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In the Wake of the Memoir Boom: New Rhetoric of Woman's Identity

In the recent years, the autobiographical project has attained much critical attention as it has the potential to be the text of the oppressed, forging a right to speak both for and beyond the individual. The genre of autobiography seems to be one of the most direct ways of countering silences and absences. According to Georges Gusdorf “the autobiographer gives himself the job of narrating his own history” (Gusdorf 40). Hence writing an autobiography becomes an attempt to explore one's identity, a quest for identity and thereby tries to give the self a narrative. Women try to assert their personal voice by imprinting themselves into the culture through self- narratives, which helps them to identify themselves and give them a voice.

Autobiography can appear in many forms such as diaries, interviews, memoirs, poetry and even criticism. In a historical perspective, one can see the potential of the form of diary which gives freedom to express one's thoughts without the anxieties of publicizing it. In an autobiography, the woman tries to find a place within herself and tries to explore her own identity. Hence, the genre offers a space for freedom and potentiality which helps women reach towards “I”. Writing for her becomes a quest, a process of self- recognition. It's quite important to identify individual autobiographies from literary history and to re- read them

with a perspective on gender. Sidonie Smith in her *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography* has said "While women have been relegated to a negative position in culture, they have nonetheless resisted this assignment' . . . by becoming 'subject(s) in discourse, rather than remaining 'subject(s) of discourse'" (Smith 51).

A woman, who is involved in the process of writing or re- writing the stories already written about her, is violating a cultural construct of her femininity as passive, weak and hidden. In attempting to give themselves a voice, in portraying their life saga, they are also engaged in re- writing the social and cultural background in which they have lived and survived. Hence in this process, autobiography turns out to be a platform in which there is mediation between the society and the individual. In this light, it would be worthy to look into the memoir written by Devaki Nilayamgode, *Antharjanam- Memoirs of a Namboodiri Woman*.

"How many doors would we have to break down in order to reach that world of security and love that we longed for?" (Nilayamgode xvii) asks Lalithambika Antarjanam, one of the greatest heroines of reformism in Kerala and of Malayala Brahmin community reformism, in her autobiographical piece, *Athmakathaiku oru Aamukham (1969)*. Her recollections in her autobiography, stresses not only the oppressiveness within the traditional Namboodiri community but also the strangeness of their lives. In Devaki's memoir too, she addresses the suppressive forces in her community as well as the difficulties that she had to face as a woman.

One of the prominent Namboodiri reformers of early twentieth century Kerala, V. T. Bhattathiripad, once remarked that the antarjanams resembled the discoloured bell- metal pots wasting away inside the lofts of the Namboodiri homesteads. K. Devaki Antarjanam, Member of Sree Mulam Legislative Assembly in the princely state of Travancore remarked in a speech in the Assembly in 1937,

Most antarjanams observe ghosha(seclusion). They have eyes, but are prohibited from seeing anything pleasant; they have legs, but their movements are circumscribed . . . hence an antarjanam is a jailed creature. They are constantly being watched; they are not permitted to breathe fresh air, to see the world. An antarjanam is born crying, lives her life in tears and dies.

Sambandham, which literally means ‘alliance’ or ‘connection’ existed in the Malayalee Brahmin community, the system of primogeniture in which only the eldest son could marry from his own caste. Younger males were to seek alliances from the women of the matrilineal castes, which included the Nairs, Kshathriyas and the temple castes. Children from such marriages were members of their mother’s families, with no claims upon their father’s. But this form of primogeniture got denounced in the radical wave of reformism within the Namboodiri reform movement of the 1930s as it had promoted irresponsibility among young male members, which added to the misery of the *antharjanams*.

Gender played a major role in the internal regulation among the Malayala Brahmins. The Namboodiri women were virtual prisoners of the namboodiri illams. After puberty, the women had to observe seclusion (*ghosha*) and they moved out of their houses in the cloak and the large cadjan umbrella (*marakkuda*)(xxi) They should not see men nor do the men have any chance to see the ladies. Apart from this there will be at least one maid with her who though a maid is in reality a spy for the family so that the umbrella is fully used for the purpose intended. The maid also makes sounds to keep away other people from their way: “Each had a chaperone who led the way, shouting ‘Yaa... hey...yaa..hey...’” Even the birth of girls was not considered auspicious, mainly because of the burden of dowry they would later bring on the family. She remarks, ". . . there were special prayers and pujas for a baby boy. if the child was a boy, servants ululated and announced the happy event. The birth itself of girls was considered as unwelcoming because of the burden of dowry that will have to paid

at the time of their marriage. The author vividly describes the agonies and torments the girls and women had to undergo, the daily rituals, conventions and the atmosphere etc of the period of her childhood, youth and before her birth. It may appear to be fiction that men very rarely see their daughters not to speak of the non communication from the father to the daughters. If a girl, irikanammas conveyed the news with soft knocks on the door and in muted whispers" (Antharjanam 8). After birth the namboodiri girl children can be with the mothers till they get the mothers' breast milk. After that the children will be under the care of servant ladies.

The namboodiris were allowed to marry as many ladies as available. Only the eldest Namboodiri can marry and the younger ones have to go to ladies of lower communities for their sexual needs. This is to see that the property of the family is kept intact without division so that the clout of the community does not get diluted by fragmenting the properties. For this purpose they introduced matrilineal system in the Nair community. The younger namboodiris can have sexual relations with the lower community especially the Nair and have no responsibility to the children or the lady. He has only to give one pair of mundu (Dhothi – veshti) on the occasion of Onam, Vishu and Thiruvathira. In the book the author points out that her father married at about the age of 54 and her mother was the third wife whose age at marriage was eighteen(3). The author was the 6th child of her mother. Within 1 year the 7th child was on the way and the father died. This is more less the condition of many illams where the young girls/ladies will have to spend the whole life alone uncared for in some dark corner of the house. But in most illams there will be more than one wife living together with the strong one suppressing, harassing and humiliating the others.

Devaki Nilayamgode's memoir recounts the trials and difficulties of the women in the Namboodiri community in the late nineteenth and in the early twentieth century. The life of the antharjanams, "the inside folks" were not so familiar to the public of that times. As their

lives not so much revealed to the public, there remained a aura of fascination towards their lives, The memoir by Devaki brings forth the elements of oppression in their community especially those faced by the women in the community. Though an autobiography, this work can also be considered as a reference book of the social conditions and in particular, the life styles and situations of the Kerala Brahmins of that time. Nilayangode describes in great detail the travails, girls and women had to undergo, the rituals, the conventions, the ambience and atmosphere of the world they grew up in. The writer actually comes out as an observer of the world in which she is involved.

Firmly rooted in a long history of politico- cultural authority and material dominance, the namboodiris had a dominant position in Malayalee society of the early twentieth century. Life in illams, the households of Namboodiris, who dominated Kerala's economic, political and cultural life for centuries, was difficult for the antharjanams. In the tradition-bound inner chambers of illams, women struggled for their rights, for authority and their lives revolved around daily chores of cooking, poojas and prayers. They were not allowed to look at men; nor did men have a chance to look at them. The author describes in great detail the travails, girls and women had to undergo, the rituals, the conventions, the ambience and atmosphere of the world they grew up in.

Human relationships were different these households, of which the author notes that "men very rarely saw their daughters. Conversations between them were rarer still. In fact, in those days it was considered wrong to pay special attention to one's children."(8) Nilayangode was born in a relatively prosperous household and was married at the age of fifteen into another prosperous, but less traditional, family. That was the time when the community was in the grip of social changes, pioneered by men and, in much smaller numbers, women too. Deeply human, she invokes personalities from her past, places them in the context of their environment and vividly describes them.

Untouchability and inapproachability were strictly practised and the readers get to know the ridiculous extent to which these affected the daily lives of both men and women.

The book gives a vivid picture of all the aspects of her life - the dress codes in childhood and later period, the games allowed for children to play, the customs to be observed, the festival celebrated, food habits and means of transport, relationships with servants and the weather. Though there are several books and articles on the life of the namboodiri families and the ladies, this is the first book explaining the real full length first hand personal account of the life of an Antharjanam, bringing forth a page of the social history. Pakavoor Illam with and the routine life of the ritual baths, plain and colorless cloths, with no jewelry or even flowers, with no parental love and affections left in the hands of maids , Devaki's life is portrayed in all its complexities. The visits of the traders or physicians during the childhood were the occasional happy moments in the lives of these women.

Devaki also brings in the horrific lives of the widows in the Namboodiri community. She says: "In the Namboodiri community, nothing was considered a greater sign of misfortune than the sight of a widow. She was unwanted and referred to as the woman without the marital symbol, the thaali around the neck. It was a bad omen to see her in any auspicious occasion" (78). It was believed during these times that husband's death was caused by the ill-fated alignment of stars in his wife's horoscope. Hence, because of the "the horrifying state" in which the widows lived in, made these women pray for longevity of their husbands. She adds "Retaining her married state was considered to be a woman's greatest good fortune. Therefore, leisure time was mostly devoted in holding her thaali and reciting mantras for the husband's well-being" (80)

Hence, the contemporary forms of memoir writing attempt to expose how autobiographical acts take place at cultural sites where discourses intersect, conflict and compete with one another. Through a performative dialogism, narrators are placed in

complex and contradictory self-positioning which help them to understand their own positions in a better light. In these ways, the terms of the narrator-audience relationship are being renewed and renegotiated by developing new rhetorics of identity and strategies of self-representation. Indeed, life-writing in the contemporary times has turned out to be a flexible set of discourses and practices for adapting voices, claiming spaces, confronting grief, resituating sexuality, imagining nature and negotiating celebrity.

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