



## **Debates On Indian Feminism In C.S.Lakshmi's "Unpublished Manuscript"**

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### **Abstract**

This paper attempts to read C.S.Lakshmi's "Unpublished Manuscript" as a critique on Indian construct of patriarchy and masculinity. This paper also clarifies the misconception that surround the ideology of Indian feminism as represented in the chosen text. The family system and the relationship between man and women are inevitable in Indian society. At the same time, as a society it has desensitized its male members regarding their counterparts. Their attitude towards male dominance, patriarchal assumptions, marriage and household duties need to be rewritten. In this context C.S.Lakshmi's text proves to be an inevitable manuscript that symbolically exposes the untold and unpublished stories of all Indian women.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy; Masculinity; Violence against women; "Unpublished Manuscript"; Ambai

## **1. Patriarchy, violence, Masculinity, C.S.Lakshmi, "Unpublished Manuscript"**

Feminism in Indian context is often misunderstood as a western notion and many men and women approach the idea and the concept as irrelevant to the Indian context. Most of the time it is posed as an allegation rather than a question. There is also another notion that feminism, feminist writings and feminists in general need to be naturally condemned and not to be taken seriously. In this context C.S.Lakshmi's "Unpublished Manuscript" is interpreted as a text that manifests the realities behind feminist ideology and feminism negating the misconceptions. First of all feminism could not be taken as merely a western notion as feminism does not derive its theoretical base from any single theoretical formation. Both in East and West the concept of feminism is defined based on the group discussion carried out among the like-minded thoughts regarding the status of women. Hence, there can be no single definition that can suit everyone. It changes because feminism differs based on the historical and cultural realities. According to Kamala Bhasin and Nighat Khan feminism is "articulated in different parts of the world and within a country, differently by different women depending on their class, background, level of education, consciousness etc." (Bhasin & Khan 1986)

In India, like any other term, the term 'feminism' too had been imported from the West but it was never artificially imposed among people and it is also not completely a foreign idea too. During 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century feminist consciousness arose as a part of the nationalist struggle and against feudal monarchs. The voice against women's subordination came in the form of articulation of the possibility of widow remarriage, abolition of polygamy and *Sati*, demand for education and legal emancipation of

women. In fact, the issues dealt within feminism in India are based on the contemporary indigenous culture. In India, feminism came with discussing the social issues that are predominantly Indian such as banning of dowry system, violence against women, fight against rape, demand for equal wage, resistance against discriminatory practices at workplace, and stereotypical representations of women in media and literature. Women's oppression is universal and it needs to be addressed in India too.

C.S. Lakshmi, popularly known as Ambai, is a feminist writer and independent researcher in women's studies from India. Ambai was born in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu in 1944. She grew up in Mumbai and Bangalore. She obtained her Bachelor of Arts from Bangalore University, Master of Arts from Madras Christian College and her PhD from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Her dissertation was on American policy towards refugees fleeing Hungary due to the failed revolution of 1956. She started her writing career in 1962 with her first work *Nandimalai Charalilae*. Her first serious work of fiction was the Tamil novel *Andhi Maalai* which came out in 1966. She received critical acclaim with the short story "Siragukal muriyum" in 1967. She published her first short story collection under the same name in 1976. She writes in Tamil and English. She has published several works in the form of fiction, such as novels, short stories and novellas, as well as non-fiction, such as essays and research papers. She has won several awards for her contributions to Tamil literature, such as the Vodafone Crossword Book Award (2006) and the Iyal Virudhu (2008). She was awarded a two-year fellowship to study the work of Tamil women writers in 1976. The research work was published as *The Face behind the Mask* in 1984. She published her second Tamil short story collection titled *Veetin mulaiyil oru samaiyalarai* in 1988. Her works have been translated into English by Lakshmi Holmström, GJV Prasad and C.T. Indra. Some of her translated short stories are "A Purple Sea", "In a Forest, a Deer", and "A Red-necked Green Bird". She is known for her passionate espousal of the cause of women, her humor, her lucid and profound style, and her touch of realism. She explores themes such as space, silence, body, sexuality, and communication in her works. She is one of the most important and influential Tamil writers today.

The novella entitled "Unpublished Manuscript" was published in English in 1999 as a part of *Katha* perspectives. It is the translated version of the original Tamil version published in 1996 in *India Today: Women's Special Issue* as "Pirachurikkapadatha Kaiprathi". The plot of the novella revolves around the life of Thirumagal and her daughter Chenthamarai and the hidden stories of their personal life. Telling of individual's personal stories either real or imaginary is also an important agenda of feminism. The chosen text never opens up the public life of either Thirumagal or Ramasami, her father. Because personal is always political in feminist theory. Universally feminists consider the divide between personal and political, or domestic and public, both unreal and problematic as everything public has an impact on the personal life of individuals. Public policies, debates, programmes influence individual's personal lives. At the same time, understanding and analyzing the oppression in one's personal lives unfolds the marginalized positions in the public and political sphere. It is the major reason why feminists emphasize the need to validate one's personal experience and subjective feelings. Moreover, the oppression and exploitation within families cannot be simply dismissed as the least important as the issues related to families remain unaddressed, unanalyzed and unchallenged. In addition, the analysis of oppression rooted in the context of family, sexuality and the relationship between men and women helps in understanding the systematic nature of women's oppression in public and political lives of women.

As the story begins Thirumagal is introduced as a Professor who heads the department of English at Benaras University. She lives at Varanasi. The plot is narrated through third person in a descriptive mode. Thirumagal is an accomplished academician and a successful independent single mother who has brought up her daughter Chenthamarai. Though Chenthamarai is a school girl she knows the personal as well as the ironic details about lives of the local, national and global literary personalities. She knows from Sylvia Plath to Chellammal, the wife of Bharathiyar. Chenthamarai has the habit of mimicking the portrait of well-known persons from mythology through Sangam literature to contemporary literary world. For her "The sex didn't matter" (Indra et al 39) as Judith Butler says gender is not being but only doing.

Thirumagal's past life is revealed as the plot develops. She is the daughter of a rationalist and idealist Ramasami who has chosen to settle at Chennai from Malaysia with his three old daughter Thirumagal after the death of his wife. The life of Ramasami is also important in resolving the misconceptions of feminism. There is a misconception that only women can be feminists. But in reality, in India it is not only women who have participated in the struggles of women's liberation, but men also participated equally like Ram Mohan Roy, Rabindranath Tagore, M.K.Gandhi, Periyar, Ambedkar and many more. Ramasami owns a printing press that promotes "literary books in Tamil, folk songs, books on various religions, scientific books and school books". (Indra et al 48) The press also chooses to print bit notices, citations and wedding invitations. By principle, Ramasami never encourages printing of books that talks about the pride of a particular caste or creed, notices that flash black magic rituals and coming off age celebration.

As an idealist Ramasami encouraged widow remarriage and he has married a young widow who has passion for pursuing her education. He has supported his wife to continue her education after the marriage. Though the story was published in 1996, it covers the major four decade from 1940s to 1970s. During the 1940s supporting of widow remarriage and empowering women with education are the major agenda of women's liberation movement. He always shows interest in educating Thirumagal and also breaking the roles prescribed to women by patriarchy. After the death of his wife, Ramasami never leaves Thirumagal unattended and he never asks Thirumagal to cook and do the household chores. Ramasami is well aware of the fact that every culture has its way of valuing girls and boys and assigning them different roles, responsibilities and attributes. This systematic process is used to enslave the girls psychologically. Ramasami never imposed gender prescribed duties to his daughter and he asserts through telling when she gets hungry she will cook her food. Cooking food is not the duty of girls but it is the need of human beings.

Thirumagal holds Master degree in English Literature and articulates her independent nature in every walk of her life. She chooses to marry Muthukumar who gets in association with the press run by Ramasami. Thirumagal's choice of marrying Muthukumar was never objected by Ramasami. Thirumagal's decision to marry has larger feministic implications. First, it establishes that independent and empowered women are never man haters and secondly, independent women are not the destroyer of peace in family. Feminists never hate men but are against patriarchy, male domination and maleness in men. Muthukumar after marriage mistreats Thirumagal. Ironically Muthukumar projects himself as a progressive writer. C.S.Lakshmi puts the irony behind Muthukumar's behaviour as "Great scholars artists, writers, and poets whose work one admires, often have personal lives that are totally delinked from their writings. "Unpublished manuscript" began as a story that tries to understand this complex phenomenon. The mother, the daughter, the highly principled father, and all the other characters evolved as fellow explorers of life, of the complicated female-male relationship that are defined by an inner need to create to evolve, to love, to resist and to overcome." (Indra et al 12) The irony of the context lies in Muthukumar's repetition of the question "Call yourself a woman?" (Indra et al 58) in the plot. During Thirumagal's stay at Varanasi she never projects herself as a man hater and it is obviously showcased through her friendship with Mohan, the playwright.

Muthukumar's problem is not only a personal problem but it is also social. Because the core of the issue lies in the social construct of gender. He has larger misconception about his gender roles. He thinks dominance is one of the attributes of male and masculinity. Masculine in general sense is power and authority on others and despite the gender role anyone who is in a weaker position becomes feminine. The system of multiple identities includes the strata of both women and men based on class, race, caste, sexual orientation, nationality, marital status and so on. The influence of this diversified classification reflects on the masculine and feminine hierarchy. Nevertheless, men are privileged in the sex/gender system because of their sex as patriarchal ideology places men superior to women. The role of power distribution is based on the maintenance of hierarchical positions and control of ideological construction. Hence, masculinity "not only defines relationships among and between men and women, it also defines relationships among and between men and in some situations, among women, too" (Bhasin 2004: 24). The connotation of women being called masculine in any leadership positions assuming militaristic power hold and unethical practices proves that masculinity is not biological. Women have to be

masculine in order to take over the masculinized system of power structure. This represents the significance of understanding masculinity and femininity in both women and men. This demands recognizing them as conscious structures of the human mind and not biological affinities. Hence, understanding the construction of masculinity and its affiliation with power challenges the hierarchical power structure and relations. In this story Muthukkumaran imbibes the negative connotations of masculinity and he tries to dominate Thirumagal which resulted in the ruptured familial relationship.

Muthukumaran turns to be intolerant when he shows his violent attitude towards Thirumagal and when it affects Chenthamarai's peace. The study conducted by ICRW found that the men involved in any violent conflict – sexual, or physical violence, did not regret or explain their actions. They do not perceive violence in a negative sense rather, they validate their act of violence as a means of resolving and negotiating any contextual issue to attain their needs. Ann Oakley points out that family is the least democratic of the contemporary institutions and compares the discrimination within a family in a global scenario. If indiscriminate, inequality within a family cannot be solved, Oakley commented that gender equality cannot be found elsewhere in the world. C.S.Lakshmi's skill in sketching the nuances of these feminist principle is worth mentioning here.

The entire story could be treated as the critique of patriarchy. Muthukumaran is mere a mere victim of patriarchy. Patriarchy is the cause of gender inequalities and the subordination of women. Understanding the relationship between women and men in contemporary times is relevant to perceive the meaning of patriarchy as gender relations are distorted due to patriarchy. By definition, patriarchy means the rule of the dominant male in a vast household who is referred to as the father or the patriarch. In the general use, it is simply, male domination and the in a relationship the subjugation of women to establish a systematic subordination of women through a number of ways. "In South Asia, for example it is called *pitrasatta* in Hindi, *pidarshahi* in Urdu and *pitritontro* in Bengali." (Bhasin 2000: 20) Women undergo various forms of subordination in their everyday life despite their class, caste or status. This form of subordination include exercise of authority, various forms of violence – sexual, verbal, physical, and psychological – and exploitation. It is not confined to the house but extends to the public places, work, and social setups. The individual stories and content may differ but the issue remains the same. Despite the common goal of women subordination, patriarchy differs within the frameworks of social class, different societal setups and different times in history. The experience of patriarchy, to state an example, was different among a Brahmin household compared to a tribal woman. It differs from one country to the other. Each stage of patriarchy contains different cultural and social practices with individual variations. The common link was male control of economic resources along with the social institutions to ensure male dominance. Patriarchy believes in the superiority of men performing through the social structure and ideological notions. Throughout the world this ideology has been supported by religious institutions in the propaganda of such values subtly. The common tool for this is the use of myths, stories and legends of Gods and heroes. This continue and gets reflected in the contemporary media and educational institutions. They spread the ideologies of patriarchy in the portrayal of men as stronger in many aspects while women stay as the dependent and problematic figure. "Ideology plays an important role in perpetuating social systems and controlling people's minds. For example, by reducing women to bodies and objectifying them, the media encourages violence against women. Ideology provides the justification for social behaviour and socio-economic structures" (Bhasin 2000: 21). A few of the areas under the patriarchal control to subjugate women's lives include, labor force, reproductive rights, sexuality, economic rights, decision making institutions and their mobility. Muthukumaran desires to make decision in press related matters in the chosen story showcases him as a victim of patriarchal construct.

## 2. Conclusion

All the major institutions and proponents of social structure are imbued with patriarchal ideologies and they maintain patriarchal position and interest. This construction of the patriarchal system becomes naturalized and deep rooted to be questioned without proper understanding of the system. Patriarchy legitimizes the tools of its ideology including various kinds of violence to dominate women. Whenever

Muthukumaran sees Thirumagal assertive he imposes physical violence to subdue her. As many feminists believe that violence has become systematic in patriarchy rather than being pervasive. Patriarchy also includes the participation of some women who derive benefits from the system and presents that women are not totally powerless. Throughout the times women have fought back and risen to authority occasionally and faced the consequences great or small. Though this happens, the system has always been male dominated and women are used and facilitated to fit the patriarchal purposes. Women support and propagate patriarchy for many complex reasons and one such reason is the internalized value system groomed from young age into patriarchal ideologies. To maintain their individual lifestyle, women negotiate with the dominant ideology even at the cost of other women. Despite this, the observation of the system holistically is needed to find solutions to the oppressed ideologies. Each woman and their position should be understood within their context and articulation of power. One example from a common woman, "Men in our families are like the sun, they have a light of their own (they own resources, are mobile, have the freedom to take decisions, etc.) Women are like satellites, without any light of their own. They shine only if and when the sun's light touches them. This is why women have to constantly compete with each other for a bigger share of sunlight, because without this light there is no life." (Bhasin 2000: 23) This way of male control is called paternalistic dominance. Men take the role of the protectors and provide provisions to life and security. Though it has dominating implications, it involves mutuality and thus, assume a status of normal and not offensive. This makes the fight harder and harder to identify. Finally masculinity and femininity are not about men and women at all; they are about power and powerlessness. This story of Muthukumaran, Thirumagal, and Ramasamy critiques the system of patriarchy and the misconceptions that surround feminism and feminists.

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