

REFLECTIONS ON ANTHARJANAM: AN INTERVIEW WITH TANUJA BHATTATHIRIPAD

Allu Alfred
Research Scholar
University of Madras
Chennai, Tamil Nadu

Lalithambika Antharjanam was a prominent writer and a social reformer who received the Kendra Sahitya Akademi Award and the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award for her novel *Agnisakshi* in 1977. She focused on the issues of Namboothiri women and worked towards their emancipation from archaic practices within the community through her writing. The following is an interview with writer Tanuja Bhattathiripad, Antharjanam's grand daughter and a current writer in Malayalam on the life and times of her grandmother and the sweeping changes in the position of women in Kerala today:

1. Given your personal association with Lalithambika Antharjanam and your position as a member of the present day Namboothiri community, how do you think your grandmother's work affected the female members of the community? Were her works accessible to women at the time it was written and more importantly were the women allowed to read at the time? Did the Namboothiri women find a connection with her works or were they critical for speaking against age old customs?

TB: I believe that my grandmother's works have influenced the female members of the Namboothiri community to a large extent. I suppose I am an example in my generation, to the degree of influence her works have had. I consider that the relevance of her works have only increased with the passage of time. During her times, although there were many restrictions placed on Namboothiri women, it was also the age of a renaissance in the Namboothiri society. Perhaps the majority of the members of the Namboothiri society did not have access to her works, but many of them did. As regards reactions from within the society, the younger generation was supportive of her writings and the reforms she wished to bring in, but the older generations did not extend that support. They stuck to their age old customs. Possibly the women in the older generation were happy with the changes that were happening but they were not vocal in their support.

2. Lalithambika Antharjanam had a very supportive family, but as a member of an orthodox community did she face any direct or indirect attack for writing so blatantly, challenging the practices that subdue women in the name of tradition?

TB: It is true that her family was very supportive. Both her parents were encouraging. It was her mom who led her into the world of literature. The fact that her parents and her husband were educated must have been the reason they supported her immensely. She did face a lot of difficulties though. She had a close association with many of the writers of her time. The letters she received from them, many of which were from men, drew a large amount of

criticism from her community, who frowned upon communication between men and women. But she overcame all these criticism largely due to the support rendered by her family. She at one point wished that she would age faster as she thought that her young age posed more difficulties for her to work in the society.

3. Since the implementation of the Namboothiri reforms a major shift has occurred in the attitude towards women in the community. But on a personal level, do you think the abandonment of archaic practises have uplifted the community? Are the reforms really put to practise for the benefit of everyone or is it just in paper?

TB: There have definitely been many positive changes in the society since the implementation of the reforms. I would say that it has uplifted the community. Although the legal position of the namboothiri women have become better, many of the old customs are still followed. Namboothiri society like other societies has blended with each other and many of the archaic and anti-women practices have been abandoned.

4. What do you think is the relevance of Lalithambika Antharjanam's work in today's world now that most of the practises against which she passionately wrote are no longer in existence. What message does her works give to the modern woman?

TB: Her works have always been against the restrictions that are imposed against women. Perhaps the nature of restrictions against which she waged a battle has changed, but they exist nonetheless. I think that Antharjanam's works reflect the thought that women should not have to face any kind of restrictions or limitations. And even in today's society women face such issues. Possibly today women are not restricted to the four walls of the kitchen but she surely faces limitations of other nature. Thus her works are relevant even today. Her works portray the simple fact that the freedom of a woman should always vest in her own hands and not be decided by the society.

5. There is usually an attempt to sideline the works of women writers by the canon. Do you think it has happened in the case of Lalithambika Antharjanam? Do you think enough attention and research have been undertaken in her works as much as it is done in the case of other male writers of Malayalam literature.

TB: I would say that there definitely was a marked difference between the male writers and the female writers in those times. She did have to face certain difficulties and probably just because she was a woman. Male writers do not have any of these difficulties and they are never discouraged while on the other hand female writers are routinely pulled down. If she manages to overcome all these difficulties and fulfils all her duties towards the family and then finds the time to write, she may write. This was the rampant policy at those times. As regards whether enough research has been undertaken, I would say yes.

6. Are you familiar with the translations of her works? If so, do you think the translations have captured the essence of her writings?

TB: I have read only a few of her translated works. So I cannot comment authoritatively on this. But from what I have read, the translations fulfill the aim of providing the works of Antharjanam to a larger audience, but I doubt if they have within them any literary merit.

7. Apart from Kerala, has her works grabbed national or international attention? Do you think there is a scope for further studies in her works?
TB: Antharjanam's works have been translated to over 22 languages, and her novel, *Agnisakshi* received the Kendra Sahtiya Academy award. Many of her works have been made into movies and documentaries, so I believe that her works have received national attention. There is scope for further studies in her works, as her works pertain to contemporary issues faced by women.
8. On a more personal level, has your grandmother's works inspired you to become a writer?
TB: Personally I have been interested in writing since my school days but I was not very seriously involved in writing. I published my first book at the age of 23. I had read many of Antharjanam's works but not in its entirety. It was only later when I was more involved in writing that I read her other works. As a writer her works have inspired me, but I would not say she inspired me to be a writer.
9. Can you tell us about your works and the major themes that you deal with in them?
TB: I write stories and articles mainly. The stories have random themes that occur in my mind. I also write children's literature. The articles that I write deal mostly with social issues.
10. As a writer in present day Malayalam literary scene, what is your opinion about the attention given to women's writing in Kerala.
TB: I believe that the women's literary scene in Malayalam has undergone tremendous changes. The women writers today do not shy away from a theme, fearing criticism. They are bolder and do not succumb to unwieldy criticism.
11. Do you think Malayalam literature finds enough readers in today's day and age when education shifts focus to English medium and regional languages are sidelined?
TB: Readers of Malayalam literature have always been a minority irrespective of the time period. But there has always been a loyal population that read Malayalam works. I think it had dropped low in between, but has gained momentum again.
12. Finally, what do you think should be done to retain the wealth of regional literature coming from various parts of the country?
TB: The younger generation should not lose track of their cultural and regional treasures. If the schools and the parents themselves encourage the children to read the regional books, then such works will not be lost and they can be retained. They should be taught to be proud of their mother tongue and be supported to inculcate their vernacular literature into their reading habits too.