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Women Critics and Malayalam Literary Criticism: A Brief History of Literary Marginalisation

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Abstract

This paper discusses the history and development of women's literature in Kerala in general and critical writing tradition in particular. There exists a biased notion that criticism is masculine. The space for women in literary criticism is negligible. The reduced literary social cultural participation of women is proportional to their lesser literary engagements. Unlike in creative writing, to establish themselves in the field of literary criticism, women writers have overcome more hurdles. Critics like M. Leelavathi, J. Devika, P. Geetha, Shamshad Hussain etc. hold on to this area breaking and re-writing many myths of and on literature. Their reviews and critical studies are widely acclaimed. The women writers of Kerala still do not have public or private literary cultural spaces to promote their literary talents. The literacy

achievements of the state have not completely succeeded in changing the attitude towards women writers.

Keywords

Women Writers; Kerala; Literary Criticism; Male Dominance.

The southernmost state of India, Kerala, possesses a rich oral and written literary tradition. It stands in the forefront regarding the number of literary and cultural magazines apart from books of fiction and non-fiction. The genre of literary criticism is much updated and advanced, growing along with the literature. Today, as literature has come under the broad range of cultural studies, the style, mode and approaches of literary criticism are also subjected to changes.

There was a time in Kerala, when women and people of lower castes were prohibited from the world of letters. Literature was then the way of expression of upper class men. Braving all the obstacles in front, with the help of their own kin who were transformed and much humanized by the renaissance movements and freedom struggle, at least a few number of women of upper classes got the chance to learn. Realising the significance of learning and education, these learned women used their pen and ink to promote learning and education among their fellow women in particular, but the efforts of these women were unmarked and unrecognized among the literary or cultural movements in the history books written by men.

At a time when men dominated the world of writing, much of the actualisations of women were blooming in oral tradition. There were different songs, hymns, lullabies and stories crafted by the women of those times. As the earlier historians preferred written materials over oral tradition, much of those earlier genres were not collected and recorded. The historians were late to consider the oral tradition with importance, that by that time much of such

female poetic expressions passed from generations to generations were lost. When women entered the written literature, their subjects of concern in the beginning were directly related to their respective religion. They developed spaces for women on the basis of their readings of epics, classics and Holy Texts such as the Bible, Qur'an and Gita.

Later, women penned poems, stories, dramas and novels. Only when women started writing about subjects of social and political concerns, men started to bother as if their area of dominance is invaded. There existed a mistaken notion that creativity is feminine and criticism is masculine. This notion is not completely uprooted from the Kerala minds even in this 21st century. Men authorized themselves over literary criticism. Unlike in other genres there are only few women names in this area. The prominent among Malayalam literary critics are Sanjayan, Kesari Balakrishna Pillai, N Krishna Pillai, Kuttikrishna Marar, Joseph Mundassery, M.P. Paul, S. Guptan Nair, M.N. Vijayan, M. Leelavati and Sukumar Azheecode.

In male-written novels, representation of women was either goddess like or demon like (Narendran 109). Often they are pictured as embodiments of patience, tolerance and sacrifice. The influence of these presentations confined women within homes considering it as nobility. Earlier women critics countered these idolisings, through the journals published by women themselves such as *Sudharma*, *Sharada*, *Laxmi Bhai*, *Mahila*, *Vanitha Kusumam*, *Malayalamasika* etc. Much of these journals had pages dedicated for book reviews apart from other articles of social and political interest (Geetha 51).

P. Geetha in her book *Ezhuthammamar* mentions B. Bhagirathi Amma who has written an article "Novel Vaayana" (Reading Novels) in the journal *Mahila* in 1902, in which she later asserted that women had outnumbered men in reading novels. To inspire women of Kerala during that time, she has written that many novels in Bengali language were written by women. She has also noted that the birth of novels and awakening of women were closely linked

(262). It is astonishing to find that twenty two years before the publication of *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf, a woman from Kerala, J. Kunjulakshmi Amma has voiced for a room of their own for learned woman in the article titled “Keraleeya Sthreekalkorupadesham” published in the journal *Sudharma* in 1903 (261). As the name stands, “CVyude Nayikamar” written by K. Lakshmi Amma published in *Mahila* in 1921 discusses the heroines of the novelist C.V. Raman Pillai (266). B. Kalyani Amma has written an article about the heroines of Tagore in the journal *Mangalodayam* (206).

These women of letters were criticised on account of their high births and ivory tower creativity. As observed by Geetha, they cannot be blamed as it was the failure of renaissance and nationalist movements in addressing the lower classes that had resulted in the reduced literary efforts from women of lower classes (50). It should be noted that the situation of women of upper classes were tragic. Their writings had great influence over Malayalam prose style as they dealt many subjects womanly, constructing words and expressions feminine. The last decades of nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century witnessed the active literary efforts of women, only to be unrecorded in history. If that tradition of literary criticism had continued and not disrupted, Kerala would have by now developed its own feminist approach as well as tools of analysis.

Due to the strengthening of independence struggle and later the political changes post-independence, sources are not available about women critics during the middle decades of twentieth century. Much of the magazines ran by women had stopped publishing by then. The prominent novelists during the period were Lalithambika Antharjanam, K. Saraswathi Amma, and Raja Lakshmi etc. Earlier women writers and critics had many tasks in front of them such as re-reading and re-writing of epics and classics from women's perspective. M. Leelavati entered the field of literary criticism when she found the existing reviews and criticism unsatisfactory and polarized. Though she

had published eight books purely on literary criticism before 1980, her name was not mentioned in the book about Malayalam literary criticism, *Malayala Sahithya Vimarshanam* by Sukumar Azheecode published in 1981. The neglect existed even in the 1988 edition of that book. At a time when histories are mistakenly understood to be written by only men, she dared with *Malayala Kavitha Sahithya Charithram* in 1980, which was a book of history of earlier Malayalam poets.

Her other books are *Kavithayum Shasthravum* (1969), *Kanneerum Mazhavillum* (1970), *Navarangam* (1972), *Navatharangam* (1972), *Vishwotharamaya Viplavethihasam* (1972), *Varnaraji* (1977), *G-yude Kavyajeevitham* (1980), *Sahithyaniroopanathile Dishabodham, Feminism Charithraparamayoranweshanam, Sthree Swathavishkaram Adhunika malayala Sahithyathil* (2008), *Bharathasthree* (2009). It was she who first introduced Karl Jung into Malayalam (Geetha 216). Unlike her successors, Leelavathi's critical approach was not feministic.

The impact of literature categorized under Cultural Studies is seen in the books and articles of later women critics like P. Geetha, J. Devika, S. Sharadakutty and Shamshad Hussain as they are concerned with social constructs, family roles, gender justice etc. and are called feminists rather than critics. Their criticisms are beyond literary aesthetics as they demand space for women and restructuring of social positions. It was these critics who had dug out many oral and written voices of women from history, influenced more or less by the feminist movements all over the world. Referring to the male critics, writer C.S. Chandrika says that the tools of established critics in Malayalam do not have the aesthetics and political potential to understand the new female face of freedom (420). Indeed there are many problems and limitations with the male dominated literary criticism, best example for which is the sidelining of Balamani Amma as the poet of motherhood, thereby closing the doors over other aspects and themes in her poetry.

Prominent among the new women critics is P. Geetha who had published books on criticism such as Kannadikal Udakkunnathinu, Devadoothikal Manjupovath, Adhunika Malayala Kavithayile Sthreepaksha Sameepanam, Pettunovum Eettupunayavum, Aaryamaakilumanaaryamaakillum, Seethayile Seetha, Athirthikalile Ashareerikal and Ezhuthammamar apart from a number of books on women's studies. Rereading of classics had resulted in many books of fiction and non-fiction by women including the latest publication of Sthraina Kamasuthram by K.R. Indira which presents the female version of the book on sex, Kamasutra by Vatsyayana.

The book Pennezhuth edited by N. Jayakrishnan, published by the State Institute of Languages is a detailed account of ecriture feminine in Kerala. Many women have contributed to this critical essay collection which subjects not only writings by women but also representation of women in noted Malayalam novels. The bilingual critic and translator J.Devika quotes the poet and critic Sachidanandan who had referred to this women's writing as the most powerful avant-garde in contemporary Malayalam literature. In her book *Woman Writing=Man Reading?* she says,

...in surveys of contemporary Malayalam Literature, women's anti-Patriarchal writing (much of which is explicitly feminist) is frequently hailed as a promising development- from different political perspectives. (4)

After all these advancements of feminism, still there are no mothers but only fathers for literary movements. P. Geetha wonders why the intellectual cultural milieu of Kerala is not celebrating centenaries or anniversaries of women writers and their books (85). Amidst all these hubbubs of women empowerment, the women of Kerala do not have public or private literary or cultural spaces to enhance their advancement in literature.

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