

INTERROGATING FEMININITY: A STUDY OF EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY MALAYALAM WOMEN'S PERIODICALS

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Abstract: The period of British control, both direct and indirect, is often seen as the modern period in the history of Kerala, when the three states [Malabar, Travancore Cochin] were influenced and affected by European ideals and attitudes. As a result of legislative measures and contact with European ideals, the social structures of the time were affected and the states witnessed a series of social reform movements. Therefore, the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Century was a period of change for this region, where the 'old or natural' ethnicity gave way to a 'new' ethnicity. This change is evident in the periodicals published in Malayalam from the last decades of the 19th century and directed at women. These periodicals enjoyed considerable popularity at the time and served as a major source of literary output, containing poetry, prose, life histories and critical review of books. Because of their wide reach and popularity, they became a hotbed for debates on gender roles and the rights and duties of women in this atmosphere of change and collapse of old structures of culture, caste and gender. This paper examines how these debates managed to redraw the lines of gendering, especially the notions of femininity and women's roles within the institution of marriage in the society of the time.

Key words: Femininity, Feminism, Gender, Malayalam Literature, Patriarchy, Women's writing, Pennezuthu

Historians have not been able to agree on when exactly the reform movements in Kerala (existing at that point of time as the princely states of Travancore, Cochin and British administered state of Malabar) began. However, most agree that it began sometime in the second half of the nineteenth century. Though opinion has been divided on the consequences and effects of the movements, one thing that historians and scholars seem to agree on is that the Reform movements were a response to the changing political and economic scenario of the time. Though they can be considered an agitation for a different—and at times better—way of living for the society, the atmosphere of change that it gave rise to could be seen as having contributed to a rising 'feminist consciousness' within the communities. They envisioned a new society based on what they believed to be 'progressive ideals'. This period also coincided with the national movement for independence, which in turn attempted to envision a new nationalist ideal that advocated freedom from the clutches of superstition and orthodoxy. And it was in this atmosphere of change and the collapse of the old structures of culture, caste, and gender that what can be considered the early feminist narratives in Malayalam took root.

Even though most of the historical records of the Reform movements of the period do not seem to focus on the role of women or the women's voices of the time on the issues that concerned them and the building of a 'modern' society and nation, it would be wrong to assume that women were absent from or silent in the debates that occurred during the time. Women were part of the change, either as subjects or objects. Women's bodies were the often the sites

where fights for caste domination were played out. Their bodies have at different times been the symbols of oppression as well as defiance. In a speech, Ayyankali, a prominent Ezhava reformer, persuaded the Pulaya women to throw away their bead necklaces that were the badge of the slave community, as well as to cover their breasts with an upper cloth in defiance of the caste regulations imposed on them. This shows how women's participation was an essential part of the movements. The articles that appeared in the periodicals of the time, like *Sarada*, *Mahila* and *Srimathi* reveal the 'significant struggles by women themselves, sometimes autonomous, to change relations within and outside the family.' They reveal how in the 1920s and 30s, women communicated with each other in order to develop 'a distinct discourse of their own' through which they interrogated not just 'traditional' patriarchal structures but 'new/modern' patriarchy as well. The first periodical came up in Malayalam in June 1847 under the editorship of Gundert (a missionary), and was called *Rajyasamacharam*. Between 1847 and 1890, Malayalam language witnessed the inception of twenty-five periodicals including *Keralasugunabodhini* (the first periodical intended especially for women readers). The first issue of *Keralasugunabodhini* contained the proclamation that though there were several periodicals in Malayalam, they were all published or written for the Malayalee male. However, there was not even one 'pathra-masika' published with the purpose of increasing the knowledge of the women and for their entertainment. And to rectify this problem, *Keralasugunabodhini* was published in 1062 (Malayalam year) Midhunam (Malayalam month).

Other periodicals followed the *Keralasugunabodhini* focusing on politics, governance, literature, and women's issues and concerns -. *Sarada* under the supervision of B. Kalyanikutty Amma and *Mahila* under the editorship of B. Bhageeraty Amma. These periodicals often served as a major source of literary output in Malayalam during the time, containing poetry and prose, life histories, and critical reviews of books in addition to articles on issues of current interest. Therefore, they can also be viewed as an important part of the literary history of Malayalam. The subjects and issues dealt with in these periodicals were mainly those that concerned the everyday life and problems of women. And they were conceived to considerably affect "women's progress", i.e., their "education, literary endeavours and modernization".

These periodicals covered a variety of burning women's issues of the time, like women's education, marriage, dowry, identity etc, and were often sites of debates and discussion. Mrs.Kannan Menon's article, "Modern Women and Their Husbands: A Rejoinder" was a response to an earlier article on women's role within marriage written by the prominent reformer, Krishna Menon. This paper will particularly focus on how some of the contributors to these periodicals interrogated and challenged the established patriarchal norms of femininity that they saw as hypocritical and attempted to replace them with a more equitable idea of gender, especially in relation to women and their role in nation building and marriage.

Beauty is a must, and besides the tresses must be long and wavy. The curls on the forehead must gently dance even when there is no breeze to ruffle them. The eyes must be constantly animated, like the flutter of black-hued bees on a white lotus. The body must be as delicate as young shoots tender enough to wither in the sun. The complexion must be either like the bloom of the hibiscus, or the golden lemon. The waist must be so dainty that the onlooker would fear that it might not withstand the strain of standing up straight. The backside must be heavy enough for the ankle to make a dimple in fine sand while walking on it.(Sarojini, 56)

The above lines, from an article titled 'Streetvam' (Womanliness) by Sarojini, records the ideal of femininity of the time.

Gender studies have critiqued and differentiated between the concepts of male/female and masculine/feminine. While male/female refer to those biological concepts that differentiate the sexes, in other words, the physical differences, masculine and feminine refer to those gendered concepts, i.e., the physiological and emotional prejudices or assumptions. While the ideas that define male and female are biological and therefore, often

unchangeable, the latter concepts (masculine and feminine) are social and gendered constructs:

... these theorists tend to argue that gender is a set of roles and cultural meanings acquired in the course of ego formation within family structures, and that significant changes in child-rearing practices and kinship organization can alter the meaning of gender and close the hierarchical gap between the genders of man and woman.(Cranny-Francis, 3-4)

The 'cultural' root of gender is revealed in the various definitions of these concepts that exist across societies and cultures. For instance, the notion of what is feminine often differs across nations, cultures, classes, and historical locations. Therefore, a study of the history of the concepts of masculinity/femininity will reveal the constant shifts and changes that the concepts have undergone, and continue to undergo, in various historical, geographical, and socio-cultural locations.

The 1930s to 1947 can be called the nationalist phase for woman's movements in India, when women "entered the nationalist struggle in service to the nation". The issue of women's role in a nation or nation building largely came up as a result of the belief that a nation's progress is measured by the status of its women. This statement is found across numerous articles, many of which state how, "a civilization's status is dependent on the condition of the women in it. A nation that does not show interest in the progress and development of its women will not achieve progress." (Nair, 8)

Another article, 'Hindu Streekalude Munkalathayum Thalkalathaym Avasthabhedam' quotes British Minister Gladstone's statement that man's progress is connected or related to women's progress. From these statements, it can be gathered that the attempts to bring women out of their homes—and in some cases to educate them and encourage them to play a larger role in the public world outside the private domains of the home—were not because these writers believed it was the 'right' of a woman, but because they believed it was in fact the necessity of a nation that wanted to be seen as civilized - "Despite the many pronouncements of good intent by the male leaders, however, most of them still saw a woman's role basically as that of a housewife within a conservative family structure." (Jayawardena, 99)

Many of the reform articles in this period targeted the *antharjanams*, and focused on bringing about changes in their condition. The reason for this could be because among the Malayalee communities, they were the most obviously downtrodden and ill-treated. They suffered from most of the maladies that the reformers wished to rectify—child marriage, lack of freedom of mobility, lack of education or literacy, no system of widow remarriage, polygamy, and so on. In

contrast, the other women of the lower castes and other religions were visibly less oppressed. Another reason could be because they belonged to the highest caste among the Malayalee communities, and therefore, became the point of entry for outsiders into the society's culture. However, if there are articles that present a reformist vision, there are others that are more radical in its challenge of established social and gender norms.

In an article titled 'Streekalum Rashtriyavum' (Women and Politics), the author appeals for an "increased role for women in the efforts at national progress" and justifies this demand by quoting examples from mythology:

In the *Mahabharatam* did not Kunti and Draupadi have opinions regarding the war? When Lord Krishna set forth as the messenger of the Pandavas, did not an impassioned Draupadi argue vehemently against a compromise? We do not see Krishna or the Pandavas interrupting her on the grounds that she was trespassing on matters beyond her authority ... human life is not something to be stored away under lock and key within one's house. Only when it becomes possible to claim that all human beings have nothing to do beyond their immediate dwelling-places, will it be possible to deny women admittance to affairs located beyond domestic boundaries.

In another example, an editorial from *Vanitakusumam* exhorts women themselves to take up the struggle for representation in government and for their rights and places the onus of change not on any outside force but on women themselves:

The work of intrepid struggle and sound bargaining to secure legitimate rights is the responsibility of women themselves. Any complacency on their part, induced by the hope that the government—which has displayed its conservatism in all affairs—will concede their rights and authority in full recognition of justice, and the mood of the times, would be most foolish....You must not while away any more time in idle slumber. Open your eyes to the realities of the world, ascertain your needs, recognize your rights, and move to secure them. Do not ever harbour the hope that others will plead on your behalf and help you claim your rightful share, even in your wildest dreams. (Amma, 76)

This implies an awareness that increased representation in the government was a necessity if women wanted their rights to be recognized and a re-imagining of women as active agents of their change - the focus here is not on waiting to be bestowed these rights, but on agitation and demanding 'political freedom'. Thus women are here exhorted to abandon passivity.

Sarojini's 'Streetvam' (Womanliness) highlight the unrealistic aspect of feminine ideals - the

impossibility of 'real' women aspiring to be 'ideal, genteel and virtuous' wives (*kuladharmapatni*) who 'resemble the Goddess of Prosperity in looks (*rupeshu Lakshmi*)'. Using humour, she examines the cross-currents of reform and traditionalism in which the women of the time were caught:

The wife must eat only after the husband eats. An early meal is prohibited even if one may faint of hunger. On the heels of this will come the translation of the English proverb that promises showers of gold from going to sleep early and rising early. Yet the shloka that warns the wife to sleep only after her husband has slept will follow. In short, the ideal, genteel and virtuous wife is synonymous with she who sleeps less. (Sarojini, 53)

Another article, with the same title but by another writer, Parvati Nenminimangalam also examines the concept of 'woman' as, "something put together for great poets to describe; a form shaped for men to feast their eyes upon—a hoax, plainly. But a beautiful assemblage that we adore—yes, womanliness is a creature that worships bondage as a matter of pride". (Nenminimangalam, 49) The criticism of the idea of womanhood that Sarojini and Parvati Nenminimangalam raise in their articles are echoed in the writings of others as well, like B Pachiamma's 'Woman and Freedom' and Mrs. Kannan Menon's 'Modern Women and their Husbands'. All four articles, expose contemporary notions of femininity as unreal and oppressive to women. The arguments that are put forth through these articles often reveal the patriarchal forces that work behind such constructs.

Kochattil Kalyanikutty Amma in her article, 'Some Obstacles in the Way of Equality Between the Sexes' reflects on the power and dominance of men over women when it comes to discourse or ideology. According to her, it is this 'monopoly' or dominance that is the root of their power, and not any kind of inherent superiority:

From ancient times, men have associated women with the malevolent and secret arts. This association is rooted in the mind's tendency to fear the inscrutable, trapped as it is between the sensory and extra-sensory. The mystery of the rhythms of the female body—menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth—challenged the human powers of comprehension. Consequently, the male imagination associated Woman with sorcery and the black arts. Woman, being steeped in ignorance, like Man himself, accepted this label graciously. Later, in different times and in different societies, some women did gain power and dignity as individuals, though as a group, women remained powerless..... This insight provides us a key to understanding why Woman is perceived to be a concoction of the Goddess and the Devil. The

fear of Woman's dark powers that sprung up so vigorously within ancient Man have condensed into certain misgivings in the Unconscious of modern Man.

Their arguments also reveal the silencing of women, and the subsequent power men have gained through their infantilisation. Generally, biological differences between the two sexes are acknowledged. However, the values associated with these biological differences are problematic. Parvathy Ayyappan in her article 'Streedharmatte Patti' (On Womanly Duty) examines how the perceived 'natural roles' of women as caregivers and home-makers is not simply the product of biology but a complex system of social conditioning and biology. According to her arguments, the inferior or limited status of women in society is not due to 'natural' causes, but due to the societal limitations and restrictions on women compounded by biological causes. But once there are methods or means to control these duties then women should be given equal opportunities to display their abilities, as men.

Her attitude to birth control or contraceptives is interesting. At no time is there any mention of the moral and religious issues involved over the use of contraceptives. Her arguments, similar to the ones Kochattil Kalyanikutty Amma puts forth, place the right of choice to have or not have children firmly with the woman and implies the right of women over their bodies. The issue of contraception and contraceptive methods was a raging issue in the states of Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar at that time. And Kochattil Kalyanikutty Amma was one of the champions for contraceptives at that time. Thus these two writers re-vision the role of women as more than just homemakers or child-bearing machines. In fact, they reject such limiting roles for women and embrace a more equitable position for women in society: "The capabilities and duties of women and men do not lie in becoming good wives and husbands." (Ayyappan, 158-159)

These arguments against the limited conventional notions of femininity/'womanliness' can be seen as attempts to interrogate and—through the process of interrogation—reveal the forces that work toward the privileging of the masculine while systematically discriminating against or othering the feminine. Many of these articles also refer to conventional and at that time, immensely popular mythical ideals of womanhood like Sita, Chandramati, Savitri and Sheelavati as patriarchal constructs and reinterpret them from a woman centric perspective, as victims of the hypocritical standards of a society that places women's chastity at an impossible height while conveniently overlooking the same in men:

Sri Rama and the common folk remained sceptical despite the fact that Sita was made to jump into a pyre to prove that she had not been desecrated by her stay in Ravana's dwelling. Urmila, however, had no hesitation, though Lakshmana had stayed away for twelve years and indeed, had gone berserk all over Surpanaka's nose and other parts, like a tipsy toddy-tapper on a coconut tree.....The so-very-non-fickle minds of men who put together the Regulation that women should have but one husband, proved too cowardly to also dictate that a man should have but one wife. Yet the high-sounding Sanskrit cannons are directed at poor women alone.(Sarojini, 58-59)

These writers do not just interrogate and challenge patriarchal notions of women and their position and purpose within the nation and marriage but attempt to re-vision and re-invent it from a more woman-centred perspective, by putting forth a more humane notion of femininity. They often draw on the mythical *Ardhanarishwara* to justify their demands for better treatment of women as entities with rights and deserving respect:

Take another quality often extolled in recent times as an ideal for woman—obedience. This is a word which could never obtrude itself into the relationships of *equal partners* such as the *Ardhanarishwara* symbolizes. The one who has to obey is implicitly an inferior. For the ideal man and woman alike there can be only one kind of obedience—obedience to the dictates of one's own conscience and Higher Nature. (Cousins, 54)

The significance of this image lies in the unity of male and female qualities that is achieved as a result. If an ideal human being is a mixture of male and female qualities, then the superior-inferior relationship otherwise associated with male and female collapses, to be replaced by a more equitable relationship—both sets of qualities are different, but are not necessarily inferior or superior to the other.

Kochattil Kalyanikutty Amma in her article critiques masculinity and masculine values as detrimental to society. According to her, it is the primacy of masculine values that lead to war and other violence - "As long as war remains a possibility, we will continue to pay inordinate attention to militarism, military prowess and 'Manliness'. We will worship as our leader precisely that person who exemplifies these three qualities." (Amma, 176) She even goes to the extent of presenting a utopic vision of society where the masculine-feminine binary can be overcome for a more equitable and hybrid existence:

Of what use is equality?...Many of us women do firmly believe that it will alleviate much of the malaises that plague us now....In human society with rational orientation, we would behave more considerately towards each other. There, neither class

nor caste nor position would matter; the greatness of the mind will form the sole criterion of valuation...In such a world, many-splendoured individuality, unthinkable in today's world of hatred and negative attitudes, may materialize, and along with it, happiness and contentment. In such a society the question, 'what for the equality of the sexes?' may echo as meaningless noise. (Amma, 176)

On one hand, her vision of a gender equal society can be considered naïve and optimistic but on the other is reflective the new thinking and nascent feminism found in the women's writings of the time. It is interesting to note that the above passage joins the cause of gender equality with that of those marginalized by the discourse of caste and class. Here, the feminist consciousness expressed by the writer becomes a voice for all those who are marginalized and silenced in society. In order to realize this utopic vision of a world of 'equality', it seems necessary to start with the re-visioning of masculinity and femininity on to a more equal footing, which seems to be the task that many of these writers have taken on themselves.

Thus these articles written in the first half of the Twentieth Century present a variety of arguments and views that interrogate notions of femininity. Their interrogation of gender and gender roles does

not extend beyond the traditional (many of them overlook new and emerging models of patriarchy constituted by modernity, especially within the institutions of marriage and family) and can therefore be seen as limited in vision. As a result, they have often been dismissed as not feminist. However, it can be argued that though they do not fit into our current definitions of feminism, through their attempts to re-define patriarchal boundaries, they are important examples of nascent feminist voices in Malayalam. They express and awareness of patriarchy and its oppressive structures as well a sense of collective. Many writers use the collective pronoun 'we' when addressing issues of oppression and marginalisation. In their belief in being agents of change and demanding it they become important women's voices in the time.

They can be seen as examples of 'pennezhuthu' (a term coined as a native equivalent of the French Feminist term 'écriture féminine'). This term refers to a tradition of women's writing that presents a vision of the world that is woman centric and an expression of their gendered experience. And these articles can be seen as an integral part of the tradition of women writing in Malayalam – an example of 'pennezhuthu'.

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