



Agnisakshi: Communal Taboos, A Study in the Light of Feministic Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Our life is dominated by ludicrous obedience. Without any apparent reason we have been used to following many taboos in community, caste, customs, rituals etc. There is much evidence to support these taboos even in sivapurana. There is a defiance of serene pine flowers for the offerings of God. Just like this flower which is being discarded, some people decide the fate of others. Agnisakshi by Lalithambika Antherjanam has a kernel part of communal taboos that shattered a woman's life. Devaki Manampalli who is the protagonist of the novel comes forward to break such taboos which have the reason of apprehensive silence. Even though she could not lead a family life which she had dreamt of, she reached the pinnacle of a sainthood which is too far from an ordinary woman's life. The novel demands attention to unnecessary taboos through the study of feministic perspective.

Introduction

Lalithambika Antharjanam's *Agnisakshi* strongly exposes the oppressive customs, rigid ritualism, and gender taboos that dominated the Namboodiri Brahmin community in early 20th-century Kerala. Through the experiences of its characters the novel explores how religious and social taboos control one's bodies, choices, and identities. When analyzing it in the light of feminism it is clear that women of that period were suffering much because of the reason that they are women. This paper mainly deals with



how different kinds of taboos triggered human existence and predicaments especially the identity of women.

Firstly, knowing the author's background and intention while creating such a work of art or unique characters like Devaki, Unni, Thangam etc are important matters to be scrutinised. Lalimbika Antharjanam a twentieth century novelist was born at kottarakkara kollam, in the state of Kerala on March 3rd 1909. She was born into a Namboothiri family known as Kottavattath Illam. She received an informal schooling. She recognized and cherished the importance of her having grown up in the community during the early stages of her life. In 1927 she married Ramapurath Amanakara Illath Narayanan Namboothiri. She has seven children. She has got many awards including Kerala Sahithya Award, Kendra Sahithya Award, Odakkuzhal Award etc. Antharjanam died on 6th February 1987. Her important works include Agnisakshi (1976), Athmakathakkoru Amugam, Thenthullikal etc.

Agnisakshi, which Lalithambika Antharjanam described as a history and culture of a Community, and Society. Though it portrayed the life of a woman which is being turned into another way there spreads a silhouette of taboos. The protagonist Devaki Manampalli loves her husband Unni very much. He also admires her. But something that makes them apart. It is nothing but communal restriction that they are going through. Looking into Devaki's life in a feministic perspective she lost everything that she desired most. Taboos are becoming taboos when it lacks apparent reasons to follow. Definitely these negatives make Devaki weak as well as strong. She never keeps aside a boy of lower caste from his right to have food, to have education. This helped him to reach a better position in his life, but Devaki was instead being accused of having acquaintance with an untouchable. All these situations demand a clear analysis. It is essential to have a suspicious look upon many communal taboos which questions the freedom of women. These taboos especially in the perspective of feminism have not yet ceased. Its reasons are not to be sought elsewhere. It may be coming from a warring conflict of women themselves. Because some are ready to come forward and others wish to stay where they are.

In Kerala feminism turned into a new wave during the time of Lalithambika Antharjanam. Because having a large caste system Kerala history draws attention in the view point of

feminism. Jane Austen had long ago pointed out that the "Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove anything" (*Persuasion*, 231). But this novel points out that not only the pen but all the powers that have been in men's hands. In Agnisakshi there is a strong restriction on reading



other than religious books. Women, especially Namboodiri women, were restricted from seeking education or contact with the reformist world.

But Devaki searches for News Papers and magazines to calm down her hunger for knowledge as well as to avert her loneliness within the four walls of that house. Though she has grown up with the care of a brother who is a reformist, she cannot come forward to do any good for the society especially after her marriage. In Devaki's case it is definitely because of the taboos set up by the Namboothiri Community for women. The following words reveal her inner conflict of being a woman who cannot act accordingly.

"Thangam, I think if I were a man. If I were a man I would have emancipated not only my wife, but also all the women. And I would die for the sake of the Nation and of human beings" (pg: 30) (translated by me)

Suffocation of life made Devaki to voice these words to Thangam, sister of Unni. The case of Thangam is not different from that of Devaki. She also faces restrictions. She wants to go for higher studies. For this genuine wish she was beaten by her father. And also Unni, her brother got married when she was fourteen years old. But Thangam has no role to be there in a wedding ceremony. It is not because she does not like to go there, but because her mother is a Nair woman. Namboothirs can get married with Nair women and can have children. But these women cannot enter into the Illam or the house where Namboothiris live. This prohibition obviously limits Nair women's freedom. As it is known that nothing is going to happen if a Nair woman enters into the "Illam". It might be to show male dominance and power.

It is believed that marriage is holy and permanent. A woman's identity solely depends on her husband forever. Devaki's arranged marriage to Unni Namboodiri is supposed to be sacred, yet it is in the clutches of emotional captivity. When she leaves the Illam, she symbolically breaks the ritualistic chain of fire which has been a witness of marriage throughout the novel, as well as the life of Namboothiri women during those days. There the fire becomes a silent witness to her suffering. Through the protagonist's departure, "*Agnisakshi*" questions whether sacred rituals truly justify love, relationships and equality or merely enforce submission and silence.

Here in this novel we can also see a character who takes responsibility to emancipate all the Namboothiri women from the taboos created by their own community. P. K.P Namboothiri who is the brother of Devaki Manampalli, works hard to abandon "marakkuda" for upper class women. It is really sad that upper class women can't come out without having an umbrella made up of palm leaves. And also they



must be accompanied by somebody else while traveling outside. It is one of the systems sustained among the Namboothiri Community. He was being criticized by the old women of the same community who believed that being under the control of all restrictions were their duty or their responsibility. They used to follow everything without any objection. They are compelling the coming generation to follow this. They are not even thinking of lending a hand to their followers to get rid of these taboos. In this novel, the 'marakkuda' is not merely an umbrella but a symbol of purity, caste identity and seclusion. It is a token of the orthodox Namboothiri women's confinement within the patriarchal system. The umbrella is used to protect her from the look of outsiders, especially lower castes and men, ensuring the ideas of ritual purity and untouchability. The 'marakkuda' is thus a metaphorical cover which hides the woman's body, voice, identity and individuality under the dominance of a strong communal code.

Through one of the characters Lalithambika Antharjanam mentions the communal punishment for a person who protests against the present system of that time. If a person happened to go to prison then he would be cast away from the community itself. It is what P. K. P. Namboothiri faced during his struggle. All the characters and events of this novel must not be real. The novelist herself admits that all the events of the novel are completely not from the real happenings or from her personal life, but from her imagination too. Still it points finger to the society that carries communal taboos along with it.

While analysing the relationship between Namboothiri s and other communities, it is clear that there is a deep-seated communal taboo that prohibits any form of interaction between members of the Namboothiri Brahmin community and people belonging to other religions or castes. It is not merely a social restriction but a spiritual one, rooted in a set of beliefs of ritual purity. To them it is a matter of spiritual pollution or *asuddhi*.

The novelist portrays Devaki's life within the illam to show how these taboos rule the daily existence of women. Devaki's world is very much confined to the religious walls that prevent her from facing the outside world. Here the reader's critical mind thinks these predicaments in the light of feminism. Feminism finds its place everywhere in society. But everywhere it is being questioned. Taboos are overwhelming in society without being questioned. Even though the study is an analysis of the communal taboos in the novel Agnisakshi, in the light of a feminist perspective, it brings a question of present day society. It can dominate the horrid fact of the restrictions by breaking it with transparent recognition. It is good to stick with what is right, and to refuse what is wrong. Feminism aims at equality between men and women. But equality with all its implications at various levels of society is a major



issue. So it is better to walk away from communal taboos to solve at least a part of inequality. Our power of awareness is our trump card.

From a feminist viewpoint, these taboos act as a system of bodily control. Patriarchy controls what a woman should know, where she should go, and whom she should touch or love. Devaki's life in the confinement within the illam to her intellectual independence represents a symbolic rupture with the patriarchal society.

Thus, *Agnisakshi* goes beyond the limits of social realism to become a profound feminist critique of the communal hierarchy. Antharjanam envisions a moral world rooted not in ritualistic or caste based separation but in equality, empathy and spiritual freedom. Her novel asserts that purity is not born from enforcement of taboos but from the power to challenge them. In deconstructing the sacred authority of communal taboos, *Agnisakshi* stands as both a narrative of resistance and a platform for women's liberation within the structures of faith and tradition.

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