



CUTTING INTERSECTIONS, CROSSING BOUNDARIES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF LALITHAMBIKA ANTHARJANAM'S *AGNISAKSHI: FIRE, MY WITNESS* AND ANITA NAIR'S *LADIES COUPE*

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Abstract : Feminism, as a sociocultural and political phenomenon, has taken numerous dimensions and manifestations throughout history. Lalithambika Antharjanam and Anitha Nair are two major women feminine writers of Indian literature from two different periods. Antharjanam's "Fire, My Witness" is a novel that explores the narrative of Namboothiri women who are dragged into the battle for socio-political liberation but are unable to break free from the bonds of traditional customs that bind them. Whereas Nair's novel *Ladies Coupe* is a story of six women who are in search of autonomy and perseverance. Even though both these novels had 25 years gap in their publication they both talk about the subjugation of women, especially Indian women. Therefore, this paper looks at how the quest for the autonomy of women changes concerning the period they live through the lens of these two novels from two different eras.

KEYWORDS— Feminism, emancipation, patriarchy, tradition, identity, subjugation

I. INTRODUCTION

The Global social movement feminism in the Indian context can be defined as a bunch of upheavals that focus on the briefing, elaborating and providing equal socio-political, economic rights and opportunities for women in India. Like their feminist counterpart all over the world, feminists in India seek gender equality and other common rights but along with those, Indian feminists also had to fight against the cultural concentrated issues within Indian patriarchal society including inheritance laws. There were and there are people who frequently tells that feminism is irrelevant, but nothing could be diverted from extreme reality. Women have struggled and women are struggling for equality and against oppression for centuries. And when it comes to an Indian context it was during the realm of the British raj and post-independence the first feminist movement took off according to records *Stri Purush Tulana* by Tarabai Shinde which was published in 1882 is considered the first modern Indian Feminist text, and it focuses on protests against agitations and oppression on women prevailed at that time like denial of education and widow remarriage. After passing each year it is true that in some areas or on certain things there have been improvements and there are changes. But still, it is crystal clear that even after it makes birth ages ago feminism is so relevant even today. Therefore, the whole core of feminism mirrors a history of different struggles, and the terms have been interrupted in fuller and more complex ways as understanding has developed.

Agnisakshi: Fire, My Witness is Kerala's renowned writer Lalithambika Antharjanam's solitary fiction and an all-time significant piece of literature.

This landmark novel from 1976 reintroduces women into Kerala's reform endeavour and serves as a remarkable narrative of women's lives purged in the fire of sacrifice. It also focuses on the role of women in the movement and emphasises women's great involvement in the movement. The era recalled in this book is a span of post and pre-independent years, which is a significant period in the history of India and Kerala in particular. This fiction also portrays the social customs that prevailed in Kerala in the early part of the twentieth century, especially in the Namboothiri community, and came from a woman author. Two of the main characters in the novel are women, each in her way trying to find their way trying to break away from the conservative and antiquated traditions that existed at that to find their freedom and to thus carve out new lives for themselves. They could be called the early revolutionaries who sought female empowerment in Kerala. Sumithranandha, who is portrayed or depicted through three names all through her life stages – Thethi Edathi, Devaki manampilli, and Devi Behen reveals three faces of the life led by the women of the last generation. In the early twentieth century, two distinct life paths spoke out to wealthy Indians, notably Malayali women. The most discussed and accepted route was that of the educated modern housewife, a role regarded as vital to the creation of contemporary society by emerging social and community reformists. The other, less talked about, constantly criticised, and the controversial route was that of social existence, as a self-sacrificing democratic activist. Just like Antharjanam would see it, the major tragedy of aristocratic Malayali

women was that their paths were not just divergent but also disconnected. *Ladies coupe* on the other hand is a 2001 novel written by Anita Nair, an Indian English writer who always strives to uphold the rights of women through her works. This novel by Nair incorporates the concept of patriarchy and implies a relationship of inequality. Narratives are attempts to show that oppression and oppression in life do not always come in a recognizable form but often pretend to be a guarantee of love, protection, and security. Patriarchy is a common concept in all women's lives, but Nair does not want to unite women's lives, so it represents the diversity of all women. *Ladies Coupe's* tale is about six women who happen to meet during a train voyage. The heroine, Akhilandeswari, listens to the experiences of five different women there in the capsule and shares her own in the same manner, looking inside them for the solution to the issue that has plagued her whole life: Can a woman be alone and happy? Is it true that a woman requires a male to feel complete? As the tale shifts from past to present and back again, we witness numerous women getting ridiculed and belittled in addition to the five ladies in the compartment. Sunita Sinha said, "Nair India is subject to a patriarchal regime that has tried in many ways to oppress, humiliate, and bring down women. The question she poses in the novel not only shakes the ideological foundation of the patriarchal role of man in our traditional society but also hints at the existence of an alternative reality. "

II. OBJECTIVES

This paper attempt to have a comparative study of these novels that have 25 years of their publication and to analyse India's social structures and the feministic resistance to them at specific moments in history by concerning the historical backgrounds of these novels. The primary texts are *Fire, my witness* by Lalithambika Antharjanam and *Ladies Coupe* by Anita Nair. The study also focuses on the novel's female protagonists' quest for autonomy changes concerning the period they live and through that this paper tries to examine feminism as a theory that is relevant and will be relevant irrespective of age.

III. HYPOTHESIS

Feminism has assumed many forms and aspects throughout history as a societal and political phenomenon. *Fire, my witness* is a novel about a Nambudiri woman who is lured into the battle for socio-political freedom but finds it difficult to break free from the bonds of the convention that bind her. *Ladies Coupe*, on the other hand, is the narrative of six ladies in pursuit of autonomy and tenacity. Even though both of these novels were published 25 years apart, they both discuss the oppression of Indian women, giving the impression that India is vast, varied, and unequal. As a result, these feminist stories are all unique, but they are all timely.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A Qualitative analysis approach is employed to analyse concept and context together with a deep examination of the sociocultural backgrounds of both novels. To research how the effect of feminism as whole changes together with the age by concerning the quest for the autonomy of the protagonists of these novels.

A comparative research study essentially compares two various things to conclude them. Within that these novels under study are investigated and examined to seek out the rationale behind the concept of feminism as a relevant theory even before it makes birth age ago, and it examines particularly how the concept of feminism gained relevance within the Indian context does.

V. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Many researchers have been done on the topics of Feminism, Lalithambika Antharjanam, Anitha Nair and their works. Across the globe, feminism has been a movement that is discussed and that includes voices of women around the universe and women are forced to change when came to an Indian context, feminism had researches which analyse the unique threats that women and marginalised sections face and the main idea of feminism researched in an Indian context was to create and uphold conceptualization that encourages equal rights directed towards males and females.

Fire, my witness is a work that undergoes lots of research and that includes the Heritage Exploring the Role of Patriarchy, Culture and Power in Negotiating Female Identity and subaltern upheaval against the patriarchal hegemony. And when comes to *Ladies Coupe*, feminist studies based on the subjugation of Indian women and the revival of self through self-introspection were the main topic that underwent the research.

VI. ANALYSIS AND MAJOR FINDINGS

Agnisakshi: Fire, my witness is explicit because it is solely novel by Indian author and social reformist Lalithambika Antharjanam. This novel should be understood in the terms of the social reformist movements of Kerala. Lalithambika, who began her career as a poet and established a permanent base with her short stories well within the arena of contemporary Malayalam literature, resolutely broadened and set up a brand-new extremely important tradition of literary writing, and she was one of the first Indian feminists to raise the issue of gender and thus the portrayal of the individuated female in a society in the throes of social change and political upheaval. Lalithambika provides a portion of twentieth-century Malayali history to a subsequent set of female readers through

Agnisakshi. In this novel, the author portrays the plights of 20th-century ladies in conjunction with the various trajectories taken by them in search of self-fulfilment are unravelled through the presence of 2 protagonists Devaki Manampilly and Thankam Nair.

Agnisakshi has a background in the early Brahmin societies of Kerala. During the early 90's the upperclassmen of the Hindu religion in Kerala were suffocated to a ritual death due to the control of 'smritis'. According to that, they followed a ritual where only the eldest man of the family, to be precise, in a circle of cousins or relatives only the eldest man is allotted to marry a woman from the same religion and all the others are supposed to have a relationship with women from lower caste-like Nair women and this kind of relationships are named as 'sambandhams'. This system promoted the elder one of the brahmin community to marry as much as he wants and this resulted in creating so many young widows in the society. Because the ageing husband dies if at the day of marriage,

the new wife even if she is a young girl who had just come of age will have to remain a widow throughout their life. And this indirectly points out the circumstance that women of the upper-class community didn't have any rights and privileges and they were supposed to stay indoors thus the 'antharjanams'. It was impossible during the early 20th century for women to lead a life of their dream without breaking the social prejudices and so-called feminine characteristics. Through the character of Thethikutty, this novel is depicting the mental trauma undergone by a woman inside the fence of traditional constraint. She mourns "my husband does not seem to know how to love anyone he is afraid of everyone and everything – of father, of mother, of custom – why he's even afraid of God. Brother was right, if I live too long in this house, I might also lose my senses out of fear" (60). Being in the shell of antharjanam she was not supposed to raise her voice, therefore, she was so frustrated with the marriage not because of an arrogant husband but because, she is surrounded in and out by the tradition and its victims. It is then she wrote to her brother and asks "why did you marry me off to a Deva after teaching me the stories of men?". This lament of a frustrated woman stands for the struggles she faces with not having anybody to interact with, talk to share anything. Thethikutty is here portrayed as an example of those women who lose all their treasured dreams under the rope of patriarchy. Thethikutty is one among those women of Namboothiri illams who is bound by the fences of many traditions. All antharjanams according to those illams were the only creatures who are left in there only to keep their virginity safely as all the Namboothiri illams sacredness and honour of their family has lived under the virginity of antharjanams. Thethikutty being a prey of such tradition along with her fellow women were treated as a neglected community and the counterparts of women treated them as such created who had nothing to do in their life other than sleeping bathing dressing. Thangam Nair being an offspring from Namboothiri's sambandham is the other prey of tradition in the novel. She is the one who breaks so-called boundaries placed to deny female education. Cheriamma and Thangam are the sides of the same coin. But while Thangam came out from the tradition through education Cheriamma got stuck there and ended up like a madwoman.

In an era where women seemed as products used for the pleasure of men and with gender stereotypes, women's identities were dehumanised with the bonds of tradition and practices. Lalithambika Antharjanam had made a brave attempt in creating two strong women characters who made a move to become rebellious irrespective of their dignity as well as identity. They are the representatives of those few women who fought against the traditional bond of Namboothiri families. "One who is not good for worldly life will not be good for even heaven" (42). Thethikutty's this statement about her husband can be defined as a groundbreaking one for an antharjanam but her circumstances made her do that. Being from a family-supporting socialist revolutionary it was so difficult for her to be in the shell of tradition. But in the name of tradition, she was denied to pay a visit to her dying mother because according to the tradition of Namboothiri her family is considered an outcast as her brother's revolutionary policies was against the Namboothiri tradition, even her husband never made a voice against this and this made Thethikutty make a statement that "if they are outcast, I am too" (70). And with that, she leaves that Namboothiri illam and starts her protest against the blind rules and regulations in the name of tradition. And in the case of Thangam, it was not her fault that she was born from a sambandham. But still, she suffered a lot and her wish to go for higher studies is also silenced with sharp words. But still, Thangam rebels until her wish get fulfilled.

Ladies Coupe is a novel by Anita Nair, the most notable Indian feminist writer of the twenty-first century. Nair is a novelist who has always focused on the plights and problems of women in today's world. Similarly, this tale follows the path of an Indian middle-class woman who confronts social servitude. Akhilandeswari, the protagonist of this novel, is a 45-year-old middle-aged Tamil brahmin cultured south Indian lady who is educated, employed, and well aware of her own identity, yet she is on a search to discover her place in her own family as well as in society. Akhila has been the sole provider for her family since her father's death, yet while being a financially accomplished lady, she is compelled to live for others and perform the secondary roles of daughter, sister, and aunt. "Akhila is that sort of a woman. She does what is expected of her; she dreams about the rest" (1). This is Nair's first description of Akhila, and it alludes to society's widely publicised demand that a middle-aged woman has no right to live for herself, but must live for those around her. One of the most important aspects of Nair's work is that her female protagonists are not mute victims, but fierce fighters who always fight to win the battle for individuality and self-identity against societal oppression. Similarly, Akhila achieves her aim of self-discovery in this work. She manages to keep her dignity while also finding self-fulfilment. She, like the male children, rescued her mother from poverty and degradation after her father died. At the age of 35, she enrolls at an open university for a B A degree to prevent her mind from straying. Akhila is an oddity in the community she lives in. Because she is single, she has no friends and has no connection to the world of housewives. Katherine Webber is her soul mate because they are both uninterested in the four grihastha ashrama corner stones.

Akhila's journey to find her identity is not a simple one. It entails breaking free from her traditional upbringing. For a year, she consumes hardboiled eggs in secret and learns the art of egg preparation. When her orthodox mother accepts her egg craving, she achieves her first win and established her identity. Akhila let her reckless thoughts overpower her in her times of weakness. The woman inside her seeks fulfilment and allows a stranger to deal with her. Akhila's loving relationship with Hari does not lead to marriage since he is considerably younger than she is so this is not a socially acceptable relationship. Akhila's strong desire to live an independent existence is broken after her mother's death when her bossy, callous sister, Padma, comes in along with her family to live alongside Akhila. Akhila tolerates the invasion of her private freedom and autonomy, but she despises being compelled to live a life devoid of highs and lows. She disliked herself because she was an extension of the identity of someone else. Once when Akhila was asked to describe happiness, she recounts Katherine's new year's greeting card. "Happiness is being allowed to choose one's own life, to live it the way one wants. Happiness is to know one is loved and having someone to love. Happiness is being able to hope for tomorrow." (200). Karapagam, a widow put on Kumkum and colourful clothing, remains a centre of vitality and encouragement for Akhila, and she often pushes Akhila out of the dismal hue of her reality as if she were a divinity. When her younger brother Narayan inquires about how any woman can cope alone, Akhila confidently puts his concerns to rest. Akhila has already prepared her responses. "I know I can. I did once before when you were children. Now I can for me, for Akhilandeswari. Nobody's daughter. Nobody's sister. Nobody's wife. Nobody's mother." (206). Her eventual decision, however, is influenced by the experiences of five co-travellers. Every one of them plays an equal role, and it is their enlightening experiences that lead Akhila to her ultimate goal of fortitude and autonomy. The five co-travellers' disclosures drive Akhila down the right path to constant self, self-realization, and self-fulfilment, and yet they all make sense of their lives.

• WHAT CHANGED WITH YEARS PASSED?

Lalithambika Antharjanam who was born in a Namboothiri family was one among those courageous women who stood against the mis practices of the Namboothiri community. The novel *Fire, my witness* which is set in the early 20th century opens up the unseen door of the Namboothiri community and Thethikutty can be called an exceptional Namboothiri woman among those Namboothiri women who were denied their right to education and she sets her path for the exploration of her self-identity. Thethikutty of *Fire, my witness* struggled to come from the so-called constrained male-dominated society. She was married and had a family but she had to leave all those behind to find her own space without any social barriers. But still, even after going so far, she is holding her past in her hands. She even says towards the end of the novel that even after going so far, she is not liberated from where she left. And she only got some relief in the end when Thankam's son came before her and asks her to accept him as his son. Even after being a revolutionary feminist novel *Fire, my witness* is re-establishing the so-called myth that no woman can free herself from the faith in the sanctity of family, and motherhood. But Akhila of *Ladies Coupe* is different from Thethikutty, she is the representative of the new Indian woman who is not at all satisfied with the roles which are given to her by the patriarchal society. Akhila succeeds to ignore cultural and societal boundaries without remorse. Akhila was sluggish; she had waited half her life to achieve her independence, yet she still manages to take hard aggressive leaps in her search for liberation from old age norms.

VII.CONCLUSION

Feminism had emerged long ago and still; it is relevant in all its shapes and forms. Feminism always stands or fought for gender equality and what is in the current society is also the same. In *Fire, my witness* the struggle is in between the Brahmanical patriarchy and the female individuality and that depicts the struggle of women of the early 20th century. At that time women were supposed to stay inside the four walls of the house and the right to higher education was a thing that was allotted to see even in their dreams. But gradually after so many feminine struggles, things changed for the better but that never means all the female struggles are sorted out. And that is reflected in the life of Akhila of *Ladies Coupe*. She is an economically independent woman but still does not have the right to decide or choose the life she wants.

Both works' protagonists, from different times, are frustrated with the constraints placed on them by patriarchal society. As a result, the comparative study indicates that even so-called contemporary women are not immune to numerous inequities. The virtues and standards of society allot specific space and attributes that fit in with the image of a "pleasing mistress." And everyone who fails to meet those standards is examined everywhere. As a result, unless a state arises that liberates women from society's patriarchal attitude, the feminist movement will remain a perennial concept in debate.

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