

Cultural Analysis of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Lalitambika Antaranjanam's *Agnisakshi*

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Abstract: *Literature, from time immemorial, has been a preserve of those in power. The educated –white- male propelled patriarchal norms in social life and thereby restricted women to their gender roles. Cultural forces further groomed and conditioned their desires and behavioral pattern in the prescribed manner. The turn of the twentieth century witnessed rapid and radical changes in society and literature, distinct and powerful female voices began to be heard from the literary arena. They were determined to de-construct and redefine their self and gender roles. Lalitambika Antaranjanam (South Indian, Malayalam woman writer) and Toni Morrison (Afro-American Black women writer), two significant writers of our times, erased geographical and cultural barriers through their soul stirring narration. They had contrasting styles and experiences in life but are unified by their focus on issues that underpin woman's identity. The study seeks to analyse the cultural experience of the female protagonists as represented in the novels, *The Bluest Eye* and *Agnisakshi*.*

Key Words: *culture, identity, patriarchy, freedom, discrimination.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Evolution of culture can be seen as a path breaking development of human civilization. The concept of culture, in every sense, is meant for nurturing and empowering human life. But the term has acquired a different connotation in the present scenario as it has become a domain of “power play”, where the privileged section of a community manipulates cultural values for domination and they maintain their stature by suppressing and exploiting the less privileged section (Nayar, 128). So culture that dictated human life is now dictated by power structures within the society. This disrupts the natural order of human life. Being a powerful medium of expression, literature is capable of reflecting and shaping culture and community. The fiction of the twentieth century witnessed a renewed interest with community life, which has also secured a place in Women's Literature, a relatively young literary tradition. The study examines the cultural scenario as represented in the novels of, Toni Morrison (*The Bluest Eye*) and Lalitambika Antaranjanam (*Agnisakshi*). Two disparate societies are constituted by comparable socio-cultural structures of oppression that define and de-limit the identity of members belonging to respective communities. The superstructures of, racism in Afro-American consciousness and casteism in the social life of Kerala deform and complicate the existence of its members especially women and children.

2. ANALYSIS:

Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) probes how an African is made to live in a racist American society. The very title of the book hints at the dominant ideology of racism. Afro-Americans, a minority in America, their lineage can be traced back to racial groups of Africa. The term also used to refer those descended from enslaved Africans. Though, they constitute the third largest ethnic group in the United States. They are looked upon as inferior beings by the white inhabitants of America and thereby attributed the title of second class citizens. *The Bluest Eye*, represents a world that is disordered with values and morals inverted. The novel exemplifies how the white ideal of beauty symbolized by “blue eyes” becomes the yardstick whereby the blacks measure their success and failure. Morrison, through her characters, presents the anxieties, aspirations, strengths and shortcoming of the blacks. In the novel Pecola Breedlove, an eleven year old girl, who is anxious to be the part of that world, which is not accepting her existence because of her black racial identity. Being neglected by parents, friends and teachers, Pecola slowly steps in to the depths of madness (Das, 11).

Toni Morrison, a female representative of Afro-American community explores in her novel, the different facets of black life in its conflict with the white American culture. All of Morrison's characters including Pecola, Frieda, and Claudia are part of a world that isolates denies and threatens their lives by executing prejudices of hatred. Morrison presents psychic violence as a more severe form of oppression (Davis, 27)

The opening of the novel presents the image of a 'typical American family' which is happy and secure in every sense. This image alone is sufficient to create a world of white suburban comfort. However the reality surrounding black life, experienced by Pecola and others, has been removed from various degrees from text book reality. This can be seen as a conscious as well as serious attempt that is capable enough to develop racial consciousness even in the mind of a child who is a delicate member of the community according to Toni Morrison. Morrison's intention is to encourage readers to compare the life projected in the series and the reality of Breedloves and Mac-Teers, two families, struggle to find them illustrated in the picture perfect life (Goulimari, 34)

The community that surrounds Pecola made her a victim of neglect, abuse and hatred. Everyone around her including parents, teachers, and friends think that she is ugly and useless. Racism is the worst factor presented in the novel and she has been subjected to racism both within her own race and by White (Prasanta, 146). Morrison narrates a particular situation of victimization in the name of race:

Bay Boy, Woodrow Cain, Buddy Wilson, Junie Bug - like a necklace of semiprecious stone surrounded her. Heady with the smell of their own musk, thrilled by the easy power of majority, they gaily harassed her.....

Black e mo Black e mo ya daddy sleeps nekked.

Black e mo Black e mo ya daddy sleeps nekked

Black e mo (Morrison, 50)

The words of contempt are targeted towards Pecola's father, over which she had no control. But still the members of her own community used it for defining and ridiculing her. Pecola could do nothing other than crying over her newly found identity. This can be taken as an example of how members of the same community insult each other. This can also be interpreted as an act of mocking at oneself (Morrison, 50).

There are many instances narrated in the novel that made characters feel contempt for their own blackness and there by confine themselves to the pattern assigned to them by White society. Once, Mr. Breedlove and his lover are forced to continue their physical relation in front of White masters, along with words of abuse. In fact he was seen behaving as an ideal servant. This phenomenon of constraining oneself to a fixed pattern, constantly reduce and reify, one's independent identity. If this attitude continues they will surely lose their self-esteem and self-worth forever. To certain extent this crisis is an inescapable ontological experience. (Davis, 27-30).

The existential dilemma of the black community is expressed through the words of Claudia:

Outdoors, we know, was the real terror of life. The threat of being outdoors surfaced frequently in those days.....being a minority in both caste and class, we moved about anyway on the hem of life, struggling to consolidate our weakness and hang on, or to creep singly up in to the major folds of the garment (Morrison, 11)

The Struggle for the existence and security concerns are evident in the words of Claudia. Each and every member of the community conceals it within them and the reality makes it difficult for them to neither reconcile nor ignore their plight. Most of them are precariously positioned with one foot each in the system of White values so desired and Black culture not desired but inevitable. (Das, 55)

The novel ends with a powerful imagery and messages that Toni Morrison carefully interwoven in to the fabric of her novel.

I even think now that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year. This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. (Morrison, 164)

The meaningful quotation sums up everything previously discussed. It narrates how an antagonistic as well as hostile environment affects an individual's consciousness, here Morrison employs a thought-provoking metaphor of marigolds to the ground, which implies that the environment exerts a powerful influence upon the construction of the self. So if the soil is bad, then certain flowers cannot bloom, likewise if the environment is hostile, then people cannot survive.

Another novel that is worthy of comparison with *The Bluest Eye* is *Agnisakshi* (1977), the only novel of an iconic Malayalam woman writer, Lalitambika Antaranam narrates a series of lives, especially women, subjected to the oppressive casteism. According to *keralolpathi* (a traditional account of Kerala history) Brahmins were brought to the south-west coast of India by the sage Parasurama. Those who settled in Kerala came to be known as Namboodiri Brahmins. They had their own temple and also set of authorities for the enforcement of religious and secular law. Thus they held a superior position in the socio-cultural scenario of Kerala. They were feudal aristocrats and religious elite famed for their adherence to tradition, which is usually visible in the form of caste-based prejudices. The social structure of Kerala was so complex with the caste system, that it practically segregated one section of people from another and marginalized women and children (George, 103).

Antaranam narrates the issues addressed by Namboodiri women and worked towards their emancipation from archaic practices within the community, through her writing. The story of the novel revolves around the lives of Teithikutty and Thankam Nair, who react against the restrictions laid upon their shoulders in the name of caste (Jyothsna, 362)

Manampalli *Illam* (The Malayalee lineage system used for classification used and

Identification of castes in Kerala) can be considered as an epitome of Namboodiri

Illams of Kerala:

It was a famous tharawad. Many members and wealth to match. They maintained an elephant, a howdah, and palanquins- all symbols of their social standing. (Antaranam, 16)

The observance of purity and pollution was of supreme importance to the members of this clan. Everyone considers himself polluted if touched by a member belonged to lower caste and it is believed that, the pollution can be removed only by cleansing oneself with water. This system brings in the practice of untouchability (*tottukudaima*). Based on this idea there was a recognized scale of distance in which members of the lower caste must stand from the members of higher caste (Sabita, 786) The reference to untouchability is mentioned in the novel when Tankam Nair {daughter of Aphan Namboodiri, who is the master of the *Illam* and of a Nair mother} was humiliated by Namboodiri women as she came to attend a marriage ceremony

Hai, Hai, move over, child. You have touched everything and polluted them. You will make us all go blind. Just because you are Aphan Namboodiri's daughter, do you cease to be a Sudra Women? (Antaranam, 12)

Antaranam provides a detailed realistic description regarding the ins and outs of the Namboodiri household. She reflects that, even in the privileged community, the condition of the women was pathetic. They became direct victims of caste-based anarchy. Community through strict rules reduced the role of women (Antaranam, xiv). They had to observe routine chores like bath, prayers, and rituals and remain confined to the four walls of Nalukettu *Illam*. They could leave *Illams* only to a temple or relatives house, that too accompanied by *dasis*. While going out, they followed the protocol of covering their whole body with a shawl and hiding their face and head with an umbrella (George, 105-107). The system convinced them to perform numberless duties and was taught to regard their husband as a noble person. In every sense "she was like a caged civet cat". Though custom allowed men to enter in to a marital relationship with a woman of lower caste namely Nairs {this social system came to be known as *sambandham*}, whereas the women of the community could marry only Namboodiri Brahmins. As a result many Namboodiri women lived and died as spinsters because all could not get Namboodiri husband. This in turn represents the double standards existed within the community. Women had to follow certain moral codes, in which chastity was strictly insisted on them. This can be seen as an obvious attempt to regulate the 'purity' of the progeny (Dominic, 55). Female characters like grand mother and aunt got trapped within this system went mad, in the course of time and were addressed as "water crazy grandmother and insane aunt" this insanity is the end result of the tension and trauma experienced by them.

The emotion of children born of the outside community relationships of Namboodiri's and their problematic belonging within their father's community is exemplified through the character Thankam Nair. They were unable to approach their father or eat with them and also could not even care for them, when they fell ill, because of the fear of pollution. The sad fact is that once the father is dead, the child along with his/her mother will be discarded from the clan and thereby denied their claim over their father and his property (Antarjanam, 71). When the mighty Aphan Namboodiri died, Netyaramma hugged her child and said:

Get up, Thankam. Our relationship with Manampalli mana is over. Come let us go.' She had wept,' Amme, where is Achan? Show me my Achan...' 'Now we cannot step in, my child. We would pollute the house. Even otherwise, polluted or not, he left with your touch on him. What a disaster..... (Antarjanam 71)

Netyaramma was a pragmatic woman and her experience was nothing new for a woman of Nair veedu:

They had always been the mistresses of a Namboodiri or Thampuran. Bear children. In the end, give up everything and return to their own houses.....she had consciously amassed wealth. Thankam should never be in need, alone, abandoned, or orphaned. (Antarjanam, 72)

There were strange beliefs and rituals that were in vogue in the Namboodiri community. One such belief attached to married life was that "the union between man and wife was unacceptable if its aim was not to produce children". The ritual of *smaarthavicharam* was another one, which was a trial for throwing Namboodiri woman out of caste and community, for the charge of sexual impurity. It was conducted according to the strict rules, prevalent among Namboodiris till the early part of the twentieth century. *Smaarthavicharam* of Kuriyedathu Thathri remains as a remarkable episode in both Namboodiri and Kerala history as she was able to unveil the mask of hypocrisy and morality of the society (Sabita, 784-788).

Lalitambika Antarjanam mirrors the reality that once surrounded the lives of people in her community and also makes the point clear that how society, culture and caste consciousness determines one's being.

2. CONCLUSION:

The uncompromising social analysis and the imaginative retelling of truth have gained critical attention to the works of Lalitambika Antarjanam and Toni Morrison. Though they address their own community's concerns, their characters are in a quest for identity and self-representation in a society that remains completely hostile. The novels present the protagonist, especially female characters in a state of clash with oneself, with others and most importantly with those inscrutable forces beyond one's control and knowledge. Novels give a vision of norms constructed by society, oppress society in general. The issues stem from racism and casteism can be viewed collectively as destructive to culture as well as threatening, the peace and stability of every nation. They cause tremendous cultural and economic suffering. They sow the seeds of hatred, intolerance and destroy the harmony of life; they negatively affect every area of the individual's life including behavior, intelligence, dignity and social status). Culture is an empowering mechanism that aimed at improving the standards of human life by generating solidarity between human minds. It dictates the human life irrespective of social, economic, political, cultural and geographical conditions but it is to be noted that if the very culture is dictated by internal forces like racism and casteism, it deprives human life than allowing it to prosper. Both novels reject and denounce racism and casteism as stumbling blocks in the way of human progress.

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