

LALITHAMBIKA ANTHARJANAM'S REACTION AGAINST THE CONCEPT OF “ANTHARJANAM” IN AGNISAKSHI: LIFE OF THETHI

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ABSTRACT--*Agnisakshi (Fire, My Witness), the only novel of Kerala's eminent women writers, Lalithambika Antharjanam which tells an account of a Namboothiri woman called Thethikutty, who got liberated from the confines of her homes and left her family for the eternal fulfilment. Lalithambika Antharjanam encountered almost all the incidents from her own life experiences, especially the way she treated in her Illom. The story of Agnisakshi centers the deep and blind caste system and the practice of patriarchy of a Namboothiri household, which reveals the world of Namboothiri men and their rules and rituals which always avoided women from everywhere near their works. Thethikutty, the heroine of the novel tries to battle with these traditional norms which she prohibited from all the pleasures and happiness of her life, especially after she got married off to Unni Namboothiri the one who's not a typical orthodox husband, but the one who grown up in those old systems. Thethi encountered with many obstacles to find out the real freedom, and she received the path of renunciation, the way she wanted to really live. There she found freedom and relief in every aspect especially breaking away all the rules and regulations of a typical Namboothiri women who's basically called 'Antharjanam' the one who is inside or 'Akathullol.' In sum, the whole paper is going to scrutinize the system of 'Antharjanam' and how it is established in the novel Agnisakshi which is written by Lalithambika Antharjanam by looking deeply into the life of Thethikutty.*

Keywords--*Antharjanam, Patriarchy, Thethi, Unni Namboothiri, Namboothiri Illom, Renunciation, Freedom fight.*

INTRODUCTION

“I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved”

- Bharat Ratna Dr. B.R. Ambedkar

When we look back to the history of ancient India, women were enjoyed each and every positions and later it gradually diminished into a low position merely as an object for seeking pleasure for the patriarchal world. They lost almost all the positions and their individuality. Ambedkar's view on women's sufferings, social democracy, class, caste and philosophy significant to the modern Indian feminist thinking. According to him, the society must be based on some reasons, and not on heinous traditions of caste and class system. He promoted education for women of any category, intercaste marriage, which may eliminate all kind of social insecurities, like caste

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and patriarchy, which maintained through endogamy. Ambedkar worked for the empowerment of women, conducted *satyagrahas* and also launched women's associations. As stated in *Manusmrithi*, women plays a key role in shaping the morals of Indian society, a female should be under the control of her father in her childhood, then by her husband in her youth and after the death of her husband she must be the only one who's responsible to look after her children in any cases.

It basically follows the patriarchal system where women were crippled. This struggle for attaining freedom among women, later spread to many other parts of India, especially to the Southern states of India. Majority of the population in Tamil Nadu and Kerala are followers of Hinduism. Like what *Manusmrithi* expressed women were confined to the cramped spaces of daughter, wife and mother mostly in their homes, they did not have the freedom to read, write or think beyond the four walls of their households. Most of the women have their own capabilities and fields of interests, but there was no contribution to the field of literature and social service till a very late period of time. From nineteenth century onwards, India witnessed an emanation of power and enthusiasm in furnishing documents regarding their own life. This happened almost all the Indian languages, especially in Kerala, includes the autobiography of Lalithambika Antharjanam and B.Kalyani Amma.

OBJECTIVES

The paper brings up the concept of **Antharjanam** which is encountered in Lalithambika Antharjanam's novel *Agnisakshi* and also deals with how Lalithambika reacted against this concept as a sin to the women of namboothiri community. Another important idea included in this paper is the elaboration of the practice of patriarchy among the namboothiri community and also mention how Thethi (leading female character) reached at her dream positions by stating her life.

HYPOTHESIS

Here, the paper moves on with question of how a woman goes through the difficulties in their household as a daughter, wife and at the end as the mother of her devotees. Thethi the one who wants to get free from all the homely laws and regulations used to be followed by the Namboothiri clan. Thethi's entire actions challenged the idea of "Antharajanm," and this completely shocked the contemporary public by leaving her husband and his children. The women of that age supposed to be at home and Thethi explained how to live freely without thinking of her family and other duties. She got liberated from all the confines and at the end she entered to the eternal fulfilment. The paper will comes to a conclusion by describing the whole life of Thethikutty and how she became role model for other women of that age.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper analyzes the patriarchal system and the concept of Antharajanam in the novel *Agnisakshi* by Lalithambika Antharajanam, so the proper theory used to analyse is the feminist theory. The status of namboothiri women of the nineteenth century was equal to the status of other Indian women. All over the India women were considered as underrated figures that were confined only to the kitchen works and all, and they were stated as completely inferior to men. Most of the Indian women were suppressed by the male dominated family, having no freedom, recognition and significance. So the paper is focusing basically on the feminist theory mainly concentrating on the patriarchal components in the text. The concept of being one's antharajanam is an important

state of patriarchy and this became a serious problem in the Brahmin community where women cannot be free in doing any activities in public.

When we come to the history of Feminism in India, it can be divided into three phases. The first phase, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, began when male European colonists started to speak against the evil concept of Sati; second phase begins from 1915 to Indian independence, when Gandhi corporate with the women's movements and women's organizations began to emerge. The third phase focused on the fair treatment of women at home after marriage, in working place and political field. The author of the novel *Agnisakshi* also fought for the empowerment of women and was a well known feminist social worker of the period.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Lalithambika Antharjanam's *Agnisakshi* analysed by various researchers. One among that is entitled *The Female Phase in the Selected Novel of Anita Nair, Lalithambika Antharjanam, and Arundati Roy*, which is written by R.Rajashree. This paper mentions the practice of patriarchy and how the leading female characters escaped from the restricted sides of their orthodox families. A paper titled *The Dynamics of Gender and Nation in Agnisakshi* also deals with the concept of gender struggles in this novel and it also mentioned the life of Thethi. A journal under the World Journal of Gender and Literature, titled *Tradition, Modernity and Sexuality in Lalithambika Antherianam's Agnisakshi* by Sreebitha P.V. discusses about how the life of Thethi moves on with the aristocratic family members and the sexuality of women within the framework of tradition and modernity and to see if there is any difference. The sexuality of women in the novel is tied up with the motherhood both in terms of tradition and modernity.

ANALYSIS AND MAJOR FINDINGS

Lalithambika Antharjanam and her Reaction against the Concept of "Antharjanam"

Lalithambika Antharjanam, the First Woman of Malayalam Letters and the solitary voice from the aristocratic Namboothiri community of Kerala, played a vital role in the social transformation of the community of Kerala society in general. Lalithambika Antharjanam born in a wealthy namboothiri family, where she enjoyed almost all her freedoms. In her Illam (Namboothiri household), she could exercise all her literary talents; she had an outstanding imagination and a pure way of presentation. Antharjanam is the only one who wrote about the real life experiences of namboothiri women who were regularly suppressed in their household.

The real quality of an author in Lalithambika Antharjanam was emerged, looking upon the sufferings of Indian women, and she felt a deep sympathy for the condition of women in her community. She had configured many associations to protest against this injustice practiced among her community. Antharjanam was very much passionate in her own field of interest and courageous toward the well being of women and reformation processes *Agnisakshi*, Lalithambika Antharjanam's most celebrated work, which is a landmark novel that questioned the worst sides of patriarchy and the subjugation of women in the namboothiri community. The story chronicles the strive of a namboothiri woman when she gets married off to a highly orthodox and prudent family. The story goes around Thethikutty and her experiences and hardships in the highly chauvinist namboothiri illam and her peregrination towards liberation. The novel limns her transfiguration into a rebellious and later on to her life as a hermit in an ashram.

Namboothiri women or "Antharjanam" lived under the fetters of hefty limitations in the patriarchy and male chauvinism. In all namboothiri households, there are Antharjanams whom destined to work and live for their

husbands and constricted to the kitchen duties. They weren't allowed to go out for any fundamental needs, so that they used to be at home focusing on the household works. That's why they're called 'Antharajanam', which literally means "people inside the house" or in Malayalam it is known as "akathullol". They stayed within the four walls of their illams. But in the end, the namboothiri women reached at a position which is lower than the slaves of their patriarchal family, and in some cases they got ill-treated like an untouchable or outcaste. The meticulous practice of patriarchy breaks all the thread-lines of their freedom, either at home or in the society. Lalithambika was a key product of their culture. As a well-known writer she raised her voice against the brutal actions towards namboothiri and all other women in general. She worked completely for the empowerment of women and also dissatisfied with the notion of 'antharjanam' because only of the misconceptions the caste system carries. In her novels, all the occasions and incidents were manifested as a great lesson for the future reading generation.

As mentioned earlier, namboothiri caste was the highest caste in Indian society. Lalithambika's writing style and the power of observing things influenced many women to come out of their hard shells. All these incidents made her happy to see the gradual change happened to the women, those who live inside come out which was a sight of happiness. Reading this novel, the readers witnessed Lalithambika Antharjanam's capacity to deal with the strange and unfamiliar turns of human life. Women readers got easily attached to the plot and the incidents encountered in the novel. By looking deeply into the life of Thethi, the leading female character in the novel we can understand that all the incidents were ensued because of the lack of love and care, and these things leads to the complete cataclysm. Agnisakshi literally means "witness by fire", the scuffle of the heroin who sacrificed all her abilities to the oppressive institutions of marriage. It is a story which brings out all the vexations and difficulties being an antharajanam of Unni Namboothiri. Unlike other characters in this novel Thethi is well educated and intelligent in her literary field. She always wanted to unbridle from the orthodox background to the world of literature.

Thethi had the ability to think logically and act accordingly. She was the one who believed in the concept that reading must builds ones potential to think abundantly about their position in the society they belong. This exposure to reading and knowledge made her grasp what's really happening outside world. Thethi's relation with endless number of books and magazines leads her to think more about her and from then onwards she expressed the natural feeling of a human being that is to exhibit her love towards her passion. But the surroundings created a fence in front of her brilliance in writing. Unni Namboothiri, the protagonist's husband failed to know the real passion of his wife, especially her interest in literature. Drastic changes occurred in their Illam soon after the veli (marriage) of Unni Namboothiri. Thethi was the sister of P.K.P., young reformer of namboothiri community. She almost had enjoyed her freedom of writing and literature at her natal home, and after her marriage, she finds difficult to live in Manambilly. He's totally unable to understand Thethi's deep emotions. Unni is not really a loveless person but Thethi got depressed at his emotionless behaviour to her. He appears to be a man of restraint sentiments. Thethi says,

"I don't think Ettan loves anyone. He is afraid of everything and everyone. Aphan, mother, traditions- why, God himself! Like elder brother said, if i continue to live here, i too might go mad with fear." (25)

Another leading female character accompanied with Thethi is Thankam, who's the representative of Nair community. The novel progresses through the recollections of Thankam. Thankam is the only one whom Thethi communicated with. After Unni's marriage with Thethi, she was very proud of the nobility of Manmbilly Mana. But things happened exactly opposite of what she really expected; there she wanted to enjoy the fullness of life as a wife and as a best mother and daughter. Unfortunately this was an impossible thing to Thethi. Then she realized that Unni was not much fascinated in the material affairs and all the basic familial purposes. Other people in their

illam do not allow them to meet casually or to talk about their future. Most of the male and female characters had a great role in making restrictions and barriers between the husband and wife. When we go through the incidents, the readers might feel that Unni Namboothiri and other characters in one way or other represent the patriarchal nature of namboothiri community.

Hindu marriage basically harmonizes two individuals for ultimate eternity, so that they can follow Dharma (truth), Arth (meaning), and Kama (physical desires). There's nothing happening in between Thethi and Unni, because it was Ettandamma who decided when Unni and Thethi should meet. She believed in the old notion that if a man or woman wanted to meet their partner each other, it is only for making children, and she mentions her own life that her husband very often met her but she had more than five children. Both namboothiri men and women were confined to the true blue conservative thoughts, and according to Ettandamma the life of an antharajanam had to be constricted in the kitchen duties and also inside the Thevarappura, the place where the supreme goddess of the residence worshiped daily. They followed the concept of Shudham which means purity or cleanliness, and an antharajanam wasn't allowed to enter into the kitchen and temple or thevarappura without cleaning their body (Especially after the menstrual cycle). In Manambilly Mana, Thethi was destined to read only Mahabharatha and Ramayana and do not allowed to read any other sacred books. But Thethi doesn't even want to stick on only to these books, and she collected many books and this was known only to Thankam. Thankam says,

“The bookshelf placed against the wall, was stacked with thick books in Sanskrit. Below that, on a wooden box, modern novels and books of poetry lay piled up. Thethi Edathi's huge box was not filled with clothes. There was a general complaint that it held only bits of paper.” (24)

More than anyone else in Manambilly Mana, Thankam was the only one who's trustworthy towards Thethi, and when they gets leisure time, both of them sat down together and would begin to talk or read. Many newspapers and magazines were being delivered at Kacheri Malika. Their father never read them. Nor Unni Namboothiri. Thankam promised that after her mother had read them, she would bring the magazines and papers to Thethi. Thethi had to contend with loneliness in many aspects of her life in her husband's aloof household. Except Thankam, all other woman of their Mana was suspicious of Thethi's behaviour. All these disorders make Thethi unhappy and intensely lonely. All those fate was against her dreams and happiness. In this rigid situation, she would not be allowed to her home. Thethi doesn't even be a part of Manambilly Mana and suffocated at the post of antharajanam. Thethi wanted to break all the rules and regulations of her family and wished to go out of her home to find the meaning of real freedom. She got mutilated and Unni refused to utter a single word in front of other people. Unni without knowing any feelings rejected all her dreams. After all these events Thethi decided to leave Unni and his family, and for that Unni do not utter a single word about her decision even she told him that she was leaving.

Thethi started working for the well being of the society and the women belong to her community. She made impressing speeches and fought for the empowerment of women. She used Gandhian and Nehru ideologies as her weapon. Later she joined in the activities of Nationalist Movements. But gradually her position started diminishing and forsook her stand as a social worker. Though Thethi became an ascetic but at the same time she refused to leave the material world totally. In Thethi's mind there's still an urge to become a mother. Thethi herself deeply regretted never having a child. Quite early in her marriage, once she realized that her own dreams are not going to workout and her chances of conceiving were inadequate, she asked Thankam to promise that, when she give birth to a girl child or had a granddaughter she would give the girl Thethi's name. At the very end of the novel, Thethi realized that a woman's greatest inclination was to be called a mother.

In this novel, Thethi mentioned about the concept of 'Ardhanareeswaran' also called Lord Siva which is the concept of oneness of male and female in a single body. When she started working as a social worker and freedom fighter, she finds herself totally unable to free her mind from the thoughts of the past. Sometimes she realizes that she cannot be free from her husband. Like the concept of Ardhanareeswara they are one and the same. Some kind of rituals started taking place in Thethi's room, that she set up a 'homakundam' which means a sacrificial fire in her room and offered all the eatables to the fire before she ate. Once, it was in front of this fire she became the wife of Unni. Being a typical namboothiri woman she considers the fire as husband and offers food to the fire. Man cannot live without fire according to the Hindu mythology and a woman's life is meaningless without her husband. According to Thethi, fire is the token of life, and symbol of hunger and sexual desire. All these incidents are flaming inside the mind of Thethi. Later she took ashrama vasa as a hermit and there she finds solace and relief in her way of living which is for the well being of her most loved 'bhaktas'. There she attained the full fledged sanyasini accepting the name of Sumitrananda. Thus she became a saint, cutting herself from all familial thoughts and relationships. Thankam herself, narrator and witness to the entire story and now she met Sumitrananda to inform the death of Unni; and Thankam handover the sacred thread (thali) to her. She offered it into the fire and takes it from the fire and give the thali to Thankam's granddaughter.

CONCLUSION

Travelling through many thought provoking incidents Thethi had influenced many women writers and readers. Thethi's life itself is a great inspiration for those who suffering from loneliness and frustration in their household. The society of namboothiri Brahmins following the misrepresentation of Hindus gave a secondary position to the women. Thethi the heroine of the novel tries to battle with these traditional norms which she was always prohibited from all the pleasures of her life, especially after her marriage. Thethi encountered with many obstacles to find out the real meaning of freedom and later she received the path of renunciation, the way she really wanted to live. In India women were basically stick on to the stages of daughter, wife and mother and nothing more than that. What really the women want is the freedom of expression, freedom in literature and all. They are capable of dealing with any kind of jobs and positions, but the practice of patriarchy wouldn't allow them to follow their dreams. The women of namboothiri community supposed to play the role of an antharajanam in order to emanate their customs without breaking the rule and regulations.

Lalithambika's direct knowledge of the conflicts and problems that namboothiri families had to deal with at this period gives the narratives its wealth of descriptive detail about the community. We can get directly into the characters, and sharply get attached to the emotion being a viewer from outside. Lalithambika employs each and every incidents effectively in her novel *Agnisakshi*, to tell a tale that has now acquired an almost successful status in the world of feminist writing in India.

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