

The Revelation of an Excommunicated Woman: Tatri as The Goddess of Revenge Lalithambikam Antharjanam's Prathikaradevatha

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Abstract

'Smarthavicharam' was a much debated topic in the Kerala society during 1900's, in connection with the excommunication of Kuriedath Tatri. But this was said revolutionary as Tatri was courageous enough to reveal the name of adulterers. Unlike Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter*, Tatri thought that both the people involved in adultery were sinners. Lalithambika Antharjanam's *Prathikaradevatha* stands anew from other stories as it is told from the perspective of Tatri herself. This paper tries to study the inner consciousness of Tatri; how herself is revealed to another Namboodiri woman that is the writer herself, many decades after the excommunication. The spirit reveals the struggle of a high-class woman in her community and questions the stereotypical patriarchal notions that transformed her to become the 'Goddess of Revenge' from a normal girl of hope and dreams.

Keywords: Inner consciousness, patriarchal society, revenge.

Ah, revenge. It's one of the classic literary masterplots, where the protagonist believes he's been wronged and seeks to retaliate against the antagonist. But did you know that revenge can also be a literary theme? How it manifests through the plot and characters will depend on what kind of story the author wants to tell. But regardless of the protagonist's motivations, his target, and the impact his pursuit has on other characters, all revenge tales shed light on the destruction resulting from the protagonist's actions, from the loss of his morality to the price he and others may have to pay. (<https://diymfa.com/writing/revenge-literary-theme>)

Revenge has always been a theme or motif for many genres of literature right from the earlier periods. Revenge tragedies and characters are always there in academic scholarships. If it was revenge plays in the older times, the theme entered into other genres of literature too. The characters, especially, the protagonists never sat passively considering the tragedy happened to them as fate, in spite they go for taking revenge against the people who wronged them.

Though the theme of revenge literature may be same, that a single or a group of people taking revenge against the sin committed against them, the method of avenging will be different according to the writers or the character of the protagonist. Unlike the fictional revenge stories, there are realistic revenge stories, which shook the whole society of those times. One such story that happened in the Kerala was the 'Smarthavicharam', a communal trial of Tathrikutty, which was in turn the trial of men folk- the revelation of the Goddess of revenge. Thatrikutty's story of revenge has become a theme of writing for many writers. Madampu Kunjukuttan's novel *Bhrashtu* is based on the real story of Kuriyedath Tathri

and her smarthavicharam. But Lalithambika Antharjanam's *Prathikaradevatha*, the short story is more like a confession of Namboodiri woman, who is helpless and marginalised. Along with the revelation of the story written in the form of an imaginative conversation between the writer and the spirit of Tathri, this short story throws light on the life and sufferings of Antharjanams, both in their family and community.

Lalithambika Antharjanam was born on March 30, 1909 to a traditional Namboodiri family in Kottavattom in Kollam district, Kerala. Unlike many Namboodiri girls of her generation, Lalithambika's parents, particularly her progressive father, allowed her to secure an informal primary education along with her brothers. This helped her to have knowledge on literature, religion, nationalism etc. The girls of her community were denied of all such freedom. But her father arranged a private tuition as he wanted his daughter to be a literate one.

In one of the stories told about her birth, as recounted in her memoirs, Lalithambika Antharjanam, tells of an incident that reveals the condition of women in Namboodiri families at that time. Lalithambika writes of herself in the third person in *Balyasmriti (Childhood Memories)*, and in Gita Krishnankutty's translation in the collection *Cast Me Out If You Will* (1997), we can infer with absolute clarity the domesticated shock of this incident for both the father and the daughter. Lalithambika writes,

"When her father, a learned man of progressive views, heard that a daughter had been born to him, he exclaimed angrily, "No, I will not live here any longer. I'll go away, maybe to Madras, become a Christian, and marry an Englishwoman."

"And what if she has a daughter too?" asked my mother.

"At least I will be allowed to bring her up like a human being. I will have the liberty to educate her, give her the freedom to grow, get her married to a good man."

(<http://feminisminindia.com>)

Lalithambika's father's words underscore a father's helplessness at the suffering of a generation of Namboodiri women in Kerala, including foreseeing the same for his own newborn daughter, at the turn of the last century.

The Namboodiri castes in Kerala were mostly wealthy landowners whose influence extended to the royal houses of Travancore and Malabar. They were considered the upper caste community who enjoyed all freedom in the society. Their house called "Mana" were more like local governing body in the concerned locality they lived. They were widely regarded as the highly learned people and custodians of the Hindu scriptures. Since everyone respected them, they held an upper hand, which at times crossed the limits by handling law by themselves. Many of the caste revolts in Kerala were against the atrocities of such Namboodiri or Brahminical rules, which oppressed and mistreated the people of other castes and women in the society.

While Namboodiri men wielded a great deal of social, cultural, and personal power, the community lived by a strict patriarchal and patrilineal code of ritual seclusion for their women, often giving prepubescent girls in marriage to men fifty or sixty years older than them, consigning women exclusively to the kitchen at puberty, forbidding them from getting an education, prescribing rigorous ritual seclusion for widows, including child widows, prohibiting widow remarriage, and casting out or ostracising women from family and community if they dared to question, confront or reject any of the strictures placed upon them. The term "*antharjanam*" is a Namboodiri caste name; it literally means "*one who lives in the interiors*." A cognate is the gendered feminine form "*akathullol*" or "*one who is inside*." (<http://feminisminindia.com>)

This abovementioned issue of Namboodiri women is being discussed by many activists and writers. Lalithambika Antharjanam is one such writer who wrote on the struggles and painful life of “antharjanams” inside and outside their family. Being a one among the community, she had the first-hand experience on the sufferings of the women of her community. Although she belonged to the Namboodiri community, her works exposed the hypocrisy, violence and injustice with which women were treated in Namboodiri society. She was attracted to the ideas of Gandhi, Vivekananda and Tagore. Along with that, there were many social reform movements happening in Kerala, which addressed several issues like social inequities, particularly against the non-Hindu religions, lower caste people and women, and against the caste, religion and gender prejudices. These oppressive practices included untouchability, atrocities against women, child marriage and the feudal economic system. The reformers Sree Narayana Guru, Kumaran Asan, writer-activists such as V. T. Bhattathiripad, who wrote *Adukkalayilninnu Arangathekku (From the Kitchen to the Stage)* and M. R. Bhattathiripad, who wrote *Marakkudayile Mahanarakam (The Hell behind the Umbrella Screen)* influenced Lalithambika Antharjanam. These influences gave her writings new dimensions.

In 1932, Lalithambika, who was by now married to a loving and supportive husband who encouraged her intellectual labors and social activism on behalf of women and the marginalised, inspired by the internal discussions about putting an end to the ritual seclusion of Namboodiri women, attended a Nair Sammelanam organised by MannathPadmanabhan to honor two Namboodiri women, ParvathiNenminiMangalam and Arya Pallam, who had thrown away their umbrellas and oversawl coverings. (<http://feminisminindia.com>)

Some of the works of Lalithambika Antharjanam were written from the perspective of such liberated women of Namboodiri community. A few of Lalithambika's stories, such as *Prathikaradevatha (The Goddess of Revenge)* and *Kuttasammatham (Admission of Guilt)* are milestones in the great progressive leap she brought to Namboodiri women's social and cultural liberation. These stories directly exposed the hypocrisy of the Namboodiri men and their tedious rituals to ostracize their women who engaged in sexual relations with men of their choice through a ritual trial known as *smarthavicharam*.

Prathikaradevatha, a short story by Lalithambika Antharjanam is based on the real life of Kuriyedath Tathri, who was excommunicated from the Namboodiri caste for her adultery. She had to face “Smaathavicharam”, (meaning 'inquiry into the conduct'), was the trial of a Namboodiri woman and fellow male adulterers who were accused of illicit relationship and adultery. If the accused woman was found guilty, she and the men found involved with her were excommunicated or outcasted from the caste. This is called “Brashtu”. “The trial was mainly conducted by the smārthans from three Bhattathiri families. They are Pattachomayarath Mana, VellaykatMana and Moothamana. Moothamana Bhattathiris did the smarthavicharams in Travancore, Vellaykat Mana Bhattathiris did the smarthavicharams in Malabar and PattachomayarathManaBhattathiris had the right to conduct smarthavicharams in the whole of Kerala. The permission of the Mahārāja (king) was necessary to start a smārthavichāram.^[3] The practice is nonexistent today and last reportedly took place in 1918.” (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wik>).

These brutal kind of atrocities were never questions and majority of the women folk involved in the trial had to undergo severe trials and punishments till they confess or found either guilty or innocent. There six stages of “vicaharam” or trial, which extended days. Since it was the practice of an upper caste society, no one dared to challenge or question these kind of misconducts.

The most sensational Smarthavicharam was of Kuriyedath Tathri that happened in 1905. The trial The tria

I lasted for six months. The trial was conducted by the bhattathiris from pattachomayarithmana. The verdict was pronounced on the night of 13 July 1905, indicting Tathri and the other accused men. It is said that there were 65 accused men and she was asked to name them and substantiate it by narrating their body marks. The accused were men of high caste, influential and reputed in the society. There were Namboodiris, Nairs, Ambalavasis and even some Muslim men. It was said that from the accounts of people who recount the tale, the Raja of Cochin stopped the trial since his name was next on her list.

Prathikaradevathais like a revelation of Tathri herself to the writer. The identity and consciousness of an excommunicated woman, the struggles she had in her life and the deliberate revenge she did against her husband and all other men who sinned along with her were explained in this small story. The story is narrated in the form of a conversation. One day, while the writer was sitting thinking about the topic to write, she heard some noise outside the room. She confesses that she is a coward by nature and so she closed and bolted all doors and windows. "The light from the lamp on the table crept out through the window and cast fearful shadows onto the thick darkness outside. The hooting of the many owl families that were my, neighbors sounded like a warning in my ears. I must confess: I am a coward by nature. Especially at this deceptive hour of the night." (Devika, 1). Even the inner consciousness, the self of being a writer and a woman is being exposed in this story. Laithambika Antharjanam brings out the agony of a writer, who ponders over the topic for writing a story, her status as an upper caste female and the incidents that happened in the society that haunted her a lot came to her mind as flashing, while she sat there.

Writing stories is not a pleasant task, especially for a woman like me, for whom status and prestige and a sense of being highborn are all- important. When fictional characters come to life and argue heatedly about contemporary issues, the author has to face opposition from many quarters. If an opponent were to use the weapon of obscene language against me, would I be able to defend myself with a like weapon? And then, the subject of caste distinctions was taboo, and religious controversies were to be avoided at all costs. Indeed, we have arrived at a point when writers have perforce to consider well in advance which particular literary theorist's recriminations they would have to face. It was all very distressing. I suddenly wanted to give it all up. (Devika, 1).

The above paragraph shows the confusion and helplessness of a writer's mind, who fails to transcribe the issues of tormented men and women with her pen and paper. She could hear the cry of these people crying out to free them from the pangs of their life by revealing them to the outer world. But, here the writer confesses the inner struggle of a writer, a female writer. Even she could never express her anger in its full sense as she herself restricts the mind reminding her that she has limitations.

The entry of the spirit of Tathri as the writer feels it takes the story to another realm. "I remained very still. I did not have the strength to move, anyway. The voice went on, its sweetness tinged with a shade of mockery, "When I heard that you wrote stories, I did not imagine that you would be such a coward. After all, a good writer usually has to witness so many scenes of agony and terror." (2). She mocks at the coward nature of the writer. She revealed her identity with lot of suspense and the narrator was bewildered listening to her. The sarcasm of the spirit towards the expression human beings is quite thought provoking. She calls human beings the most deceitful creatures.

Human beings? For heaven's sake, don't count me among them, Sister:' she interrupted, looking displeased. 'There was a time when I loved to be known as a human being, when I expended my greatest efforts on staying as one. But I have learned- and taught others- that I never want to be called a human

being again, and particularly not a woman. To be human, how deceitful it is, how cruel, what an experience of agony.(3)

The experiences of her life had made her retort so harshly against human beings. Then she goes on explaining her life story, which was a real revelation. Lalithambika, the writer was shocked hearing the real life story of Tathri that made her life horrible. Like many young Nambudiri women of the previous century, Tathri too was married off at a tender age. Everyone thought her lucky as her husband was not too old and senile; as she did not have to live with co-wives; as the family had enough to meet her modest needs of food and clothing. Tathri did all she could to please her husband and managed to keep him happy for some time. However, insatiable and dissolute, he brought home his lover. Tathri had to serve them food and make their bed. When she lost control and called the woman a harlot, her husband burst out: ‘Yeah, she is a prostitute. I brought her home knowing that she is one. I like prostitutes. Go, become a prostitute yourself!’ Tathri went away to her natal home.

This was a turning point in her life. Tathri was not accepted by her own family as she was discarded by her husband. Out of all troubles and alienation she felt from her husband and both the families, she decides to take revenge. The way she took revenge was unique, which was of first kind in the Kerala society, especially Namboodiri community. “A few years later, a damsel of maddening beauty and sharp brains, appeared in the locality. All the men around began to sing praises of her. Although she gave them the pleasure of her company, she told everyone the truth about herself - that she was married, that her husband was alive – thus leaving the doors of escape wide open.” (<https://www.thehindu.com/>)

Tathri revealed that she kept evidence to prove which person came to her for quenching sexual thirst. She too enjoyed her life as she felt it the only way to move forward. Her vengeance can be understood through her rendering “Anger and fury sharpened within me. I wanted to batter myself. I wanted to die. I even cursed myself for having been born. Why had I been born a namboodiri woman? Couldn’t I have been born into some other caste in Kerala, some caste that would have given me the right to pay this arrogant man back in his own coin?” (Devika, 4). This is a harsh criticism on the Namboodiri society and their customs. The struggle of a woman in Namboodiri community is explained through her words, probably the confession of Lalithambika Antharjanam herself. In between she also explains the life of whole Namboodiri women, especially that of a widowed one. The house became a real prison for them. Tathri further goes on explaining the hostility and aversions she had to face from her own mother, sisters and sister in law. Even if someone laughed at her, it was considered her fault. The anger and fear of disgrace grew within her along with the desire for revenge. From a feminist perspective, her words can be considered the act of resistance and revolt. She became a poisonous serpent. She walked out of the house gaining the courage, like a one men army to fight against the system and law that viewed women as second citizen and marginalised, destined to be the victims always.

Oh, my sister, what I did was as much for your sake as for mine. For the sake of all namboodiri women who endure agonies. So that the world would realize that we too have our pride. I wanted to prove that we have strength and desire and life in us too. I delighted in the sorrow each man had to bear, for not a single tear shed by a namboodiri woman has value. But alas, all of you, for whom I did this, despised me. My very name was uttered with disgust in my lifetime. I was feared more than a demon. Even in the fashionable world of today, Tatri remains despicable; even you look upon me as a fallen and disgraced woman.”(Devika, 5)

Tathri is really a martyr, who sacrificed her life for the sake of her sisters, for the future of the women of the so-called upper caste community. A woman, who raised from hopelessness, is now the hope of the

women. Tathri thinks her act as the expression of the desire for revenge experienced by all Namboodiri women who are caught in the meshes of evil customs, who are tortured and made to suffer agonies. But while talking to the writer, she is again in rage and anger with an air of profound hopelessness. She thinks she had made a mistake by talking yet another of those Antharjanams who are without shame or self-respect serves as salves even now. The women will never improve unless they wanted to change their lot.

The spirit makes fun of the writer for not writing on such matters and brings out the evils in the society. In turn, the writer sympathises with the spirit. The story ends open ended in one way as there is no concluding statement by the writer. Another important aspect is that the revelation of Tathri was an eye-opener for the society to understand the agonies of a woman in a patriarchal community. But, at the same time it also reveals the inner self of the majority, who considers the act of revenge “as a legal affair involving a prostitute – an affair that certainly created a turmoil, but did not succeed in pointing the way to anything positive.”(8).

The writer reveals that there are people, who still torture women pointing out the story and the families of excommunicated men still suffering. But she calls the act of revenge as a cry for victory and a bright light still burning in the minds of Namboodiri community in the future. So Lalithambika Antharjanam tells that the sins of Prathikaradevatha are forgiven. Tathri was shocked at this revelation and fades away saying, “Oh, I am a sinner. A fallen woman. An evil spirit. Even my shadow must never fall over society.”(8)

The Goddess of Revenge is thus the revelation of an excommunicated woman in all sense. Tathri was strong enough to reveal her life story and inner agonies with all emotions. She expresses her anger and fear of disgrace in its full sense. But, the writer reveals her own inner self, her failure to address the problems raised by the fallen spirit. She confesses that she could only sympathise with Tathri, as the act of revenge by a woman, which excommunicated lot of men folk can never be accepted by the patriarchal society. So, in one way or the other, both the women in this story stands helpless. The last line of the story is symbolic as the writer calls the whole narration as a false dream. But the writer hopes that the call of Tathri is definitely a call for change in the society.

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