



## Feminist Anthropological Approach to Rajam Krishnan's

### 'Lamps in the Whirlpool'

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#### ABSTRACT

*Feminist anthropology<sup>1</sup> is fairly recent in literary criticism with the forerunners appearing in 1970s. It is a four-field approach to anthropology (archeological, biological, cultural, and linguistic) that seeks to transform research findings, anthropological hiring practices, and the scholarly production of knowledge, using insights from feminist theory. The focus of this paper is the application of the findings of this field to the novel of Rajam Krishnan. It is one among the eighty works of Krishnan which were duly nationalized by the government of Tamilnadu. Being the winner of Sahithya Award, one of the prestigious institutions, and a social activist adds to her glory as a writer and translator. Lamps in the Whirlpool first saw its publication in Tamil (1987), and was later translated to English in 1997. The central characters in her novels are not those of epic importance, rather, in contrast, they are people of destitute, belonging to the lower cadre of society: they include the land labourers and worldly pilgrims. Women are among the suppressed in post-independence India. This particular novel reveals the inner conflict of a woman who is trying to regenerate herself socially, emotionally and economically after the stigma of infidelity attached to her unannounced separation from her family for two days.*

**Keywords:** *Feminism, Feminist Anthropology, Indian Women, Rajam Krishnan*

#### I. INTRODUCTION

Cherry Ortnor with the publication of 'Is female to Male as Nature is to Culture?' in 1972 asserted herself as one of the pioneers of the Feminist Anthropological movement. This radical notion has subsequently changed over the decades with the key focus shifting from varying aspects of female roles in different cultures to, gender roles and ultimately to questioning the conservative notion of gender. Contemporary research shall add significant changes to this field of study. Susie Tharu and Lalitha have acknowledged the importance of women writing about their experiences and feelings to untangle themselves from the male dominated field of publication and power. Feminist anthropology reexamines the roles of women in society to point out the general subservient roles of women. Indian women traditionally form the last rung of the family system and subsequently in society and politics.



## **II. GIRIJA AS A 'DUTIFUL' WOMAN**

Girija, the protagonist in the novel, is not one among the lower cadre who are usually uneducated and financially dependent. After her master's graduation she worked, for a period of eight years, as a school teacher. Yet neither education nor employment made her truly independent and free thinking. She accepted the transition from her family of birth to her family of progression naturally as any average Indian female. Included in this transition was her shrugging off her roles as a daughter and teacher and accepting those of a wife, mother, and a daughter-in-law. Such subconscious and culturally-implied acceptance meant that she had to be an utterly unselfish mother, and a dutiful daughter-in-law. Whenever her husband visits her from his business trips abroad she has to be a subservient wife. Generally Indian women go through this 'transition' unquestioningly and obligingly because of their social conditioning: thus losing their self-respect and ultimately themselves in the process. Being a descent of the Brahmin caste (the Hindu upper class) she was 'destined' to follow the 'madi' rules like any other orthodox family in the south Indian family system.

## **III. REINVENTING THE FEMALE ROLE**

Although her seventeen-year-long marriage was monotonous and unimpressible to her as a person she did not complain until Ratna's works awoke her consciousness: "I cannot bear to see a talented person like you trapped in a life ruled by blind orthodoxy. The madi concept is quite outdated and only a means to torture people" (Krishnan, 12). Her husband's niece acted as a catalyst and radicalized her thinking. A questioning attitude quickly overtook her so she started reflected on her own marriage life only to find it wholly unsatisfying and repressive. She succumbed to the burden of motherhood and tiresome everyday household chores little realizing that she gained no satisfaction or happiness.

When change came it was rampant and the 'madi' rules seemed intolerable to her, especially when she seemed to be the only one following it - her children were allowed to eat food not prepared at home. The patriarchal society relaxed the rules for her husband who works abroad. The expectations out of marriage are children and their well-being. Kindersley and Wine in their book 'Backwards in High Heels' suggest the priorities of marriage, "The absolute first principle is respect. Essentially this means you do not let yourself be taken for granted, either as a woman, [or] mother..." (Kimbersley and Wine, 12) They insist on the importance of the ability to self-check whether a woman is truly happy in a marriage. Girija is awakened by the talk of consciousness rising by Ratna, her husband's niece: "Tell Girija, you are imprisoned in the four dark walls of this tiny kitchen where your education and skills are wasted. Girija, are you happy with this life?" (Krishnan, 12)

## **IV. WAS IT A 'CRIME' TO LEAVE THE HOUSE UNANNOUNCED?**

Girija left the house in an impulse: to quickly gratify her dwindling spirit that was longing for a respite. Leaving unannounced may seem entirely out of her character and critics point it out as a major flaw in the novel, but to the author Girija has had enough. She, like a rubber band, was stretched beyond the breaking point where her



“infinite patience, guile and resourcefulness” (Kembersley and Wine, 207) were depleted. Without the aid of modern technology the family members had no means to locate her and assumed the worst. The worst scenario for an Indian family would be to suffer a social indignation for having harbored a “loose” woman, rather than the news of her death.

The double standards are quite evident in the case of Girija whose faithfulness to her husband is questioned whereas his credulity never comes under the radar. Thus women are bound by the thorns of social abuse if so ever they steer away from the archetypal portrayal. Krishnan in *When the Kurinji Blossoms*, “A woman, like a fire, is a powerful force in shaping the family you are entering with the strength to make sacrifice for the family, prepared to give up milk if necessary...” (Krishnan, 130)

In India women are advised to keep mum about domestic abuse, be it physical or psychological, in order to safeguard the social standing of her family. Under the guise of saving the family name women, a large portion of who live with their in-laws, are treated as no more than maids. There are ways the Indian in-laws have misused their ‘power’ by pushing the daughter-in-law out of the family circle in all important matters. The daughter-in-law’s hardship is taken for granted; and if not appreciation they are certain to receive complaints. Thus Girija, who devoted her life to her husband, children and in fulfilling the ‘madi’ rules and duties to her mother-in-law, was never recognized as an important member in the family. In contrast the bread-winning husband was always doted upon by the mother-in-law. Marisa Silversti notes on the need to reconceptualize domestic abuse as torture, “It is through understanding the relationship between the abuser and the abused as one founded upon domination and coercion that we begin to make the connection between the more traditional victims of torture and the victimization that women experience in a domestic setting.” (Silvertri and Crowther-Dowey, 177)

## V. CONCLUSION

A radical way of thinking is essential to bring in positive and realistic changes. Feminist anthropology emerged in response to the acknowledgement that across the subdisciplines, anthropology operated within andocentric<sup>2</sup> paradigms: “Early questions ranged from identifying women in the anthropological record to explaining universal female subordination...underlying concerns with understanding the operation of power in various contexts continue to animate feminist anthropological research.”(Anderson-Levy, 1) Living with toxic in-laws can be quite traumatizing for the Indian married woman because of it curbs her of a lot of freedom she has enjoyed as a bachelor, and even so because of the loss of certain human rights. In the Twenty First Century economic independence has been extended to a larger percentage of married women and in turn has relaxed their financial dependency. Rajam Krishnan through her central character has successfully illustrated the contradicting morals associated with being a married woman in Indian society. Girija has proved to be a liberated female, although at some cost, unwilling to submit to the binding ‘madi’rules.



## VI. NOTES

- 1) The science that deals with the origins, physical and cultural development, biological characteristics and social customs and beliefs of humankind.
- 2) Dominated by or emphasizing masculine interests or a masculine point of view.

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