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(Executive Summary of the Report of the Minor Project submitted to University Grants Commission, South Western Regional Office, Bangalore by Dr. Asha Susan Jacob, Dept. of English, St. Thomas College, Kozhencherry.)

THE FICTIONAL CANVAS OF K. SARASWATHYAMMA: THE FORGOTTEN PIONEER OF FEMINISM IN KERALA

Global feminism has its local dimensions customized to the specific spatial-temporal contexts. While early reformist Malayalam writers like V.T.Bhattathirippad attempted to move the female from the darkness of the kitchen to the fresh air of the public space, Lalithambika Antharjanam carved a niche for the female in the literary scenario. The reformers constructed a perfect image of the honourable woman whose image is not far exotic than the dominant patriarchal one. The early female literary ventures were overshadowed by the patriarchal imprint embedded in them. Those attempts challenging dominant discourses were sabotaged. But the burgeoning of female narratives is a manifestation of the altering attitude of the society as well as the female self. In the male monopolized literary scenario Saraswathyamma has left a mark positing patriarchal cultural domination, socialization, and forced submission as effective sexist tools in sexual politics. She demythified the hegemonic literary canon of Malayalam short story by stamping her mark through her fictional corpus. In a patriarchal oriented society her deliberate, dauntless exposure of the female world heralded a female perspective to the cultural and social scenario. The author's attempt of a re-evaluation of the cultural dimensions of the man-made hierarchies posed serious threats to the hegemonic patterns which always guaranteed the marginalization of the female. Her pungent criticism of the existing male constructed power relations led to the deliberate sidelining or omission of her name from the list of mainstream writers.

Following an era of westernized female characters like Indulekha modeled after 19th century European women, Saraswathyamma has projected the live in, stereotyped, quotidian domestic experience of the female. Exposing the discriminations and double standards operating against women in the society, she demands gender equity. A realistic writer par excellence, the author refuses to enchant the readers with any romantic notions about female existence. The female in her various gender ascribed roles, man-woman relationship in and outside the spectrum of marriage, love in its varied forms, female individuality, double morality and other related issues form the matrix of her work. Through a variety of situations the author has delineated the intricacies of the still male-engineered, male-overseered lives of the female folk of Kerala. The uneducated, powerless women are trapped within the holdings of the traditional society with no chance or brawn to exit. Even the attitude of educated, employed woman is tainted by traditional socialization which prevents her from demanding and enjoying gender parity.

Maternal instinct is never eulogized by the author, nor does she find it mandatory for personal fulfillment. It is often viewed as a confining element which limits her capacities to her home. Tradition encourages women to be submissive and conforming, discouraging their development into full-fledged individuals. Saraswathyamma projects women who venture to the public space to serve mankind more fruitfully .

The trenchant pen of the author is unprejudiced towards the male. It is woman who often receives a backlash from the author for allowing herself to be victimized by the male, for succumbing to the carnal pleasures without using her reasoning capacity. Protagonists like Vilasini, Santhy, Sarada, Seetha, and Kamamma are all the epitomes of positive women images that the author wants her sisters to emulate. They proclaim the transforming

power of education and employment which empower them to offer alternate modes of experiencing gender parity instead of compromising with the space allotted for them.

Gleaning from personal as well as collective life around her, the author exhorts the female to shirk the burden of the discouraging, discriminating past to embrace a new world empowered by emotional and economic independence. However it is not an anti-male manifesto as the author realizes the complementary nature of human relations; she is antithetical only to the hegemonic structure that exploits and throttles the female.