

Caste, Gender and Sexuality in Matampu Kunhukuttan's Brushte

By

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Abstract

Antherjanam, a Sanskrit word for "people who live indoors," is/was the surname of the women of the *Namboodiri* community residing in Kerala. This community was one of the most brahmanical and patriarchal to reside in Kerala, and they exercised strong control over knowledge, land, and women. This paper aims to analyze the experiences of Antherjanams and the ways in which they were subjected to mental and emotional alienation by the men of their community in the name of traditional practices and beliefs. The study used Chakravarti's concept of Brahmanical Patriarchy as a lens through which to examine the lives of Antherjanam women, with a focus on the story of Kuriyedathu Thatri, a woman who sought revenge against the men of her community for their treatment of Antherjanam women. The study highlighted the need to challenge and dismantle the dual standards and normalization of subjugation and oppression within the Namboodiri community.

Keywords: Antherjanam, Brahmanical Patriarchy, Caste, Namboodiri, Sexuality.

Public Interest Statement

Using the insight of *brahmanical* patriarchy, several scholars in the twenty-first century have attempted to bridge the gender and caste divide. Several types of atrocities have been discussed and brought forward in the discussions, but a significant portion of the community has been left out: the *savarna* women. The atrocities that Savarna women faced as caste gatekeepers are rarely discussed in any way. This research paper chronicles the struggle of a *savarna* woman from Kerala who dared to question *brahmanical* patriarchy and break free in 1905.

Research Paper

Introduction

The caste system, according to theorists such as Shridhar Ketkar, M.N. Srinivas, and Uma Chakravarti, has historically been an integral component of Indian society. It has served

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as the watchword for the most elaborate, rigid, and comprehensive social hierarchical system. Caste, as explained by Ketkar (1987),

It is a social group with two distinct traits. (i) membership is confined to those who are born of members and includes all people so born; (ii) the members are forbidden by an inexorable social law to marry outside the group (p. 15).

According to Ambedkar (2016), caste has a profound impact on the lives of everyone who lives in it, particularly the lives of lower caste men and all women, whether they belong to an upper caste or an underprivileged caste. Chakravarti (2003) refers to Berreman's explanation of the caste system in her work *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens.*, 'institutionalised inequality, which guaranteed differential access to the valued things of life...The human meaning of caste for those who live it, is power and vulnerability, privilege and oppression, honour and degradation, plenty and want, reward and deprivation, security and anxiety' (p. 11).

The caste system in India is hierarchical, with fixed social positions that are determined by birth and cannot be altered through education, wealth, or success. Upper-caste women play a particularly significant role in maintaining the system of Brahmanical patriarchy, which involves strict control over reproduction through endogamous unions and the interweaving of caste and gender (Chakravarti, p. 26). This system grants exclusivity to those who adhere to its laws and institutions, and it is upheld through the enforcement of strict social boundaries. Despite attempts to challenge or change the caste system, it remains a persistent and influential force in Indian society.

Literature Review

Matampu Kunhukuttan's novel *Outcaste* or *Brushte* (2019) offers insight into the small but powerful *Namboodiri* Brahmin community in eighteenth-century Kerala, known for preserving their knowledge, wealth, and power through strict codes of control for their women. The novel is based on the real-life 1905 trial of *Namboodiri* woman Kuriyedathu Thatri, who sought revenge on sixty-four *Brahmin* men and the community. Chitra Ahanthem (2019) describes the book as a powerful indictment of the male privilege enjoyed by *Namboodiri* Brahmins until Thatri challenged its foundations. Rohan Manoj (2019) calls the work a modernist interpretation of a traditional tale of morality and divine punishment, while E.V. Ramakrishnan (1997) notes that Kunjukuttan provides valuable insight into the social structure and mindset of the ruling group during this period. The story of Kuriyedathu Thatri is significant as it illustrates the intersecting themes of eros, politics, ritual, and rebellion.

Mayadevi M. (2017) notes in her work "Notions of Womanhood, Family, Marriage, and Morality among *Namboothiris* and *Nairs* in late Nineteenth Century and early Twentieth Century Malabar" that although Kuriyedath Thatri's trial was not the first or last of its kind in the region, its consequences were devastating for the *Namboodiri* community, which was shaken by the destruction of their moral values concerning women. Swarna Kumari (2015) asserts in her work "Social Changes in Malabar with Special Reference to Two Traditional Communities 1881–1933" that Thatri is a symbol of the difficult circumstances faced by *Namboodiri* women, citing V.T. Bhatathiripad's statement that "Thatri should be considered as having started a social revolt and a revolt against the male members" (p. 30).

Aji K.M. argues that Thatri's sexual desires played a role in her actions and that by choosing her own sexual partners, she was able to establish her own identity and agency,

breaking away from traditional understandings of sexuality. A.M.N. Chakyar, in his work *Avasanathe Smarthavicaahram*, also discusses Thathri's case within the context of a changing society.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Chakravarti's concept of *Brahmanical Patriarchy*, which refers to a system of laws and institutions in which caste and gender are intertwined and where women play a significant role in maintaining caste borders. The concept of *Brahmanical Patriarchy* is used as a lens through which one can examine the lives of *Antherjanam* women, with a focus on the story of Kuriyedathu Thatri, a woman who sought revenge against the men of her community for their treatment of *Antherjanam* women. It also incorporates Welsh's concept of honor and Foucault's concept of power to understand the events described in the study.

This framework is used to examine the dual standards and normalization of subjugation and oppression within the *Namboodiri* community.

Namboodiri Brahmins: Power and Knowledge

From the seventh century until the mid-1950s, before the implementation of the Kerala Land Reforms, *Namboodiri Brahmins* held a significant portion of land in the Malabar region. They were highly favoured members of society, occupying positions of elite, serving as high priests and patrons of the performing arts, holding feudal lordships with vast land and temple property, and excelling as scholars in *Vedic* and traditional learning. As the highest-ranked caste in the Kerala caste system, *Namboodiri Brahmins* held a position of great influence and power, shaping the region's religion, politics, society, economics, and culture. They even served as advisors to the Kochi king.

The caste system exercised power through the ownership of knowledge. As Foucault (1990) argued, power is exercised through the production of knowledge, as institutions and systems are constructed on coherent knowledge systems that validate power. Upper-caste men held complete authority over lower-caste men and all women due to their superior knowledge of the scriptures. According to Chakravarti (2003), knowledge was largely inaccessible to women of all castes and lower-caste men in mediaeval India. The denial of knowledge was a fundamental aspect of the caste system's ideology and a key form of inequality. Kunhukuttan (2019) writes that there was no way "for a *Namboodiri* girl who had come of age, there was no way of continuing her studies" (p. 82).

Sankaranarayanan (2019), the translator of *Outcaste*, notes that it was the *Namboodiri*'s possession of knowledge that made them more powerful than the king. The caste system's strict division of labour in terms of knowledge acquisition is one of its most distinctive features. Sakthidharan (2019) states that in a *Brahmin*-dominated society, the *Namboodiri* enjoyed a monopoly on religious matters and the right to acquire knowledge, while any attempt by lower castes to acquire knowledge was considered a crime (p. 53). This ability to seize power and maintain hegemony for centuries can be attributed to the *Brahmin* communities' complete possession of knowledge.

Intersection of Caste and Gender in Brahmanical Kerala

In pre-colonial India, there was a strong patriarchal order in which politics and religion were dominated by men. Despite the benefits enjoyed by *Namboodiri* men due to their high social status, including financial protection from land ownership and access to

extensive *Vedic* knowledge, *Namboodiri* women, often referred to as "*Antherjamas*" (indoor people), lived lives of illiteracy, subjugation, and countless injustices. Although being members of the highest caste by birth, *Namboodiri* women had few advantages. Kunhukuttan (2019) sheds light on the lives of *Namboodiri* girls who were denied education once they reached maturity. These *Antherjanams* were not allowed to leave their homes, interact with men, or even see their teachers.

Chakravarti (2003) cites Yalman to define the primary concept of caste social organization as constructing a closed system that strives to preserve land, women, and ritual purity (p. 63). These three elements are closely interrelated, and it is difficult to maintain them all without strict control over female sexuality. Without such strict protection of women, the foundations of the entire organization, including land ownership and caste purity, cannot be guaranteed.

In "Intersection of Caste and Gender Based Subjugation," Swati Sharma examines the ways in which the intersection of caste and gender operates to subjugate women in India. They argue that the caste system, which stratifies society based on inherited social status, and the patriarchy, which privileges men over women, work together to perpetuate the oppression of women. This suppression of women through the medium of caste can be seen in the private lives of *Antherjanams*, as they were strictly monitored and governed by extensive lists of dos and don'ts covering every aspect of their daily lives, including their attire, mannerisms, and even their thoughts. An *Antherjanam* was expected to live a life of sanctified rigor.

The *brahmanical* social order is characterised by both caste hierarchy and gender hierarchy, which are interdependent. Early pre-pubertal marriages, particularly among *Brahmins*, were encouraged in order to maintain the purity of castes. Yalman (1963), in his work "On the Purity of Women in the Castes of Ceylon and Malabar," notes that the onset of puberty represents a particularly "dangerous" position, and the caste system protects itself by limiting women's movement or even isolating them. Women are viewed as "gateways" into the caste system, serving as points of entry. To prevent a non-conforming woman from undermining the caste system, women's sexual subordination was institutionalised in *brahmanical* literature and enforced by state power.

The *Namboodiri illams* (traditional homes) were brutally patriarchal fortresses, as described by Mutampu Kunhukuttan (2019). He illustrates the conditions of *Namboodiri* women and their loneliness within the walls of the *illam*, stating that "the unseen ghosts that dwell in the dark closets of *Namboodiri* houses, where sunlight never entered, frightened the young girls... The very foundations of the *Namboodiri* houses, soaked in the incessant tears of these women, began to crumble. The new generation, delivered onto the ground wet with tears, shut their eyes tight, fearing the light. They even forgot to cry" (p. 19). Kunhukuttan effectively shows the contrast between the lives of *Antherjanams* and *Namboodiris*, stating that while *Namboodiri* women were prohibited from seeing the sun's rays and would hide from the few that managed to sneak through the cracks in the doors, *Namboodiri* men would hastily cover the cracks in an effort to block the light.

According to Kannabiran (1991) in "Caste and Gender: Understanding Dynamics of Power and Violence," caste and gender social relations are based on the exercise of power through the use of force. This power can manifest in various ways, ranging from simple and direct to complex and subtle. However, the most absolute exercise of power occurs when grievances or dissent are not even expressed, as the expression of a grievance implies a level of political awareness and agency that the absolute exercise of power does not allow.

Honour: An Aristocratic Code of Conduct

During the time when the *Namboodiris* migrated to Kerala, they were governed by the highly patriarchal *Manusmriti*, a text written between 200 BCE and 200 CE. The *Namboodiris* subsequently created their own code, known as the *Lakshudharma Prakashika* or *Saankarasmriti*, between the 14th and 15th centuries, which was even more regressive and patriarchal than the *Manusmriti*. This code governed the daily lives of *Namboodiris* until the early 20th century. According to Sakthidharan (2019), women in *Namboodiri* households were raised to serve their husbands, and the rigid rules of the *Saankarasmriti*, which focused on a compilation of dos and don'ts, served as the basis for the power exercised by male members of the *brahmanical* community over their women.

Female sexuality was strictly regulated by male *brahmins*. The *Manusmriti* viewed women in the community as nothing more than sex objects. The *Saankarasmriti* rendered the lives of *Antherjanams*, or *Namboodiri* women, dull and lifeless, confined to the somber interiors of large *illams* and shackled by meaningless rituals, constantly praying for their husband's longevity. The chastity of *Antherjanams* was guarded by *Namboodiri brahmins*, and any hint of deviation from expected behaviour resulted in swift excommunication after a private trial conducted by family elders.

The control of female sexuality was a crucial aspect of *brahmanical* patriarchy. Uma Chakraverti coined the term in her 1993 work, "Conceptualizing *Brahmanical* Patriarchy in Early India." It is important to note that "*brahmanical*" patriarchy does not refer to patriarchy within the *Brahmin* caste or community. Rather, it refers to a specific form of patriarchy found in caste-based societies. Chakraverti defines it as the need for effective sexual control over such women to maintain not only patrilineal succession (a requirement of all patriarchal societies) but also caste purity, an institution unique to Hindu society. "The purity of women has centrality in *brahmanical* patriarchy, as we shall see, because the purity of caste is contingent upon it" (p. 579).

Brahmanical patriarchy is characterized by the strict control of female sexuality in order to maintain the purity of the caste system. This is achieved through the institution of endogamous marriages and the prevention of intermarriage. According to Uma Chakravarti (2003), this control is necessary to protect the purity of upper caste men's bloodline from the perceived threat of lower caste male sexuality. She states that "the lower caste male whose sexuality is a threat to upper caste purity of blood has to be institutionally prevented from having sexual access to women of the higher castes, so such women have to be carefully guarded" (p. 35). In this way, the control of female sexuality is a crucial aspect of maintaining the caste hierarchy in *brahmanical* patriarchy.

The women (upper caste) were not allowed to appear between strangers or any male member of their families. Despite their wealth, these women were not permitted to look beautiful; they were not permitted to wear gold and were expected to wear brass. There prevailed a rigid purdah system- while going out the women had to hide themselves under palm leaf umbrellas (Sakthidharan 2019, p. 57).

The prescriptive laws established for *Namboodiri* women were in stark contrast to the sexually promiscuous lifestyles of their husbands. These women were expected to adhere to strict standards of confinement and restricted social mobility, while their husbands were free to engage in promiscuous behavior. As a result, *Namboodiri* women were forced to bear the burden of both patriarchy and caste conservatism.

The gender roles and life spaces of women are often determined by their birth, and this definition of liminality, or existing on the margins, aligns with Bhabha's (1994) concept of liminality. Limiting a woman's space is one way to ensure her compliance and subservience. Women are frequently relegated to secondary spaces, and when all spaces are dominated by men in positions of power, women are reduced to mere objects of male desire, with no identity outside of their relationships with men and the spaces provided by them.

Honor, as described by Welsh (2008), is a code that is associated with aristocracy and is maintained through the recognition of membership in a particular honor group by those who follow the same code. According to Stewart (1994), the honor code consists of a set of standards that are considered especially important and serve to measure an individual's worth within their honor group. Failure to meet these standards can result in not only being viewed as inferior, but also as contemptible.

Honor killings are a form of punishment for women who are perceived to have brought shame upon their families or communities by violating the codes of conduct and rules regarding female sexuality and behavior. These codes, which are often shaped by traditional gender roles and cultural norms, are often used to justify violence against women. In patriarchal societies, women's honor is closely tied to their sexuality, and any perceived deviation from the norms can result in violence. According to Jafri (2008), the construction of female honor as passive and male honor as active fuels men's self-assertion and control, encouraging them to maintain their families' social status and wealth by preserving the family's identity, which is intrinsically linked to honor. Chakravarti (2003) argues that endogamy, or the practice of marrying within one's own group, is a tool for the perpetuation of caste and gender oppression.

According to Rege (1998), honor, like caste, serves to maintain community boundaries. The strict boundaries required to preserve caste purity are maintained through endogamy. Therefore, honor, which is largely dependent on the behavior of women, become a crucial means of preserving these boundaries.

...hapless *Namboodiri* women, who moved slowly dragging their feet within the northern and southern quarters of their houses, for seventy or eighty years! Those women who had given up their inner most desires to perform penance, to fast, to pray in hope of a better life in their next birth; to preserve their marriages; for the happiness of their children; for the happiness of the whole world (Kunhukuttan 2019, p. 153).

During the colonial period, as some harmful religious practices were dismantled in India, *Antherjanams* remained confined in *purdah*, lacking education, land, and a voice of their own. Welsh (2008) notes that women have never been considered members of an honor society in the past, even when their chastity was imposed upon them by male family members. The passive roles of women in the honor society allow men to improve their families' social standing and capital by safeguarding the family's identity through the controlled sexuality of women, which is inextricably linked to honor.

The Rebel and The Reformer: Kuriyedathu Thatri

There are multiple versions of Thatri Kutty's (hence referred to as Paptikutty) story: some believe she married a man her age, while others say she married a man in his sixties. In each story, the source of her vengeance and the cause of her heinous act are different. The work *Brushte (Outcaste): A Novel* (1969) by Matampu Kunukuttan is taken because he is the

great-grandson of the chief priest who presided over the trial of Paptikutty's excommunication in 1905 and thus a more reliable source.

Paptikutty was considered a lucky girl. "The bridegroom was a young man and this was his first marriage...She was indeed very lucky" (Kunhukuttan 2019, p. 20). The story follows the life of this *Antherjanam* and how her life unfolds after her marriage. For an *Antherjanam*, it was indeed extremely rare to find a groom who is not in his old age and had previous wives. *Namboodiri* men had the right to have four wives at a times and various concubines from the *Nair* community. This practise as above mentioned is contradictory to the rules and regulations imposed on *Namboodiri* women and their chastity.

Foucault (1990) argued that power is not simply held by those in positions of authority, but rather it is diffuse and can be found in various forms of social control. He suggests that power is not simply exercised through physical force, but also through the production and dissemination of knowledge. This leads to the rephrasing of the popular adage "knowledge is power" as "power is knowledge." In his work, Foucault discusses the concept of panoptic surveillance, with a focus on discipline and punishment, as a means of exerting power and control over individuals and groups.

The *Namboodiri* men, intoxicated by their power and constant pursuit of physical pleasure, often neglected their women and subjected them to persecution through both direct assault and indirect indifference. They controlled all aspects of social space and confined women to the inner quarters of the *illams*. *Antherjanams* had no identity beyond the space provided to them by their *Namboodiri* husbands. There was no authority to challenge the *Namboodiris*, as their caste and position as lawgivers granted them the power to manipulate religious texts to suit their own desires. These *Brahmins* spent their time engaging in illicit relations with women from other castes while living a life of leisure. The tragedy that befell Paptikutty occurred within the confined space of the *illam* provided to her by her husband. As she had no space of her own, her tragedy was inevitable and she was destined for doom. Papti was raped by her husband's elder brother on her wedding night, while her husband stood guard outside the room to ensure that his brother was not disturbed during the act of exploitation. She laments about the incident,

'Where was that *Namboodiri* who had sat by her, the mantra to open her vagina? This man? Paptikutty's vision blurred. Again, she recalled words from the sacred verse: I shall not give you cause to weep. Where were the hands that had promised to wipe her tears? Her husband's brother who was to be like a second father!' ...In Paptikutty's heart, where the God of Death was howling, something else quivered and woke up'(Kunhukuttan 2019, p. 125).

According to Abbott and Wallace (1991), power is a patriarchal tool, and male dominance has always been an essential organizing force in all civilizations. Women have been oppressed as their freedom of action is restricted by men's power, as men possess greater economic, cultural, and social resources than women. Sexuality is used as a tool for exercising and maintaining dominance over women.

Paptikutty, a victim of oppressive patriarchal authority, becomes aware of the destabilizing power of feminine sexuality on her wedding night when her husband's elder brother consummates the marriage with her husband's approval. The trauma and humiliation of this experience transform Paptikutty into a "goddess of revenge" as termed by Lalithambika Antherjanam (in her short story titled the same). According to MacKinnon (1989), "no woman escapes the meaning of being a woman within a gendered social system,

and sex inequality is not only pervasive but may be universal (in the sense of never having not been in some form)." The social relationship between the sexes is structured in such a way that men can dominate and women must submit, and this relationship is sexual—in fact, it is sex itself (p. 3).

Paptikutty...covered her bare breasts with her intertwined hands and gazed at the floor...'Look at me'...That voice! This was not her husband, but his elder brother. Tundan! ...In that instant, the bridal chamber was transformed into a chamber of birth. This was her second birth, the true fulfilment of the title 'twice born' given to her clan. Paptikutty! The Goddess of Revenge! Enough of obedience! Oh Paptikutty, Mother of the Universe!...She laughed, satisfied at the thought of those being who would fall at her feet and surrender completely, mere beggars whose begging bowls would remain empty(Kunhukuttan, 2019, 128).

Refusal to be a Victim

Power, as potentiality, refers to the ability to act, influence, and affect rather than be affected. Women's empowerment in the face of male supremacy begins with their ability to reclaim their own experience and their bodies as the locus of their desires. According to Foucault (1990), "Where there is power, there is resistance." No individual is the permanent custodian of power. It has a strategic and circulatory function.

Papti's decision to assert agency and resist the oppressive patriarchal authority of the *Namboodiri* community marked the beginning of the community's downfall. She used her sexuality, which had previously been used by men to exert power over her and other *Antherjanams*, as a weapon to seek revenge and bring down the men of every household in the community. Through her refusal to be a victim and her transformation of her sexuality into a source of power, Papti subverted the caste norms that had been used to subjugate her and other women.

Sexual violence, as well as the threat of it, has long been used as a tool for maintaining male dominance in patriarchal societies. In the case of the *Namboodiri* community in India, female sexuality was heavily regulated and controlled by male *brahmins* in order to preserve the purity of upper caste men's bloodlines. This strict adherence to endogamy, or marrying within one's own caste, also served to maintain community boundaries and reinforce the oppression of women. Paptikutty, a victim of sexual violence and oppressive patriarchal authority, chose to resist and reclaim her own sexuality as a form of power, thereby challenging the dominant narrative and destabilizing the traditional power dynamics in her community. Through her actions, she demonstrated the potential for individuals to resist and challenge the constraints imposed on them by dominant institutions and ideologies. She was able to excommunicate sixty four powerful and influential *brahmin* patriarchs on her own. She was determined to enlist the entire land's *Namboodiris* in the rituals of this new *Mahamakam* battle.

All *Namboodiri* houses should shudder and cry out in terror in memory of Paptikutty until the end of time. Although written with a blunt pencil point, the writing was clear. The names and detailed descriptions of bodies. She had also recorded the date and the hour of each union. The horoscopes of those who were to be cursed. She must have more names. Not a single *Namboodiri* house should be left out. One person from each house, no more (Kunhuhuttan 2019, p. 154).

In the context of the *Namboodiri* community, Paptikutty's use of her sexuality as a means of resistance against the oppressive patriarchy serves as a powerful example of the potential for sexual agency to challenge and subvert the dominant power dynamics. By reclaiming control over her own body and sexuality, Paptikutty was able to wield a significant level of influence and disrupt the status quo. This highlights the importance of prioritizing female sexual agency as a means of resistance against oppressive systems, as well as the potential for such resistance to bring about significant change. Audre Lorde (2020) argues that the sexuality is a source of power. Sexuality is an intrinsically subversive force, a source of mobilisation against oppression.

In early India, the patriarchal state considered adultery to be a significant crime, on par with theft. Adultery was viewed as a betrayal of a valuable resource controlled by men, particularly the husband. Since a woman's honor was tied to her sexuality, adultery was considered a social rather than a private offense. In Kerala, when an *Antherjanam* was accused of adultery, she would undergo a social investigation, leading to a *smarthavicharam*, or trial by *smarthans*.

Brushte/Social excommunication/Outcaste/Smaarthavicharam was a common practise in *Brahmanical* dominated Kerala. This excommunication was carried out following a series of trials as prescribed by the *Smritis* and was only applied to *Antherjanams*. It revoked their human rights until they were proven innocent. During the *vicharam* period, they were known as "*sadhanams*," which translates as "objects," but in strict terms, "instruments" or "means to an end." Kunhukuttan's novel highlights the fall of women and their existence by referring to Papti as an "object" throughout her trial. 'I shall tell you. My days of modesty are over. After all, I am no longer a pure woman. Why, not even a woman! In your language, I am just an Object' (Kunhukuttan 2019,p. 177).

Logan (2010) notes in his work that women (*Antherjanams*) who went under trial were considered dead by their families. They closed their doors on her and performed their last rites, symbolising her death as far as the family was concerned. The family's maid-servant is the first to be interrogated, and if she accuses her mistress, the *Antherjanam* is separated and a watch is placed on her. She is imprisoned in a special chamber and interrogated by *smarthans*, community representatives, and the King until she confessed. If the accused does not confess, various forms of torture were used, including wrapping the accused in matting and letting the bundle fall from the roof to the courtyard below. At times, live rat-snakes and other vermin were introduced into the room next to her. When an accused offers to confess, she is thoroughly examined, cross-examined, and re-examined as to time, place, person, circumstances, and so on.

At last, she was able to look at the sun's rays and fulfil her innermost desires. Then she looked at the startled Vedic scholars and smiled her seductive smile. That innocent smile which attracted people and sucked their lives out of them. With every step she took, the earth shuddered (Kunhukuttan 2019, p. 207).

On the day of her assault, Paptikutty's destiny was determined; she was destined to become an outcast. Accepting her downfall was the first step in her plan to seek vengeance. Papti knew that her actions would lead her towards excommunication, which would also allow her to confront the highly educated *Namboodiri* men and the injustices they inflicted upon their women. The issue of whether the oppressed subject can speak was addressed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988), highlighting the challenging interaction between the

knowledgeable investigator and the (un)knowing subject of subaltern histories. Papti spoke, through her, the oppressed spoke,

May I ask something? What is my crime? That of being born in a *Namboodiri* household? Is it really my fault that I was born a *Namboodiri* woman?...Some who are present here today said: “Obey what the elder brother says.” My father not only advised me so, he insisted. What did the elder brother say? Don’t you want to know? She taunted...Do you know what was said? That the elder brother should first enjoy the younger brother’s wife. You men, who enjoy reciting the Vedas and twisting its meaning this way or that, will never understand my plight. For you, the routine of attending feasts and visiting prostitutes must be maintained...Let me ask you, if the law of being faithful to one’s partner was imposed on men also, how many *Namboodiris* would escape being cast out? (Kunhukuttan, 2019, pp. 176-177).

The trial of Thathri in 1905 had significant impact on the society of Kerala and its traditional structures, including the caste system and consanguineous bonds. Thathri's naming of her paramours, who were elite *Namboodiris*, marked a departure from the traditional secrecy and unanimous judgment of chastity trials. This bold action was made possible by the evolving tastes and institutions of society, as well as Thathri's own determination to challenge the norms of her time.

Her trial also reveals the economic structure of the region and the impact of colonialism on the emergence of nuclear families and monogamous marriages. It also demonstrates the influence of Victorian morality and Eurocentric knowledge systems on local societal values and power structures. The trial becomes a significant event within the context of these complex societal and cultural dynamics.

Papti's excommunication from her caste and home was a result of the *smarthavicharam*, but the Raja of Kochi granted her a *purushavicharam* due to the exceptional circumstances of her case. Manoj Kumar in his work “Shaping of Rights: State, Jati and Gender” writes in detail about the unusual events of the trial and says “the *Namboodiri Brahmins* were present and the decisions were taken on the hitherto unknown and unheard Purushavicharam (summoning and trying the males whom Thathri had stated as courted with her) (p.251). All sixty-four men involved, including Papti, were exiled. The novel ends with Papti leaving Kerala, hoping that no other woman will have to endure the same suffering as she did. She advises young, revolutionary *Namboodiris* to support the women in their households.

Lalithambika Antherjanam, the revolutionary female writer of Kerala, belonging from the same caste, pens down the story of Kuriyedathu Thatri. Thatri in the story *Prathikaradevatha (The Goddess of Revenge)* is ostracized by her own community and is not even allowed to be mentioned by name. She seeks out the writer of the story to share her perspective and explain her actions, which were motivated by a desire for revenge against men and their hypocritical attitudes. The writer feels sympathy for Thathrikutty and sees her as a representation of society, particularly the vulnerability and strength of women who are fighting for justice and their own humanity. However, the writer also recognizes that it is impossible for one person to take on a centuries-old system and that individual rebellions may not be effective. Instead, the writer suggests that it is important to build solidarity with other women and suggests that Thathri's boldness serves as a warning to the patriarchal forces that have been indifferent to women's struggles.

Aji K.M believes that the trial of Thathri became a significant event within and beyond the *Namboodiri* community because it challenged the control of land and its products and sought to undermine the long-standing caste system that was maintained through ideologies and language to control society. He continues, “Thathri was able to transcend and practically break the culturally and theologically stipulated boundaries of sexual practices that were designed to retain caste purity” (p.7).

Conclusion

Women in patriarchal societies are often the victims of oppression and abuse. However, they can reclaim their power and resist male domination by focusing on their own pleasure and desire. Sexuality can be a source of mobilisation against oppression and a way to resist the control of men. The evolution of gender binary, caste system, family system, and moral/sexual interdiction over centuries were all combined in Thathri's trial. She used her sexuality to seek vengeance against the men who had oppressed and abused her, ultimately leading to the downfall of the *Namboodiri* community. Her actions transformed her personal vendetta into a social revolution, challenging the male chauvinist sexual anarchy that had previously ruled. By using her sexuality to shame and disgrace prominent members of the community, Paptikutty sought to insult and bring discredit to them.

The trial of Thathri had significant consequences for the societal structure of Kerala, including the collapse of traditional caste hierarchy and the challenging of traditional ideas of sexual purity. The event exposed the power dynamics of consanguineous bonds and disrupted the foundational ideology of the caste system. This can be seen as a resistance against traditional practices and a move towards modern concepts of individualism and freedom.

Paptikutty's transformation from victim to revolutionary illustrates the potential for women to wield their own power and resist patriarchal control. By channeling the trauma of her assault into a conscious effort to challenge male dominance, she was able to confront the oppressive systems that sought to control her sexuality and her life. By implicating influential members of the community in immoral acts, she sought to undermine the power structures that upheld their dominance and bring about social change. This journey from victimhood to agency demonstrates the importance of women's ability to reclaim their own experience and use it as a source of power and resistance.

Thathrikkutty's case serves as a prime example of the ways in which women can resist and subvert patriarchal power structures. By reclaiming control over her own sexuality and using it as a weapon against the male-dominated society in which she lived, Thathrikkutty was able to challenge the oppressive systems that sought to control and suppress her. In doing so, she sparked a social revolution that ultimately led to the demise of the *Smaarthavicharam* practice and the beginning of a larger conversation about sexual morality and freedom. Through her actions, Thathrikkutty demonstrated the power and agency of women to resist and challenge oppressive systems, even in the face of overwhelming odds.

Conflict of Interest

I/we hereby declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Disclaimer Statement

The following research paper is part of my (Sree Harsha Sree Hari) thesis, titled “Study of Gender in the Selected Works of Lalithambika Antharjanam, Chnadu Menon and Devaki Nilayamgode”. which will be submitted to Amity Institute of English Studies and

Research, Amity University Uttar Pradesh. The Supervisor for the same is : Dr. Surbhi Saraswat and the co-supervisor: Late. Prof. Dr. Prem Kumari Srivastava. This work extracts 3-4% from the above mentioned research.

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Authorship and Level of Contribution

Sree Harsha Sree Hari has researched and written this research paper under the fruitful guidance of Dr. Surbhi Saraswat and Dr. Prem Kumari Srivastava.

Glossary of Terms

Antharjanam/ Antherjanam: A Namboodiri woman. The word literally means “A person indoors”.

Brahmins/Brahmanas: A varna in Hinduism. They have specialised as Priests, Teachers, and Guardians of Sacred Learning for generations. Brahmins are the highest-ranking of Hinduism's four social classes.

Illam : The traditional homesteads of Malayala Brahmins.

Lakhudharma Prakashika/Saankarasmriti: Sankara Smriti, also known as Lakhudharmaprakasika, is a 14th century text that discusses Kerala's social religion and cultural customs.

Manusmriti/ Manusanhita: The Manusmriti, also spelled as Manusmruti, is an ancient legal text among the many Dharmaśāstras of Hinduism.

Namboodiri/ Namputhiri/ Namboothiri: Upper Caste Brahmins of Kerala. They follow the concept of ‘Sankaranarayanan’ which combines the rituals of Shaivism and Vaishnavism.

Sadhanam: Objects.

Smaarthavicharam: The trial for throwing Namboodiri women out of caste and community for sexual impurity.

Smarthans: Justice committee of Smaarthavicharam.

Vedic: The study of Vedas. Vedas are ancient scriptures containing spiritual knowledge. There are four Vedas- Rig, Yajur, Sama, Atharva.

Vicharam: Reflection.

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