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FREE THY LAND, FREE THYSELF: HOW THE PERSONAL BECOMES THE POLITICAL IN *FIRE, MY WITNESS* BY LALITHAMBIKA ANTHARJANAM

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Abstract

A nation's independence and the living conditions of its citizens are inextricably forged together. Sometimes the larger context of the land's freedom presupposes the lived reality of its minorities, mostly overlooking their tribulations and struggles. Women in India, being doubly marginalised in the pre-independent era, had a moving story to narrate. It is in this context that the narratives of the Kendra Sahitya Academy and Kerala Sahitya Academy Award winning Malayalam writer Lalithambika Antharjanam gain immense significance. Through the narratives of her heroines like Thethikutty in her 1976 novel *Agnisakshi/ Fire, My Witness* the political landscape of the country merges with the woman's experiential landscape making it near impossible to extricate one from the other. For instance, in *Agnisakshi*, Devaki Manampalli's search for personal freedom finds expression in the national independence movement where she transforms into a new woman named Devi Behan. It is through the medium of the land's freedom that the women discern the right to personal freedom and two paths merge towards a single goal. The article attempts to trace how these two trajectories coalesce and how the marginalised upper caste Nampoothiri women visualised their liberation as a guaranteed offshoot of the land's independence.

Keywords

Nationalism, Indian Feminism, *Agnisakshi*, Brahmin, Patriarchy, Emancipation.

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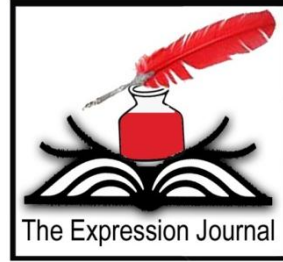
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Kerala is a small state in the South Western coast of India. The state lies isolated from the rest of the subcontinent owing to the massive Western Ghats range geographically and to the linguistic and cultural uniqueness of its people in spirit. India gained independence from the British in 1947 and eventually, the state of Kerala was constituted on November 1, 1956 on the basis of the language spoken in the region. Malayalam, the mother tongue of over thirty five million Keralites, is believed to have emerged as a well-defined language during the Kulashekara dynasty from 8th to 11th centuries. Malayalam belongs to the Dravidian family of languages and has welcomed influences from several other languages like Tamil, Sanskrit, Arabic, French, Portuguese and English (Paniker 11). As in the case of most other literatures, folk songs and ballads seem to be the earliest contribution to Malayalam literature, transmitted orally from one generation to the next. From those songs which were associated to primitive rituals and customs of the Dravidian and Pre-Aryan times, Malayalam literature has come a long way.

The rise of the novel in England in the 19th century saw a parallel mushrooming of the genre in Malayalam literature as well. In Paniker's words,

It would perhaps be more correct to say that both internal and external socio-educational conditions and external influence combined to produce and popularize this new genre. It was perhaps not wholly transplanted as a finished product into Malayalam; the existence of the printing press, the growth of a literate reading public, the development of the habit of buying books, the increasing requirements of educational institutions and libraries, the rise in the status of women and the gradual penetration of democratic ideas and liberalism into the social fabric; these were

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essential factors which by their conjunction could favour the growth of the novel in Malayalam (59).

The end of the 19th century witnessed a great renaissance in Malayalam literature with great spokesmen like O. Chandu Menon and C V Raman Pillai leading the way. Both of them benefitted from English education and wrote with a vision to expose Malayalam readers to contemporary social reality as well as history through fiction. It is also be noted that it had been the authors of *Kundalatha* (1887) and *Indulekha* (1889) – the first two novels in Malayalam – Appu Nedungadi and O. Chandu Menon respectively, who conceptualized women as potential readers and gave propaganda to women’s education through SPEW (Society for Promotion of Education for Women). In other words, the culture of the land was radically influenced by the intelligentsia and their outlook.

An offshoot of Western education in India was a renewed look at one’s own culture and religion by the Indians. Spiritual leaders like Chattambi Swamikal and Sree Narayana Guru called for a religious reawakening and a new moral idealism was in place in tandem with the preaching of Mahatma Gandhi. This also gave rise to an increased political awareness with a newfound desire for freedom from British domination. Literature, education and the spirit of emancipation worked hand in hand at a time when the land was politically, culturally and morally colonized by the British.

The last decades of the 19th century also saw the emergence of the western short story. Story telling techniques of the English writers influenced Malayali fiction writers like Vengayil Kunjiraman Nayanar, Ambadi Narayana Poduval and Murkot Kumaran who developed a new mode of narrative expression. The best talents in the field were bolstered by institutions like the Sahitya Parishad established in 1927 and Progressive Literature Association in 1944. Karur Neelakanta Pillai, Keshava Dev, Ponkunnam Varkey, Vaikom Muhammed Basheer, S K Pottekkat, and Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai received critical and popular acclaim which have placed them permanently in the luminous firmament of Malayalam literature. Two women writers who employed the canvas of the short story for expressing pressing issues in the society in the early part of the twentieth century were Lalithambika Antharjanam and K Saraswathy Amma.

Women writers in Malayalam in the early part of the 20th century were mostly educated, progressive, upper caste women whose revolutionary ideas were propagated through several periodicals in circulation in pre-independent India. Most of these periodicals took up the responsibility of defining womanhood, enlisting their roles, duties and rights and promoting the need for liberty through education. In her article on the early Malayalam periodicals for women, Teena Antony uncovers a world that is “vivacious, fascinating and fraught with tensions.” In her view, periodicals like *Sarada*(1904), *Laskhmibai*(1905), *Sumangala*(1916), *Mahila* (1921), *Sthree* (1931) and a dozen others not only reflected the sociopolitical contexts of the times, but also helped in shaping women’s history in Kerala. She writes,

Within the women’s periodicals published before the Indian Independence, there is a general shift in ideology that one can perceive towards the 1920s. Until the 1920s most of the articles were on the need for women’s education, training women in appropriate forms of domesticity, their duties, possible role models for women to emulate and so on. From the 1920s onwards the articles take on social and political issues – child marriage, Home Rule, contraception, dowry, marriage bills, suicides, educational curriculum, nationalism, Gandhian ideology and so on. Women’s education, *sthreedharmam* (women’s duties), *sthreeswathandryam* (women’s freedom), and modernity are the

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main concepts that are found repeatedly in a majority of the articles. Periodicals published from the late 1920s, like *Shrimati* and *Vanithakusumam* were more assertive and radical in the positions they espoused as opposed to an earlier *Sharada* and *Lakshmibai*.

Lalithambika Antharjanam and K Saraswathy Amma are pioneering women fiction writers in Malayalam, in post independent India, whose creativity and ideology make their works relevant even today. While the former dealt with the domestic hardships and injustice in Brahmin families, the latter boldly explored man-woman relationships and patriarchal atrocities among different social classes. Even though hundreds of women penned their fervent thoughts on women's lives in the periodicals of those days, the names of only these two fiction writers stood the test of time. It is through their creative lens that posterity came to view the twentieth century woman in societies in Kerala. These authors wrote at a time when Malayalam literature was construed as a harmonious blend of aesthetic pleasure and moral uplift, by the liberal humanists who opposed classicist poetics. Literature was expected to represent what was good and righteous in the society. Alongside, there were groups of communists, anti-caste reformers, and progressive thinkers also forming what J Devika terms as 'homoaesthetic circles' which were totally devoid of any woman representative (Introduction to *On the Far Side of Memory: Short Stories of Lalithambika Antharjanam*). These groups of male reformers, writers, critics, and thinkers resembled the patriarchal kinship system that kept women out of their intellectual engagements. It was also the time when radical Brahmin revolutionaries like V T Bhattathiripad (who scripted the play *Adukkalayil Ninnu Arangathekku- From the Kitchen to the Forefront*) and M R Bhattathiripad (who wrote the play *Marakkudakkullile Maha Narakam- The Hell within the Cadjan Umbrella*) tried to speak against orthodoxy and inhuman atrocities that were happening in Nampoothiri households. Arya Pallam, Parvathi Nenmanimangalam and Devaki Narikattari were Nampoothiri women who joined in bringing to light the oppression of women in upper caste families in Kerala. They also fought for keeping up their dignity by covering their bodies and cladding the sari. At a time when India was surging forward towards independence, Nampoothiri women were brigading for basic human rights.

Lalithambika Antharjanam, the first woman who won acclaim as a writer of modern fiction in Kerala, was born in an aristocratic and affluent Nampoothiri (Malayala Brahmin) family in Kollam district in the princely state of Travancore in 1909. She did not receive formal education but was fortunate enough to be get private tuitions at home and also to catch glimpses of the contemporary social scenario through her relatives' narrations. Her interaction with her brothers was interspersed with discourses on nationalism, literature, arts and religion. She was one of the first Nampoothiri girls to wear a skirt and blouse and enter the reading room of their house and read voraciously. Yet, she grew indignant at the suppression faced by Nampoothiri women around her and wished to do her best to break the chains of anti-woman conventions and customs. She also desired to join the national freedom movement but was married off at a very young age which confined her to the mundane world of domestic chores and boredom. Her attempt at breaking the limiting conventions of domesticity began when she started writing short stories at night, after a hard day's labour, when the rest of the family slept. She is said to have found solace in rocking the cradle with one hand and writing stories with the other. Her eyes, that were already sore with continuous exposure to smoke and fire in the dark kitchen space, turned painful and when the doctors advised her against writing at night, she is believed to have continued writing with her eyes closed.

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Antharjanam's first collection of short stories was published in the 1930s and by then she was accepted as a Nampoothiri community reformer. Her stories delineated the suffocating rituals and stigmatic ordeals faced by the Nampoothiri women. Nampoothiri men enjoyed a very powerful role and demanded extreme subservience and silence from the womenfolk. The young girls were married off to aged men, confined to the dark corners of the kitchen, denied basic education and the fascinating world of books, and ostracized when they turned widows. The Nampoothiri women had no rights or privileges even though their counterparts, the Nampoothiri men were the most influential and dominant persons in the society. "Antharjanam's stories are marked by her innate sympathy for people in distress," writes Paniker (88). Her compassion towards the sufferers of pernicious patriarchal and patrilineal customs finds representation in hundreds of short stories written between 1930s and 1970s. Her stories *Kuttasammatham (Confessions of Guilt)* and *Prathikaara Devatha (Goddess of Revenge)* expose the heinous victimization of women whose husbands develop a nasty, baseless suspicion on their morality and arrange a communal trial named *smaarthavichaaram* after which the women are excommunicated from the Nampoothiri clan and discarded merely as *saadhanam*, meaning an object, with no human soul. While *Moodupadathil (Behind the Veil)* reveals the callousness shown towards young girls by ignoring their desires and instead marrying them off to men older than their fathers, *Mulappalinte Manam (The Scent of Breast Milk)* exposes an all-pervading maternal love that strengthens humanity and nullifies all destructive instincts.

Agnisakshi /Fire, My Witness, originally serialized in Mathrubhumi Illustrated Weekly is the only novel Antharjanam wrote in her entire career. It was published in 1976 and went on to receive the Kendra Sahitya Academy, Kerala Sahitya Academy, Odakkuzhal and Vayalar Awards in 1977. In Jancy James' view, the novel "established her capacity to portray the strange turns of human life by building up the peculiarities of character on meaningful and substantial foundations, both private and social" (163). The novel was translated by Vasanthi Sankaranarayan in 1980 and again by her in 2015 as part of the prestigious Charles Wallace Scholarship. Tracing the novel to Antharjanam's previous short stories like *Maralakal*, *Prasadam*, *Udayathinu Nere* and *Mulappalinte Manam*, J Devika notes, "(the novel) seems to embody (her) intellectual engagement with discourse of modern gender, which cleaved the world neatly into the home and the public – the alternate philosophies of gender that they were groping towards in and through the short stories" (xxviii; Introduction to *Agnisakshi*). The author cites three stages in the genesis of the novel. The first one was her accidental meeting with a woman ascetic in the tirthaghat at a pilgrimage centre in Uttar Pradesh in 1962. She reminded the author of stories of several women who had forgotten or rejected family life and entered the sphere of social service and spirituality, owing to several bitter experiences in their personal lives. Second stage was the blossoming of a story named *Prasadam* that was serialized for the All India Radio in 1970. She noticed that the story of a revolutionary social worker had evolved on its own, chartering unpremeditated routes and shapers, surprising the author too. The third most unexpected reason was a request from the editor of Mathrubhumi Illustrated Weekly for a novel to be published in the forthcoming issues. In the author's own words, "there were unfinished scripts of some old novels, scribbled in notebooks. I took them out, wiped the dust off them, and chose this one. The narrative was like a child lying pressed to the bosom of the mother, which could not be plucked and thrown aside. I changed the structure. I untied the contents and rebuilt them. The story turned out to be completely new. I began living it" (Antharjanam xii). The story is a product of her creative imagination

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underpinned by the strange lives of people she had met or heard of in Nampoothiri families in the mid twentieth century Kerala.

Agnisakshi/ Fire, My Witness is a period novel that revolves around the lives of predominantly two women, Thethikutty and Thankam. The first fifteen sections of the novel are narrated from the perspective of Thankam and the last three sections from the viewpoint of Thethi. Manampalli Mana was a famous Nampoothiri household in central Kerala where the head of the family Achan Nampoothiri was a naïve old man who prayed and played chess most of the time. The household was ruled by his younger brother Aphan Nampoothiri who according to custom was not allowed to marry from the Nampoothiri sect but was permitted to marry as many women as he liked from the other castes. His Nair wife was stay put in the two storey building named Kacheri Malika, adjacent to the main house, with their daughter Thankam. Unni Nampoothiri, the son of Achan Nampoothiri was a very conservative, diligent, and pious soul whose days were spent solely in observing dharma towards everyone in the family, living or dead. On reaching the marriageable age, the seniors in the family get him a wife, Devaki who is fondly called Thethi edathi by Thankam. The story of that ill-fated marriage is the main focus of *Agnisakshi* with the stories of subjugation of several other Nampoothiri women in the background.

Devaki belonged to the progressive Puthusseri family and her brother PKP Nampoothiri was a bold social reformer and activist. The painful contrast between her expectation and her actual experience with regard to marriage is silently witnessed by Thankam who becomes her alter ego and confidante. Unni, who wedded her with fire as witness, turns out to be over enthusiastic about dharma and moksha; he fulfills all his duties in the family without fail except the one towards his wife. They hardly get a moment of privacy and intimacy due to the constant intervention of others. Thankam recollects: "By day, Unni ettan never set foot in this room. Even at night, he visited it only after consulting the almanac: the tradition of Manampalli Mana. Ettan's mother was very particular about such things" (24). His reluctance to break conventions became obvious soon after the marriage. Devaki tells Thankam: "I don't think Ettan loves anyone. He is afraid of everything and everyone. Aphan, mother, tradition – why, God himself! Like my elder brother said, if I continue to live here, I too might go mad with fear" (25). Her only solace was that Thankam would bring her newspapers and magazines after Netyaramma (Thankam's mother) finished reading them each day. Thankam who shared a close bond with Unni ettan tried to sensitise him to the tragic situation of his wife, whenever she got a chance. But Unni ettan's reply was impassive. "Will it do if we consider only our likes and dislikes? Mustn't we pay some attention to other people's wishes? Doing things in the manner suggested by you is not Manampalli Illam's tradition. In this Illam, the purpose of married life is not pleasure, but dharma. Child, life is a great yagnam. A fire yagnam. Ultimately, your Edathi too will understand this" (27). Once, during the first thiruvathira festival after their marriage – which was considered very auspicious – Devaki and all the women in the household finished the water-play and bath and prepared to welcome the husband in their chamber. Devaki, dressed in newly washed gold-embroidered traditional clothes, her eyes adorned with collyrium, her neck with a garland of karuka grass, and her forehead with sandalwood paste, reminded Thankam of Goddess Parvathy who won over the heart of Lord Shiva with a similar glow. Her hair was adorned with the ten auspicious leaves names dashapushpam. The main ritual of the festival was the preparation of a hundred and one betel leaves by the married woman and sharing it with their husbands. Devaki prepared it with a lot of attention and requested Unni to meet her in their room without fail. She waited coyly for her husband in

anticipation of an intimate time with him at that auspicious occasion. But as soon as he entered the room, his mother called out to him asking him to meet Aphan urgently. He took the betel leaves and without so much as glancing at her face, left the room in a hurry. Devaki's dreams and desires were crushed on several such occasions. Only Thankam was aware of the sickening life of neglect and disrespect that her Thethi edathi was leading in the dark corners of the naalukett.

Matters worsened when the insane aunt, Unni's grand uncle's wife, died childless. In her youthful days, this aunt was physically tortured and neglected by her husband, Muthaphan. She was one among his several wives and had a slight limp. When Muthaphan thrashed her, she felt grateful that at least that way she was being touched by the husband. Once, when Unni was only ten years of age, he could not bear to see the beating inflicted on her. He gripped Muthaphan's hand and pleaded with him to stop beating her and requested Muthaphan to beat him instead. Since that day, the mad aunt considered Unni as her son and made him promise that he would do the rituals when she died. When the death occurred hardly a year after Unni's marriage, Netyamma advised Unni against observing the stringent rules of deeksha for the departed soul, for his wife had not still conceived. But Unni would rather neglect his marriage vows than break his promise to his hapless aunt. Thankam confronted her Unni ettan with the question "Do your Vedas and Puranas sat that you should give up your wife? That you should not look at her? In that case, why did you marry her?" He replied unemotionally: "Child, I will never give her up. She knows this. But neither will I give up Amma, my family, or the values of my clan. I will not abandon respect for gurus and elders. You should not ask that of me, Thankam" (34).

Devaki Puthusseri who was married off to Manampalli illam had a gradual change as time progressed. Her brother PKP Nampoothiri was garnering public support against the stifling customs like smarthavicharam and ghosha. He extolled women to cover their bodies in saris and blouses and come out in public to seek education and employment. His name was considered a bane in Manampalli illam and Devaki silently bore the curses heaped on him by each member in that conservative family. Having got a chance to read contemporary books and magazines, Devaki was aware of the social upheaval that was accompanying the struggle for Indian independence. Topics like child marriage, widow remarriage, monogamy and women's emancipation were discussed alongside. She once told Thankam: "I often think if only I had been a man. If I were a man, I would free not only my wife but all women. I would have given my life for the freedom of the country and for humanity" (35). Apparently, at that point of time itself, freedom of oneself and the freedom of the land got co-mingled in the mind of the heroine.

When Devaki's mother passed away, the elders in Manampalli prohibited her from going back to her tharawad, the Puthusseri illam, for her brother PKP Nampoothiri's speeches and actions had turned them all into outcastes. While her husband remained silent, the adamant young Devaki touched his feet, and then his mother's feet and paying no attention to anything else, stepped out and walked away to her illam. Since then she was also considered an outcaste and in no time, the elders persuaded Unni to get a second wife. But his response was that "Thethikutty might have a life without me, but I have no life without her. Manampalli Unni Nampoothiri might be a traditionalist and a fool..but he knows how to wait for the people he loves" (61). Since the day she left Manampalli illam, the festering dissatisfactions within her were getting ready to explode as a volcano and light the flames in the social arena. Thus the glorified-yet-abandoned Thethikutty evolved into the public domain, akin to her brother, radiant with knowledge, experience and vision to lead her compatriots from darkness to light.

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“Devaki Manampalli, who held her head high and spoke in a firm voice on that day: I am not the representative of any one caste, one religion, or one society. I am the representative of the entire clan of women who have, for centuries, endured ill treatment. You can look at the Truth which stands before you, veil cast aside, and bless it or curse it. But you must remember that this burden of sorrow which is ours is your creation...”(63). As she stood between two generations of women, the devastated old one and the emerging new one, her vision broadened to embrace women of all castes, classes and clans. The volcano within had burst and scattered; its glowing sparks fell on the surroundings, scorching everything around. Thankam who was staying away in pursuit of studies noticed with mixed emotions that not a single newspaper failed to carry a photograph of Devaki. No meetings happened without her speeches and people travelled long distances to see her, greet her and to praise her. As Thankam realized, the weak Thethikutty in the dingy quarters of the naalukettu no longer belonged to her Unni ettan; she belonged to the society and to the country. Thethikutty was elevated from an individual to a movement. While the majestic Manampalli illam was partitioned and was perishing on one side, the social uprising led by PKP, Devaki and others was gathering momentum. Devaki, renamed as Devi Behan, began to live in a distant ashram as the disciple of Mahatma Gandhi. She understood that if society wanted freedom, the country had to be free. She was a changed person who no longer observed customs of pollution or ghosha. She was unconcerned about caste and won great respect from Gandhiji and Nehru. Having grown from the social to the national level, she had no time to think of her past or her husband. She was badly wounded and crushed by police brutality during the nationwide protests and reprisals on several occasions. But when India earned its freedom from British domination, Devi Behan, the unselfish social activist never came forward for any reward or position quoting the price for her suffering in the struggle. She accompanied Gandhiji to assuage the pain of the abused during communal riots in eastern Bengal, served refugees and continued her work in ashrams in several states for the uplift of village women.

Devi Behan took charge of the Mahilashram and introduced strict rules of decorum for the inmates. She refused to tolerate any pleasure-loving instinct on their part and conducted constant check on their behavior and possessions. She was very fond of a Pakistani refugee girl and named her Thankam; her sweetness of character and piety made her Devi Behan’s constant companion. In due course, the ashram, inadvertently, gave refuge to a young revolutionary named Arun with whom the inmate Thankam committed the lustful sin. Devi Behan would tolerate emotions like anger but could never condone lust. She decided to atone for the mistake and left the ashram. She travelled to many places, dipped in sixty four bathing ghats in holy rivers, paid obeisance to the 1008 idols of Shiva, and prayed without food and sleep but her mind was restless and she could not forgive her negligence. She had wanted to uplift the society and the country. She wanted to build a new world filled with firm ideals. But the mistake of the inmate torpedoed her visionary zeal. At a weak moment, she entered the waters in Kedar ghat and walked undecidedly deeper and deeper into it. That was when a hand reached to her and brought her back to life and to yet another stage in her search for emancipation.

At Swamy Suddhananda Saraswathy’s ashram, Devi Behan was renamed as Sumitrananda yogini and worshipped as Mataji by her followers. She was not merely a mendicant who observed severe penance and disciplines; she was a goddess to her admirers. She gave shelter to women in agony. People believed that any misfortune or illness could be cured by Mataji’s touch. The belief that her blessings would never fail spread far and wide.

Even intellectuals who visited the thirthaghat would come to Mataji's hut and receive a unique experience of conversing with her. Mataji was well versed in the epics, exuded wisdom and spiritual knowledge and also bore the stamp of a social worker and a satyagraha practitioner. By the end of the novel, Thankam travels to holy places on the banks of the river Ganga to do the final rites of Unni ettan. After years of anonymity, she also manages to meet her Thethi edathi, now Mataji, who consoles her saying this: "When we reach the presence of the ultimate God, there will be no difference between sin and good deeds, or between pleasure and pain. ...What remains is only the ultimate truth: the truth of love" (133). The novel ends when Mataji's motherhood is awakened by Thankam's son who falls at her feet calling her "Amme, come back!" and she experiences an endless satisfaction of the soul.

Agnisakshi/ Fire, my Witness is not merely a period drama that happens in an upper caste household in the middle of the twentieth century. It records the abysmal changes that happened in the world around it with the independence struggle and anti-feudal uprisings as the backdrop. It talks about individual predicaments involving love, duties, traditions and relations which render universality and timelessness to it. In the words of the film director who adapted this story into a film, Syamaprasad, " It is about choices or the lack of them, of numerous individual quests – social, religious, spiritual, and emotional. It is also about one's personal failures to sublimate our desires, the existential angst of the human condition and its predicaments" (quoted in *Taming the Fire* 141). Devaki's transformation, from Thethikutty silenced within the confines of her illam, to a powerful leader Devika Manampalli, to the Gandhi's trusted disciple Devi Behan, and then later to the spiritual guru Sumithrananda, is an act of empowerment and liberation. She represents a group of suppressed women who did not want their future generations to inherit the legacy of sorrows and disillusionments that they had received. In Meena T Pillai's words, the text treats "domestic self-denial and feminist self-seeking as complementary," indicating that Devika Manampalli needed to break the shackles of domestic slavery and seek a public role in order to embrace her true modern feminist identity (146). She had to lose one to gain the other.

In her pursuit of her free self, the national uprising had a major role to play. Whenever she imagined her personal freedom, she immediately attached the freedom of her fellow sufferers too. The country was suffering from colonial rule where as the womenfolk were kept oppressed by patriarchal systems.

The interaction between feminism and nationalism was a complex phenomenon. The activities of women in both local and national organizations and the activities of thousands of women who joined the nationalist movement together made up the women's (liberation) movement. The freedom did not lead to a separate, autonomous women's movement since it was part of the anti-colonial movement, but it did generate a sense of power among women who realized their own strength (Basu 104).

Sara Joseph asserts that Antharjanam had gained the strength to oppose the mental and physical subjugation of Nampoothiri women as a consequence of the country's freedom movement under Gandhiji's leadership. In 1932, Lalithambika Antharjanam along with Parvathy Nenmenimangalam and Arya Pallam attended the Nair's meeting in Mavelikara, where they appeared without the ghosha and the marakkuda. Pointing to those brave ladies, Antharjanam said to the audience, "Don't think this is an illusion. What you see here are real antharjanams. Those who fear that looking at antharjanams would make them blind can close their eyes!" (Quoted in Joseph 161). Having listened to the intense debates and discussions in her family and having got the chance to read the daily newspapers during her younger days,

Antharjanam's transformation into a silent servant of the nation and a blind admirer of Gandhiji's ideology later was not entirely unpredictable or strange. Thethikutty's transformation into Devi Behan at the Sevashram is a direct reflection of the author's own ideological stance. Thethikutty's physical act of stepping out of the cloistered household to the landscape of India's freedom movement brought her emotionally closer to the victims of power struggle, colonial and patriarchal. Her sincere social work towards releasing humanity from archaic conventions and confinement saw its culmination in the selfless compassion and spiritual guidance she offered as Mataji at the yoginimadhom. The journey that started as a result of lack of marital, interpersonal love paved way for the attainment of the Ultimate truth of universal love. Just before taking on her new avatar as a sannyasini, she sends back her mangalyasuthram, the auspicious symbol of marriage purified by mantras, to Unni with a letter in which she says: "We who were once far apart have now drawn very close. I do not feel any separation at all. I can see, hear and touch you...When I got tired of life, I came out to serve society. Then I turned to serving the nation. Having finished that too, I now wish to serve the ultimate truth...like in the path of birth, we have united in the path of work also. Now, there is no separation" (107). In Thethikutty's journey, the personal became the political which eventually became the universal. The novel seems relevant even in this twenty first century when female foeticide, marital rape and honour killings have become items worth a single day's coverage in the newspapers and television channels. The society has a long way to go to achieve the ideal of gender equality.

Endnotes

Dashapushpam- ten sacred flowers of Kerala worn by women during auspicious occasions

Edathi- elder sister

Ettan- elder brother

Ghoshha- a system prevalent among Nampoothiri women which forbade them from leaving their houses without carrying the palm leaf umbrellas and shawls to cover their faces and bodies

Illam- the Nampoothiri homestead, each one having a different name

Mangalyasuthram- the thali or the gold ornament worn by married women around the neck symbolizing loyalty, self discipline and sacrifice

Marakkuda- palm-leaf umbrella used by Nampoothiri women to cover their faces

Naalukett-house with a courtyard

Saadhanam-the excommunicated woman

Sannyasini-a female renunciate

Smaarthavichaaram-a trial for excommunicating Nampoothiri women on accusation of sexual impurity

Tharawad-the joint family household

Thiruvathira-Lord Shiva's birthday on which he is believed to have met his wife Parvathy. Unmarried women observe fast to get a good husband and married women for the well being of their husbands. Several rituals are associated with the celebration.

Thirthaghat/ ghat- Bathing areas on the banks of the river Ganga

Yagnam -sacrifice offered to appease the Gods

Yogini/ yoginimadhom- a woman ascetic and her residence

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