

Representation of Nambudiri Women in the Novel

‘Agnisakshi.’ : A Reading

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Abstract

Agnisakshi is the novel written by the famous Malayalam novelist Lalitambika Antardhan. This paper is an attempt to analyze the construction of Nambudiri women in early twentieth century Kerala as reflected in Lalithambika Antardhan's novel Agnisakshi. Nambudiris, the upholders of Varnaadharma were the most privileged section in Kerala society. There was a strong patriarchal community. Women have always occupied a subordinate position among them and they were regarded as the gateways or the points of entrance in to the caste system. They were expected to be wives, mothers and to lead a quite private life within the four walls of Illam (Nambudiri House). They were called Antardhan meaning people living inside and were rarely permitted to go outside that too with a cadjan umbrella and a maid servant. A reappraisal of women's position was attempted in the early half of 20th century by the reformist activities of Yogakshemasabha. Nambudiri women's transits from private to public space was reflected in the novel Agnisakshi. My argument in this paper is that the novel 'Agnisakshi' reflects both the traditional values of Nambudiri community and colonial modernity.

One of the key consequences that the social reforms brought about in Kerala was the change that happened in the lives of the *Antharjanams*. Before that, the life of a woman in a Nambudiri family was miserable. It is the family structure of Nambudiri families that adversely affected women's lives. As per this structure, only the eldest son in the family was allowed to marry from the community. The rule was that the younger male members had to have a loose association called *sambandham* with women of other castes living in the matrilineal tradition. As per this custom, the eldest son used to marry three or four times from the same community. Moreover, he was allowed to have several "*sambandhams*" with women from other castes as well. The *Antharjanams* who were wives of these eldest sons seldom enjoyed conjugal pleasures. They merely existed as devices to perpetuate the family. They had no right to education nor the right to property. However, as the "purity" of a woman was regarded as the purity of caste, she had to face many restrictions. She had the permission to step out of the home only on rare occasions: that too, holding the *marakkuda* a cadjan umbrella and with the body fully covered in *chela* (shawl). It was mandatory for her to be accompanied by *dasis* (maid).

She didn't have the freedom to see any other man except her own immediate family members. If her character was defiled in some way, she had to go through the harrowing procedure known as *Smarthavicharam* and if found guilty she was excommunicated. Even while social reforms were happening in the beginning of the 20th century, Nambudiri women were leading this kind of a life. In 1905 while other communities were undergoing changes, a woman in the Nambudiri community was subjected to *Smarthavicharam*.

The changes brought about in Kerala by colonial modernity took a long time to influence the Nambudiri community. The spread of English education, the advent of western ideas, the propaganda of the print media, the work of missionaries etc. brought about a lot of changes in Kerala society towards the end of the 19th century. It was when the foundation of the feudal society that consisted of Nambudiri and temples began to shake that the Nambudiri started the social organisation called the Yogakshema Sabha as well as social reform movements. This was started by the elite and the wealthy Nambudiris. The initial objective of Yogakshema Sabha was to bring the Nambudiri to modernity without causing any damage to their Vedic supremacy and land ownership. Women or family structure were never subjects of discussion here.

However, by the 1920, youth wing of the Yogakshema Sabha took shape and they formed the Yuvajana Sangham. Under the leadership of V.T. Bhattathirippad, the social reformer, the marriage customs, family stricture, rights of women etc. became subjects of discussion. If family structure was to change, it was mandatory for the woman within the structure to change. Hence the clamour arose for education for women. There were demands for changes in women's dress habits. The most important were marriage reforms. Demands arose to the effect that all Nambudiri should marry within the community. There were discussions and staging of plays on women's plight. As a result of all this, Nambudiri women began to come out of their houses. They threw away the Cadjan umbrella and shawl. The associations known as *Antarjana Samajams* were formed. Then also they had to face many oppositions from within and outside their homes. Many *Antharjanams* who came into the public sphere participated in national movements and leftist movements. In the early part of twentieth century there were Nambudiris who were transformed by modernity, Nambudiri who threw away the Sacred thread, the Nambudiris who still followed traditional customs, and *Antharjanams* who abandoned cadjan umbrella and *Antarjanams* who were relegated to their homes. This is the context of the novel, 'Agnisakshi.'

'Agnisakshi' is largely a term related to marriage. Brahmin weddings used to take place with fire as witness. Not only marriages, but all sacred rituals used to be performed by Nambudiri with fire as witness. Fire(agni) is an important part of their lives, and their rituals. Among Nambudiri, and other Brahmins as well, marriage is the most sacred ritual. It is through marriage that the perpetuation of the community, and the caste is maintained. Marriage was not just a ritual among Nambudiri, but also a practice of controlling women, and denying them of their rights. This novel depicts how women were affected by the marriage customs of Nambudiri, and the practice of *sambandham*, and also how at the time of social reformation, the tensions caused by the conflict between tradition and modernity affected women's lives.

The novel begins with Thankam, the Nair girl going in search of her father's brother's wife. Thankam is a daughter begot by a Nambudiri through a nair *sambandham*. She is a daughter dear to both her father and mother. Lalithambika Antharjanam reveals the hardships caused by Nair *Sambandhams* through Thankam. Thankam is not allowed to touch her father or receive his petting because he is a Brahmin. Thankam is a Nair girl.

Here we can see the mental conflicts experienced by Nair girls born of *Sambandham*. At the same time she acquires modern education. In those times, modernity and English education were acceptable in the Nair community. Thankam is a girl who wishes to get educated and earn her living, and is thus a representative of change.

Unni Nambudiri who is her father's brother is someone Thankam loves and respects as her own brother. Unni is a symbol of tradition. His life consists of *shaanti* (priesthood in the temples) as well as rites and rituals. Thethi, his wife is someone who has been born and brought up in a household where modernity and education had already made their entry. Her brothers were activists in the Yogakshema Sabha. Thethi who loves reading and writing enters her husband's house which is a centre of tradition, as a bride. Although Unni Nambudiri and Thethi love and respect each other, conflicts between tradition and modernity affect their lives as well. Unni Nambudiri who respects rituals remarks thus:

"Marriage is for the perpetuation of dharma".

These words remind one of *Manusmriti* and *Sankarasmriti*. There is no importance for conjugal relationship dynamics that colonial modernity had brought about, in their life. However, Thethi desires a new life.

The emptiness caused by absence of the books affects Thethi to a great extent. She often wishes aloud that she got something to read. The novel is written in times when reading and books had influenced at least a few people.

The novelist mentions the sad plight of women in many places. Thethi once remarks that a volcano is fuming in everyone's minds. Thethi had the spirit that stood up for not just *Antharjanams*, but all women in the world. Though her heart was full of love for her husband, Thethi abandons the house and gets out as she couldn't stand the ritual-bound life of Unni Nambudiri. She first participates in the nationalist movement, and eventually retreats to a *sannyasi's* life after quitting the public life.

There are several characters in this novel who depict the life of Nambudiri women. For instance, there is the story of a mad aunt in this. The mad aunt wasn't mad when she came as a bride after marriage to the *illam*. She was a fair, beautiful young woman of eighteen. However, the Nambudiri whom she married had another *sambandham*, and children out of

those relationships. He used to come to the *illam* (Nambudiri House) for lunch, while he slept with the women of the *sambandhams* every night. She eventually turned mad. When the story was narrated to Thethi, she said, “I would also turn mad if we go on like this”.

Lalithambika Antharjanam presents Thethi’s brother thus: “ A good writer, forceful orator, fearless social reformer.” He who spoke vehemently against *Antharjanams* having to carry cadjan umbrella was considered vile by traditionalists. In a letter she wrote to him, Thethi says, “ I’m trying to put up with all this. I take bath very early in the morning, perform the offerings, do all the work in the kitchen. But my heart is writhing in pain: a life equal to death, with nothing to read, and no one to talk to.”Thethi says, her husband is a god, not a human. She asks why she was taught the story of humans, and married to a god. Their married lives were meant for ‘dharma’. Unni Nambudiri who respects tradition remarks thus:

“*. Marriage is not for lust, but sacrifice. Life is a yajna(offering), an agnihotram (oblation to fire).*”

Thethi who came from an *illam* where social reforms were the norm, desired a married life that welcomed changes. Unni Nambudiri used to come to the bedroom only on rare occasions. His mother used to believe in rituals. When she couldn’t take it any more, Thethi said,

“*If I were a man, I would liberate not just my wife, but all women.*”

To someone born in a Brahmin community, life is a *yajna*. They have to live a life according to the rituals, instead of their own comfort.

The contrast between tradition and modernity which made the Nambudiri community conflict -ridden in the beginning of the 20th century can be felt through the length and breadth of the novel. The protagonist Thethi is a symbol of resistance against Brahmin patriarchy and its customs. However, at the end of the novel, the novelist consolidates the purity of the culture of marriage. Thethi who enters *Sanyasam* seeking redemption after her service to the society, tells about her *thali* (Sacred thread signifying the married status of a woman) thus: “This was my protection, my solace, and my armour. When I wore this tightly around my neck, I felt I was

“*sanadha*.”(one with a husband). These lines show that the identity of a woman is in marriage. Not only that, the novel also says that motherhood is of paramount importance in a woman’s life. Reaching the shores of motherhood was believed to be an indispensable desire in a woman’s life.

At the end of the novel, she dedicates her *thaali* to the hearth (*agnikundam*.) She picks up the hot glowing gold from the fire, cools it in water and tells :

“*This is pure gold. You shouldn’t adulterate it. You are free to melt it and make anything out of it that is trendy in your generation. Be careful about one thing: don’t let it be tarnished in any manner.*”

Though colonial modernity and the social reforms that ensued brought changes to marriage customs that reflected in this novel, it also represents the *dharmasastric* notions such as the purity of the marriage ritual, the paramount identity of a woman as a wife and motherhood.

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