

Who Decides the Expiry Date for a Woman's Dream? A Journey into Lalithambika Antharjanam's Fire, My Witness

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Introduction

"Be woman, stay woman, become woman" is an age old chorus which explains 'femininity'. 'Femininity' is a social construct. As Simone de Beauvoir puts it, "one is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (330). From birth a girl is under constraint, constraints of what to do and what not to do. As Maya Angelo rightly states woman is a "caged bird" who just sings because her "wings are clipped and her feet are tied" (12- 13). There are a number of women writers who voices the plight of women through their pen. Lalithambika Antharjanam is one among those women who is a courageous spokesperson for the oppressed women in Namboodiri community.

The Namboodiris were powerful feudal aristocrats famed for their stern adherence to tradition. "In her award-winning novel *Agnisakshi (Fire, My Witness, 1976)*, set in the early twentieth century, Lalithambika Antharjanam gives us a glimpse of this Namboodiri world as she tells the story of two women who rebel in different ways against the soul-destroying restrictions of the life laid down by their tradition" (Tharu, 487-488). Most of the women in the community are denied of higher education and hence left with no awareness of their rights. Tethikutti, who was grownup under her revolutionary freedom fighter brother, is but an exception. The novel revolves around her life. She reads, so she thinks and fights for her rights. Through her life story and the story of the characters around her Antharjanam proves that nobody can decide the expiry date of a woman's dream.

Traditional Constraint and Dissent

"From her initial family upbringing throughout her subsequent development, the social role assigned to the woman is that of serving an image, authoritative and central, of man: a woman is first and foremost a daughter/ a mother/ a wife" (118) says one of famous feminist critics Shoshana Felman in her essay "Women and Madness: the Critical Phallacy". This is the role the patriarchal society assigns to women. If anybody dares to protest against it they are silenced in the name of the so called traditions of religion and caste. "It is clear that for a woman to be healthy she must adjust to and accept the behavioural norms for her sex even though these kinds of behaviour are generally regarded as less socially desirable" (Felman, 117).

Without breaking the social prejudices and the pre-defined feminine characteristics such as sweetness, modesty, humility, etc. women can never lead

their lives according to their dream. *Agnisakshi* presents the mental trauma of women under traditional constraint through the words of Tethikutti. She laments, “My husband does not seem to know how to love anyone. He is afraid of everyone and everything- of Father, of Mother, of custom- why, he’s even afraid of God. Brother was right, if I live too long in this house, I might also lose my senses out of fear” (60). But as an *Antharjanam*, which means ‘people who live inside’, she is not expected to raise her voice in such a way. In and around her she comes across nothing but tradition and victims of this tradition. Out of her frustration she asks in a letter to her brother Oppa, “Why did you marry me off to a *Deva* after teaching me the stories of men?” (67) This is a heart breaking lament of a woman who struggles with nobody to speak or nothing to read and leads a rather dead life.

Women in Namboodiri *Illams* are bound by so many restrictions of tradition. The entire Namboodiri life was patterned to ensure the virginity of the Antharjanam. Their travel was limited to the temples or to the house of their immediate relatives, but that too had to be accompanied by a maidservant. The girl children moreover were made to feel that they occupied only second place at home and in society, and the rites and rituals were patterned after this belief to instil this feeling. The Antharjanam also had separate places for worship, and their rituals had restrictions placed on them: women were not allowed to chant, for instance, and to do other ritual performances like those of males. In addition, from her teenage, a Namboodiri girl was not allowed to leave the *Illam*; she was not allowed to visit even close relatives. She was neither allowed to see men nor allowed to be seen by them. The morning ritual bath, chanting and work in the kitchen was the only activities of the Antharjanam that were allowed. The women were an absolutely neglected group in the Namboodiri community; the men treated them as creatures whose limited needs were believed to be only dressing, bathing and sleeping. Tethikutti, a prey to such practices, was even denied of the permission to see her dying mother because of her brother’s revolutionary ideas against tradition.

Other women characters like Thankam, Cheriamma etc. are also victims of tradition. While Thankam breaks away from the bonds of tradition and practices through education and writings, Cheriamma succumbs to it and die as a mad woman. Therefore traditional constraint plays an important role in thwarting women’s emancipation.

The dissenting women are a Characteristic of the novel *Agnisakshi*. Panchali Mukherjee in one of her essays on Lalithambika states that, “According to the gender stereotypes, women are viewed as objects of pleasure or the property of men thereby leading to the dehumanization of their identities” (89). Women lose all their treasured dreams under the clutches of patriarchy. Under the strain of life starts her dehumanization. Devoid of her identity and dignity she starts to become rebellious.

The rebellion of Tethikutti and Thankam are a result of traditional constraint in Namboodiri Families. Tethikutti is the first to begin her protest against the blind rules and regulations. This is very clear from her conversations with Thankam. Her first meeting with Thankam indicates her inhibition towards reading and high convictions about life that she got from her brother. She states about her husband's over interest in divine matters, "one who is not good for worldly life will not be good for even heaven" (42). In her in-law's she finds nothing but criticism and accusations about her and her family. Because of her brother's status as a freedom fighter, her family members are considered as outcasts. She is even denied of the opportunity to go to her home to visit her mother on her death bed as they are outcasts. Here nobody, not even her husband, is there to defend her cause. So she courageously states that "if they are outcasts, I am too" (77) and walks out of her constraints. Here she has to sacrifice a lot to get her freedom and achieve her dreams. She loses her security, husband, good name etc. just to live her identity.

Thankam, the second to rebel is successful to some level in her attempt. She fights for her right to make her higher studies. She being the daughter of a low caste woman in a Namboodiri family is not even allowed to touch her father because of the strict rules of untouchability. Whenever she goes into the *Illam* she is being cursed as the low caste wife and daughter of a Namboodiri is expected to live separately. When she informs her wish to study further she is being silenced by sharp words. But she can't be just stopped by them. So she rebels until her wish gets fulfilled. This opens a door to her freedom and future dreams.

New Face of the Old Coin

Anyone in the modern world may take these arguments as out-dated as Namboodiri women are no more under such constraints. But the old coin comes with its varying facets. The value system in the modern world is a best example of it. Virginia Woolf writes about this discriminating value system in her work *A Room of One's Own*. She states that:

It is obvious that the values of women differ very often from the values which have been made by the other sex; naturally this is so. Yet it is the masculine values that prevail. Speaking crudely, football and sport are 'important'; the worship of fashion, the buying of clothes 'trivial'. And these values are inevitably transferred from life to fiction. This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing room. A scene in a battlefield is more important than a scene in a shop- everywhere and much more subtly the difference of value persists. (Woolf, 41)

Thus modern women are also not free from different types of disparities. The values and morals of the society assign certain positions and qualities which are fit to a 'good woman'. If anyone breaks those rules and expectations they are

being criticized everywhere. Even the most modern society doesn't prefer women crossing certain limits. This shows that basically there is no change in the patriarchal mentality of the society.

Conclusion

The old binary system which undermines women should be rooted out from its very base. The title, which is taken from a recent movie, "Who Decides the Expiry Date for a Women's Dream?" indicates the emerging power of women. Nobody can keep her caged and prevent her from flapping her wings to the heights. Like men she has every right to dream about the heights of sky and the unending horizons. To reach that end, the society should frame an image of a woman who is commanding and powerful enough to rule a nation. Society should erase its mental biases of exclaiming at an emerging woman as if she is a great wonder. This mentality comes from a familiar feminine image, 'Either women is passive or she does not exist'. A state which respects women and provides her equal rights will progress to greater heights as women are the life giving source of a society. So any type of inequality that is prevalent against women should be ceased.

Reference

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