

Varsha K

Assistant Professor

Dept of English & Languages

Amrita School of Arts & Sciences, Kochi

Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham

India

vkpattola@gmail.com

ⁱWho gains in Matriliny? A Critical Observation on the Matriliny among the Nairs in Kerala

Abstract:

There have been a lot of debates still going on around the subject of matriliney and the status women had enjoyed in the system. While many of them, including Nair reformers, argue that women hadn't gained anything in particular in matriliney; Dr.K.Saradmoni and G.Arunima view matrilineal period as the golden age of Nair women and its abolition through a series of legislation as a well-planned patriarchal move. The sociologists and anthropologists, however, observe it as a byproduct of various socio-political and economic circumstances in the history. Through this paper I analyse the matrilineal past of Nair women based on Anita Nair's novel *Idris: the Keeper of the Light*.

Key words: Matriliny, Kerala, Nair Women

The matrilineal system in Kerala was developed around the 11th century, widely practiced until the initial decades of 19th c. Due to British legal system and Nair reform movements in the 19th c, many changes occurred in this system and finally, it got legally abolished in 1976 when Kerala government promulgated the Kerala Joint Hindu Family System Act. Some critics and social scientists in Kerala consider matriliney as the glorious past of Nair women. In Kerala matriliney existed not only in Nair caste but other religious and tribal groups as well. Concentrating on the dominant Nair caste and their matriliney had contributed to view Kerala predominantly a matrilineal society though it was not restricted to that one particular community. While matriliney was followed by many Hindu caste groups, some tribal, Muslim and Christian groups; the rest of Muslim, Christian and the Nambutiris followed the patrilineal system. Even within each caste and religious groups different norms and customs are followed which make it difficult to understand the family structure of Kerala. There have been a lot of debates still going on around the subject of matriliney and the status women had enjoyed in the system. While many of them, including Nair reformers, argue that women hadn't gained anything in particular in matriliney; Dr.K.Saradmoni and G.Arunima view matrilineal period as the golden age of Nair women and its abolition through a series of legislation as a well-planned patriarchal move. The

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Robin Jeffrey who had done an extensive study on matriliney is of the opinion that the greater freedom women enjoyed in matriliney enabled them to access salaried employment and in this way they were considered as the potential earning members the same way the men were. He says,

“matriliney created conditions in which some high status girls, in some parts of Kerala, learned to read and write, had more freedom of movement than most high status women of their time elsewhere in India, and some of these women went to work in salaried jobs (648).”

But Praveena Kodoth comments that only a quarter women who belong to privileged social background were employed and had access to public places(20). Saradamoni deals with three fundamental features of matriliney such as the tharavadu, the marriage system and the inheritance with the descent through the female line. She draws attention to the following points emphasized by K P Padmanabha Menon: simple and complex *tharavads*, depending on their composition; women forming the stock of descent and kinship; *tharavad* estates being held in trust for the support of the women and their descendants in the female line, with no individual partition; and control and management by the karanavan. Saradamoni had studied the matrilineal system in the Travancore region in Kerala and applies the same throughout the state. What she misses to point out that the status divisions among the Nair caste itself. There are many families among the Nairs who follow *makkathayam* or patrilineal system(58). As C J Fuller says it was in central Kerala- Cochin, Calicut and the rest of south Malabar- which had the typical pattern of matriliney which includes strong matrilineal descent groups, property groups as residential and common households constituted of matrilineal kin, duolocal residence with visiting marriage, the absence of institutionalized conjugal family, inter-caste hypergamy, and some non-fraternal polyandry. In respect of marriage, the following points are emphasized by Saradamoni.

“Women entered into sambandham with men of their own caste or castes above. It was a simple affair. Children belong to the mother's tharavad and had rights of maintenance there. Dissolution of sambandham was easy and was not looked down upon. Remarriage of divorcees or widows were not considered inauspicious, nor were they subjected to inhuman treatment as often happened in the upper caste of matrilineal India. Women continued to be the members of their natal tharavads throughout life, with rights of residence and maintenance there. A man was not considered legally responsible for protecting or maintaining his wife and children, although men doing that were not lacking (76).”

All these had created a derogatory attitude among the high caste patrilineal Hindus and people of other religions towards Nair sambandham. These caused embarrassment to Nair men with new education and exposed to western ideas and values. This hurt their masculinity, when women enjoy life long rights and lived with a sense of independence and self-worth. Thus, all these led to Nair reform movements and men became the protector and supporter of women and children, converting women as their dependent.

Matriliny, often confused with matriarchy, is almost on the verge of extinction in India in the present day. It has always been celebrated as the ideal institution which emancipates or empowers women often understood as the opposite to patrilineal and patriarchal societies. Many sociologists and social scientists tried to understand it from different points of view without any regard to time and space. There exist several myths about the institution of matriline. Almost all of them convinced that under matriline women enjoyed an equal or even more than equal status with men. Some quote the earlier writings on and continue to argue on that ground as if there has not been any change in this institution. Many of them cherish it as an ideal type to practice evading the tensions and variations within it. There have a lot of legislations been passed in support and against the existence of matriline. Still there are only a few studies which tried to understand matriline in a very critical perspective. According to Dr.Celine Augustine, author of *Matriline in Transition: A Comparative Analysis*:

Matriarchy is a hypothetical system of social organization in which familial and political authority is held by women. The real life type of social organization that most resembles the so called 'matriarchal' society is matrilineal social organization, in which the descent is traced through women. In such a society the household usually consists of the adult women and their in-marrying husbands. Authority over such a matrilineal household, however, is in the hands of a male, most commonly the oldest brother of the woman. In such a society, property and position are inherited matrilineally; the property being handed down from the mother to the daughter while the position and authority passes from the mother's brother to the sister's son. In matrilineal systems, the ownership of property and the authority over the property never rests in one person as in the case of father/husband of the patrilineal system and the succession of the two offices follow the female line (mother-daughter) and male line (uncle-nephew), respectively. (6)

Idris: Keeper of the Light is set in pre-independent India matriline held strong position in society and here I attempt to contemplate on the claims of Matriline in the context of the select novel. Primarily, in matriline women were supposed to enjoy more freedom than in patriline. They had the power to make decisions in the family as the men. They owned property and descendants of the family followed through female. They were said to have sexual freedom- the freedom to select their conjugal partner and also to reject them. All these are cited to talk about a glorious past that Nair women had enjoyed in matriline. The below cited passage is by a woman from a matrilineal taravadu which shows the karanavan's control over the women in taravadu.

“Ammavan didn't approve of girls making noise. You don't laugh; you smile. You don't speak in your natural voice; you whisper. You don't meet a man's gaze; you peer at a point beneath his chin. Ammavan had many such edicts.”
(Nair 28)

Saradmoni and Robin Jeffrey say women get education in matriline and this enabled them to carry out salaried employment. But the fact is all women didn't get educated in matriline- a privileged few got the opportunity due to different reasons. In the novel *Idris: The Keeper of the Light*, the female protagonist Kuttimalu had to hide herself among the many boys to attend the classes and when discovered by her mother she had been scolded for doing things

which the girls are not supposed to do. Her mother says “Why do you do things to annoy my brother? Why can’t you be like other girls? Why do you always have to be different?” The mother was more worried that her daughter’s education may displease her brother who is the karanavan of the taravadu. But the karanavar let her continue education thinking that she may continue ‘to fill her head with this and that for some more time’. Kuttimalu was eleven years old then and about to reach puberty. The karanavan thought that soon the girl may become ‘old’ enough to start a sambandham till then she may find some entertainment in education.

Another point which is often cited to talk about matriliney is about the freedom women had to choose and to reject their conjugal partner in sambandham. The sambandham relation is always talked about to show how much freedom women enjoyed in matriliney. It is the connubial relation a man begins with a Nair woman through a simple ritual-by giving her a piece of cloth in the presence of a lighted lamp in the presence of the karanavan. Nair women engage in sambandham with other Nair men or with men from other higher castes especially Brahmins. Mostly it is a pride for a karanavan when men from well-known taravadus start a sambandham with his taravadu. In such cases women may not have a choice to begin a sambandham with a man whom she likes. If the sambandham is from a higher caste the men observe certain customs to not to lose their caste purity. For example, they will not eat from or stay overnight in the Nair taravadu. Woman continues to stay at her place and her sambandhakaran is an occasional visitor to her taravadu. It is said that the woman can end the sambandham if she want by keeping his things outside the house when he comes to visit her next. But in many of the cases women remain waiting for their men to come home. All these leave the women with a kind of bereftness. The following passage describes the agony of a Nair woman in sambandham.

“It’s a strange life we lead... Our husbands are not really husbands; they are merely sambandhakarns- consorts with whom we share some nights and the call of the flesh; they fill our wombs but seldom our hearts; they come and go while we wait; when one leaves another takes his place. For a piece of cloth he will buy the tenure to my body and if my soul craves for more, I will tell myself as my mother did and hers before that: Still your tongue and desires, girl, we Nair women keep our names and homes, isn’t that enough? Shouldn’t that do? Your destiny is not hitched to that of a man’s. Any man’s. Learn to accept what you receive and no more. The Nair woman’s heart should never ache with expectation. Leave that to others in whom the warrior spirit has no place.” (Nair 31)

Another argument regarding matriliney is Nair women had the freedom of movement while women from upper-castes were not allowed to step out of their houses. But many a times this freedom of movement was present themselves to men of higher castes to begin a sambandham. The novel shares a strange custom which existed in Kerala. During the Month of Karkitakam, if a man from untouchable caste happened to see a young Nair woman outside her taravadu, he would throw a twig or stone at her. If that touches her, she will be excommunicated from her caste and she will have to make home with that untouchable man. Fearing this no Nair woman would step out of their house during that time. Idris wonders what made Kuttimalu so desperate to come to the pond on that particular night when they met for the first time. If a woman had any relation with men who do not belong to the accepted caste, she would be killed by her own family members or would be sold as a slave. That rigid was the caste laws in Kerala(92).

In matriliney women were supposed to be actively participated in decision making. The instance from the novel doesn't match this argument. When the karanavan requests Idris to take Kandavar along with him, Idris had asked him whether the kid's mother had agreed for that. For which the answer was "She will not question my decision." Kuttimalu listens to this conversation through a small window which is would be there in any taravadu. It is through this window, women used to listen to any important discussion that men have. The window is made in such a way that the women could see the men while they remain unseen to them. (Nair 148)

The children of sambandham grew up with sense of insecurity and question on their identity. The following words shows the agony of the son in matriliney

"Father! I never had one. He was my mother's consort but when her belly swelled with me, he stopped coming. He died soon after. She has a new sambandhakaran now. a fair, soft worm who doesn't know one end of a spear from the other."

By the early 20th century the opposition to the matrilineal tharavadu grew stronger and one reason for it was "the coalescing of the interests of discreet groups, like the younger members of the tharavadus and the tenants, into a more systematic attack on matrilineal kinship." Among Nayars and Nambuthiris divisions based on tharavadus were replaced by the caste identity and they critiqued identities centered on the family. Their attack was mainly on the matrilineal kinship which they considered as 'the barbaric past of the Nayars'. They 'rejected the narrow-minded divisiveness of tharavadu identities' while ignoring the basis of the caste identity itself. "For the Nayars, the idiom of progress was defined by the need for an identity that would be both patrilineal and broad-based enough to encompass the interests of its different sub-castes, with their varying ritual and material statuses." As G Arunima says, "The two primary aims of the community, it was felt, were to provide husbands for its women and to create opportunities for employment for its men." The reformers contended the custom of talikettukalyanam as it reduces the status of woman since it is a not 'real' marriage. They opposed polygamy and easy divorce. They felt the colonial state standing in the way of progress and thought individual partitioning and the apportioning of shares as a path to progress. Arunima further points out that, not only was the idea of transforming matrilineal practices into a patrilineal system entrenching gender differences and a skewed access to property, it was also premised upon the creation of a new familial ideology based on conjugal love. For this to be possible, there was the need to create a new ideal type of womanhood and female virtue that would gently and without demur accommodate itself to the changing times. "A perfect wife is the way to perfect marital happiness... good behaviour, wealth and status make a woman an asset to the family... no one should be able to put a price on her." All this ended up in gender difference and allotting gender roles(159).

Observing the various arguments which support, oppose and critically examine the matrilineal joint family system and the status of women under that system one can conclude that matriliney is a product of social changes that happened in society due to various socio-political and economic reasons. As many have assumed it did not offer any absolute power to its women although the matrilineal women had enjoyed a greater freedom of mobility as compared to their equals in patriliney.

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End Note

ⁱ Dube, Leela. "Who Gains From Matriliny? Men, Women and Change on A Lakshadweep Island." *Sociology of Gender: The Challenge of Feminist Sociological Knowledge*. Ed. Sharmila Rege, Sage Publications, 2003, pp. 153-165.