

Review

Re Reading Namboodiri Ideology: An analysis of Devaki Nilayamgode's *Antharjanam*

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India is a country which is deeply rooted in Caste system. Majority of the people are followers of Hinduism. Though India claims of the concept of 'Unity in diversity', the disparity that divides each caste into multifarious categories is very much part of the country especially in Kerala, the southernmost state of India. *Antharjanam* is a work written by an upper caste Hindu woman who belongs to the caste called 'Namboodiri'. The work is a documentation of Namboodiri culture, claims Devaki Nilayamgode, who does so for the upcoming generations of Kerala. This paper "Re Reading Namboodiri Ideology: An analysis of Devaki Nilayamgode's *Antharjanam*" attempts at an analysis of Devaki Nilayamgode's *Antharjanam* using "Althusser's Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus". Ideology is the conviction that what people accept as being natural is in fact an illusory reality constructed in order to mask the real structures of power that exists in a society. The argument of the paper is that Nilayamgode tactfully plays the role of an Agency and wants to maintain for the Namboodiris a significant position in society which she feels that her caste has lost. Sensing that the aura of superiority their class of people enjoyed has slowly begun to lose its significance in the present scenario, the need to preserve her culture as the ultimate becomes quite pressing. In short the paper aims at presenting the idea that *Antharjanam* is a conscious, deliberate and compulsive sketching of the Namboodiri culture as privileged.

Keywords: Kerala, class structure, class consciousness, ideology, culture, privileged

INTRODUCTION

India is a land of diverse cultures with almost thirty states and about a hundred and more languages. Kerala is the southernmost state of India. Majority of the population in Kerala are followers of Hinduism. Kerala is a state which possesses a rich cultural heritage. It follows the patriarchal system where women were sidelined. As women were confined to the narrow spaces of their

homes, they did not have the freedom to read, write or think beyond the walls of their existence. Hence there was no contribution to the field of literature till a very late period. It was the nineteenth century that witnessed a spirit in documenting one's own life. This so happened in most of the Indian languages. Some of the well known autobiographies from Kerala include the autobiography of

Visakam Thirunal, B.Kalyani Amma's *Vyazhavatta Smarnakal* and Lalithambika Antharjanam's *Athmakadhaiku Oramukham*. However it was the twentieth century that saw the emergence of women's writing which was sidelined till then. Women were confined within the domains of family and never had the freedom to exhibit any kind of ideas or emotions of their own. Women were marginalized in the social, political and literary scenario. The first of its kind, the autobiographies, was B. Kalyani Amma's *Vyazhavatta Smarnakal* in which she recounts the memories of her husband. However, today there are many women writers who have created their own space through their works. This paper attempts at an analysis of Devaki Nilayamgode's *Antharjanam* using "Althusser's Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus" (1972). It shows how existing class structure runs along the lines of paradigmatic structure of dominant thinking. Nilayamgode paints the lives of the Namboodiri women of Kerala, commonly known as *antharjanams*. Upon the persistent insistence of her grandson, Tathagatan, she takes up writing at the age of seventy-five. *Nashtabodhangalillathe* and *Yaathra* are some of her works. She has four books to her credit though she began to write late in life. The scope of this work is immense as it contributes to the documentation of the culture of Kerala and hence can be analysed as a work of Cultural Studies. It can also be interpreted from a feminist point of view. However, this paper will be read along the lines of class structure. The aim of the paper is to analyse the text through the perspective of class consciousness.

In *Antharjanam*, Nilayamgode recounts the Namboodiri life and culture by sketching the beliefs, practices and rituals in their community. In many ways her experience crosses cultural spaces even though Nilayamgode claims that her writing is an attempt to project the predicament of universal suffering of women, especially the *antharjanams*. However an analysis of the *Antharjanam*, reveals that Nilayamgode's work is a deliberate attempt of a glorifying image of herself and her class of people —the Namboodiris.

The Namboodiris held a dominant position in Kerala. They were the land owning aristocracy as well as the religious elite. In his work *Social Revolution in a Kerala Village*, A. Aiyappan (1965) designates the above mentioned sources of power as theocratic feudalism. He goes on to state that the Namboodiris commanded greater resources than any other section of society. It was not only the Namboodiri men who enjoyed privileges, but also the Namboodiri women. The words of Radhika P Menon, one of the translators of *Antharjanam*, are a fine instance of the halo which reverberate the superior position of the Namboodiri women in the matrix of domination:

Antharjanams have always been a source of

great fascination in popular imagination in Kerala...they were living exotica. Cocooned in luxury, shielded from public view, always escorted by an entourage of obsequious attendants and endlessly enjoying a hedonistic life full of festivals and elaborate feasts.(xii)

These festivals and exotica which the Namboodiri women enjoyed highlight the superiority they relished. Devaki Nilayamgode was born into a Namboodiri family – the Pakravoor *mana* in Malappuram district of Kerala. The Pakravoor *illam* is described as:

was very spacious... a *nataka shala* for staging performances like Kathakali... Each building had a big kitchen attached to it which we called the *oottuppara*... The *nataka shala* could serve meals to a thousand people at a time. One of the porticos was exclusively for Namboodiri's and they sat there to chew betel leaves... It was there that Namboodiri's assembled and swapped stories. So the building always echoed with loud conversations and laughter. Another portico was for estate managers... It took five to six estate managers to keep the accounts of the *illam* and collect rent from properties. (5-6)

This essay is an analysis to depict how the Namboodiris used the ideology of superior power structure to their advantage.

The understanding of a society's structure is essential as it functions on various ideologies. Ideology is a definite part of every structure. Ideology "is the system of the ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or a social group" (Althusser 149). Althusser makes use of the concept by Karl Marx that the structure of every society is based on two levels; "the politico-legal (law and State) and ideology (the different ideologies, religious, ethical" (Althusser 129) Althusser adds on to Marx's definition of the State Apparatus. According to him the State Apparatus is divided into "Repressive State Apparatus" – the Government, the Administration, the Army, the Police, the Courts, the Prisons and "Ideological State Apparatus" – religious, educational, family, legal, political, cultural (Althusser 136). Both the State Apparatuses function through repression and ideology. The Repressive State Apparatus predominantly makes use of repression and then ideology, whereas Ideological State Apparatus initially makes use of ideology and then repression. Although there were specific Repressive State Apparatuses used during that period, Nilayamgode does not highlight these incidents. But the Ideological State Apparatuses that helped form her ideology are analysed within this paper.

Ideological State Apparatus enforce gender roles. According to Althusser, "we are always already made

subjects before our births” (Althusser 166). Women are made to follow directions, obey rules, and accept authority. Women are the carriers of agency and voice of the male dominated society which is to be imparted to and ingrained on the psyche of the next generation. Nilayamgode describes her mother “as the efficient wife of the celebrated and powerful Pakravoor Krishnan Somyajippad...she was respected both within the family and amongst the townspeople” (9). Her Amma is the voice of agency that passes on the ideology to the next generation: “She did not give us, her daughters, any freedom because she believed that girls should not be encouraged to think and act independently” (10). The dominant ideology conditions an individual’s thought processes. Women act as agents of this thinking which forces a child to think in the ways approved by the State. Here, the State stands for the accepted models of supremacy governed by the patriarchal male dominated society in which women play marginalized roles. Thus, by playing the role of an agent, women prepare children for roles they shall later assume as adults. Kunhikuttyamma, a Kaikottikali instructor, who taught Nilayamgode dance, was a Nair woman. Nair women were inferior in caste to the Namboodiris. Nilayamgode pictures Kunhikuttyamma as a beautiful woman who would narrate stories and speak of strong women. This Nair woman, Kunhikuttyamma, a woman of a class lower than the Namboodiris was spoken of as a negative influence by Nilayamgode’s mother:

Kunhikuttyamma regaled us with songs and stories of Unniarcha and Kungi. The moral was that women should never consider themselves inferior to men, but must learn to stand up for themselves like Unniarcha did. We marvelled at these tales of courage, but Amma disapproved of them. She took us aside and advised us, She may sing and dance well, but her comments are unwarranted and not worthy of emulation. (53)

Kunhikuttyamma is thus the ‘bad’ subject – a deviant who does not follow the rules of ideology and interpellation. Her own mother on the other hand who is the ‘good’ subjects according to the dominant discourse advises her daughter to ignore her remarks. The inferior class of Kunhikuttyamma is another deciding factor in her mother’s brushing her off as “not worthy of emulation.” By being disciplined thus, a child’s sense of individuality and pursuit of self interest decreases. Thus by documenting these aspects in her work and preserving these concepts of class through her writing, Nilayamgode also functions as an agency through her narrative.

The State Apparatus puts forth the “ideology of the ruling class” and the conditions of the “relations of exploitation” (Althusser 142). According to Althusser the superstructure can only be characterized from the point

of view of the infrastructure. In short, Ideology is the conviction that what people accept as being natural is in fact an illusory reality constructed in order to mask the real structures of power that exists in a society. A fine instance of this is the very title of the work which helps you anticipate a journey through the never attainable elitist class of women in Kerala. Throughout *Antharjanam*, the lives of the women in the Namboodiri household are unveiled. However, the notion of subjugation is relegated to the backdrop in the persistent urge of creating a self conscious image of preserving an elitist and glorified culture. In comparison to the *Irikkannamma* and other working class denoted, the Namboodiri women enjoyed a privileged position in society. Nilayamgode never presents herself or other Namboodiri women as being victims or subjugated individuals – “Like all the children of Pakravoor Illam, I was raised by *irikkannmmas*... A few Nair women, six or seven, lived in the illam to look after us... there were separate groups of women to look after the children of each *antharjanam*.” (13) The *antharjanams* were assisted by maids. “Each had a chaperone who led the way, shouting ‘Yaa... hey... yaa... hey...’. These sounds were meant to alert unwary passers-by belonging to lower castes, who could then move out of the way so as not to cause the *antharjanams* any pollution.” (7) The services of the women who belonged to the Veluthedath family “generally addressed in short as *veluthedath ullaval*’ were as invaluable to the *antharjanam* as the *irikkannmmas* (24). Rather, through a rosy portrayal of the women of her community in contrast to the plight of Nair women, servants, Nilayamgode throws light on the privilege that her class of women enjoyed thereby assimilating herself as a superior subject of the state. Hence, class consciousness and class pride are all evident throughout the work.

Ideology works in a rather complex way. Even though “an ideology always exists in apparatuses, and its practice or practices”, it is not dogmatically imposed on individuals without their consent (Althusser 156). On the contrary, individuals freely accept to live within a particular ideology, even if “their relation to the conditions of existence is an imaginary relation to real relations” (Althusser 156). The strict adherence to a set of rules in the guise of beliefs and rituals best describes how ideology functions. not only were these restrictions made as far as rituals were concerned, but also in the preparation of food. The Namboodiri’s would never have food made by people belonging to another community. “Pakaravoor was a prosperous household, two Namboodiri’s were engaged to prepare food and a Tamil Brahmin was employed solely to make snacks. In those days, Namboodiri’s did not eat rice cooked by Tamil Brahmins” (5). The maids who worked for them also had to face a lot of discrimination. For instance, “there was a special room in the illam called *chottara* to store their

containers” as brushing accidentally would make them polluted (16). The ritual bath was the most significant of the Namboodiri practices. It was considered the corrective for all defilement—whether it was the news of death, or merely a visit to the house of death. Ritual baths following a death was also quite significant. It is quite surprising when Nilayamgode pens down the unseen instances like narrating the astonishing story of how her husband’s father was given a bath before he died. She recounts even minutest of details and adds on as to how vividly everyone remembers it. Things brushed off aside usually as insignificant gains larger proportions only to add on to it as something significant thereby portraying how different their caste is in comparison to the rest. Moreover, “if the vessels washed and stacked in the kitchen the previous night by the *irikkanamma* were found inadequately cleaned another bath became imperative” (14). Even if they accidentally brushed against the servant’s clothes, a bath was the only remedy as “it was believed that a Nair woman’s touch polluted any garment made of cloth. Any such material would have to be discarded”(15).

The *Irikkannamma*’s daughters were cleverly tricked into working in order to ensure that the surroundings were kept clean:

... if someone who had not had a bath, or a lower-caste Shudra who was washing clothes, happened to splash some water on them, the antharjanams were required to go for another dip in the tank. If they trod on some strands on the stone steps, yet another bath became unavoidable. They would, therefore, encourage the *irikkanamma*’s daughters to keep the area clean and the incentive offered was their assurance that the girls would be reborn as beautiful maidens if they did their bidding. (20)

This is an ideology- a masked one wherein the Namboodiri women carefully trick their maid’s daughters. The only objective these women have is to get their work done and so they make these servants work with the belief and desire that they are reborn as Namboodiri women.

Ideology works on the principle of “interpellation”, as the socially constructed reality is passed as “natural” even though it is a subjective distortion of the reality and the world (Althusser 163). Those who reject these notions of dominant discourse are considered as “bad” individuals who do not follow the “naturalization” and “the rules of the established order” (Althusser 127). Hence, there is a constant urge to be a part of this dominant thinking. Similarly, Devaki Nilayamgode who desires to be part of the “naturalization” makes this theme as a recurrent mode throughout her narrative. She does so by trying to assimilate with the mainstream and by being an

agent of the ruling class. “At a time when girls were barely educated, Amma could read the Puranas” (4). Books were nothing uncommon to Nilayamgode:

My brothers borrowed books from the library and secretly passed them on to us. The monthly rest was given to menstruating women. But touching books were a taboo. Thus to keep their readings uninterrupted they took the help of their servant’s daughters: Touching books was taboo during those days and we lacked courage to break the custom. But here, the servants’ daughters came to our aid. One of them sat in front of us and turned the pages. Thus, we succeeded in reading books without touching them. (32)

Right from a young age, thus the Namboodiri girls try to suit the servant’s daughters to their convenience and advantage, thereby indoctrinating and preparing the servant’s daughters with the roles they will have to play in the future. Hence, by accepting and putting forth rules of the dominant discourse she becomes a good subject of the state. Hence by following interpellation and mirror structure Nilayamgode tries to achieve the ideal. She positions women within the patriarchal discourse in order to frame them within the dominant ideology.

As ideology works through interpellation, an identity is constructed through a range of signs and codes. Nilayamgode, by establishing the lower caste as ugly and grotesque in comparison to “all the fair skinned” Namboodiri children, brings out the differences at various levels with a conscious attempt (44). On the other hand, she describes the lower caste thus:

Most of those who worked in the fields were Harijans. We therefore could not get a close look at them... sometimes when the women field hands strayed into our paths in their hurry to reach their destination, they would flee as if they had committed a crime... it was difficult too distinguish between a cherumi, a low-caste woman, a crow, and a buffalo. This was endorsed by the women in our family who also considered them less than human. (126-127)

Equating a woman of a lower caste to a crow and a buffalo, shows how the upper caste considered the female gender of the lower caste as a non entity, like a common animal or bird that could easily be ignored or cast away. These cultural codes become a part of the subjective psychology. So when an individual responds in an ideological way, she thinks that the opinions she expresses is wholly hers and ceases to recognize that they have come from the outside. Ideology “has no outside”, an individual never realizes that she is in an

ideology (Althusser 164). Consequently there is a link between an individual's thought processes, behaviour and cultural codes.

Hence, Nilayamgode creates for herself and her class an enviable place in society that has otherwise begun to dissolve. Through the voice of ideology carried forward by women, she aims at a deliberate image to chalk her culture as supreme. She employs strategies thereby depicting her class as the absolute: "Here, my brief autobiographical account comes to a close. The reason for it is obvious and simple—after this; there can be no autobiography which claims to be the first by an antharjanams or exclusively about us" (156). Sensing that this aura of superiority has slowly begun to lose its significance in the present scenario, the need to preserve her culture as the ultimate becomes quite pressing. In short, *Antharjanam* is a conscious, deliberate and compulsive sketching of the Namboodiri culture as privileged.

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