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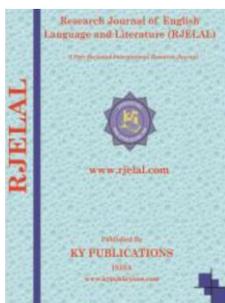
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THE SCENT OF BREST MILK: CRITIQUE OF MOTHERHOOD

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses Lalithambika Antherjanam's story "Mulappalinte Manam" (The Scent of Breast Milk) with a focus on the theme of motherhood which is a dominant one in almost all her works. "Mulappalinte Manam" discusses the value of breast milk and thereby, the value of motherhood. Her views on motherhood are articulated in this work. The story begins with a discussion on family planning by five women--the narrator herself, an activist, a doctor's sister, a poet's lover and a politician's wife. The discussion later turns to breast milk. There is a story within this story told by the poet's lover which is about breast milk, and which values motherhood. It is also interesting to note that the identities of three female characters are defined by their relation with a male member-- a doctor's "sister", a poet's "lover" and a politician's "wife". Through the glorification of motherhood and reproductive power, patriarchy subordinates women. It controls female sexuality and connects it with motherhood which is then glorified. Lalithambika Antherjanam's rationale to reproduce, to produce breast milk, to serve the nation by playing the mother is not very different from the patriarchy that has constructed motherhood. In fact, she seems to be endorsing the same.

Key Words: Motherhood, Sexuality, Patriarchy, Women

This paper analyses Lalithambika Antherjanam's story "Mulappalinte Manam" (The Scent of Breast Milk) with a focus on the theme of motherhood which is a dominant one in almost all her works. "Mulappalinte Manam" discusses the value of breast milk and thereby, the value of motherhood. Her views on motherhood are articulated in this work. The story begins with a discussion on family planning by five women--the narrator herself, an activist, a doctor's sister, a poet's lover and a politician's wife. The discussion later turns to breast milk. There is a story within this story told by the poet's lover which is about breast milk, and which values motherhood. It is also interesting to note that the identities of three

female characters are defined by their relation with a male member-- a doctor's "sister", a poet's "lover" and a politician's "wife". Through the glorification of motherhood and reproductive power, patriarchy subordinates women. It controls female sexuality and connects it with motherhood which is then glorified. Lalithambika Antherjanam's rationale to reproduce, to produce breast milk, to serve the nation by playing the mother is not very different from the patriarchy that has constructed motherhood. In fact, she seems to be endorsing the same.

The story was published in the year 1960. This was the time when motherhood and

reproduction were sites of debate for feminists of the west. I am not arguing that Lalithambika Antherjanam was influenced by the western feminists. But she has articulated similar ideas. In the west, there were two groups of feminists who argued about reproduction and mothering. Among the five characters, some of them shared the ideas of the first group of feminists and others shared the views of the second group. By bringing forth their ideas in their story, my attempt is to point out that there was a conflict in Lalithambika Antherjanam's mind especially about the concept of motherhood. This conflict can be seen in these characters. But what she most believed is delivered through the last statement in the story. "I am in favour of family planning. But it doesn't mean that breast milk should dry up. Breast milk is *Amrtam* (The nectar of immortality), medicinal and life giving. Let it flow forth from our women's breasts on to the land, the nation, the entire universe." (Antherjanam *Mulappalinte Manam* 102)

For the first group of feminists, reproduction and mothering were burdens on women and they found new technologies as a key to women's liberation (Freedman 68). The activist in the story also sees motherhood as a burden. She opines that continual reproduction will not give freedom to women and it will only deteriorate women's physical condition. But the difference here is that she did not want to set women free from the function of reproduction like the first group of feminists. Furthermore, she thinks that new technologies will help in family planning.

The doctor's sister also sees motherhood as a burden for women. She argues that a woman has to face more difficulties as a mother. At the same time, she criticizes the so called "modern woman" who hesitates to feed her children. She criticizes bottle feeding. She is a woman who could not have children and has taken medicine to become a mother in vain. Though she thinks motherhood as a burden for women, she wants to be a mother. It looks like she wanted to be a mother only because it would give her a positive identity. Woollett remarks: "One attraction of motherhood therefore is that it means a release from negative identity,

whatever the problems and difficulties involved in being a mother." (60)

The narrator holds the opinion that since there was no machine for reproduction, a woman had to continue the task. Here Antherjanam actually ridicules modern technology and tries to glorify motherhood. She brings forth the idea that motherhood is a great experience in a woman's life. Her question "Can anyone have an understanding of the experience which is banned?" tells a great deal about it. We can include the writer among the second group feminists who thinks motherhood as a great pleasurable experience, who is also wary of new technologies (Freedman 69). Technology, it is argued, is made by man to control reproduction according to his wishes.

The politician's wife supports family planning but does not allow it to be practiced in her own community. Her reasoning is that if one has to get more votes from the community, there has to be an increase in population. She is the mother of five children and wants to have five more children only because of this reason. Reproduction is not a problem for her since she thinks about its utility. In such a case, how can one justify motherhood as a great experience? Among the five members, she is the only one who has experienced motherhood and she interestingly does not glorify it. It is important to note that the politician's wife is a Muslim and Antherjanam constructs the stereotype of muslim/muslim women who aspire for large families. By doing so, she also constructs a binary between the Hindu upper-caste woman and the Muslim woman.

The doctor's sister puts forward the question of breast milk. As already mentioned, she criticizes bottle feeding. Scarcity of breast milk worries her since she knows that breast milk is necessary to prepare ayurveda medicine. The poet's lover thinks that the scarcity of breast milk is a good theme for a poem. Her idea is to suggest this theme to her lover who would then write a poem. The doctor's sister and the poet's lover holds the view that women should reproduce because breast milk was so very valuable!

The activist strongly argues that women are not machines of reproduction; they are not cows to give milk. She is actually worried about continual deliveries and of bad health. She questions whether women are not capable of anything else other than reproduction? She thinks reproduction and mothering are obstacles for women's creativity. The activist is not married because she thinks it will be a burden that will hinder her social activities.

The narrator argues that reproduction is necessary because of two reasons. Firstly, she agrees with the politician's wife that in a multi-religious country, each community needs more vote, and therefore, population has to increase. Secondly, she agrees with the doctor's sister that ayurveda medicine needs breast milk and so women have to reproduce. A medicine that would supplement for breast milk is suggested to be the best way out of reproduction. The poet's lover agrees with her on the issue that such discovery of a medicine would solve all problems of reproduction.

Except the politician's wife, none in the story has experienced motherhood. The poet's lover is in a dilemma and she argues that breast milk is necessary for reasons she reveals through the story which was told to her by her lover. Her lover wanted all women to hear the story. It should be noted that this is actually a story told by men for women. She feels that a woman who doesn't have a husband or child is not considered lucky. In a patriarchal society, a woman has a high status only if she has a husband and a child, particularly a boy. Here the protagonist had born children but could not rear them because of their sudden death. She fed one generation of children of all castes and classes in her village because other women there did not have breast-milk. She was therefore called *Amminjamma* (Breast mother). She considered all of them to be her own children. Years passed by and these children became enemies of each other. They would not stop fighting. Once, while they were fighting, she entered the scene and got hurt. Surprisingly her blood flowed as breast milk. It opened their eyes and they begged her pardon. They promised her not to repeat their folly and took the vow to love each other forever. The poet's lover concludes by saying that family planning was good

but breast milk had to be produced, it should flow from a mother's breast to our place, country and the whole world (Antherjanam *Mulappalinte Manam* 102).

Antherjanam gives the message that women, especially mothers, have the strength to maintain peace in the world. This re-inforces the notion that women are the producers and keepers of culture. By imposing on them the role of mother, the intention to channellize women's sexuality towards motherhood is established. This trope to recognise women as producers of culture burdens them with the responsibility to rear children as desired by patriarchy.

By virtue of the fact that mothers generally bear the major responsibility for their children's upbringing and usually spend more time with them in their early years than does anyone else, women are often seen as reproducers of culture. (Phoenix and Woollett 17)

The duty of women to rear children is taken for granted. The problem lies in Antherjanam's argument that women should reproduce and rear children. She perhaps expresses the view that nature has endowed women with certain qualities and her power lies in this. Like Adrienne Rich, she explores the idea of female biology, in particular the potential to reproduce, as a source of power (Richardson 119). There is a problem in arguing that female biology is empowering. It falls into the patriarchal trap that considers female biology as a site of reproduction. Thus a woman's identity is limited to her capacity to be a mother.

In India, the assumption was that women were more lustful than men. This assumption has undergone changes with time. Gandhi believed that women did not have sexual desires and that sex was distasteful and acquiesced for them because of the duty to please their husband, and the need to procreate (Caplan 292). He thus assigned a passive role to female sexuality. According to Ketu Katrak, Gandhi's idea of sexuality was a traditional one wherein female sexuality was legitimately embodied only in marriage, wifehood, motherhood, domesticity--all of which are forms of controlling women's body (Katrak 396). Even now, this

conception of female sexuality is dominant in India. Gandhian idea of sexuality is very important while reading Antherjanam's work because as mentioned earlier she was very much influenced by Gandhian ideology and it is reflected in her works.

In Kerala, the question of caste and gender is very important while trying to define sexuality. Women's sexuality is very important in maintaining the caste system. Women's sexuality was regulated in order to maintain the caste system. Ideologically, it was controlled by attributing sacredness to values like chastity and motherhood. According to Uma Chakravarty, land, women and ritual purity i.e. purity of caste are structurally linked and it is impossible to maintain all three without stringently controlling female sexuality (66). It means purity of caste and land are ensured only by guarding women who form the pivot of the entire structure. She argues that this is the main reason for controlling female sexuality.

To conclude, class, caste and gender defines one's sexuality. It varies according to social norms as well as the cultural and economic background. There is little to contest the argument that sexuality is constructed and can be reconstructed. Richardson makes an important point in this context:

If sexuality is socially constructed then it can be reconstructed in new and different ways; sexuality need not be coercive or oppressive, it can be changed. (157)

Lalithambika Antherjanam's writing can be seen as trying to construct women's sexuality within a restricted framework that was available to her.

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