

**THE PLIGHT OF NAMBOODIRI WOMEN IN COLONIAL KERALA –
READING THROUGH LALITHAMBIKA ANTHARJANAM’S
*CAST ME OUT IF YOU WILL***

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Abstract

Lalithambika Antharjanam, the First Woman of Malayalam Letters and the lone voice from the elite Namboodiri community of Kerala, played an important role in the social transformation of the community and of Kerala society in general. This paper intends to study an anthology of her short stories and memoirs, *Cast Me Out If You Will*, translated by Geetha Krishnankutty. These stories are not totally fictional; rather they are the true historical representation of the life of Namboodiri women who were condemned to lead a cloistered life beset with tormenting taboos. During the colonial era, Namboodiris were at the top of Kerala’s traditional social hierarchy. But the community degenerated due to the indulgence of Namboodiri men in multi marriages and uninhibited lifestyles, while their wives lived in seclusion being away from the outside world. Antharjanam’s writings captured the spirit of the period and the struggle of the then young generation. Her famous short stories explicit the suffocation of Namboodiri women, their struggle in a hostile world, their loneliness and their search for an identity of their own. These stories unfold the turbulent life of these Protagonists, and the brutal suppression suffered by them and how they are excommunicated or incarcerated from their community due to their rebellious reactions to the patriarchal society.

Keywords: Antharjanam, cloistered life, excommunication or incarceration, tormenting taboos, Smarthavicharam.

The Namboodiri community held a prominent position in Kerala’s traditional social hierarchy and they exerted enormous cultural and economic authority in Kerala before colonialism. Ironically the Namboodiri women lived cloistered and restricted lives and are called ‘Antharjanam’ which literally means ‘people inside the house’. Women of this caste often have this as their surname. The Namboodiri women observed strict sacramental purity. 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. 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 while at home, and they could only wear white

clothing. Sage Parasurama's name is invoked to endorse these customs, as he is believed to have brought the Namboodiris to Kerala.

The Namboodiri community in Kerala observed strict marriage and inheritance laws. The laws ordained by the Smarta Sankaracharya stated that only the eldest son inherited the property and married within the community. Other sons made alliances with the matrilineal Nair community. However, Namboodiri women were not allowed to marry outside their caste and remained unmarried because it was difficult to get 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, old and sick Namboodiri men. The young girls were condemned to be widows and to lead a secluded life in the kitchen or prayer room or ill-treated by the older wives. The miserable plight of these antarjanams led to protests against patriarchal oppression in Kerala in the first quarter of the twentieth century.

Namboodiris were more orthodox than other communities like Nairs and Syrian Christians, and were most reluctant to reform and resisted the changes that occurred in Kerala in the twentieth century. But a revolutionary upheaval of thought and tradition occurred in the 1920s when V.T Bhattathirippad and EMS Namboodirippad began to question and challenge the inhuman practices prevalent within the confines of their own caste. In the latter half of 1930 the progressive literature movement changed the political and social atmosphere and created new concepts of individual and mass liberty. As a result, social and political issues became the focal point of literary efforts. The genre of short story came to be recognized as the literary form best suited for propagating these novel and hitherto unknown ideas.

Lalithambika Antharjanam, who belonged to a family that was aware and supportive of the social changes taking place around them, turned to short story writing at this juncture with the idea of contributing to the principles of equality and liberty. Her stories are not in anyway experimental in tone or content. But she was the first woman writer in Malayalam to display the courage and commitment to openly write of the woman's life from a woman's singular viewpoint and this fact has assured her a unique status in the history of the Malayalam short story. Antharjanam herself was to reveal to the world at large the inhuman practices and superstitious beliefs that prevailed inside the façade of the Namboodiri supremacy. In this, she was inspired by the writings of V.T. Namboodirippad and Muthiringod Bhavatharhan Namboodirippad. In fact, she went one step further than these male writers and brought out the plight of the Namboodiri women who were suffering silently all the iniquities imposed by a primitive communal lifestyle that needed complete re-designing.

Elaine Showalter detects in the history of women's writing a female phase (1920 onwards) that looked particularly at female writing and female experience.(1979)Lalithambika Antharjanam depicted her female characters in the modus operandi by which they subvert the existence of their male counterparts. It is done with a motive to win over them, to achieve their end. They redefine the female role to crush and demolish the patriarchal mindset and seek to achieve the central position. It tells us of the significance of the existence of female characters who retain the balance of society while adhering to diverse rituals and practices. The role of the female characters thus becomes vital and significant. The reactionary women expose the angularities of men and hence the malpractices of society. Motives of the action of the female characters are analyzed in the feminist angle.

In *Cast Me Out If You Will*, an anthology of short stories and memoir, Lalithambika Antharjanam gives a voice to the legacy of suffering, silent as well as rebellious women.

Ironically the punishment for rebellion is expulsion from the household, they became outcasts. The stories consist of myriad motifs referring to the recurrent themes of identity, power, gender relations, politics and cultural traditions. These stories are more like oral histories of the Namboodiri women as Lalithambika records them from what other Namboodiri women had told her. Together they record the Namboodiri culture of colonial Kerala.

According to Kate Millet and Simone de Beauvoir sexual colonialism is a relationship of dominance and subservience between the sexes. (1972) The Namboodiri women are the colonized and the Namboodiri men the colonizers. The story ‘The Goddess of Revenge’ projects the fiery spirit of the oppressed woman flaring up against the fanatic society. It describes an unusual Smarthavicharam, where an accused antharjanam not only confesses her crime of adultery but also cross-examines her partners who are also cast out of the society. Brushte, the practice of social excommunication that was a prevalent practice among the Namboodiris in the nineteenth and twentieth century, forms the critical background for this short story. This was preceded by Smarthavicharam, a trial of caste offence for transgressing the laws of community. This placed innumerable restrictions on the Namboodiri women and their moral behavior and conduct. Says Logan, in his Manual on the Malabar: “When a woman is suspected by her own kinsmen or by neighbouring Brahmins of having been guilty, under light conduct she is under the pain of excommunication.” (Vasanthi: 7)

‘The Goddess of Revenge’ is based on the true story of 1905, of Kuriyedathu Tatri; a Namboodiri woman who plans an elaborate revenge after her Namboodiri husband abandons her. 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 harlot.’ (Antharjanam, 23) is taken as a challenge by Tatri. The significance of Tatri as Goddess of Revenge lies in the powerful subversion of authority, of the order that seeks to destroy her. Her final act of revenge is instigated by her husband’s words. This brutal and humiliating taunt is a glorification of male depravity and lecher and sanctifies the commodification of the woman as a collectively owned sex object. The moment of irrational anger and grief that demolishes Tatri also simultaneously paves the way for the resurrection of her self worth and dignity in the act of revenge. 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’ (Antharjanam, 26).

Thus Tatri becomes a harlot and she has secret liaisons with several prominent Namboodiri men as well as her husband. A trial or smarthavicharam follows where she reveals herself as a Namboodiri woman. When she is tried, her challenge to the jury or Smarthan is that if she is to be cast out of the community, so must be all the sixty-four men, who slept with her. Her logic is irrefutable and Tatri wins. At the end of the story Tatri asks a pertinent question which is true of all women 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?’ (Antharjanam, 28). One of the most moving moments in the story is when Tatri cries in despair at the fact that Namboodiri women despise her, that she is remembered as nothing but a ‘fallen and disgraced woman’ (Antharjanam, 25).

Lalithambika Antharjanam portrays a woman whose name was shunned by Namboodiri society. The story opens with Antharjanam speaking in the first person and towards end we know that Tatri appears to her in a dream. Tatri has gone down in history as womanhood screaming for justice, for hundreds of silenced antharjanams. The story begins at night and ends at daybreak,

signifying the movement from the darkness and obscurity of the unconscious to the clarity of a fearless consciousness that comes alive in finding its union with the light of a new dawn.

“Pale and thin with grief
The young bride wept
The compassionate wind
Sighed to hear
The Namboodiri child’s
Sorrowing lament” (Antharjanam, 168)

The tears, the pain and suffering of many child widows in her husband’s family furnished Lalithambika with inexhaustible material for her stories. ‘Admission of Guilt’ is a powerful story of an antharjanam who at her smarthavicharam admits her guilt of adultery but her deeply moving defense brings to light the suppressed sexuality of a Namboodiri child widow. The moving soliloquy of the young Nambudiri widow being questioned about adultery brings out from buried depths her yearning for love, the sensual feelings aroused in her and denied by the society of her times. The story exposes gender politics that keeps women and their sexuality captive in its folds. The protagonist is the victim of an exchange marriage. She is married to an old namboodiri with four wives and forty sambandhams when she is a child and her father returns this favour by marrying her husband’s daughter. But she becomes a child widow and she is bewildered when her mangalsutra is broken. 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.

As a widow she respected societal norms and lived in seclusion. She struggled with desire and sensation. The protagonist argues, ‘we struggle with desires we can not suppress, sensations we can not control...(Antharjanam, 37)’. Temples are the only places that antharjanams can visit. The antharjanam 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’(Antharjanam, 37). Like all the antharjanams 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. ‘Feeling of pleasure that I had never known or experienced before came alive’(Antharjanam, 42). She admits ‘defeat in the struggle against...natural instincts’ (Antharjanam, 42). She confesses her guilt and accepts the punishment. 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. In both stories ‘Goddess of Revenge’ and ‘Admission of Guilt’, we can see how caste ideologies dictate and condition gender identity and sexuality.

The story ‘Within the Folds of Seclusion’ also critiques the Namboodiri custom of marrying young Namboodiri girls to old Namboodiris, without considering their feelings, because of high dowry. It also explores one possibility of resistance. The young girl Pappi could exert great influence over her sixty year old husband but she ignores him in spite of punishment and torture. Her silent resistance, her withdrawal from life, her secret love for young man, her conflicting desires and rigid Namboodiri customs earned her the label ‘mad antharjanam’. She died young at the age of twenty-five. When she died the author says, ‘while she was alive she had never really looked at the world around her’ (Antharjanam, 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’(Antharjanam, 44).

In the short story ‘Power of Fate’ Lalithambika narrates the tragic story of an antharjanam who is cast out of the namboodiri household for no crime but the jealousy of her

husband's eldest wife. After she is expelled she is taken by the Muslims or Mapillas. Her wish to see her son whom she had left in the namboodiri household is fulfilled on her deathbed. 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' (Antharjanam, 10). He had to do purificatory rituals of repentance for the 'sin'. The story criticizes the custom of touch and pollution and it is more important than one's mother.

The short story 'Life and Death' indirectly advocates widow remarriage by criticizing the custom of incarcerating young Namboodiri widows in the anthapuram. The young widow Tatri questions, 'why couldn't I be happy too? How long would I have to live, incarcerated in this cell of darkness, benumbed, and alone, with only memories for company?' (Antharjanam, 77). The 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 does not allow her to practice it in her own life. Like 'Admission of Guilt' this is another Namboodiri widow whose sexuality is suppressed. She is diagnosed with incurable hysteria at the end.

Through her short stories, told with compassion and conviction, Lalithambika reflected the sobs and sighs of a bygone period. At present Namboodiri women are liberated and lead normal lives. In today's context, these beliefs may sound incredulous, but that was how it was in those days. The plight of antharjanams stands in for women as a whole. In her memoir Lalithambika Antharjanam 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' (Antharjanam, 171).

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