

Feminist Tamil Poets and Their Perspectives in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Poetry is the most popular literary genre. It is admired and loved by women as poetry is a way of expressing women's feeling which is from their tender hearts. From ancient period, Tamil literature has the highest number of women poets in the world. It is amazing to see they were able to compose poems and attend assemblies of poets. They express their feelings in various ways.

We have what is called women's poetry in our times. Women engage in this creation of poetry based on feminism for two decades. There are many views about feminism in the short stories, novels and any other literary works. Comparatively, feminism is revealed in the poetry more frequently.

Feminism is a collection of movements and ideologies that share a common goal: to define, establish and achieve equal political, economic, cultural, personal and social rights for women.

Keywords: Sri Lanka Tamil women poets, feminism, socialist women, freedom

Feminism

Feminism is a theory of interdisciplinary nature for society. It is centred on three major combined issues: Context, experience and their struggles, Activities and wellbeing of women and Criticism regarding women.

In 18th century Elizabeth Abel, Mary Daly, Kate Millet, Juliet Mitchell and Mary Wollstone craft investigated about feminism in the literary field.

In Sri Lankan literature, Annar, Sangari, Auwai, Manohari, Sharmila, Seyyid, Kekirava Sahana, Sivaramani, and Kekirava Sulaiha engaged in literary writing.

Gender difference, gender inequality, gender oppression, social location, liberation, violently oppressed, subordinate position are the key threads of their poetry.

Purpose of This Study

This qualitative study intends to analyse a selected few of the above mentioned women poets based on context, experience and their struggles.

Poetry, Poets and Women

A poet shares her experiences with others in the form of poetry by pouring out her emotions, which is intertwined with the real life. The nature of her experiences and the depth of her emotions determine the quality of the poetry. In that sense the poetry should be created in order to experience the reality of this world. The maximum utility of the poetry depends on its contents. Such usage is related to the type of feeling emerging from the poem. The poet's personality could be understood from her writing that deals with the well-being of the society. The poem should have substance that will benefit the society in the long run.

According to Mathew Arnold, "poetry is a criticism of life at the bottom"

The perfect art of poetry helps to increase the happiness of the society, to liberate the oppressed and if it helps to know about the world around us, claimed Valdath Peter.

Feminist Movement in Sri Lanka

Standard of life of the women in Srilanka is very much improved. If that is so, the question arises whether it is necessary to have feminist movement? However during the last decades there have been many issues related to the women, Therefore the feeling for women's liberation has been felt in the recent times. This problem is noticed all over the world and therefore the international women's day is observed throughout the world to emphasise the importance of women rights.

In the system of open economy the women were used as cheap labour and this may be also one of the reasons for the rise of the feminist movement. Even in the ancient, middle and highly advanced modern literature like "Kavviya Sekaraya" in the preaching for the conduct of women has been mentioned in the following manner. Women have been advised to maintain the good qualities like chastity, sacrifice, modest, remaining in the house,

confinement in the house and the following activities such as speaking a loudly, laughing a loudly, laziness, should be avoided.

In the Sinhalese literature “Panchakalyani”, it is mentioned about the beauty of woman and their good behaviour.

The women’s rights mean not only the equal rights but also freedom to carry forward the struggle against male domination and paternal superiority.

The first women socialist women rights movement originated in 1978 in Sri Lanka.

Feminism as a Perspective

Feminism is also strongly present in the literary field particularly in poetry. Therefore the feminist views through the women poet’s poetry are analysed here.

Feminism is a unique doctrine. Its influence is found in different fields of activities. It has developed as an interdisciplinary subject matter in the society. Because of this fact, it has attracted the attention of the scholars in the field of science of anthropology, Biology, Law, History, Literature, Psychology, Theology and etc. It is as approach to explain issues in these fields. There are two ways of looking at feminism. One is to expand their knowledge in their respective fields. The other is to critically understand the changing world.

Idea of generalizing by feminism is meant for human experience and broad outlook of the social life from a feminist point of view. It is centred on three ways.

1. The experience of the women in the society and situation is subjected to investigation as a main issue.
2. To view the mundane life on the basis of the well-being of the women in the social world.
3. To carry forward the criticism and the activities in respect of women to create a world of prospect for the women.

Though women liberation is being achieved by accepting these three concepts, they developed into activist movements. This development has a long history. It is reshaped as a struggle for women's rights. It was aimed at liberating the women from the fetters in the society.

Even in the literary field, feminism has become influential perspective. In the beginning Elizabeth Abel, Mary Daly, Kate Millet, Juliet Mitchell and Mary Wellstone Craft did some research on feminism. By the end of the 18th century, Slogans about the women's rights have already started.

In the modern literature, Feminism was brought to lime light in the novels, short stories and poems. Nowadays, it has become the theme in the creation of literary works and its criticism. Creators of feminist literary works have been identified in Srilanka, Tamil Nadu, and their Diasporas'. If we consider the women poets in Srilanka, Sangari, Avvai and Penniya can be mentioned as exemplars.

It was preferable for them to expose the problems of women disappointment in their lives in poetry rather than in other creations like short stories novels etc.

(The Tamil poems discussed below were written by the poets in Tamil. These are translated and presented here by the author of this paper Mathura Annalingam.)

Although Freedom is Desired by Sangari

**I longed to
Unfurl thousand wings
And fly in the sky**

**My Atma desired
To touch
The stars
The sun in the sky**

**I thought
Of revolving unlimited
In the universe
Like the space Craft-Odys**

**I wished
All birds in the sky
Changed into my self
But
The iron ringlets
Chained to my feet
The grinder stone
The pot
The Thali like a fence
Have
Pressed me on to the gourd
And
Into the darkness of the underground**

This poem by Sangari deals with freedom. Freedom is meant neither freedom from want, nor political freedom but freedom to women. Freedom, the bright light of humans is denied to woman. Here Sangari paints out the desires of the woman for freedom and explains how she is.

The position of woman in society must be taken into consideration when inferior. She is subservient to man and can't play a dominant part in society. Her natural place is "home" and not "office". Her duties are comforting the husband and bringing forth children. These appear well and good.

Based on this principle women are treated as second class citizens. Their desires to exalt themselves are dismissed. For example, a lady who was an aeronautical engineer was allowed to fly small planes but not big passenger planes. A qualified lady doctor was not allowed to perform certain operations. A lady who topped the list in the competitive

examination for administrative service was dropped on the ground as she couldn't ride a horse.

These are some of the ways by which even educated women were discriminated. In a so called democratic country like England women were given franchise only in 1928. It was these sorts of treatment that prompt feminist writers to question the "freedom" enjoyed by women. This feminine movement cropped up throughout the world. Even Muslim women began to fight for their freedom. It was this movement that had made Sangari to voice her protest.

Sangari's imagery to fly up in the sky, touch the stars and sun and travel in the space craft shows the desires of the women to break the restrictions that stand in their way to freedom unlike in other societies. These restrictions are not explicit among the Tamils. The Tamils have very cunningly by bribing the women with gold and silk. They also have creation marriage rituals that keep them in slavery. Sangari speaks about the lion, the pot, the thail, which are really like fences that prevent a woman to "ask for more..." she must bonfire herself with the customs, traditions and conventions and voluntarily give up her desire for freedom.

The poet doesn't give any "remedy" for it. She ends the poem abruptly and it is left to the reader to interpret in his/her own way.

In their outlook by Sangari

To me

No face

No heart

No soul

In their out look

I have

Two breasts

Long hair

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 **16:10 October 2016**

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Little wrist

Hugh thighs

Cooking

Preparing the bed

Bringing forth children

Being obedient

Are our duties

They speak

About chastity

And the rain that

Poured when ordered

Always look at my body

This is the custom

Of the husband

And the shopkeeper

In this poem Sangari gives the authentic speech of woman and being. One is able to understand female experience- the lustful look of man. This look really is a sexual expression. The poet Sankari shows the woman's awareness and the meaning of the opposite sex. This is a criticism of the men folk who pretend that they are pure, but in fact full of lust. Sangari is most stressful and skilful when she makes the woman say.

I have

Two breasts

Long hair

Little waist

Huge thighs

These are the things a lustful man expects from a woman. The poet is not against sex as such. She is concerned with lust. That is why she speaks of perspectives. Man never thinks about the face, heart or the soul of a woman. To him a woman is a plaything. Sorrowfully

Sangari paints the picture of the woman who in the eyes of the lustful man, is a symbol of sex.

But the poet is very clear in showing the irony on the part of this lustful man. He speaks loudly about chastity and purity, but he is ready at any moment to break these disciplines to enjoy sex. He cites examples from classical works like the Thirukural to prove that a pure woman could bring by command the rain by command, if she worships her husband, not the God.

It is clear that Sangari's writing mirrors her own life experiences. The final line is most stressful which stands:

Always look at my body
This is the custom
Of husband and
The shopkeeper

It is not ordinary "look" but "lustful". This makes the reader to think about Jesus Christ's saying.

"Every time you look at a
Woman with lust you commit
Adultery"

Sangari brings in a homely truth that everyone with eyes is a sinner.

Today I am a big girl by Sangari

I'm a flower

Transformed into a stone

I'm the wind

Turned into a rock,

I'm water frozen into ice

Once I could

Leap and float

Roam and wander

I was free
To stamp my foot
To shout aloud
Clap and laugh
And when provoked
To tear my exercise book
Then I could climb trees
Pluck mangoes
Join the children next door
In playing *Kiddi*
Or hide- and- seek
No one said anything

Today
I am a big girl
If I laugh aloud
I'll become
A stretched tobacco

Must me modest
Patient
Coyness
A female ornament
Talking
Smiling
Glancing
Dressing
And walking
Everything as per code
I'm now a stone
A rock
A block of ice
A woman

It is a narrative by a feminine poet Sankari that tells the story of a girl who becomes a woman. As a small girl she had lot of freedom. Leaf, float, roam and wonder. The joys and delights of life are symbolised by stamping of foot, shouting aloud, climbing trees and playing hide and seek. Pout after attaining age that is becoming a big girl. She is subjectivity. She is expected to be modest patient and coy and maintain herself as a female ornament.

Sangari tells this story without any explanation in diction closest to ordinary speech with something in it. "I am a flower, transformed into a stone". It is up to the reader to decide what the something is, it is a handcuff but a golden hand huff. She is confined to a "Golden Imprisonment". The happy mood of the small girl is changed to a sad tone overnight. (Transformed into a stone) She has to conduct herself according to a code- the code of distinction.

The girl is no longer a play girl. She is a big girl now. She has no freedom to shout aloud, laugh, climb the trees and roam. She must behave herself. Any attempt to break these convene waif rules will be regard as a disgrace 4th of only to the girl but to family. Every community has its own priority and in the Tamil community. It is the girls who are oppressed or subjected to this sort of treatment.

This probably had an adverse effect on Sankari and made her to voice her strong protest against the oppressors. There is full of fire but she is very cool and calm and has succeeded in telling a natural, straight forward story in a modern way- using very simple blank verse.

This poem should be considered as keeping in mind the Tamil society before and after the rise of feminism. Before the rise of feminism those restrictions or forbidden things were regarded as "good" or necessary wills. They were in fact introduced by man with a definable purpose. A big girl was not considered a person but a marketable commoditise in the wedding market. Even a tiny black mark on her character would ruin her life and bring agony to the family. If we linger a little bit on this problem, it would dawn upon us that these restrictions were nicely introduced with maxims like "if laugh aloud you will become a stretched tobacco." These restrictions, definite served their purpose then.

However with the rise of feminism the poets began to look at these restrictions outmoded, unnatural and psychologically oppressive. The poet Sangari feels that restrictions make life more difficult and limits the happiness of a big girl. The first monthly period is a natural state and is fashioned by God. The second period-big girl is fashioned by man to suit his whims and fancies. So this golden handcuff must be broken.

Constrains such as “don’t do this, don’t do that, etc.” are man-made and these really constrain joy – simple joy of “talking, smiling, glancing and dressing”. Sangari writes with bitterness and sore. The result of the sad situation according to Sangari is “rook”. Her use of symbols is worthy of consideration. A flower laughs and moves but a stone or rock neither moves nor laughs. The poem shows female anger. It should be noted that women’s poetry must or needs to be read differently from men because they give their own experiences regarding sex, lust, child birth, and domestic cruelty. So, one should read Sangari’s poem with “femaleness” in mind.

Voice of a friend by Sangari

Again and again

Confined kitchen

Slavery to be the fate

How long can we tolerate?

Don’t be as timid as a deer

Don’t move slowly as a swan

Rise up bravely

To win our rights

Don’t allow the fences with thatched leaves

Around you

What more to be done

In the dark

The place of women in Tamil society is the kitchen. A woman is expected to be the cook of the family. The husband earns the money. His wife cooks and looks after the family.

This is the normal accepted natural explanations of men. Usually this is normally accepted by women without protest.

Probably the poet is influenced by the woman's liberation front in the western countries. The first question asked by this movement was why should a woman do this unpaid work? So the poet expects that situation be changed.

Don't be as timid as a deer
Don't move slowly as a swan
Rise up bravely
To win our rights

Here, women are prevented through "don't do this", but in this poem asks women not to be timid as a deer and walk like a swan. Don't be passive, Awaï asks the women to fight for the elimination of restrictions.

Penniya

In the poem of Penniya's "*Vathai Padalam*",
Do you know?
How many scratches are there?
In my heart?
Have you ever realized that?
You are killing me
For the sake of
False prestige.

Through this poem, we identify men's cruelty on the women. These are every day happenings. Violence is there yet. Killings are there. When a tortoise is performing is it beneficial to be dumb rather than making huge cry. What is wrong? Penniya points out the problems of women.

Vijkala Puvanenthiran

Another poem presents the cruelty of men.

In the poem of Vijikala Puvanenthiran's "Tortoise",

Tortoise

I am tortoise

I am tortoise

At the time of my birth

To live in this manner

To protect my body

Placed me in the shell

Carrying the house

Wandering

(This is a) big burden to me

Like to walk

Without the shell

Conclusion

All these Sri Lankan women poets try to break the restriction imposed on women in the name of custom, tradition and religion. It is clear from these poems that the feminism has exerted its influence on Srilankan Tamil culture. This article is based on poems published in magazines which argue that feminism should be strengthened and feminism should be described and presented in its proper perspective.

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