

# What Makes a Woman? “Woman” From the Perspective of Women Writers in Malayalam

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What women writers in Malayalam crave to unveil is not an imaginatively constructed tale of woman in contemporary society but the very authentic description of their first hand experience as a 'woman' in patriarchal society. Woman could be a passive entity or a goddess figure or in patriarchal terms a passive, weak, timid, fickle-minded temptress or a prostitute. These concepts are imprudent constructs of man about woman. Those male writers who even attempt to delve deep into the problems of women were only concerned about portraying her craving for boundless love and sexual passion, restraining from any attempt to spit out the factual miserable condition of woman in a male-dominated society. Woman's individual or personal desire, the social code which limits these desires from fulfilling it are gone unspecified in the works of male writers. The life experienced by women alone, their undone dreams, their struggle to make both ends meet, their effort to raise their individuality, yearning for selfless love and their benevolence all go unnoticed in the fictional works of early male writers. The legend of women should not be limited in an aura of fanciful images fashioned by male but the true chronicle or history of women must be unearthed by a woman herself and the women writers of Malayalam stand testimony to this endeavour. The major women writers of Malayalam fiction are Saraswathi Amma, Rajalekshmi, Lalithambika Andarjanam, Valsala, K.B Sree Devi, Sara Thomas, Kamala Das.

The consequent quest for identity plagues the minds of the women characters of K.Saraswathi Amma. Her characters are ideological mouthpieces or representation of her own psyche and the quest for a liberated self can be studied through the chief character Booni, in her novel *Premabhajanam* (Darling). Booni was brought up in a western culture not in every sense of that concept but with reference to her broad minded way of thinking and advanced life style. She is educated, independent, smart and bold but the very flaw in her character is her dally with men. She never had a lasting true love with a single person but always bounced from person to another. She would always justify her action by pointing an example from Greek mythology. Early man and woman formed a single creature which was later split into two equal halves. From that point of time the split halves of the same entity have been on a perpetual quest for one another. This is the basis for the attraction between the opposite sexes. Booni is also on an unending quest for her better half. In her case there is no self quest, but a quest for an ideal man according to her beliefs.

She discovers her ideal half at the end of the novel in the character Jeevakumaran. But rather than abiding to him for the sake of their mutual love and compromise on her ideal of independence, she prefers to commit suicide along with him. She chooses to die with him

deliberately, as she feels that married life with him would force her into giving up her ideas of liberated self.

In her short story “Purushanmar illatha lokam”(world without men), she creates a paradise devoid of dominating influence of men, where woman enthalls in utmost liberty.

Thus Saraswathi Amma’s woman characters live in an utopian world where they are offered full fledged freedom of thought, action and speech untouched by male domination and not influenced by society’s moral code of conduct. For her characters a liberated life is the primary concern rather than acting the role of a typical lover, wife or mother to convince the society.

According to Rajalekshmi, woman carries a mind that can revel in an imaginative world. Society which diverges away from accepting this fact stood as a challenge to the dreamy characters of Rajalekshmi. The author’s brave attempt to disclose the personal or private desires of woman rather than portraying her physical world, family, job had to face copious criticism from literary world. May be it was her inability to cope with social circumstances which were contrary to her personal desires, which ended up with her surrender by committing suicide.

Rajalekshmi has written two complete novels- *Oru vazhiyum kurayae nizhalukalaum* (1958, one path and a few shadows), *Uchaveyilum elam nilavum*(Mid sun and tender moonlight,1960) and one incomplete novel *Njan enna bhavam*(I am the one). Women of her fiction are those who swing in their dreamy world of love and perfection-the characters Remani in *Oru vazhiyum kurayae nizhalukalaum*, Vimala in *Uchaveyilum elam nilavum* and Ammini in *Njan enna bhavam*. These three characters are women of same disposition. Isolated from external circumstances these characters build up an interior personality and individuality glossing over with pride "I am the one". They are unwilling to be buried themselves in the injustice of social morality, code or norms. They love freedom, equality and individuality but all these desires are crushed by their responsibilities, obligations and limitations in a patriarchal society. This pathetic situation of the woman forms the major crux of her novels.

Remani is the character who struggles to find her own path of life and those who follow her path are her shadows, and it is her duty to put them in forefront. Her liberated mind never allowed her to remain in tangles of filial relationships or obligations. This dreamy girl found solace in old oracles and anecdotes in her childhood. In her teenage she found comfort with her cousin Appukutan and as she became a grown up woman, was at ease in being love with Madav.

What estranged her from her family rapport is its hostility meted out to woman in general. A moron father, mother and aunt who bend their desires to the wish of her father and her brother who was not yet ripe to know the value of relationships, were other factors that distanced Remani from her family. Indulged in childhood ecstasy and teenage mysteries she refined her life to a dreamy world during her early years. She could not find any affection or solace in family relationship and also nurtured an aversion towards such conventions, especially to her father. She always found pleasure in defying her father, and showed love towards her aunt and her cousin Appukuttan, who were detested by her father. The more she detested her dad, the more she loved her cousin Appukuttan.

Though her imaginative creativity was blossomed by her innocent relationship with Appukuttan, it sprouted large with her relationship with Madhavan. They wrote poems of the same

trait which was the sole reason that attracted the two poles. But in their love relationship Madhav Menon adorned the role of a "dominant lover" whereas Remani a "meek dreamy lover" and most of all what attracted Remani is not his warm love but his large eyes, painted lips, raised and thin nose.

Her dreams were never realized in a circumstance of customs and duties. Appukuttan who bore the responsibility of the family, father who strived hard to get her married, relatives, brother Gopu or her love Madhav who offered to marry her in exchange of his sister's marriage with her brother Gopu could not help her to materialise her dreams but pushed her into a solitary refinement.

But those dark days are over, Remani ventures out to save her cousin Appukuttan in his last days who loved her and cried over her loss. It was not a decision by her heart but she succumbed herself to fate, that destroyed her life by shattering her dreams. On one side the heart-broken cousin Appetan and on the other, the bright eyes of Madhav haunted her. There was no other choice other than self sacrifice for Remani and she resolves to serve Appkuttan by joining her aunt. Women's dreams and ambitions are immaterial in a male-dominated society. For a woman, her obligations, responsibilities and sacrifice are the only alternatives to lead a healthy life. This message is heralded throughout the novels of Rajalekshmi.

For an imaginative buff like Remani, obstinacy was the characteristic trait but for Ammani in *Njan enna bhavam* it was arrogance and pride that distinguished her. She was a naughty willful girl even from her childhood. She runs away from her marriage with an old namboodri and found refuge in a relative's house. Not only did she escape from an unwilling marriage but married a rich noble Sub-Judge of the town. She had everything, a loving husband, money and luxurious life. She got whatever she desired but all her pride goes before fall and fate arrives to slash off her horns of pride in making her sterile. Her husband becomes ill and dies. In spite of the hostility of fate, she survives and remains arrogant and strong. But at a particular instant she falls from her pedestal as she rips open her kind heart to save her brother's son drowning in the river. The crowd saw Ammani press the child against her chest. She held the child firmly and smiled at his brother and there her brother saw motherly love and affection hovering over her face. The villain of her life was fate. Whatever accomplishment she possessed in her life, her life would have been meaningful only if she could become a mother, a privilege nature denied to her.

When all contemporary writers portrayed woman as an object of love and sexual pleasure, Rajalekshmi voiced that woman's life is decided by fate and society, but still she clutches to her dreams and abilities, and she is forced to set aside all her desires to fulfill her obligations. Mercy and compassion are the characteristic features of a woman. Both Remani and Ammani show this trait at the last leg of their life. In Remani it is in the form of sympathy but in Ammani in the form of motherly affection. And one must remember these traits in woman are not their weaknesses but their strength, the power which aid them to fight against the vagaries of life.

In spite of all wreck and desolations, Valsala's character Sarasu (Thakarcha (Failure)) hoped she could evade from all these miseries by helping herself and paving the way to save her family from disaster. Dilapidated abode, aged grand parents, wailing parents, forced her to find an earning by enrolling in teachers training academy. Though her father refused to send her to work, she neglected and was determined to earn a living. Her mother was well acquainted with the

wretched circumstance of her family and blessed her to follow her goal. Sarasu stayed at her relative's residence and began attending the classes. Her late knowledge of the house owner's secret toddy business did not deter her from moving away from her goal to achieve education. Day after day the passion of her dream grew wilder and wilder and she achieved her goal after two years of completing her course.

But the path of success was still long way ahead. Disaster and failure followed her like an endless war. Her mother's death, betrayal of her lover all succumbed to disturb her mentally and that ended up with her failure of her final examination. In spite of all these tribulations, the disastrous of all is to lose her chastity by being the victim of her house owner Subhadra's and her accomplice Vasu Menon's conspiracy. Accepting the hostile destiny's verdict, she returned to her home to partake in her family's misery.

If the extravagance of her father ruined their family's wealth, what impaired her life was the crookedness and dishonesty of evil human beings. Her house owner Subhadra represented any woman who is willing to choose any path for a prosperous and luxurious life and her accomplice Vasu Menon symbolised any man who is keen to do any heinous crime to satisfy his lust.

The character of *Nizhalurangunne vazhi*, Madavi is yet another stubborn character. In spite of her courage to abandon her family and live with her relative Moothachi, her life was ruined by her marriage to an invalid cousin. Long term tussle between her mother-in-law's possessive character and the ailment of her husband drained away her impudence and hope. With the death of her husband her life was ditched to solitary refinement.

To escape from all misfortunes she found refuge at a missionary centre. But there the poverty stricken atmosphere moved her heart to marry a rich old man and to abandon her poor lover Sankaran Kutty. Even Sankaran Kutty's destitute life prevented him from accepting Madavi, which would result in aggravating her misery further. Thus both of them decided to break off their relationship for a better future. In spite of her marriage to a wealthy old man, her mind and heart still pondered over the images of her lover Sankaran Kutty. Impoverished circumstance and a weak-willed lover would shatter any woman's gallant and that is what happened in the life of Madavi. Here self betrayal is the sole tactic to survive, says the novelist.

If mental potency and obstinacy rule the character of Sarasu and Madavi, what dominates the character of Nangema Andarjanam in *Agneyam* is her "individuality". She had determination and will power to accomplish her aspiration. Her husband worked hard for the betterment of the society. But his day and night toil and hardship deteriorated his health and soon he was bed ridden and dead. After spending money on the betterment of society what left was a bit of property and coconut trees. There was no protection for Andarjanam beyond the door steps of her house.

The licentious Keyi Muthalali and his accomplice's illegal activities were inevitable threats to the life and livelihood of Nangema. She realised that determination could alone would not help to survive these hazards. Thus she migrated to her sister's husband's house in Wayanad along with her children. But what awaited there was yet another disaster, the changing attitude of her brother-in-law from a saviour to another lustful Keyi Muthalali. But Nangema was not ready to surrender. Not only did she escape from the hard grip of these evil men but also succeeded in her life by her indomitable

courage and hard work in agriculture. She educated her son and married her daughter to an industrious man. The character Nangema proves that determination and constancy would alone reap victory in one's life.

Nangema challenged the limitations of a woman and objected to the advances of lustful men with sheer will power and resolution. Her character portrayed women as an abode of insurmountable courage and self-will. Woman is not an object of pleasure but her love and presence had yet another transcendental meaning and this could be scrutinized from this character study. In spite of determination, social codes are yet another factor that prevents a woman from enlistment. This is the cause of failure in the life of Madavi and Sarasu and even in the life of Nangema. Though Nangema strived to survive, her son's ruin in the conspiracies of political establishments wrecked her life again.

In her novel *Nellu*, the two woman characters are different from other novels and so does their life. Here the character Mara's husband is seduced by another woman Kurumati. Finally, none of the two women will possess the husband Mallan. But Mara's life would become secure in the hands of Raghavan Nayar who offers to marry her, attracted by her innocence and modesty. Here the novelist shows that man's benevolence would also play an important role in the success of a woman's life.

Caste system, recession, covetousness of men, hostile fate and discrimination are the factors that impinge the life of every woman. Conviction would play a considerable role in escaping these giant waves but the whole ball of wax will blow up finally. Thus novelist replaces the conventional passive woman character with a self determined damsel in her novel, but in spite of all these fortitude in her woman character, the novelist knows what lays ahead-the ruin, and she hasn't failed to portray that too. Nangema, who accepts failure with determination and love; Madavi who pursues liberty through self betrayal; Sarasu who accepts failure stoically- all these characters are symbolic of real life characters except Mara who is the model of the author's ideal imaginative woman.

All major women novelists' major concern was to explicate the plight of woman who is condemned to misfortunes and pitiable vagaries of life. Despite, expounding the need of emancipation of woman, they also explored the inevitable constrained life of woman devoid of free will and liberty.

Despite getting hold of freedom, we could see the ceaseless craving deep within the heart, to realise the feminine desires and passions in the character Thethi kutty of Andarjanam's magnum opus *Agnisakshi*. Though the novelist consumes much of the space to describe the freedom struggle, she has not elapsd to portray the yearning of heroine's mind to fulfill her womanly longings.

The novel takes place in the period when the high caste of Hindu religion "Namboodris" influence had a major bearing on hindu society. Thethi kutty was the sister of social reformer P.K.P. Namboodri and an ardent lover of freedom but fate had been too hostile that she ended up marrying to an orthodox namboodri family "mamballi" adorned and ruled by a stringent oldman Apan. The rigorous discipline and rituals of the family, and her husband's reluctance to be with her other than at a definite time, had led her to a monotonous life. She "burned like a volcano" within the constraints of her fragile body.

Her sister's endorsement through letters could not hold her long inside the restricted parameter of her husband's family. When her husband's abode turned out to be a prison where her freedom was questioned, she defied their customs outrightly and left the home in search of new pastures. She returned to her parent's home where she was still accepted as the sister of P.K.P. She abandoned her traditional garb of "puthap" and "mundu", and put on saree and blouse. From there her life turned out to be a new beginning of hope and promises to emancipate woman from shackles of customs and social obligations. Her elaborate and inspiring speeches on liberation of woman motivated other woman to come in fore to tussle against whims and eccentricities of a male-dominated society. She turned out to be a new person accepting a new identity as a social reformer and a new name "Devakimanamballi". Further she turned out to be a political icon called "Devibehan", and then to a faithful disciple of Gandhiji, and became a prominent member of woman social service. Despite of intense suffering in the hands of cops, she endured and moved forward towards victory.

Thethy's freedom struggle for woman is an inspiring legend for every woman who withers in the so called patriarchal society. The character Thethy proved a woman's indomitable courage in liberating herself from social restrictions, moral obligations and from shackles of slavery. But the story never ends here. It can be concluded only when the disturbed and vehement psyche of the heroine is unveiled.

Though she reached the high realms of freedom, Thethi kutty was distressed, and deep within her heart she always remained the faithful wife of Unni namboodri. She could not understand the conflicting feelings of her husband caught between his wife's earning for freedom and the orthodox beliefs of his family members. Neither could he accept his wife's liberal attitude or abandon conformed values of his community. Though Thethy was separated from her husband physically, she always cherished her role as a wife to Unni namboodri and always chanted the mantra to remain an eternal wife. And when during her last days as an ascetic, she still craved to nurture a child and motherly instincts welled up in her heart at times. Finally her motherly affection found its fulfilment with her blessings on her friend's son and cuddling him in her arms.

Thus Thethi kutty lived in her world of freedom with the protection of her "mangalya sutra" and with the mind churned with motherly affections. In short, Andarjanam has succeeded in ascertaining that, woman however she earns for freedom, her basic instinct lies in her role as a wife and a mother and those feelings are inevitable as far as a woman is concerned.

A woman who ripped away from the restraints of an orthodox Brahmin Namboodri family makes the high spot of Sreedevi's novel *Yajnam*. Being born as the daughter of a cast off father, Savitri underwent a tremendous trauma during her childhood. Though she was born to a Brahmin father and mother, she was treated as an outcast by others of her family as she was born to an exiled father. The wound of being neglected by others and the scorching accusation of others nurtured in her a defiant and resolute heart to defy all decorum. With the help of her lover Kuttan she absconds from her family ties and led a prosperous life.

Consequently, Sreedevi succeeded in proving that woman can be emancipated and can flourish in her life if she possessed a tenacious self along with an aid of a passionate benevolent man, in her novel *Yajnam*.

Womanhood that has been delimited within the four walls of a society and the deliverance from that fortification through education and employment form the major crux of Sara Thomas's novel *Narmadipudava*.

The principal character of the novel *Kanakam* was the most unlucky woman who was doomed to be a widow on the very day of her marriage itself. She accustomed to live alone as her society denied the remarriage of a widow. Though she was courted by many men, she decided to live according to the tradition of the society. But gradually she came to realize the hollowness of her life and with the help of few generous people she abandoned the traditions and embraced a new liberal life. She resumed her studies and eventually became an employed lady. Her step daughter Kanjana also followed her path and took one step forward to challenge the society by marrying her lover.

If other women novelists are concerned about the suffering and loveless life of women characters, what perturbs Das's characters are their lost identity, lost love and the creeping vengeance against the Machiavellian society, that ruined their dreams and suppressed their desires. Her characters are not docile, adaptable or self sacrificing. They have a strong passion to dominate the male authority, to establish their identity and to assert their sovereignty. Her fictional autobiography *My Story* and other novels such as *Manasi*, *A Doll for Child Prostitute*, all encompasses the struggle of woman to survive in a hostile society. The characters of the novels strive for self- contentment and meaning in their life. They chose unconventional and tabooed mode of behavior for ultimate happiness and gratification.

Malayalam women writers opened a new vista by tracing out the bona fide experience of a woman in a society of Kerala. One could map out the waning of comprising attitude of woman, who is now capable of dreaming and materializing their desires with determination and courage, in their novels. They slash off the rotten mores and conventions of an orthodox society, and emerge as New Woman ever determined to escape from all restrictions bound on them to reach the zenith of a liberated life. Saraswathi Amma's *Booni* rejects to negotiate with the values of a patriarchal society and choose to end her life rather than going against her heart. Rajalekshmi's dreamy character *Remani* defies family customs and adamantly clutches to her dreams. *Valsala's Nangemma* fight against all odds and ends of an antagonistic society and asserts her individuality with long-suffering will power. *Andarjanam's Thethi Kutty*, *Sreedevi's Savitri* and *Sara Thomas's Kanakam* decry all accepted views of a bigoted society and trail the path of freedom. *Kamala Das's* major characters too follow their heart paying no heed to the disparagement of their family or society.

Therefore, almost all the major characters of the Malayalam women writers turn out to be an instance of revolution and emancipation in the woman world, which is thrashed and crushed to the ground right from the beginning of humanity. These women become the symbol of power and command. They follow their consciousness; precincts never deterred them from pursuing their inner call. But failure rears again on each character either by the hostile fate or the by the preconceptions of a conformist society.

In case of Rajalekshmi's Remani, personal obligations fail her whereas the wickedness of the Machiavellian society ruins the life of Valsala's Sarasu. In spite of attaining self-liberty, the lost wifehood and motherhood haunts Andarjanam's famous character Thethy kuty. In case of Kanakam, step daughter and Manasi, her own daughter account for their fall. Thus success and failure go in conjunction with each other in all the characters of the famous Malayalam women novelists, thereby depicting the existent status of a woman in Kerala society.

Save for their unconventional approach, what adds worth to these characters is their sense of responsibility, patience and boundless love for their fellow-beings. Valsala's Sarasu always cared for and loved her parents and grand-parents, and never thought of a revenge on her destroyer. In *Agneyam*, the character, Nangemma strives hard to make both ends meet and forfeits her son's life to save another. Andarjanam's Thethy Kuty, even at the last breath cherished her husband and unborn children. Sara Thomas's Kanakam, a human symbol of love is an exemplary character. Though Kamala Das' characters lack any exceptional qualities, they show immense daring to survive in a patriarchal society. Helpless and mislaid life of the woman is enhanced in the novels of Das. In short, Malayalam Women novelists accomplished their purpose in giving an authentic account of women's life by delving deep into the psyche and unsolved vagaries of woman folk in Kerala, and also succeeded in presenting that woman is not a heap of flesh or a temptress, but a human being made of love, passion and free-will hoping to reach a new "pasture" where she will be treated equally with man.

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