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Double Standards of Namboodiri Culture through the Eyes of Kuriyedth Thatri depicted in the novel “OUTCASTE” by Madampu Kunjukuttan

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Abstract

Namboodiris, the Brahmin-upper caste of Kerala. The caste, which is more powerful than the royal community itself. The so-called intellectual and progressive community which decided to shape their society were always ignorant towards their women. We always talk about the plights of lower caste women of not getting a proper education, having no sexual safety etc., but the plights of upper caste women are less famous. This paper has tried to portray the namboodiri culture and their society. The hypocrisy of their community, where men are permitted to roam around and have infinite extramarital affairs while women are obliged to stay in their four-walled homes, illam. Through the eyes of Kuriyedath Thatri, the sensational topic of discussion in 1905 is also discussed and her perspective is withdrawn to find the loopholes of hypocrisy prevalent in namboodiris. Kuriyedath Thatri and her Smarthavicharam was a ground break moment not only in the namboodiri community but also in the whole of Kerala. Brashtu novel authored by Madampu Sankaran Namboodiri popularly known as Madampu Kunjukuttan is a cavernous echo of the early 20th century. A perfect concoct of various elements of Malayali society. The novel has tried to show different human strata and their emotions. The novel concentrates on the convictions and sentiments of different castes in Kerala then. The author of the novel, Madampu Kunjukuttan, a Brahmin himself has taken an effort to picturise the power and dominance of the Namboothiri caste. The novel also parallels the depiction of Kuriyedath Thatri's

Smarthavicharam, her thought process, and her pain during the trial.

This particular dissertation reflects the hypocrisy of namboodiri culture present during the wake of the 19th century through the sensational trial and flashback of Kuriyedath Thatri (as Paptikutty) which is depicted in the novel “OUTCASTE” by “Madampu Kunjukuttan.”

Keywords: Namboodiri Culture, Brahmin-upper caste, Kerala's Brahmins.

Introduction

Outcaste

OUTCASTE is the translation of the Malayalam novel “**BRUSHTU**” written by **MADAMPU KUNJUKUTTAN**. It was translated by **VASANTI SANKARANARAYANAN**. It mainly talks about the condition of namboodiri women in the early 20th century from different perspectives. The language used by Madampu is Sanskritised Malayalam and the colloquial conversational dialect which is special to the namboodiri community.

The novel is based on the true event of the 1905 trial of a namboodiri woman called **KURIYEDTH THATRI** (Paptikutty in the novel) who had been accused of infidelity. This trial shook the Malayali society, whose effects are still prevalent. Madampu's “Brushtu” is the first literary work to portray thatri’s life. It is a story about the revenge and retaliation of a single woman who fought alone against the whole patriarchal and male-dominated society. The novel also tries to depict the harsh and authoritative customs as well as the ignition of collapsing of the most powerful caste in Kerala. The book has tried to capture the diverse emotions of the epoch it has represented. The work doesn’t get limited to a particular mutiny but also depicts the caste, class and gender

segregation especially the upper caste male privilege, and exploitative social structure in land ownership. The narrative of an Anglophonic native ruler who chooses enslavement towards the British rather than his duty towards his subjects. The novel itself is an intense research of the life, personality, infrastructure and traditions of the famous progressive community. The book doesn't fail to encompass the royal family- The Thampurans, and their infamous indulgences, inequality and ignorance. The transition from one thread to another in the flow of the storyline gets us stuck.

The novel doesn't provide you with a definite end, Madampu leaves it to the imagination of the reader on how each character of the story defines their life. Outcaste gives us an everlasting impact on how cruel patriarchal society can be on women.

Matampu Kunhukuttan

Madampu Kunjukuttan is a Malayalam author and screenplay writer. His novels, short stories, and screenplays mainly reflect the Kerala society in a satirical way. He has a unique literary style and is noted for his sharp humour and a deep understanding of the political and social milieu of Kerala.

Namboodiri

Namboodiris are the Brahmin caste of Kerala. It is believed that they are immigrants from Tamilnadu and the Banks of Narmada, Krishna, and Kaveri. Etymologically, the word Namboodiri is derived from “Naam” means “knowledge” and “purika” means to “impart”. Namboodiri is also transliterated as Nambudiri, Namboodiri and Namputiri. It is believed that Parashurama, the sixth avatar of Lord Vishnu, who founded Keralam by throwing his axe and parting the sea, settled Namboodiris in the land of Keralam. It is reckoned that they

were made to settle into 64 villages by Parashurama himself. Namboodiris in Kerala were the powerful people of that time, more powerful than the king. They owned huge measures of land and resources.

The Namboodiris were very distinct from the other Brahmins of other states. They followed Shankarasmriti rather than Manusmriti, followed by other Brahmins. Shankarasmriti consists of 64 Anacharams which Namboodiris had to stick on. “Acharam” means “rituals”. Thus, “Anacharam” means “rituals which are not followed elsewhere”. These anacharams indoctrinate about saintliness in body and food, worshipping of God, four ashramas or stages of life and control on women. Other than these anacharams, there were sixteen Shodhakriyas, which taught minuscule things about a Namboodiri life.

Namboodiris were not only unprecedented in the habit of living from other Brahmins but their marriage system was also totally different from others. Namboodiris followed a system of primogeniture, where only the elder son called “Moos” could marry from the same community and the properties are all inherited by him alone. Younger sons had to withdraw to “Sambandhams” (Illicit relationships to Nair women), and their children get matrilineal inheritance called “Marumakkathayam”, “Marumakkal” means “sister’s children (nieces and nephews)” in Malayalam. This was done because the property should not be divided and fights on properties should be eschewed.

Namboodiri women are called “Antharjanam” where “Anthar” etymologically meant “inner” and “Janam” meant “people”, this points out that they were the people of the inner courtyard. Antharjanams were always confined to the “Illam” or “Mana” (Inherited Family Houses of namboodiris). The namboodiri women, regardless of being taken birth into the most superior caste, had the least prerogatives compared to

other caste women. She was expected to be the symbol of saintliness. Observance of chastity was anticipated from them. Her life must be devoted to godliness. She was never allowed to go in front of other men except her husband. She was not permitted to wear flowers, perfumes or other fragrance-invoking things. She was denied from going to festivals, watching dramas, sports etc. She is only sanctioned to go to the temple and her own house. Her attire should be very simple and should always cover herself with the “Ghosha”, a white cloak and a “Marakkuda”, a large cadjan umbrella being virtually invisible. As only the eldest son “Moos” is allowed to marry from the same community, the men getting married were very few in number to women. Therefore, a man is permitted polygamy and thus, many times young women are married to very old men and become widows at a very young age. They are then not permitted to have a second marriage. There is even a practice of exchange marriages, in which a father in order to get his daughter married off consents to marry with the sister or any other women in the groom’s family, who is a spinster. Thus the latter becomes the former’s mother who is her sister-in-law too.

The woman who fails to protect her abstinence, that is if she is doubted of her chastity and purity she is made to face an unconventional trial called “Smarthavicharam”. This is a caste offence and is considered perfidy against the community.

The episodes in the trial of a caste offence among namboodiris are very curious and drama-like scenes are created. Shlokas 1 to 35 of the Laghudharmaprakashika in Shankarasmriti convey the procedure of trial. If the head of the house or any kinsmen, or neighbours of the woman doubt her chastity and believe that the woman has “Adukkaladosham” (adultery). She is then shifted to the outhouse called “Anjampura”, if any, or is kept excluded inside any other corner of the house. The maidservant “Dasi” or “Vrushali” who is always with every antharjanam of all Namboodiri illams, is then examined by

the Namboodiris of the Gramam (village), if she accuses her mistress of adultery, they then advance to the local chieftain, who then is required to give sanction for the trial to be conducted and thereafter they call her “Sadhanam” (object). If the sanction is provided, they all write for the “Smarthan” (president of the trial), who in turn calls “Mimamsakas” (people who are skilled in this law) along with them, “Agakoyma” (checks whether the version is faithful) is also brought into the play. They all get together at a particular spot, generally near the temple. The chieftain also sends a representative from his side called “Purakoyma” who stands with a sword in hand near the smarthan and the entire tribunal.

The entire tribunal including smarthan, agakoyma namboodiri, and purakoyma namboodiri lead to the outhouse where the accused is kept. Smarthan and agakoyma namboodiri enter, while purakoyma Namboodiri stays out. Eventually, they are blocked by the maidservant of the accused, then they ask why they are being blocked and thus demand an explanation. Then the maidservant would inform that such and such a person is inside, the smarthan then asks for more information and is informed that, the person is no other than such and such a lady, daughter, sister, mother or wife of such and such Namboodiri of such and such illam, the smarthan then demands an answer for, why she is at such a place. Here, the proper trial begins.

The accused is then asked different questions through her maid as an intermediate. The accused whispers answers to the maid and the maid in return tells it to smarthan. This continues until the accused admits the guilt. This is the preliminary stage but many times this preliminary stage is difficult to attain. Therefore, many times she is forced to answer by putting her into starvation, rolling down the accused from the roof wrapped in a mat or leaving snakes and other rodents in the room. Many times smarthan consoles and

promises to get the chieftain to take care of her. No verdict or evidence of guilty can be put forward against her, except on her own confession to prove her guilty. Once she confesses, she is examined, cross-examined and re-examined again and again as to what, where, time, the person and the circumstances for adultery to happen. The adulterer's name is withheld (though it may be known to all) to the very last. The persons accused by the women are not permitted to disprove the charge against them but the woman herself is closely cross-examined and the probabilities are carefully weighed. The trial many times goes for many months or years but as the family of the accused is responsible to bear the expenses (that is food and accommodation) of the tribunal, thus the family forces the accused to confess. When the accused confesses, the trial is finished and at night (nighttime seems to be essential for this part of the trial) is used for declaring the verdict and a numerically ordered list of the adulterers is pronounced. Then, the accused and adulterers are given a verdict of “Brushtu” (ostracized from the namboodiri community) by a process of a “Swaroopam Chollal” where a “Kutty Pattar” (a boy, a term applied by namboodiris to their east coast Pattar servants). The kutty pattar stands on a low stool and announces the adulterer's name and thereafter takes a bath to wash out the pollution caused due to the announcing of the names. The next procedure is “kaikottal” which literally means “hand clapping ceremony”, where an assembly of women have a clapping of hands process and the accused's large cadjan umbrella (which is a symbol of chastity of namboodiri women) is formally taken from her hands by a Nair of a certain caste the pollution remover of the Desam. Now, as the accused is announced ex-communicated, she goes wherever she likes but should not stay in the same village. After the ceremony, all her family ties are broken and she is considered dead by her kinsmen and death rites called “Udakavichedam” are performed thereafter. Then, a cleansing meal called

“Shuddhabhojanam” is arranged where for the first time since the trial started, the relatives of the accused are permitted to eat in the company of their caste fellows. If she dies during the procedure of trial the proceedings still go on as if she were still alive and they are formally but to a conclusion in the usual manner by a verdict of guilty or of acquittal against the demand implicated. Now if the other side of the coin happens, that is if the accused is found guiltless (which rarely happens) the tribunal and the head of the house must bow down before her and ask for a pardon which is called “Kshama namaskaram” and send her back respectfully to her home which is coined as “Azhivuchollal”.

Double Standards of Namboodiri Culture through the Eyes of Thatrikutty Depicted in the Novel Outcaste by Madampu Kunjukuttan

Kuriyedath Thatri was regarded as a misconstrued woman in earlier times. She was considered a prostitute, a fallen woman who wandered and flew from one man to another for the contentment of lechery because women were gauged as the embodiment of chastity and their virginity was worshipped. Slowly and gradually the notions and beliefs started changing. And Thatri was given a goddess-like position. Her facades became revolutionary and she was sympathized and honoured for her deeds.

It has been 115 years since the mutinying trial of the early 20th century. The trial which trembled aroused trepidation and alarmed the whole province of Kerala. The trial which proved a woman can go to any extremes. Smarthavicharam of 1905 gave its verdict on 13 July 1905 (approx. date). It ostracized the accused, the heroine of the evergreen tale of revolution and 64 other men. Kuriyedath Thatri or Kuriyedath Savitri popularly known as Thatrikutty, the lady who had been arraigned for perfidy was the daughter of Ashtamoorthi

Namboodiri and his first wife, Oki Antharjanam. Thatri's birth was at one of the then venerable namboodiri house named Kalapakkasery Illam. It is located in Arangottukara a small thorp that separates Palakkad and Thrissur district. As a child, Thatrikutty was a very genius girl and was very passionate about artistic talents like music, kathakali etc. She was not only gifted with intelligence but was extremely beautiful too. After reaching puberty, she was married off to Raman namboodiri of Kuriyedath illam located at Chemanthitta, Thrissur. After which in 1904 she was accused of adultery. Later, she had to face the Smarthavicharam, which was held three times. First, it was held by the villagers. Then it was held in Iranjalakuda and again it was held in Thripumithara, the capital of Cochin province, under the surveillance of the king himself. Thatri was brought and was made to stay at Thripunithara Hill Palace (Kunnumel bungalow, now in Ernakulam) and the trial was held over there.

The trial was held again due to the controversies, lack of trust in the first trial and changes in the style of trial due to the intervention of the Madras High Court. Jathadevan namboodiri was the President (Smarthan) of both trials. Thatri faced the trial with complete valour. She called out the names of the men who were involved in the treachery with full confidence and proofs.

She had the minute details of the date, time, and place of the intercourse. She noted down the dates according to the upcoming festivals or temple poojas. Smarthan then was astonished by her memory power. 64 men of all castes and creeds were involved in treachery. The highest caste, Brahmin to the lowest caste. Even her husband, her brother, her father, and her brother-in-law were all on the list. After 64 names were called out it is believed that Thatrikutty by holding a ring high asked whether there is a need to call out this name too. King of Cochin stopped her from calling out the next name. The trial ended there and the verdict was out. It is surmised

that the 65th man was the king himself. Contretemps aroused against Thatri's statement. Many said that this was her plan to defame the man of good households. Thus there was a demand for Purushavicharam (trial of men), where men could state their arguments and opinions. Summons were passed to call out all 64 men for the purushavicharam in which 60 men were present. Two had already passed away and one other was absent due to illness. All the men accused and Thatrikuty were ostracized from the community.

After excommunication, Thatrikuty was an Enigma. According to the rituals, the responsibility of excommunicated lady is to the king. So, therefore it is believed that she was shifted to the banks of Chalakkudy River (in Thrissur district), there is one belief that there she got married to a railway officer. Rumours were also there, that after ostracization, she went to Madras where she got married to an Anglo-Indian.

One question which arises to our mind is even after having these many sexual relations, did Thatrikuty ever get pregnant? The answer is no, she didn't have any children from her extra-marital affairs nor with her husband. The place where Thatri's birth house was situated was set blazed, nothing but a pond is left over there which people believe Thatrikuty's spirit still roams there. There is a story revolving around Arangottukara. That is, Thatrikuty's father was a temple priest at Arangottukara Karthyani Temple. After Thatrikuty's ostracisation, the idol at the temple broke by itself and a plant called Madhavalata grew over there. People believe that the idol was Thatrikuty herself and the plant was her incarnation. The offerings and the worshippings are now for the plant which people consider as Thatrikuty.

Double standards are hypocrisy means claiming to have moral standards to which one's actions do not conform. The namboodiri culture which was prevalent in ancient times was such. Men and women had two different sets of rules. Women

had to be always a servant to their husbands. Women of other lower castes in Kerala Desam thought that namboodiri women enjoyed all privileges like timely food, fresh clothes to change every day, and enough education to read and write. But less did they know the truth behind the four-quarters of illams. Antharjanams had to most spend of their life being chaste to her inhuman husband, chanting verses, fasting for their husband's betterment, wearing wet clothes for the welfare of their husband's life, wearing black thread and praying holding these threads for their husband's enhancement. While these husbands got married again and again by collecting huge dowries to marry off their daughters. This resulted in petty brawls between the wives. Because of this, husbands went in search of secret liaisons with women from lower caste communities. This sprang to illicit relationships all over the country.

The only place women were permitted to go was temples other than their own mother's house. So there was always a group of women who wandered around the temples during the festival only to form illicit relationships. They indulged in vulgar exploits and dirty gossips.

Namboodiris had a saying in them that if the first three virtues of four are fulfilled, that is Dharma Artha (money) and Kama (lust) is fulfilled, the fourth virtue, moksha (liberation) is automatically attained. Dharma and Artha is to be attained by serving these namboodiris.

Hence, everyone is responsible to serve namboodiris. Then Kama, namboodiris believed that secret relationships are their right and their duty, being their seventh Karma along with other karmas like yagnam.

The novel starts itself with the representation of the trial being ended. 64 men, 64 lovers had been excommunicated. We can see that 64 men are compared with 64 arts of Bharata's Natya Shastra. 65th is Lord Shiva, Lord of all the arts according to

Natyashastra. Similarly in Paptikutty's trial 65th is the Lord of all namboothiris, the king of Kerala Desam himself. The king who criticised Paptikutty judged Paptikutty for her unchastity never gave a gaze back to his palace. In his Royal palace at the dawn of the 20th century, women like men didn't have any gender-specific entitlements they were called thamburans (royal lord - masculine title) unspecific of their age and power. These kingly houses also had a system of “resident husbands” where women had an extra husband along with their legally wedded husbands. These husbands are given salary and freshly laundered clothes for the fulfilment of sexual desires of thamburans when their legal husbands are not around. Women of the royal houses go through three wedding ceremonies. First is thirandukalayanam, which is a kind of celebration when a girl attains puberty. The second is kettukalyanam, which is the legal wedding. During this, the groom ties a Tali (a chain of gold with a leaf pendant) to the bride's neck. Third, is the pudamurikalaynam, where the husband gives a saree and owns the wife. Other than these, is the marriage for Resident Husband. These husbands are welcomed to Thamburan's bed by extinguishing the lamp outside the bedroom. Dousing of the lamp symbolises an invitation to Thambran's bed. These resident husbands are usually namboothiris from poor families who in order to have financial support get married to the women of Royal houses. On one side Namboothiri women are not even permitted to look at other men, these royal women have extra husbands exclusively for lechery. We can look at how the men involved in this lechery are also called “husbands”. The king never looked into these matters and came to decree the verdict of Namboothiri women's unchastity. King after listening to Paptikutty's questions as, to who is on the wrong side, the community or the woman's desires got raged and commented,

“What impertinence”

Asking someone's rights was considered as impertinence while women in the King's own house enjoyed more than one husband. For centuries, in the history of Smarthavicharam, no king had ever permitted to conduct a trial or a justification round for men, where men could counter the statements and question the accused woman. Women had no right to substantiate their situations or give proof of their innocence. A woman once accused is called an “object” and is excommunicated from the community on every ground, rare cases are there where women survived.

Every smarthavicharam has an executor who conducts all the ceremonies and procedures at his home and takes care of all the outlays. He is the one who takes up all the expenses. Paptikutty's smarthavicharam was looked after by Achan namboodiri - master of ceremonies. He who took the responsibility of the whole trial, feared getting accused and being defamed. This fear resulted in opting out from the responsibility of trial and protection of Paptikutty. Achan namboodiri is the greatest example of hypocrisy. First, his brother nambyattan who was an inhuman person killed a pregnant woman who was bearing his child. Nambyattan had illicit relationships all over Kerala Desam. Though after his love relationship with mathukutty changes him he had targeted and killed many women already. One of which was palanquin bearer Raman's niece. When nambyattan kills the woman, Achan Namboodiri commented that

“Killing a woman is a great sin but if remedial rights are performed it will doubtless be an atonement enough after all she was only a maidservant”

Achan namboodiri knows very well that killing a woman is a great sin. Still, if the remedial atonements are done it gets nullified. This line shows that he doesn't value the lower caste people. This also signifies that the Vedas and Manusmriti

through which they rule women gets manipulated by their choice. Another biggest irony is when nambyattan gives 4 to 5 acres of land to Raman as compensation for the death of his niece. At this point, Raman wishes if many women of his house would die like this, he would get more and more acres of land. The cruelty of the elite does not limit here. Achan namboodiri kills another namboodiri girl, Unnikali who is the best friend of Mangazhi Vasu's nephew's widow. Though, it is not clearly mentioned why he murders her. It is vaguely revealed to the readers that Unnikali gets pregnant with Achan's child. Achan kills Unnikali because she is a namboodiri girl and he could get ostracized due to it. Vague revelation itself explains the power of namboothiris that even if great efforts are put such secrets will never be revealed. Achan, after the first round of trial ends refuses to continue the trial at his home and comments

"I have heard enough we don't know what else she is planning to say that senseless ignoble woman"

He calls Paptikutty, a senseless and ignoble woman but he is a very noble man with divine qualities like killing a pregnant woman, supporting his pathetic brothers etc.

Paptikutty was the favourite disciple and obedient student of Chemathiri Ottikkan that's the reason she eliminates him from her list. She respected and honoured him from the bottom of her heart. Though he is depicted as a person to be admired and idolized, somewhere he is prejudiced towards his caste's cruel system. When Paptikutty is born Chemathiri knew from his mathematical calculations that Paptikutty would be a rebel and a pioneer to revolutionize Kerala Desam. He commented that

"It is a beginning of kaliyuga"

Yet, he is reluctant to reveal her horoscope, he fears to discuss it with anyone. He is afraid of the destruction of his community. Chemathiri is the one who mentions that this is the fault of times and not the fault of individual action. He highlights time as a great factor in the demolition of his community. Despite his fear he decides to teach Paptikutty is one positive aspect of him. But when she attains puberty he denies him to teach further, he has the opinion that whatever she has studied is enough for a girl. Again it's hypocrisy because he teaches other male students as much as they want. But when she is insistent about studying further he comments that

"Then we are only saying the beginning of her stubborn insistence"

He also considers his deeds as her obstinance which must be treated. Long after when Paptikutty tries to seduce Chemathiri, he comments that

"Child, must you go so far?"

Through this line, we can see that Chemathiri somewhere doesn't want the demolition of his caste and his favourite disciple to get polluted in this way.

Paptikutty to reach this position and to reincarnate into Goddess Kali had a reason behind it, that reason is her husband who offered Paptikutty to his brother to fulfil his lust. Tundan who had arranged everything for his brother and Paptikutty's wedding ceremonies. According to Sankarasmriti, younger brothers shouldn't get married into the same caste. So Tundan also performed remedial rituals for the removal of Vedic hitches but while the bridal entry he became greatest the hitch. He didn't want the bridal entry unless his conditions are fulfilled. Whereas on the other side, Neelan was reluctant to obey the wishes of Tundan. Everyone advised Neelan to follow him as it is Neelan's duty to agree to his conditions.

Neelan agrees with the conditions and the remaining rites of purification of the bride are conducted after which she becomes capable to bear a child.

On the first night, when Paptikutty is full of desire, and expecting her husband into her life. Tundan appears and asks for a one-night stand. This was the condition for which Tundan agreed to the marriage and performed the rituals to avoid the bad consequences. Paptikutty breaks down. She remembers the words of the Vedas.

“I, lord of oceans, grant you the privilege of creation”.

The knowledge of Vedas which had raised Brahmanism to heaven had now entrapped one’s own brother’s wife to satiate a man's last.

Nambudiri women should not even look at their husband's brother's face. But, here husband's brother is asking for the fulfilment of lust. During the wedding Vedic verses recited by husbands are

“I shall not give you cause to weep this promise”

Is broken by her husband in the post-nuptials itself. Another verse in the rituals are

“I imagine your vagina as godhead”

This promise is also broken by Neelan by offering her vagina to his brother. Prayers for sexual desires and bearing a child are offered which in turn becomes a bane for Paptikutty.

Whenever Neelan approaches Paptikutty with full desires for the union but due to her grace and power of reincarnation, he fails to have the intercourse. To satiate his arousal, he advances towards the servant. Whereas he expects Paptikutty to be faithful to him ignoring her desires. This transforms

Paptikutty and encourages her to reincarnate as goddess Kali who with her power takes revenge on the entire.

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