

**“Voices of Feminine Sensibility in the selected poems of Lakshmi Kannan”
– An Insightful Study**

R.D JANARDHAN

Assistant Professor

&

H.O.D Government College For Women

Kolar, Karnataka

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. Gender-generated issues of womanhood and quest for identity are dominant preoccupations in many of Lakshmi Kannan's representative poems. She redefines and reinterprets feminism when she parallels feminism with 'human rights'. Lakshmi Kanan's view universalizes women issues and perspectivises feminism as humanism. Her poems re-evaluate the entire gamut of experience, examine the imposed identity and reassess the relationship and roles. Her personal writing invariably becomes a kind of social commentary also.*

Key Words: *stereotyping, womanhood, andro-centric society, solitary experience, mental space, marginal status, volcanic energy, domestic tyranny, phallo-centric, chaotic blossom.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Feminist thinking as a mode of understanding was present in the literary world for a considerable time in the past. Initially this mode of thinking was engaged in the evaluation of society and experience, but later it started evaluating the problems of literature and criticism. Contemporary feminist criticism obviously derived its original impetus from the Women's Liberation Movement of the late 1960s in America. Early feminist criticism drew extensively on Simone de Beauvoir's, 'The Second Sex', a work which had initiated the process of analyzing the social construction of gender and of distinguishing between sex and gender; and on Kate Millet's, 'Sexual Politics' which analyzed the system of sex-role stereotyping and the oppression of women under patriarchal social organization.

Before we take up examining the poems of Lakshmi Kannan from the Indian perspective of feminism, let's perspective the western counterpart of the problem in the hope that it will give us a more democratic and humanistic ambience to our own categories of feminist issues. This perspective would appropriately situate the present study in relation to the localized spectrum of issues.

The discipline of women's studies in India is of a comparatively recent origin, more so the discipline of women's studies in the context of literature in English – its birth, growth, development, exploitation of formal strategies and methodological assimilation of issues vital to women's existence as human beings in specific social set ups.

By the mid-70s there was an increasing attention from both broadly 'liberal' or broadly 'socialist' or 'radical' feminists to texts by women as opposed to the study of the representation of women in texts by male authors. This approach was explicitly advocated, in particular by Elaine Showalter. In 'Towards a Feminist Poetics' she distinguished feminist criticism into two distinct modes. Showalter's creative woman writer is known as 'gynocritic' and the analysis of texts by a woman reader is labeled as 'feminist critique'¹. The former, study history, theories, genres, structures created by women in literature – the 'psychodynamics' of female creativity. Gynocritics centre their study what women have felt and experienced in their works while the feminist critique offers feminist readings of texts which desires to change our apprehension of a give text and offers the re-reading of the women characters in canonical texts. This critical reading can be a liberating intellectual act, questioning the stereotyped representation of women in the andocentric society. Showalter relentlessly tries to oppose male critical theory with female critical problems. She proposes counter theoretical discourse and canons to accommodate women writers.

Helen Cixous in 'Medusa' rejects contemporary feminists' approaches as they unnecessarily dig up the past and are invariably caught up in an endless game of oppressive binary oppositions already perpetrated by a patriarchal ideology. Creating a separate discourse and canon is to operate again in the oppressive patriarchal hierarchy which marginalized women writers and issues. She propagates to do away with these theories and canon itself. Women issues can be better voiced working within the system and when there is a free play between the two binary partners.

Susie Tharu and K. Lalita write in the introduction to their edition of 'Women's writing in India':

"We believe that there are powerful alliances feminists of all classes the world over can make and equally powerful alliances feminists can make with other oppressed groups if we accept the challenges held out to us... We must also explore why it is that if we simply apply the theories of women's writing that have been developed over the last

decade of so to women's writing in India, we will not merely reproduce its confusions, but compound them."²

Tharu and Lalita raise a highly valid point which all practicing feminist writers should keep in mind. The problems women face in this part of the world are not the same as those of women in the west, and even though we may share some of those concerns in a changed context, we cannot, imbibe, impose and practice what is alien to our social conditions and psyche. Feminist literary expressions cannot be supported by a philosophy of isolationism and exclusionism in the Indian tradition where the concept of 'ardhanarishwara' forms the pivot of sensibility. Though the outpour of Indian feminine experience is carried out in a male dominant sphere, it gives itself enough scope to revolt, disagree, dislodge and rewrite the marginalized status of women in all the spheres of life. Unlike in Ibsen's 'Doll's House', who breaks herself from the family bonds and domestic responsibilities, her counterpart Jaya in Shashi Deshpande's, 'That Long Silence' silently revolts against the restrained freedom and conventional rigidities.

Like all the fledgling movements, the women's movement of 1970s had to resort to extreme positions in order to be noticed. They wanted to disprove that they were different from most other women who are traditionally believed to be soft, feminine and good-looking. They attacked patriarchal power, like husband, children, home and domesticity. They turned their backs on traditional womanhood. Feminism thus began by distancing itself from the majority of women who balanced home and career. They perpetrated the image of the tough, manly, aggressive feminists. Naturally most women, while sympathetic to feminism in theory, increasingly found it expedient to distance themselves from it in reality.

In the post feminist era of the 1990s, the definitions of feminism are no longer so rigid. They are blurred and ever changing as the message spreads to the women from all the walks of life. So, increasingly, the trend is on women's voices and experiences which give credence to the representations of women in Indian literature in English. Radha Rastagi in her article, 'Gender' articulates that:

"It is now possible to be a feminist and yet be only a housewife. Feminism means also that you can take pride in looking good, and I being a woman. The tones are less strident and judgmental; women more clearly understand the message of freedom. Not freedom from responsibility, but freedom to make your own choices. And having made them, to be able to stand up and say, yes, you feel good about being a woman."³

If a woman can say this, it means she is a feminist, because in its widest sense, feminism is not about doctrines and theories, but about a theory of self worth that every woman should be able to apply to herself. From this stems the self worth and her style of functioning with the other sex, whom she perceives as a partner, not as an adversary. Feminist writers are concerned with the issues of oppression of women, their economic,

social, sexual exploitation and a male-centered system. The literature reflects women's struggles and tensions at various levels aimed at achieving self identity. The issue of the representation of women in Indian literature in English especially in poetry provides unique perspective to the growing consciousness about women and their problems.

Modern India is witnessing the emergence of a new woman with a distinct sense of identity in the man-oriented society, owing to the processes of urbanization and westernization. This has led to a sudden increase in the number of women in the literary field including Indian poetry in English. Sunanda p. Charan says that, "the poetry by modern Indian English women Poets is thus the first chaotic blossom from a virgin land of feminine poetic consciousness bursting into creativity."⁴ The noted poets are Kamala Das, Eunice De Souza, Rukmini Nair, VijayaGoel, Lakshmi Kannan, Monika Varma, Imtiazdharker, Sujatha Modayil, Sunita Jain, Shanta Acharya, Sujata Bhatt and K.K. Dyson. These women litterateurs express gender-specific angst and agony which are an overwhelming reality I their poems. Rashmi Bajaj and Aparna Batra say that:

"Much of the gender-specific crises of women seem to be not God-made but man-made and in a traditional country like India, society continues to be formidable force to contend with. Unlike in Nissim Ezekiel, "where Home is the place to gather grace, in women writers 'Home' often becomes the microcosm of the callous macro world where many social evils and ills find a respectable shelter and patronage."⁵

Struggling against the confronting odds result in the inextricable mingling of the personal and the social in writing of these Indian women poets. The commonly shared feminine experiences are: female child as an unwelcomed being; domestic violence; identity crisis; stereotyped roles; failed marriages; protest for recognition and equal status; realization of the potential and energy within; the journey within to consolidate the female energy; unique and gender specific physical and psychological awareness which expands mental horizon.

Gender-generated issues of womanhood and quest for identity are dominant preoccupations in many of Lakshmi Kannan's representative poems. She redefines and reinterprets feminism when she parallels feminism with 'human rights'. In one of her interviews she says:

"To me, at this point of time, it has become synonymous with "human rights". It has become basic as that. So I find, it is enlarging. "Feminism is human rights."⁶

Lakshmi Kanan's view universalizes women issues and perspectivises feminism as humanism. Her poems re-evaluate the entire gamut of experience, examine the imposed identity and reassess the relationship and roles. Her personal writing invariably becomes a kind of social commentary also.

Many of the women poets share the experience of the female child being an unwelcomed being on this earth. Lakshmi Kannan weaves this anguish with words:

The means of the women around
Lamenting the birth of a baby girl
Uninvited guest. (Women with a past, Exiled Gods, p.22)

The traumatic feeling of being unwanted haunts in her adulthood, which shows the ever presence of the conventional mindset in the society. She movingly expresses a girl child's first tryst with this agonizing reality as her cries mingle with the women's anxious cries over birth. Ironically it is the women (one of the baby's kind) 'lamenting the birth', which deepens the crisis.

The perennial remorse glued with the girl child's entry into this world is wholeheartedly accepted and positively treated by Lakshmi Kannan:

It's easy you see
to ignore a body
that's constantly ignored
gradually, it loses the feel of its weight.

(A Seminar n Indian Women Poets, Unquiet Waters, p.147)

The birth and growth of a female body which is viewed as a liability, a thing of curse, parents' burden throughout and an entertaining entity, cut and shaped according to the desires of the male has been treated sarcastically by Lakshmi Kannan. The history of 'ignorance' of the female body turns as a boon and inspiration for her. This ignorance by the world make her feel light like feather and air which can enter any domain of its like:

For I write as I live
Forgetting that I've a body at all...
With no body to acknowledge
I walk into the dusk of poetry lightly.
I go gliding through the maze of life
I live, and yet I do not live.

(A Seminar on Indian Women poets, Unquiet Waters, p.148)

The others' negligence of the woman's body is received as an inspiration for creativity. The willful rejection of the physical presence which has been cruelly denied

for long, acts as an impetus to the sub-conscious mind which travels without any inhibition in the world of sublimity to verbalize the women's unique experience.

A severe identity crisis is experienced in the works of women poets as the growing-up girls are coaxed and conditioned into stereotyped roles. Growth of a real self and complete personality is invariably thwarted by a plethora of do's and don'ts. This crisis has been experienced and expressed by poet after poet. Lakshmi Kannan in 'An Omen' angrily recalls her childhood full of instructions:

No, Don't run
 don't take long strides
 don't raise voice
 be a woman
 be moderate in everything.

(The Glow and the Grey, Calcutta Writers Workshop, 1976, p.27)

Lakshmi Kannan gives a biological perspective which is in fact a concrete evidence for the society about women's stored-up and suppressed emotions in, 'An Autopsy', she says that the traditional value system could only keep women's body under surveillance but not her brain. The other sex is under the wrong impression that everything in women can be explained understood and controlled, but not. When the autopsy (study women to control her) is done they were 'baffled' as:

There was a honeycomb
 Where there should have been grey matter.
 She had stashed away her private moments,
 This woman,
 Stored them up, sheltering them from the door,
 Censoring eyes of the world. (An Autopsy, Unquiet Waters, p.119)

The idea is how complex it is to understand the whole being of woman. The philosophy is that, man-made customs and values could only restrict women's physical space but not her mental horizon. Her 'private moments':

Had gold-browed the insides
 of her brains in a wild-grown honeycomb
 that glistened defiantly under their questioning eyes.

(An Autopsy, Unquiet Waters, p.119)

The illusion and false pride of the people who thought that women could be controlled were shattered when they witnessed the accumulated energy in the women's brain which was about to explode and show its magnificence to the world.

Lakshmi Kannan's, Meenakshi's parrot exploits and exposes the appearance and reality of the Indian religious system which worships woman as goddess in the sanctum sanctorum of a temple but not in the real world. The legendary parrot on the shoulders of the goddess Meenakshi symbolizes the life of women, who have been faithful to their domain in the patriarchal system:

The parrot
frozen in stone, silver, bronze, panchaloh, copper or wood
slowly forgot to fly
and stayed on Meenakshi's shoulder.

('Meenakshi's Parrot', Unquiet Waters, p.117)

The women who are forced to accept their domestic domain for centuries, slowly forget their strength and substance like the bird:

'Mittoo, Mittoo', the woman called out
the parrot's cloying syrupy name
unchanged over the years
in novels, films and homes.
the parrot nodded her smooth head."

(Meenakshi's Parrot, Unquiet Waters, p.118)

The poet observes the irrevocable status of women from legends to the present real world. The women who occupied the conditioned status in the legends continued to domestic world like a parrot in a cage, but not to be sustained long:

On her page, the poet brushed the bird
with vivid parrot green and flame red colours
she also gave her some words.
But the parrot refused to speak the tutored words.
She turned into a canary instead
and sang her own tune
and flew off the page. (Meenakshi's Parrot, Unquiet Waters, p.118)

The women who were etched according the patriarchal needs, slowly understood the tricky rituals and sought freedom to carve her own niche in the double-faced society she sing her own tune and flies her own air to shape and express her exclusive experience.

Historically woman has been assigned the traditional roles of bringing up children, looking after husband and his family. Preserving and nourishing our man-made rituals and customs. Till date we believe that, it is because of woman kind, our culture and familial values are sustained. Her patience, honesty, modesty, perseverance and sacrifices are not rewarded equally by the male-dominated society. This pain has been movingly expressed by Lakshmi Kannan. The woman labours work hard without expecting any returns to nourish the ‘family tree’ till it attains recognition and status in society but she suffers ruthless negligence at the hands of her own family:

Strange, how the same family tree
 now big, strong-limbed and leafy
 could not give her the cool shade
 she sought, when she sat down
 under the tree
 after her work was done? (‘Family Tree’, Unquiet Waters, p.120)

It is really strange and ironical that the woman is promptly refused the ‘cool shade’ from the tree which she has nourished from her sweat for years. The poor woman cannot understand this cruel negligence at the hands of her own family. The doubt expressed by the question mark at last is that, to seek care and protection from the family which she has nurtured itself is a crime. This horrible experience is not only empathized but also presents the domestic violence meted out to women, which is forced to accept quickly. The representation of the female persona in her poems who undergo this blatant violation of human rights itself is a strong protest against the double-edged sword of andro-centric society.

The secondary status attributed to woman finds its strong presence regarding the inheritance of father’s property. This is not an issue with the girls married to well-off families, but an injustice to those who are unmarried and widow. These biased and prejudiced norms have been exposed by Lakshmi Kannan:

Her brothers stood,
 rightful heirs to the house passed on to them
 the ground firm under their feet.

She remained un-housed

vague and uncertain

In having lost

what she had never possessed. ('Un-housed', Unquiet Waters, p.140)

The 'brothers' are unquestionable heirs to the property left by their father but the sisters born to the same father are aliens now. These who were brothers once are now staunch enemies and the house in which the girl nourishes her childhood memories is not hers. The paradox 'in having lost/what she had never possessed' can only be experienced by a woman and concretized by a woman writer which is their solitary experience, a unique mental space inadmissible for men.

Lakshmi Kannan's zeal for women's social recognition and equality, protest against the marginal status and the consolidation of volcanic energy within takes the shape of a verbal outburst in her representative poems. The woman who takes all pains in the world to give birth, is considered, 'ineligible for prayers and ceremonies' after she delivers the child, in the poem 'Tinctures'. Guilty conscience is forced upon her which makes her think that the blood released is impure and giving birth is a sin. Lakshmi Kannan sarcastically comments that the blood which has given birth to a child itself is considered impure and the body which has created something precious unfit for worldly rituals. She says:

Anointing the male infant with her blood

her fluids in his arteries

she thought how he would never know

the treacheries of the blood hounds

baying for 'purity', more 'purity'!

Blood had never looked so right and red.(Tinctures, Unquiet Waters, p.139)

It is ironical and mockery of the whole process and struggle in giving birth to a child, where the woman experiences the agonizing pain in giving birth to a male child who expectedly forgets the 'treacheries' and finds women impure for many a rituals and metes out unprecedented pain to the woman kind. 'Tinctures' send a sharp message to society that men who are the fruits of women's pain should understand the holy and painful act of giving birth and know to respect and honour the woman as a whole being. The blood which is viewed as, 'wrong and red' is considered, 'right and red' by Lakshmi Kannan which is a modest verbal revolt and a razor-edged critique of the andro-centric society.

‘Ask for the Moon’ acts as a sequel for ‘Tinctures’ where her revolutionary voice finds its final version. To recite ‘Gayatri mantra’ is to ask for moon in a male-dominated society. The woman denied of her wishes argues, why a woman can’t recite Gayatri mantra, though Gayatri herself is a female and worshipped as Saraswathi and Savitri. She knows very well that, ‘no woman won anything by arguing’. The argument is well heard but not well taken:

Arrogant Suryavanshi
 the patriarch of the household
 reserves the right to worship the sun.

(Ask for the Moon, Unquiet Waters, p.131)

Lakshmi Kannan shakes the very edifice of Hindu/Indian culture by questioning the self-styled rule-makers who deny woman’s rights to recite mantras and worship several gods. Moreover, woman is considered as a commodity or a thing which is bought to produce children for the sustenance of family lineage. The arrogant ‘patriarch’ out rightly rejects the very existence of his first wife who has not given her ‘sons’:

She, a forgotten piece of furniture
 hobbles around on arthritic legs
 groping, eyes blinded by cataract

she is never shown to a doctor. (Ask for the Moon, Unquiet Waters, p.132)

Lakshmi Kannan presents the dichotomy between Gayatri, the women goddess being given a status of god and the woman in real flesh and blood being reduced to, ‘a forgotten piece of furniture’ for not giving a male child. She sends a strong message to society and an issue to debate. (How far a woman is responsible for not giving birth to a male child?)

When the moon asked is denied to the woman persona in the poem, she snatches the freedom on her own to break the rules:

I let it flow down my gullet
 then cleared my throat
 to recite Gayatri.

The sound tore through the darkness.

(Ask for the Moon, Unquiet Waters, p.133)

The symbolic sip of the moon, ‘on the waters in the bowl’ and the revolutionary recitation of Gayatri mantra is a complete relinquishment of patriarchal commandments.

Realisation of being powerful and being rendered powerless grows slowly and the recitation of mantra like the slogans of a revolution tears through the dark veil of conventions.

In our marriage-obsessed society, relationship with a male in marriage has been considered to be an all important step in a woman's self-realization. This traditional prop however seems to rather aggravate the identity crisis. For the bride in 'A Scented Burial' the lavish marriage ceremony was, 'scented' but the married life was a, 'burial'. The grand ceremony with all its minute details in the first two stanzas takes a ironical twist in the third stanza:

Wedding over...

She saw her man, the groom
for the first time without flowers.

She saw his face
the mean, thin line of his mouth
his eyes, dull with native cunning.

He stood stark naked

In his fine wedding clothes. (A Scented Burial, Unquiet Waters, p.146)

II. CONCLUSION

It is the height of traditional and domestic tyranny to marry a girl to a man whom she has never seen before. She has never been asked for any consent or even a nod. The marriage arranged satisfies the elders and the marriage ceremony makes the crowd happy but the young girl with full of dreams and tender emotion is a cow sent to a slaughter house unasked. The oxymoron, 'A Scented Burial' culminates the tyrannical saga in the guise of tradition. Her body cut out to the needs of phallo-centric doctrines but her mind in the quest for essence in existence.

In the writings of Lakshmi Kannan, the female persona seems to be very vulnerable and the victim of a too powerful patriarchal system. However, she epitomizes not only the crises of womanhood but also the emergence of a New Indian Woman. In, 'Subterranean Agents' she affirms that women cannot be compared to flowers but:

They are the water poured at the roots
of saplings, over seedlings.

Quickly the waters hurry into

the hungry earth.

They send up

the healthy shoots

that hold the flowers above

gorgeous colours. ('Subterranean Agents', *Unquiet Waters*, p. 144)

The realization, that they are not flowers but the water which gives life to flowers, explores and excavates a newfound land for femininity.

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