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‘Cast Out’: Namboodiri Women in Lalithambika Anterjanam’s Short Stories
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Abstract
This paper attempts to throw light on the Namboodiri women of Kerala of the early twentieth century through a study of the English translation of a few Malayalam short stories of Lalithambika Anterjanam. Through these stories Lalithambika has retrieved from the past an entire culture of women who were silenced and marginalized and has criticized the strict patriarchal Namboodiri code of conduct which shows her as an early feminist writer.

Full version of Paper
The Namboodiri community of Kerala was regarded as the highest caste in Kerala. Namboodiris exercised enormous cultural and economic authority in Kerala before colonialism. Ironically the Namboodiri women lived secluded and restricted lives. They were known as ‘anterjanams’ meaning ‘those who live inside’. Strict marriage and inheritance laws consolidated the Namboodiri holdings. The eldest son inherited the property and married within the community. Other sons formed contractual relationships with the matrilineal Nair community. Consequently, anterjanams found it difficult to find husbands. Dowries were high for young husbands and so instead of remaining unmarried, young Namboodiri girls of 12 or 13 were married to already-married eldest sons who were sometimes, old and sick or about to die. The young widows were condemned to a life secluded in the kitchen or prayer room or ill-treated by the older wives. The miserable plight of these anterjanams led to protests against patriarchal oppression in Kerala in the first quarter of the twentieth century (Lalithambika Anterjanam, xv).

Namboodiri girls, once they reached puberty were called asuryampasyakal, literally, those who should never see the sun. They were confined to their homes and had to observe the namboodiri rules of seclusion. If they had to go out, they had to cover themselves with palm-leaf umbrellas, cover themselves with a bleached cloth and have a female chaperone to accompany them. Namboodiris were more orthodox than other communities like nairs, and Syrian Christians and were most reluctant to reform and resisted the changes which occurred in Kerala in the twentieth century. The Namboodiri women had to observe strict ritual purity. They could not look at men other than their husbands, the widows may not cover or shave their heads, they could not cover the upper part of their body when at home, they could only wear white clothing; they could not pierce their noses, they had to wear heavy dangling earrings because of which their ear lobes lengthened. Sage Parasurama’s name is invoked to endorse these customs as he is believed to have brought the Namboodiris to Kerala.

Lalithambika Anterjanam(1909-1987), a Malayalee novelist, poet and short story writer belonged to the Namboodiri community of Kerala. She was fortunate to live in a
Namboodiri family where her parents allowed her freedom within the confines of the extended family. In the autobiographical essay ‘Childhood Memories.’, Lalithambika Anterjanam writes, ‘Her father took great care not to let her realize that she had been born into a society that did not believe in bringing up girls as human beings.’ (Lalithambika Anterjanam, 134) She was taught different subjects at home even Sanskrit. She never went bare-breasted and her earlobes were not lengthened. Her community disapproved of the way in which she was brought up with so much freedom.

Nevertheless, her parents reluctantly confined her in the house once she reached puberty. Like other Namboodiri girls, she had to submit to a centuries-old custom. However, as Lalithambika Anterjanam confesses her real education took place in those years when she was confined to the antahpuram. It was at this time she came to understand the joys, sorrows, desire and experiences of all the people around her. She saw and heard stories about child widows, incarcerated in the Namboodiri house (illams), and who were sometimes cast out for as trivial a reason as going out of the house without an umbrella. Either they died on the road-side or were taken away by the Muslims or Mapillas. She felt inspired to write about these women, and give voice to their silent cries. Lalithambika observes, Namboodiri society was revitalized by the impulse towards a renaissance. Thus she was one of the first few Namboodiri women to discard the umbrella and shawl after her marriage. This earned the ire of her family members who wanted to perform her shraddh or funeral rites for such a crime. However, smarthavicharam was averted by her father who built a small house for her husband and child. Anterjanams, Lalithambika observes, ‘were accused of the most inconsequential misdoings, for which they were tried by a smarthavicharam and then cast out of society. Fear was the only emotion they knew. The tears, the pain, and the suffering of unhappy anterjanams, old spinsters, widows disowned by their families and dissatisfied co-wives, filled the antahpurams, which were worse than Hitler’s concentration camps’. (Lalithambika Anterjanam, 146)

Smarthavicharam was a private court convened in the family and was conducted by male Namboodiris, king’s representatives and a judge. These sometimes ran into months and impoverished the family. The accused was often terrorized into confession and was cast out of the household after removing her umbrella and shawl. The rites of the dead were performed for her and she had to fend for herself.

In the short stories we find Lalithambika critiquing the patriarchal Namboodiri society. She gives a voice to the legacy of suffering, silent as well as rebellious women. Ironically the punishment for rebellion is expulsion from the household, the freedom from the incarceration but they had nowhere to go. They became outcasts. Lalithambika is important as a feminist writing about Namboodiri women of early twentieth century Kerala. Household and family are the themes of the stories. The stories consist of myriad motifs referring to the recurrent themes of identity, power, gender relations, politics and cultural traditions. They weave together different states of mind. These stories are more like oral histories of the Namboodiri women as Lalithambika records them from what other Namboodiri women have told her. Together they record the Namboodiri culture of colonial India. Lalithambika has attempted to explore the ubiquity of power - repressive and hegemonic - and the numerous possibilities of resistance.
In the short story ‘Power of Fate’ the author narrates the tragic story of an anterjanam who is cast out of the Namboodiri household for no crime but the jealousy of the eldest wife of the Namboodiri. Leela Dube in her essay ‘Caste and Women’ states, ‘…the punishment for transgression of rules and norms of caste leads to the ostracism of the domestic group of the offender unless s/he is disowned by the household.’(Mary E. John, 467) After she is expelled she is taken by the Muslims or Mapillas. Sick and impoverished on her death bed, her wish of seeing her son whom she had left behind in the Namboodiri household is fulfilled. The author narrates how the Namboodiri son reluctantly goes into the mapilla hut to see his mother as it was ‘a terrible sin’ to ‘touch a woman who had been cast out, who had lived with a mlecha for years and had two children by him(Cast Me Out,10)’. He had to do purificatory rituals of repentance for the ‘sin’. The story criticizes the custom of touch and pollution. It is more important than one’s mother.

According to Kate Millet and Simone de Beauvoir sexual colonialism is a relationship of dominance and subservience between the sexes. The Namboodiri women are the colonized and the Namboodiri men the colonizers. The story ‘Goddess of Revenge’ describes an unusual smarthaticharam, where an accused anterjanam not only confesses her crime of adultery but also cross-examines her partners who are also cast out of the society. ‘The Goddess of Revenge’ is based on the true story of 1905, of Tatri, a Namboodiri woman who plans an elaborate revenge after she is abandoned by her Namboodiri husband. Through the character of Tatri, the author brings out the Namboodiri woman’s incarceration in her husband’s family as well as in her father’s family. Tatri regrets that she is born into the Namboodiri caste and wishes to pay her husband back in his own coin when he brings home a second wife. Her husband’s words, ‘If you want me to love you must become a prostitute’ (Cast Me Out, 23) is taken as a challenge by Tatri.

When she returns to her own father’s house she sees more sorrow and grief instead of relief: two of her widowed sisters, another sister who had turned mad because of her husband’s torture, two unmarried sisters, a continual source of worry for her mother, and her brother looking for a wife to replace his fourth one who had just died. She feels all Namboodiri households are like prisons. She is not allowed to go into the kitchen as she looks out of the window and smiles at others. Tatri plans out revenge by becoming a courtesan. She feels, ‘If I were going to be pushed aside, others who were mean and cruel were going to fall with me’ (Cast Me Out, 26). Many well-known men crowded to her as well as her husband. A trial or smarthaticharam follows where she reveals herself as a Namboodiri woman. At her trial she reveals the names of all the men during the cross-examination. Hence not only is she cast out of the society but 65 men as well. At the end of the story Tatri asks a pertinent question which is true of all women even today, ‘was it simply an act of revenge performed by a prostitute? Or was it also the expression of the desire for revenge experienced by all Namboodiri women who are caught in the meshes of evil customs, who are tortured and made to suffer agonies?’(Cast Me Out, 28) The author boldly portrays a woman whose name was shunned by Namboodiri society. Tatri has gone down in history as womanhood screaming for justice, for hundreds of silenced anterjanams. The narrative investigates anti-authoritarian model of resistance but
‘One of the modes by which power works is by simple repression…’ (Saugata Bhaduri, xix) ‘Admission of Guilt’ is the story of an anterjanam who at her smarthavicharam admits her guilt of adultery but her deeply moving defence brings to light the suppressed sexuality of a Namboodiri child widow. The tears, the pain and suffering of many child widows in her husband’s family furnished Lalithambika with inexhaustible material for her stories. The story exposes gender politics that keeps women and their sexuality captive in its folds. The protagonist, a pregnant widow claims to bear responsibility for her adultery but she does not know who is to blame. She says, ‘my world was limited to the kitchen and the vadakkini (the room adjoining the kitchen). Never once did I open the door of the nalukettu (the main living quarters), even to look out. Why did it happen? (Cast Me Out, 32).’ As a child of 11 married to an old Namboodiri who had three Namboodiri wives and who lived with forty nair women she is bewildered when her mangalsutra around her neck is broken. She refuses to take it off but is appeased with the promise of a gold chain from her father. She observes all the rites and rituals of widows at the age of fourteen and is confined to the place of worship in the household. But repeated quarrels in her father’s house makes her go to her husband’s house. She argues, ‘we struggle with desires we can not suppress, sensations we can not control… (Cast Me Out, 37).’ Temples are the only places that anterjanams can visit. The anterjanam says the women visit temples not merely to listen to stories from the Puranas but ‘to experience the pleasure of listening to a male voice (Cast Me Out, 37).’ Like all the anterjanams she too worshipped the young male reader who read out the stories about Krishna. When she is seduced at the tank by an unknown man, she cannot resist. ‘Feelings of pleasure that I had never known or experienced before came alive (Cast Me Out, 42).’ She admits ‘defeat in the struggle against …natural instincts (Cast Me Out, 42).’ She confesses her guilt and accepts the punishment. As an embodiment of suffering, she herself is a rebel who claims to bear responsibilities but achieves little. She points her finger at the patriarchal Namboodiri society for not protecting young girls like her who have not even learned what life is all about.

‘Within the folds of seclusion’ critiques the Namboodiri custom of marrying young Namboodiri girls to old Namboodiris (without considering the young girls’ feelings) because of high dowry. But the story also explores one possibility of resistance. The young girl Pappi could exert great influence over her 60 year old husband but she ignores him in spite of punishment and torture. Her silent resistance, her withdrawal from life, her secret love for another young man, her conflicting desires and rigid Namboodiri customs earned her the label mad anterjanam. She died young at the age of 25. When she died the author says, ‘while she was alive she had never really looked at the world around her (Cast Me Out, 44).’ In her death she is able to experience rest for the first time. ‘Relief, satisfaction, peace -feelings she had never experienced in life- she had them all now (Cast Me Out, 44).’

The short story ‘Life and Death’ indirectly advocates widow remarriage by criticizing the custom of incarcerating young Namboodiri widows in the antahpuram. The young widow
Tatri questions ‘why couldn’t she be happy too? How long would she have to live, incarcerated in this cell of darkness, benumbed, and alone, with only memories for company? (Cast Me Out, 77.)’ The short story has a play within it in which Tatri acts as a widow. The play influenced many in the audience to advocate widow remarriage. But the Namboodiri society of Tatri does not permit it in her own life. Phyllis Chesler notes, ‘What we consider “madness”, whether it appears in women or in men, is either the acting out of the devalued female role or the total or partial rejection of one’s sex-role stereotype’ (Chesler, 56). Like ‘Admission of Guilt’ this is another Namboodiri widow whose sexuality is suppressed. She is diagnosed with incurable hysteria at the end.

At present Namboodiri women are liberated and lead normal lives. Nevertheless, these narratives echo the plight of women in general. Lalithambika gleaned these oral stories narrated by her mother, grandmother and many others. In her memoir she feels that talking openly about these unpleasant stories is like a purificatory ritual and that ‘it will cleanse us of the sin that they committed in the past, make us pure and whole again (Cast Me Out, 171).’ In today’s context, these beliefs may sound incredulous, but that was how it was in those days. The plight of anterjanams stands in for women as a whole.

Works Cited

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