

Desire and Self-Representation: A Philosophical Reading of the Malayalam Novelette “Agnisakshi”

Meera Kumar¹ · Sangeetha Menon²

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Abstract With the focus on the concepts of desire and self-representation, in this paper we present a philosophical analysis of the Malayalam novelette “Agnisakshi” by Lalithambika Antharjanam, which narrates the customs and taboos that existed in the *Namboothiri* community in Kerala in the early twentieth century. Through a method of narrative analysis supplemented by philosophical reflections, the study brings forth the living conditions of Brahmin women in the *Namboothiri* society in Kerala and their self-representations in the text. Engaging with the characters of the novelette, we discuss desire and agency in the light of the larger narrative of the text, and how the psychosocial factors influence them. One of the conclusions we arrive at, analysing the tensions between patriarchy and female individuality, is that it is important to understand the psychological formation of desires and its philosophical transformations. The study depicts desire and self-representation as two important concepts, and the understanding of the relation between them as crucial, in the formation of personal identity.

Keywords Desire · Self-representation · Narrative · “Agnisakshi” · Feminism

✉ Meera Kumar
parappilmeeramenon@gmail.com

Sangeetha Menon
prajnanata@gmail.com

¹ Department of English Studies, University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad, India

² Consciousness Studies Programme, National Institute of Advanced Studies, Indian Institute of Science Campus, Bangalore, India

Introduction

In Kerala,¹ one will often come across the tales of hundreds of women whose voices were crushed under the onslaught of patriarchy during the nineteenth and twentieth century. The journey from the kitchen to the living room was for many a herculean task and often impossible. Even in the twenty-first century, ample records of women writers are available, who were denied the freedom of expression due to sociocultural factors. Lalithambika Antharjanam² (1909–1987) is one among the first few women writers from the *Namboothiri* community, a community that represented its women as those bound, by numerous cultural ties. Her first and only novelette “Agnisakshi” is a sharp ridicule on the customs followed by the *Namboothiri* community in Kerala. Through its strict moral code, the creative freedom of women in that community was curbed, and thus, lives were restricted in expression. Under patriarchal circumstances that prevailed in this community, the desires of women were hardly ever considered and almost always subjugated or violated. It is needless to say that their sexual urges were often ignored in order to conform to the priestly ideals which were conceived only to reinforce the patriarchal system.

Desire is a powerful source that drives human action, hence, it is inevitable to study why and how the desires of the *Namboothiri* women were easily overpowered. An analysis of these concepts may help in bringing forth the underlying issues that concern the living conditions of women and its reflections in women writings. A century later, if the reflections of these circumstances are still felt subtly in the *Namboothiri* society, then it has to be considered as the need of the hour to understand the issues scholastically and to uncover the multiple psycho-philosophical processes³ which shaped them. It is with the intention of bringing vernacular texts to the mainstream context that this specific text has been chosen.

The sociocultural situation in Kerala, and the social reform movements, in the early twentieth century has invariably shaped and regulated the formation of desires in the women of those times. Some of these movements questioned patriarchy which in turn led to forms of repression such as retaliation. The various customs and taboos in the *Namboothiri* society served as a prerequisite for the formation of physical, emotional and intellectual needs of these women. These customs not only impacted the flow of their desires, but remained as an undercurrent influencing future actions. The social conditions also led to the repression of desires and the formation of “deformed desires” (Bartky 1990a, b), which are reflected in self-

¹ Kerala, also known as Keralam is a territorial state in the south-west region of Indian subcontinent. The Namboothiri are a particular caste-based community in Kerala who adorn a higher status in the society. The caste system which is followed throughout India is a traditional ascribed status given to people according to their lineage and occupation.

² Lalithambika Antharjanam was an Indian author and social reformer best known for her literary works in Malayalam language. Her published oeuvre consists of nine volumes of short stories, six collections of poems, two books for children and a novella, *Agnisakshi* (1976) which won the Kendriya Sahitya Academy Award and Kerala Sahitya Academy Award in 1977.

³ Although it is important to independently analyse and review the political and anti-colonial agencies that influence the individual agencies, the scope of this paper excludes this topic and focuses on philosophical, narrative and psychological aspects.

representations. Through discourse and narrative analysis, this paper looks into the customs and taboos specific to the orthodox *Namboothiri* families in Kerala such as “out-casting” which influences the shaping of the desires of women in this community and the representations of different female characters in “Agnisakshi” reflecting the repressed desires in these characters.

Contextualising Desire in “Agnisakshi”

“Agnisakshi” is the only novelette written by Lalithambika Antharjanam who was one of the most popular radical feminist writers in Kerala in the early twentieth century. Her works which consisted mostly of short stories were well received by the native audience. Antharjanam was not merely a writer but also a social reformer, whose writings most often stood for a cause. She was born and raised in a traditional Brahmin family in Kerala, belonging to a community called “*Namboothiri*”. This community held the highest rank in the caste hierarchy in Kerala and enjoyed a superior status. The *Namboothiri* were the priestly class, and the women belonging to their families were called “Antharjanam” a term when translated would mean “the people who are inside”. True to this nomenclature, the women of these families were treated as properties of their respective homes or “*illam*” and were denied all kinds of freedom, by carefully sanctioned social norms. The numerous taboos exercised by caste and religion tied them with invisible chains, and these women from the moment of birth were trapped in the complexities of a strict patriarchal system. Lalithambika Antharjanam, who hails from such a background, however, had the privilege of being educated, and later, she used her writings to expose the atrocities faced by the women in her community. Since the women in *Namboothiri* communities were seldom given voice regarding their own lives, there was absolutely no question of their desires being fulfilled, or let alone addressed in any manner. It might be due to this very reason that Antharjanam hardly comments explicitly on feminine desires. However, in most of her stories including “Agnisakshi”, the desires of female characters manifest themselves in one way or another.

Desires which are the driving force of action, it may occur, would have a minimal role in the lives of women who are denied agency. However, while some among Antharjanam’s characters choose to silently sacrifice their ability for even desiring an end, some others involve in a rebellion to somehow free them and acquire agency. It is in this context that the contradictions of female characterisation and representation of self in “Agnisakshi” can be analysed.

Exploring Desires Through the Women Characters

Sandra Bartky (1990a, b) describes repressive satisfactions, or deformed desires, as those that fasten us to the established order of domination, for the same system which produces false needs and also controls the conditions under which such needs can be satisfied. “False needs, it might be ventured, are needs which are produced through indoctrination, psychological manipulation, and the denial of autonomy;

they are needs whose possession and satisfaction benefit not the subject who has them but a social order whose interest lies in domination.” (Superson 2005: 110). To a certain extent, deformed desires are provoked by certain religious and cultural doctrines in the *Namboothiri* society where sacrifice and selflessness are considered essential virtues. Women are expected to serve their families without questioning such a system of female subordination and subjugation. While Unni explains to Thethi, his philosophy of life, he calls it an “agnihotram” (a trial by fire). Unni explains, “For people born in the Brahmin caste, life is a spiritual sacrifice. One has to foreground the other’s wishes, over one’s own” (Antharjanam 1976: 48)⁴. Even though the virtue is one of the tolerance, its implications are multi-faceted when it comes to individual agency, which was denied to the Antharjanam. They themselves indoctrinated these values of silent suffering and learned to compare their desires in relation to that of the society. There are many other instances where the formations of such deformed desires are reflected in the novel. Thankam regrets objecting her father’s views and leaving the house in the pursuit of higher education. Even though it was her desire to study and acquire a job, she is deeply saddened, since her parents and the society consider it to be a selfish decision on her part. When Thankam returns for her holidays, she prostrates at her father’s feet and has this thought of repent:

Forgive me father! Bless me! Your wishes are from now on my wishes too! I shall never object to it! (Antharjanam 1976: 44).

Philosophically and psychologically, desires are of multiple types, kinds and with varying causes. There is a general agreement among various philosophers that desires invariably lead to some kind of action. One may desire for material objects, states of affairs, emotional support, physical gratification or a state of mind that assumes perception of goodness. The objects of desire may vary according to different circumstances. According to action-based theories of desire (Anscombe 2000; Millikan 1984; Papineau 1987), desire is both a mental state and also produces an action. Desire–satisfaction is how the action production systems lead to purposes. In “Agnisakshi”, the desire for education, freedom, sexual gratification, affiliation, motherhood and the like is exhibited by the different characters. The story presents an intricate scenario of characters which exhibits a goodness-based theory of desire (Stampe 1987; Oddie 2005) while perceiving them as instruments to bring in freedom for self-expression. The goodness-based theories perhaps carry in them the classical thoughts about Socratic Eudaimonia or the Upanishadic concept of well-being for the other and oneself. Desire perceives goodness and not just believes in goodness, in the line of these theories. The characters in “Agnisakshi” at times pose the question to the reader whether such a perception of goodness is a product of the subjugation of their agency and choices, or is it a mechanism to psychologically cope with a conflicting situation bridging family and the society.

The story line in “Agnisakshi” traces the life of two female characters, Thankam (who later on begets the name Mrs. Nair) and Thethikutti (who later comes to be

⁴ Unless otherwise specified the translation of the original Malayalam text [Antharjanam, L. (1976). *Agnisakshi*. Kottayam: D.C.Books] into English is by Meera Kumar

known as Devi Behen). Thankam who is the daughter of a senior member in the *Namboothiri* family does not belong to the *Namboothiri* society completely, since her mother belongs to the Nair caste. Thankam is depicted as a stubborn girl who questions the norms that are placed on her by the society. Thankam's cousin brother Unni is a man who is highly influenced by the religious scriptures. He desires to live a life rooted in the practice of dharma and seldom questions the societal codes. Thethikutti, who is a *Namboothiri* woman by birth, however, is influenced by her brother who is a social reformer. While Thethi, a young girl in her teens, is married off to Unni who belongs to a highly conservative family, her life thereafter becomes a true test by fire. The author explains the intrinsic politics of the ceremony of marriage, where a woman is considered as an iconic goddess thus:

The sounds of jubilation were then raised by the crowd. On either side ladies holding metal plates with lighted lamps and other auspicious articles, welcomed them. Red chrysanthemums and fried grain were showered on them. An auspicious deity was being installed at ManampalliIllam. The continuation of the family depended on this deity (Antharjanam 1980: 20).

The teenage girl who enters her husband's house as a newly-wed bride is already burdened with the responsibilities and expectations placed on her. She is expected to follow and internalise every tradition and custom and protect the family as a deity. While a woman is accorded as a deity, it needs to be considered that implicitly she might be expected to ignore her desires for self-expression. Throughout the story, this incident acts as a self-fulfilling prophecy. A day after the wedding, when Thankam has her first conversation with Thethikutti she observes that the bride has entered a life of unending misery: "How can one be sure that he wouldn't be an ascetic? He married for the purpose of having an heir in the family. It is *grihasthasrama*. For the ritual a wife is needed" (Antharjanam 1976: 21).

The desire for affiliation and affection from a partner is the basic desire for a married woman. This right is not only ignored in the cases of several female members in the *Namboothiri* community, but also often violated. The feminine desire for affection and sexual gratification is ignored, and this when repeated for an entire life time results in serious mental breakdown in women.

Lalithambika Antharjanam brings to light another character "Branthicheriyamma" (the lunatic aunt) whose past is revealed in a story which is told to the protagonist Thethikutti. Branthicheriyamma in her eighteenth year was married off to an orthodox *Namboothiri* family. "She was a beautiful young woman with a fair complexion, beautiful eyes and full rounded breasts" (Antharjanam 1976: 26). This might be considered as a reference to her inherent femininity, her physical need for sexual gratification and her desires as a newly-wed woman. However, Branthicheriyamma was married to Muthaphan who treated her like an animal. It was his second marriage and he was more inclined towards his first wife, who through her seductive skills had taken control over Muthaphan. Branthicheriyamma was merely a victim of a prevalent practice in the *Namboothiri* society wherein a woman is forced to be the second wife of an elderly man, who already has a daughter of her age. "Branthicheriyamma cried a lot. Then she muttered. In the end she started expressing a violent nature" (Antharjanam 1986:

26). Here, the ignorance of a woman's hopes and desires and the non-fulfilment of these desires is indicated to lead to serious psychological implications. Her patience which eventually died out had given way to frustration due to suppression and repression which later manifests as eccentricity.

Nethyaramma, another female character in the story, sympathises with the sad state of Branthicheriyamma and says thus: "Poor lady! Is it her fault that she became a lunatic? If the husband does not give company for even a single night, which woman wouldn't go mad?" (Antharjanam 1976: 27). It is also mentioned that Branthicheriyamma used to provoke physical violence from Muthaphan, since she craves for the touch of her husband even in the form of beatings. Here what is depicted is the zenith of hopeless craving and desire resulting in a clear case of trauma and eccentricity. The ruinous battle between patriarchal Brahmin society and the female desires along with the subterranean gush of sexual revolt beneath brahminical asceticism are well reflected in Antharjanam's works.

Reflections of Desire as Instrumental Causes

In our lives, desires serve not only as objects of physical pleasure, leading to an outcome, but also serve as instrumental causes such as education and intellectual stimulation leading to self-expression. In a community which considered education as a luxury, and not a necessity for woman, Thethikutti and Thankam were considered as rebels for their interest in formal education. In a letter Thethikutti sends to her brother, she describes her predicament thus:

My heart is melting, there isn't a letter to read, not a single person to speak to, a frozen life. He doesn't understand anything brother. He is a deity, not a man. You taught me the stories of men, and married me off to a deity. How could we ever be compatible? I read your speeches and articles. Thankam brings them to me. If it wasn't for her, I would have committed suicide long back (Antharjanam 1976: 32).

Thankam, who is being persuaded to be married off by her parents at a tender age, retaliates. She is firm while she exposes her desires and ambitions in front of her mother and neighbours. Later on, Thankam even goes on to conduct a hunger strike in her family until her request to be sent to college is agreed upon. "I will study. I will study to the best of my abilities and succeed. I will get a dignified job and look after the family" (Antharjanam 37). This is a radical statement coming from a teenager in a *Namboothiri* family. Her mother almost faints after listening to this declaration. However, Thankam's desire is not merely a wish and a wanting, but one for which she takes responsibility and initiates agency. She even swears that she would not marry until she gets a job.

The complexity of human desires is such that one desire leads to another, and ultimately, it becomes the accumulated agency behind several actions. The Hindu households in Kerala considered maternity of a woman as her ultimate purpose of life. A woman is given very little importance if she fails to conceive, and is looked down upon. The desire to become a mother was etched in Thethi's heart at a very

young age, when her brother explains to her the purity of mother Mary. She thinks, “Such a nice mother. So highly dignified. I also want to be a mother of this sort” (Agnisakshi: 98).

However, the social restrictions were such that the mothers were not allowed to show great affection or attachment to their children either. Devaki Nilayangode, a contemporary writer from the Namboothiri society remarks: “In fact, those days, it was wrong to give special attention to one’s children. Even mothers referred to their own children as the nephews or nieces of so and so.” (Cf. “Antharjanam Remembers”). In “*Agnisakshi*”, Thankam remembers that Thethikutti used to be thirsty for motherhood. Thethi once says to Thankam:

I don’t think I will ever deliver a child Thankam. There is no chance that I will. But your child should be mine too. If it is a girl, you should name her after me. If not, the grand-daughter (Antharjanam 1976: 61).

Thethikutti’s desire to become a mother is such that she makes her friend promise that her daughter will be named after Thethi. Her husband who is unable to oblige her wish to become a mother deepens her sorrow. On the other hand, Thankam mentions that she had very little wish to get married or have children, which implies that not all women would have desired maternity even in those days.

The desire for freedom and change was one that women who had the privilege of literacy and education cultivated. Thethi, whose life was confined to the four walls of her husband’s “illam”, had a deep desire for propagating emancipation for women. She says:

I wish I was a man. If I were a man, I would give freedom not only to my wife, but to all women. I would’ve died for the freedom of people and the country (Antharjanam 1976: 30).

This desire must have emerged in Thethi due to her upbringing under her brother who was a social reformer. Very few women in the *Namboothiri* society could think likewise, since they were mostly under a false consciousness which stated that it was their duty and responsibility as a woman to succumb to male dominance and restrict their own freedom. When Thethi joins the freedom struggle, she elevates herself into an agential feminine. However, when she meets Thankam after she becomes an ascetic, she is taken back to the times she spent in the illam bringing back the desire and instinct of maternity. This is indicated in her expressing her pleasure when called “mother” by Thankam’s son. The concept of deformed desires helps in the analysis of such desires wherein a woman uses her own autonomy to give up her autonomous choices. Desires also are motivational states (Wall 2009) in that they develop as instrumental causes for self-expression.

Desire and Its Agency

Thankam who is one among the very few characters who shows the courage to exercise her agency and follow her desires from a young age finally decides to follow her father’s wishes without questioning it. It is not by a mere subjugation that

she succumbs to the patriarchal wishes of her father. Even in such a repressive situation, Thankam engages in thoughtful analysis, weighs options and comes to an informed choice. She engages her own autonomy to give away acts of her agency and succumbs to her father's wishes. It needs to be noted that after her father's death, Thankam is taken over by remorse and does not complete the education for which she fought rigorously. And there we see a disintegration of the agency she supposedly engaged with in the beginning. She also obliges to the marriage alliance the family chooses for her, with little objection. One might conjecture here that in the case of Thankam, there is a constant conflict between desires, choices and her agentive actions. The factors which may cause the conflict, in this case, are not merely the death of her father (which accelerates guilt) but also the constant yearning for his approval and social sanction.

Devaki Nilayamgode comments: "I had many losses at that time, but I grew my heart. At that time I was very satisfied that I could at least read the Malayalam alphabet" (Cf: Nilayamgode, "Antharjanam Remembers"). A woman trying to justify her fate by comparing it to the less privileged can be seen here. Lalithambika Antharjanam's Thethikutti, on the other hand, stuck in Manampalli illam with nothing to stimulate her political intellect mentions to Thankam that the only books available in the illam are *Ramayana* and *Sheelavathi*, the latter being the story of a chaste and dutiful wife. These books reinforce the concepts of chastity (*pa-tivrathya*), of considering oneself to be completely devoted to one's husband and his family.

Thethikutti who was a woman with a fire for freedom and emancipation, however, was not stopped from her endeavours. She leaves the illam later on and joins the struggle for freedom. While Thankam meets Thethi later in life by when she had accepted asceticism, Thethi speaks about the wishes that she had, which were never fulfilled. She expresses how she desired to reform the community and build a new world. She regrets that she had to digress midway, and her hopes remained unfulfilled. She sighs, "I wished to die as a martyr. It didn't happen. Well, which one of my desires has ever been satisfied?" (Antharjanam 1976: 88).

The deep remorse in her words might be considered as an implicit accusation on the society, which in its treatment of women showed little mercy. The societal influences on women and her desires seem interwoven, and Thethikutti while she was giving away a speech, as a social reformer, reflects:

I am not a representative of a particular religion, caste or community. I am the representative of the women class, who had been suppressed and sabotaged since centuries. You can either bless or curse the truth that is now unveiled before you. But remember that our bundle of sorrow is the product of your deeds (Antharjanam 1976: 51).

This statement implies how women themselves are capable of seeing the contribution of society to their plight. However, very few dared to voice their opinions against such injustice. This could be due to the pressure from the community, which sharply responds to such deviant tendencies by out-casting them. While Thethi's brother joins the reform movement, her father-in-law commands that she should forget her brother and family: "You can forget the family that you

were born into; if you set your foot there you shall not step into this house again” (Antharjanam 1976: 34).

While Thankam and her mother try to bring Thethi back into her husband’s house, Thethi’s mother-in-law takes an adamant stand. She dictates that Thethi will not be allowed to enter the house and, if Thethi did so, then she herself would leave it. Such is the psychological opposition to individuality and agency for a woman, where few other women also join in its propagation. It can be seen that the mother-in-law’s words are considered final in this case, and she is provided the agency to exercise it. However, it has to be noted that this is the case only because the mother-in-law here tries to uphold the values of the patriarchal society without even remotely questioning it.

There are also other characters like Madhavi Varasyaar, the first wife of Muthaphan, who succeeds in ruling over her husband. This again is attributed to her beauty and seductive skills, which is not a possibility for all other women belonging to the community, especially since *Namboothiri* men had the privilege of marrying as many women as they wished, which again reduced the possibilities of fulfilling the very basic desires of affiliation or rights over one’s husband. Antharjanam, in her short story “*Prathikara Devatha*”, writes:

Aren’t these *Namboothiri* houses a kind of prison? Which one is better than the other? Although my father was no more, all my five mothers were alive. My brother was in search of a wife in the place of his fourth wife who had died recently. Two of my elder sisters were living with us as widows. A third sister had turned mad due to her *Namboothiri*’s torture and was wandering about. My two younger sisters who had passed marriageable age remained at home as a burden to the family and sorrow to my mother. I too joined this crowd—from the frying pan into the burning fire (Antharjanam 1966: 12).

What is at the root of the submission and frustration of these women characters? Jane Flax gives a feminist account of subjectivity (Flax 1987) through her clinical experience which suggests that women repress aspects of the self, concerning autonomy, aggression, ambition, mastery and sexuality because of which they are victimised by counterproductive outlets such as self-hatred and attraction to self-destructive relationships.

Representing Self and the Other

The plight of these women surpasses the imaginable; however, they were trained to accept these harsh realities as a way of life and adapt to it. The suppressions of desires in these women either led to lifelong frustration or eccentricity. The reform movements had little effect in the domestic lives of these women, who were the victims of a merciless patriarchal set-up. Authors like Lalithambika Antharjanam, who was also a social reformer of her times, used their pens as swords to fight against the malpractices in her community. Throughout “*Agnisakshi*”, the author’s consciousness has been working in constant company with the characterisation and the autobiographical elements in the novelette are easily recognisable to a

close reader.⁵ There is a fusion of the author's experiences and outlook in the character formation which manifests itself throughout the work. "The goals, wishes, motives, values, and emotions should be studied in relation to the self (self-representation), not subsumed within it." (Fridhandler and Tunis 1992: 38).

Antharjanam was born in *kottavattathillam*, a traditional *Namboothiri* family in Kerala. She was one among the most privileged women in her community. She was blessed with progressive-minded parents and a liberal atmosphere at home. Though her family background was well beyond satisfactory compared to that of other women in her community, Antharjanam was quick in realising the problems faced by them. After marriage, while she was in her husband's home, she came in close contact with these maladies. "When marriage transplanted her from the free and intellectually stimulating atmosphere of her own house into the closed custom-ridden set-up of a *Namboothiri* family in her husband's house, the first acquaintance with the 'life in the corridors of darkness' shocked her, although she had learned a great deal about the sufferings of her compeers. In her own home she had never been exposed to them, blessed with a generous father." (James 1996: 168).

Her predicament is similar to that of Thethikutti, who is bought up in a liberal atmosphere under her reformist brother and feels suffocated inside the conservative walls of her husband's house. When she realised the pain of the helpless victims leading pathetic lives chained with religious and social customs and taboos, Antharjanam took up writing as a vent to express these emotions which flowed into her. The inherent confusions of taking a firm stand against a community and its customs that were so closely related to her, and the oppositions she had to suffer are all manifested in one way or another in her works.

While Thankam gives a novel to Unni and asks him to pass it on to her wife Thethi, she explains about the novel to Unni. She says that "some people don't understand just by seeing, some others will not understand even after listening. They need to experience it. This is the story of the people who have experienced it" (Antharjanam 1976: 24).

It is clear that Antharjanam's life and her experiences have added greatly, both consciously and unconsciously to the novel's plot and characterisation. Her desires for social emancipation and reforming are seen in Thethi's character, and numerous such parallels can be drawn likewise. While the plot in "*Agnisakshi*" is set in the age of independence struggle in the nation, which also saw multiple social reform movements in Kerala, their effect on women has been tremendous. The ways in which women writers including Antharjanam amalgamated these voices are noteworthy.

If there are two voices, then, for the woman writer confronting the masculine hierarchies of her world and the injustices of colonialism, these voices rather than being split as analysis might have it along the lines of dual imposition, sexism and colonialism are found in a longing for a self-enclosed feminine, sanctified by ritual and tradition and another desire, fierce turbulent, yearning apart the skin of things, as they are (Ramakrishnan 2000: 355).

⁵ As far as the self-representation of the author is concerned, she emerged as a successful author even while she was surrounded by the walls of brahminical patriarchy. The scope of this paper does not involve an analysis of the author's self and desires, but is limited to the analysis of the same in the author's characters.

Conclusion

The psycho-social atmosphere of the times has greatly influenced the formation of desires of women, and this is true specifically regarding the *Antharjanam* in the *Namboothiri* community in Kerala, where education transforms their attitudes on the one hand and tradition binds them on another. The desires of these woman are left unsatisfied most often than not, and sometimes, it even leads to the formation of deformed desires or desires as instrumental causes. Lalithambika Antharjanam, who belongs to the same community, represents the plight of these women with commendable clarity. Since she is exposed to these challenges as a primary participant, her writings reflect her experiential knowledge. The representation of self is interwoven with the narrative in such a way that the novelette provides the reader with a feeling of reading an autobiography.

A striking connection between the repressed desires of the author as well as the characters, and its manifestation through self-representation in “*Agnisakshi*” is identified in this paper to a limited extent. One major limitation of this paper is that the desires of male characters or the thought process that shapes and sustains the rigid patriarchal society are not examined. The influence of psycho-social factors playing a vital role in the formation of desires in woman, its repercussions when left unsatisfied and its manifestations through self-representation is analysed with the help of several characters. Several of the female characters in their younger age show a tendency to dream and cherish different desires. These desires were slightly influenced by the social and religious customs of their societies. But, through the process of socialisation, customs and taboos were imbibed by every individual drastically influencing the formation of desires. Psychologically, since one’s desires invoke the course of action and the choices one makes in life, the impact upon the formation of desires needs to be studied from a larger psycho-social and political perspective.

The *Namboothiri* society is a priestly class which gives great importance to its religious sanctions and pious ways of life. There is greater rigidity in meticulously following each of its customs and taboos. Attempts to question these were considered blasphemous. The *Namboothiri* women, who were expected to nourish the values of selflessness and sacrifice, moulded their desires to suit the community’s expectations. This resulted in the formation of deformed desires which is reflected in different characters throughout Antharjanam’s writings. The self-representations in “*Agnisakshi*” carry evidences to the complex nature of human agency, through the reflective narratives of the formation and realisation of desires of the women of its times.

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