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### The Social and Cultural upheavals of women in Lakshmi Kannan's *The Bead Curtain*

#### Abstract

Lakshmi Kannan is a well reputed and bilingual poet, she is also known for novels and short-stories. The writings have received wide critical acclaim. The Tamil writings of Lakshmi Kannan have been translated into many Indian languages, and the novel *Aathukku Poganam* made her famous in Indian English Literature. She is respected among the contemporary writers, critics and readers for her bold, non-conformist questioning of conservative socio-cultural values of the Indian society, particularly the Tamil community. The writings of Lakshmi Kannan won her an important place in Indian writing in English. *The Glass Bead Curtain* is her first fiction in English, It brings, the stories of several generations of women living within almost one century. This fiction portrays the sufferings of the women in male dominated society and nuances of experiences of social and cultural upheavals of women. Further it presents the women's disruptions in the Indian society, as represented in the Tamil community during the 1920s and 40s. When the nationalist movement raised its head, the new ideas spread out within and outside of India about the recasting of gender roles and family relationships, especially marital relations. These elements made the writings of Lakshmi Kannan as famous in India.

**Keywords:** Bilingual, Non-Conformist, Women, Marital Relations.

The sociologists and cultural historians, like Partha Chatterjee, Kumkum Sangari, Sudesh Vaid, Ashis Mandy, Tanika Sarkar and Lima Chakravarti have been analyzed the subject of women's condition in colonial India. A researcher can get the information of the

women from these researchers and further it provides the information about the denial of the women's equal rights in education. The rights for independent writing and the right to live with 0 dignities are expressed in this well-constructed novel with the help the lively characters and dialogues. The majority of the situations were drawn from the known world. These incidents and situations are collaborated with the accounts of the social world. The historical events, details about personal lives and social practices are transformed into a real life. It was claimed by Shailja, the writer within the novel, that the novel is based on the interviews of a living person, Kalyani Natrajan. Kannan selected the subject from the social history. The Indian novelists mostly write about diaspora, global, social encounters or myths and legends. It seems to be an act of courage as Kannan goes against the tide. The twentieth century writings have been trying to bring out the greater facilities and possibilities of freedom and education to women. Kannan presents the real life of the Tamil Brahmin upper class families, who experienced the new ideas that were sweeping across the entire nation during the 1920s and 40s, along with the political turmoil.

The novel clearly presents the struggle of these families between the orthodox and modern views and their efforts to move along the new lines. The new idea of Indians like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Harbilas Sarada, Mahatma Gandhi, and the British and Irish men and women, are discussed by the characters in the novel. These discussions have been happened within the closed rooms. *The Glass Bead Curtain* provides a mixed fare as thought-provoking and informative as it is engaging and entertaining.

The novel of Lakshmi Kanna is feminist and woman-centric. It refrains that all men as dominators and the suppressers and woman presented as a helpless victim. It forgot the well-hearted men who support for the women's equal education and rights. Kalyani is the young protagonist of the novel-within a novel. She belonged to an affluent, well-educated Tamil Brahmin family. She faced a lot of struggles in getting education, her marital relations, and her efforts to reach out to other young girls. The novel is introducing different persons, from different classes and social strata, who too are mired in the unequal system. It presents a girl student, who is dropping out of school due to her economic and social hardships. Further, the novel explains the intellectual debates and emotional tensions of the women in Indian society and it relates the women's struggle for equality. The Irish woman, Miss Susan O'Leary presented as the bold women, who transcended national borders and worked for the uplift of women in the novel.

The personal journey of Kalyani revealed the domestic spaces and the contradictory forces represented by the upholders of "tradition". The woman's pleading for a modern

outlook and treatment are presented in the novel. When her mother-in-law, Ambujam, and sister-in-law, Karpagam, and other woman relatives mocked her for her education and her skill in speaking English, she was hurt a lot. "Growing so rebelliously... So ...so irresponsibly," or as one of the relatives tells her parents in clear words: "If you don't check her growth now, how is she going to show her face to her parents-in-law and her husband?" (59), then Kannan allow the illogical and inhuman attitudes to be seen for all their absurdity, and makes fun of them. Kalyani is sent to live within her husbands' family and he was affected too much of her husband's humour and she has developed tolerance, self-awareness and respect for Kalyani's mental qualities in her husband's home. The concepts of masculinity and marriage were played a major role in the lives of the women as human beings worthy of respect. These shifts were subject of such importance that many writers of the 1920s and 30s wrote novels to deal with them. The Indian novelists such as Tagore, Sarat Chandra, Prernchand and Jainendra, dealt with the changing images of masculinity along with the changes that were being crafted in the image of the feminine persona.

The child marriage, resulting in strange anomalies, incompatibilities, early widowhood and subsequent torture of the girl child are carefully portrayed in the novel. Kalyani's problem is growing taller than her husband end with tragically. The sister of Kalyani and her sister-in-law faced a serious danger of rejection for not knowing English. Kalyani's skill of reading and speaking the foreign language made her the "saviour". She was requested by her family to help Karpagam. The novel sprinkled the humour that turns these events into problems. She become part of the disruptive, turbulent, and transitional period, Laughter lightens the mood and the family members move ahead, brought closer through greater mutual acceptance, love and understanding in her family.

The problems are resolved in a lighter mood by Kalyani. The novel moves on to depict grievous and grim aspects of the society's ill-treatment of women. When the young Kalyani sheds tears over her beloved aunt Athai's fate of being prohibited to either sing or dress up like other women. The novel exposes a deeply painful situation of Kalyani's aunt. one feels her rage against the injustice: "Let them all rot in hell," she thought, bringing her fists down on the pillow. "Let all of them rot, those who crippled the movements of Athai's limbs just because her husband died. A widow should not sing anymore. She should not play the tanpura or veena or violin because she has to observe one long mourning all her life, for her dead husband'." (49) The above lines express the pain of an innocent child and the denial of a woman's talents in different forms.

The Widows have been treated badly in the name of tradition. The practices including forced conjugal relations that had become a grave concern of many social reformists in the late nineteenth century. There are references in the novel about the reformers. Kannan's characters Vishalakshi and Kadambari are beneficiaries of the modern and liberal outlook that had developed among the conservative Tamil Brahmins by the early decades of the twentieth century. The novel presents the women were rescued from their husbands' families who were bent upon treating them as their household slaves after their husbands died. The women, who have saved from her husband's home independent individuals and they play important role in society by helping other girls.

The portrayals of Lakshi Kannan changes build up a positive picture of women in the world. The men women made the women and children suffer more in the society and there were also those who tried to change these conditions. They are treated as the second class people at home, hidden behind curtains. There are many forms of injustices and inequality. The novel pulls aside several of these curtains, to expose the double standards, hypocrisy and illogical. The different norms, rules and rituals are exposed, questioned or denounced. The society pushed women down into accepting an inferior, subordinate position as a part of their 'duty'.

The discussions between learned men like Swaminathan Aiyer, Justice Ramaswarni Myer and Natrajan or be-tween Miss Susan O'Leary, Vishalakshi and Parvati speak out the burning issues, which is referring the cases of Rukinabai of 1887 (237) and Phulmani (237). It had divided the whole nation by asking the question of marriage for girls. The novel includes a variety of voices, from across the different social strategy and expressing contrary. The novel employs a large range of diverse linguistic registers - personal, emotional, rhetoric and pedagogic, journalistic, legal discussions and public speaking to convey this multivocality.

The new awareness about the need to improve women's condition had spread from the colonial and nationalist thinkers. When the debates entered into the public print media, several journals, some devoted specifically to women's condition, came up in different Indian languages, including Kannada, Tamil and Hindi. The forum attracted some of the educated women, who wrote without disclosing their real identity.

A new form of women's writing emerged which had focused the political and social concerns. Some of the women continued to hide their identity even in the early half of the twentieth century. Susan O'Leary and Vishalakshi contribute the public and an impact on both men and women readers. The women writers were rarely wrote in that period. It was

difficult to assess the journals and newspapers that written by women. These provided the high-spirited, talented women, ample scope for getting their views published. It presents how social disapproval raised against the activities led them to hide their true identity and to use pseudonyms is recognised by feminist critics. The Indian women writers' autobiographies have disclosed the devices of women and it had to employ to subvert patriarchal prohibitions upon female literacy. The clever subversions and rebellion of the women's qualities well expressed through the women like Athai and Susan O'Leary. It made the novel to be interesting narrative of women's restlessness and rebelliousness. Women's ability self-expression and artistic fulfilment are expressed well in the fiction.

"So whose story was it in the end? But she spent most of her time talking about her Athai. Was it Athai's story then? She in turn, spent most of the time writing about her times, writing about the context of her family during the times she lived, and she also wrote about Ponni," (372), the writer, Shailja who has written the novel-within the novel, asks, at the end, in the "Epilogue". Natrajan's old grandmother Angachi's life-story leads on to Ponni's tale. It is a novel in which the narratives of women's lives flow on. Further, it brings together the later generations' life-style to the lives of the older generations. It had led an inhibited life behind the curtains, of women who sought to break the shackles of ignorance, deprivations and pro-habitations, to gain human fulfilment and dignity.

As a short story writer, Lakshmi Kannan's felicity with words brings out the variety of expressions and fine nuances of emotions in the young and the old. The writings of Lakshmi Kannan expressed the love nurtured with care grew between these generations, and, how the warmth of friendship matched the sincerity of purpose is gently depicted. Tamil words are used to convey the finer differences of relations and emotions. These combinations of English and Tamil languages come naturally, for even those who used English for their conversation, continued to rely upon native languages for such personal relations and cultural items of consumption. The novel opens up a world that had begun to change, and moves towards the continued quests of the human spirit.

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