

A Feminist in the Workshop

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Most of the interpretations of feminist Malayalam poetry are either fragmentary or distorted. Lack of exposure to recent feminist critical theories and practice is only one of the causes of this predicament. The root cause of this type of criticism is the appalling deterioration in Malayalam critical standards. In many instances appreciative eulogy is mistaken for criticism. Journalist-cum-reviewers and academics with no sense of propriety and totality of vision pass out premediated and elaborately worked out critical verdicts for non-literary reasons. A foreword by a venerable patron coupled with a review by a bosom friend makes a classic out of a mediocre book. But this type of misleading criticism is hazardous to the sensibility of genuine readers. Laurels presented to an undeserving writer also exercise a vicious influence on readers, sensibility.

Vijayalakshmi's books *Mrgasikshakan* (1992) and *Thachante Makal* (1994) are ill-edited anthologies. In any anthology the poems should be arranged in some

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order. Generally the poems are so arranged that the evolution and makings of the poet can be graphically and effortlessly understood. However, the poems of the two anthologies are arranged at random. As the year of the first publication of each poem is given, any discerning reader can rearrange them before he proceeds to analyse the poems. A few overenthusiastic reviewers have mistakenly evaluated the first book as the maiden flowering of feminist Malayalam poetry. But the first thing which should be noted is that only a few poems of the anthology comes within the ambit of feminist poetry. Most of the poems are written on themes which are not feminist. The early reviewers have erred in making a sweeping generalisation on the basis of a few poems. This must be discouraged as a critical practice. These reviews are versions of deceptive criticism.

The title poem of the first book is remarkable for its explicit feminist ideology. The poem, which portrays the fear psychosis of a hapless housewife, recalls to memory Anne Sexton's "The Wife-Beater" and Adrienne Rich's "The Roof walker." The speaker of the poem is a tamed animal. The central image of the poem *mrgasikshakan* (animal tamer), attains a metaphor status. In a male-centred-aesthetic the images of women, slaves, servants and animals are interconvertible. The whole poem is a broadly constructed imagistic structure in which the relation between the animal and its tamer is a parody of man-woman relationship in a patriarchy. The image of the animal is subordinated to that of the tamer to symbolize woman's subordination to man. The two main images are qualified by subsidiary images, not all of which are appropriate. The central image of the animal-tamer is qualified by images that convey masculinity, activity and cruelty. These attributes are appropriate to a man in a patriarchally engendered

society. The other main image of the animal must have been qualified by images that indicate femininity, passivity and misery. This is absolutely essential for a congruous and harmonious framework for a feminist theme. In this context, the animal-speaker's desire to have a sexual union with its female partner in an exotic forest setting, as expressed in the third stanza of the poem, remains incongruous. For similar reasons the images of the sixth stanza that attribute the qualities of violence, revenge and savage instincts to the animal-speaker remain inconsistent to the feminist setting of the poem. The animal-speaker is synonymous with the Indian housewife who is at once rebellious and submissive. The poem could have been concluded with an emphatic note had the poet exploited the technique of substitution. The narrative framework with the animal-speaker and the tamer as the chief characters could have been changed to one with the female persona and her tyrannical male protector and then to one with the poet and her male partner during the course of the poem. The fear psychosis is at once the inescapable predicament of the animal-speaker as well as the poet who cannot even conclude her poem on an emphatic note of protest.

The second poem of the anthology, "Kousalya," also deals with a feminist theme: the relative position of women in multiple relationships. The role of a wife provides a woman with a relatively more solid position than that of a lover in relation to a man. The epic setting of the poem dilutes the gravity of the feminist theme and contradicts the modern social reality. In the modern world only one of the several woman sexually related to a man can be a wife and "the other women" are lovers. Motherhood, especially in the Indian context, is a standard of social acceptance. With the birth of a son, a woman attains social recognition which she

fails to evoke as a wife. But motherhood alone will not make a woman's life fulfilled. Her discontent is all the more intolerable when she fails to gain the love of her husband. Her life is completely wrecked when she finds that the rival "Other woman" takes whole of her husband's love. The poem "Kousalya" vividly brings out the destiny of a woman who is forced to content with her motherhood alone even as she is ungraciously edged out in love by "the other woman" and ignored by her husband in personal life as well as in the power structure of the family. Had the poet avoided the epic context, the poem could have been a more explicit and realistic portrayal of the situation.

The third poem "Varav," deals with an exclusively feminine theme, the womanly experience of childbirth. Kamala Das's poem "Jaisurya" remains as an invisible ghost in this poem. The poem also echoes Sylvia Plath's "Morning Song" and Anne Sexton's "Unknown Girl in the Maternity ward." The feelings associated with childbirth assume a universal dimension in these poems which celebrate childbirth as a fulfilment of love. The creative process of motherhood finds a parallel in the creative process of nature, and both again find an analogy in the creation of a poem. The mother-speaker finds meaning and fulfilment in her new role. Childbirth is not only a loving act of creation but also a psychological event with a cathartic effect. In this context, these poems question the paternity theory of art. What Vijayalakshmi shares with the great women poets of the century is the vision of motherhood as an act of fulfilment. But she spoils the intensity of the poem by bringing in shadowy figures like uncle and grandmother into the framework of the poem in which even the father is rather a concept than a reality.

The next poem of the anthology, "Vittupokoo," portrays motherly instincts. The poem chronicles the various events during the growth of a child. The poem also expresses the mother's anxiety about the future of the child. This poem is remarkable for its explicit feminine theme. Another poem of the anthology, "Bhagavatham," catalogues the domestic drudgery. The poet conveys that domestic routine is a burden on women. It hinders her intellectual and spiritual pursuits. *Bhagavatham* is a symbol of intellectual and aesthetic delight. The reading of *Bhagavatham* symbolizes creativity for which women are, as the poet bemoans, ill-equipped owing to their domestic burdens. The other poems of the anthology have no appeal from a feminist point of view.

Only the title poem of Vijayalakshmi's second book deals with an explicit feminist theme. The poem "Thachante Makal" is, perhaps, the masterpiece of her poetic art. It is a classic illustration of revisionist myth making. It seems that Alicia Ostricker's critical theory and Anne Sexton's *Transformations* have influenced Vijayalakshmi in the composition of the poem. In the popular myth of the *Perumthachan* (Master carpenter), the well-versed young son, who excelled the well-established father, met with a premature death. The prodigious young craftsman was killed by the broad chisel of his father. Vijayalakshmi creates an imaginary younger sister to the ill-fated youth. Women poets often create imaginary relatives to symbolize certain aspects of the self. The imaginary daughter of the *Perumthachan* symbolizes the feminine aspect of a creative mind. This character, who is also the speaker of the poem, not only reinterprets the myth but also rationalizes the old tale of fixed co-ordinates in the context of modern social reality. The speaker and her brother were two industrious

disciples of the master craftsman who was a demi-God. The accidental death of the brother figuratively represents the death of the masculine part of the speaker's self. This metaphoric death is a turning point in her life as well as her career. She resolves to liberate herself from the tyrant father-figure and to find her own destiny both in her career and her life. The speaker liberates herself from the vicious influence of the patriarchal father whose broad chisel has been a perpetual terror of her life. The poem is a strong indictment of the paternity theory of art and a censure of women's marginalisation in literature. The poem ends with an emphatic declaration of independence from andro-centric aesthetics and ethics which is equally applicable to the speaker as well as the poet. The poet tears away the veil of the speaker and reveals herself towards the end of the poem. Vijayalakshmi strategically adopts poetry as a means of emancipation from the male-centred poetics and tries to evolve a kind of women's poetry that is entirely new to Malayalam literature. This poem could have been given a contemporary significance, as feminist poets often do, had the poet used consumerist epithets and technological terms instead of traditional phrases.

Most of Vijayalakshmi's poems remain outside the "two inches of feminist ivory." Her best poems are explicitly feminist in their content and form. These poems herald the arrival of feminist poetry in Malayalam. But, this truth never makes light the fact that most of her poetry is written on conventional themes and in conventional form. If judged by output, Vijayalakshmi's poetry can be considered a late flowering of traditional poetry in Malayalam. Nevertheless, her poetry has an excellent poetic flavour and an effortless ease and beauty which are generally associated with the spontaneous

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poetry of great masters. She masterly renders her poetic materials into rigid poetic forms. The rigour and control of form, which is the hallmark of her poetry, is characteristic of the early poetry of many renowned women poets. In spite of her visionary perception and faultless craftsmanship, Vijayalakshmi seems to waste away her talents in pointless versification on common place themes. She ought to confine her creative energy to the objective rendering of her subjective, womanly experiences and the history and culture of her gender.

