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Traversing the Inner Courtyard to the Public Sphere: Exploring Lalithambika Antharjanam's Short Stories as Narratives of Protest in Early Twentieth Century Kerala

By Revathy Hemachandran¹ and Maya Vinai²

Abstract

This essay analyzes women writing about their experience in the changing socio-cultural and political context of the early twentieth century and especially in the face of the global, national, and regional transformations that Kerala underwent. The essay argues that the short stories of Lalithambika Antharjanam subverted the popular representation of *antharjanams* in the early 20th century as impassive, oppressed, and vulnerable subjects and provided alternative ways to conceptualize an *antharjanam* as a feminist trailblazer with a strong voice of protest. Her writing exposes her first-hand experiences of gender discrimination practiced in families as related to her caste and family lineage. Thus, her literary expression is one of the first ventures in feminist writing that Malayalam literature witnessed. This article draws on the scholarship of Uma Chakravarti, Nur Yalman, and Michel Foucault, employing their theories on gender, sociology, psychoanalysis, and cultural and anthropological frameworks to explore women's roles in their respective social groups. Furthermore, the works of Joan Watt and J. Devika are applied in this interpretation of works by women writers in twentieth-century Kerala.

Keywords: Antharjanam, Reform, Colonial Modernity, Kerala, Feminism, Lalithambika Antharjanam, Gender Renaissance

Introduction

The written articulation of experience is a powerful tool that aids social and political transformations. The conceptualization and execution of the Indian Independence movement were carried out by men who attempted to decolonize their space and culture. However, as Partha Chatterjee argues, patriarchal ideologies internalized centuries before and after colonization remained in men's psyches. Studies in the recent past by Janaki Nair, Victoria Browne, and Charu Gupta have tried to understand and document gendered representations in writing as a qualitative method to understand history wherein the historically absent and the narratively displaced could participate in the process of historiography. Indian women's writing is an exploration of the

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expression of gender in relation to social and political transactions and structures of patriarchy that were original to the subcontinent before colonization and later in the nation of India.

The purpose of the colonial intrusions into the Indian subcontinent was two-fold; the primary purpose of the imperialists was to amass resources and gain territory, and the second objective was the proliferation of missionary activities which were often reformist in nature. Both these objectives played a catastrophic role in the numerous transformations the subcontinent underwent economically, socially, and politically. The continuous and violent disruptions in the social fabric of the colony by the colonizers played an essential role in the socio-cultural productions that emerged from India. An important aspect of India's colonial experience was women's treatment, agency, and recording of their experiences. The previous imperialists of the Indian subcontinent, like the Portuguese and the Dutch, had laid the foundation for the British administration in creating various hierarchies of power to facilitate their economic and political gains. The existing practices and traditions in India were overrun with socio-cultural and religious agents that determined the position of women, and this Eurocentric idea of civilization was woven into the native social fabric of India. One of the fundamental reasons for the lack or absence of representation of women's experience in literature is the replacement of the native variant of patriarchy with the Eurocentric variant during decolonization.

The socio-cultural construct of gender can best be analyzed by considering its intersectional nature in society. The location of women within definable bounds of society requires an in-depth understanding of the multiple hierarchies based on religion, caste, and class, thus revealing the multifaceted power systems in operation within any group. Several twentieth-century theorists, like Surinder Jodhka, Leela Dube, and M.N. Srinivas, talk about the pervasiveness of caste in the domestic units of families in society. They comment on the specific dictates that women are endowed within each caste and class and how the performance of their genders, in turn, determines how the status of women in society is defined. From birth, women are conditioned to be the hallmarks of honor for their families and, by extension, their respective communities and society. Moving from the natal home to the marital, similar if not stricter adherences were prescribed to the purity of married women, which continued even beyond the death of husbands. Those who did not adhere to the prescribed rules of purity were identified, called out, put to trial, and endured rigorous punishments. The feminist critic Sandra Lee Bartky asserts in her essay "Foucault, Femininity and the Modernisation of Patriarchal Power" that those women have internalized this form of patriarchy over their bodies and lives for centuries.

The need for effective sexual control over women was essential in maintaining patrilineal succession and caste purity amongst the upper-caste Hindus. Uma Chakravarti drives home this point in her essay "Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State" in which she explores the complex relationship between caste and gender. She focuses on how patriarchy, through religious codes that shape social practices, made women themselves a key agent in maintaining sexual control and subservience to their kith and kin (Chakravarti 579). Another important observation which is brought forth by Nur Yalman in his essay, "On the Purity of Women in the Castes of Ceylon and Malabar," is that the purity of caste is maintained by controlling women's sexuality. Chakravarti summarizes Yalman's ideas: "women are regarded as gateways—literally points of entrance into the caste system" (579). Paramount importance was associated with her virginity until she had been traditionally passed from her father's care and authority to that of her husband. Preserving both virginity and chastity demanded strict adherence to guidelines, especially mobility within and outside the household. Yalman argues that one of the fundamental principles of caste is to construct a closed structure to preserve land, women, and

ritual quality within it. Thus, safeguarding the caste structure was achieved through the highly circumscribed movement of women and sometimes even through the seclusion of women. One such group was *antharjanams*,³ the women of *Nambudiri Brahmins*.⁴ The works of V.T. Bhattathiripadu and Lalithambika Antharjanam undertake to represent the previously unknown experiences of *antharjanams*. As a result of the introduction of Western education under the British administration, there was a marked increase in reading for leisure which in turn led to the increase in short stories, novels, plays, biographies, and magazine articles. It is at this point in history that one can trace the origin of creative and re-imagined representations of real-life characters that emerge in the literature. The present essay analyzes women's writing in Kerala and the representation of *antharjanams* in Lalithambika Antharjanam's short stories. The essay argues that the short stories of Lalithambika subverted the popular representation of *antharjanams* in the early 20th century as impassive, oppressed and vulnerable subjects and provided novel and alternate ways of conceptualizing an *antharjanam* who could voice strong protest. The women in these short stories trail-blazed and pioneered a new wave of feminism. This essay's interpretation of the works of Lalithambika Antharjanam is informed by the autobiographies of V.T. Bhattathiripadu and Lalithambika Antharjanam and theories on gender from the fields of sociology, psychoanalysis, and cultural and anthropology by Uma Chakravarti, Nur Yalman, Michel Foucault, Joan Scott, and J. Devika.

Politics, Culture, and Gender in Literature by Nambudiri Men

Early modern writings from Kerala were not entirely an original construct. They were borne out of existing traditional models of literature and Western intrusion and inspiration in the form of imperialism. The transition can be observed both in the form and the content depicted in the writings as they try to recast the traditional content in more modern forms as inspired by their Western counterparts. As a result, more women were represented in the literature. Women were represented as mere objects of desire and a medium of procreation in *Sringarakavyas*,⁵ elevated to the status of heroines of the novel *Indulekha*,⁶ and also became creators of literary expression. Furthermore, women's writing was also a by-product of the early modernization project and the transformation of the literary landscape in Kerala. In the excellent foreword to *Inner Spaces*, noted writer and critic K.M. George points out a significant anomaly in the literature of Kerala:

Despite the high level of literacy among women, the field of literature is conspicuously dominated by men. Women have produced much less than their level of education would warrant. Moreover, much of what they have written is confined to regional circulation or condemned to the oblivion of periodical literature. (George ix)

In the late 19th and 20th centuries, Kerala's public sphere emerged as a space where the new forces contended with established socio-cultural forces and colonial ideologies for hegemony. Acclaimed critic Satchidanandan, in his article in *Frontline*, mentions how the decades of the

³*Antharjanam* means indoor people confined within four walls of an *illam*, a Nambudiri household.

⁴*Nambudiri*, also spelled *Nambūdiri* or *Nampūtiri*, is one of the dominant *Brahman* castes of Kerala, the Indian state. Orthodox in the extreme, its members regard themselves as the true repositories of the ancient Vedic religion and the traditional Hindu code.

⁵*Sringarakavyas* are erotic poetic compositions.

⁶*Indulekha* is a Malayalam novel written by O. Chandu Menon. Published in 1889, it was the first major novel in the Malayalam language.

“1930s and 1940s saw the burgeoning of debates and discussions on gender, identity, women’s education...and women's domestic and public roles, especially in the context of the emerging nationalist movement and the accompanying social reform projects under what later came to be termed the Kerala Renaissance” (Satchidanandan). Literary forms and theater contributed tremendously to creating solidarity and reforming the unjust practices of society. However, social modernity and women’s empowerment were not uniform among all communities.⁷ The group primarily excluded from the public sphere, institutions, and ideas were the *Nambudiri* (Brahmin) women, also known as *antharjanams*. The *Nambudiris* (Brahmins) occupied a dominant position in Kerala until the early 20th century due to their political, religious, and material stronghold. *Nambudiri* Brahmin families practiced a strict custom under which only the eldest son could marry a *Nambudiri* woman and thus produce an heir to the family property. Younger sons were restricted to practices like *Sambandam* (maintaining multiple sexual relations and liaisons with women, especially the subordinate *Nair* community), whom the *Nambudiris* considered concubines and whose offspring could not inherit (Collins 301).

Eminent anthropologist A. Aiyappan identifies “theocratic feudalism” as their primary power source. The *Nambudiri* men enjoyed several privileges due to their high status. They were severely criticized in literary texts like *Indulekha* for the treatment of *antharjanams* and *sambandam*. These so-called visiting husbands did not take responsibility for the progeny born as a result of these sexual transactions. These practices were publicly denounced by *Nambudiri* reform movements for promoting “irresponsibility, licentiousness, and laziness among younger male members, for adding misery of *antharjanams* as the number of bridegrooms were limited, for being ‘against nature’ and ‘culturally and morally inferior’” (Nilayamgode xxi). From the early 20th century, the plight of *antharjanams* received considerable attention in reformist literature and several literary and cultural productions which repeatedly focused on “the images of the ineffectual *Nambudiri* and the passive and suffering *antharjanam*” (Devika, *En-gendering*, 119).

The representation of the plight of *Nambudiri* women was taken on by famous *Nambudiri* reformers like M.R. Bhattathiri and V.T. Bhattathiri under the activities of Yoga Kshema Samithi. P.K. Aryan Namboothiri, in his work *Naalukettil Ninnun Naatilekku (From a Four-Block House to Hometown)*, comments on the two directions that the establishment of *Yoga Kshema Samithi* took in its objective. The first was to ensure the tradition of rituals stood against the scientific temper of the time without forfeiting superiority, and the second was to placate the radical group who wanted to embrace socialist and nationalist ideals (Namboothiri 122). In M.R. Manmathan’s thesis on the earliest reformers like V.T. Bhattathiripad, he remarks that Bhattathiripad “did not approach gender issues with the same sympathy throughout; his position was dependent on the nature of politics involved in it; he also retreated considerably from his earlier radicalism in later years. His patriarchal limitations and his vacillating position on the gender issue can be properly understood only if we distinguish his reminiscences and later writings from his speeches and works of the reform days” (Manmathan 444). However, it becomes interesting to note how the so-called plight and vulnerability of *Nambudiri* women were represented not by the disadvantaged women themselves but by *Nambudiri* men. Feminist critic and writer J. Devika states how in literary and cultural productions, the *antharjanams* “were set up, again and again, as victims who needed to be led out of their plight, as if passivity were a necessary attribute of the oppressed” (Devika, *En-gendering*, 128). The agency to champion their cause and voice their plight was, to a large extent, appropriated by the male *Nambudiri* social reformers until the 1930s, which consequently led to a

⁷The State of Kerala was heralded by both development studies experts and social scientists for its development indices like high literacy rate, low fertility rate, and low infant mortality.

tendency to homogenize discourses and experiences. Joan W. Scott's essay "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis" suggests how encoding, representation and dissemination of information about women are necessary for consolidating power structures and information. Scott writes, "This usage insists that the world of women is part of the world of men, created in and by it. This usage rejects the interpretive utility of the idea of separate spheres, maintaining that studying women in isolation perpetuates the fiction that one sphere, the experience of one sex, has little or nothing to do with the other" (1056). Joan Scott's keen observations regarding the nature of women writing in the sphere of historical narrativization point to the significance these works have in the historiographical process.

The earliest *antharjanam* to step over the threshold into the public domain was Parvathi Nenminimangalam, a noted social reformer who was also contemporary to V.T. Bhattathiripad. In her speech at Alathiyur Upasabha, she criticized the indifference of the male reformers towards the issues of the *antharjanams*. She said that women who boycotted *ghosha*⁸ resumed the practice again after facing ostracization from the orthodox majority in their community. She astutely observes that liberals and reformers were more interested in gaining alliances with Kerala brahmins for the freedom movement, because the brahmins were held in high regard because of their perceived divine connection and Vedic knowledge. This resulted in reforms taking a relaxed attitude towards gender issues, and many reformers were returning to a conservative position, saying they had not expected this much. She called out men for their hypocrisy in professing revolution without sincerity and having little interest in practicing reforms and progressive ideals in their personal life (Manmathan).

Through the writings of M.R. Bhattathirippadu and V.T. Bhattathirippadu, the nature of the *antharjanam* experience saw its first ray of sunlight, whereas the *antharjanams* were prohibited from being seen by anyone outside the immediate family. Later on, this tradition was taken on by Lalithambika Antharjanam, a revolutionary in her own right. Lalithambika Antharjanam was born into a famous *jenmi* (land-owning family) in the Kollam district of Kerala. Her father, Damodaran, was a follower of the illustrious reformist group *Yogakshema Samithi* who attempted to ensure his reformist ideologies translated into action. As a result, he made provisions for his daughter to be educated in Malayalam, English, and Sanskrit. This progressiveness was based on his agency as a man, but on Lalithambika's attainment of puberty, her father gave in to society's conventional pressures and married her off to another *Nambudiri*. As a woman, she had firsthand experience of gender discrimination practiced in families, based on her birth community of Kerala *Brahmins* and her caste. Thus, her literary expression is one of the first ventures in feminist writing that Malayalam literature witnessed, which she undertook with a creative and persuasive voice. The following section explains how she implemented her writing as a strategy to assuage her concerns regarding reforms in Kerala.

Reformist Themes in Lalithambika Antharjanam's Short Stories

Lalithambika Antharjanam's short stories, "Power of Fate," "The Goddess of Revenge," "Admission of Guilt," "Within the Folds of Seclusion," "Life and Death," and "Manushyaputri," depict the varying aspects of *Nambudiri* women's lives and the social degradation they are subjected to. These stories show the repercussions of transgressing against the restrictions placed on women's purity (virginity for unmarried and chastity for married women). Her narrative also sheds light on varied aspects of the upbringing and marriage of a girl child, wherein the transfer

⁸ *Ghosha* is an entourage to protect women from the sight of anyone but the socially approved members of her family.

of responsibility for her purity from her father to her husband takes place. A widow is kept within the late husband's home if the economy allows, and there is no difference as to their mobility since it was already limited within the women's quarters.

Antharjanams were not allowed to be part of any auspicious event as they were believed to be sinners in their past lives that did not let them remain with their husbands as a symbol of prosperity for their marital home. In the short story "Life and Death," a reader can observe how *Nambudiri* women are expected to go through an intense and austere mourning period, after which they return to their routine. The *Nambudiri* widows were subjected to many inhumane restrictions, such as being strictly prohibited from making use of fashionable attire, ornaments, or caste-mark sandals. They were allowed to use only cow dung ashes to mark their foreheads. The discrimination faced by *antharjanams* (women from a culturally superior caste) was a denial of any material comfort based on desire or aesthetic rationale. Although the life circumstances of a married *antharjanam* was considerably better than that of widows, *antharjanams'* lives were also cast in domesticity that was ritualized by strict codes of gender and religion. In a *Report of Namboodiri Female Education Commission of 1927*, constituted by the Yogakshema Samithi, Madampu Nambuthiri responded to a distraught committee about the domestic perils that *antharjanams* were mercilessly forced to do: "...they start working in the kitchen by the age of eight...when a few years pass in this fashion other tasks are loaded on...what is called *Nedikkal* (making offerings) and *namaskarams* (bowing down) towards the east, towards the south, what more, to every corner" (qtd. in Nilayamgode xxii). However, Lalithambika Antharjanam's contemporaries, like Narikkatiri Devaki Antharjanam, who was also associated with the *Nambudiri* reform movements, saw the kitchen as a space endowed with power and its occupants as wielding considerable power and participating in decision-making. In her article, "Streekal Adukkala Upekshikkarutu" (Women Should Not Abandon the Kitchen), she remarks, "women should not abandon kitchen, when they are fighting for comprehensive freedoms...our efforts in the kitchen will go a long way to foster the reforms of custom, health, moral consciousness, and other matters" (Narikkatiri Devaki Antharjanam 156). Lalithambika Antharjanam's representation of kitchen and domestic labor does not echo Devaki Antharjanam's conceptualization of the kitchen; instead, it finds solidarity with that of Anna Chandy, who tries to demystify domestic labor and attempts to denote it as a space of drudgery and servility.

Another prominent theme that features in Lalithambika Antharjanam's writings is the trials faced by women who exercise their sexual agency voluntarily or involuntarily and the consequent seclusion and punishment for the offense. These trials were intended to dehumanize so-called "fallen" women and ultimately excommunicate them from the caste. The general subordination of women assumed a particularly severe form in Kerala through the powerful instrument of religious traditions which have shaped social practices. A marked feature of *Nambudiri* society is its legal sanction for the extreme social stratification in which women and the lower castes have been subjected to humiliating conditions of existence. The trials called *smarthavicharam* for the *Nambudiri* women were publicized with punitive intentions for them and their families. The trials recorded in history have been conducted based on trivial acts and sexual subversions. These ranged from forgetting an umbrella when crossing the inner courtyard to the boundary wall, to being seen or claimed to have been seen by a man other than her husband, to voluntary prostitution. J. Devika notes in an introductory essay that many times, these trials were actually "anti-trials" because the chief intention of the judges "was not to provide the accused a chance to defend herself but to extract a damning self-condemnation from her" (Nilayamgode xxiv).

The stories “Power of Fate” (woman declared as “fallen” for no crime), “The Goddess of Revenge” (woman declared as “fallen” for engaging in sexual endeavors), and “Admission of Guilt” (woman declared as “fallen” for succumbing to sexual desire instigated by sexual advance from a stranger) examine shared pasts of these women whose stories only differ in terms of their responses to the events that led to their casting out of their communities. In “Water,” the trial is not manifested as a procedure but rather implied in terms of ostracization from the shared social space and degradation in their status, even among other widows. Meanwhile, in the stories “Power of Fate,” “The Goddess of Revenge,” and “Admission of Guilt,” the elaborate procedures followed to excommunicate these women serve the purpose of dehumanizing them and casting them away from their social and religious lives. The short stories “Folds of Seclusion” and “Manushyaputhri” relate the woman’s engagement with the restrictions they are bound to, their internalization of patriarchy. The stories also explore the dilemmas the women face once education and activism has exposed them to nationalist and Western ideologies. These stories show women’s perception of their role ascribed by the societal parameters of honor, chastity, and purity. Partha Chatterjee, in his much-acclaimed essay “Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonized Women: The Contest in India,” articulates how the new patriarchy casts women in the nurturing role of ideal homemaker, mother, and goddess, which highlights her feminine qualities and suppresses her sexuality (630). The home remained her central terrain of activity, and a woman “out of home” was expected to be an “ascetic” at best or “a prostitute” at worst (Thomas 51). The performance of various roles prescribed by the male head of the family becomes the cornerstone of Lalithambika Antharjanam’s contempt. The resulting performance of gender roles points out the absence of a woman’s agency in her interactions within the family and with the outside world. According to Sanju Thomas, a prolific writer whose career spanned over four decades, Lalithambika has made pivotal progress in engaging with themes of sexual agency but has also stuck to the ideal of woman defined as a companion and mother. This is not to say, however, that she has not explored escape from unsatisfactory situations in their domestic units. The following section examines Lalithambika’s use of writing as a tool to enter and locate herself in a male-dominated realm.

Writing as a Tool to Subvert Power Structures: Gender Renaissance in Early 20th Century Kerala

Several short stories of Lalithambika Antharjanam are autobiographical, which can be considered a powerful tool to herald social transformation and construct discourses of self and subjectivity. Thus, writing, by and large, became a vehicle for her to re-invent and re-assert herself and gain autonomy. Her conscious portrayal and re-enactment of *Nambudiri* women’s plight stand as a bold articulation of her thoughts on the dire need for social transformation. Despite awareness of the criticism that would engulf her life, creativity, and work, Lalithambika continued championing the cause of several illiterate *Nambudiri* women. In an interview with T. N Jayachandran “Anterjanam: Oru Padam,” Lalithambika openly expressed the concerns she faced as a woman writer: “No sooner does a woman write something than it starts a scandal...Even women whose writing has been accepted by society, who are well known and independent-minded, have to endure a slur on their names” (qtd. in Krishnankutty xxviii).

From many biographical sources on Lalithambika Antharjanam’s life, one can observe the struggle she undertook to break into the writers’ world, which was predominantly masculine. As a woman, she was subjected to restraints by her relatively progressive family, caste, and society. Many of her short stories subtly hint at the act of juggling she needed to perform in order to placate specified gender roles as a wife, a mother, and an *antharjanam*. In *Men Writing Women: Male*

Authorship, Narrative Strategies, and Woman's Agency in the Late-Victorian Novel, Molly Youngkin identifies three methods of expressing agency by women: consciousness, spoken word, and physical action (Youngkin ii). These are the cornerstone of women's expression in the public sphere, and creative expression became an effective tool in disseminating the need for empowerment among women by women. J. Devika, in her essay "Beyond Kulina and Kulata: The Critique of Gender Difference in the Writings of K. Saraswathi Amma," brings to attention the interesting binary interplay of personal lives and writings in feminist writing:

The works of Lalithambika Antharjanam were detrimental to Kerala's Brahmin reformism, yet, even in the 1930s, her writings display the critical distance from the latter in its acute awareness of the male-centredness of reformism. There is an abiding engagement with modern individualism and its implications for women in her work, transcending the horizons of dominant reformist aspirations. However, she has been mostly lauded for evocative depictions of the sighs, tears, and struggles of Malayali Brahmin women, or poetic rendering of some 'womanly' themes, especially motherhood. (Devika 205)

Lalithambika's crucial narrative strategy that registered protest was to re-imagine the maternal body, invest it with value, and locate a woman's originality within it. Devika concludes that "Antharjanam's effort to reconstruct rather than reject gender difference was all too easily 'tamed' into a romantic affirmation of motherhood..." (qtd. in Thomas 52). Furthermore, the most negative of all techniques of marginalization was applied to her writing—that of simply pretending that it did not exist. From many biographical sources on Lalithambika Antharjanam's life, one can observe her struggle to enter the writer's world. As a woman, she was subjected to the restraints of her family, caste and society. Many memoir excerpts in *Cast Me Out If You Will* mention that juggling the specified gender roles as a wife, a mother, and an *antharjanam* negatively affected her efforts to pursue a career as a full-time writer. In her foreword to *Cast Me Out If You Will*, Meena Alexander discusses the concept of "circumventing traditional hierarchies" and subsequent literary marginalization, and both those concepts are evident in her stories "The Goddess of Revenge" and "Is This Desirable?". Both these works reflect deeply on the internal struggle the writer is riddled with while balancing domestic life with the responsibility of a writer. The setting against which the protagonist approaches her creative passion and social responsibility is the same dilemma that the author herself experienced. In "Is This Desirable?" Lalithambika shines a light on the continually faltering support of her male counterparts in the reform movement. Lalithambika Antharjanam's writings show that identity construction is a temporal activity that must constantly be reconfigured due to socio-cultural confrontations and contradictions.

After 75 years of freedom, the State of Kerala has often found itself in a vortex of conflicts regarding the role of women and the space they occupy in the socio-cultural scene. However, the spirit of challenging patriarchy in hostile circumstances through writing, ignited by the early women writers like Lalithambika Antharjanam, remains undeterred and an epoch-making initiative. The space allotted to information on women's writings in history, however, remains minimal. In her essay "Outcaste Power: Ritual Displacement and Virile Maternity in Indian Women Writers," Meena Alexander refers to the location of these writers as "hierarchically displaced" by the traditional hegemonies (Alexander 18).

Lalithambika's writings not only represented the plight of *antharjanams* but subverted all the norms of genteel reformist writing of the 1930s by making her characters undertake bold steps. For example, in her short story, "Vidhibalam" (Strength of Fate), an aged *antharjanam* who is

ostracized gets married to a Muslim. Many of her short stories offer a discourse of resistance, delineating women's ways of negotiating with gender-biased spaces and alternative means to reinvent their lives and acquire some kind of autonomy. Resistance against patriarchy is not transacted by protests or vociferous ravings but through transgressions and the defense of transgressions. Body and physical intimacy often feature not as aspects involving guilt and subjugation but as tools of resistance in her narrative. The short story "Confession of Guilt" is a defense and justification of the protagonist's sexual transgression, whereby sexual exploits are used to revolt against Brahminical patriarchal codes.

In "The Goddess of Revenge," Lalithambika Antharjanam uses emotional outbursts by women to register resistance in spaces where resistance fails to embody, thereby challenging the status quo and equilibrium of the highly complicated system of layers and hierarchies manifested by *Nambudiri* men. With the Kuriyedathu Tatri case in 1905, a newspaper article reported that the *antharjanam* became a figure who was "unrepentantly sinful, calculating, ruthlessly bold and outspoken," who could argue "like a barrister" and defeat her opponents (qtd. in Devika, *Engendering*, 116). Lalithambika's recreation and recasting of Kuriyedathu Tatri in "The Goddess of Revenge" was a great catalyst and trailblazer for reform movements which overhauled the traditional image of *antharjanams* as a "mute spectator and victim" waiting for her redemption and remade her into a powerful woman thirsty for revenge. Lalithambika's protagonists threaten to expose and disintegrate the social fabric that enclosed and subjugated them. Lalithambika's Tatri accepted that she was the worst sinner and was ready to accept any kind of punishment for her transgressive behavior. She is nevertheless determined that she will not spare the men who created such circumstances in her life. Her aspiration for equality can be seen as an inconspicuous plea for gender equality in a highly patriarchal society that forcibly imposes and exerts the will of men due to their privileged status. The graphic representation of the *smarthavicharanam*⁹ acts as a reminder and a clarion call for women to realize and unleash their dormant potential. Furthermore, what adds to the reformist zeal invoked in Lalithambika Antharjanam's work is the recasting of previous images and discourses in theatre, novels, and folktales that represented *Nambudiri* men as simpletons, backward, and unadaptable. This negative representation of men further precipitated the reformer's desire to add more nuance to representations of her community in a society tremendously influenced by ideas of colonial modernity.

Conclusion

Jacques Lacan posits that "the subject" is often constituted through language; however, Foucault puts forth his proposition that "technologies of the self"¹⁰ allows individuals to behave, act, and think consciously, fashioning their own identities (Foucault 18-19). Thus, an analysis of women writers from the *Nambudiri* community of Kerala is not just an analysis of their literary genius but also a critique of the formidable landscape and circumstances in which they managed

⁹ *Smarthavicharam* is a trial for Brahmin women who have been suspected of adultery. This trial is conducted by Brahmin *Smarthas* belonging to certain families who have acquired the necessary knowledge through family tradition, study, and experience. See Rohini Nair.

¹⁰ Technologies of the self, according to Foucault, are tools that permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.

to survive and evolve as cultural contributors. References to women writers' literary contributions are often confined to certain general statements that evince conscious neglect of their importance. This marginalization verging on suppression of women's writings is a common phenomenon in the literary histories of the regional languages in India. To counter the denial of social decolonization, writers have to decolonize themselves from the constraints of social taboos and fears. Lalithambika Antharjanam uses a host of strategies—memory, gothic fantasy, and madness—to structure a discourse of rebellion against sexual politics. Thus, Lalithambika Antharjanam's writing can be counted as a voice with a robust narratorial presence that can also serve as a formidable contribution to history. The above analysis of women's writing thus poses the question of space occupied by women's voice as both a narratorial voice and representative category in the historiographic process.

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