



Subaltern Hues in Devaki Nilayamgode's Memoirs

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Abstract

Antharjanam, Memoirs of a Namboodiri Woman, is the first full-length account of a Namboodiri (Kerala Brahmin) woman's life, a compilation of Smt. Devaki Nilayamgode's memoirs, translated from Malayalam by Radhika P. Menon and Indira Menon, reads like a single book with logically sequenced chapters. Minority discourses have gained considerable currency in the recent decades providing platforms for the surfacing of the marginalised groups, as part of a shift of paradigm in cultural discourses. Due to the economic/cultural/caste-class forwardness of her community, Devaki Nilayamgode cannot be literally treated as a 'subaltern' in the strict sense of the term. What is crucial here is to see that the gendered, old, homely, semiliterate Brahmin woman and a non-professional writer, who had experienced life within the confinements of a pungent paternal world and who has survived in a society which was eclipsed by the dominant concerns of the commanding group, is attempting at expressing her innermost feelings through the possibilities of narration, rendering new scripts for women's lives, deciphering submerged subaltern voices/presences, during the process. Dealing with the subjective resources of the author's memory, I attempt to foreground how a life narrative becomes a reclamation of agency particularly by those who have been marginalised through class, race or gender and as a mode of self-expression, inventing a new identity beyond their caste/gender frame. I have adopted a flexible theoretical application of feminist, Marxist, Postcolonial critical approaches, with modifications suitable to women's experiences in the textual context to excavate the representation of the marginalia that had eluded the grasp of compressive categorizations.

Keywords: Marginality, Gender-Expectations, Power-Relations, Subversive Potential.

The social class structure of Kerala during pre-independence period can be conceived through various interactional axes of gender, caste, class and community identities. During the early Middle ages, Kerala Brahmins---Namboodiris---shaped the society on the lines of the caste system. Brahmin community, occupying the privileged top cluster, was interwoven with rigid proscriptions rooted in patriarchal ideology of male domination, subsequently displaying a blunt suppression of the 'other', especially women. Caste and gender hierarchy are thus interconnected factors that formed the organising principles of Brahminical social order. Smt. Devaki Nilayamgode, in her 'book of memories', *Antharjanam, Memoirs of a Namboodiri Woman*, effortlessly reflects the history of an age through the sieve of memory and provides



direct visions of the lives of Namboodiri women confined to the sombre corners of domesticity and their fervent attempts to flee from their clogged life.

In Kerala, Namboodiris held a powerful position with a long history of socio-cultural and economic dominance and command over resources. They constructed and perpetuated a set of social arrangements that preserved their exclusivity and cultural uniqueness. Patrilineal succession, the emergence of private control over land and their claim to the ritual and ideological leadership of society through sacred knowledge have helped them to establish and preserve their hegemony over different socio-economic channels. Namboodiris thus reinforced their feudal elite status as the landowning religious aristocracy through their adherence to orthodox traditions and rituals and administering grip on land, temples and their subsidiary villages. Their regulated interactions with different groups aided them to maintain strategic relations with each of them, extracting different sorts of services and benefits. They retained a sense of pride in their conscious display of materialistic and cultural superiority and asserted their eminence by clearly marking their caste prestige and distinctness, fortifying their high-ranking in the given social arrangement.

Nilayamgode's writings typify the significant position and aura of superiority that Namboodiris commanded in society. The Illams (residence) were very spacious with Nataka shala for staging performances like Kathakali or to serve meals to a thousand people at a time, a big kitchen called Oottupura, where men enjoyed coffee and snacks leaning against the railings, (6) and Pathaayams (place to store grains or vessels) filled with golden grains of paddy, golden coloured Uurulis (large vessels) and utensils made of bell metal, brass, bronze and wood, the spacious Nilavara (underground cell in the house) with granite floor, walls and ceiling and the smooth shiny Chinese jars used to store food- stuffs inside Nilavara were all pointers to the prosperity of the family. (138)

Though the Brahmin women were honoured members in society, they were considered inferior by their men-folk. "Antharjanams have always been a source of great fascination in popular imagination of Kerala. To an outsider's eyes, they were living exotica. Cocooned in luxury, shielded from public view, always escorted by an entourage of obsequious attendants and endlessly enjoying a hedonistic life full of festivals and elaborate feasts, these upper caste women appeared to lead a charmed life. However, what most people never realised was that the antharjanam's awe-inspiring exclusivity concealed the cruellest form of patriarchal oppression that robbed them not only of independence and education but even the simplest and most innocent of joys." A Namboodiri girl had no right over her father's property. Preferential treatment and consideration were given to boys from their early infancy. The birth of a girl was not considered auspicious. Prayers were conducted only for "the boy's long life and good fortune" (83) because it was believed that sons had the power to "elevate their wandering spirits to the higher plane inhabited by their departed forefathers." (83) The world of colours and fragrances were banned for girls since childhood, conditioning their impulses to a dull, unexciting life pattern. "Colourful and sweet-smelling flowers were used only in the pujas for deities ... or in the temple" (16) and they were expected to dress "very simply without any redeeming colour."(24) Education was denied to them and could



not get into any profession. They were not permitted to read and were excluded from learning Vedas or religious texts. "Initiation into learning, studying alphabet and reading the Ramayana - this completed a girl's education" (30) and the only prayer they were taught to repeat was to have plenty of food, clothes and enjoy marital bliss. (31) The large hall where Sanskrit was taught, held a wide collection of books; but "this was a place only for men" (137).

Namboodiris practised a peculiar set of marriage and inheritance system to keep the control over the family-property intact. Only the eldest male member within the family was allowed to marry a Namboodiri girl. Many Namboodiri girls had to remain unmarried throughout their life as they were prohibited from marrying outside their caste -group. Many of them were forced to marry aged-men, who were already married and had to endure a drab life with co-wives. Often, small girls, whose *Uduthu thudangal* (Puberty ritual) had not even been performed, were forced into marriage and no one paid attention to their refusal. They were forcibly taken to the bedrooms by the matrons of the Illam; frightened and anxious, these little girls waited to get the door opened in the morning, to escape. (115) Women had to prioritise their husbands' needs over everything and Antharjanams very rarely got chance to take care of their own children, as most of the time they would be busy with customary temple visits, assembling Pooja items for daily worship, cooking sumptuous meals to the family and guests and preparing offerings for the deity. (16) It was women's duty to maintain the purity of food, and their taintless domestic management became a pivotal element in the maintenance of purity of rituals. Delicacies like coffee and snacks were meant only for Namboodiris; children looked pale and consumptive, but cow's milk was never meant for them. It was used to make ghee in which lamps were lit at the temple or to prepare coffee or to make currys to serve the Namboodiris at feasts. (14) When Nilayamgode writes how the women folk longed to drink coffee and waited eagerly in the evenings for a small portion of snacks to reach the inner rooms, what is disclosed before us is a life of impoverishment that had been imposed on Antharjanams, children and the servant-class at the Illams.

Antharjanams were mainly confined into routine domestic chores. They rarely got opportunity to go outside their Illams and were not allowed to use or move freely around *Verandhas* (a roofed platform along the outside of a house) or *Poomughams* (portico), which were used by male members and visitors. However, on such rare occasions of their visit to near- by temples, they had to cover their entire body with white cloth (*Ghoshha*) and should use *Olakuda* (palm-leaf umbrellas) to cover their face. Usually, they were accompanied by servants, who made sounds to drive off low caste people to avoid pollution. Widowhood was a stigma and strict patriarchal rules ensured that even young widows did not attract the attention of other males. Any shadow of suspicion would condemn them to *Smarthavicharam*, the inhuman ritualistic trial by elderly males, and outcasting. "In the Namboodiri community, nothing was considered a greater sign of misfortune than the sight of a widow." (78) Weak, vulnerable and abandoned, they tolerated their dreadful life, cursing themselves. Well-known social reformer V.T. Bhattathiripad aptly observed that the women of Namboodiri community were insignificant scapegoats of male ascendancy that formed the



axis of social system and the notions of nobility of clan, superior family status and dowry system were holy weapons employed to demoralise the dignity of the individual. Referring to the isolation and seclusion they were kept, Namboodiri women were called 'Antharjanams' or 'Akathulla aal' -which means 'Person Living Inside', indicating their extreme home-bound existence within the vast feudal estates.

Nilayamgode, thus attests that traditional Brahminism was an extremely oppressive system in its treatment of women, in which the stereotypical male enjoyed a carefree existence absolved of responsibilities and women were subjected to severe forms of restrictions under the tyrannical dominance of the men folk. But her narration also captures those lives who live in marginalized conditions, suffer economic exploitation, sexual abuse, socio-cultural persecution and political powerlessness, and deciphers experiences of oppression and their transformation into narratives of resilience. Politics of power remains as the subtext of narration, representing the personal/private in the public/political domain, blurring the distinction between the two. It does not merely reproduce the events or people it describes; through an array of subtle silences, fissures and nuances, it outspreads a subverbal awareness, embedded with questions and equations of the continuous struggles between the loss of identity and assertions of subjectivity.

Nilayamgode remembers that, though girls were not permitted to read, they took pains to read in secrecy and managed to familiarise themselves with the works of famous writers and world classics. (32) Little girls were also smart enough to sneakily enter the kitchen to take away some coffee powder, sugar and a huge quantity of thick milk to make coffee, the exquisite drink savoured only by the male Namboodiris of the Illam, smartly hiding the evidences of their risky deed. (17) There were women at her Illam, including her mother, who overlooked the norms, when it came to rendering a helping hand to others in their crises, and hurrying to the needy with positive thinking (100). At a time when girls were barely educated, they could read even *Puranas* and efficiently manage the household. (4) Staying even within the confining areas of domesticity, Antharjanams had managed to establish female spaces of support, companionship and modest enjoyments. While meeting at temple premises, they decided the venue of each year's *Kaikottikkali*, (type of dance performed by women with a set-pattern of steps and clapping of hands) and all the women gladly hurried towards the venue unfailingly, to be part of the enthusiasm. (49) Mutual help and friendship among Antharjanams were also quite common at that time and some of them undertook the responsibility of nursing sick women with unfeigned concern and deep care. (122) They were instantly ready to offer a helping hand to the forlorn women and permitted them to stay on and accepted them as part of their daily living. (73) There was no reluctance on their part to preserve grains and seeds for future necessities and also preserved with care the sackful of grains their neighbours brought in for safekeeping. (140) Antharjanams did not have money to satisfy even their slightest demands, as they did not have right to own property or meaningful professions. Thus, they saved money for their most pressing needs from the *Pidiyari*, a fistful of rice they put away in their personal container daily to be sold outside. (9) We also come across strong female figures who displayed extraordinary will power to hold



themselves together with confidence (9) even when widowhood had deprived them of their status in family and society. Nilayamgode also writes, how Namboodiris, initially unwilling to adapt to changes in wider society, also could not remain isolated from the resurgent phase of modernisation started off with the advent of colonialism. A flurry of socio, cultural and economic changes associated with colonial modernity had forced them to shift towards a wider consciousness of being a united community, leading to the formation of socio-cultural organisations like Yogakshema Sabha and Antharjana Samajam, which sought to instill in Antharjanams the importance of education, self-employment and steady income for women. Many women dared to define themselves differently by discarding their traditional umbrellas and enveloping cloth wraps, and accepting a life style and body image that they were comfortable with. (109) Centres were also setup to give vocational training to Antharjanams (153) which motivated them to stand up for themselves and seek diverse experiences and a full-fledged partaking in different domains of the wider world. Nilayamgode attests that the process of humanising the Namboodiris had levelled out most differences and succeeded in bringing mere homemakers to the forefront of public life (154). The public also began to respond to the changing needs of the time, irrespective of caste, creed and gender. Ethos against social disabilities and the quest for social justice naturally helped to improve women's social conditions, helping them to be conscious of their rightful place and opened up new vistas before them, affirming their privileges and responsibilities in the larger society.

Nilayamgode not just narrates about subversive female figures of her community who possessed the grit to subvert their subalternity even while remaining within the patrilinear, class-structured society, but also about the audacity of the proletariat women who refused to be reduced to the role of a silent 'other' with flat refusals to swallow objectifications in stoic resignation. Nilayamgode's rendition is with full of affection and admiration when she describes the life-style of proletariat women. The Brahminic day-today discourses had moulded an ambition in women for the permanency of life in the other world by fulfilling the ritualistic duties ascribed to them. In contrast, life for a proletariat woman is related to meaningful and productive work in this world. They were thoroughly integrated into labour systems and the interaction of these women with the land, water, plants, live-stock and weather were constructive, unlike the exploitative, non-labouring leisure activities of upper caste men. Women were experts in their work, with enormous physical and mental skills which the upper caste women utterly lacked. While the upper caste women were devoid of rights to themselves, these working-class women were not contained in a derivative position. They laboured efficiently, and through a creative interaction with nature and life, they preserved and developed knowledge and skills to create socially useful products. The whole process of the paddy being tied into sheaves, threshed with the feet, the grains separated from the chaff by the wind and hay-stacking were done by women who were adept at it (127) and each woman had "a distinctive, identifiable method" of doing their work (129). They were repositories of the knowledge of nature. Their concoction of medicinal leaves provided a panacea for the sickness of the villagers. The therapeutic porridge they served to their women post-confinement was highly effective and restorative. (128). "They took pregnancy and



childbirth in their stride " (128) and did not have a long period of rest after their confinement. The pains and pleasure of giving birth to a new human being is emotionally shared by all the women folk and before long, they returned to work in the fields to be part of their labour collective.

Their thorough understanding of land had always helped them to improve their labour productivity. "Farmers' wives' could tell from the direction of the clouds whether they would bring rain or not" (133). They maintained stocks of plant genes, and carefully selected and preserved seeds for planting. "Sackfuls of these seeds were carried by women to the fields, taking care not to break the sprouted ends" (131). Their experience had also helped them to work out successful hybridization and grafting of plants, fastidious uprooting and transplanting of the seedlings, precise sowing and prosperous harvests. (132) Shared work played a positive role in their life. There was a collective integration of the entire family into the productive labour system. The workers' children helped out their mothers by carrying small bundles of harvested paddy on their heads and arranging them on the threshing floor (129). They also stood guard over the planted seeds till they took root in the soil. (132) "Grandfathers and grandmothers also arrived to help their children" (134) and the whole family accompanied the women carrying headloads of paddy for sale at the fair, and delightfully returned from the fairgrounds with dates, roasted grain, *murukkus* to munch, and enough glass bangles to cover their wrists. (135) --- the simplest, but precious pleasures that they derived out of their hard work and productive knowledge.

The accumulation of private property by the hegemony neglected the labour power of the workers and for all the labour that they had invested in the production, very little reached them. "Day time was spent harvesting paddy and at the night, threshing it with the feet --- this was how each day went." (133) yet, what they received as wages were pouches of paddy, a bundle of roasted rice and a bunch of banana fruits. (132-133) Immediately after the harvest, they had more than enough to spare. But, with their menial funds getting exhausted right away, most of them were forced to take a loan against the following year's harvest. (135) Nonetheless, they "seemed contented" (132) and showed "no visible signs of fatigue" (131) or dissatisfaction.

Their "sense of involvement and discipline" (128) is further highlighted by the writer as she unravels their loyalty to the employer and the reverence they accord to hard work. "Even when they had no work in our fields, they would ask our permission before going to work for others" (129) and always considered work as worship, doing it with simplicity, love and commitment, "paying obeisance to Mother Earth and her produce" (129) for blessing their hardwork with plentitude. While the men hurried to the toddy shop after a gruelling day's work, women readily rushed back home to finish off their domestic chores.(133) Nilayamgode also mentions about their common sense and adaptability, that prompted them to use "tapioca, wheat, semolina and other such edible things" (144) during famines to ensure their family's survival, while the upper caste women plainly cried out aloud finding empty vessels in their kitchen.

Their hectic work schedules but did not prevent them from establishing constant



interaction and belongingness with other social beings. While Namboodiri women had to suffer the pangs of an isolated life and the burdens of segregated roles, these women enjoyed moments of togetherness with their kith and kin while working, cooking or watching festivities. They owned an exemplary skill not disengage themselves from creative thought while working and "their joy in the work poured out in the form of songs." (132) This made labouring process a pleasure, helping them to overcome their exhaustion. These songs, that observed the natural rhythm of the season, not just instilled respect for the generosity of nature, but also helped them to preserve their cultural tradition, remember their history, convey their concerns and desires, express their solidarity with each other, and enjoy themselves through productive toil and talent.

Nilamgode also delineates how smartly the washerwomen carried themselves. She had noticed that they always dressed neatly, their appearance untouched by the sun and the wind beating down on them. Their "strenuous exertions ensured their good health" and the "strength to hoist heavy things". (129) Their children, even their guard-dogs were "healthy and well-groomed", (25) predisposed to tackle any adversities or hardships, while Namboodiri children were victims of defective seclusions and prohibitions, making them feeble and fragile. The washerwomen were always pleased with the modest pleasures of life, like the solicitous enquiries of Antharjanams and the share of food given to them to take home. The women of Pakaravoor called the washerwomen affectionately by their names, not just as *Veluthedath Ullaval*. Their services were highly valued and the Antharjanams expressed their affection and gratitude by evincing keen interest in their family matters and giving them baskets of extra food and special items and sweets. (24) When the Antharjanams suffered the pangs of hunger and destitution due to the fickleness of their menfolk, they were helped by their maids who would work in other homes and share some of the rice and vegetables they were given as payments with these defenceless Antharjanams. (75) Their benevolence does not become a mere execution of their duty towards their Namboodiri-mistress, but an act of empathy that women share with each other. This sense of solicitude affirms the collective bonding of all women irrespective of their class and creed that exists as an integral component of their natural consciousness.

Marginalisation of the underprivileged classes is a historical reality and the ruling class creates its own values in what it presents as a common culture, legitimizing its own interests by inducing other classes to accept this 'neutral' culture with a beguiling offer of elevating them from their backwardness. Viewing from the elevated heights of superiority, the hegemony maintains an imprudent dismissal of the proletariat, denigrating them as a passive entity which is constantly in need of help from above. But, as domination works through a dualistic world where power and resistance are inter-wined, the instances of emancipatory possibilities disseminate through the gaps and cracks in social arrangements. By reason of gender, caste and class, the backward women had to face many experiences of humiliations, deprivation, exploitation and isolation in all walks of their life. Their individual voice and agency were thoroughly repressed from hegemonic discourses and historical representations. Nilayamgode does not claim to speak for their experience, but through the



seemingly neutral strands of her writing, Nilaymgode scripts the body and mind of these women and the emancipatory directions of their existence. Through Nilaymgode's words, they emerge before us as an organic group with a prolific community feeling --- self-made, efficient, reliable, conscientious and well-disposed. Their oratures incorporate and transmit their values, ideas, desires and heritage into the symbolic cultural order and potentially unsettle it by reviving the primal energy of life-giving forces. They transcend the wounds of all the agonizing events into the comforting joy of creative potency and feminine determination, expressing their identity and perspectives in their own terms, in their unique language without fear of consequences. Though not aware of the implication of their actions, their everyday acts of resilience, the way they endure and withstand the conditions of subordination and their distinctive modes of accepting their culture in its own terms subvert and rework the power relations. The female strength here becomes a signifier of a force which has always been excluded from the patriarchal order of things, but which is capable of disrupting that order to the point of destroying it.

Devaki Nilaymgode's memoir, thus, moving between the positions of being a witness, spectator and participant, mines those memory tropes which can yield complex human subjects in new light, re-inscribing their subjectivities in a new register. Monologic hegemonic representations are problematized and defamiliarized by evoking the intricate connection between the individual and communal, creating a dialectic between both. It invokes multiple subjectivities where the unique medium of the individual 'I' reaches out to communal 'We', providing overlapping identifications, where the collective finds a voice in/through the narrating self, that being the outcome of extending a strong identification with those countless subjects all bound by their identity as tyrannized and subjugated. She, thus crafts a narrative that warrants the creation of the 'other' side of the story as equally important to cultural history, employing various 'others' as a means of telling the story, enacting the marginal along new lines, consequently fighting back the bitter pains of passivity and invisibility of borderline experiences. It can be read as an act of cultural intervention that raises the visibility of the peripheral, allowing lost voices to be heard, artfully filtered through the device of memory. Her writings become a graph linking varied experiences, from where probable interpretations radiate in various directions that necessitate a redefining of subjectivities capable of representing a life worth living, executing in /through writing, the performativity of the marginalized self, making its own art as significant and meaningful to the cultural moment.

Hence, this multi voiced act becomes a narrative strategy, which subverts the established standards and anticipations about the content of life narratives, mapping the subalterns' dialectical negotiations with a history which places them as idealized or invisible, leading to reformulations of what it means to be human.

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