

Discipline, Power and Resistance: A Foucauldian Analysis of Lalithambika Antharjanam's Novel Agnisakshi

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ABSTRACT: The objective of this paper is to explore and analyse the novel Agnisakshi written by Lalithambika Antharjanam in the light of Foucauldian concept of discipline, power and resistance. When we apply these theories in the corpus of this novel, it will definitely reflect upon the various ways in which man gets privileged to establish his power over woman. Through a certain systematic conditioning, they make the female subordinate to them. Besides these, there are certain social, cultural and religious structures that function so as to bring "discipline" and "order" to the behavioral pattern of the woman in society. All these ultimately add to the subjugation of woman in a male-dominated patriarchal society.

KEYWORDS: Patriarchy, Subjugation. Power, Resistance, Panoptic surveillance

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I. INTRODUCTION

The novel is set in the backdrop of early twentieth century Kerala. The representations in the text highlight a period of transition in the social and political arena. There is a strong contempt for fascism and an emerging inclination towards democracy is visible. The emergence of certain forms of activism is the offshoot of the fundamental changes that occurred at the same time result in the deterioration of the feudal system. The story focuses mainly on the Namboodiri women in the illams where the perseverance and observation of certain rituals, conventions and beliefs are established by the man. But, unfortunately, the suppressed psyche of the main female heroines, namely Tethikutty and Thankam resist oppression and liberate themselves from the deep-rooted patriarchal hegemonic traps and practices.

II. PATRIARCHY AND FEMALE SUBJUGATION

Patriarchy is a system of structures where the system of power application is mainly hierarchical in nature. In such a situation women always experience not only a state of subordination, but also they are victimized by various forms of discrimination, oppression, exploitation and humiliation. The nature of subordination of women differs on the basis of the society they belong to. Each and every society is an amalgamation of different types of people who practice and follow their own cultural, religious and conventional rituals according to their caste, creed and the religious community they belong to. Therefore, the subjugation of women cannot be unique while considering the multidimensional facets of its manifestation. In addition to this, the implementation and effectiveness of this patriarchal power application differs on the basis of geography also. The mode of subordination of women who hail from a developed country is entirely different from those of the developing and under developed countries. There are certain power structures that owe certain power to control women. This control is institutionalized and legitimized by certain aspects like social practices, rituals and rights and conventions that exist in a society. Social conditioning is always to the advantage of the male. Therefore, the societal norms and conditions are created for the privilege of men.

III. FEMINISM AND FOUCAULDIAN THEORIES

Foucault's major concern in all his works has been the myriad faces of power and subjugation. Even a casual perusal of human history shows that those in authority have exercised their power over large segments of human society through physical, psychological, theological and other such means of intimidation. It was this socio-political reality that forced Foucault to turn the familiar maxim "knowledge is power" into "power is knowledge". This further helps Foucault to formulate his ideas of panoptic surveillance, with a strong emphasis on the ideas of discipline and punish - - terrorizing people into subjugation. Feminists obviously are concerned about those areas of the exercise of authority like patriarchy which make them doubly handicapped: besides the

general authority of society, there is a specific sway of power that men hold over them. He elaborates his ideas on power in his seminal works, *The History of Sexuality Vol:1* and *Discipline and Punish*. The traditional concept of power is 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 Volume: 1*, 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.

IV. A BRIEF HISTORY OF WOMEN'S LIBERATION STRUGGLES IN KERALA

The Hindu hierarchal caste divide is unique in human history in that it declares a person as high or low at the time of birth; thus branded, he or she carries the stamp of respect or stigma till his or her death. Also, this caste divide is practised in so subtle a manner that the colour of the skin and economic status of a person are of less importance than the caste privileges the person is entitled to. An impoverished dark-skinned Brahmin priest is superior to the fair-skinned ruler as ordained by the Hindu ethics. Here also, Hindu women are doubly underprivileged in that they suffer the shame of belonging to a particular caste and also face problems relating to patriarchal ways. A major contradiction in this trajectory is that the upper caste women suffer no less than their low caste counterparts in the way they follow the social mores. There is no dearth of taboos - specially designed by patriarchal authorities to keep women under subjugation in every caste to ensure that women are treated as inferior. There is a whole network of surveillance, mostly under the banner of immutable religious practices that stops women from raising rational or logical questions; religious practices we are told are beyond the scrutiny of ordinary mortals. Namboodiri (Kerala Brahmin) women are the community that suffered the most at the hands of patriarchal and religious practices.

V. AGNISAKSHI AS A MIRROR OF A WOMAN CAUGHT BETWEEN FEMINIST CONCERNS AND EMOTIONAL RELATIONSHIPS.

The problematic nature of Namboodiri women's suffering came to light in the early 1900s when a tempest of renaissance swept over the whole State, uprooting age-old customs and traditions, and ushering in a new way of life. Although, the renaissance movement was focused on the social suffering of the lower caste people, it spread to all communities and forced them to take a new look at their own practices. The Namboodiri community was no exception to this. Social reformers from that community like V. T. Bhattathirippad, E.M.S. Namboodiripad, and several other dedicated men raised the banner of revolt within the community and underscored the immediacy and necessity of radical reforms. The consequent restructuring also gave birth to a significant number of literary works. The most famous among them being 'Adukalayil Ninne Arangathekk' (From the Kitchen to the Centre Stage) by V.T. Bhattathirippad. Among the women writers of that community, Lalithambika Antharjanam is the most outstanding and Agnisakshi is her magnum opus. This short novel is a mirror of the lives of Namboodiri women in the seclusion of their illam (Namboodiri houses in the 90's). The novel also reflects the inevitable changes that are in store for the community. The novel is an authentic and sensitive portrayal of the fears, hopes and dreams of a community of women who is on the threshold of a new birth and new life. Probably, the finest part of this novel is that the novelist's enthusiasm for change does not blind her to social realities, which unfortunately, she recognizes is a slow process. A jump from one way of life to something fundamentally different is far from easy; there is always the crisis faced by rational convictions and emotional complexities. Discovering a middle path is not only difficult, but often carries the revolutionary into outmoded religious practices. The novelist herself declares in the preface to the novel that "a realistic depiction of life can never be art. When such a depiction merges with the heart and takes another birth, it becomes art" (12).

VI. TETHY AND MRS. NAIR: A CONTRAST

Devaki, the heroine of the novel, known in several situations in her life as Tethykutty, Devi Bahan, and Sumithranadayogini grew up in a progressive and liberal atmosphere unlike the other conventional Namboodiri families. Her brother P.K.P. Namboodiri was a freedom fighter and revolutionary. When she comes to Manampallilam as young bride of Unni Namboodiri, she is full of hopes and dreams of a liberated life. Within days of her arrival she realizes that she is in the wrong place and her husband is the wrong man. Not that he is ever cruel or angry or unconcerned towards her; only, he is a slave to the age-old rituals and customs of what is expected of the eldest male member of a traditional Namboodiri family. She says:

By day, Unni Etten never set foot in this room. Even at night, he visited it only after consulting the almanac: the tradition of Manampallimana. Etten's mother was very particular about such things. Achan Namboodirippad, 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. And hadn't she, his wife, conceived and delivered several times? She seemed to believe that a union between a man and wife was unacceptable if its aim was not to produce children. (24)

He believes that it is his duty to strictly adhere to the 'dharma' enshrined in the religious text and practised over the centuries by his ancestors. Consequently, he has no time for his young bride; nor is he willing to take steps towards changing the traditional ways. He never gets angry and quietly follows the conservative elders of the family led by the powerful Aphan Namboodiri. He treats Thankam, later Mrs. Nair, his first cousin as his own sister. Thankam's position as a daughter of a Shudra mother has created innumerable barriers between them. The net result of this situation is that a deep friendship develops between Tethy and Thankam. Their relationship is frowned upon by others. The unseen surveillance mechanisms that Foucault theorizes on, work in full measure on all the three central characters. Every action of Unni, Tethy and Thankam is watched not only by patriarchal authority but more forcefully by the ignorant and disgruntled elder women of the family who blame and try to discipline the young bride whenever she strays from the beaten path.

Unni's mother says: "Namboodiri women were to restrict their entire lives to the kitchen and the prayer room. Their destiny was to read only the Ramayanam and the Shiva Puranam" (24). Unlike Tethy, Thankam is very obstinate and stubborn when it comes to shaping her future. She insists upon going to college much against the wishes of her own father Aphan Namboodiri, who finally bows to the request of Unni. However, the inevitable confrontation occurs when Tethy insists upon going to her house to visit her sick mother, which is objected to by Unni's family. Their objection is that Tethy's brother has been excommunicated because he had participated in the freedom struggle movement. Tethy decides to visit her mother despite these objections. To her surprise, her husband keeps quiet at the crucial moment. Neither does he say yes nor no. This is both a turning point in the life of Tethy as it indicates her initial step towards liberating her cloistered state in search of her identity and also in the novel.

She becomes Devi Bahen and joins Gandhi's ashram. Before moving to Gandhi's ashram, she becomes a reputed public speaker, championing the cause of reform and progress among women. She becomes a close associate of Gandhi and saves a child when he is beaten up by the police. She gets injured. She accompanies Gandhi during his tour. During the pilgrimage to the Bengal region, Gandhi ji used to say, "Look at Devi Bahan. The greatest symbol of fame is stamped on her forehead. It is because of that that I took her along with me during this journey" (91). Her disillusionment with the freedom movement and consequent trip to Benaras influence her and she becomes a disciple of a Muni in an ashram and turns spiritual, accepting the name of Sumitrananda. After the death of Muni, she herself becomes a sanyasini with several disciples.

VII. CONCLUSION

The conclusion of the novel raises several questions. For example, (1) Has Tethy abandoned her quest for radical reform in society? (2) Has her life been a success or a failure? To say that a person has found Moksha, or Shanthi or transparent peace of mind is not the realization 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 in the Hindu religious philosophy which is not the structure of the search Tethy and her brother embarks upon. It is even retrograde in that it suggests a conclusion that is contradictory to the discipline and punishment the feudal and patriarchal forces insist upon. Foucault's stand is vindicated in that the seeds of opposition and revolution which the reader notices at the beginning of the novel blossom and die before their fruition. This is a victory of the forces of authority.

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