



Caste and Gender in Lalithambika Antharjanam's *Agnisakshi*

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Lalithambika Antharjanam (March 30, 1909 – February 6, 1987) was an Indian author and social reformer best known for her literary works in the Malayalam language. She was influenced by Mahatma Gandhi and social reform movements among the Nambuthiri caste led by V. T. Bhattathiripaatu and her writing reflects sensitivity to the women's role in society, in the family, and as an individual. Her published oeuvre consists of nine volumes of short stories, six collections of poems, two books for children, and a novel, *Agnisakshi* (1976) which won the *Kendra Sahitya Akademi Award* and *Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award* in 1977. Her autobiography *Aathmakadhakoru Aamukham* (An Introduction to Autobiography) is also considered a significant work in Malayalam literature.

The binary of caste and gender not only in modern Indian society but also in ancient times has perpetually been recognized to be the most important factors and vectors of social organization. Both of these vectors have ceased to be confined to the dungeon of darkness and have a strong presence in contemporary Indian society. As the social organization is arranged along these socially constructed dimensions discriminately, the experiences of life affect women across the board i.e. a Brahmin woman as much as a Dalit one, of course, in different ways and with a diversity of nuances. Although, there is no specific and precise definition of caste and there is no definitive theoretical perspective on the caste system. Despite radical changes, *status quoists* (majority of them belonging to higher castes) and the victims (majority of them belonging to the lower castes) naturally perceive it differently and the social practice is in accordance. The term 'Caste' was first used by the Portuguese to describe inherited class status in their own European society. English *caste* is derived from the Latin *castus* means "pure, cut off, segregated" (OALD 2010). *Caste* is an elaborate, complex, and cohesive social system that combines elements of endogamy, occupation, culture, social class, tribal affiliation, and political power. What is the most significant fact about this institution is that it is independent of race and class. As a mode of cultural and social stratification, it had analogous modes prevalent in different civilizations. In the Roman Civilization, in addition to state-sanctioned slavery, there were all kinds of caste-like inequities coded into law. Even in the Christian era, European feudalism provided all hereditary privileges for the knights and landed barons (somewhat akin to India's Rajputs and Thakurs). Ancient Iran had four *Pistrās* or classes, comparable in some respect to those of India. Discrimination against the artisans was also commonplace throughout Europe, and as late as the 19th-century artisans in Germany had to go through a separate court system to seek legal redress.



As compared to these systems of stratification, the Indian caste system is unique and complex. Its genesis goes back to *The Rig-Veda*, in the form of *Varna* which literally means 'colour'. *Varna* system thus is a broad and aggregative classification of Indian Hindu society. Conversely, *jāti* is taken to be a regional or local sub-classification involving a much more complex system consisting of hundreds or even thousands of castes and sub-castes. So the four *varna* classification is common all over India, whereas, the *Jāti* hierarchy has more local classification that varies from region to region.

Though the caste system is also observed among followers of other religions in the Indian subcontinent, including some groups of Muslims and Christians, most likely due to inherited cultural traits, it is generally identified with Hinduism. There is no universally accepted theory about the origins of the Indian caste system. In India, castes are small and complete social worlds in themselves, marked off definitely from one another although subsisting within the larger society. Thus, Castes are groups with a well-developed life of their own and a separate arrangement for their members. The membership whereof, unlike that of voluntary associations of classes, was determined not by selection but by birth. The status of a person is not dependent on his wealth but on the traditional importance of the caste in which he is born.

It is not that the severity of caste was not challenged. The long tradition of challenging the caste system began with Mahavir and Buddha. The process to challenge the caste system continued during the Bhakti tradition of the medieval period and the social reformation of the nineteenth-century Indian renaissance. Finally, it became a part of the freedom struggle and nation-building process after independence. The process is easily perceptible in the repeated and frequent changes in constitutional provisions. In the present time, the process of 'De-sanskritization' is a very strong mode of challenging the hierarchal social order. Surprisingly, many castes higher in the social hierarchy are also making an effort to be included in the category of marginalized castes for pecuniary benefits although it would be interesting to measure their readiness to be perceived as practically marginalized in the typical Indian meaning of the word 'Dalit'.

'Gender' is such an issue that has been bringing radical changes in all kinds of conceptualizations of life in cultural terms. The term 'gender' has been used so frequently in women's context that we take for granted what it does not actually mean. Of Course, the meaning of gender is likely to vary depending on the context but mentioning the word gender usually refers to gender concerns, and the phrase 'gender concerns' refers to gender discrimination against women. The term 'gender' is not to be confused with another term 'Sex' as sex refers primarily to the anatomical distinction between man and woman made at birth. On the other hand, gender refers to social and cultural interpretation that turns sexual difference into more than merely a biological distinction. In a way, sex has social repercussions only because of gender: it is on the basis of the later, that the worlds and activities of women as opposed to those of men have been demeaned. So, gender comes to be associated with a set of bifurcated characteristics, dividing this entire



universe into separate but unequal spheres. Women in general are excluded from positions of power and dominance. Such a system founded on inequality has apparently been sanctioned and approved by society and domination becomes the prerogative of patriarchy. Through the introduction of man in the thought and reality of human society, the males become the foreground while females become the blurred and indecipherable background making the experiences of the females unreal and invisible. On the one hand, a woman is encouraged to have a prolonged infancy in mind, on the other side; this infancy is perceived and interpreted as a kind of deficiency on her part.

Traditionally, the woman has been assigned the function of rearing the next generation in addition to reproduction, a job for which they are superficially patronized rather than paid. Simone De Beauvoir maintains that women have been relegated to the status of the ‘second sex’ and reduced to objects for men since the dawn of history. In her seminal work of that title *The Second Sex*, she asserted that woman has been constructed as man’s other and is denied the right to her own subjectivity. She opines that woman is trained and imprisoned in the exclusive vocation of love which in fact is a gilded confinement for her, but of which she herself is not aware. Kate Millett who popularized the term ‘Sexual politics’ through her powerful polemic book *Sexual Politics* has thrown light on the unbalanced relationship of dominance and sub-ordination (subordination) that has prevailed between the sexes throughout history and continues to exist even at present. As Kate points out through this system, the most ingenious form of “interior colonization” (25) has been devised. Jean Genet has pointed out that “the fundamental human connection of sexuality” is “hopelessly tainted” in itself and refers to it as “the very prototype of institutionalized inequality” (Qtd. in Millett 20). Genet being aware of the consequences of these fundamental divisions has cautioned that this system will “underlie and corrupt all other human relationships as well as every area of thought and experience” (Qtd. in Millett 20).

Though the fact of the dominance of one sex over the other has been accepted for a long, a probe into the historical factors that contributed to such a state of affairs was made only much later. No less a philosopher than Aristotle held the view that a female is a “mutilated male” (Qtd. in Lerner 207), without an immortal soul. He even affirmed that women had lesser teeth than men. He asserted that male is born to rule the inferior female. Rousseau dedicated woman to her husband and maternity and declared that she was made just for the purpose of yielding to man and putting up with his injustice. Religion and politics have always catered to the dominant masculine group to perpetuate the notion of feminine subjugation. No matter to which religion, culture, or society a woman may belong she is denied opportunities for growth and the development of her selfhood. In Christian churches, women’s freedom of speech is curtailed. This is in keeping the dictum of Saint Paul who exhorts women to keep silence in churches, for, as he insists “they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says” (Marcey 14:34). Catholic law that



decrees that women are “unfit matter” (Marcey 14: 34) for ordination still reflects this view. Muslim women enjoy very few moments of freedom and are even forbidden to enter the mosque.

Thus, women in general everywhere suffer from a lower status but in India, it appears to have devastating consequences. The appropriation of women and the consequent gender bias is perhaps more crucial in Indian than in other countries. Here a woman is an entity, which exists only in a male-defined and male-related context. She must become a male appendix in order to have a role in the family and society. The physical and psychological identity of the woman is defined through the role and control of man: the terrible triad of father-husband-son. “In childhood, a woman should be under her father’s control, in youth under her husband’s, and when her husband is dead under her son’s. She should not have independence” (Qtd. in Nubile 1). It may sound unbelievable that at the beginning Indian society was not structured according to this biased patriarchal system. Unfortunately, the role of Indian women declined over the centuries and ultimately Indian women were indoctrinated into believing that self-effacement, submission, tolerance, self-sacrifice, and stoicism are the classical virtues of Indian womanhood.

An awareness regarding this unjust and unfair treatment meted out to women had set in long before the formal inauguration of the women’s movement. This movement, aimed at the social, educational, and political equality of women with men originated during the late eighteenth century in developed countries and finally reached India in the nineteenth century. This awareness and commitment towards the upliftment of women were followed by the Suffragette movement which succeeded in achieving suffrage for women in the mid-twentieth century. This social and cultural revolution to eradicate gender discrimination was accompanied by a literary revolution as there was a veritable explosion of books and pamphlets like Betty Friedan’s classic work *The Feminine Mystique*, Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics*, Simone De Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* and in Britain Germaine Greer’s work *The Female Eunuch*. In India, Tara Bai Shinde’s *Stree Purush Tulanā* and Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hosain’s *Sultānā’s Dream* introduced the literary tradition of feminism. The resurgence of feminism in the second half of the twentieth century has developed into the most significant liberation movement in the world. Originated in the United States, it has spread like a wild forest fire to all parts of the world. It has achieved global significance after making its impact in developing countries like India.

Since the oppression of women in the Indian context is based on a multiplicity of factors like class, caste, and ethnicity, it has been perhaps more severe than in other countries. Not until the nineteenth century was there a move toward abolishing unjust practices and evil traditions. Men like Dayanand Saraswati, Govind Ranade, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Jyotibha Phule, and Sir Sayed Ahmed Khan, launched a campaign to unfetter the womenfolk. The cause of equality for women was also taken up in the national freedom movement. Mahatma Gandhi was an ardent champion of women’s rights. Participation in these movements gave Indian women awareness of their inherent power. Women’s groups formed by the organizations such as the Indian National



Congress, the Indian Communist Movements, The Dalit Movements, and The Ādivāsi Movements have taken up specifically gender issues such as domestic violence, property rights, land rights, and inheritance rights. The late '70s and early '80s are said to be explosive times for women in India.

In spite of sincere efforts to eradicate caste and gender discrimination, the gender-caste legacy is still in power in modern India where caste perpetuates gender discrimination and where in some cases gender discrimination with violence and exploitation is allowed and even justified on the ground of caste. Manu's infamous laws, which distinguished between the twice-born castes on the one hand and women and *Shudras* on the other, belong to the past but contemporary Indian society is still based on them. In India, discrimination against women is by and large threefold viz. sex-based (*Stree jāti*), caste-based (*Jāti*), and class-based (*Amir-Garib*). So a very profound study of their possible origins, counter effects, and their repercussions thereof are desirable for the comprehension of these two concepts.

Agnisakshi by Lalithambika Antharjanam points out that gender is always a step above caste in the restrictive hierarchy. Women remain the second sex irrespective of other socio-lingual, ethnic, and, political factors. Rinehart observes that "The critique of Brahminism did not come from non-Brahmins alone, but from Brahmin women as well, who identified completely with the Self-Respect critique, bringing to mind Jotiba Phule's inclusion of all women in the category *shudratishudra* (the caste ranked lowest in the caste system.) ... the Brahmins and the *Shudratishudras* formed the two poles and all women irrespective of caste were placed in the latter category following the Laws of Manu, which viewed all women as *shudra or dasa*" (293).

Agnisakshi is the story of a Brahmin woman living in one of the villages located in the state of Kerala. In this novel, Lalithambika is presenting the caste restrictions on the life of a Brahmin woman through the eyes of a Nair (A lesser caste as compared to Brahmins) woman, showing how family confines, age-old practices, caste monopoly pushed even on the high caste women further back and their life more miserable. Lalithambika's works represent the problems of her own kind—the Antharjanams or the Brahmin women of Kerala who are left as silent puppets to be polished, protected, and hidden within the four walls of the house. *Agnisakshi* probes the life of a freethinking woman in a conservative cultural space where the undercurrents of liberty and newer political ideas are shattering conservative fences to enter the high-caste household where women are seen as silent puppets to be protected. The first resonances of feminism can be felt when the term was still foreign even to the literate circle. The story unfolds the life of Thethikutty as she enters the renowned Manampilly Illam as the new bride of the eldest son, Unni Nambudiri. Finding herself trapped between the highly patriarchal and conservative members of the household, she finds solace in the company of the narrator of the novel, Thankam who is Unni's half-sister. Thankam, being a Nair, immediately forms a special bond with her. Individual choices affecting the larger world of the three main characters- Thethikutty, Unni, and Thankam are dealt with as



the story progresses. It is a specific story of these larger-than-life characters which evolves into a universal theme of resilience in the aftermath of resistance.

The notion that discrimination does not touch the privileged is questioned and rewritten by Lalithambika Antharjanam. The novel presents the extent to which the high-class sticks to their old power and practices, Change strikes the privileged the hardest as they are comfortably used to their way of life. The oppressed want a change, not the oppressor. We have often come across the hopelessness and dejection of the privileged woman in literature with characters like Henrik Ibsen's Nora in *A Doll's House* and Kate Chopin's character Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening*. The same society that holds her above the rest binds her to the 'Illam' or the ancestral home of Brahmins. Thethikutty, the protagonist is trapped in such a vicious circle where female subjugation is a necessary good than an unnecessary evil. The four walls come closer and closer, suffocating and strangulating her and she is finally forced to decide to break free from the fetters. The invisible chains bind her physically while her mind roams free. She can no longer contain herself when her own mother is ill and wishes to meet her. But the rudimentary in-laws prevented her from discharging her primary duty as a daughter, so, she decides to fulfill the duty of a daughter which was the first relation in her life before being somebody's daughter-in-law. A bold move was made by the author to talk of the so-called 'privileged Brahmin women' as mere oppressed puppets of their caste. She gave Thethikutty's face to the faceless Brahmin women who were not allowed out of their Illam. She gave her voice to the voiceless who were not allowed to speak freely in front of men. She gave her story to talk of how family confines, age-old practices, and caste monopoly pushed even the high-class women further back. "Now I no longer wish to be known as a human being, particularly a woman. Surely a man cannot be expected to waste away his entire youth married to one woman, and that a Nambudiri wife...I often cursed my lot as a Nambudiri woman, thinking, if only I belonged to any other caste of Kerala, one which would have given me the right to reply, to match his male arrogance with my freedom." (Antharjanam. 221).

Agnisakshi brings before us an age-old tradition standing in the way of a few progressive minds while one character remains midway, torn between both worlds. The bygone times of stagnant practices are replaced by revolutionary currents. It showed the naivety of the caste castles in the air built by the older generation. In the short story 'A Brahmin Woman: Revenge Herself' by Lalithambika Antharjanam, the narrator and the author appears to have the same concerns "It is not easy to write a story, particularly for a woman in my position. I want to write out of my convictions, but I fear to hazard my name, my status." (Antharjanam 219). The author does precisely this with the *Agnisakshi*- she writes fearlessly of a woman from her own community going against the age-old customs. The author of her first novel *Agnisakshi* blew the breeze of transformation throughout Kerala, thus succeeding in giving a voice to countless Brahmin women who were confined by outdated and unwritten laws. They were ignored and discriminated blot in society which greatly disturbed the author as she grew up. The two women protagonists



Thethikutty and Thankam, from two different castes of society, gave multiple layering to the novel, giving it a palimpsest view of the Brahmin household. Education and worldly knowledge drew them together amidst the adamant concrete systems of their household.

Thethikutty's brother and social activist P.K.P. tell her that her struggles are not her own, it is that of society. The surname 'Antharjanam' given to the Brahmin women literally means 'people inside the house. The intent is simple. These women are expected to remain in their houses cooking, praying, and sleeping with their husbands when they wished to do so. Only the eldest son was allowed to marry the Brahmin woman, and later remarry many Nair women who did not receive the same respect. But due to this practice the Brahmin women, who were allowed to marry only from their own caste, remained spinsters. While the Nair caste was matrilineal while the Brahmins, like most castes in India, were patrilineal. Hence the marriages were a less restraining affair for a Nair woman. Amitav Ghosh in his book *Imam and the Indian Prince* points out that "the Nairs have achieved an unparalleled eminence in the anthropological literature on matrilineality". (Ghosh 229)

The process of transformation was slow, gradual, and painful, both at the level of an individual household to the level of the nation as a whole. While the transformation of the nation is radical, the transformation of women's rights is still in the initial stages of the novel. Agnisakshi brings to us that transition phase. Thankam's mother married Aphan Nambudiri and they have to live separately from him. They do not receive the same respect as the other Brahmin women. But we can notice the slow changes like Thankam getting an education and learning a foreign language, English. The ideas of change have entered the Nair house and are knocking on the doors of the Nambudiri Illam now. Even though, for Thankam's mother, the purpose of high education is to find a suitable groom, Thankam rebels and gains her freedom for higher education. This rebelling would not have been possible in an older setting. But now the winds of change have touched society and girls being educated is no longer an unspeakable offense. P.K.P tells Thankam in the many letters they exchange that he is just not fighting for the Nambudiri woman but for people like her too and that the society will not be liberated unless it accepts 'Aphan's daughter' too, referring to the Nair offspring like Thankam who do not have any claim over her father's house or name.

Jancy James points out in her essay, *Feminism as Social Commitment: The Case of Lalithambika Antharjanam* that *Agnisakshi* has at least three dominant themes. The first one is "the ruinous battle between Brahminical patriarchy and female individuality. [Second is] the subterranean gush of sexual revolt beneath Brahminical asceticism. [Third one is] the paradoxical dimensions of Indian feminism and its avowal of spirituality as a feminine strategy. (James 164)

The outdated beliefs of society and manmade rules are questioned while the spiritual and divine beliefs are reinstated with the characters receiving spiritual salvation towards the end. Unni



successfully completes his *yagna*, Thethikutty becomes a saint and Thankam finds the ultimate solace in the banks of the Ganges showing how irrelevant all the stringent human laws are as one nears death. The transiency of life and the inevitable ending makes human life complex relations due to the half-burned dead bodies floating away in Ganga puts society look as small as an invisible dot on a canvas. The image of Ganga before us. The mortal bodies merge with the immortal waters, the temporariness of human life as opposed to the permanence of losing their old identity and becoming part of the vastness of these holy waters.

It is a story that refuses closure. A lot of lives have been left incomplete. The characters left their interlinking life midway and went on different paths. We do not know about an afterlife or rebirth but the story leaves us hoping for a better society for Thankam and Thethikutty and most importantly, a chance for Unni to stand by his wife. The transformation of India from the pre-independence phase to the post-independence phase can be viewed as a parallel to Thethikutty's transformation from the Antharjanam, to Devaki, the social worker. The final calm of the post-colonial era after all the unrest where the trauma of the past still remained can be seen in the final time frame of the novel. When Thankam remembers the past, Thethikutty appears as Sumitrananda, who has lived through all the traumas coming out of the fire as a complete human being. Femininity stands out in the book right from the beginning. This femininity is infused with purity through the sacred river imagery leading to collective gender purification. The stereotypical gender roles remain to be under scrutiny throughout. But never in the book is gender unaccompanied by caste. Agnisakshi is one book where caste shadows gender making it a single entity. The problems discussed are not that of a woman. It is specific to a Brahmin woman. "The Brahmin stress on ritual purity and superiority led logically to coercive practices designed to control women, to the extent that women's oppression came to be exemplified by Brahmin women" (Kosambi 97).

This symbiotic relationship between the high class and the low gender shows subordination in a new light. When all the other factors except gender are at their prominence, she is still weighed down emphasizing the author's critical gaze on the patriarchal structures. The different domains of dominance in Indian society have resulted in the interbreeding of literature with various cultural themes. This corpus of mixed literature rewrites the stereotypical equations to bring out new combinations of hierarchical structures.

In this cultural context of the upper-class Hindu Brahmins, only the minority of their way of life is seen outside the surface which is the easily observable factor of tradition and culture. The women of this caste are allowed to exist only in this little space demarcated by society; any deep internal conflicts, beliefs, and attitudes are hidden or ignored by the larger community. Their existence of another deeper self is never acknowledged and hence Thethikutty's inner depth perplexes society. Thus, women, irrespective of caste, are granted only the tip of the cultural iceberg which features easily understandable factors like faithfulness and procreation. A deeper aim is invisible to the patriarchal eyes which are programmed to look at the surface level. Thethikutty occupies the lower portion of Hall's cultural iceberg which cannot be understood by the other members of her community. In short, her status as that of an educated Brahmin woman stands as another culture in itself that needs to be understood with constant interaction and acceptance.



"An early bifurcation of the social reform discourse of the nineteenth century along caste and gender lines led to the lower caste preoccupation with caste-based oppression, while the upper castes were more concerned with the gender-based oppression." (Kosambi. 96)

Thankam, the Nair sister-in-law of Thethikutty faces discrimination based on low caste, but still lives a normal life when she restricted herself to her gender roles. She faced problems when she decided to go to college and study but she does not become an outcast. Thethikutty on the other hand breaks her conventional women roles making her unwelcome in the family. Her high-class status does not help her break free of the restrictive roles, but rather, it tries to bind her closer. The point put across is clear. Higher caste does not free you from gender repression. Caste here just decides the value of a woman's cage if you are in a golden cage, you are still caged. Gender transforms into a cage. The value of the cage increases and decreases according to the bird inside, like the castes are arranged according to power politics. Lalithambika Antharjanam makes us question the concept of real freedom for a woman and if society will ever let her roam free without clipping her wings. Jotiba Phule ranked women with the '*shudrathishudras*' enumerating that their caste does not seem to help women overcome their oppression. Being born into a high class does not make life easy if one is born as a woman. Lalithambika Antharjanam deals with only the high classes in the story. The struggles of the lower classes are not trivialized here, but rather Antharjanam chooses to address the question of the privileged caste's underprivileged gender. The characters are facilitating the author's transfer of opinions to the reader. Thethikutty and Thankam are only the harbingers of Antharjanam's larger frame narrative of the high caste, low gender juxtaposition.

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