pronoun>]

A Pronoun is a word used instead of a noun.

*I, we, you, he, she, it* are called Personal Pronouns because they stand for three persons:

- the person speaking (First Person e.g. *I, mine, me, we, our, ours, us*)

- the person spoken to (Second Person e.g. *you, your, yours*)

- the person spoken of (Third person e.g. *he, his, him, she, her, hers, it, its, they, their, theirs, them*)

[FOR MORE INFORMATION CONNECT TO  
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pronoun> ]

**NOTE: COLLABORATION WITH INSTITUTES LIKE CIIL (MYSORE) CIFL (HYDERABAD) MAY BE VERY USEFUL IN HANDLING**

**LANGUAGE TEACHING PORTIONS OF THE SYLLABUS. THESE INSTITUTES ARE SPECIALIZED IN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND HAVE PRODUCED TEACHING AIDS OF VARIOUS KINDS FOR THE PURPOSE.**

Personal Pronoun and the theme and structure of the poem

The first and second person pronouns are mixed throughout the poem but in the beginning when the poem addresses the mother, it is dominated by the second person pronouns like 'your' and 'yours'.

A shift occurs with the coming of the image of the snake sinking its fangs into "someone" and we find more use of first person pronouns like 'my', 'I' and 'me'.

This represents a simultaneous movement in the mood and content of the poem which moves from a request, to a struggle, anger, rejection, and then a final assertion of strength. The thematic focus shifts from the mother who is in control in the beginning to the young daughter who takes charge of her own life and shapes her own destiny.

Evaluation and sample exercises

**Evaluation and sample exercises**

1. *Discuss and write answers to the following.*

- Do you think there is any similarity between the images of "a tomboy riding the winds" and the river "breaking out of the dam"? Discuss how these may be connected to the theme of breaking down barriers in the poem.
- Do you think that the poem "To Mother" ends in hope or hopelessness? Give reasons for your answer.
- Do you think the image of the saree in stanza I narrows down the relevance of the poem by placing it within the Indian context? Discuss.
- What do think could the reaction of the mother who hears her seventeen year old daughter speak out her mind in the way she does in

the poem?

- Do you think that the image of the snake is in some way different from those of the wind and the river? Discuss.

2. *In the following sentences use Pronouns in place of nouns wherever you can:*

(a) Rama had taken his watch out of his pocket and was looking at the watch uneasily, shaking the watch every now and then, while holding the watch to his ear.

(b) The boys went into the garden where the boys saw a snake.

(c) Very soon the rabbit noticed Alice as Alice went about and the rabbit called out to Alice in an angry tone.

3. *Write the correct form of pronouns in the blanks:*

- Can you sing as well as ----- ? (the, they)
- Wait for Hari and ----- . (I, me)
- We are not so poor as ----- . (they, them).
- Whom can I trust if not ----- . (He, him). \*

\* Taken from P.C. Wren and H. Martin Edi. *High School English Grammar and Composition* (S.Chand, New Delhi, 1936 rpt. 1994).

Project work

- To begin with students could attempt to translate some specific words like the following into their own mother tongues:

Sunlight, blanching, leaves, tomboy, winds, snake-charmer's flute, nitwits, spreading, hood, fangs, venom, holy, rangoli, light, break build,

dam, thunderstorm, rolling, different.

- The students could then attempt to translate and write down the complete poem in their different mother-tongues. This would provide the students with the opportunity of seeing what some other languages and scripts in India sound and look like.