

From the Scullery to the Stage: On Educating and Constructing *Pativratas*

Alphonsa C. A
Priya Jose K

Defining gender is an essential aspect of patriarchal discourse and in Kerala, literature has played a pivotal role in fashioning the notion of the ideal woman in the 19th century. This paper attempts to analyse two vernacular texts published during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Kottarathil Sankunni's *Aitihyamala* (a popular compilation of legends) and Kallingal Chathunni Vaidyar's *Pativratha Dharma Shatakam* (a long poem) which prescribe rules pertaining to both public and private spheres enabling an ideal woman to assume her role in society. They are evidently the result of an attempt at the construction of a tradition of homogeneous values in formation of womenhood among the various castes through education. The agenda to create and enforce a brahminical value system which exercised strict control over the women who were the custodians of chastity and extend it to include the women belonging to the other castes is examined here.

Key words: subjectivity, pativrata, femininity, duty.

'Self-fashioning' as used by Stephen Greenblatt is an underlying reality in every society especially relevant in the case of women who have been subjected to the process of identity fashioning since very early days and Malayali women are no exception. The history of Kerala provides immense examples for the fashioning of the 'ideal woman'- as daughters, wives, mothers, and widows. Literature too was instrumental in consolidating the societal attempts

towards self-fashioning of women during the 19th century. Much research has been done on the role of Christian Missionaries in promulgating the empowerment of Kerala/Malayali woman, but the role of vernacular literary texts in asserting and glorifying the image of ‘ideal woman’ has largely been ignored by researchers. This paper attempts to analyse two texts, Kottarathil Sankunni’s *Aitihyamala*, and Kallingal Chathunni Vaidyar’s *Pativratha Dharma Shatakam* which offer bold directives as to how an ideal woman should assume her role in society. The former is a compilation of the popular *aitihyas* or legends of Kerala and the latter is an instructional text. Both are examples of the attempt towards ‘pativratisation’- the process of training *pativratas* (dutiful wives) through ‘appropriate’ education. This should not be considered as sporadic attempts by individuals because Kollam Paravoor Kesavanasan’s *Pativrata Dharmam Kilipattu* serve as an indicator to the interest in propagating *pativrata dharmam*. The relevance of these works is heightened by the fact that similar efforts were taken by the Christian missionaries in the selective identity formation of Malayali women. The missionaries provided a parallel training in traditional and patriarchal ideologies in the guise of modernity.

Women’s education had the primary aim of training the girls for household duties. Moulding *pativratas* became the ‘necessity’ of the time and women’s lives were placed under surveillance. The concept of ‘*sthreedharmam*’ (woman’s duty) influenced the construction of the image of ‘modern’ Malayali woman. The political and ideological necessities that determined the nature and status of women in the gender roles assigned to them posit an interesting area for research. These undergo obvious transformation in the face of unprecedented changes in gender relations. The changes span the economic and social status of women, their demography and spatial placement within society, and also the ideologies of their containment and scope for resistance. The qualities possessed by an individual came to be viewed as strongly determined by the sexual character of one’s body, its maleness or femaleness. Thus, attaining modern individuality meant creation of ‘manly’ and ‘womanly’ subjectivities especially in the distinct spheres of the domestic and the public. This resulted in

the fashioning of ideally gendered individuals within the boundaries of the projected caste-based modern communities of the future.

Kottarathil Sankunni's *Aithiyamala*

Kottarathil Sankunni's *Aithiyamala* (Garland of Legends), published by Mangalodayam is considered to be the most comprehensive resource on the legends of Kerala and occupies a significant space in the canon of Malayalam literature. The collection of 126 aithiyas compiled in eight volumes of which the first was published in 1909 and the last in 1934. Sankunni, in the course of his lifetime, painstakingly recorded the popular oral legends that he had collected during his extensive travels and polished them lest they may be forgotten with the passage of time. He performs the function of a compiler, a re-teller of tales, rather than that of an author, in the modern sense of the term. Sankunni narrates the history of a place through providing information about faiths and practices in the local temples, along with the biographies of historical personalities of the region. He also recorded traditional stories about the popularity of famous magicians, mystics, physicians as well as antics of local heroes. Sankunni gave it finality with his creative flair and narrative oeuvre, rectifying the defects and mistakes and preserving them. The legends are made to read as if real although they may have no historical validity. The tales owe their popularity to the content as well as the brilliant narrative.

An analysis of the sexist traces in *Aithiyamala* demands a two-fold trajectory. First, a reading into the *aithiya* as such to enable an unearthing of the attitudes towards women as portrayed and second, a reading to explore the gender bias displayed by the narrator/author while narrating *aithiyas* portraying women. The first trajectory will reveal the social, cultural and political practices that led to the subjugation of women in Kerala during various periods. The second trajectory reveals the power of patriarchal ideology in inscribing the 'inferiority' of women in the male psyche. *Aithiyamala* thus becomes a successful discourse of patriarchy in defining and governing the 'female'. The patriarchal logic rests on the social existence of women with their biological functions. A systematic effect of sexual division is produced by highlighting diverse sexual differences. An imaginary

signification of womanhood is produced by determining the female sex as the embodiment of specific feminine characteristics.

Kallingal Chathunni Vaidyar's *Pativratha Dharma Shatakam*

The *Pativratha Dharma Shatakam* is a poem written in a hundred stanzas by Kallingal Chathunni Vaidyar, son of Kattukandi Kunjikorru Vaidyan . Published in 1879, by Mallisherry Chandu at the Minerva Press, this discourse has deeply influenced the Malayali idea of a perfect woman. It is positioned in a very crucial point in the history of Kerala, that is the latter half of the 19th century which saw a sea change in the ideas regarding the individual, family, caste, gender sensibilities along with paternity, maternity, matrilineal, patrilineal structures, and new ideas regarding the human body, travel and freedom. This period paved the way for social emancipation by creating modernity and an analysis of this work helps in understanding the changes brought about in gender discourses.

The agenda to create a brahminical value system which propagates that a woman should only have one husband in her life even though the men are entitled to many wives is extended to non-brahminical castes by ascribing them the status of universal values. The idea of a family in which wife becomes the sole property of the husband is formulated through this. A woman after her marriage reaches the house which becomes her sphere/space. There is an omnipresent system of surveillance to control her thoughts and actions. We can find the mechanics of marginalization and subordination operating in gender relations associated with family and household. The work offers detailed rules regarding not only how a woman should act inside and outside the family but how to think too. Some of which are as follows. It must be remembered that the husband should never ever face any inconvenience due to the wife. She should not take any decisions on her own even in familial matters, forgetting all her desires she should adapt her husband's desire as her own. A perfect woman would not even think in her heart of hearts that another woman's husband is handsome. The work instructs that a woman should never refer to her husband by name, should always get up when the husband comes from outside. She should never utter an unpleasant word to her husband ever and should always support his deeds. Cooking and serving food to the husband is an indispensable part of life and

ISSN:2582-550X

therefore must be strictly done. She should never eat before her husband and only feel satisfied by eating whatever is left after he has had his food, should serve him in the best of the utensils the best food possible. She should remain awake with reverence until the husband goes off to sleep and should wake up before him. If the husband is feeling sad the wife should also feel sad, and likewise if the husband is happy. The primacy of the husband is established beyond doubt as the work reminds that the wife should still remain pleasant when her husband takes another wife and even if it happens to be her own sister. If he resorts to physical beating also the wife shall harbour no ill will and should resolve the fight using pleasantries. She should never elope nor complain about the husband to her kinsmen or even cry out loud (59). It is certain that it is the duty of the lady to take care of her in-laws respectfully (41). Regarding financial matters the text states that she should never give any money to friends without getting the permission of the husband (43).

The right to movement is also determined by the will of the husband as he is more dear to the wife than her own siblings, parents and friends. The poem now concludes with a long list of promises that shall be accorded to the women who fulfil all these instructions: life, fame, children, heavenly bliss, material prosperity. The last stanza explains how this dictum of Sage Vasishtha that he had passed on to the King Dilipa had been translated for the benefit of the women here who do not know the original language in which these were composed.

Analysis

These texts were written during a period of transition wherein maelstroms of social reform movements were at its height. Social reform movements to fight caste system, educational reforms, and gender rights had influenced on people from various sections. The notion of pativrata was aimed at establishing the role of women as a service provider while enabling caste oriented patriarchal society with an ideology to school women in this role. This dharma based on self-denying, passive faith was based solely on unquestioned devotion to husband and was couched in familiar stock terms of the wives restraining their senses and controlling their minds. Education could not be seen as taking women away from her *sthreedharmam*. Even though education provided to girls appeared to be ‘modern’ - the ‘real

modern' content was scrutinized by traditionalists and they resorted to other strategies to provide a parallel learning in patriarchal notions.

Aithiyas and verse narratives are the simplest medium for propagating patriarchal behavioral codes. The texts present diverse and conflicting views on the position of women and their education limiting gender roles. Education in the colonial period focused on basic learning, refinement of domestic skills, moral education, and study of religious texts. Education was also the means of setting the middle classes apart from the lower castes. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, various castes and communities were in the process of self-transformation as a result of social and political movements taking place throughout Malayalam-speaking regions and in India. One of the urgent and compelling issues being debated in print media and the social sphere was that of the role of the woman in the changing milieu. Different communities had different agendas for their women.

Women's freedom included in its ambit elements of modernity. Modernity in the context of Malayalam-speaking regions was different from the Western variant. Modernity signified a time of ever-changing progress, endlessly urged by development. The writers regarded modernity as coming from the West through contact with the coloniser and modern education. It included institutions like schools, hospitals, law courts, administrative system, revenue system, public works department, etc. brought in by the British. What the writers considered as problematic was not modernity itself but certain elements associated with it. Customs inherited from the coloniser through education, changes in lifestyle and the education system itself were being critiqued during this period. If education was leading people to be unrestrained, to be selfish, to blatantly disregard customs/rituals, etc. then education was neither necessary nor desirable according to orthodox thinkers/writers:

Swaathandryam means freedom, i.e., unrestrained individualism. Unrestrained individualism is not allowed for women; or for men. If so, there would have been no need for law or dharmashastras (religious texts on conduct). Therefore it is clear that nobody should have swaathandryam beyond their rights. When looked at like this, we will be forced to say that women have swaathandryam within the limits of their dharmam. Now if education leads to unrestrained

freedom, that would affect men too, and so men too should not be educated. (Parameshwaramenon, 1901: pg. 297)

By swaathandryam was meant not just the removal of external forms of constraint on a person but also their replacement by internal means of regulation. More importantly, the ability to conform to ideal gendered subjectivities – the ability to be Man or ‘Woman’, to be comfortable in the domains specified as proper to them – was crucial in swaathandryam (Devika 10).

Wifely codes get internalized by women and their only aim was to live up to the idealized notions of pativrata constructed by the ideologues of society in the case of upper caste Hindu society. Pativrata, the specific dharma of the Hindu wife, then became the ideology which women accepted, and even aspired to. Chastity and wifely fidelity became the most successful ideology constructed by Indian patriarchal system where women themselves controlled their own sexuality and believed that they gained power and respect through the codes they adopted. It thus became the means by which the hierarchical structure was reproduced with women’s complicity. Patriarchy thus ‘naturalized’ itself by masking the attempts to control women’s sexuality and ensure subordination.

Tales in the form of epics and *aitihyas* become the means by which women are won over to the point of view of patriarchal discourse. *Aitihyamala*’s authorial comments shall be read as response to the liberal attitudes exhibited by women as a result of their education. We can find the writer lamenting over the loss of ‘*streethwam*’. Women easily succumb to patriarchal ideologies and internalize hierarchical positioning. This is evident when Sankunni, the narrator comments on the attitudes women should develop, as a conclusion to the *aitihyas* like “An Antharjanam and Her Sensibility” which opens thus with the authorial statement:

It has often been suggested that if wives lack intelligence and stray from the virtuous path it reflects the incompetence of the husbands. It can also be said that when husbands behave the same way the wives are responsible for it. If a husband can motivate his wife to take care of him and be devoted to him, then a wife can manage the husband ten times more easily and ensure that he is

totally devoted to her. There are enough examples among our own people of wives and husbands going astray. One such is narrated below. (Narayan 43)

The same *aitihya* ends thus: “May our Kerala women display the same tact and the devotion to their husbands as the wife in our story did. May they all thus command the attention of their husbands and live happily” (Narayan 44).

In *The Chastity of Pakkanar’s Wife* the author comments: It is possible that this theory will be contested by the modern generation. However, it is to be hoped that all will agree that all wives should not refuse to do their husband’s bidding giving lame excuses and producing futile arguments. It is acknowledged that a wife has the right and the obligation to reason with and dissuade a husband who makes improper demands out of obstinacy or lack of understanding.

...Our sisters in Kerala would do well to make note of these legends which can only help them be true wives. (Narayan 150)

In the *aitihya Chastity of Pakkanar’s Wife* there is a debate between Pakkanar and Agnihotri on the qualities of a pativrata. Even though this debate seems to question the traditional practices, which define a pativrata, it actually leads to the situation where men want women to observe obedience through their deeds and customary practices which in the end tighten the patriarchal grip on women.

Conclusion

Defining gender seems to be crucial for establishing of dominant ideologies and the formation of womanhood in public and private spheres and has been a great concern of society from early times. Education for women included a mix of achievements and skills, accomplishments and functionality. Women’s education was structured and transformed by indigenous, national and colonial traditions, ideas and values. Verse narratives and even tales were instrumental in inculcating and schooling women on patriarchal discourses. Women internalize the offered models and constitute themselves with varying degrees of conformity. The texts as carriers of patriarchal ideologies prove the pervasive influence of the same in spite of class and caste variations.

References

- Antony, Teena.(2013). *Women's Education Debates in Kerala: Fashioning Sthreedharmam* (Doctoral dissertation). Manipal University .
- Chakravarti, Uma. (2003). *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens*. Stree .
- Devika, J. (2003) . *En-gendering Individuals: A Study of Gender and Individualization in Reform – Language in Modern Keralam 1880's – 1950's* (Doctoral dissertation). Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam .
- Devika, J.(2015). *Kulasthreyum Chanthappennum Undaayathengane?* Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishath .
- Gladston, Hepsi. (2006) .*History of Development of Education of Women in Kerala (1819- 1947)*. *Samyukta: A Journal of Women's Studies* VI.1, 7-69.
- Hancock, Mary. (2001). *Home Science and the Nationalization of Domesticity in Colonial India.*” *Modern Asian Studies* .35. 4, 871-903.
- Narayan, T.C. (2009). *Lore and Legends of Kerala:Selections From Kottarathil Sankunni's Aithiyamala*. Oxford UP .
- Ortner, Sherry B, and Harriet Whitehead, (Eds). (1991). *Sexual Meanings: The Cultural Constructions of Gender and Sexuality*. Cambridge UP.
- Ramachandran, Sreekumari . (2011). *Aithiyamala: The Great Legends of Kerala*. Mathrubhumi .
- Sankunni, Kottarathil.(2009). *Aithiyamala*. D. C. Books .
- Vaidyar, Kallingal Chathunni. (2018). *Pativrata Dharmam*. Thunchath Ezhuthachan Malayalam University.

Alphonsa C. A

Assistant Professor

Dept of English

Mar Athanasius College (Autonomous)

Kothamangalam

India

Pin: 686666

Ph: +91 9809580667

Email: aca@macollege.in

ORCID: 0000-0003-3002-1454

&

Priya Jose K

Associate Professor, Dept of English

Maharaja's College (Govt. Autonomous)

Ernakulam

India

Pin: 682011

Ph: +91 9847460517

Email: priyajosek@maharajas.ac.in

ORCID: 0000-0002-0197-0477