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BITTER IS MY REVENGE: A RICHLY LAYERED TATRI EPISODE FROM FEMINIST
HISTORICAL STANCE

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ABSTRACT

'Bhrushtu' by Matampu Kunjukuttan and translated as 'Outcaste' by Vasanthi Shankaranarayanan, in 1996 is a richly layered tale about a Namboodiri Brahmin sect in Southern India where oppressive customs kept women indoors and men in warehouses all the time. Women were an absolutely neglected group with limited needs like dressing, bathing and sleeping leading very unsatisfactory lives. Their travel was limited to the temples or to their close relatives only.

The paper deals with an actual event which took place sometime during 1905 when a Namboodiri woman was annoyed because of limitless restrictions placed on her by the Namboodiri tribe. Primarily, she was frustrated by the apathetic and neglected behaviour of her husband. Instead of suffering in silence, she was now ready to rock the whole social system and deliberately conducted secret relationships with several prominent kinsmen of upper caste but kept proofs of those associations. At the time of her trial for out casting, she produced those proofs and reasoned that if she were to be pronounced an outcaste, so too should all the men who had connections with her. Her protest was so forceful that this crushed the very strongholds of society and religion and the community which ignored and humiliated women had no other choice but to hear her strongly. The acknowledged investigators could not raise any argument against her infallible logic and as a result all kinsmen who shared bed with her were isolated from the society. She took life into her hands and inflicted revenge on the wrongdoers without assistance from anyone.

Her trial and exile thus became a welcome prologue to that revolutionary change which was to shake the whole community and the decades that followed.

Keywords: outcaste, Namboodiris, liaisons, secluded, trail, guilty, excommunicated

'Outcaste' translated from the Malayalam novel 'Brushtu' is the story of a girl Papti Kutty, who on the night of her wedding, is raped by her brother-in-law while her husband stands guard at the door. So, the novel is based on the true story of the sexual revenge that the lone lady wreaked on an entire community that was rigid, oppressive, and male-dominated. The setting of the story takes us back to 1905s Kerala, South India

when the Namboodiris held influence on top of the caste hierarchy. They were wealthy landowners and had many rights over people of the other lower castes including the Nayars. The patriarchal system prevailing that time permitted that only the eldest son of a Namboodiri family should marry: recapitulation

As a result, the latter were allowed to have illicit liaison, provided these affairs were restricted to women of castes other than their own. The virtue of the Namboodiri women was protected and preserved to prevent them from illicit affairs with men of their own or other castes.¹

Namboodiri men were allowed to take many wives, leaving many women to the sorrow of sharing in grief their undivided devotion towards their husband. As women for them, must be strictly monogamous, so the system had an adverse effect on the Namboodiri women. They were an absolutely neglected group whose limited needs were believed to be only cleansing, taking two ends meal and sleeping. Women of this caste observed strict sacramental purity. Namboodiri girls, once reached puberty, were called 'asuryampasyakal', literally, 'those who should never see the sun' and were restrained to their homes observing the Namboodiri rules of seclusion. They were not permitted to look at men other than their husbands; the widows may not cover and must shave their heads. They could not cover the upper part of their body while at home, and they could only wear white clothing. If they had to go out they had to cover themselves with palm-leaf umbrellas, cover themselves with a bleached cloth and have a female chaperone to accompany them. Their travel was limited to the temples or to the house of their immediate relatives, but that too had to be accompanied by a maidservant who should precede them and watch their movements:

Puberty onwards, they were confined to their houses, known as nalukettus; to avoid any contact with men. The very architecture of these houses with the four wall enclosures and the inner courtyard which comprised the women's world signified this status of seemingly voluntary imprisonment of women. After marriage they were not even allowed to visit their parents ... Any slight deviation from this routine was considered a sin and those women were ostracized and eventually excommunicated.²

Ironically, these Namboodiri women lived cloistered and restricted lives and were called 'Antharjanam' which literally means 'people inside the house'. They were treated as mere a thing of pride and joy. They had eyes but were prohibited from seeing anything pleasant; they had legs but their movement was confined; their state was quite like that of household utensils or prisoners who were constantly watched; who were not permitted to breathe fresh air, to see the world:

Another unfortunate aspect was that a single Namboodiri man could marry as many as four Namboodiri women. As a result, young girls were married off to old men – either widowers or men marrying for the second, third or even a fourth time. Widowhood or sharing of a husband (with his other wives) was the cruel fate which awaited them. All these restrictions, the consequent sexual frustration and the insecurity of widowhood had their own effect on the psyche of Namboodiri women. Most of them preferred to suffer in silence rather than face the consequences of illicit liaisons and trials of caste offences.³

Namboodiri women were not allowed to marry outside their caste, so they remained unmarried because it was difficult to get husbands. Also dowries were high to get some young husband and so instead of remaining unmarried, young Namboodiri girls of 12 or so were married to already married or, old and sick Namboodiri men. As a result, many women remained unmarried and died without experiencing the bliss of motherhood. As the marriage of widows was forbidden, there were many young widows who were the prey of their husband's old-age marriage. They were considered as objects of contempt in the community; an absolutely neglected group to be treated as destitute creatures.

Through this paper, I have managed to put together a plausible account of the protagonist who made a difference - by playing the system against herself - one Namboodiri woman who decided to use her body to lash out at society. The brave and intelligent lady, Paptikutty who was known for her beauty and had been married off at a very young age of 18 to a 60 year old man Cherriyedath Neelan, grew up as bold and

outspoken a spirited girl, who spoiled the sleep, but enriched the dreams of many a man, old and young, a woman who played with destiny.

But the protagonist was a victim of circumstances, who later turned a revengeful victimizer, on an avenging spree for the wrong done to her on the ceremonial day of the purification of the bride when she became fit to bear a child. On that fateful day, after the celibacy ritual when she was declared pure enough to bear children, in her western bridal chamber she was waiting for her first union with her husband. And when the door to the bridal chamber opened noiselessly, she noticed that:

This was not he, her husband, but his elder brother. Tundan!

Paptikutty stood in front of this stunted gnome, who smiled. Nay, showed his teeth and grinned like a devil. She began to perspire profusely.⁴

It was "her husband's brother who was to be like a second father!"⁵ Paptikutty was unable to understand the situation. Something started howling inside her. Struggling to save herself, she started crawling towards the door:

Paptikutty, who had waited anxiously for her nuptials, cursing the length of each second and too shy to look at her own heaving breasts, now writhed, unable to get out of her bridal chamber.

The door was bolted from the outside.

The precaution taken by the younger brother on behalf of the elder brother. Gatekeeper! God of Death!⁶

After great struggle there was no option left with her except to surrender before that stunted animal who was ready to crush her youthful beauty. She was ready to suffer the twisted fate as:

The Knowledge of the Vedas which had raised Brahminism to heaven had now entrapped one's own brother's wife to satiate his lust!⁷

For the first time in life Paptikutty felt herself lifeless. She atoned that if only once her wedded husband had touched her, and that too as a part of the ritual. But she knew that:

He was waiting his turn, outside the door. A true worshipper of elders! Let his elder brother finish his turn. A slavish dog that waited to lick the leftovers.⁸

The moment Tundan gripped her:

The purpose of her birth was revealed to her in that moment. Her weariness and inertia vanished. The concept of illusion reared its head. The primal figure of the Mother Goddess in a graveyard, wearing a garland of skulls, gleefully sucking the blood trickling from the decapitated demon's head, appeared in her mind's vision.

In that instant, the bridal chamber was transformed into a chamber of birth.

This was her second birth; true fulfillment of the title "twice born" given to her clan.

Paptikutty! The Goddess of revenge!⁹

Tundon, who was sitting before her, seemed her smaller and smaller, like a mustard seed, 'a mere slave at her feet!¹⁰ Now she was able to understand 'the secret behind her incarnation, the entire plan of action, till her death and union with the ultimate'.¹¹ But she was frustrated by the apathetic and neglected behaviour of her husband. Instead of suffering in silence, she was now ready to rock the whole social system. "She must seduce all Namboodiris nay all men".¹² She was trembling in a fit of revenge, ready to reincarnate as many times to extinguish the masculine race:

She would attract all of them and bring them here. Let this special penance take its own course; at the end of it all the great houses would be blasted. Now, O ye protected deities of renowned families! Where are you now?

The act had to begin with this Namboodiris house itself, her husband's. In the very presence of her husband and his brother, she would make all the Namboodiris who came to the feast, sleep with her. One by one, each one would take the turn.

Tunden and Neelan (her wedded husband) would serve as guards at the door.¹³

Now she was determined to squash all the Namboodiris and for that she used her servants as poker chip. She bribed them with some silver coins to bring the young Namboodiris to her husband's house:

She was determined to enlist all the Namboodiris of Kerala in the rituals of this new Mahamakam battle. All the Namboodiri houses should, till the end of the universe, shudder and cry out in fear remembering Papatikuttam'... Using a broken, blunt pencil, Paptikutty wrote on a scrap of old paper, the epitaph for all Malayali Brahmins.

One ... Pachu Otikkan from the Otikkan's House.

Two ...¹⁴

Call her brave, cunning, callous, whatever, but she was now rebellious. Otherwise she would not have had the courage to tackle and denigrate so many persons, some of whom were of high social status. Now she deliberately conducted secret liaisons with prominent men of several upper class families.

She kept proofs of these liaisons either by way of mementos given by her lovers or through recording intimate physical details such as birthmarks on the genitals:

She must refer to that old piece of paper. Although written with a blunt pencil point the writing was clear. The names and detailed descriptions of their bodies. She had also recorded the date and the hour of each union ... She must have more names. Not a single Namboodiri house should be left out. One person from each house, no more. She did not do this for physical pleasure, but to fulfill the purpose of the incarnation she had taken.¹⁵

A woman's revenge took on the dimension of a revolution for social reform and she saw herself as an instrument of this for reaching reform. And the author elevated the act of revenge itself by sublimating it from the whim of a sexually wronged woman to an act of reckoning which the Namboodiris of the time richly deserved.

And on one fateful day, her husband Cherriyedath Neelan reached her bedroom. After a very satisfactory session, he was successful to see her face but recoils in utter shock when he realized that the lady was none other than his own young wife Paptikutty. The man fled the place and raised a hue and cry.

Soon Paptikutty was secluded according to the norms and was kept in a special outhouse built for the seclusion and imprisonment during the trial. It looked that she had no problem at all and seemed serene and ready to face the questioning. Unlike other timid prisoners, that proud and beautiful lady who had controlled many weak men above her for the last few years had no apprehension in her mind:

How could Paptikutty be moved, when she had waited for this hour of trial from the day of her nuptials.¹⁶

The pillars of the caste system started trembling. The Chief Priest, prosecutor and Namboothiri scholars questioned Paptikutty, who accepted all the charges but stated that the rule of law has to be administered equally. If she had to be pronounced guilty, so should be the people who slept with her. They were people of supposedly high moral standing, and with that basis she revealed the names of well-known scholars, musicians and many other prominent people. She produced a treacherous catalogue — a list of gods-on-earth whose intimacies she revealed. She knew the dates of their unions the names of their families, months were jotted down, with details like — a birthmark here, a mole there. There were legions of them in her records -- crumbling elders, masters of the Vedas, those whose learned feet attracted the high and low. There were charming actors and scholars of Sanskrit too. There were barbers and there were tradesmen. There were those who served in temples, and there was the husband of her sister alongside the brother of her own husband.

There were officials, and there were even some who had gone to the grave -offering proof of their crimes. With every name, Paptikutty hacked at a hundred pretensions, a rotting façade of honour crumbling in her wake. And finally the world beheld bare men, stripped by an invisible woman who claimed at last her voice. Many heads hung in shame. But Paptikutty's was not among them.

She presented strong evidence to substantiate her charges including visual and written evidence. She also requested the Chief Priest to summon her legally wedded husband, to narrate what happened on the nuptials night and how she reached that plight.¹⁷ To Chief Priest it looked as if the sky after descending has fallen on his head:

The Chief Priest's tongue cleaved to his throat, now parched. Words which pierced the inner drum of his ears and entered his soul burning it like hot charcoal!¹⁸

But Paptikutty was nonchalant, she had the guts! And it was her sense of fairness, her personal experience and that questioning nature of hers that led her to wonder at the inequities in the Namboothiri system of justice, and to ask for punishment for all, if there had to be punishment for one:

'... do you know, how many other men came to clutch the hem of my clothes? Ask! I shall tell you without omitting a single name. But before that, just think for yourselves, if your minds are still not hardened by Brahminical influences. Have I reached this position by myself? Answer, you wise and great men.¹⁹

The Chief Priest, prosecutor and other Namboothiri scholars who administered Vedic laws had no option with them except to put the case before the King. The King was in trouble and the public uproar was going severer. So against the norms where only Paptikutty would have been implicated, the King agreed to administer equal justice. A large number of persons belonging to several communities were implicated by her. As the names started coming out, the number of nervous men increased. Many ran away, escaped to other states even, many others conducted poojas so that Paptikutty would forget their names and features. The king was much horrified. He ordered the case be closed, and closed himself from hearing any more names as next it could be his name, the king himself?

After the trial, it was found that sixty four persons were involved in the enquiry and all of them were excommunicated. This evoked strong resentment among the educated section of the people. Though Paptikutty was also excommunicated, she paved a way for women's revolution. There is saying in Sanskrit that a country or kingdom is compared to heaven if the women in that kingdom are treated well.

Conclusion: Paptikutty is an unusual character. When raped and humiliated on the eve of her nuptials by her husband's brother, she refused to cave in and be one more victim to patriarchal assertions and brutalities; instead, she used the female body which was subjected to domination and defilement, to wreak revenge on her tormentors, the upper class men of the highly restrictive and oppressive society of Kerala in the early part of the 20th Century. She seduced men of 64 upper class families, kept evidence of the sexual acts through souvenirs given by the lovers or remembered birthmarks.

When she was tried for infidelity and was about to be made an outcaste she argued effectively that her partners in crime, the men who slept with her, should also be treated the same way. The canonical investigators could not raise any argument against her infallible logic and as a result all kinsmen who shared bed with her were isolated from the society. She took life into her hands and inflicted revenge on the wrongdoers without taking assistance from anyone. Her protest was forceful that it shattered the very strongholds of society and religion. Her act was so public that the society which ignored and humiliated women had no other choice but to sit up and heard her strongly. But this created an intellectual void in the social and political arenas of Kerala. Most of the earlier social reforms of Kerala could be traced to this earth-shaking event orchestrated by Paptikutty. Enough, they said: it was time to change. Now men called for education and women began to speak; widows took husbands and the parasol was discarded and Paptikutty got an honourable mention in the novel of Matampu Kunhukuttan, who relayed her story in a sympathetic and understanding manner.

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