

**GOING BEYOND THE THRESHOLD: A STUDY OF SELECTED WORKS
OF LALITHAMBIKA ANTHARJANAM AND KAMALA DAS**

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Abstract

This article touches upon the two constraints of writing, namely language and sociological constraints, that hinder the true expression of women's writing in India. The Indian women writers chosen for analysis are Lalithambika Antharjanam and Kamala Das from Kerala society. It focuses on the construction of language and sociology by the male hegemony and the challenges of these writers. The frame work used is 'The Law of Threshold' that helps in understanding the power structures that have gained control over the literary activities of a woman in the society. The paper makes an attempt to engage with the way women writers embrace to overcome these challenges of the patriarchal hegemony using different techniques to enhance the language and convey the intended meaning.

Keywords: women writings, language, society, threshold, patriarchy, hegemony, constraints

Introduction

“I think the degree of a nation’s civilization may be measured by the degree of enlightenment of its women.”

Helen Keller

Women are visualized as the cultural heritage messengers of the patriarchal society. The social issues related to women and restrictions imposed on them are so authenticated that those cater to the needs of patriarchal set up. V. Geetha expresses, “it has been argued that a patriarchal system provides comforting self-definitions and norms, which, however restrictive and limited, also amply reward those who learn to accept their defined roles as mothers and wives.” (2009:6). The existence of patriarchal society has always posed women with the deep rooted cultural norms in the various forms of domestic, cultural and social specified roles and responsibilities. Indian women writers have emerged as a set of writers who raised voice, through their works, on behalf of the women members in the society. They speak about the position of women in India and the expression of the marginalized roles assigned to women by the patriarchal society, further questioning various constraints imposed on them. Toru Dutt, Sarojini Naidu, Lalithambika Antharjanam, Nayantara Sehgal, Kamala Das, Shashi Despande, Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Nair, Jhumpa Lahiri, Arundhati Roy, Shobha Rajadhyaksha, etcetera, are some of the prominent women writers of India who have gained acclaim as unique writers among the readers throughout the world.

Indian women writers of twentieth century have dealt with the various themes related to women’s issues such as human relationships, social problems, confinement, search for self identity, spirit of modernity, science and rationality, spirit of freedom, sensitive portrayal of inner feelings, stress on forging a balance between tradition and modernity, struggle in fighting the patriarchal hegemony, traumatic psychic experiences due to the collapse of value-system and lack of satisfactory alternatives, etcetera. Indian women writers, right from Toru Dutt’s time in the late 19th century to Bharthi Mukherjee’s more liberated world, have been subjected to far greater sociological forces.

The writers chosen for my study are Lalithambika Antharjanam and Kamala Das from Kerala. These writers speak about the Indian women’s constant mental exercise negotiating the paradigms of English literature and their own real encounters in a conventional household. Their works reveal the insights of understanding the complex system and women being caught in the web of this complex system. These writers have acknowledged the status of woman in a male dominated society as per the exploration and manifestation of Indian social reality.

Lalithambika Antharjanam is one of the Kerala’s leading women writers. She was born in 1907 into a Namboodiri family of Kerala, who did not receive any formal education. She was tutored at home in Sanskrit and Malayalam, and acquired proficiency in English and Hindi on her own. She was always interested in writing and her first published work was an article on Mahatma Gandhi entitled ‘The New Parthasarathy’, which appeared in the September 1923 edition of a local magazine called Sarada. Her first short story, ‘The End of the journey’, was published in the magazine Malayalarajyam in 1927. She married Narayanan Namboodiri and had seven children. She was active in the social reform movements of Kerala in the early 1920s. She won the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award and the National Sahitya Akademi Award for her novel *Agnisakshi*. As one of the early women writers of Kerala who tried to empower women through her writings, she is a very important Indian writer. Her contribution to the field of Indian women writings is very remarkable.

Kamala Das is a renowned Indian writer who was born in 1934 into a literary family of Kerala. She is a prolific writer, who wrote both in English and Malayalam. She has contributed several taboo-breaking collections of short stories and poems, six novels and three memoirs, in which she explored a woman's quest for freedom from sexual and domestic oppression and examined the paradoxes of life and relationships with great emotional depth. She is best known for her autobiography *My Story*, which is her sensational work that shocked readers with its total disregard for mindless conventions and its fearless articulation of subjects still considered taboo. It depicts the author's intensely personal experiences in her passage to womanhood and shedding light on the hypocrisies that informed traditional society. This memoir was far ahead of its time and is now acknowledged as a bona fide masterpiece.

In post-independent and modern India, sociological constraints place the burden of community valuations upon the tales that are narrated by the fiction maker. The women writers are always burdened with the pressure of language constraints imposed by the patriarchal hegemony. The thought that woman needs to write in a certain way satisfying the male chauvinistic mindset astounds/startles the writer's mind. These constraints force women writers to change the course of their thought process itself. Patriarchal society constantly monitors the writings of women and highlights the women who break the norms of the system. Kamala Das expresses her pressure in one of the stories, *Sedation*, "I am punishing myself for what I have once done. Punishing myself for writing poetry and for living like a poet. I brought disgrace to my family. Brought unhappiness and misery." (2013:110). Many writers hesitate to express their mind as that would lead to consequences which disturb their lives in the society. The women writers are overburdened by the fear of stigmas cast upon them. They are weighed down by many taboos when it comes to writing one's own mind.

Lalithambika Antharjanam and Kamala Das face these sociological challenges and are burdened with community valuations.

Lalithambika Antharjanam expresses in her author's note to the novel, *Agnisakshi*:

"I remembered the stories of several women who had forgotten or rejected family life and entered the sphere of social service and finally sought solace in renunciation. I had come to the conclusion that such sacred stories should only be stored in our minds, and not written down." (Antharjanam 2015: xi)

The societal structural play forces her to bury such stories in her subconscious. So this speaks of the control over women's writing and behavioural pattern designed by the male world and the same is reflected in the writings and moreover it speaks of the literary constraints imposed on the women writers.

Lalithambika Antharjanam speaks about the characters, in her novel *Agnisakshi*, and short stories, who rise up and prove their courage but somehow are forced to feel guilty and are pressurized to withdraw at the end partially serving the purpose of patriarchal system. Whereas, Kamala Das overtly speaks about broken trusts, marriage, relationships, adultery, love, etcetera. The fear of being confound as the writer's personal experience and getting restrained from writing seems to be one of the challenges faced by women writers. Kamala Das challenges this transparently by questioning the norm through her work *My Story* which is a bold assertion of self.

Frame work

The Law of Threshold is the frame work introduced by Malashri Lal, a writer who mapped out reading strategies, for feminist literary criticism in India. It denotes three essential components namely

1. Interior space 2. Doorway poise 3. Exterior adjuncts

Malashri Lal observes the text which follows a linear pattern in the narrative that serves the purpose of the patriarchal limitations. The Indian women writers are influenced by English language and are challenged by its literary and social constructs. The writings of Lalithambika Antharjanam and Kamala Das speak of the language barriers posed by male dominant society. The politics of language can be visualized. The reader would not be encouraged to detect the repressed desires, the sad compromises, frustrated anger that may have formed the subtext of the woman-centered story. But the clever and bold women writers like Lalithambika Antharjanam and Kamala Das express their particular threshold of strenuous poise between the outer world of patriarchy and colonial influences and an inner world of energy let loose by the selected visions of the 'other'. Malashri Lal opines that women's writing in English is deliberately simple on the surface because that is the way the cries of agonized displacement can find space in the subtext. Kamala Das had to device subterfuges hidden in a simple text which would yield meaning for a treasure hunter.

The threshold is a real as well as a symbolic bar which marks a critical transition where men are allowed to enjoy multiple existences but a single for women. Legends, myths, history and literature provide examples of women who crossed the threshold and lived by the tragic consequences. The Law of Threshold argues that women's personal lives are often disguised in fiction as narratives of a depersonalised time and place. The protagonists in the works of Lalithambika Antharjanam and Kamala Das are often conventional women who encounter the ordinary vicissitudes of domestic living but come to some extra ordinary consciousness of their selfhood.

The first space is Interior space that is a real and psychological location on this side of the threshold which means that the characteristic positional tools of the narrative derive from conventions commonly assumed by the author and her readers.

The second operational space for the narrative is the threshold itself. This is a contested space between two kinds of influence one being the interior that comprises custom, heritage, beliefs coded by generations of patriarchal hegemony and the concept of security that is imposed on the women writers. Being poised at the threshold the writers receive messages from the outer world. This speaks of the possibilities of the writers' quasi manhood- freedom, risk, glory, death. Lalithambika Antharjana's protagonists grow up within tradition but have sufficient awareness of man's professional enterprise to imagine adopting that manner of life for themselves. The character Devaki in the novel, *Agnisakshi* is poised by the ideas of freedom and modern views and takes a bold decision of serving the society and nation. Her brother regrets for being her inspiration regarding such thoughts, "He wroteI have erred by providing her with such knowledge and ideas of freedom"(Antharjanam 2015:38).

Lalithambika Antharjanam's protagonist as social activist exercises real power in charting the destiny of the nation but their self awareness as women often interferes with the process of decision making:

This Devaki Manampalli, who moved like a tempest, shattering every obstacle in the path of 'progress,' who was she to her?...The weak, tortured Tethi Edathi, who her dear

Unni Ettan had wedded and brought home?...No, no, no. Her mind repeated in pain....She belonged to the society. To the country. She had been elevated from an individual to a movement. (Antharjanam 2015:66-67)

Such women are mistaken, misread and misinterpreted by the societal members often reminding their sociological limitations no matter within the family or outside it forcing women to possess the experience of pressure. Devaki's mother-in-law states, "...Now look at her! The girl who was raised with great care is mixing with those riff-raff muslim women, dressed in a blouse and sari, not observing either the laws of pollution or untouchability. Her desire was to covert our own antharjanams to her ways." (Antharjanam 2015:61).

Devika indulges oneself completely in the service rendered and her courage is exhibited in the following lines:

I am not the representative of any one caste, one religion, or one society. I am the representative of the entire clan of women who have, for centuries, endured ill treatment. You can look at this Truth which stands before you, veil cast aside, and bless it or curse it. But, you must remember that this burden of sorrow which is ours is your creation... (Antharjanam 2015:63).

She speaks about the accursed burden of ancestral women in the society that speaks of the restrictions on women's freedom of thoughts. The character's interior space of her habitual positioning has sensitized her to her female identity and the expectations aroused at the same time they obtain knowledge of man from obliquities hints of the external world. From the interior to the threshold verging on the other world –she declares a direction of change to herself and to those observant of her positioning.

Poised on the threshold, Lalithambika Antharjanam is acutely aware of isolation. Neither History nor family traditions offer any role models by which to read her possible future in the world beyond and if she should move in the same direction. Lalithambika Antharjanam questions about biological determinants of destiny and sociological constraints superimposed to limit women on one hand and a few thoughts that are culture specific about how a woman will be viewed in a masculine world unaccustomed to female presence on the other. Her protagonist Devaki in *Agnisakshi*, being a Namboodiri woman discards her veil, emerges into the open and breaks certain social codes. The following lines exemplify this, "...At this state, it is impossible for me to be the old Tethikutty Anthajanam, carry an umbrella, and walk with my head bowed. I will attend meetings. I will deliver speeches. I will not observe pollution....I will not do any acts of atonement." (Antharjanam 77) But ultimately she withdraws due to the societal pressures which force her to believe that she is in a mesmeric state of euphoria.

Lalithambika Antharjanam's works speak of the dichotomous strains by which the women writers live. Many of her short stories relate the tragedies that ultimately befall such individuals, who pursue chosen life-projects, focusing mainly trajectories, and in the process, refuse or ignore their social bonds. Their inward-looking seems to sever them from others. In other words, they are negligent of what is made to figure as the more important social responsibility –the forging of harmonious, non-violent, tolerant, equitable social relationships.

The third conceptual space in the Law of the Threshold is the world beyond the home, taking count of its real and metaphysical components. This space is operative for the woman who on narrow personal has made the irretrievable choice in her one directional journey. She has

accepted the challenge of a gender determined environment designed for the promotion and prosperity of men and must contend with prejudices against her attempts to appropriate her own space in the name of personal dignity and social justice.

Kamala Das expresses in *My Story*:

I wanted only love and kindness. Hate of any kind would ruin my work.....I wrote about the subjects the editors asked me to write on, fully aware that I was uneducated by the usual standards and that I had no business meddling in grave matters....but writing was possible. And it certainly brought me happiness. (Das 2004:202)

The writers had to devise strategies for survival of their own selves and acceptance by the 'other'. This space speaks of the writers who used the subterfuge of male camouflage. This could be male attire in the battlefield, male pseudonyms in literary texts or male protectors in statesmanship. Most important is the 'new woman', the courage of her convictions is all she can rely upon.

Kamala Das has separated her characters from other women who habitually authenticate their passivity by giving value to a common belief in socialization. She has to devise a world of her own and creates her self-progenated images rather differently. All descriptions of her new identity are evaluated as extensions or rejections of the patriarchal norm. Kamala Das' woman character in the story *Sedation* illustrates this further, "I was not meant for his purposes.....I was like a virus longing for survival... no writer has any excuse to stay alive after she has stopped writing, and after the gushing flow has weakened to a trickle." (Das 109) Some situations make her feel uncomfortable because she has been accepting and following roles that were assigned to her.

A woman in the man's world has to negotiate a perilous terrain where she places her feet on untested ground but must be determined not to sink. Kamala Das proves to be one such writer forging an alternative life alone in her enterprise but with a large and interested audience.

Kamala Das in *My Story* states:

As I wrote more and more, in the circles I was compelled to move in, I became lonelier and lonelier. I felt that my loneliness was like a red brand on my face.... I withdrew into the cave I had made for myself where I wrote stories and poems and became safe and anonymous. There were books all round me, but no friend to give me well-meaning advice, no relative telling me of u discrediting my family name by my unconventional ways of thinking... (Das 2004: 170)

This too is a position of being objectified for her 'dare' and 'unusual' womanhood. Due to the gaze of society upon her each action becomes final, as there is no retreat without public ignominy. The failed or defective performance outside the threshold has its corollary in a woman's recanting statements and humiliation. If unable to accept these necessary terms of re-entry to the inner space of domestic 'convenience', the woman is prone to suicide or mental breakdown. Kamala Das' works reflect the themes of madness due to restrictions, mental depression, desire to die, etc. highlighting the sociological constraints. Some of the expressions of the writer Kamala Das illustrate this in her work *My Story*. She speaks about madness and depression experienced, "My husband told me that I was going mad. Perhaps I was, but it was

not within my power to arrest its growth” (Das 98). Kamala Das expresses the pressure experienced, “..... the foundations of my sanity were shaken....I wished to escape from my home and walk on and on until at last my feet reached the end of the world....My husband was advised to call in a psychiatrist. I had begun to shed my clothes, regarding them as traps.” (Das 102-104). But the writer picks up the courage and fights against the circumstances and realizes the strength of self. She quests for her identity and further states, “One’s real world is not what is outside him. It is the immeasurable world inside him that is real. Only the one who has decided to travel inwards, will realize that his route has no end.”(Das 102-104). The author finds solace and great relief in one of the strongest modes of expression that is through writing. The following lines from Kamala Das’ *My Story* demonstrate the power of writing and freedom of expression, “My grief fell like drops of honey on the white sheets on my desk. My sorrows floated over the pages of magazines darkly as heavy monsoon clouds do in the sky...” (Das 99)

Conclusion

The women writers are overburdened by the fear of stigmas being cast upon them. They are weighed down by many taboos when it comes to writing one’s own mind. They have experienced social, literal and cultural constraints and still show courage to fight against all the odds posed by the patriarchal system.

The women writers are able to find their own unique ways to overcome the barriers that obstruct their writings proving the statement of Maya Angelou:

“You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I’ll rise.” (Maya Angelou, *Still I Rise*)

Lalithambika Antharjanam as a freedom fighter gave a great deal of importance to women’s emancipation. She through her characters reflects the injustices and ills perpetrated on women, especially by the Namboodiri community and protests against these through her actions and her literary works. Kamala Das is the writer who spoke her mind, wrote her mind and stood strong and courageous in accepting the challenges of patriarchal society. Indianness, westernization, indigenous culture, native persuasions, language acquisitions and social thought are the questions that arise and further link with a woman’s sense of her own gender positioning and her determining biology. It will put us to thought as how all these are detrimental in manipulating the position of women in the society.

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