

WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY: CHANCES AND CHALLENGES

Dr. J. S. Rohan Savarimuttu,

Senior Lecturer in English,

Department of Languages and Communication Studies,

Faculty of Communication and Business Studies,

Trincomalee Campus, Eastern University, Sri Lanka.

Abstract

This paper focus on the need to reinterpret the mainstream feminism in order to make it a life-furthering is focusing on attributing importance to locality not only in culture but also in taking up native texts to substantiate or refute claims made by occidental thinkers and stresses the fact to emancipate research from compartmentalization since literature is seen as the example of an idea and thus literature is an interconnected system to all other systems and only a valid interpretation can be attained when researched with a holistic perspective.

Key Words: *feminism, interpretation, compartmentalization, .etc*

Although Feminism is seen as a movement since the 1960s, it is mandatory for us to see the status of the Woman from the beginning of time since the past is very important and relevant to understand the present and project the future. At this juncture, I am reminded of Roland Barthes' quote "where History is denied it is most clearly at work". We, the literati, should be very careful in delineating a feminine consciousness that is life-furthering and life-preserving subduing all totalitarian forces at work.

Narratives are codified forms that exhibit the belief systems, cultural systems, and traditions of a society where history becomes a part of narrative since it narrates an event from the vantage point of the historiographer (who usually represents the dominant ideology). Even though Feminism sees the already codified narratives as patriarchal (since they view themselves as leftovers of the dominant ideology), the need of the hour is to rethink and rework all human strands from the beginning of time. The earliest spirit of rebellion is attributed by the modern or new feminist to Lilith, who is Adam's first wife, but only rebellion was taken into account and not the symbolic meaning of Lilith, for recent trends in feminism lead towards the annihilation of human race —the acute symbolic meaning of the mythic Lilith— which knowingly or

unknowingly has crept into the movement which started with a so-called positive stroke in uplifting the conditions of women but most of it was done as or seen as a run against the masculine dominant world view through destroying the patriarchal consciousness rather than creating a maternal consciousness. This dissent by the feminist movements largely could be categorized as negative dissent and it is this negative dissent that has set-in the negativity of Lilith. For example, the spirit of Lilith is clearly seen at work in today's academic and cultural system starting with Julia Kristeva who sees childbearing as a key form of transgressive experience; to the Posthumanists who view that Earth will be a better place without the human race; or the same ends achieved through LGBT literature (Gay Literature, Queer Literature, Lesbian Literature, Bisexual Literature, etc.) and etc., take the idea of annihilation beyond all boundaries. Whereas Judith Butler's Performativity Theory of Gender; Disability Studies; and etc., project a milder version furthering positive ideas for life furtherance.

The title chosen for this paper is not only to make the Woman a better one but at the same time to make contemporary society a better place to live. Since the feminist lookup to Lilith, a Jewish narrative codification, one is again forced to look into the Jewish tradition for seeking answers in order to identify the chances to overcome the present challenges. In addition to the Jewish tradition, we as Tamils should not forget our roots since ours is the richest and the most advanced one in human history. The Wikipedia enlists 52 women writers since the pre-independence era of India in Tamil Nadu alone leaving out Tamil women writers in other parts of the world. But it should be remembered that since ancient times, Tamil society had prominent women poets, for example, Avvaiyar, Ponmudiyar, Vellivedhiyar, and Andal to name a few out of the prominent 57 female poets and one should remember that they were not just poets but also decision makers who advised the King on various occasions like poetess Avvaiyar. In addition to this, no tradition can boast of such a wealth of women writers.

In order to delineate a valid feminist praxis rooted as here and now, it is vital to emotively understand the already existing concepts in Liberal Feminism, Marxist Feminism, Psychoanalytic Feminism, Eco-Feminism, Radical Feminism, Socialist Feminism, Feminism of Colour, Anarchist Feminism, Cultural Feminism, French Feminism, Anglophone Feminism, Libertarian Feminism, Postcolonial Feminism or Third World Feminism, Postmodern Feminism, and Transfeminism to name a few. The challenges faced by women differ from place to place and therefore most of the feminist concepts become irrelevant to the present context in many parts of the Tamil society. Since no theory is perfect, we are forced to look into all and evolve one that best suits our predicaments; and it is here that one needs to look into the past literary history of Tamil literature with a focus on women writers so as to create new valid feminism than blindly following the occidental trends.

It is pertinent to remember that Feminism, as a movement came into existence due to real problems faced at a given time in history and one, should remember that no 'ism' was just an academic exercise. Therefore, the most essential component in order to make a paradigm shift would be to identify the problems faced by women in the Tamil society. And once, these problems have been listed, the challenges in solving each problem have to be identified and only after this process the modus operandi in overcoming the challenges will become the chances materializing true emancipation. At this juncture one should not find fault with Tamil women writers since many researchers try to visualize them as ideologues but in reality they are just storytellers doing the role of narration and it is the critics who have to be very careful in delineating a life-furthering feminine consciousness and is that will be rooted in our past helping each one of us to undo the misery that has happened during the Middle and Modern Ages with regard to women in creating a better future.

At this juncture, one has to also take a closer look at The Kibbutz Movement which is not transgressive if one were also to look up at Lilith and moreover the following reason makes it mandatory for one to study the women in The Kibbutz. In today's Tamil society the concepts such as employers and employed create lots of negativity in the society at large and particularly in the lifeworld of women. The dictum that Capitalism can only exist alongside Prostitution, dethroned the life world of the Tamils and I hope that none of us here have forgotten the steps taken by the Capitalists in orchestrating the Cinema Industry and its actors and actresses in dethroning the already existing traditional system amidst the Tamils. For example, the interview was given by the film star Kushboo in September 2005. This interview set-in the beginning of the fragmentation of the Tamil tradition. In the same way, the Me Too Movement in recent times in India is set in the same by making the normalization of sexual harassment at workplace and other places i.e., unconsciously creating an acceptance within the family and society at large that sexual harassment is part of the MNC or TNC culture. One has to understand how these are the helping arms of the Capitalist, since Capitalism cannot function in sexual rigid societies, the Capitalist forces use many mechanisms to break through the traditional barriers and make all transgression usually sexual ones as normal activities and that the family or the society need not worry about it at large. It is this trend that has made so many shifts even in the legal system with regard to sexual activities between persons which in the long-run will decentralize the institution known as family. It is only at this juncture the relevance of The Kibbutz, the Israeli commune comes into validity.

The kibbutz is not only a practical attempt to create a way of life but an extraordinarily elaborate, long-term experiment. The founders of the kibbutzim wanted to develop a new kind of human being, motivated by the communal

commitment and uncontaminated by private greed. This determination to share all benefits and responsibilities extended beyond property to children, who were reared by the collective—they were a gift and a concern to the entire group. The kibbutzniks (their own semi-affectionate term for themselves) would not re-create the intensely loyal but convoluted family many of them had fled in Europe. They would not restrict women from being only mothers, children to being the exclusive property of harassed parents. Nor would the sex roles of ghetto Europe be re-created in village Palestine, especially the historical anti femaleness of many ghetto traditions—ritual baths to wash away the alleged impurity of menstruation, the devaluation of women's religiosity, elaborate assertions about male superiority. They would take care that none of this was thoughtlessly repeated in the new way of life. Men and women would do the same work, have the same privileges and obligations. They would equally be politicians and cooks, equally have the freedom to make love with whomever they wished, unbound by the old association of sex, marriage, and procreation. Indeed, they would be free not to marry at all; they could live together and could separate as easily as they had united. No man would be any woman's master, no woman would have to shiver with fear at any man's edict. And no one would use sex to achieve social ends. In short, gender would not mean coercion. This was to be a revolution not only in living but in spirit (Tiger, Lionel and Joseph Shepherd 4).

Furthermore, Lionel Tiger and Joseph Shepherd in their book *Women in the Kibbutz* also stress the fact that in a kibbutz

All children are dressed in the same "work clothes" in the children's house. There is no sex difference in the style of haircut. Children take whatever they want from the pool of toys; girls are not encouraged to play with dolls, boys are not encouraged to play with cars and trucks. The children do not hear such sex-typed injunctions as "It isn't nice for girls to..." and "Boys shouldn't ..." Girls often climb trees, play very energetic ball games, and engage in fights. Boys cry without shame, handle dolls, learn to cook, and sometimes knit (166).

One must not think that the kibbutz is an experiment done in alien soil, for if one opens their eyes; such communities also exist around us in different forms. These communities silently exist without making a big noise, very well validates their claims of peaceful living. Starting from the Ashrams of Mahatma Gandhi, Meivazhi Salai, and the Ashram of Revd. Fr. Bede Griffiths there have been and still, are experiments that counter the challenges creating better

survival chances to all humans. But the literati have made a little study on the impact of such communities and have paid more attention to extreme views that bring about collateral damage.

Can Tamil texts be used side by side to English texts?, is a question that most are confused with since many think that literary research has to do only with literature and especially English literature has to do only within a certain boundary. We must learn from our brothers and sisters in Kerala who use to quote Malayalam texts in their English research work. At first, this might sound odd, may be out of the so-called English Literary Studies, but when deep thought is given one understands that they as scholars have identified the thought pattern or idea preexisting in their literature and so use it along with other theorists etc., to validate their claim. When such is the case, we the Tamils also should use Tamil thinkers amidst our research work in English, where even lines can be quoted in Tamil and a near translation can be offered within parenthesis and this cannot be a transgress since thinkers like Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur use Greek and Latin in their essays paves the way for one to recognize the thinking mind in any language or field to be cross-referred for the furtherance of knowledge. Therefore, we the students of English Literature must not think thinkers like Subramanya Bharathi, Bharathidasan, Periyar E. Ramasamy, belong to Tamil Literature or Mahatma Gandhi, Jiddu Krishnamurti, Sri Aurobindo, Vishal Mangalwadi and Gabriele Dietrich belong to religious circles only. One should know that these people were and are not just mere academicians writing for the sake of completing an assignment or thesis or research work, rather they had seen human suffering and wanted to challenge the sufferings and find solutions. For example, are we familiar with Prof. Dr. Gabriele Dietrich who is still living in Madurai and still fighting for the welfare of the downtrodden women? The answer will be negative. Only after a few decades when her works are referred and injected into the syllabus by some force we tend to learn about her. In fact, we should take care to invite people like her so as to influence our students, we should take our students on field trips to places like Meivazhi Salai so that our students will have the power and strength to face the challenges and create life furthering chances. It is very important to study our own thinkers in order to stand on their shoulders so that we may not only look taller but also will be in a position to identify the problem at hand, understand the various transmutations of the problem and identify workable modus operandi in challenging the problems creating multiple chances for life-furtherance. Not only using our own native thinkers for research but also to use the local culture as a part of interpretation is a must since it gives the researcher a reality footing validating a meaning in their research as here and now.

For example, the Alagar festival in Madurai is known to all and the stories are available even on Google. When the case is so, do we use these events as intertextual elements to interpret the text at hand or do we discard it, thinking that it has nothing to do with the so-called

literature? It is well mentioned that Meenakshi the warrior princess of the Pandiya King not only ruled Madurai but also conquered the vast amount of land and waged her last battle with Lord Shiva and during war fell-in-love with him. Lord Shiva comes and marries Meenakshi at Madurai. Alagar who is the brother of Meenakshi disguised as a robber in order to protect himself from other robbers makes his journey to the wedding, but as he reaches the Vaigai river news arrives that the wedding is over, and Meenakshi and Sundrasvara visit Alagar to the Vaigai river and receive the gifts brought by him and appease him thus. This story does not have any historical or archeological evidence proving the fact that it belongs to a time period before the dawn of history, i.e., to legend or myth. Therefore, one could conclude that Alagar lived in BC and further studies also prove the change in the venue of the celebrations and even the change in the dates of the celebrations. But what one has to pay heed is that after the dip in the river Vaigai, Mr. Alagar enters the house of Muslim women, fornicates, then goes back to his Alagar Kovil, and his wife beats him up and throws him out of the palace for quite some time. This is even practiced today, where the statue of Alagar is thrown outside spat with Beetle leaf and beaten with broomsticks.

The pertinent question arises here, how could Mr. Alagar who belonged to the mythic times i.e., Before Christ go to a Muslim women's house for fornication, since Islam sprouted as a religion and spread to India only in AD (Anno Domini)? How could such a festival use a female who belongs to a minority religion in India be used to put down the entire minority community? Feminists should voice these kinds of atrocities since stories are used to school the masses and these interpolations to the Alagar story has to be challenged and defined anew. This annual event which is ritualistic has lots of symbolic meaning in shaping the psychic of the masses like the tools used by the Capitalist society, i.e., the rituals are used by the Aryans or the Brahminical upper castes to subjugate the other using stories as bringing in cultural hegemony.

The Women of today have to play a greater role not only in questioning the existing paradigm but also in re-defining so as to make the world a better place for future generations.

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