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FACING THE SUNRISE: WOMEN, SEXUALITY AND PUBLIC SPHERE

SREEBITHA P V

Assistant Professor of English

Central University of Karnataka

Email: sreebitha@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Lalithambika Antherjanam's story, "Udayathinu Nere" (Facing the Sunrise), describes the tragedy of Bhanumathi Amma, a woman activist and reformer, who had to withdraw from activism at a certain point in her life. The narrator, who is also a character in the story, sympathizes with her and calls her back to the public sphere. In the beginning of the story, the narrator mentions that whenever she thinks about women's social initiatives, she is reminded of Bhanumathi Amma. The reason for her withdrawal from public life is concerned with her sexuality. Once she was admired by everyone; but later considered a fallen woman. There is a paradox here in the representation of Bhanumathi Amma. Though Bhanumathi Amma argues against patriarchy, she ultimately falls victim to it by accepting it. My reading of Antherjanam suggests that the solutions she offers to the problems of Nambutiri women are in many ways restricted by patriarchal notions. However, the present story critiques the patriarchal notions associated with women's sexuality and argues for the presence of women in the public sphere.

Key Words: Patriarchy, Women, Sexuality, Public Spheres.

Lalithambika Antherjanam's story, "Udayathinu Nere" (Facing the Sunrise), describes the tragedy of Bhanumathi Amma, a woman activist and reformer, who had to withdraw from activism at a certain point in her life. The narrator, who is also a character in the story, sympathizes with her and calls her back to the public sphere. In the beginning of the story, the narrator mentions that whenever she thinks about women's social initiatives, she is reminded of Bhanumathi Amma. The reason for her withdrawal from public life is concerned with her sexuality. Once she was admired by everyone; but later considered a fallen woman. There is a paradox here in the representation of Bhanumathi Amma. Though Bhanumathi Amma argues against patriarchy, she ultimately falls victim to it by accepting it. My reading of Antherjanam suggests that the solutions she offers to the problems of Nambutiri women are in many ways restricted by patriarchal notions. However, the present story critiques the patriarchal notions associated with women's sexuality and argues for the presence of women in the public sphere.

There are three women characters in the story--Bhanumathi Amma, Radha and the narrator. Once a young male poet mocks the narrator and asks her to point out if there was any woman in Kerala who was renowned in the name of art, literature, social service or at least in singing. She feels helpless and could not

give him an answer but consoles herself by making the comment that there were mothers who reared many eminent men. But she remembers Bhanumathi Amma who used to say-

Only women who are ready to do anything to challenge the tradition can make our lives better. They have held our neck and nose with their claws making us unable to sing, to speak or do anything else. But again, they themselves complain that women are unable to sing or speak. Sister, we should release those claws with force, it may cause pain, but it is worth it! (Antherjanam *Udayathinu Nere* 26)

Here Bhanumathi Amma harshly criticizes patriarchy. Bhanumathi Amma is quite aware of the power of "tradition" in controlling women. She holds the view that if women wanted to improve their status in society, they had to come out of tradition using enormous will-power.

Women's sexuality in the story (as is outside) is controlled in the name of tradition. Katrak has argued that,

The arena of female sexuality–fertility/identity, motherhood, the sexual division of labour is the site of certain "traditions" most oppressive for women. The key issue of the control of female sexuality has been legitimised, even effectively mystified, under the name of "tradition". (297)

The narrator comments that it is difficult to agree with Bhanumathi Amma's ideology. Bhanumathi Amma's utopia is a place where women would live independently. She believes that, "Women should create their own world to become empowered. There will be art, literature and sculpture. They should be taught at all sorts of politics and struggles. The aim is to live independently without the help of a man in this world." (Antherjanam *Udayathinu Nere* 26) She further explains, "In that ideal world, silk or perfumes is of no importance; neither powder nor cosmetics. Even a mirror will not have any relevance there. Ignore those feelings which make us weak and flippant." (Antherjanam *Udayathinu Nere* 26)

The solution Bhanumathi Amma finds for the empowerment of women is to mould five hundred women aged between five to twenty five years, who are trained in the ideal of her utopia. She believes that they would construct a new world in which women are empowered. Bhanumathi Amma was always worried about how one could overcome the humiliation of women and how their limitations could be overcome. She never believed in anything other than self-perfection.

Bhanumathi Amma found an organisation for women. Members in the organisation had to follow certain rules and regulations. All of them admired Bhanumathi Amma. She was totally against love and marriage. Radha was a close associate of Bhanumathi Amma. It is she who tells Bhanumathi Amma's story to the narrator. Bhanumathi Amma was not married but she becomes pregnant. Because of this, she had to withdraw from public life. Though Antherjanam portrays Bhanumathi Amma as a rebel in the beginning we find her being helpless by the end of the story.

Bhanumathi Amma strives to improve women's status in a patriarchal society. With the organisation, she proves that women can do something productively. But the organisation's ideas were bound by the gendered division of labour. It gave importance to jobs like weaving and spinning. Special classes were conducted for child-rearing. This is actually a paradox because Bhanumathi Amma wanted to make women independent of men and marriage and at the same time, she trained women in child rearing and nurturing.

Bhanumathi Amma refused a "good" proposal and decided not to marry anyone. When she took this decision, she was accepted by the members of the organisation. To them, she was the embodiment of the so called "female virtues" such as chastity, purity, self-sacrifice and suffering. She dedicated her life for the service of women's society. She thought that the soft feelings of women would make them weak and also destroy them. Therefore the women in the organisation were expected to follow strict rules of conduct. They were not even permitted to talk about love. There is also the paradox that though she was against the so called "soft feelings" of women, she was also subject to it. She becomes a "failure" because she could not recognize a woman's desire and how patriarchy constructed it.

The story shows how the sexuality of women determines their access to public life in a patriarchal society. We can see the influence of Gandhian ideology of women in Antherjanam. As Caplan points out, Gandhi had the view that if women want to take part in the public life, they had to cease to be sex objects and become “sisters” who abstain from sex (Caplan 292). Women were/are treated only as sex objects with heterosexuality which was/is considered natural and where women’s role was/is passive. Antherjanam too had this essentialist view of sexuality. The narrator in the story agrees with Bhanumathi Amma’s parents opinion. For them marriage is the foundation even for social service. The narrator adds that a woman cannot have access to all areas of public life. Women’s chastity is believed to be like a soap bubble that would burst if blown hard. It has the capacity to destroy her future and even destroy the organization in which she is involved (Antherjanam *Udayathinu Nere* 31). Through such arguments, Antherjanam seems to be legitimising male power and male sexuality. For her, chastity is something women have to value. In order to safe-guard it, women need to be very careful while mingling with men. This becomes the way through which women’s entry into public life was controlled. Sexuality becomes a means of social control. Antherjanam was aware of the restrictions on women in the public life, but she does not challenge it as one would expect her to.

When an unmarried woman becomes pregnant the blame ultimately goes to her; while nobody blames the male partner. Radha, who is very close to Bhanumathi Amma, also blames her. Once Radha receives a letter from her in which she writes: “Women are cursed, we are helpless and unlucky. One fault or weakness in a moment is enough to destroy lifelong expectations and ideology. This failure may spoil all the goodness in us. Isn’t it a sin to commit a sin even if it is to wipe out another’s sin?” (Antherjanam *Udayathinu Nere* 39)

Radha goes to meet her but is shocked when she sees Bhanumathi Amma with a baby. She hates her at that moment and remarks that she is no different from any other women. It is not acceptable for Radha since she knows that Bhanumathi Amma hated love and is also unmarried. This is the turning point in Radha’s life. She withdraws from public life, gets married and finds it to be a solution for everything.

Bhanumathi Amma seems to be desperate. Nothing is known about her later life. She had to withdraw from public life. She too found women helpless. We may agree with Devika’s argument that Bhanumathi Amma’s harsh self-discipline breaks down before her bodily desire (5). She fails to realize that it is her desire and that she has not committed anything wrong. She admits that she is guilty. Antherjanam legitimizes the conventional view that female sexuality should be suppressed and expressed only within the confines of marriage.

Nothing is mentioned about Bhanumathi Amma’s colleague who is supposed to be her partner. Katrak remarks that, “Male power and male sexuality are legitimate; female sexuality, understood as female power, must be controlled and bounded through social custom, primarily within marriage.” (398) This notion is also steeped in the minds of women. The narrator seems to be sympathetic towards Bhanumathi Amma. She comments, “I have never thought of Bhanumathi Amma as a goddess without any mistakes. None of us are goddesses. Can we not get rid of this aversion towards human feelings? Can we not amend it? (Antherjanam *Udayathinu Nere* 41)” The feelings of women are always controlled. But here the narrator asks Bhanumathi Amma why she hid her face for a sin (desire) which she committed unknowingly. And, in any case, one cannot judge what is good and what is bad. She asks her to return to public life by forgiving herself.

Antherjanam portrays the patriarchal notion that it is not possible for women to engage in public activities unless and until one is married and thereby “respectable”. It shows how women’s sexuality determines her social life. The major question here is what is important for a woman--family or public sphere? Bhanumathi Amma once points out that women are a failure only because they give more importance to family than to social life. Bhanumathi Amma who had argued that public sphere is more important than family is rendered helpless by the end of the story. In a patriarchal society, marriage is the foundation for everything including social activities of a woman. Here the narrator mentions that family life and motherhood has taken over her health and Radha’s health.

The narrator describes Bhanumathi Amma as a reformer who is beautiful, *kulina* (Aristocrat) and an educated woman. But when failed, she is treated only as a sexual being. Being a wife or a mother (of a male child) are the only things that define her identity. The body which belongs to the husband is expected to reproduce. This becomes the sole function of the women's body/sexuality which happens within the confines of private domain.

Patriarchy sees motherhood as constituting a positive identity and status for women. It is highly valued as the key to adulthood having a child makes a woman a mother and an adult (Woollett 49). But if an unmarried woman becomes a mother, it gives her a negative identity. Motherhood is not acceptable outside the institution of marriage. The question of pleasure is also important here. Though motherhood is considered a pleasurable experience for a married woman, it is a miserable experience for an unmarried woman. It is considered to be a misfortune for an unmarried woman. Such characters can be seen in Antherjanam's works. While portraying the helplessness of women in patriarchal society, Antherjanam call for their liberation.

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