

## The Reflections of Female Writing in India: A Cultural Critique of *Agnisakshi*

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### Abstract

Lalithambika Antharjanam is one of the powerful writers in India who unravelled the pains and dilemma of women under caste system. She narrated the first hand experiences of namboothiri women who were destined to live faceless, voiceless lives. The brutalities of caste system, pains of child marriage, and dilemmas of widowhood were subtly narrated in her works. *Agnisakshi*, the novel that considered as the magnum opus of Lalithambika Antharjanam, is narrated on the backdrop of Indian freedom struggle and renaissance movements. The novel narrates the story of a namboodiri woman, Thethikutty, and her husband Unni Namboodiri. Thethikutty is an educated woman and owes sympathy to the political and social struggles of the country. Unni Namboodiri, a loving man, cherishes the rituals and norms of his caste. So, though love deeply, Thethikutty and Unni cannot nurture their nuptial for long. The novel also develops the subplots of Thankam, the Nair child of the Afphan Namboodiri and the Aniyam Namboodiri, the representative of rebellious youth in namboodiri families. The novel carries the reflections of the then social systems and the religious currents of Kerala. This study tries to read the cultural currents of the novel.

**Keywords:** renaissance, progressive, literature of white ink, women writings

The emergence women liberation movements in Kerala are entwined to the renaissance struggles. In western countries renaissance and reformation were two separate movements where the first one uncompromisingly uttered the primacy of human being. The equality and liberty advocated by western renaissance humanism enriched the society to urge for a social change and it culminated in the French bourgeois revolution in 1789. It was the progressive stage of capitalism. Capitalism needed free man for the sake of industry and so the bourgeois in its flourishing stage fought to establish equality. But again took a century to speak about, at least in the case of franchise rights, the equal rights of women.

In India the bourgeois never advocated renaissance values as they had done in European countries. It is because capitalism was in its moribund stage during the stage of Indian Renaissance movement. For these historical reasons, Indian bourgeoisie compromised with the feudal value concepts. So Indian renaissance and reformation movements neither cannot be separated but are interwoven. Raja Ram Mohan Roy who fought against Sati is considered as the avant-garde of Indian Renaissance. His ideals are to reform the Hindu religion. Iswar Chandar Vidhyasagar, who devoted his life for

women's education and widow remarriage uncompromisingly demanded for secular democratic education. In the history of Indian renaissance this was a unique voice for tried to divorce the religious orientation Indian renaissance, but it never continued after Vidhyasagar. Kerala, though it was more problematic because caste system reflected the nationalistic trend.

The movement against caste discrimination which was led by Sree Narayana Guru, Ayyankali, Sahodaran Ayyappan and so on spoke and fought for the discrimination and atrocities against women. The Brahminical movement which raised the watch word "reform Namboodiri to human being" was led by V.T. Namboodirippadu, M.R.B and so on. Widow Remarriage and liberation of elite caste women were the focused targets of the reformative groups. They believed that to turn namboodiri to man it is essential to bring women "on stage" from the darkness of kitchen. The epoch was noted for Kuriyedathu Thathri's Smarthavicharam (trial on the prostitution of Kuriyedathu Thathri). The incident unravels the strong form of protest against the patriarchal Brahmanical rules those chained women's body and mind. Lalithambika Antharjanam's literatures produce the first hand narration of these women's experience at this particular social epoch.

Showalter categorises the women's writings from 1920s onward to female phase. She says that from this period onwards women explore their original experiences as the raw material for their literary endower. "I always write from my heart, what I have seen, heard and touched my heart" Antharjanam says in the epilogue of *Agnisksakshi*(105). For women literary production is analogues to child birth. It is a kind of procreation. While sharing her experience Antharjanam verifies this theory. *Agnisksakshi*, the magnum opus of Antharjanam's literary career, may be a mile stone of women writings, signifies how a woman arises from the sparks and darkness of society, caste and history.

Literature, especially women's writings cannot take birth from hallow. They are the products of existing social conditions. The writings of Antharjanam were the products of her own life struggle. Her evolution as a writer was not either entertained or admitted by the then society. But she herself was adamant to pen the stories of the women of her community. Her writings were the literature of "white ink". She did not have a room of her own. So in midnight, after cradle children to sleep she wrote in the flickering candle light. The little piece of pencil that she used to write was kept in the kitchen, in vessels. Her writings were her reaction to the social conditions. So she had to continue her writings to express the women's experiences which had been erstwhile remained unexplored.

The sympathy for the suffering human beings urged me for literary production. The memories kept in the fathom of my heart gradually get temperature, spark and then life. They take another birth. I feel that just as blood turns to breast milk, truth transforms to art. (108: 1976)

*Agnisksakshi* (Fire, My Witness) is the finest product of Antharjanam's career for it unifies the various experiences of elite caste women life before and after independence. To intensify the emotive faculty and may be to give more authenticity to the plot the novel progress through two narrations. The first half is narrated by Thankam Nair, the daughter of Aphan Namboodiri from his Nair wife. The latter half is the reflection of Swamini Sumithranantha who is known as Mathaji. Thankam Nair recollects her

memories of her teens at her father's house which then led her to Kasi to perform the after-death rites for 'unni ettan'. Though Thankam led her childhood as the untouchable daughter of Aphan Namboodiri she enjoyed love and freedom unlike the Namboodiri women. Because of her father's love and Unni ettan's support she could win her revolt for education. Though Aphan Namboodiri's unexpected death and the emotional breakdown caused by the death forced her to discontinue studies and to get married, she lived a comfortable life. But at the verge of the middle age she confesses that the "comfortable life" made her to forget all the promises she had given to her sister-in-law. Thankam is a silent witness of the troublesome flow of history where Sumithranantha or Thethikutti is an active part of it. Both Thankam and Thethikutti were the products of same milieu but their social and familial conditions were not identical. So Thankam opted to the life of an ordinary middle class house-wife while Thethikutti broke the chains of family for a social life. The differences in their caste identities play a vital role in diverging path from each other.

Thethikutti who has been married to Unni Namboodiri, the first son of Manampallimana. But her upbringing never let her to lead an ordinary life of an obedient Brahmin wife. Puthusseri Kuttan, her brother who was a social reformist instilled knowledge in her mind. "Whether something got to read! Oppa had subscription of many magazines and news papers. How many books were there in the shelves! He used to give them to me. Also he explained to me what I had not understood" (Self translation 23:1976). For her inner eyes were opened she could not survive in the darkness of the husband's home. She learned love the material world and human beings. But her husband, to satisfy the needs of the orthodox bhramanical house, loved the abstract world and gods. Though Unni and Thethikutti loved each other till the end of their life, they could not admit each other. The one year celibacy and rituals that Unni had decided follow and the death of Bhranthi Cheriamma (Mad Auntie) and Thankam's departure for higher education made Thethikutti fell in complete loneliness. It was Thankam's companionship substituted her husband's absence. Finally she decided to give up husband's house to attend her dying mother.

Thethikutti's sufferings at husband's home were not an isolated condition, but her revolt was unique. Wives at Namboodiri houses rarely enjoyed husband's affection. Men were allowed to have sexual relation with Nair women which was called as Sambandham. Bhranthi Cheriamma was a victim of this custom. Her husband denied her beauty and youth and spent night at Nair house. The lack of affection turned her to mad. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar unveil the fact behind the insaneness of women in nineteenth century. The women writers and the women who were protested against patriarchy were casted as mad. Bhranthi Cheriamma's violent revolt for husband's affection was casted as madness. She even longed for her husband's beats to be touched by him. Though Unni remained aloof from Thethikutti for the sake of holy rituals, she felt identification to Bhranthicheriamma. "Nothing unusual in her madness. If it continue so, I too turn insane"(27) Thethikutti once said to Nethyamma. Likewise, many times she expressed the similarity of their condition. The frustration in nuptial relationship haunted her till the end. The platonic love of Unni was not enough to torn her estranged soul. That is why she got identifies with Bhranthi Cheriamma. But it was not possible for an educated woman like Thethikutti who was aware of the then social condition to resort in madness. She had

in her the urge to revolt. “Thankam, if I were a man, I had given freedom not only to my wife, but to all women. I would have died for the independence of the motherland and for the freedom of all human beings” (self translation, 30). This realisation led her to leave husband to fight for motherland. In fact, her urge for self representation, might be self realisation brought her to independence struggle. Unni Namboodiri, though he had decided to devote his life for his orthodox ancestors, was aware of Thethikutti’s inner life. “It is not possible for her, who was brought up by Puthusseri Kuttan, to live as Manampalli Aphan’s daughter” (self translation, 49). Because of this realisation he always loved her.

The desire for motherhood is also remained in Thethi’s life unattained. According to religion, bhramin man needs a wife and child to fulfil the *grihasthasrama dharma*. They had to have an heir. “He married to have a child at home. That is grihasthasrama” (self translation, 21) , Thethi complains to Thankam. She always longed to be a mother, but she realised the futility of her dream. So she asked Thankam to consider her children as Thethi’s too. She also showered maternal affection on Unnaman, the maid’s son. Since the childhood itself, she admired Virgin Mary and cherished the dream of becoming mother. Unlike her husband for Thethikutti having a child is not an act of dharma, but the need of her mind. But social norms were not ready to transcend to materialise a woman’s urge for motherhood. Even when Thethi had turned to Mathaji(mother) Sumithranantha, she could not quench desire for motherhood till she met Thankam’s son. Sumithranatha ponder on her life as a freedom fighter, bhrahmin wife and on her new venture to search for salvation. “What had turned my life? Is the frustration caused by desire led me to this path” (91). But she realised that though she won over desire she could not stop loving the urge for procreation that lies on every organisms. “She longed to kiss every living being by calling them my children. But no one needs mother; they need only guru” (91). More than an institution and dharma, Antharjanam depicts motherhood as an eternal desire that overwhelms as the love for creation. Though she had tried satisfy the desire in her through *bhakthi* she failed to find satisfaction. Neither through sacrifice but by showering maternal affection on every humans and animals had she attained salvation of mind.

The life of Devibahan can be considered as a critique of Gandhism. Thethi left home and decided to join the freedom movement not only because of frustration in family life but also for the realisation social condition. The freedom fighter, Devaki Manampalli, understood that it was only by attaining indepence of nation, her community would also realise freedom. Devaki Manapalli could find parallels in history as Arya Antharjanam, Devi Nilayangodu and son on. But in Independent India, like all these real life warriors Devaki had also lost her arena. Dr.P.Geetha writes in her book *Penkalangal* that these women were brought on the stage during the days of independence struggle. But in independent India they were either deserted or asked to return to back stage. It intensified their identity crisis. “...Thethikutti had grown to Devaki Manampalli and then to Devibahan. She had grown from community to nation. Now it is not possible to go back” (self translation, 64). But the independent India which was compromised with feudal values could not grow enough to satisfy Devibahan. The communal violence, cultural denigration and lack of bond in love made her to desert *seva asramam* and to find resort in spirituality. But urge for self representation never got satisfaction even in the life of Sumithrananda.

Agnisakshi is the literature of a particular epoch in Indian history. It represents the life and identity of women at that particular epoch. It is the reflection troubles and crisis of Indian womanhood. Antharjanam herself admits that it is a novel that recollects the memories of the political and social transformation of forty years. “Though it had written on the background of a particular community, the novel hints many common issues of the then society” (107: 1976). What Antharjanam says is true because the novel reflects the prospects and critiques the draw backs of Indian renaissance movement.

### **Works Cited**

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