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**Tracing the Voice of the Silenced: A Quest through the Select
Women Autobiographies in Malayalam**

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Silence is a word impregnated with various connotations. Sometimes silence is loud and powerful. It is something which is destructive and constructive at the same time. Being silenced and being silent are two distinctive concepts; the latter signifying the absence of authority. When the silenced decides to break the silence, it brings them back the authority and power and will enable them to gradually move towards the mainstream society. Autobiography gained importance as one of the tools which is used by the silenced to break their silence.

Even though autobiographies garnered critical attention in the twentieth century, the life narratives of women were ignored and their lives were not considered worthy to be narrated. With the advent of feminism, structuralism and post structuralism, the purview of the genre expanded to accommodate the subjects like 'women', who were pushed away from mainstream stream society and were forced to remain silent throughout their lives.

This paper discusses the types and contexts of silence as represented in the autobiographies written by three women belonging to the Malayalee public sphere. Autobiographies chosen for the study are the autobiographies of three women from Kerala- B Kalyani Amma, Lalithambika Antharjanam and Nalini jamila (belonging to three different periods) which are analysed with a feminist perspective and examined to highlight the ways in which they used the autobiographical medium to break their silence and voice their journey towards empowerment. Furthermore, the paper also endeavours to trace out the influence of the socio-political situation of the time, during the course of their journey.

In his book *Speaking and language*, Paul Goodman talks about nine types of silences. Dumb silence- silence when you don't have to say anything because you don't care, Sober Silence- just listening to a conversation and not being a part of it, Noisy silence- your staunch judgement for a person prevents you from hearing what is being said, Baffled silence- silent because you are confused, Musical silence- you are absorbed in your activity and feels that the world around you is silent, Peaceful Silence –peaceful accord with other persons or communion with cosmos, Fertile silence- silence of awareness, Alive silence- silence of alert perception, and silence of Listening. Apart from this there are many other classifications of silence in terms of its function, duration, impact etc. Authorial silence is another type which we come across while analyzing literary works especially Autobiographies .Authorial silence is the deliberate refusal of author to speak directly in the text.



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Feminist critics have also written on the different types of silences and the ways in which it can be read and interpreted. For instance, Tillie Oslen writes about ‘unnatural silences’, ‘hidden silences’, ‘censorship silences’ etc. In her book *One Out Of Twelve* she laments on the disparity in the ratio of successful women writers to male writers. Oslen’s observations testify the fact that there is a tendency to make the women writers being silenced or ignored. Elaine Showalter also puts forth the view that women are not being given access to the “full resources of language”, which compels them to retreat into silence or to use euphemisms. Another writer Cheryll Glenn in her work *Rhetoric Retold: Regendering the Tradition from Antiquity through the Renaissance* discusses silence and its impact on social settings as well as gender. According to her,

Silence is perhaps the most undervalued and under-understood traditionally feminine rhetorical site. Silence has long been an unexamined trope of oppression, with “speaking out” being the signal of liberation, especially given the Western tendency to valorize speech and language. But sometimes women choose the place of silence (175-176).

Autobiography is one genre which gives space for women to break their silence and a site to explore the different implications of silence. Women autobiographies, in any language, have always focused on the issues which played a pivotal role in liberating them from patriarchy and over all change in gender equations. In autobiographies written by Malayalee women also, one can observe along with the autobiographers’ quest towards Self-esteem and individuality, the plight of women in the society they belong to.

The autobiography of B.Kalyani Amma is considered to be the first autobiography in Malayalam. Her work *Oru Vyazhavatta Smaranakal* (1916) (*Memoirs of a Lunar year*) is focused on the portrayal of the life of her husband Swadesabhmani Ramakrishna Pillai (He was a nationalist writer, and an activist and was the editor of the newspaper “swadeshabhmani” which he used as a medium to fight against the corruptions in the society. He was exiled from his hometown for criticizing the diwan and maharaja of Travancore) whereas her *Ormayil Ninnu* (*From the memory*) (1964) is an exploration into her own inner self. The latter work implicitly explicates how she garnered the strength to survive the trials and tribulations of her life. It vividly portrays the different stages of her life- as a daughter, as a wife, as a mother, as a teacher, as an author and how she integrated all these roles and created her own identity as a woman.

Kalyani Amma was born into a poor traditional Nair (upper caste family) and at a time when



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women's voice was not supposed to cross the four walls of the house. Despite that, she became the first graduate in her family. It was not at all an easy task for a girl to go out of the house for education, in a society which considered marriage to be the most pivotal thing to happen in a girl's life. The autobiography depicts the obstacles she had to face during her studies. She was the only girl in her class. She was often left out; her thoughts were never welcomed by her classmates. At the same time, her exposure to various literary, social and cultural groups helped her to channelize her thoughts and develop a perspective of her own.

Her autobiography unveils the societal conditions her time. It was a time when superstitions, untouchability, casteism etc were prevalent in the traditional upper caste families. Non-hindu and lower caste people were not allowed to enter the hindu houses. Child marriage was a part of their tradition. She recollects those unnecessary celebrations and rituals shattered the financial stability of many families. She observes that people were ready to spend huge sums to do poojas, but were not ready to buy a newspaper or a book. In the book she remembers that she was very much disappointed with the lack of scientific temperament even among the teachers. She was silenced whenever she questioned their beliefs in superstitions and other unscientific culture. She was even forced to remain silent and watch the superstitious rituals in her own family.

This life narrative illustrates how the struggles of the life train a person to emerge as a warrior. Her marriage, subsequent child births, her husband's exile, poverty etc prompted her to break the shell given by the society and emerge as an empowered woman who became the pillar of her family. When she realised that her husband wouldn't be able to provide for the family, she took up the job as a teacher and took care of the needs. Apart from her profession as a teacher, she has made her footprints in the literary scenario as well. The autobiography also tells us about her literary ventures. She had written many articles under the pseudonym 'mathruhriday. It also reveals about the books which had remained unpublished due to unfavourable situations.' She has used autobiography as a medium to give voice to all these untold stories of her life.

As the life story of a woman who had fallen prey to the political agenda and consequently to the trials of the life and her efforts to come out of it, her autobiography is truly inspirational. This autobiography had been written at a time when feminism as movement as was nowhere around the nation. Therefore we can consider it as the expression of the individuality of a woman with determination and self esteem and



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who was not ready to surrender herself before the test of fate.

The next autobiography chosen for the study is Lalith Ambika Antharjanam's *Atmakathakoruumugam (Preface to Autobiography)*. Lalithambika Antharjanam was born in to a Brahmin family. 'Antharjanam' means people who have to stay inside the house. It is a title given to women belonging to the Namboodiri caste (uppercaste). It was a time when the community was from top to the bottom, patriarchal. Women were not allowed to go out from their homes, not been able to meet their own father and brother once they grew up. They had to spend the entire life time in the shadow of "Marakkuda (an umbrella made with the leaf of palm tree)." If anyone of the female members were alleged to have any illegitimate relation with anyone, the community would conduct "smarthavichaaram" and disown the woman. It was the right of the lower caste men to take possession of these kinds of women and was entitled to do anything to them, even prostitution. The "smarthavichaaram" was conducted by the elite members of the community, and the arguments of the defendants were often or always neglected. The rules of the community were based on Bhargava Smriti and Sankara Smriti, which were crueler than Manu Smriti in its pro-patriarchal stand.

Lalith Ambika Antharjanam was born in the community at a time where there was a great unrest against these inequalities. Lalith Ambika Antharjanam took courage from ideals of Gandhi and other reformers like V T Bhattathiripat *et al.* She had entered the Malayalam Literary gallery at time when it was predominantly male dominated and obtained a permanent position in it. Her works exposed the plight of Namboothiri women who were forced to remain silent throughout their life. In her autobiography also, she questions the stand of the society which discriminates women. It is a collection of incidents happened in her life.

The author talks about many women members who suffered during that period. She mentions "Kuriyedathu Thathri" and also her own family members. One of the women members of her family helped her family to overcome the difficulties when some of the elder members died unexpectedly. She looked after her little brothers and got back the lost prestige of the family. When the brothers grew up and got married, there began unrest. Their wives complained about the elder sister to their husbands due to jealousy. Then the brothers questioned the elder sister and openly told that since she is a woman, she has no right in the property. Out of anger she replied that then she will leave the home, but contrary to her expectation, her brothers asked her to go. She went out of the home hoping that they will call back, but they didn't. Once she



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crossed the gate, they closed it. At night, as she could not go anywhere, she returned and called them. The servant in the family replied that since she left the home without accompanying any maid, she would be an outcaste and so they would not take her back. She had to leave the place and after that nobody has heard of her.

Another instance she narrates is that of a young girl who married to an old man. As per Brahmin rules at that time, the married woman can enter her husband's room only on the fourth day of the marriage. On the third day, this girl's husband died. She was forced to have the fourth day night's ceremony with the husband with an image of him made in grass. The rest of her life, she had to remain as a widow. Witnessing the plight and predicament of the women in her own family, she realised the intense discriminatory rituals prevalent in the Namboothiri community and her autobiography gives us glimpses of that.

The last work in the corpus of study is Nalini Jameela's *Oru LaingikaThozhilaliyude Aathmakadha*. It was translated into English by Devika as an *Autobiography of a Sex worker*. This autobiography is a powerful narration of patriarchal oppression faced by sex workers through her own experience. The book focuses on the trials and tribulations of women as sex worker, wife and a mother. The book unveils the way in which a woman without a husband is still looked down upon and treated by our society. She also unravels the complexities of the sexwork industry. She deliberately uses the term 'sex worker' instead of 'prostitute' because, for her, it was a profession that she has chosen to win her daily bread. She gives sex work all the dignities of a profession.

Nalini was born into a not so affluent family where her mother was always given a lesser place. The head of the house was whom she called 'Valyamma'. The plight of her mother in the house deeply engraved in her mind that pride and dignity comes only with money. She started going to work at an age of nine. She had to face many bad experiences and later was thrown out of her own house because she supported her brother's marriage. She was given shelter by a person whom she had to marry later because of societal pressure. Her husband died after three years leaving her with two children. She started sex work to take care of her children. She talks about her clients, broker, etc in detail through her autobiography. She got married twice after that. According to her, sex workers are free compared to other women in four ways - they don't have to cook and wait for a husband, they don't have to wash his dirty clothes, they don't have to ask for our husband's permission to raise kids as they deem fit, they don't have to run after their husbands claiming rights to their property to raise their kids. Later on she started associating with 'Jwalamukhi' an organization



that worked for the welfare and rights of sex workers.

Her autobiography gives insights into the hypocrisy of male psyche and how it manipulates and functions. Her determination and enunciation to continue with sex work and giving the choice to her daughter and accepting her will is a perfect example of emancipation and free expression of her opinions. She is unapologetic of her life and the way she deals with it.

A close reading of the above-mentioned autobiographies will reveal that there are different manifestations of silence. One type of silence that one can observe in the selected texts is Authorial Silence. There are instances, especially in the autobiography of B. Kalyani Amma and Lalithambika Antharjanam, of unspoken communication between the narrator and the reader without narrator's conscious knowledge.

In Kalyani Amma's *Memoirs of a Lunar year*, she remains silent about her own Self, rather the focus is given to her husband and their bondage. Even though she could voice her thoughts and feelings unlike the other women of her age, there is a deliberate silence that she keeps, which can be interpreted as the silence of acceptance. If we can interpret silence as absence of voice/something, then she uses autobiography to reveal how some of her works remained silent /absent from the literary scenario. She maintains an authorial silence regarding her daughter's marriage at the age of 15. Silence as a tool is not limited to the authors' representations of certain characters as being silent, but it is also evident in what the authors decide to omit or conceal in the narratives. Many a times, we can observe baffled silence, or silence of confusion. However, Kalyani Amma has chosen autobiographical medium to voice her journey as an independent working woman who donned her role as a daughter, wife and mother satisfactorily. Later on, her daughter published an epilogue to her autobiography which revealed many things which Kalyani Amma chose not to reveal.

In Lalithambika Antharjanam's Autobiography also silence can be read and interpreted. Authorial silence involves among others in her decision to narrate her own story from a Third person point of view, instead of her directly intruding with her authorial voice in the narrative. Despite being born into a Namboodiri family, she got all the privileges which the other girls of community couldn't even dream of. But the silence entered her life for the first time, when she attained puberty. That day she observed that there was dead silence everywhere, the reason for which she understood in a few days. A girl after puberty, had a silent and invisible existence in the Namboodiri house hold. So, the silence she first on served was an alert



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silence of awareness. Lalith Ambika was able to voice the silence imposed upon the Namboothiri women. Her work unravels the ways in which the women of her time were being silenced.

When it comes to Nalini Jameela, she is the representative of a group who were being silenced by the mainstream society. It was a kind of noisy silence as the strong judgements against them prevents the society to listen anything about them. Nalini Jamila's autobiography was an attempt to break that noisy silence. The autobiography is a testimony to the hypocrisy prevalent in the society. The silence in her autobiography connotes shame –the silence maintained because they are ashamed to support something which is a social taboo. Sometimes silence is the result of helplessness- Nalini's mothers silence represents helplessness. More than anything one can read the existence of dumb silence of society throughout her autobiography.

The reading of the three autobiographies reveals the different types of silences and the context of silences during their times. Another point that we can observe is though these women were able to break the silence prevalent in their community, the academia, was more interested in the reading of the first two autobiographies. One can observe an academic silence towards the autobiography of Nalini Jamila during the initial years. Her book became popular as it was controversial. However, there was an academic silence as well as censorship silence towards the autobiography of a sex-worker, which again makes obvious the inherent hypocrisy of the society.



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