

# Of Metamorphosis, Power and Subjugation: The Renaissance of Caste and Culture based on Lalithambika Antharjanam's Agnisakshi

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## ABSTRACT

The objective of the study is to delineate the power structure within the culture in the light of Foucauldian theory of power, resistance and discipline by which it explicates culture as a curse in the lives of Brahmin women. By establishing the cultural norms, the power that revolves around men and caste moulded the females as subordinates to them. The inclusive discussion tries to establish the psychological transfiguration of upper-class women community in Kerala towards the traditional orthodox culture and practices within the caste and thereby the new renaissance, with reference to Lalithambika Antharjanam's Agnisakshi (1976), which was translated as Witness, My Fire by Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan.

## Keywords

culture, gender oppression, marginalization, new renaissance

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## Introduction

Since a distant past, women have been brushed aside as a group that is subservient to men. According to *Manusmriti*, estimated to be a text of the 5<sup>th</sup> Century C.E, a dutiful woman should be subservient to her father, brother and later to her husband and sons. It portrayed the roles of everyone in the society – the subordinates as well as the superordinates, describing the women as “the people within the household”. The pride of place granted to women is that they alone are “the guardians of *dharmā*”. It has to be remembered that women of Vedic period enjoyed auspice similar to that of the men in the society. But during medieval period, women had to go through several obstacles related to education, religious rights and privileges. During 1900s, the main objection faced by women of Kerala was the inferior status imposed upon them. In the Namboodiri community, women were subjected to severe restrictions under the tyrannical dominance of men, as well as with reference to several rituals in practice.

## Methodology

The present study employs an investigative methodology of Foucault's power theory and Glass Ceiling with the view to examine the motives of power and resistance emerging from the socio-political as well as cultural background of Kerala, with reference to the work of the Brahmin woman writer and social reformist, Lalithambika Antharjanam.

## Interdisciplinary relevance

The relevance of this topic comes not only in literature, but can also be viewed under customs, culture and psychology to portray the transformation of female psyche through breaking the restrictions in the society. Lalithambika Antharjanam not only tried to portray the rebellious women

characters in a particular community but also wanted to convey the idea that the Namboodiri women have enough mental stability and strength needed to articulate a reaction towards what they clearly felt was the irrelevant ways that subdued them. Further, Antharjanam wanted to show that they are not at the margins but right in the midst of struggles and suffocations. Most of her works appear to be capable of enlightening the minds and hearts of women and make them take on themselves the task of moving forward to protest against and naturalizing the subjugation of women. Through her works, she portrayed the vitality and inventiveness of women characters to metamorphose the patriarchal stronghold of the society of the time and to work for the upliftment of not only women in general, but also the women of the ‘upper-classes’.

## Role of patriarchy in the lives of brahmin women

The Namboodiri women were popularly known as *Antharjanams* meaning “people of the inside of the home”. This itself was an indicative of the restrictions imposed on them by which they had practically no freedom. Their movement out of the home was restricted to visits to temples. Or else they were confined to the *illam* (house) alone, once they come of age. Chastity was appraised and highlighted as an important factor for the implementation of this rigor on the girl child, where, ritual bath, chanting and working in the kitchen were the only things that were normally permissible for them. On the other hand, it is seen that the Namboodiri men were legalized to have several wives. During the colonial period, the Namboodiri's possessed a high social rank in Kerala by which later this community drove itself into decline due to their life styles and multi marriages of men in this community. The culture enforced rituals like *Ghoshā/Tholvirasamaram* or veil system, child marriage, dowry etc. and also restricted the possibility of education for women. According to the Namboodiri pattern of family, the eldest son in the family

inherits and possesses their wealth, and that makes it compulsory for him to marry woman from his own caste. The other Namboodiri sons were allowed to marry women from other castes and also the women in this community were not allowed to marry men of outcastes. *Smarthavijaram* was a trial against the Namboodiri women when their chastity was doubted. "The last chastity trial was considered to be Kuriyedath Thatri, the wife of Chemmanthata Kuriyedath Raman Namboodiri, a silk-stocking debauched man" (Bhaskaranunni, 2009)

### The New Renaissance

The reformist group, *Yogakshema Sabha*, was created by several Namboodiri men and women, to articulate a new renaissance against the existing socio-political situations, especially towards the patriarchal stronghold of the society, on the *mahasivaratri* day of February-March, 1908. Kurur Unni Namboodiri, Chittoor Narayanan Namboodiri, VT Bhattathirippadu, Parvathi Nenminimangalam, Arya Pallath, Uma Antharjanam, Kainikkara Devaki Antharjanam, and Lalithambika Antharjanama were some of the activists in *Yogakshema Sabha*. The spectacular effect and result of this strong initiative was the first widow remarriage happening between the social reformists, Uma Antharjanam and VT Bhattathirippadu in his house *Rasikasadanam*, on September 13<sup>th</sup> 1934. One of the main focuses of *Yogakshema Sabha* was to reintroduce education for women and to get rid of unwanted orthodox beliefs and customs. And this organization founded *Namboodiri Vidhyalayam* to provide better education for both men and women in 1919. Namboothiri Women started participating in this movement willingly and in large numbers by the 1930s. This paved the way for bringing about greater awareness and focus on the necessity of women empowerment in the male dominated society.

### Manifestation Of Brahmin Cultural Background: An Overview To The Novel

#### Agnisakshi

Lalithambika Antharjanam was the first Brahmin woman writer in Kerala, who established her self-efficacy to eliminate the socio-political events in her society. She succeeded in throwing a flood of light into the ordinary life of the Namboodiri women community that resulted in the new transformation in the caste, community and culture. She belonged to the very small minority of privileged women whose families were comparatively more progressive. She celebrated even the small achievements of her women characters for the reticulation of the society. Antharjanam always establish an effort to reform not only the mental subjugation that they are forced to experience but also the rules and regulations that compelled them to stick to the path of conventional practices and thoughts she found baselessly primitive. According to Indian cultural tradition, a wife is supposed to treat her husband with utmost adherence even if he happens to be one of sexual promiscuity and misdemeanors. Through her works, Lalithambika Antharjanam projected the tormented life, learned helplessness and also the self-efficacy of women

characters, to re-establish their identities that were gradually fading away. The women characters of Antharjanam, regret to witness the betrayal of the patriarchal society towards their identity. In her epilogue of *Agnisakshi*, Lalithambika explained that "women of Kerala from ordinary families, who function as mother household heads and hostesses, find it difficult to wake up writing as a full-time job" (Antharjanam, 1976). She elaborated on the real-life history of certain characters through literature to establish the quest for identity to social equality.

Antharjanam was particular with each and every character she depicted in her work. Antharjanam, actually expressed a sort of stability to their women community, by establishing the acts of assorted women revolutionaries who not only revolted towards the subservient nature of women but also seek to fade that inadequate conservative implementation from their community itself. Through the character of Thethi, Antharjanam, portrayed the psychological transfiguration of a married woman of Thethi to Devaki Manappally, a freedom fighter, by splintering the glass ceiling made by the observant traditional customs in the society and finally offsets as a penitent, Devi Bahen, in the Himalayan ashram. *Agnisakshi* one of the notable works of Lalithambika Antharjanam, in which she manifested the idea of psychological transfiguration via the character Thethi, who was a highly educated woman who was restricted within the proclamations of the family by which she encounters frustration but tried her best to cope up with the situations.

Thethi was unsatisfied with her marital life with Unni Eattan, her husband. By always involved in rituals and prayers, he failed to comfort Thethi with his love and care. He wanted Thethi to play the role of a traditional wife and to understand him. Even though he expressed his love and compassion to the insane elder aunt in the *illam*, he forgets to fulfill the needs of his wife. Antharjanam explicated the real life characters that she had witnessed in her life by which she tried to explicit the multi-marriages of Namboodiri men that results in the mental subjugation women in this community.

As an educated woman, she felt very depressed without even reading anything in that house. She said to Thankam, "within these four walls, I have no books other than Ramayanam and Seelavathy...if I continue to live here; I might too become mad out of fear." (Antharjanam, 1976). In the perception of Thankam, Thethi is like a 'caged civet cat'. "She walked restlessly in the kitchen, prayer room and the grounds in front of bathing house". (Antharjanam, 1976). She felt empty within the house. "I read your speeches and articles. Thankam brings them to me. If not for her, I would have committed suicide" Thethi wrote to her brother. (Antharjanam, 1976). Thethi was confined within the domesticity and tried to avoid open confrontations with the existing norms. But by subjugating her dreams herself, she was aware that, her life had been transiting through futility and she called it 'death in life' (Antharjanam, 1976). But she was courageous enough to get rid out of those struggles and to apprehend her dreams.

*Agnisakshi* documents disquiet, strangling patriarchal society in Kerala by which it traces some of the rules in the Namboodiri household predominantly and the ordinance of untouchability. Her strong bond with her Sister-in-Law,

Thankam, who was half Brahmin and half Nair, assembles blustering dissensions about Thethi in the *illam*. When she helped a low caste boy by providing books and food, it was not benevolently contemplated by the family. And also her elder brother PKP's activism for the freedom for Namboodiri women and his close connection with outcaste people established discomforts in Manappally Mana.

Once in the newspaper Thankam witnessed the new face of an Anantharjanm, who has given up the *Ghosha* and come out, her own beloved Thethi Edathi, now as Devaki Manampalli. Under the heading from 'Darkness to Light', "a woman dressed in a sari and a blouse, head held in high, that young woman who stood on the platform". (Antharjanam, 1976). Thankam said, "oh, my Edathamma...Is that you? Was there a burning volcano inside you? When it burst and scattered, those glowing sparks fell on then surroundings scorching them" (Antharjanam, 1976). Aphan Namboodiri's wife was one of the best examples for the conventional orthodox practices and believes that forced her to oppose the new renaissance that emerged from her daughter-in-law Thethi. She said in uncertain terms,

"That useless woman..., she, who has given up her umbrella and eats with untouchables not observing pollution... That fallen woman will not be allowed to enter the gates of this tharawad". Keeping the unending obstinacy of his mother aside, the younger brother of Unni Namboodiri, tried to convince Thethi to return home to begin a new family life with his Unniattan. But Thethi firmly believed in her actions and her new focuses. Thethi uttered, "At this time, it is impossible for me to be the old Thethikutty Antharjanm, carry an umbrella, and walk with my head bowed. I will attend meetings. I will deliver speeches. I will not observe pollution" (Antharjanam, 1976)

For Thankam, from Thethi to Devaki Manampalli, was a magical change. She never expected that her Eddathi would have become a freedom fighter of strong opinions. Late from Devaki Manampalli, she gradually changed to Devi Bahen at the National level. Then she couldn't return into the life of an Anantharjanm, within the four walls of the house. Netyamma said, "It would now be futile for her to return. She is a changed person. She does not observe pollution and non-pollution. She cannot cover herself up again because she has been too open. Nor she has any concern about caste. Will it possible for her to submit to young master Unni's desire?" (Antharjanam, 1976). Later Thankam came to know about several Sathyagraha and the freedom movement of Devi Bahen along with Gandhi. Devi Bahen became a strong follower of Gandhian perceptions. "She lay unconscious in the jail hospital for several days. She did not become a minister. Nor even a leader. Nor, on a small scale, a committee member. But that unselfish courageous heroine bathed in blood, who had stood holding the symbol of future India close to her chest" (Antharjanam, 1976). Later she preferred *sannyasam*.

It is considerable that, in all three stages she succeeds in ushering in changes in the set up around her. Her purpose of convergence was to stimulate the career and lifetime of women out with caste and gender. As a revolutionary she protested against the dress code that was obtruded by the patriarchal society. To her sister in law, Thethi established her read that, she doesn't represent any specific community,

faith or society. But she needs to be the representative of the ladies folks who are defeated to suffering for hundreds of years. The writer has tried to portray the women who have been subjugated to multiple oppressions, enslavement and trouncing not only by the caste and class men and women but also their own men folks from their community. Lalithambika Antharjanam explained "It is the duty of the writer to dismantle the narrow, decaying rafters of the social structure and to arrange for the materials necessary for the construction of a modern stature. Novels, short story, poetry- all the literary genres are the objective conditions for this". So through her works, Antharjanam urged to make a change in the social scenario by which women have been handled like unpalatable creatures by the age of traditional conservative customs, practices, and rituals.

It is very evident from this circumstances that, women who have been subjugated to multiple oppressions, enslavement and trouncing within the caste and class. Lalithambika Antharjanam explained "It is the duty of the writer to dismantle the narrow, decaying rafters of the social structure and to arrange for the materials necessary for the construction of a modern stature. Novels, short story, poetry- all the literary genres are the objective conditions for this". So through her works, Antharjanam urged to make a change in the social scenario by which women have been handled like unpalatable creatures by the age of traditional conservative customs, practices, and rituals. At last, after the death of her father, Thankam understands that "the house is which she had been born and raised was not hers. She could not claim her father as her own. Nothing was hers. They had no rights in this house" (Antharjanam, 1976). For Nair women, they had always been the mistress of a Namboodiri or Thampuram and to bear their children. At last after the death of this Thamburan they had to leave that house and to return to *tharawad* with many members of old traditions and disciplines. And they were forced to leave their *tharawad* once as they had left their husband's *illam*. It was considered as the fate of *Marumakkathayam* families in the society.

Nevertheless, the writer was very particular in a way which she firmly believed about a time when all women will be treated with indistinguishable state and consideration. In the epilogue Antharjanam explored her views; "will prove useful for the women of new generations to remember their mothers and grandmothers...to realize and examine by gone age's tears and dreams" (Antharjanam, 1976). By fair means, she wanted to inculcate the reinforcement and competence most urgently needed by the women of her time and generation. She also wanted to see the demolition and extinction of an unrelenting set up which tyrannizes womanhood. Antharjanam's works possessed a steadfast positive attitude inevitable to enlighten the society to the unwritten truth in Nature and Creation that women in society are in no way a trifling puppet – particularly, in the hands of male. Here is what she said:

"If this helps the women of new generation to have a better understanding of their counterparts of the older generation, while persuading the older generation to analyze themselves, and other people to examine the tears and dreams of a bygone age, it will suffice" (Antharjanam, 1976).

## Feminism And Foucauldian Theories

Foucault mainly focused on the varied faces of power and subjugation. The socio-political reality that, informal inspection of human history explicates psychological, theological menacing results in the conclusion that the familiar maxim “knowledge is power” into “power is knowledge” by Foucault. The ultimate outcome of this idea paved the way to formulate Foucault’s ideas of panoptic surveillance, with a strong impact on the views and ideas of discipline and punish monitoring and scrutinizing people into subjugation. Obviously, the very same power of authority, a particular way of power that man holed over them, besides the general authority of society was concerned by the feminists. In his predominant work, *The History of Sexuality and Discipline and Punish* Foucault established his ideas on the concept of power as very oppressive and negative. But Foucauldian power can be of two modes: repressive and relational. The expediency of repressive power is very brief. He focuses more on the relational aspect of power, and according to him, it is ubiquitous. It has the capacity to influence the social, political and personal life of an individual. It produces subject, truth, identity, knowledge and even reality. In *The History of Sexuality*, he states that, “where there is power, there is resistance” (95). No one is the permanent custodian of power. It is strategic and circulatory in nature. This strategic operation of power is often hidden and quite often it is used to subordinate others with their consent. Certain disciplinary methods are used as part of the strategic power operation to make its execution an ultimate success. Hence, radical feminists complain that Foucault’s ideas are not feminist-oriented although his ideas of discipline and punish have all along been the central pillar of feminist subjugation in human history.

## Conclusion

Lalithambika Antharjanam, is conversant with the need to write down about the feminine psyche by their methods of coping to introduce a replacement path. Thethi is one among the foremost powerful characters created by the Brahmin women writers in India, who tried to say the true-life history of girls rebels, who were objectified for his or her posterity. Being within the midst of Hindu culture and conjugality, the ladies characters of Antharjanam, found hard to proceed forward and to form a landmark history that enlightens others to be a neighbourhood of the society through their own effort. She configured the patriarchal traditions and prescriptions at its best level. It had been a task for her to revamp and reconstruct the feminine experience that was neglected in their previous days. She traveled through a difficult path to writing about the ladies who broke the silence. Still, the conclusion of the novel raises several questions; “Has Thethi abandoned her go after radical reform in society? Has her life been a hit or a failure? To mention that an individual has found moksha or transparent peace of mind isn't the belief one expects of a social worker-one who had devoted all her creative life to social upliftment. The conclusion of the novel is specifically religious and rooted within

the Hindu religious philosophy which isn't the structure of the search Thethi and her brother embarks upon. It's even retrograde therein all it suggests a conclusion that's contradictory to the discipline and punishment the feudalist and patriarchal forces insist upon. Foucault’s stand is vindicated therein the seeds of opposition and revolution which the reader notices at the start of the novel blossom and die before their fruition. This is often the victory of the forces of authority.

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