

Converging Concerns, Diverging Destinies: A Reading of Lalithambika Antharjanam and K Saraswathi Amma

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Late nineteenth century has been a turning point in the history of India. The English East India Company consolidated its position in India by the mid nineteenth century. English education that had begun to take roots in India even before Macaulay's minutes of 1835, slowly paved the way for a new awakening in the field of intellectual thought and literature. By the turn of the 20th century, writers in Indian languages were writing novels and short stories that increasingly became the favourite mode of expression. The western values of fraternity, equality and liberty imbued from the writings of the English literary masters inspired a feudal India to re-consider their own position. This new awakening gave the much required impetus not only to the freedom movement but also to various struggles for social transformation. Women's cause was just one among these struggles, and women writers all over India responded to this clarion call. In Kerala's literary scape too things were not very different. In my paper, I would discuss the role of two women writers of the early twentieth century who paved the way for subsequent feminist writings in Malayalam literature. In the course of the paper, I intend to engage with the ways these writers articulated the concept of womanhood in a comparative framework, and critically analyse the responses their works generated.

Kerala has always been considered to be a progressive state in the history of Modern India. From the first democratically elected Communist government to the high human indices it maintains to this day, Kerala has been unique in the way it responded to political, intellectual and social challenges. The idea of the Kerala model of development with its many contradictions still manages to linger on. Even when the economy of the state has been qualified as a remittance economy, and the suicide rates are high, Kerala still scores in the fields of education, health and social welfare. The state still has relatively fewer number of caste conflicts and while the undercurrents cannot be completely ignored there has been a semblance of peace and unity in the State. This progressiveness has been the result of many factors including an early awakening amongst the lower castes and women, missionary activities, charismatic social reformers and communist interventions. The nineteenth century bore witness to the beginnings of many struggles that led to social reformation movements resulting in sweeping social transformations. One of the very first of such struggles was the fight of the Christian women converts from the channar caste who wanted to wear a 'melmundu' over their 'chatta', the long white blouse worn by Christian women. This enraged the upper castes since the use of an unstitched cloth to cover the upper part of the body was allowed only to the Namboodiri women when they go out of their homes. This is an instance when patriarchy and caste converged to claim right on the women's bodies by trying to manipulate what they should bare and

what they should wear (Chandrika 19). In 1888, Sree Narayana Guru established an ezhava Shiva at Aruvippuram, challenging the Brahmin hegemony on temples, Gods and worship. In 1915, the Pulaya women, responding to the call of Ayyan Kali, discarded the iron bangles and stone necklaces that they were mandated to wear. Though these incidents generated a series of attacks especially against lower caste women the resistance found its echo in the lives of upper caste women too. The 1920s and 30s found many voices within the nambuthiri community protesting against the orthodox customs and practices that invariably were pitted against women. Progressive men advocated for the education of women and encouraged them to step out of the domestic sphere. There were debates about traditions related to marriage, family property etc. The women of the Kerala Brahmin community formed Antharjana samajam which took part actively in all progressive activities and many times even provided critique to the apparent progressiveness of the men. Though the Nair community was perceived to be more accommodating towards women because of the matrilineal system it has been argued that women of the family were still under the control of the uncles, the reigning patriarch of the household. The element of choice in the practice of sambandham ¹ cannot be completely denied even though women could be manipulated by the power wielding men in the family. However, colonial rule brought in a distinctive patriarchal flavor and increasingly the practice of sambandham was used to malign the Nair women as wayward. The Keraleeya Nair samajam worked towards monogamy and the establishment of a patrilineal, nuclear family set up which was considered to be modern and acceptable. Though the eagerness of the men of these communities to act as the guardians and the harbingers of freedom to their women is obvious, the coming years saw a greater involvement of women in matters affecting them (Chandrika 87-88).

The presence of women in Malayalam literature can be traced back to the 18th century. The early recorded women writers belonged to elite, royal families and their literary ventures included Sanskrit kavyas, shlokas, hymns and songs for ottamthullal, thiruvathira, kaikottikali etc. They were home-tutored and many of them were well versed in Sanskrit and Malayalam, and some even in Tamil. By the end of the 19th century prose writings started to appear, Ambadi Karthyayani Amma being the first of them (James 101). As English education spread women writers too were influenced by the modern progressive ideas and many times these thoughts found expression in their creative works. This was also the time when the national movement gathered momentum. Many women from educated, elite and middle class families joined the movement as fresh ideas of freedom, equality and solidarity against an imperial power resulted in a new resolve and opened up a new world of opportunities to realize themselves. The early twentieth century saw women in various public roles as activists, freedom fighters, writers, poets, playwrights, actors and so on. Thus, the mid twentieth century proved to be a ripe setting for the progressive writings of Lalithambika Antharjanam and Saraswathi Amma.

Lalithambika Antharjanam was born to progressive parents who got their daughter educated in Malayalam, Sanskrit and English. Her father was a member of the Kshema Sabha, and her mother was a voracious reader who instilled the same habit in her daughter. Animated discussions about major political and social issues of the time were the norm of the house she grew up in in which women too participated. She grew up inspired by Gandhian ideology as many other children of her time. With marriage came many other responsibilities but she kept alive her love for writing and her social commitments. Antharjanam has written about the difficulties of finding time amidst the household

chores and child rearing which underlines the fact that how the very act of writing has been a struggle for women all over the world. The stories that she wrote expressed the deep anguish of the women of her community who were relegated to the domestic sphere (the word *antharjanam* literally means the people inside). The unique system prevalent among the *nambuthiri*'s mandated that only the eldest of the men could marry a woman from his own caste. The younger *nambuthiris* would have a *sambandham* with Nair women, and thus the children born out of that relationship were not heirs to the property of their father but would rather be taken care of by the Nair household. This practice led to elder *Nambuthiris* marrying more than once, some going to the extent of taking three to four wives, who could be young enough to be his daughters. This also resulted in a higher number of young widows in the household. Once widowed, the women were expected to live an ascetic's life. In short, almost every *nambuthiri* household held frustrated women. They were further controlled by very strict patriarchal as well as caste practices which denied them any life outside the *illam*. The first outburst against the oppression came in 1905, when Kerala was jolted by the revelations of *Thathrikutty* in the first *smarthavicharam*². But it still took a few more years for the women to speak up, and the first few among them included *Lalithambika Antharjanam*.

Antharjanam's stories relentlessly voiced the suppressed wails of the women of her community. One after another she sketches women who find themselves absolutely helpless in the face of a system that didn't attribute any importance to the lives or feelings of women, and considered them mere instruments for the pleasure of men. In the story *Prathikaradevatha* (*The Goddess of Revenge*), her protagonist is *Thathrikutty*, whose name the *antharjanams* were not even allowed to mention. In the story, the protagonist comes in search of the writer to narrate her side of the story. She justifies her sexual acts as a means to seek vengeance on the men and their double standards. The writer sympathises with her story, and observes that *Thathrikutty* represents the society. She epitomizes weakness that is seeking strength. She becomes a symbol of helpless womanhood seeking justice, and the humanity that bleeds, its feelings and urges trampled upon. Still she points out that an individual cannot take on the centuries old system and emphasizes that personal rebellions might not bring in the desired effect. But even when she underlines the need to build solidarity with other women, she acknowledges that *Tathi*'s audacity did act as a warning for the nonchalant patriarchal forces.

Stories such as '*Kuttasammatham*' (*Confession*) and '*Moodupadathil*' (*Behind the veil*) too vividly depict the inner struggles of women and their desire to find a meaningful place in the world. '*Kuttasammatham*' talks about a young widow who romanticizes Lord Krishna. She confesses she acted upon her sexual urges, and would rather take up the blame of it entirely on herself. Even when the story is titled *confession*, the young woman declares that if she committed a sin by giving into her physical urges, she is ready to give up her entire life for that sin. '*Moodupadathil*', on the other hand, depicts a woman who keeps her husband away in the memory of her lover. When he betrays her she withers away in pain. Before her death she comes back to her husband to ask for his forgiveness. '*Mamsanibadhamalla ragam*' (*Love is not carnal*), '*Bharthavinte Snehita*' (*Husband's lady friend*), explores man-woman relationships in new and diverse ways. While '*Mamsanibadhamalla Ragam*' explores the veracity of platonic love, '*Bharthavinte Snehita*' unravels how half-baked principles may come in the way of finding true companionship. '*Vivahamuhurtham*' (*The hour of the Wedding*) punctures the romantic expectations of a woman about matrimony right before she steps into it. However, the

most prominent theme in Antharjanam's stories remains motherhood. Stories such as 'Avivahitha' (The Unwedded woman), where a celebrated doctor gives up her career to marry the father of her foster son, and 'Mulappalinte manam' (The scent of breast milk) which glorifies motherhood in the character of Amminjiyamma whose breast milk can stop a riot in a village celebrates motherhood as the crowning glory of womanhood. 'Mulappalinte manam' starts with a few women, including the author, discussing family planning. Antharjanam reserves the most cynical remarks for the one who does not believe in having children. In the story, breast milk becomes a metaphor for the nurturing ways of Indian women, the effect of which would inspire nations of the world. The doctor in 'Avivahitha', deliberately decides not to have a family to concentrate on her career. But at the end of the story she is ready to give up all the hard work of her life, just to have the pleasure of being with her foster son. That she has to marry her foster son's father, a complete stranger, does not even bother her. 'Pancharayumma' (Sweet Kiss) is narrated from the point of view of a baby waking up from sleep, and ending up in the arms of his mother. The maternal heart of the writer is so palpable in this story in which she lovingly describes the baby's attempts at making sense of the physical things around him. Antharjanam herself was a mother of seven children and while she has commented on how difficult it is for a woman to find time for her creative pursuits, she never challenges motherhood as a restrictive experience.

Antharjanam's focus did not limit itself to women but she also commented on the class struggles, changing social structures and political ideologies. One of her most popular stories, 'Manikkan', depicts the life struggle of Karumban, the Pulayan and his bull, Manikkan. The story powerfully and poignantly portrays the bond between man and animal, and one becomes the image of the other in devastation and in hope. In 'Maalayogam' and 'Manushyaputhri', Antharjanam etches out the changing fortunes of the nambuthiri families in stark contrast to the earlier depictions of wealth and arrogance. Ironically, the worst affected are, again, the women. 'Gandhijikku Shesham' (After Gandhiji) talks about the decline of values in the political sphere while 'Dhirendu Majumdarinte Amma' (The Mother of Dhirendu Majumdar) invokes overtones of Toba Tek Singh in the moving pain of a mother who has lost all her sons to the freedom struggle but becomes an outsider in her own soil.

Written over a period of forty years the short stories of this prolific writer give a wholesome picture of the changing India especially with regard to its women. While the earlier stories unleash a vehement criticism against the patriarchal practices of the Nambuthiri community and speak about the need to educate and empower women, they also boldly speak about women's sexuality, which had been a taboo subject till date. One can see that while she is cynical many times about the kind of life marriage might offer women, she also does not depict many unmarried women in her stories. There are a few characters who are disillusioned with marriage and decide to get out of the relationship, like Devaki of her only novel *Agnisakshi*, but even they seem to ultimately yearn for love and belonging. Her writings uphold the concept of womanhood that does not step outside the conventional framework, but within this framework she advocates for more agency and a better understanding of the requirements of a compatible relationship.

Saraswathi Amma's writings are in sharp contrast. Born into a middle class Nair family, Saraswathi Amma was the youngest of the three sisters. Her father passed away when she was just 17. Though her studies were disrupted in between, she did manage to get a

BA degree in Malayalam. She joined the local fund audit department as inspector in 1945. Saraswathi Amma didn't have a cordial relationship with her sisters, and she lived alone in a house near the family home. She never married though she brought up her nephew as her own son. Saraswathi Amma is said to have withdrawn from the world after his untimely death. Though many of her stories have been published in Malayalam periodicals of the time she died unsung. In fact, her unique nature coupled with the kind of stories and articles she wrote gave her the image of a man-hater. S Guptan Nair, a college batch mate, in his note about Saraswathi Amma recalls that her unorthodox ways had got her the name vattu Saraswati (crazy Saraswathi) even in the college (Amma 9).

Saraswathi Amma mainly wrote short stories but she has also penned a novel, a play and a few prose pieces. Many of her short stories explore the place of women in the family and society that was moving away from traditional ways to herald in modern values. Inevitably, she looks at the world as a battleground for women who have to fight for what they consider right, as against what society decides for them. Invariably, women are forced to compromise and give up on their dreams but still the world Saraswathi Amma draws is without much rancour. For example, in the story 'Bahumanappetta Amma' (Respected Mother), we see a woman who decides to remain single in life. After higher education she becomes a teacher but the societal pressure finally forces her into marriage. The conversation between Subhadra, the protagonist and her friend Vishalakshi lays bare the problems an unwedded woman faces in the society. The story tells us how the priorities of a woman, once married and a mother, change completely. The intellectual pursuits of a woman are looked down on in a typical patriarchal society that thinks a woman would never be able to match a man. 'Penbudhi' (A woman's Wisdom) categorically states marriages lead to 'ennui' of the intellect of the women, that for women who are born to be parasites intelligence is a curse. The story 'Sthreejanmam' (The life of Woman) ridicules the romantic notions of women about men and marriage even when both turn out to be of not much use to a woman's life. The story 'Ramani' is a tongue-in-cheek reply to Changampuzha's *Ramanan* which had caught the imagination of the young people of Kerala and is a celebration of doomed love. Amma observes that men have various reasons to heap atrocities on women but they can be outsmarted, and they ought to be outsmarted. Many of her stories resemble a tug of war between man and woman. In 'Paathi Pathivrathyam', (Part Fidelity) Padmam, a bright woman when confronted with her husband's infidelity stages a suicidal attempt, in 'Barthrithvam' (Husbandhood), a husband is stunned when he realises after his wife's death that she was having an affair with another man. However, he is brought down from his moral high horse when he is reminded by the lover about his own past affair, and how his wife had put up with his indifference during the early days of marriage. The story interestingly ends in a compromise between the husband and the lover. 'Pavangal' is yet another satirical take on how men can be brought around if a woman decides to act wisely. In the story Sumathi's uncharacteristic violent outburst silences her husband but it is also a reminder about how a man who is a paragon of liberal views during courtship changes his shape once he becomes the husband.

Saraswathi Amma tears into marriages that turn into business in stories such as 'Vivaha vyavasayam' (The Business of Marriage) and notes through the protagonist Vasudevan Nair that women are means of good profit for men. 'Prathamarithri' (First Night) sketches another man who decides to marry to make money to get back to his father's home. Many of her stories etch out portraits of women who lose their vibrancy and become

victims of male chauvinism and abuse. 'Anthikkoottu', (A companion for the Night) 'Veettilum Purathum' (Inside the home and Outside), 'Madhuvidhu' (Honeymoon) etc. show how women suffer humiliation and neglect but still hold on because the sense of sacrifice comes naturally to them. Still Saraswathi Amma is not blind to the double standards of women too. In the story 'Vivahasammanam' (Wedding Gift) Shanti wryly comments on the symbolic wedding gift Sukeshini receives from her previous lover and comments that there is a profitable side to love as well. Stories such as 'Keezhjeevanakkari' (The subordinate) and 'Prathamathri' are more morbid in nature, and underline the most terrible ways women suffer at the hands of men. 'Achhan evide' (Where's father?) a story that Saraswathi Amma mentioned in an interview as one of her favourites, forces one to think about the price women pay for the ideological pursuits of men.

These stories undoubtedly are in favour of women but are not blind to the shortfalls of them. While she criticises the ways in which a woman is taken for granted, and how her unique capabilities are crushed under the yoke of responsibility of home and child bearing she is not always apathetic to men. In stories such as Chola Marangal (Trees of Shade), Saraswathi Amma portrays a man and a woman from different faiths who were once lovers but both of whom have now turned to asceticism. They conclude that what they do for humanity is far better than what they could have done together as man and wife. In the story 'Pareekshanam' (Temptation), a young man moves away from temptation though he could have had his way with a young girl. In many stories men do reflect on the plight of women and the way they could be swayed with and by emotions but unfortunately they do not stop exploiting them. Saraswathi Amma, in an interview, expressed surprise at her stories being labelled as anti-men. She clarified that she had only been noting down her own and others' experiences in her stories. She points out how she had to face the world without the shield of a man after her father's death. She declares without doubt that what she faced was a man's world. There were serious restrictions on women about what she could do and what she should not do. It was only natural that these experiences crept into her stories. In fact, her friends and critics like Guptan Nair and K Surendran write in their memories about Saraswathi Amma that she seemed to have more male friends than female friends. Her status as an unmarried woman would definitely have added to her image as a man-hater. Her articles such as "Purushanmarillatha Lokam" (A World without Men) and Njan oru Bharthavayirunnenkil (If I were a Husband) would have added to this view.

The article "Purushanmarillatha Lokam" envisages a world without men and explores what happens to women's lives in such a scenario. In a humorous take, she elaborates that the only thing one might miss if men are not around would be the lyrically romantic words with which they attempt to describe the beauty of women. She takes a dig at the poets and writers saying that literature survives on such exaggerated romantic outpourings from men. But in return a woman gets the freedom to travel anywhere and do any kind of job and wear anything that she wants, may be even a folded mundu. She wonders in a world where an atom bomb has become a possibility if there could be ways that women could conceive without men. She concludes that however she is aware that there are many for whom freedom is not a priority. Another essay "Njan oru Bharthavayirunnenkil" imagines what would be different if she were a husband. The essay highlights that what she would value in a woman is her intellectual abilities and underlines the need for every woman to be independent in life. Amma stresses the practical aspects of matrimony rather than the emotional side of it. However, one cannot but note the active role the husband is expected to play in shaping his wife into a rational being!

What is most unique in Saraswathi Amma's writings is her inimitable humour. Humour becomes her weapon to fight for a better world for women but she does not always place man in the position of the accused. Amma vehemently criticises the trivialities and frivolousness of women in her works and mocks at feminine charm. She reveals in her interview that women were more unhappy with her stories than men. A character named Shanti appears in many stories that becomes the representative of the writer herself. There definitely is female camaraderie in her stories but this solidarity is not blind to the faults of women, and their complicity in maintaining the status-quo. Her voice many times takes the role of a wry and objective commentator with a pungent sense of humour. In 'Penbudhi', when one of the characters lists her children and their age, the first person narrator comments that it looks like a special calendar. In just one line Saraswati Amma derides the society who makes baby making machines of women, and also the women who cannot make any better of their lives.

Both Antharjanam and Saraswathi Amma together lit up Malayalam literature of the twentieth century with a feminine consciousness. Both of them ardently believed in the cause of women and protested against the way women were treated in a male centred society. Both the writers engaged with their own experiences and thus their voices are authentic and genuine. Though Saraswathi Amma does not seem to get out of her immediate context of middle class life, Antharjanam definitely has a wider context of national politics and class-caste struggles which are almost absent in Saraswathi Amma. But one can also see that Saraswathi Amma is more unorthodox in her views and more scathing in her attack of male supremacy. While Antharjanam looks for a world of peace and dignity for women, she also upholds the feminine qualities of sacrifice and compromise. Saraswathi Amma too does not negate men but in her perfect world women can find happiness without the help of men. Though the anxiety of a woman writer is not visible in the stories of Saraswathi Amma, she mentioned in an interview that writing was not considered to be a worthwhile activity for a woman (Amma 1018). However, she believed that having a career was finally acknowledged to be dignified for women and that was one change her stories could bring in. One can also conclude that Saraswathi Amma being unmarried could get more time and space for herself unlike Antharjanam who had to struggle for both these. Antharjanam's language, especially in the earlier stories, touches upon melodrama while Saraswathi Amma's crisp language and harsh ridicule fall like whip lashes. However, these whip lashes seem to have hurt the sentiments of the progressive Malayali.

Saraswathi Amma was a prolific writer, and there was a time when her stories appeared in periodicals very regularly. She was the contemporary of Antharjanam, Thakazhi, Basheer and many others who we associate prominently with the short story genre in India. The Malayalam literary scene like many other literatures of the time was dominated by men. However, while Antharjanam was celebrated as a mother figure in Malayalam literature, Saraswathi Amma was completely forgotten. Of course Antharjanam had a longer literary career while Saraswathi Amma suddenly stopped writing in 1960s and never could resume it as she had planned. But that does not justify the way she was forgotten so completely by the Malayali literary world.

Meena Alexander points out that early women writers all over India had "to struggle with iconic images of feminine, sanctioned and prescribed by culture" (367) despite the awakening of the feminine imaginative power and female consciousness, which hitherto were subservient to or at best mediated by man. The new modern woman was expected

to get an education to take better care of home and as Saraswathi Amma notes it was fashionable to have an educated wife. It gave the aura of progressiveness to man but it subjected women to a “new patriarchy”, according to Partha Chatterjee. In his much acclaimed essay he articulates how the new patriarchy casted women in the nurturing role of ideal homemaker, mother and goddess which highlighted her feminine qualities and suppressed her sexuality (630). Home remained her main terrain of activity, and a woman out of home was expected to be an ascetic at best or a prostitute, at the worst. In the new modern nation independent single women were not accounted for. Even after 75 years of freedom, this remains very much true. Kerala has very often found itself in conflicts especially regarding the gendered public spaces. News of sexual harassment, moral policing, stalking do not make much news in Kerala unless they lead to violent reactions from victims³. Even after the active involvement of women in all walks of life if public platforms are still hostile to their causes, the private world too is not any better. Pointing out to the dichotomy between the progress women made in the field of education and healthcare and their status in the Kerala society, researchers have invited attention to the increasing number of suicides and the rapidly changing sex ratio in Kerala. The number of domestic violence cases and divorces are also on the rise.

“The conflict arises because the educated women in Kerala are independent and unwilling to accept the traditional dominance of men in all spheres of life. Women in Kerala have high expectations of themselves because they have been imbibed with the importance of acquiring education and literacy. Yet the social structure is characterized by the dominance of males who restrict the choices of women in the labor market and in household decision-making process” Mitra and Singh (1240)

This statement underscores the contradiction between expectation and reality with regard to women in Kerala and stresses how modernity and promises of a new equal world have failed them. Saraswathi Amma’s life and works are examples of this dichotomy that still persists.

Saraswathi Amma perplexed the society when she could not be fixed into a framework that demands women to be defined in relation to men. May be, the role she would have been most comfortable with could be that of a friend to women as well as to men. But then that category did not, and may still not, exist in the Malayali male psyche. In her stories, we find that witty repartees and vibrant exchanges are part of a man-woman friendship but the moment friends become husband and wife, the power equation changes. In the story ‘Double Act’ Sita aspires to be a friend to Sudheeran Nair, while he goes on to dub her either as a lover or as a sister, according to his convenience. Sita clarifies to Soudamini that a duty-bound sibling love is different from an emotional friendship, and reiterates that it is friendship that she feels for Sudhi. Friends can be unequivocal supporters as well as objective critics and the relationship is based on the concept of equality between two free individuals. One will not get intimidated, oppressed or humiliated by true friendship. However, in the story “Just One Night’ Chitra observes that men are unable to love women as friends. “At the bottom of their friendship smoulders the carnal desire marked by gender difference,” (Amma 77). Saraswathi Amma has mentioned how she herself had to forego friendships with men since they brought in desire into it. She thus points out to the difficulty in maintaining friendship between man and woman and interestingly puts the onus of it on men. In one of the stories she mentions that for women desire does not come naturally. It is stirred up in her by the protestations of man. This could be interpreted as a stand that negates women’s sexuality

and thus falling into the trap patriarchy has set. However, there is a difference in the way patriarchy attempts to suppress female sexuality by branding women as seducers, whimsical fools and whores or by elevating feminine energy as the all-encompassing prakriti. For Saraswathi Amma, women were as intellectual as men and if given an opportunity she would define her own happiness. She herself has never expressed regret in not marrying. But society does not approve of women who remain unmarried but also entertain friendships with men. Louisa, the protagonist of 'Premabhajanam', is in search of her other half but she rejects desire and a conventional marriage. She flirts with young men as she believes that a younger man may balance the power equation in a relationship that usually favours man because of his older age and physical strength. J Devika comments on the element of androgyny in Louisa. She undeniably combines the masculine and the feminine, and defies the categories of the kulina and the kulada. (221) In a society where terms like kulasthree⁴ are still used in celebratory tone, Saraswati Amma resists all kinds of categorisation through her too individualistic, too rational and therefore 'masculine' ways. Interestingly, Guptan Nair puts this as Aantatvam⁵, the male spirit (Amma 9).

J Devika comments: "Antarjanam's effort to reconstruct rather than reject gender difference was all too easily 'tamed' into a romantic affirmation of motherhood. Saraswati Amma's rejection of gender difference, her strident claims to androgyny, provoked a horror that affirmed her as an outsider, a freakish man-hater to be consigned outside as an abject" (223). Antharjanam, though late, did receive the Kerala Sahitya Akademi (1977) and Kendra Sahitya Akademi award (1976) for her novel *Agnisakshi*. Saraswathi Amma's death seems to have not deserved even an obituary in newspapers (Surendran 1023). It took almost two decades to resurrect her from her literary past. Undeniably, Saraswati Amma was a writer who was much ahead of her times. Her ideal woman is one who is free to live her life in her own terms, and her ideal man would rather let her be. Is such a union even possible? To Saraswathi Amma platonic companionship could have been a more meaningful engagement between the genders. But then friendship is a much suspected and misused word between a man and a woman even in the 21st century. A woman who would like to retain her individuality and also would like to have friendship with men is never free from the surveillance of the society. She does not fall in the neat category of lover, wife, sister, mother or daughter so that the boundaries are clear to the man. Such women unsettle man and his sureties. Such women are convenient to be branded vattu, vedi⁶ or at least a 'feminichi'.

Notes

- ¹ A practice that allowed Nair women to have sexual relationship with men. This was not recognized as a legal relationship in the official records. See 'Courting Legitimacy or Delegitimizing Custom? Sexuality, Sambandham, and Marriage Reform in Late Nineteenth-Century Malabar' by Praveena Kodoth
- ² The trial of a nambuthiri woman who has committed adultery. The first smarthavicharam was held in 1905, and the woman who was put to trial was Kuriyedathu Thathri. She named 65 men including her own father and brother as co-accused all of whom were ostracized. See CS Chandrika for details.
- ³ Very recently, in September 2020, some women, derogatorily qualified as 'feminichis' (derogatory word for feminists) made news when they assaulted a man who had publicly derided feminists of Kerala. He posted on his youtube channel an explicitly abusive and defaming tirade against some women questioning their morality, personal choices and even criticising their physical attributes to come to the conclusion that they were worthy of contempt from all men. However, what created more furore was not the video itself but the way the women hit back at him abusing him and posting a video of the assault. All the three women involved are single and many social media comments highlighted this as an evidence of their promiscuity.
- ⁴ A woman born into a good family, who observes traditions and remains within her 'limits'.
- ⁵ As against "aanatham", or masculinity.
- ⁶ Colloquial word for a prostitute.

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