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Social Reform and the Gender Question: A Reading of Chathu Nair's *Meenakshi* (1890) in the Context of the 19th Century Debate Over Nair Caste Marriage

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Abstract

In this paper, I attempt to read the early social reformist novel Chathu Nair's *Meenakshi* (1890) in the context of the debates surrounding marriage and female education in the Nair caste during that period. Some of the early novels in Malayalam had something to say on the hotly debated issue of the time - i.e. whether the Nair way of life, especially its marriage and family norms were suited to the times or not. Chathu Nair's *Meenakshi* has to be situated in the midst of these debates. In the debates involving the validity of the Nair customs and rituals, one can also see the influence of the Victorian norms of sexuality as well as that of the mainstream Hindu reform movements that were built around the images of "ideal women" like "Sita" and "Savitri".

Keywords

Early Indian Novels; Social Reform; Gender Question; Caste Reform; Female Education; Nair Caste Marriage.

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In this paper, I attempt to read the early social reformist novel Chathu Nair's *Meenakshi* (1890) in the context of the debates surrounding marriage and female education in the Nair caste during that period. Some of the early novels in Malayalam, whether it be the first "proper" novel *Indulekha* (1889), *Meenakshi* (1890) or *Lakshmikesavam* (1892) had something to say on the hotly debated issue of the time - i.e. whether the Nair way of life, especially its marriage and family norms were suited to the times or not. Chathu Nair's *Meenakshi* has to be situated in the midst of these debates. In the debates involving the validity of the Nair customs and rituals, one can also see the influence of the Victorian norms of sexuality as well as that of the mainstream Hindu reform movements that were built around the images of "ideal women" like "Sita" and "Savitri".

The Nair matrilineal kinship system (*Marumakkathayam*) had been seen in a number of quarters as "unnatural", being different from the patrilineal conjugal family system which was considered the norm (Arunima 134). Also at least some of the Nair "sambandhams" (relationships) had a history of being polyandrous in nature and the Nair sambandham also granted the parties the right to break off the marriage contract at the will of either of the two parties (Menon 219; Gough 362). There were other practices like the "talikettukalyanam" which evoked comparisons with the practices among the Devadasis [temple dancers, who eventually involved in prostitution] and hence the related charge of prostitution (Nair 193-194). As a result of all these, the Nair male writers who supported *Marumakkathayam* frequently had to justify the Nair marriage as a valid one and emphasise the chastity of the Nair woman (Chandumenon 259). A famous instance of such a defence comes in

Chandumenon's *Indulekha* when Madhavan, the hero, accuses "the women of this land" [the Nair women] of not being faithful to their husbands like the "women of the other lands" (Chandumenon 24). Thus for the Nair woman, the "family woman's" status was not given compared to at least some sections of women in other parts of the country. The ideal female figures projected by the Hindu reform movements such as the monogamous "Sita" or "Savitri" bound in indissoluble marital ties to their husbands (the Hindu marriage being a sacrament), with Savitri even challenging the God of Death to get back her husband, were a far cry from the Nair women whose systems of kinship and marriage were different. As the mainstream Hindu reform movements posited a uniform Hindu nation along with the ideal Hindu man and woman, there was greater pressure on the community-based reform movements like the Nair reform movements which had other systems of family and conjugality to conform to the stereotypes (Nair 193-194). One can say that there was also a greater desire on the part of the Nair reformers to join the mainstream Hindu fold.

It is also important to remember the influence of the colonial systems of family and marriage (the Christian marriage being monogamous and indissoluble) on the Hindu and in this case the Nair male reformers. English education that propounded the English way of life to the Indian subject population inevitably taught the Nair subjects to look down upon their marriage system as "unnatural" and barbaric.

Students could not avoid hearing open attacks on Nair marriage and morals. Augusta M. Blandford, who spent forty years evangelising among Nairs around Trivandrum and whose Fort Girls' School produced the first Nair woman matriculate, described "the customs of their caste with regard to marriage" as "very revolting". Rev. A. F. Painter, who moved freely among Nairs in north Travancore for more than twenty years, wrote of a system so horrible that even its defenders are ashamed of it as it stands (Jeffrey 136).

This is not to say that the Nair subjects completely assimilated the colonial notions regarding “native systems”. The response, as one can see in the cases of Chathu Nair and Chandumenon, was to create what Partha Chatterjee calls “our modernity” where changes were brought in the existing system without its total annihilation (Devasia xvi). How successful they were in this aim remains a question.

However, even amongst the Nair male novelists, one can note major differences. Chandumenon in *Indulekha* makes a more liberal interpretation of “wifely devotion” as can be seen in Indulekha’s response to Madhavan’s questions regarding the chastity of the Malayali women [note how the term Malayali woman is almost used synonymously with the Nair woman]. “A woman can, without forsaking her devotion to her husband, be entertained by and freely enjoy certain matters with other men. She can also think independently” (Chandumenon 25). In Chathu Nair’s world-view, however, such free interaction among men and women is suspect. The lines that divide the “family woman” from the “other woman” are more firmly drawn in case of Chathu Nair. Chathu Nair is more of a moralist compared to Chandumenon and he clearly had a social reformist message to deliver in *Meenakshi* as is evident in his Preface to the first edition of the novel. One can say that basically the main concern of Chathu Nair in the novel is social morality - from its surface manifestation in the form of the dress worn by the men and women or in its more concrete manifestation in the way they behave. Vulgarity in dress and immorality in behaviour thus become the two main points of the novelist’s attack though the specific social evils he attacks are many and varied. *Meenakshi*, particularly, is a testament to the growing unease among the English - educated Nairs regarding male and especially female sexuality. Sexuality came to be regarded as an impurity and the local way of life was put under the scanner to discover the perversities that needed to be removed to enter a “civilised way of life”.

Before going on to deal with the novel in detail, it is important to note the caste conflict which is an integral part of the novels written by the Nair male writers, whether it be Chandumenon or Chathu Nair. These novelists belonged to the English-educated generation of Nair men who were becoming a part of the colonial setup and were thus moving out of the socio-economic setup in which they were dependent on the higher caste Namboothiris (a Brahmin caste) for social and economic privileges (Kodoth 351). The Namboothiris and the Nairs had for centuries been involved in economic and social relations with each other though as part of a setup that kept many of the caste restrictions intact (Kodoth 351). The Namboothiris followed patriliney and primogeniture, with only the eldest son allowed to marry within the caste (Devasia 228). The younger sons entered into sambandham with matrilineal Nair women (Devasia 228). The children born out of these unions could not lay claim to the fathers' property or other privileges (Devasia 229). Such unions were however traditionally considered to be beneficial to the Nair "taravads" as the Namboothiris were not only highly placed in the social hierarchy (many were landlords and had a landlord-tenant relationship with the Nairs) but were also, as Brahmins, regarded as the embodiment of spiritual authority (Gough 323). But by the nineteenth century, such sambandhams were now being regarded as heavily biased in favour of the Namboothiris and sexually exploitative in nature (Devasia 231). The Malabar Marriage Bill introduced by C. Sankaran Nair in the Madras Legislative council on 24 March 1890 to legalise the Nair marriage thus had a number of implications. Moving the bill, C. Sankaran Nair said, "our wives are concubines and our children bastards in a court of law, and therefore the necessity for a bill to legalize marriage and to provide for the issue of such marriage seems apparent" (qtd. in Panikkar 195). It was also clearly an attempt to check the Namboothiri man from entering into a sambandham with a Nair woman as it put more responsibilities on him in the case of an issue being born out of it (Arunima 145). Set as it is in such a

context, where there is an unprecedented questioning of the traditional privileges of the Namboothiris, *Meenakshi*, like its predecessor *Indulekha*, mixes the caste question with the gender question.

In *Meenakshi*, it would not be wrong to say that the morality question pervades almost the entire novel – whether it be the practices related with marriage and other rituals among the Nairs, the education of women, the threat posed by the “other woman”, early marriages among women or “Dress Reform”. Support of female education and opposition to early marriages are two issues that come up in this novel as well. However, there are particular issues that concern only the Nair Caste - reform in the Nair marriage and other rituals. However, even when specific questions get discussed, one can detect in the novel an anxiety regarding the incompatibility of these systems with what was being considered the norm - “the patrilineal conjugal family” that lay outside the community.

The morality question, particularly female morality, gets discussed in greater depth in the conversation that takes place between Meenakshi’s mother, Lakshmiamma and her two sisters Naniamma and Parukuttyamma in their “taravad” Puthanmalikakkal. One should note the important fact that this discussion on female morality that brings in the question of male morality as well (through the radical opinions of Parukuttyamma) takes place in the absence of the “Karanavar” (the eldest male member of the taravad), Gopalamenon. In fact as soon as he enters, the women disband and start doing their respective duties.

The immediate context of the women’s discussion is Kochammalu, a Nair woman in the neighbourhood who has polyandrous relations with many men and is treated as a “prostitute” in the novel. It indicates the change in attitude towards Nair women like Kochammalu who continue to have polyandrous relations. As stated earlier, at least some of the Nair “sambandhams” before the 19th century were polyandrous in nature and were not looked down upon.

However, polyandry in the new setup is equated with prostitution, monogamy being the only valid type of marriage for women. The contempt the women characters feel for a woman like Kochammalu is a reflection of the changed times when writers like Chandu Menon were busy arguing that the Nair sambandham was a monogamous relationship founded on values similar to those of the Hindu marriage (Chandumenon 259).

According to Naniamma, it is the behaviour of women like Kochammalu that reinforces popular notions about women that they are untrustworthy. Lakshmiamma and Naniamma attribute Kochammalu's immoral behaviour to the absence of a man in her house. Lakshmiamma says, "One should have some fear for the man of the house. Otherwise the husband should have some shame and honour. Those [places] become the hunting grounds for men, where neither of these is there¹" (Nair 61). Naniamma too seconds her argument.

Kochammalu's reformation happens later in the novel through the correcting of this "mistake". A Brahmin man "emancipates" her and establishes her in grihastashrama, marrying her off to a "good man", who is established as the head of her house.

Lakshmiamma then goes on to give her thoughts on how girls should be brought up so as to prevent any recurrence of Kochammalu's case. According to her, girls should not be allowed to hang around the necks of all and sundry and holds that for it; first of all, the parents should have sense. She lays special stress on the need for the men in the house to be vigilant regarding any untoward activity and attacks irresponsible men ("Karanavars") who get rogues to start sambandham with the women in the house.

The control over women's behaviour is at issue here. According to Naniamma and Lakshmiamma, to prevent women from going astray, their behaviour has to be controlled through force by the men in the house (direct control) or through careful upbringing (indirect control).

¹ All quotes from Chathu Nair's *Meenakshi* have been translated by the author.

Meenakshi, Lakshmiamma's daughter, is brought up with fastidious care, her parents and uncle taking all measures to prevent her from learning anything untoward. The training of the female child becomes very important for Chathu Nair. It is this which, according to him, that creates the distinction between Meenakshi and Kochammalu – between the “family woman” and the “other woman”.

This gets emphasised further in Kochammalu's outburst before her mother and brothers where she puts the blame for her behaviour on the bad training she got from her mother. Kochammalu cries out, “If my father was alive, I would never have had the misfortune to bear this great sin ... Isn't it because I got into the hands of my senseless mother that I have to undergo so much suffering?” (C. Nair 184-85).

Kochammalu's bad training as a child is attributed to her father not being there and her mother having no sense. In contrast is the “family woman” Meenakshi, who has male guardians in her uncle and father, who are also educated. Meenakshi, as a result, gets the right kind of education and is married off to a “good” educated man and becomes a part of another “good” household through her marriage.

One can see the new equations that come into place with the coming of colonial modernity. In the new scheme, when one of the major arguments in support of female education itself revolves around the “training” of women into “good mothers”, an “uneducated widow” like Kochammalu's mother easily becomes the target of reformist censure. The mother's training of the girl child is here presented as one that is only aimed at making her into a “prostitute”, a charge that gets levelled at “single mothers” in the case of the Dasis as well. The attempt in both cases is to discredit the qualifications of women to be the proper guardians of their children on their own.

Coming back to Chathu Nair's concern with social morality, one finds that it is not limited to female morality alone. He also insists on the morality of

men and the conversation between the three sisters becomes an occasion for the author to highlight the importance of male morality as well as challenge the popular conception that painted women as the root of all immorality. In the conversation between the three sisters, Parukutty Amma argues that if women had been the authors of the “Smriti”, they would have insisted more upon the men’s behaviour and she maintains that prostitution will flee from the land if men become virtuous.

This conversation, as discussed before, happens when no male characters are present. This is the only discussion in the novel where female characters take part. The other two discussions, one between Gopalamenon and Puruhoothan Namboothiripad regarding the propriety of Namboothiris entering into sambandhams with Nair women and the other one in which all the adult males take part to discuss when the “talikettukalyanam” is to be held, are marked by the absence of women. It is also important to note that the discussion the women have is on general topics while the men discuss specific issues that were central to the Nair way of life and which were the cause of heated exchanges between different parties at that time.

The “fictional” silence of the women characters in *Meenakshi* on matters most intimately connected with their lives can be read along with the actual “enforced” silence of the Nair women when it came to a real event that determined their lives - the passing of the Malabar Marriage Act of 1896 which sought to legalise the Nair “sambandhams”. The Malabar Marriage Commission was the body appointed to look into the matter which recorded evidence from a number of sources that included Nair men from the educated classes, members of the “kovilagams” or royal families and “respectable” Namboothiris (Arunima 130). The Commission also received petitions and resolutions which had been passed in meetings held in various parts of Malabar (qtd. in Panikkar 196). Of the petitions received, four were from the Nair women. Amongst these, 245 signatories supported legislation and 378 opposed it (qtd. in Panikkar 196).

However, the report finally submitted was marked by the absence of the women's voices and contained only a mention of these four petitions. G. Arunima sums up the issue thus: The absence of any opinions from the "respectable Nair ladies" in the Commission's report was attributed to the conservatism of the women in the north, and the inability of the relatively "freer" women of the south to express themselves unmediated by the men of their families. The inquiry was thus considered complete without having analysed any information based on the experiences of women for the promulgation of a measure that would critically affect their lives (Arunima 131-32).

In *Meenakshi*, apart from female education, another reform which interests the author Chathu Nair is Marriage Reform. As noted earlier, traditionally, sambandhams between Nair women and Namboothiri men were quite common. However, Chathu Nair, part of the new generation of English-educated Nair men, was of the opinion that this practice needed to be abolished. He wanted the Nair sambandham to be held henceforth only between a Nair man and a Nair woman. One can see Chathu Nair's views on the validity of sambandhams with Namboothiri men in the debate between Puruhoothan Namboothiripad and Gopalamenon. Puruhoothan Namboothiripad, who comes on behalf of Kuberan Namboothiripad, has no doubt as to the fact that the proposal will be accepted by the girl's family. It is also important to note the hierarchical marks which are in place during the conversation. Gopalamenon sits on a mat while Puruhoothan Namboothiripad is seated on a chair. He refers to himself as "your servant" while talking to the Namboothiripad. Yet, despite the outward signs of servility, Gopalamenon is not ready to accept the proposal. He, in fact, avers that their taravad has not had the history of sambandhams with Namboothiri men and does not intend on having any in the future as well. He feels that the suitor should have the proper qualifications, one of the major being that he should be from their own

caste. The Nair heroine's choosing a man from her own caste, after rejecting a suitor from the higher caste, becomes the premise of both *Meenakshi* and *Indulekha*. One can see from this itself how the gender question gets inextricably linked with the caste question in the case of Nair social reform.

Gopalamenon goes on to argue that the practice of Namboothiris having sambandhams with Nair women is against all caste norms. Puruhoothan Namboothiripad counters his arguments by falling back on a popular origin myth of the Kerala Sudras in which Parasurama is said to have brought apsaras from heavens to satisfy the needs of the Namboothiris. He argues that this being the case, the Sudras in Kerala are different from and better than the Sudras in other parts and that there is nothing wrong in the Namboothiri man entering into liaisons with the progeny of the apsaras. Gopalamenon looks at this myth as one created solely for meeting the ends of the Namboothiris and is disparaging about its truth value. He wonders as to why the Namboothiri man is willing to flout all the caste rules only in this matter, insinuating that the caste rules are followed and discarded by the Namboothiri men as and when they please. He particularly stresses on the denial of rights of parentage to children born out of sambandhams with the Namboothiri men. He wonders how they can be called the Namboothiri's children who are not permitted to do any funeral rites for the father and on touching whom he has to purify himself by bathing many times.

It is interesting to note the re-definition of "fatherhood" that occurs with the questioning of the practice of sambandham as to whether it constitutes marriage or not. The "father" becomes one who provides for the mother and the children. It is in this light also that the Namboothiris' sambandhams with the Nair women are criticised. In the existing setup, where the Nair women and her children were not dependent on the husband, but were provided for by the taravads, the father did not have the role of a provider. One can see how a re-

definition of “fatherhood” becomes part and parcel of the project of establishing a patrilineal conjugal family.

One needs to note the fact that the above exchange takes place between men of the two communities and does not have any women participants. Meenakshi is not present there during the exchange and the women who are present, her mother and aunts, only listen in on the conversation from the inside. One can contrast this with *Indulekha*, where it is Indulekha herself who refuses the sambandham with Soori Namboothiripad and not her uncle, as in *Meenakshi*.

Before going to the next issue, I feel that one needs to ask the question as to what was Chathu Nair’s take on the validity of Nair sambandhams. We cannot say clearly from the novel as to whether Chathu Nair was in support of the bill to legalise Nair marriages or not. However, he does not seem to have much of a problem with the Marumakkathaya system under which the woman’s brother was the head of the family. Gopalamenon, the uncle and Kunjikkrisshnamenon, the father, seem to be on perfectly amicable terms with each other. The guardianship of the children, particularly Meenakshi, is one that they share amongst themselves. The animosity between the Karanavar and the Anantharavan (the nephew) that one gets to see in *Indulekha* is also absent in *Meenakshi*. If in the patrilineal conjugal family, the training of the daughter becomes the responsibility of the father aided by the mother, in the matrilineal Nair family of Chathu Nair’s vision, it becomes the responsibility of both the father and the uncle. Chathu Nair’s matrilineal Nair family is strictly “patriarchal” with the uncle and the father making all the major decisions which include the training of the children within its ambit.

Chathu Nair’s opposition to the Nair women’s sambandham with the Namboothiri men was one shared by the supporters of the Nair marriage Bill as well. They were of the opinion that the sambandham’s having no formal features of “marriage” made it easy for the Namboothiris to exploit the Nair

women (Kodoth 351). However, recent critics like Praveena Kodoth are of the view that the Nair men's support of the Nair marriage bill was one fuelled by more than selfless motives. Praveena Kodoth in her article "Courting Legitimacy or Delegitimizing Custom? Sexuality, Sambandham, and Marriage Reform in Late Nineteenth-Century Malabar" finds the motives behind the Nair men's support of the Nair marriage reform bill to be similar with those of the men in the Dasi community who were in support of the abolition of the Devadasi system. Dismissing K.N. Panikkar's reading of matrilineal institutions as mere support-structures of a Namboothiri-dominated value system as incomplete, Kodoth argues:

"[He] fails to interrogate the specific resolution of the question of sambandham by Nair reformers in the realm of the 'Paternal family'. Worked out in the interlocking interests of morality and 'enterprise', this resolution went beyond 'liberating' women from the exploitative 'land for sexual relations' network, seeking as it did to establish a form of access to and control over women that was hitherto unavailable to Nair men" (Kodoth 358).

However, Sarah Joseph (1946-) has other complaints about the Nair reform movement. Even while accepting that the Nair taravad was a patriarchal space where the "Karanavars" had a great say in who the women of the taravad started sambandhams with (the sambandhams with Namboothiris often specially favoured as they were supposed to add to the taravad's name and honour) or whom they broke off their relations with, she argues that the woman in the Nair taravad did have certain rights, which included the right to divorce which made it easy to end an unhappy relationship and also the right to stay in her own house throughout her life (Joseph 260-93). However, these get challenged in the 19th century by the colonial moral norms, particularly the European value system which gets imbibed by the youth through English education, as well as the Sanskritic tradition with its many embodiments of "pativrata" (Joseph 260-93). She sees the working of a patriarchal moral

system behind the Europeans' attack on the system of Marumakkathayam, sambandham and Matriliney, which granted women some rights, though limited, over their sexuality (Joseph 260-93). The right to divorce enjoyed by the Nair woman was seen as a problem by both the colonial as well as the Brahminical systems (Joseph 260-93). Sarah Joseph quotes from a number of articles written during the early decades of the 20th century on the value of "pativratyam" by eminent writers which asked women to be chaste and to serve their husbands better (Joseph 260-93). Women too participated in these debates by attacking such opinions fiercely (Joseph 260-93). The opinions of the dissenting women were however not taken into account by the reformers (Joseph 260-93). The reformist position was also not one, Sarah Joseph argues, which had the interests of the Nair woman at heart (Joseph 260-93). Instead of criticizing the custom of sambandham as one that forced the woman to get into and out of relationships at the behest of the Karanavar, i.e. criticising its exploitative aspect, it came to be criticized as one that promoted the overt expression of female sexuality (Joseph 260-93). Sarah Joseph argues that the Namboothiri-Nair caste-conflict was one of the main motives that impelled the Nair youth to rebel against the custom of sambandham, the secondary factors being the opposition to the Karanavar and the aptitude for colonial norms of justice (Joseph 260-93).

Chathu Nair cannot be called a supporter of the Nair Marriage Bill since his position seems to be that of a moderate within the debate where while he wanted the Nair community to reject certain practices which he considered as barbaric, he did not see anything wrong with sambandham, with the dominant position of the Karanavar or with the system of matriliney itself. However, in Nair's novel as well, the women characters, while they have some voice, are overshadowed by the progressive-minded male characters. The major debates surrounding *sambandham* that happen in the novel do not give much space to

the voice of the women in the community. Instead, the attempt seems to be to craft a more benevolent patriarchy within the system of *Marumakkathayam*.

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