



SARASWATHI AMMA: A FEMINIST READING

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Abstract

In spite of the rhetoric on the liberation of the woman, even in the 21st century, the misogynistic tendencies of our society remain unchanged. The woman has remained a perpetual second-class citizen; in some cultures, she is still considered a commodity, subject to her father from birth and later handed over to her husband for safe-keeping. The absence of the grey space when defining a woman is not unique to the oriental societies, where she is either black or white. Here the woman is either the angel in the house or else the demon out to corrupt the world. The ideal woman that society covets is passive, submissive and devoted to her husband. The woman who does not yield to men come under the rubric of 'a bad woman'. Most often, an outspoken woman, is classified as the latter. There are claims that in the 21st century her world is a changed one, the living conditions of the woman has improved, and she has come out in the public sphere. However, the myth that is constructed around her remains the same. The taboos around her sexuality is still a problem.

The works of Saraswathi Amma (1919-1975), the first feminist writer from Kerala, appeared in the 1940s. But she was largely and intentionally disregarded by the male pantheon of writers in Malayalam. The writer has been noticed and recognised for her unique approach to writing only in the recent times. This paper aims to read the works of Saraswathi Amma, the first feminist writer from Kerala from a feminist perspective.

Keywords: Feminism, patriarchy, misogyny, women's liberation.

Feminism attempts to reinterpret and re-evaluate the literary works of the past. If we look at the history of women's writing in Kerala, we may observe that this writer was deliberately ignored by the male writers and critics of her time. It was not until recently that Saraswathi Amma has been placed upon the high pedestal by the reading public and critics. As the critic Dr. Jancy James points out, "In the entire history of women's writing in Kerala, Saraswathi Amma's is the most tragic case of the deliberate neglect of female genius" (K Saraswathi Amma 164).

Saraswathi Amma is considered the first feminist writer from Kerala. She was born in Kunnampuzha, Trivandrum in an upper class family. She worked as a teacher for two years before securing a job in the government. Amidst the blatant criticism she faced from her fellow writers and critics, she managed to publish a novel *Premabhajanam* (the loved one), several volumes of short stories, a collection of essays *Purushanmarilathe Lokam* (a world without men) and a drama *Devadoothi* (messenger of god), in Malayalam, in the 1940s. Most of her works discuss the status of women in society and women's

liberation, specifically in the background of Kerala. They talk about the emotional, intellectual and social independence of woman. Her last book *Cholamarangal* (shady trees) was published in 1958 after which she virtually disappeared from the scene.

Saraswathi Amma remained single throughout her life and lived in an isolated house. Her extroverted nature, bold opinions and her free interactions with men were unusual in her time, especially for a single woman, and caused much discussion. The greatest crisis in her life was the death of her nephew whom she considered her own son. The sincerity of their relationship was questioned even by her sister, which depressed her more. She stopped writing after the early 60s and lived the last years of her life as a recluse.

Saraswathi Amma established without doubt that women also had the potential of intellectual thinking. When her contemporary writers wrote about hunger, poverty and other revolutionary ideas, Saraswathi Amma discussed gender prejudices and discriminations and hypocrisies that prevailed around her. As the protagonist in Sara Joseph's Story "Oru Ezhuthikariyude Ullil" (Inside Every Woman Writer) says, women were supposed to talk only about themes as simple as Radha-Krishna love. The men-folk prohibited any intellectual discussions from a woman.

What Saraswathi Amma fought against were the gender constructions and roles laid down by the patriarchal society. She did not criticise the men alone but also the women who behaved according to the set norms of the patriarchal society. She tried to demolish the essential 'Sarvamsahayay'(all-enduring) image of an Indian woman. This image is similar to the one created by Coventry Patmore in his poem "Angel in the House".

As Dr. Jancy James notes,

Saraswathi Amma shattered the illusions of man nurtured by woman with a fierceness and vehemence unprecedented in Malayalam literature. Her writing often turned vituperative in the attack on male domination. She was the angry bitter

spinster who condemned any gesture of injustice to women. (Veneration 105)

Purushanmarillatha Lokam (a world without men) is a collection of essays by Saraswathi Amma published in 1958. It talks about the need for equality between both the genders. It cautions the women not to be submissive to men, lest they lose their independence. Even at that point of time, she believed that true liberation is possible only if women stop depending on men. This anthology criticises Patriarchy with a high degree of severity.

Saraswathi Amma's outspoken comments had earned her the title 'Man-Hater'. However, she continued to write only about the prejudices in the society and had no specific hatred towards men. She believed that man and woman are equal in a relationship, and one is not dominant over the other.

Her women characters like Seelavathy and Savithri transforms the very notion of an ideal woman. There is an interesting conversation between them, where one of them asks the other: "Is the husband a chronic invalid to be perpetually attended upon by the wife?" The patriarchal society assumes that the wife has to cater to the needs of the husband. Saraswathi Amma also comments sarcastically on the woman who believes it is her duty to do so. She tries to convince them that marriage is not the only important thing in a woman's life.

Saraswathi Amma created many strong women characters through her short stories. Contrary to the stereotypical image of a woman, she chose thought over emotion in her stories. The women in her works are individuals and freedom-loving. Most of them raise their voice against patriarchy. In the story "Vivaha Vidweshi" (A Misogamist), Saraswathi Amma proved that a woman can also betray man. The story "Pavangal" (Miserables) is about a woman who shows courage to kill the man who betrayed her.

In the story, "Ellam Thikanja Bharya" (The ideal wife) an eligible young bachelor is looking for an ideal woman as his wife. He has certain conditions. She should be 14 years old, with a

wheatish complexion, black knee-length hair which is long and curly. She should be less than five feet in height with a slim body and a beautiful face. He eventually finds a girl with all these qualities, but the girl has the nerve to look straight at his face which according to him revealed her lack of modesty. Through this story, Saraswathi Amma seems to warn the men to be realistic and practical.

Some stories of her discuss the plight of educated women of her times. "Penbudhi" (Woman's Wit) talks about a woman who had been a medal winner in her college days. Her insensitive husband sells off her gold medal to meet household expenses. In "Bahumanappetta Amma" (Respected Mother), we see a woman who is educated but has to discontinue her job. She is forced to live within the four walls of the house. One day her children see her B.A degree certificate and understands B.A. as Bahumanappetta Amma.

Saraswathi Amma's works reveal her as a very progressive woman. According to her, wifehood and motherhood should not be imposed upon women. In her story "Pavangal", the husband torments the wife about the relationships she had before their marriage. Tired of his accusations, she throws a chair at him. This 'untypical' 'unfeminine' behaviour shocks the husband so much that he never misbehaves with her anymore. Perhaps the writer is hinting that if women openly expressed their displeasure at men, they would be treated better by them.

The Story "Bhartruhvam" (Husbandhood) is about Vimala, an ideal wife. Only after her death does Balarama Menon, her husband, realize that she was in a relation with their servant Ramakrishnan Nair. Towards the end of the story, there is an interesting conversation between the husband and the lover. The husband asks the lover, "Of these four children, which are mine". Both the men's attitude towards Vimala are worth observing. The lover doesn't want to bring bad name to his beloved especially after her death. The husband doesn't want to shame his wife because it would affect his reputation. For completely different reasons, they decide to keep this little secret between them. A pact is made between

them; Balarama Menon shall provide the money to look after the four children, whereas Ramachandran Nair had to actually look after them. They divide the responsibilities between them.

The theme of the story is certainly universal, it's about extramarital relations and how it is viewed within the structure of a traditional marriage. There is also the element of how a man's extramarital relationships are considered as done and that of a woman considered taboo by the same society. This theme is not oft used by a female writer; especially in the period in which Saraswathi Amma lived.

For a woman who lived in the second half of the twentieth century, Saraswathi Amma was very liberal in her thoughts. She was not against healthy friendships between men and women. This idea is elaborated in the novel *Premabhajanam* where the heroine has no hesitation in encouraging male friends, mostly platonic relationships.

She also disliked those women who were subservient to men and was ready to stoop to any level when the men demanded her to. "Ramani" is a story based on the widely popular poem of Malayalam by the poet Changampuzha, the romantic elegy *Ramanan*. The original story talks about Ramanan who was cheated by Chandrika, his lover. Ramanan is a gentleman and the ultimate symbol of love whereas Chandrika is the typical deceitful woman. Ramani is a twist to this popular story. She says instead of criticising Chandrika, we must appreciate her for rejecting his love and this should be seen as an act of revenge against men for all the injustice done to them across time.

Saraswathi Amma's thoughts on marriage are extraordinary. Marriage was not just a physical reunion of two people; their spiritual as well as intellectual quotient played a great role in it as well. She advocated companionship in marriage where both the individuals are equals, and are able to retain their individuality. In order for a marriage to be successful, there has to be compromises. But it must be at the cost of both the individuals and not just the woman. Saraswathi Amma never considers the woman as a child-bearing machine, in any of her fiction. She was far-sighted in her attitude and

was firm in her belief that a newly married couple should plan their families. The heroine of *Premabhajanam* gifts her friend a packet of contraceptives on her wedding. She has also mocked women who keep on making babies in the hope of getting a boy.

Saraswathi Amma along with Lalithambika Antharjanam created a new trend in Malayalam literature by writing stories with women as central characters. Their aim was the liberation of the subjugated women in the society. Till then women were presented either as the embodiment of perfect qualities or the demon who destroyed men. Saraswathi Amma portrayed the real essence of women so far unrepresented or misrepresented in literature.

Saraswathi Amma's legacies have been carried forward by writers like Rajalekshmi, and Kamala Das. However, her brand of feminism is more outspoken than that of her contemporaries like Lalithambika Antharjanam or even Kamala Das, who were more subtle in their approach to the problems of women and their freedom in their fictional works. This may be because unlike the other two, she did not have a supportive family. Also, she was very well-educated and had a job of her own which made her financially independent.

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