



Birth of a Woman Reader: An Analysis on Malayalam Women Readers as Social Agents

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Abstract

The literary criticisms and studies on Malayalam Gynocentric literature have flourished as an academic branch presently. But the linkage between women writings and women readers remains still unexplored. Gynocentric writings are about women and it depicts the need for equality of gender, primarily. The way in which such literature connects with readers in particular, and Kerala society in general is to be researched acutely. This article is an attempt to the same. The effort of this study is to find out the possibilities of Malayalam women literature to extend from 'pleasure-reading' to 'social endeavour-reading'. This article is based on the in-depth interviews taken from Malayalam women readers who meticulously engage in reading. The motivation, interest, purpose and legacy of reading of the women readers are analyzed. The influence of patriarchal institutions in the self-identity of a woman reader is also scrutinized. This study also examines the social agency acquired by women readers through the intuiting of Malayalam Gynocentric literature.

Keywords

Malayalam literature, Gynocentrism, women literature, gender, women readers

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I. INTRODUCTION

The mode of literature is very different from other media. It just does not provide information, it necessitates us to experience and participate. It makes issues of social and cultural life come alive for the reads. Literature mirrors society and the position of women; both as writers and as fictional characters is replicated as well. As any other cluster, the field of literature has been patriarchal and thus women voices and manifestations remained unrevealed, hid and biased in the early stages. Gender remunerations in world literature were not a sustainable one. Literature reflects the whole social system, its practices, custom and culture which produces it. 'For most of history, anonymous was a women'¹ says Virginia Woolf.

The manifestations of women-minds and character sketches of female in Malayalam literature in the early decades did not illustrate any trace of justice to women's socio-cultural condition. Male literature stayed on as patriarchal representation of the socio-cultural world. Language was used as a tool to establish the patriarchal norms, expectations, practices, statutes etc

It is high time to dive deep into the gynocentric literature and understand its influences on women readers. Elizabeth Gould Davis² remarks, 'The time has come to put women back into the history books, to readmit her to the human race. Her contributions to civilization have been greater than man's and man has overlooked her long enough'. The advent of women literature opened the possibilities of 'hearing womanhood'. The current study is a sociological revisit to the influence of Malayalam gynocentric literature; especially fiction, on women readers.

II. Literature review

The tradition of women writing has been much ignored due to the inferior position women have held in patriarchal societies. Gynocentrism in literature is not a category of writing done exclusively by women. Occasionally there were men who spoke and wrote out alongside women. 'Feminead' (1754) by John Duncombe is one of the first recorded attempts to note women's contributions to literature. Memoirs of several

ladies of Great Britain who have been celebrated for their writing or skill in the learned languages, arts and science written by George Ballard in 1752 also collected women literature of the period.

'A vindication on the rights of women' (1792) by Mary Wollstonecraft, paved the way to overall critical discourse surrounding the issue of feminism and women in literature. The English literary journal 'Room' (formerly titled "Room of one's own") which was launched in 1975 came up. The book '*A room of one's own*' (1929) written by Virginia Woolf secured as an inspiration to it. The journal specifically seeks to publish and promote works by women writers.

The second wave feminism in 1970-s and 1980-s sparked the renaissance for the women's works. Presses and publishing companies dedicated themselves to find and uncover, lost or ignored works by women. Women's history and gynocentric literature were offered as courses and researched as academic disciplines in colleges and universities.

'*Women writing in India*', the book edited by Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha (1991) is a new reading of cultural history. It contains biographical, critical and bibliographical analysis of women writings from languages. It places 200 texts of women in intellectually rigorous, analytical and challenging way. Gynocentric views from different south Asian eras, social conditions and languages serve as a dutiful supplement to an imagining library of world literature. The extensive research to unearth women texts, sensitive translations and gynocentrism reveals that gender is so important factor in the study of Indian cultural history. Accounting to Meenakshi Mukherjee (Author of the perishable empire : Essays on Indian writing in English) women literature is '*The rich and diverse material – mystical and earthy, joyous and sad, serious and funny opens out a densely textured, vibrant world that does not always confirm western notions of Indian women*'.

Ooru Kakkunna pennolikal (2014), Edited by Sreedharan and Deepa Chittakkol cites the representation of gynocentric literature through different stages.

1. First Stage: The daft and coreless woman's writing which emulated men is the feature of this initial stage. These writings lack self-motivated gynocentrism. They centred on the thought that 'deliverance of womanhood was attaining a good man'. Major family- friendly weekly novels and similar serialised literary visions are the products of this period. The writers in this period rebuffed any kind of politics both in life and literature. They pictured men as ideal/perfect creations who possess all visitors and never betray.

2. Second Stage: The coming of Lalithambika Antharjanam³, K Saraswathyamma⁴ etc scored a new direction in gynocentric writing. Literature by/ for women was established. The writings become strong and it threw light to the social, cultural, familial conditions of women in all strata of society.

3. Third Stage: Sarah Joseph⁵, Madavikutty and their followers makes up the third stage or the contemporary stage of women's writing. The Writers themselves and their fictional characters challenge patriarchal dominations. The dimensions of women freedom, sexuality and body widened a great deal.

'There is no doubt that the literature sphere which developed in 19th century Kerala was purely patriarchal' (Devika.J, *Malayala Sahityathile Thaaykulam*, 2012). The author features the period as:

◆ Reading, writing, criticism, publication etc were authorized by men. The enjoyment and reading experience were just reserved for men authors and readers. This silent consent was the supreme facet of this era.

◆ By the late 19th century, the group of critics and thoughtful readers started to begin in the creative space of Malayalam literature.

◆ These groups were reserved only for men and they went through special thought processes in literary quality, nature of experience, sources and relevance of male literary works.

◆ The above mentioned homo-aesthetic groups were formed around the prominent intellectuals like C.P. Achuthan Menon, A.R. Rajaraja Varma, Kesari, M Govindan etc.

'*Pennezhuthu*', the Malayalam phrase is analogous to 'gynocentric writing'. Pennezhuthu changed the historiography of Malayalam women's writing. Feminist historiography selected women's writings as significant documents in the analysis of women's spaces. In other words, gynocentric writings in Malayalam demonstrated making and remaking of women's spaces and the resistance to the outside, Patriarchal society. Seemanthini Niranjana⁶ says in her essay 'Themes of Femininity: Notes on the 'World' of women's fiction' as follows:

'Women's writing assumes importance as response to patriarchal relations within patriarchy itself. It may provide a unique record of the systems which shape and contain the life stories of women'. Therefore women writings can be deemed as a site of struggle which entails both social reality and resistance to it.

Until late 1980-s, women writing in Malayalam was regarded as a sub part of mainstream male literature. The dominant literature criteria was biased because it was patriarchal male academics and literary public were inadequate for the evaluation of female writing. This critical practice of patriarchy is referred to as 'Phallic criticism' by Mary Ellman⁷ in her work, 'Thinking about women' (1986).

These literary phases gave the researcher a keen view of recognising 'Women Writing' or gynocentric writings as a very recent category in Malayalam literature. Till then women writers in poetry, fiction and others literary fields were lacking collective sense of identity. The "phallic criticism" of the earlier women writers

denied their existence as a recognizable group. Women writers were compared and judged against their male contemporaries and marginalised nastily.

Objectives

1. To analyse the influence of Malayalam gynocentric literature in women readers' attitude and gender perceptions
2. To analyse the influence of Malayalam gynocentric literature in women readers' social interactions and self-esteem

CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPTS

Gynocentric literature

It is any kind of literature which rises up the womanish point of view. Women literature is used as an alternative term for gynocentric literature, in this article.

Gynocentrism

It refers to a dominant or exclusive focus on women in theory or practice or to the advocacy of this.

Methodology

This research study belongs to the qualitative research design. The study is descriptive as it explains the acquaintance between gynocentric literature and women readers. A qualitative methodology, which is well fit to satisfy the needs of the present research, claims a well primed interview schedule. A well-ordered open-ended interview schedule is used to collect feedback from 99% of the samples. In-depth interviews and observations were used in particular cases.

The present study requests women readers with the following characteristics:

- Those women readers who concurs that gynocentric literature especially fiction, influence them personally or emotionally or socio-culturally.
- Those women readers who are cognisant about the literary transformations in Malayalam gynocentric literature sphere.

The criteria is stringently acted upon in sample selection because, literature influences merely those who are keen on it. Focused reading -which demands time, space, mindfulness and insistence, can only build changes in the reader internally and socially.

Purposive sampling, which focus on particular characteristics of a population that are of interest (women readers); is used, which best enabled the researcher to answer her research questions.

In the initial stages of setting samples, 2000 readers (samples from libraries, colleges, book shops, and social media) were identified by the researcher. As the study needed women readers who meticulously read gynocentric literature, the researcher condoned the sample size to 500 regular readers. These samples were again sieved to those women who constantly engage in reading and interpreting gynocentric literature, on the basis of a detailed interview. The concluding sample size consist of 260 women readers in Kerala.

FAMILY AND THE 'IDENTITY' AS A READING WOMAN

The women readers included in the older age category, memorized their youthful days and acrimoniously talked about the penalty received for reading Madhavikkutty⁸, Rajalakshmi⁹etc. Some of the readers explained about the appalling isolations received for attempts of creative writing. Time has not yet arrived to be in solace, considering these narrations as past-events. The 21st century witnesses family continuing as strong promoter of inequality, anti-democracy and intimidations. Only a few readers get total support from family to read gynocentric literature. Some gets partial assistance from their family members. Here the reading process gets continued only because of the willingness of the readers themselves. Family is not bothered about their reading and often pleased when the women are free from the process.

Majority of women readers believe and exist within the institution of family. Half of the families are undoubtedly patriarchal and it is thus clear that women readers within such families lack the expression of thoughts, opinions etc. The reasons that patriarchal families charge against reading gynocentric literature are:

- ◆ Gynocentric reading create distraction from mainstream reading
- ◆ Gynocentric reading is futile and contemptible
- ◆ Gynocentric literature deceives girls and women to depart from their responsibilities.
- ◆ Gynocentric literature includes redundant feminist notions that mismatch our (patriarchal) culture

From the opinions of the families guided by patriarchal principles, the following notions are clear:

- ◆ Social institutions continue to articulate revulsions to the uprising voices of women
- ◆ The social institution of family control the minute interests and resolutions of its women members
- ◆ The patriarchal institutions persist to uphold the reluctance to women writings and expression of her own opinions

- ◆ The patriarchal familial norms are so strapping that it pedals women members more than any other inventive, artistic, aesthetic interests.
- ◆ The social institutions which knot its female members with patriarchal rules cannot be expected to accept the creative manifestations of women writers.

INTEREST MOULDS A READER

To understand the interest of women reader to focus on gynocentric literature; time management, expenditure and continuity in reading is observed intensely. It is obvious that family fails to act as an endorsement to women's reading interest. Therefore the following points are vital:

- ◆ Only one fourth of the respondents could manage their daily routine to get time for reading. The remaining three fourth of the women readers passes through inflexible ways to seize on to their reading interest. The ride to sustain their interest is strenuous, complicated and totally based on self-possession.
 - ◆ The women who could manage their time get diminutive backing from family, that too not to a totality. They find their own ways and strategies to adjust their reading hours with their family.
 - ◆ The way of self-alteration for the whole family is a customary practice for women belonging to patriarchal social institutions. Same is the case with women readers in Kerala. They alter themselves to fuse on to familial interests. The reading of gynocentric literature is also the consequence of certain resistances and forfeits by women within the family.
 - ◆ In such a belligerent situation, women literature can only function as an emotional connector than as a catalyst to social emancipation.
- But, interest in gynocentric reading can be considered a cultural product, as it leaves the possibility to act as a driving force in women's liberal social life.

Political orientation and purposive reading

Political status is not only about membership in political organization. It is all about having a vivid stand in all socio-cultural issues. The political stand may or may not direct to political activities. In this study women hold clear political orientation, but they are not into politics. But they have uniqueness as they possess clear political stand. The women who possess a political point of reference are not inside the stereotyped models. Political orientation helps out in women readers in different ways:

- ◆ The awareness about gender equality and related issues
- ◆ The need for the distinctive genre of women writings
- ◆ The sense of evaluating gender bias in the personal lives

Therefore an analysis on the relation between political orientation and purposive reading was essential. The nature of reasoned analysis of purposive reading would result in better social activities. But the nature of reading and political orientation shows little relation. Political orientation causes internal changes in women readers. They showed an attitude against every social happening. But women are hesitant to be in politics and to be stern in issues at home. They retain political orientation to be individualistic and to be self-respectable.

PURPOSIVE READING AND DECISION MAKING

Purposive readers manifest certain speciality in their reading process

- ◆ They have concentration on the minuscule particulars of the women literature
- ◆ They are privileged of comparative interpretations
- ◆ They do detect the gender successions in writings
- ◆ They do undertake narration to the possibility of their social life

The current study analyses that passive readers of Malayalam Gynocentric literature, are dispossessed of captivating the existing ideas of women emancipation. Emotional readers attach the fictional situations to their life and get satisfaction from equalising both the circumstances. It does not result in any peripheral changes in the women reader. The emancipation and liberty of women reside in overt social activities.

Purposive readers- critical, intelligible, work-based readers have higher level of freedom in their life decisions. This tendency is suitable and buoyant as gynocentric reading acts as a source for it. Intellectual transformations are worthy, but not relevant until women break stereotyped versions of social acts.

SELF-IDENTITY AS AN ACHIEVED STATUS

The dimensions of self-identity of women readers as a 'reading woman' and as an entity have parallel bases. Majority of the women readers possess the self-identity of a reader. This status is relevant because of several reasons:

- ◆ Self-identity as a reader symbolize the elevated point of consciousness concerning the process involved
- ◆ Self-identity is the level of awareness of being lively, communally on the go and dynamic
- ◆ Self-identity makes the stride to uniqueness and individuality

◆ Self-identity leads to self-organization which is the overall outcome of social activities. The readers' identity is not the status attained by nepotism or privilege, in the case of women. As mentioned earlier women readers are from patriarchal families where gynocentric reading is a matter of secrecy or totally a personal affair. Therefore self-identity as a women reader is an achieved status and it is the result of struggles and upheavals within and outside.

INFLUENCE FROM FICTIONAL CHARACTERS

Women readers were active and appeared vibrant at the instances where they narrated about the characters from their reading. Women writers were idyllic figures of esteem for the readers. They believed in the capability of language to craft tremendous influence on minds. The strong women characters that tussle against different life situations showed different levels of liberation.

- ◆ Fictional characters who fight domestic violence
- ◆ Fictional characters who dispute stereotyped versions of purity, chastity, monogamy etc which are just intended for women
- ◆ Fictional characters who confront the social institutions of family, marriage, religion etc
- ◆ Fictional characters who defy the marginalisation caused by childbirth, physical weaknesses, menstruation, menopause etc.

The above mentioned characters from Malayalam gynocentric literature have occupied their cultural space early from 1950-s itself. The distribution and discussions of such gender themes spread out in different ratio in different decades. All these characters break the patriarchal stereotypes and they influence women readers in personal perspective than in a social one. They acquiescently accept these gender modifications and expect succeeding changes in the society they belong to.

READERS' SOCIAL REPLICATION AS FICTIONAL CHARACTER

The unremitting interviews on women readers revealed the fact that fictional characters influence women readers in their mental efficacy only. They show a moderate level of lifting the attitude of fictional characters to their social activities. They seem satisfied with the contentment levels of reading only. The highlights of their reading are featured as:

- ◆ Detection of the space between character portrayals of men writers and women writers
- ◆ Marking out stereotyped gender portrayals
- ◆ Probing of text, themes, situations and characters in women literature
- ◆ Evaluating contrast of male-female assembled literature fields
- ◆ Deeper rendezvous and more active ways of reading
- ◆ Recovered control over one's own reading
- ◆ Elevated levels of empathy

It is important to note that women recovered better control only over their reading processes, not in the social processes. Therefore women readers do not replicate the fictional existence of characters to their own social existence.

DECONSTRUCTION BY WOMEN READERS

Deconstruction is an approach of decisive questioning concentrated towards revealing unquestionable and inner contradictions in philosophical and literary language. Decentring or unmasking of problematical centre of texts is involved in this process. This study shows that every women reader is into the process of deconstruction in gynocentric reading, intentionally or not. Women readers aim to display the intrinsic features of both language and meaning. It rejects the usual "analysis" or "interpretation" as well as it rejects any postulation of texts. Instead new meanings are discovered.

Gynocentric literature in Malayalam possesses women characters that show intense sexual, political, religious and familial freedom. Their attitude to patriarchal rules is dynamic and it is so much required for establishing social equality between genders. Women readers in this study, deconstruct the following aspects in gynocentric literature:

- ◆ The repeated stereotyped women portrayals in literature, as a whole.
- ◆ The social freedom explicated by women characters in gynocentric literature
- ◆ The rejection of patriarchy furnished by women characters in gynocentric literature

Continuous conversations with the respondents by the researcher make it explicable that every reader has the capacity of redefining, rediscovering and conceiving literature. Malayalam women writers inscribe with complex sensations; so do women readers read it.

ATTITUDE AGAINST SOCIAL STEREOTYPES

When the reading processes are intense and aspiring; simultaneous social practices are expected. But women readers show moderate level of resistance against stereotyped gender perceptions. Their opinions and behaviour appear in such a way that they explicitly accept all the patriarchal norms of family, religion and gender, even though they have implicit denunciations.

SELF-ESTEEM OF WOMEN READERS

Women readers in this study showed moderate level of self-esteem. The important fact to point out is that the increase in the level of esteem is directly proportional to the ascending level of age group. The indication of control on stereotyped notions of patriarchy is very apparent here. It is distressing to understand that nearly half of the women readers who possess extra educational qualifications fail to express their own opinions in the fields they engage. This flings proof to the following aspects:

- ◆ The education they received may be the decision of family or elderly family member
- ◆ The extra educational qualification may have increased the level of academic degree and occupation of the women readers but not their status of self esteem
- ◆ Where education fails to have an impact on women readers, literature too become unsuccessful to make a productive transformation in the reader.

Participation in literary camps and such extrovert activities are less in women readers. Many of the readers connect more in their own introvert reading zone which is away from the practical social sphere.

READING AND EXPLICIT SOCIAL ACTIVITIES

Several studies about the influence of literature on the readers have proven that reading enhances empathy in the reader. Studies by P.Matthijis Bal and Marijin Veltkamp (2013), Emauele Castano, Mar and colleagues, Djikic M, Oatley K, Zoeterman S, Peterson JB (2009) etc emphasizes the point that reading, especially fiction facilitates readers to widen empathetic skills and allocate them to counter appropriately in social situations. This study figures out that women readers show moderate levels of attitude against patriarchal stereotypes and self-esteem. Here, women readers are navigating in fiction but fails to place it in real social situations. Therefore the impact of literature is not explicit. Literature makes an ideal woman not a social being that clearly respond and react to social situations. Women react according to the norms of family, religion and other social institutions.

REALISTIC AND PRACTICAL SOCIAL ACTIONS

The studies by David comer Kidd¹⁰ prove the social scale of reading literature. He explains that fiction is not just a stimulator of a social experience, rather it is a social experience. In the present study women readers understand women literature as a part of their lives. But they do not end up in social actions. They empathize with fictional situations and also bond with the soreness and inequalities of women in literature. But the ensuing processes of reading finish up in prolific reading satisfaction, character evaluations etc but not in durable social activities. As *K P Appan*¹¹ says *'The culture which is amplified by literature does not result in abrupt social actions.'* Comprehensible social actions and extrovert activities can only lead to a change in status of the individual. Unless it is accomplished, the effects of reading are void. The tangible liberation is achieved through external social actions and real women's agitations.

BIRTH OF A WOMAN READER

Berthold Brecht¹² once said that he didn't want people to leave his plays thinking about the theatre, he wanted them to leave his plays thinking about the world. Acknowledging Brecht's idea; gynocentric literature makes its women readers proficient to think about women in the whole world, not just the formal aspects of creative writing. Women life and its realities are deeply and directly linked with gynocentric literature.

The nature of literature is so different from other media that it demands time, space and mental presence to act as an influencing mode of art. Virginia Woolf said that women; writer or reader needs not only courage and willingness, but also economic independence. The relevance of socio-cultural factors in influencing women's role is significant because of this reason. Especially in the Kerala society the evolution of a woman as a 'reader' is challenging. They defend against existing norms, inside the chain of patriarchy.

For them, scope of women emancipation is the inner liberty of the mind, which is not necessarily recognizable. It leads to the renovation of one's own habits, viewpoint, tradition and conduct which have been disingenuous all the way. Literature expunges ones false awareness about the conscience. The readers engage in inspecting and recording the self-assurance and self-respect; reflected in everyday activities and in reaction to situations, in a fundamental yet implicit way.

III. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- 1) Women readers express continuous interest in gynocentric literature
- 2) Family plays a role in women's gynocentric reading
- 3) Women readers' political orientation influences the purposive reading of gynocentric literature
- 4) Self-identity of a women reader is influenced by type of family and marital status
- 5) All type of readers deconstructs gynocentric literature.
- 6) Influence of gynocentric literature on women readers does not creates explicit social actions.

IMPLICIT READING

The women readers excel in their characteristics as readers. They identify, evaluate, interpret and wrap up the gynocentric reading with immense passion and interest. They relate literary themes to their life and vice-versa. They are aware about the inequality, intolerance, marginalization and exploitation going on in the society. But they show reluctance to counter, respond and proceed. Here reading process is skilful, but its aim has gone useless. This type of reading can be called **implicit reading**. The Latin root *implicāre* means "to involve or entangle."

Therefore the concept of implicit reading can be referred to the type of reading which:

- ◆ Fulfils the ethics and standards of the reading process
- ◆ Fails to execute the internal recognition into explicit actions
- ◆ Prioritize reading nature, writing style, theme preferences and deconstruction of literary meaning
- ◆ Importance to involvement in reading than matters of conduct.

Malayalam women readers of the present study manifest the characteristics of implicit readers.

IV. CONCLUSION

Women writings or gynocentric writings are the result of intense struggles and difficulties suffered by forerunners of writers. The inevitability of gynocentric literature is still a matter of question for most of the patriarchal societies. This study attempts to find the sociological impact of gynocentric literature on women readers. The motivation, interest, purposive reading and desire for focused result set of women readers show intense optimism. The women readers excel as 'ideal readers', but fails to implement the liveliness obtained from reading to social activities. They continue to be in the chains of patriarchy and religion. Reading, alone would not be adequate in making changes in women. A social change can arise only when there is a union of internal as well as external emancipation. Gynocentric reading should be focused in such a way to promote more social activities, so that it enables gender equality.

Notes

1. This quote exemplifies the place of women's stories in the chronological record.
2. *Elizabeth Gould Davis* was an American librarian who wrote a feminist book called *The First Sex*.
3. *Lalithambika Anantharaman* was an Indian author and social reformer best known for her literary works in Malayalam language.
4. *K. Saraswathi Amma* was a Malayalam feminist writer whose short stories have been anthologised in translation in several American texts.
5. *Sarah Joseph* is an Indian novelist, activist and short story writer in Malayalam who brought-in penetrating feminist notions in gynocentric literature.
6. *Seemantini Niranjana* is the feminist author of books such as *Gender and Space*
7. *Mary Ellmann* was an American writer and literary critic.
8. *Kamala Das*, popularly known by her one-time pen name *Madhavikutty* and married name *Kamala Das*, was an Indian poet in English as well as an author in Malayalam from Kerala, India.
9. *Thakkathu Amayankottu Rajalakshmi*, better identified as *Rajalakshmi*, was an Indian novelist, short story writer and poet of Malayalam literature.
10. *David* currently works with the Humanities and Liberal Arts Assessment (HULA) project based at Harvard Graduate School of Education's Project Zero.
11. *Karthikayil Padmanabhan Appan*, better known as *K. P. Appan*, was a renowned literary critic, orator, philosopher in Malayalam.
12. *Eugen Berthold Friedrich Brecht*, known professionally as *Bertolt Brecht*, was a German theatre practitioner, playwright, and poet

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