

Lalithambika Antherjanam's Writings on Widowhood: A Critique or Affirmation of Reformist Agendas

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Abstract

The writers, who document Malayalam literature, especially women writing in Malayalam literature, cannot stop with stating that Lalithambika Antherjanam is a woman writer. Many writers find her place in the arena of Malayalam literature worthy to mention. Devika writes, "Antherjanam's writing is important as noteworthy instances of re-imagining gender and the very process of the en-gendering of Individuals, marking a time in which a complex and qualified receptiveness to modern ideals of gender became possible."(3) However, I would argue that though Antherjanam deals with modern ideals of gender and individuality, she always articulated such issues from within the framework of the Nambutiri reform movement. In this sense rather than giving a radical purpose to her work we can actually consider them as part of reformist writings. I have tried to articulate that Antherjanam's writings are actually criticizing modern ideals of gender and individuality which stands contrary to reformist's agenda. Devika argues that Antherjanam's writings are different from reformist propaganda but it seems to me that it was not so. In a way, she articulates the same. Though Antherjanam criticizes reformists she does not subvert the weakness of the reformists' agenda.

Keywords: Antherjanam, Reform, Nambudiri women, Widowhood

The writers, who document Malayalam literature, especially women writing in Malayalam literature, cannot stop with stating that Lalithambika Antherjanam is a woman writer. Many writers find her place in the arena of Malayalam literature worthy to mention. One such writer is Parameshwaran Nair who comments that Lalithambika Antherjanam marks a transitional place in the evolution of the short story (139). Some writers have acknowledged Antherjanam as a writer who described the miserable life of Nambutiri women. K.M George mentions Lalithambika Antherjanam as a writer who described the disabilities of the Nambutiri women who are forced to lead secluded lives. (234) M Leelavathi acknowledges Antherjanam as the writer of crucified lives (639). More importantly, writers like M. Leelavathi and Meena Alexander considered Antherjanam a feminist. According to Leelavathi, Antherjanam is a person who could consider freedom in terms of submissiveness to loved ones. She identifies Antherjanam as a feminist who is different from those feminists who deny motherhood (643). She also points out that the radical

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Antherjanam, who wrote the story of Deerendhu Majumdar's mother (a Bangladesh woman) and Joythi (a Punjabi woman), was actually not only bothered about the freedom of one community but also the freedom of humanity itself.

Meena Alexander's study brings out Antherjanam as a feminist whose concept of motherhood does not fit into the traditionally acceptable definition of femininity (370). But, on a close reading of Antherjanam's work, we can see that her concept of motherhood actually fit only in the traditional concept of femininity. According to Lekhanarendran, Lalithambika Antherjanam was bothered about women's freedom and their status in society and family. She emphasizes that Antherjanam was always concerned about women's oppression and sufferings and she succeeded in bringing them out of their oppressive situation. Lakhanarendran considers women as homogeneous entities and says upper-caste women were the most oppressed section in the society and thus Antherjanam's writings are more important (75-76). There is no mention of the lower-caste women's situation about which all histories are silent. We cannot avoid the fact that Antherjanam was a representative of the Nambutiri community which was one of the most oppressive communities.

J. Devika in her article "Unnamable Discontent': Gender and Individualization in the Writings of Lalithambika Antarjanam" has placed Lalithambika Antherjanam within the history of imagining gender and individual in modern Keralam. She points out that all the discussions during this period were centered on re-forming women into an idealized womanly subjectivity. Devika discusses gender and individualization in Antherjanam's writings and points out that we can find a complex engagement with modern ideals of gender and individuality in her work. Devika writes, "Antarjanam's writing is important as noteworthy instances of re-imagining gender and the very process of the en-gendering of Individuals, marking a time in which a complex and qualified receptiveness to modern ideals of gender became possible." (3)

However, I would argue that though Antherjanam deals with modern ideals of gender and individuality, she always articulated such issues from within the framework of the Nambutiri reform movement. In this sense rather than giving a radical purpose to her work we can actually consider them as part of reformist writings. I have tried to articulate that Antherjanam's writings are actually criticizing modern ideals of gender and individuality which stands contrary to reformist's agenda. Devika argues that Antherjanam's writings are different from reformist propaganda but it seems to me that it was not so. In a way, she articulates the same. Though Antherjanam criticizes reformists she does not subvert the weakness of the reformists' agenda.

Widowhood was a serious issue for Nambutiri women during the period in which Antherjanam was writing. She wrote the play *Savithri Adhava Vidhavavivaham* (Savitri or Widow Marriage) and three stories, "Yathrasanam" (End of the Journey), "Jeevithavum Maranavum" (Life and Death) and "Kuttasammatham" (Admission of Guilt) all of which were based on widowhood. That widows appear in most of Antherjanam's writings indicate the preoccupation she had with the condition of widows in Nambutiri community

Antherjanam's play *Savithri Adhava Vidhavavivaham* (Savitri or Widow Marriage) becomes more important because it becomes the first play written by a Nambutiri woman on the

theme of widow-remarriage at a time when the Nambutiri community could not even imagine such a thing. She was the first woman writer to take up this revolutionary theme in Malayalam literature. In this play, a young widow named Savitri gets married to a social reformer who was her childhood friend. It is evident that she had much foresight and also deep concern about the progress of women.

However, though Antherjanam dealt with the issues of widowhood in a liberal many a times she also moved away from such a position into a more traditional perspective. Antherjanam's story "Kuttasammatham" (Admission of Guilt, 1940) shows her limitation in dealing with such issues. The context of the story is the *smarthavicharam*² of a widow. The reason for the trial was that the widow was pregnant. She gets married at the age of 11 and widowed at the age of 14. During the trial, the widow admits her guilt but she does not utter her partner's name. Dealing with such issues seems to be quite rebellious but at a close reading, it seems that while supporting widow-remarriage, Antherjanam does not support women having any sexual relationship with men without the consent of society. The story is a kind of warning to the society that if a young widow does not get married again, there is a chance that she will become a "fallen" woman. Antherjanam's resistance here is against patriarchy which does not let women to re-marry. However, the same rebellious spirit does not go as far as imagining a sexually liberated woman.

This becomes clearer in the stories "Jeevithavum Maranavum" (Life and Death, 1946) and in "Yathrasanam" (End of the Journey, 1966). In the former, Antherjanam tells the story of a widow, Tathri who acts as a widow in a play and later become one in her real life. Her husband was a social reformer who has written a play on widow marriage in which she acted. In spite of this, he does not want his wife to get married after his death. Through this story Antherjanam criticizes reformists who actually demand for widow-remarriage but would not let that happen in their lives.

The second story "Yathrasanam" (End of the Journey) is the story of a widow, Sreedevi who gets remarried and it shows how society responds to her and her partner. In short, Antherjanam is suggesting a "happy married life" for a widow that was only an imagined "luck" for Nambutiri women.

Lalithambika Antherjanam is considered to be a reformist. She realized the limitations of her community especially of a woman after she reached puberty. She got married when social reform movements spread like wildfire in the background of freedom struggle. It was the time when writers like V. T. Bhattathirippad and M. R. Bhattathirippad used art as a powerful weapon for social reform. As already mentioned, with the support of her husband, Lalithambika Antherjanam wrote and worked for the "progress" of Nambutiri community. Whatever the form of art, she considered art a healthy mode for the revival of social life. By removing *gosha* and by giving speeches in meetings, she became part of the Nambutiri reform movement. She wrote about

² This ritual was practiced only in the Nambutiri community under a feudal patriarchal system. If a Nambutiri woman was suspected of having a sexual relationship with any other man other than her husband, she and her partner were punished.

reforms in magazines like *Yogaskhemam*, *Navajeevan*, *Keralakaumudi*, *Srimathi* (Women's magazine). But, later she herself comments that she became a social reformer by misfortune³.

Anyhow, in the literary movement which began as a part of Nambutiri reform movement, Lalithambika Antherjanam deserves the same position which writers like V. T and M. R. B. have occupied. Lalithambika Antherjanam wrote her first play *Punarjanmam* (Rebirth) which was staged thrice at the time when V. T's and M. R. B's revolutionary plays *Adukkalayiil Ninnu Arangathekku* (From Kitchen to the Stage) and *Marakkutakkullile Mahanarakam* were written. The theme of her drama was widow remarriage which in reality had not happened until then. Quite interestingly, M. R. B got married to a widow at the time of the drama rehearsal. However, it did not get much attention.

It is evident that even though she wrote about the subordinate position of women in society, she did little to free them from those constraints. She herself was not free from these. A recent study by J. Devika about Nambutiri reform movement articulates that Nambutiri reform movement liberated Antherjanams by consecrating them at the center of the nuclear household with its own power and responsibility. Lalithambika was not an exception. Lalithambika Antherjanam tried to co-ordinate family life and literary life. Her involvement in family affairs disrupted her health. She grieved over the fact that she could not give more time to literature.

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³ This is a statement from her autobiography. The reason is not explained by her. See Lalithambika Antherjanam's *Athmakathacku Oramukham*