

**“The Metaphorical Presence of River in the poems of Lakshmi Kannan”
– A FEMINISTIC APPROACH**

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Abstract: *Lakshmi Kannan who has been with and different from the poetic sensibilities of the post-Independence Indian English poets who have contributed to establish Indian English poetry as an independent enterprise among Common Wealth English Poetry. Indian landscape and religious beliefs provide an ideal background to her poetry which is characteristic of modern Indian English Poetry. Lakshmi Kannan’s poetry reveals its distinctiveness in the treatment of myth (religion and river) to acquire an authentic voice and a unique identity of its own. Gods who act as guiding and inspirational force and river as a mythical force in her poems have been examined here which provides her a rightful place in the modern Indian poetic scenario to establish an identity of her own.*

Key Words: *feminine consciousness, river myth, regenerative force, symbiotic relationship, psychic energy, timeless energy, metaphorical counterpart, mythical primordial craving.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Lakshmi Kannan establishes an inherent fusion of river myth and its vital role in the transcendence of women’s lives. The symbolic significance of water being a regenerative force is further explored in the selected poems of Lakshmi Kannan.

River occupies a major space in the thought system of Lakshmi Kannan’s poems. It is one of the predominant themes in the collection, ‘Unquiet Waters’. River as a metaphor runs throughout, like a subterranean stream is the leitmotif of the collection - the flowing of rivers and their metaphorical counterpart in a woman’s life. In her interview with Ranjana Harish she says, “It has great religious significance in the south ... It is almost like a goddess for them ... They have the rich repository of knowledge and reaction to the sacred river”.¹ She is closely associated with river kaveri since her childhood days. The long cherished memories find its finest expression in her representative poems. She even assumes the pen name, ‘kaveri’ when she writes in Tamil.

Naturally, kaveri in particular and river/water in general flows metaphorically in her subconscious.

Since the days of earliest civilization mankind has found rivers/water as a source of life, Seat of religion and the preserver of culture. Lakshmi Kannan assimilates the similar line of thought and assigns mythical status to rivers. Heinrich Zimmer says:

“From the period of the early Vedas down to the Hinduism of the present, water has been regarded in India as a tangible manifestation of the divine essence. The water is regarded, for the period of the worship, as a residence or seat (pitha) of the god. It is the life-maintaining element that circulates through nature in the forms of rain, sap, milk and blood. Therefore, in the symbolism of the myths, to dive into water means to delve into the mystery of maya to quest after the ultimate secret of life”²

He opines that waters are boundless and imperishable. The cosmic waters are at once the immaculate source of all things and the dreadful grave. For a time it nourishes and sustains, but it dissolves them again, without mercy or distinction. It is the all-consuming, universal womb. In the course of her writing, lakshmi kannan bears in mind the mythical precognition that water is creator, preserver and destroyer. Her poems perspectivize this mythical concept to explore a symbiotic relationship between women’s lives and water in all its grandeur.

In ‘The Song of the Seven Seas’, the spiral shell of a conch is a female being with, ‘her body soft as a marine mollusc/ to the stinging, brackish waters’. The softening process of the women’s body and mind at the, ‘ocean floor’ of society by the ‘tumultuous waves’ of the male-domination has gone on for centuries. But ironically this subjugation has been used as an opportunity to record the resonance of all the colors of voices:

... shaded yellow, white and black
from across the seven seas
daughters of the ocean, each one of them,
female born to a female energy, zoetic.

(‘The Song of the Seven Seas, Unquiet Waters, p. 114)

The verbal magnificence transports the readers to a sublime world of creation. The conch is the reservoir of the echoes of the seven seas which are the, ‘daughters’ born to a ‘female energy’. The unfathomable creative force of a female has been unfolded incisively. If giving birth is creativity, then, water is undoubtedly the, ‘female energy’ and it is an apt metaphor for women writers to excavate.

In ‘The Salt in you, Mother’, ‘I’ representing the woman kind, when engrossed with the ‘nothingness’ of this scorched earth confidently returns to the ‘cool well’ seeking energy:

I return to your healing waters
that never fail, they’re magical,
I get into the cool recesses of your well
to soak I the secretive reserves of water

(‘The salt in you, Mother’, Unquiet waters, p.121)

The speaker is confident that water has the powers to rejuvenate the psychic energy and believes in the enigmatical spiritual force to revitalize one’s self. She continues to assert:

I came to bury myself in your well, mother that restored me to myself .

(‘The Salt in you, Mother’, Unquiet waters, p.122)

The speaker recognizes with a child yearning to sleep in a mother's lap. The grown-up adult totally surrenders to mother water urging to reinstate her lost self.

In, 'A Seasweep', selfless and generous qualities of a mother have been attributed to sea which doesn't accept anything from others:

They swept over the gifts, the waves

They threw them back on the shore:

('A Seasweep', Unquiet Waters, p. 123)

The mother cannot accept any gifts from the reared ones for all her care and sacrifice:

How very small and trivial they looked

for the sea.

('A Seasweep', Unquiet Waters, p.124)

The mother's sacrificial self has grown to such unfathomable limits that nothing seems to be symmetrical to her benevolence. The conscious choice of the role of a mother attributed to water is commemorable as the waters share more of feminine elements – creating, caring, sharing, energizing and inspiring. 'I' in lakshmi kannan's poems representing universal womanhood consider water as an embodiment of psychic energy which elevates one's self beyond all societal suppressing forces.

'A River Remembers' gives an exclusive literary experience which showcases - the sense of loss, murky experience, regret, hope and confidence of helpless women. This intricate psycho-physical experience is honestly shared by the river kaveri as it flows. Lakshmi kannan herself says, "River kaveri was once affectionately called 'ponni' in classical Tamil. Considered a sacred river, it is always perceived as a woman."³

She flows within the blood-stream of women

... River ponni flows as usual

remembering

how the women once buried their faces

in the silky folds of

her shining waters

seeking adventure, seeking life

(‘A River Remembers’, *unquiet Waters*, p.129)

The retrospection of the widowed women with their helpless past and hopeless future has been brought out with the striking imagery of the bald women on the banks of river kaveri. The visit of these women becomes so usual that the lifeless river also starts sharing the painful moments as another custom-based woman does. This sharing of experience becomes so persistent that the, ‘Unquiet Waters’ of ponni metaphorically flows in the subconscious of the ‘bald woman’, ‘seeking adventure’ and ‘seeking life’.

Condition of a widow is pathetic due to the inhuman treatment she receives at home and outside. Her only identity is widowhood. Forced to live a listless life of an accursed being:

She saw her fresh young face

Reflected on the waters.....

Now she saw other faces beside her

behind her and above her

faces not unlike her own

a whole gallery of gaunt faces

laved by flowing time.

(‘A River Remembers’, Unquiet Waters, p.130)

The young widow suddenly realizes that this identity of widowhood is shared by others since ages. The timeless nature of the flowing river, flowing time and the flowing customary subjugation of widowhood slowly merges into one universal whole. This complex mixture of water and experience flow toward ‘distant destinies’ in search of new identity.

The general understanding of river as a life-giving force and creative energy has been given a new outlook by lakshmi kannan as A.K.Ramanujan in, ‘A River’ does. The dual nature of river being a life-giver and destroyer has its metaphorical counterpart in a woman’s life:

Gomti. It’s only when you swell in pride
 Every few years,
 it’s when you rise in fury
 lashing at bridges, embankments
 shaking up the whole of Avadh.....
 When you’re quiet and acquiescent Gomti,
 you’re left high and dry.

(‘High and Dry’, Unquiet Water, p.136)

The traditional image and the romantic assumption of river being only the life-giving energy has been portrayed as a demonic force. Nobody can have a faintest idea of this potential devastating energy when it is ‘quiet and acquiescent’ with little water. It is this dichotomy which can be considered as a counterpart in a woman’s being. When it is ‘quiet high, and dry’ it is ignored and

taken for granted like a submissive woman. But when she assumes the form of an avenging Durga, she reveals a shape and identity that makes people sit up and take notice.

Lakshmi kannan brings in another river of mythical status, 'Ganga' to analyze its vital importance in woman's life. As the Ganges flows unaware of the filth it carries towards its destiny, the ocean, the woman with all her assumed sins advised by the guardians of culture to wash off the 'private' sins on the 'public ghat'. This woman has been :

Trying to be 'good'

had meant taking on a lot of filth.

Now her whole being itched

with the dirt of living.....

... It called for just such a holy dip

to rub the dead cells off the soul

to scrub the skin off the bone

till there was no sinning flesh left on the body. (‘Ganga’, Unquiet Waters, p.

137)

Heinichzimmer says, “She is the source of redemption... Heaps of sin, accumulated by a sinner during millions of births, are destroyed by the mere contact of a wind charged with her vapor...

As fire consumes fuel, so this stream consumes the sins of the wicked.”⁴ Like river Ganga which takes all the dirt, women have been loaded with sinful thoughts in the guise of tradition and customs. Ironically, though the woman is conscious of this atrocity, her thoughts are conditioned to be unaware of the vicious act and exhibit only 'Goodness'. The only hope to wash off this

soul-smearred dirt is to take a 'holy dip' in the Ganges. By bringing in a striking similarity between the river Ganga and the woman kind, has Lakshmi kannan been trying to raise an apt question: If Ganges can accept all the sins and offer redemption to mankind, can't the society accept that woman is the only life giving source to wash off all the sins of mankind? Though the poem raises this utopian idea, it returns the reader to reality. The woman who is forced with the dirt of living seeks to raise herself and consolidate her psychic energy on the banks of Ganga:

the waters...

Knocked her consciousness out

and dissolved her name...

She hurtled on with Ma Ganga

Seawards. ('Ganga', Unquiet Water, p.138)

The physical contact with the water transcends the limits of individualized consciousness. As the Ganga moves towards the ocean, the 'holy dip' of the woman is a gateway to elevate from the existential self to the essential universal self. It is a destined and fateful subconscious spiritual journey.

'Crossing the River' is another poem in the series with the thematic continuance of the river being an integral part of the woman's life. 'I', the typical Indian woman finds the inevitability to transcend from the bonds with the spiritual light of Buddhist philosophy.

The way to the river of life is a 'darkling road' paved by countless women sharing gloomy experience. The speaker in this poem is an every woman who empathizes with the agony of others. The physical differences slowly dissolve into all-inclusive mental space and are, 'destined to walk this road':

I cannot tell how many kalpas
brought us together
on this darkling road
we feel we've known each other all along,
now we walk, our faces turned to the east,
the air misting over with our whispered liturgy.
(‘Crossing the River’, Unquiet Waters, p. 151)

The choice of the word, ‘kalpa’ which means an immeasurably long measure of time in Sanskrit, reveals the plight of women from time immemorial. The only way out of this nightmarish experience is to seek refuge in waters:

I felt strangely happy though
about our age
not only because it freed us from fretting, from clinging,
but more because it took me closer
to the river Phalgu.
(‘Crossing the River’, Unquiet Waters, p.152)

‘It’ is the slowly emerging revolutionary voice of the marginalized women which has grown stronger with age. The matured voice of liberation has given them the strength to fight the imposed bonds. Moreover the growing awareness has transformed the journey of revolution from physical self to the subconscious transcendental energy. River phalgu is an apt metaphor and a guiding force for this self-actualization. In the Indic tradition, the Buddha attained enlightenment on the banks of the river phalgu and presents himself as a ‘ferryman’ to carry us across the river of life, from this world to the next. The speaker waiting for the ferryman to cross the river of life,

is the river which has been flowing between the two mental halves of the women psyche and the women crossing from the world of shackles to the world of self-created mental space of freedom. Lakshmi Kannan, through her writings has attempted to evolve seeking answers to women's problems from political arena to the philosophical world.

The journey, 'into this secluded path' to understand and analyze the intricate women's world, reflects Elaine Showalter's idea of an exclusive and impenetrable psycho-physical experience. But Lakshmi kannan's women, with a rich Indian philosophical background transcend themselves to subconscious spiritual cosmic experience through waters:

It was the waters...

Which cooled the brow

of troubled gods and mortals alike.

It was the waters

that unfailingly brought out

the youness

of you.

(‘It was the Waters’, Unquiet Waters, p.165)

Water has been considered as a mythical symbol of self- transformation for ‘gods’ and ‘mortals’. To dive into water symbolically means to quest after the ultimate secret of life. Water has the power to consolidate all the psychic energies and a total identification of consciousness with the ultimate aim.

‘Unquiet Waters’ after which the volume has been named is a unique one where water is analyzed in psychological terms. It seems to be quietly flowing, but the unquiet, turmoil nature is embedded within its nature. Here, ‘I’ the narrator is at the same time water and woman:

I take the shape
of the receptacle that holds me.
(‘Unquiet Waters’, Unquiet Waters, p. 184)

As water takes the shape of its container, so the woman is made tensile in her behaviour. The conditioning of woman’s nature has gone to such an extent, that she now completely identifies herself with water, the fluid element which can fit into any situation. Endless taming has resulted in a boon rather than curse. This transformation has raised her from matter to mind:

I am the waters that you can see through
I am the liquid that a almost not there
... my shape not my own.
(‘Unquiet Waters’, Unquiet Waters, p. 184)

Lakshmi kannan has struck a perfect metaphor in water for the woman’s being. Like the binary opposition present in water which can be seen but shapeless & not solid, which is at the same time there and not there, woman can elevate herself from the knowledge of physical self to the subconscious boundless reservoir of energy. After the realization of its resilient nature, water is all set to free itself from all its containers and join its, ‘mother’, the ‘river’:

If you can but break pitcher just once
And set me free.....
I’ll run over the smooth rocks

swiftly to join my mother the river

till we melt together

into the ocean of our being.

(‘Unquiet Waters’, Unquiet Waters, p. 185)

Water in the human world, in different containers which is taken away from its genesis, always strives to dissolve itself into its greater being. Though de-linked from the river or sea, every drop of water shares all the qualities of its larger form. Lakshmi kannan extends this philosophical idea to living souls of human beings who share all the qualities of the universal soul and always strive to dissolve in it.

The change of first person singular ‘I’ to the first person plural possessive, ‘our’ records the vertical raise of idea in the poem which moves from physical self to subconscious self to the ultimate universal super-conscious self where everything is melted and dissolved into one formless vacuum - no man, no woman, no being, only sensations.

Heinrich Zimmer discerns that:

“The imagery of the Hindu myth allows for a cautious, intuitive reading in terms of psychology - the psychology of the conscious and unconscious. Among other interpretations this approach is indeed demanded.

II. CONCLUSION

The individualized differentiated forms of the universe - earth as well as the higher and lower spheres of the heavens and underworlds are supported by the formless fluid element of the depth. All have evolved and grown out of the primary fluid and are maintained by its circulation. Likewise, our individual, conscious personality, the psyche of which we are aware, the character

role we enact socially and in solitary seclusion is supported as a mental and emotional, microcosm on the fluid element of the unconscious ... The water represents the element of the deeper unconscious and contains everything – tendencies, attitudes - which conscious personality always strives to attain. It represents the indiscriminate, comprehensive potentiality of life and nature present in the individual, though split off from the perceived, realized, consciously enacted character.”⁵

The characters in the poems of Lakshmi Kannan reaching out to water, reflects the mythical primordial craving for the perfect totality within oneself. As water supports the earth as its deep foundation and communes with it, the presence of water in the poems is a frequently disturbing fluid, rather ‘unquiet’ symbolically flows into the labyrinths of the unconscious which reinforces the conscious mind.

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