

**DUAL SUBJUGATION OF NAMBOODIRI WOMEN BEFORE 1950s:
AN ANALYSIS OF AGNISAKSHI AND ANTHARJANAM****Shinu Sabu and Garnet P T**P G students of English with Communication Studies
Christ University
Bangaluru, Karnataka
India**1. INTRODUCTION**

Subjugation of women is the primary concern of feminist of all time period. When we speak about female subjugation in Kerala, we can't ignore the dual subjugation experienced by Namboodiri women- subjugated for being a woman and being an upper caste woman. The plight of Namboodiri women came to an end through social reforms done by Namboodiri Yoga Kshema Sabha (YKS) and other prominent leaders of the time such as V T Battathirippad, Arya Pallom and Parvathy Nilayamgode. This paper tries to understand the dual subjugation of women in Namboodiri community through Lalithmbika Antharjanam's 1976 novel *Agnisakshi* and Parvathi Nilayamgode's memoirs *Antharjanam* (2011).

These two literary works- *Agnisakshi* and *Antharjanam*- are purposefully taken for the analysis as one work is a fiction and the other work is the memoirs of a Namboodiri woman. In both the fiction and memoir, the authors' portray the same sketch of subjugated life lived by Namboodiri women. These works through the representation of social issues, outlines the reality of Namboodiri women before social reform. Namboodiri's were more orthodox than other communities like Nairs and Christians. They were most reluctant to reform and resisted the changes that occurred in Kerala in the twentieth century. "But a revolutionary upheaval of thought and tradition occurred in the 1920s when V.T Bhattathirippad and EMS Namboodirippad began to question and challenge the inhuman practices prevalent within the confines of their own caste. In the latter half of 1930 the progressive literature movement

changed the political and social atmosphere and created new concepts of individual and mass liberty. As a result, social and political issues became the focal point of literary works”.(Silima).

Brahmin community is interwoven with the rules and rituals of Hinduism. The status of women according to the teaching of Hinduism has been misinterpreted like that of caste system throughout centuries. This is evident in Barshat's essay, where he says “Hinduism as a religion opposes the role of women and gives them no respect. In nineteenth century, people being quite conventional, thoroughly practiced injustice laid by the religion such as sati, being subordinate to males and no access to education”. The practice of this misinterpretation resulted in the agony of women in Namboodiri community.

Caste Hierarchy and gender hierarchy are the organizing principles of the Brahmanical social order and are closely interconnected (Chakarvarti 579). In Kerala, caste hierarchy and gender hierarchy exist predominantly in the Namboothiri community. The root of patriarchal society lies in the ideology of male domination and subsequently its manifestation of suppression of women. In the article “Brahmanical Patriarchy : A paradigm of Patriarchal power” author shows how the power is operated in the Brahmanical patriarchy and how this power has been exercised in the lives of women in the later decades of the twentieth century.

Both literary works chosen for this research clearly deal with the power structure. The article “Feminism in the Indian context: An Introduction” talks about the power structure in Indian society. It clearly says that male domination and social institutions sideline women from the mainstream society. Empowerment of the women during nineteenth century was suppressed by not allowing women to write and read. Margaret Homans has rightly pointed out that concept of feminism raises fundamental queries about reading, writing and the teaching of the literature. Women writers believed that art is a major weapon for social change (Woolf). Feminism is defined as the struggle against all forms of patriarchal and sexist aggression such as oppositional definition presents.

The status of the Namboothiri women of the nineteenth century were more or less equal to the status of other Indian women who considered women as completely inferior to men having

no freedom and no significance. These women were kept under as subjugated, oppressed and suppressed conditions. The objectification of Namboothiri women could be traced in the writings of Abbe Dubis in the article “Hindu Manners customs and ceremonies”. This article states that “if a girl who have arrived at an age when the signs of puberty where apparent, die before having had intercourse with a man, caste custom rigorously demanded that the inanimate corpse of the discarded should be subjected to a monstrous connection”.

Patriarchal society brings polygamy for their benefits. Earlier, in Namboodiri community, the elder son of the family was only supposed to marry the woman within the caste. The other sons in the family were forced to marry from nair communities. “The practice of polygamy had created Antharjanam only a name sake wife. Women enjoyed only the second place in the home and society after the male partners” (Eswaran, 125).

Namboothiri hold a dominant position in Kerala. In the memoir *Antharjanam*, Nilayamgode recounts the Namboothiri life and culture by sketching the beliefs , practices and rituals in their community. The writer argues that her writing is an attempt to project the suffering of the women and objectification of women especially in the Namboothiri community. The article “Re-reading Namboothiri ideology : An analysis of Devaki Nilaymgode’s *Antharjanam*” says that women are made to follow directions, obey rules and accept authority; women are the carriers of agency and voice of the male dominated society.

During nineteenth century, women from Namboothiri community remained powerless. Even though they were liked to question the systems of the community, they remained silent. “Namboothiri women are the colonized and the Namboothiri men are the colonizer”(Sabitha 786). “The tears, the pain and suffering of many child widows in their husband’s family furnished Lalithambika with inexhaustible themes for her writing” (Sabitha,787). Namboodiri women during the days of widowhood lived as if they are dead. Widowhood is seen as one of the phase in which Brahmanical patriarchy used its power to subjugate the widowed women (Rose,193).

The work of the Lalithambika Antharjanam has been translated into many languages. Antharjanam has influenced the female members of the Namboothiri community to a large extent. It was the time of renaissance. “Younger generation supports her trial to bring the reformation through her writings. Positive changes had occurred in the society. Her writings also helped to uplift the Namboothiri community. She fought against the restrictions and limitations of women which were put forwarded by the society” (Alfred,572).

2. DUAL-SUBJUGATION

Women throughout centuries have experienced subjugation from patriarchal society. But the world failed to see the dual subjugation experienced by Namboodiri women during the same period. They have undergone subjugation for not only being a woman but also being a Namboodiri woman. Radhika P Menon in the translator’s note of *Antharjanam* says “To an outsider’s eyes, they were the living exotica. Cocooned in luxury, shielded from public view, always escorted by an entourage of obsequious attendants and endlessly enjoying a hedonistic life full of festivals and elaborate feasts, these upper-caste women appeared to lead a charmed existence. However, what most people never realized was that the antharjanams’ awe-inspiring exclusivity concealed the cruelest form of patriarchal oppression that robbed them not only of independence and education but even the simplest and most innocent of joys”. Their experience have made many antharjanams like the character Devaki who forgot how to laugh and women like water-crazy mothers in illams. Some like KuriyedathuThatri turned out to be the storms that destructed the foundation of many illams.

Movements of women among Namboodiri community were restricted to kitchen and prayer room. Antharjanams were allowed to go to their house from their husband’s house only once a year. Unniettan’s mother in the novel *Agnisakshi* says “Namboodiri women were to restrict their entire lives to the kitchen and the prayer room. Their destiny was to read only the Ramayana and the Shiva Puranam”. Responding to the queries of the Namboodiri Female Education Commission of 1927 instituted by YKS, Madampu Narayanam Namboodiri remarked: “Antharjanam start working in the kitchen by the age of eight....from early morning to 10 o’clock

there is nothing but *nedikkal* and *namaskarram* towards east, towards south, what more, to every corner”. Devaki Nilayamgode in her memoir documents this pathetic condition of atharjanams. She says “A girl who had come of age was not supposed to step out of the illam or even see the portico. There was a pond near the kitchen exclusively for the use of an atharjanam. She could go there for her bath, but had no freedom to step beyond that limit. She could not attend any social function at other illam. A portion of the feast prepared on the occasion was brought to her. She was not permitted to attend any wedding ceremony- not even that of her siblings”.

Rituals had a prominent role in the life of Nmboodiris. Even the sexual desires were controlled by rituals in Namboodiri community. Novel *Agniskshi* says “Achan Namboodiri, her husband, had not only married twice in his own community, but had had liaisons at the palace and with the women of the Variar community. He searched for auspicious days to enter his bedroom...She seemed to believe that a union between man and wife was unacceptable if its aim was not to produce children”.

Reading anything other than religious books were prohibited to antharjanams. This can be seen as the tool of the patriarchy to maintain antharjanams as inferior beings. The character Devaki in the novel *Agnisakshi* says to Thankam that she would have been able to bear the situation in Manampally, if she get something to read. The same novel depicts an incident- “As she climbed the stairs, carrying folded newspaper, Ettan’s mother scowled. The water-crazy grandmother muttered. The insane younger aunt hawked and spat’. The same situation is documented in *Anharjanam*- “I am not sure whether newspaper had come to Pakaravoor then. Perhaps there was one at the pathayappura used by the Namboodiris. But it never reached us”. Reading was restricted mainly because people like Devaki Nilayamgode’s mother think that women should not be encouraged to think and act independently. Most of the antharjanams’ education lasted for only six months by teaching them to read alphabets and then to read *Ramayana*.

Kanippayur Sankaran Nambudiripad, a prominent figure of the early twentieth century in his memoir *Ente Smaranakal* (1965) remembers that the submission of the female members was

fostered in illams in many ways, like, for example, through preferential consideration towards boys from early infancy. Devaki Nilayamgode documents that special pujas have been done for the birth of baby boy when a woman got pregnant and also mentioned about the birth of twin girls in a nearby illam which was perceived as a calamity. Novel *Agnisakshi* defines the character Devaki as a ‘caged civet cat’. Whereas *Antharjanam* documents the remark made by V T Battatiripad about antharjanams as “the coloured bell-metal pots wasting away inside the lofts of the Namboodiri homesteads”.

The condition of Namboodiri widow was more pathetic than a widow from any other community. Devaki Nilayamgode says “Widows had to sit in a dark room such as this, during pula, the period of defilement, shut away from others. Most people were reluctant to see them in their newly widowed state, their necks bare of a ‘thaali’.” Most of the widows in illams were very young. Devaki Nilayamgode mentions about her widowed relative who became widow at the age of ten. As childmarriage was prominent during those days, young antharjanams were married off to old Namboodiris who die soon after the marriage. Many of the illams in Kerala had such widows who was not even been touched by their husband. Since widows are not allowed to go back to their own home, they remain in their husband’s house helping other atharjanams with the house hold works. They are not allowed to be seen anywhere on auspicious occasions.

Like many other restrictions, they were even restriction for the intake of food among antharjanams. Devaki Nilayamgode’s *Antharjanams* says “Cooked rice, dishes like sautéed vegetables, kalan and mango pickles were common for lunch. For the antharjanams, this was their day’s first meal. After the customary temple visit, they had to prepare offerings for their deity and therefore had little time to spare. The servants would have atleast the previous day’s gruel for their breakfast”.

Of all the rituals to be followed by antharjanams, traditional bath after delivery was the most distressing. Devaki Nilayamgode documents- “The women would usually be desperately thirsty soon after giving birth, even before the placenta was expelled, but would not be allowed any water because the midwife who attended on her belonged to the lower-class barber

community and had sullied on her by her touch. So the first thing the antharjanam was forced to do would be to walk to the kitchen tank even it was far away and take a bath.....In summer months, the water level would have dropped and the tank filled with slush and mud. But this was no deterrent. It did not occur to anyone that perhaps a bath in muddy water could lead to infection”.

Unlike women from other community, women from Namaboodiri community were not allowed to wear saree- blouse and to tie hair. Devaki Nilayamgode mentions about nair women Subhadra and Barathi- “they had knee length hair, wore colorful blouses and zari-bordered mundus with an upper cloth...it was on seeing Subhadra and Bhrathi that we girls suddenly became ware of our own uncouth appearance”. Transportation was much difficult than women from any other community. Devaki Nilayamgode says “even when the bus did come, there was no certainty that they would take antharjanams on board. The reason was that she was saddled with a palm leaf umbrella which cause discomfort to other passengers”.

During festive season, atharjanams danced in closed doors without audience to cheer up. When birthdays of Namboothiri men were celebrated with grand feast, no one celebrated antharjanams’ birthday. No one even cared to pray for their longitivity. No one invited antharjanams for any fest. They didn’t had the right to know about their marriage. Most of the antharjanams came to know about their marriage a day or two days before it through their maids. They had given no right to take decisions about their marriage.

The memoir *Antharjanam* helps us to understand the inadequate medical attention received by Namboodiri women. Devaki Nilayamgode says “Nobody paid much attention when women were unwell. In the absence of any special illness in her oldage, a vague reference was made to the effect that the women had taken to her bed. She was confined to vadakkeara and treated by well-known vaidyans...since women are not allowed to see them, the vaidyan would stand leaning against the door and would not venture close enough to either touch the patient or even to observe her symptoms, confining herself to asking her in loud tones what the problem was. The treatment depended on her answers or on the reply of those who stood near her”.

3. CONCLUSION

To conclude, this paper actually looks at how the pathetic conditions of women has relation with male domination and upper caste, and the many ways in which its ideas were deployed to keep women dually subjugated. In Kerala, caste played a major role to keep women suppressed. By looking at all these instances quoted in this research paper, it makes clear that Namboothiri women got oppressed or subjugated only because of the unjust religious patriarchy in the society. Religious patriarchy worked as a vehicle for coercing women to accept gender oppression through religion. Religious patriarchy brings to the forefront many theoretical questions regarding the position of women in religion and family.

Today we have come so far from all these. Yet, there are tiny bits inside us which think that women are to be oppressed. It has been observed that the activities by Yoga Kshema Sabha and the new thinking pattern which were put forth by communist party has brought wide range of changes among the lives of Antharjanams in Kerala. Both the literary works of Lalithambika Antharjanam and Devaki Nilaymkode show us how Namboodiri women of that period, without much accesses to freedom, have initiated to make changes in a way or the other. Even though women of 21st century have access to all sources, they are still been subjugated. Even after decades, these two novels offers inspiration to those women who were subjugated or oppressed.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alfred, Allu. "Reflections on Antharjanam: An Interview with Tanuja Bhattathiripad":
An International Refereed e-journal of Literary Explorations.3.1(2015).571-
574.Web.
- Bashrat, Tahira." The Contemporary Hindy Women of India: An Interview": A research
Journal of South Asian Studies.24.2(2009).242-249. Web.
- Chakarvarti, Uma." Conceptualizing Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India, Gender,
Caste, Class and State":Research Journal of English language and
Literature.20.1.(2013).579-587. Web.

- Cook, Elizabeth.” Feminism and the Gender Gap – A second look. The Indian Journal of Political Science.53.4(1991).1111-122. Web.
- Eswaran, Murukesh.” A Gender Based Theory of the origin of the Caste System of India”: Internatioanl Journal of English Literature and Culture.18.4(2012).282-291. Web.
- George , Mary.” Rereading Namboothiri ideology: An analysis of Devaki Nilaymkode’s Antharjanam”: International journal of English Literature and Culture.2.7(2014):104-110. Web.
- Goshal ,Guha.”Major trends of Feminism in India”:The Indian Journal of Political Science.66.4(2005):793-812. Web.
- Rose, Galdin.”Brahmanical Patriarchy: A paradigm of Patriarchal Power”: Research Journal of English Language and Literature.3.2.(2015).190-197. Web.
- Silima, Nanda. “Subjugation : A study of the women Characters in Khalid Hosseini’s and Arundhati Roy’s novels”: International Journal of English and Literature.4.10.(2013).456-461. Web.
- Antharjanam,Lalithambika. “Agnisakshi”. Kerala Sahitya Academy, 1980
- Nilayamgode, Devaki. “Antharjanam”. Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2001