



Survival as Subversion: Female Subjectivity and Everyday Realities in Chandrika Balan's Short Stories

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Abstract:

This paper focuses on how Chandrika Balan—a noted contemporary bilingual writer from Kerala—engages with female subjectivity and everyday realities in her stories. Though she distances herself from the tradition of ‘radical’ feminist writing, or what is often referred to as *pennezhuthu* in Malayalam, her innovative and creative reworking of women’s lived experience and survival tactics makes her stories not only a powerful site of negotiation for women’s concerns but also a strong critique of patriarchal systems. While renouncing the convenient practice of perceiving women as “feminine” or “feminist”, Balan creates complex female subjects who are subversive without being openly rebellious. The power of her writing comes from the fact that she does not allow any theoretical template to straightjacket women’s lived experience, rather foregrounds it by making an effective use of humor, sarcasm, and irony. The paper will primarily focus on four of her short stories, namely “The Story of a Poem”, “The People’s Court”, “The Fifth One”, and “The Optical Illusion.”

Keywords: Feminism, Gender, Malayalam short story, *Pennezhuthu*, Women’s writing in Kerala

Introduction

The history of modern women’s writing in Kerala goes back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Though the early writings fall short of fundamentally challenging the entrenched patriarchal structures in Malayalee society, they usher in a notable tradition of literary and creative ventures by women in

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Malayalam revolving around women's concerns. This tradition becomes more diverse and confident in the post-independence period with the emergence of prominent fiction writers such as R. Lalitambika Antarjanam, K. Saraswati Amma, Rajalakshmi, Madhavikkutty, among others. However, it was only after the 1990s that women's anti-patriarchal writing is said to have acquired a place of its own as the number of writers receiving critical acclaim and popularity increased significantly. As J. Devika observes, women's writing became "a central topic of concern in the Malayalam literary public for the first time in the 1990s" (48).

Much of this concern was initially triggered by the term *pennezhuthu* (woman writing), coined by the radical left poet and critic K. Satchidanandan as part of his extended introduction to a collection of short stories, *Paapathara* (1990), by Sarah Joseph, a well-known feminist activist and writer. Satchidanandan derived this concept as a direct translation of French expression *écriture féminine* to refer to a particular strand of radical feminist aesthetics which he perceived for the first time in Malayalam in the stories of Sarah Joseph. To him, this aesthetics is constituted by at least two vital aspects of radical feminism: One, "the deconstruction of the structures of patriarchy" and two, "the reconstruction of the feminine experience hidden, repressed, or ignored in the past" (qtd. in Devika 50). Satchidanandan hails Sarah Joseph for her "clear recognition that if the women must break the silence imposed on her for centuries, [she must] forge a new language" (qtd. in Devika 52). He considers Sarah Joseph as "the first conscious feminist in Malayalam fiction" who has discovered "a woman's language, a poetic semiotics" which is centred around "the female body" and which is "adequate to express women's oppression, protest against patriarchy, [and] desire and emancipation" (Satchidanandan 14-15).

Pennezhuthu faced stiff opposition immediately after its coinage, but most of the early criticism came from the conservative quarters.ⁱ However, later scholarship has highlighted certain fundamental theoretical lacunas in Satchidanandan's conception of pennezhuthu. G. Arunima points out that Satchidanandan fails "to engage with how pennezhuthu may contest or transform aanuezhuthu (men's writing)", and only replicates a mainstream position which implies that there is ezhuthu (writing), which is "gender neutral, value free", and there is "pennuezhuthu, which is simply a set and a form of feminine expression" (178). In her detailed assessment of Satchidanandan's essay, J. Devika highlights his ambiguous use of feminist theory and its problematic implications. The manner in which Satchidanandan imports Elaine Showalter's teleological model of women's writing ('feminine', 'feminist' and 'female') in the context of women's writing in Malayalam sets up "an implicit standard of assessment" in which women authors are "placed in specific categories according to the 'levels of progress' attained by their 'consciousness'" (56). Though Satchidanandan does not explicitly state a universal model for feminist literature, his perception of Sarah Joseph's writing as "the pinnacle of feminist progressive consciousness" in the Malayalam literature projects such a model (56-57). Satchidanandan's attempt to trace historically the present 'feminist subject' as epitomised by Sarah Joseph and explicated by his idea of Pennezhuthu not only renders "invisible" the works of female writers of the past but also dehistoricizes Sarah Joseph's writing and removes it from "its immediate contexts" (21).

Despite these problematic propositions, pennezhuthu soon gained popularity and institutional acceptance among the then dominant radical left academic circles and a group of creative writers. Though invented in the context of Sarah Joseph's writing, it became not only a yardstick to assess the works of existing writers, but also a prescription for the emerging writers

to portray and foreground women's bodily experience, sexuality, desire, and resistance to patriarchy in a particular manner. As it came to uphold an idealized combination of radical political goals and an experimental style of writing as the model of women's writing, the term met with vehement opposition from a set of writers which included Chandrika Balan, Gracy, A.S. Priya, and Gita Hiranyanⁱⁱ who categorically rejected such an imposition on their writings.

Pennezhuthu – 'A Gate Bigger than a House'

Chandrika Balan is a noted bilingual writer who writes both in her native language, Malayalam, and the language of her profession as a teacher, English. Although she began writing at the age of twelve, she had to stop at about twenty due to the scathing attacks she received for portraying "the wild zones of female experiences" in her story "Maalathinu Veliyil" ("Author's" ix). Balan resumed writing after a long break in 1993 under the pen-name Chandramati – with which she is primarily known to her Malayalam readers. By this time pennezhuthu had already become the dominant model of women's writing in Kerala. Balan distances herself from this label because, in her view, it denotes not only "sexual politics" but also "leftist politics" in Kerala, and therefore not acceptable to writers like her who wish "to stay above any party politics" ("Search" 346). She points out that barring a few writers like Sarah Joseph, "the space of pennezhuthu is now overcrowded with women writers who throw literary merit to the wind" and "compose dull theoretical stories of female heroes at war with society" (349). Instead of a strong anti-men and activist approach of radical feminism, Balan prefers a writing-style marked by "invisibility of the author, indirect narration, and the tendency to compromise" (344). She declares that "it is not the conscious aim of women's writing to idealize women", but to be "thoroughly unsympathetic" in exposing women's self (346).

Balan's avowed rejection of the mantle of *pennezhuthu* or radical feminism can also be seen in the context of the unease shown by several prominent female writersⁱⁱⁱ towards the label 'feminism' before the turn of the century because it came with its own risks and disadvantages. The well-known author Nabaneeta Dev Sen plainly articulates this unease, "most of us wish to belong to the mainstream, rather than be ghettoized and go down in history branded as someone who belonged to the margins" (8). The unease becomes all the more acute when the label is invented or proposed by a male counterpart as in the case of Chandrika Balan. Balan refers to Satchidanandan's essay as "a gate bigger than a house" (qtd. in Devika 59), hinting at not only the size of the essay but also the manner in which the male critic's interpretation was prioritised over the text. J. Devika insists that Balan's response to *pennezhuthu* comes as a reaction against the skewed power relations between the male critic and female author, quite evident in the present case as well as in the entire Malayalam literary world (60). She also emphasises that the resistance put up by Balan to *pennezhuthu* should be recognised as "the rejection of consecration/silencing within the radical left homoaesthetic circle"^{iv} on the one side and on the other "to the very form of homoaesthetic circle" (62).

For Chandrika Balan (and also others), this rejection of *pennezhuthu* does not mean that she cherishes "any illusion that all is well with women" ("Search" 349), or her critique of patriarchal structures is compromised. Rather, it allows her the freedom to respond to women's oppression in her own manner, endowing her writing a subversive aesthetic of its own. Most of her stories present an unresolved conflict between the conventional role of woman as a good wife or mother and her aspirations and dreams as an individual. Balan does not associate femininity with weakness or docility in the manner of anti-essentialist thinkers, nor does she glorify it as a powerhouse in the essentialist manner. Most of her female protagonists arguably traverse the space between the 'feminine' and the

‘feminist’, combining the traits of both without essentially becoming any one of the two. In other words, her protagonists are not social rebels or committed revolutionaries, nor are they docile weaklings. They are full-bodied human beings who want to live a dignified life of love, peace and harmony, but at the same time intensely aware that they are denied the same because they are women. Balan’s stories do not offer any ready-made template of solutions, rather provoke the readers to recognise the existence of women’s oppression within the gendered space of our society.

An intimate story of a poem

Balan’s story “The Story of a Poem” revolves around the lives of three characters – the protagonist Sushama who is a housewife, her office-going husband Reghuraman and his colleague at the office, Shriranjini. Sushama is an educated woman who nurtures the habit of writing poetry, but she only writes secretly because the domestic space which she inhabits leaves little room for her to do so publicly. Her husband wants to see her only as an ideal homemaker, caring mother and faithful wife. She attunes herself to these roles and performs all her homely chores. Nevertheless, when she is alone at home, the same space becomes ‘a room of her own’ and is used to give vent to her writing instinct. Driven by this impulse, Sushama writes a romantic and nostalgic poem about her former lover. The reader’s attention is specifically drawn towards how Sushama writes along with her kitchen work, “Look at her, writing the poem at the kitchen table on which lie scattered some blank sheets of paper, a broken pencil, a knife, vegetables, sliced and otherwise, and few plates” (“Story” 92). The narratorial voice closely follows what Sushama does in the private space, while also eavesdropping into the inner recesses of her mind.

Though the “hostile and suspicious world” does not give her adequate freedom to write, the act of writing is empowering and

makes her happy (92). After the completion of her poem in bits and pieces throughout the day, “there is no trace of any fatigue” even though she has “risen with the sun and moved with it” (97). Writing endows “a celestial rupture on her face” like “an apsara who has come to the green woods to give birth to a baby in secret” (97). She forgets her drudgery and mundane existence when she communicates with her former lover through her poem. Imagining the caresses of her lover, she feels sensations in her body without any sense of guilt. Her poem becomes a space of rendezvous with her lover in secret, which could not be peeped into by the voyeuristic world. The process of writing a poem transforms her into an individual who cares for nobody but herself. She does not want to remember the moments spent with her husband and wishes to be completely with herself. Responding to the memories of her husband, she bursts out, “go away, ...don’t stand in the way of my poem. Get lost!” (96). But there is an anti-climax to her ecstatic state. As soon as her husband and children arrive, she tears down the poem and throws it out of the window, “for she is the ideal wife and the ideal mother” (98). Hardly anyone misses the effective use of sarcasm and pathos here. However, before the story ends, the reader is reminded that Sushama’s poem can be retrieved from the pages of Balan’s story. Thus, though Sushama’s poem could not see the light of the day, her emotions and aspirations are preserved by Balan’s act of writing.

Balan’s story makes an interesting contrast with Sarah Joseph’s story “Inside Every Women-writer” in which the protagonist ultimately walks out on her husband overcoming her attachment to her children and house to claim her own world (Joseph 68-9). The manner in which Balan’s story ends where the protagonist continues with her role as a wife and mother instead of renouncing these roles assigned to her by the patriarchal society might not find favor with some avowed radical feminists. However, the story does exhibit strong anti-patriarchal impulse while remaining faithful to the lived

experience of a middle-class educated house-wife. Though Sushama is not able to renounce her familial duties, she is not tied to the ideals of motherhood or wifehood in any idealistic manner. When she writes poems expressing her suppressed desire, her transgressive side overpowers her wifely docility and comes to the fore in a subversive manner. She is not bothered about anybody when a new line of poem comes to her mind. She comes out of the bathroom “naked, running” and “shaking her dripping hair” to write down that line (95). Sushama expresses her tenderness towards her former lover and fantasizes about him without any sense of guilt or sin.

Balan’s story reflects the confines faced by women writers in the hegemonic masculine environment. Balan’s own writing career was ruptured multiple times, first because her family did not like that “an unmarried girl” went into it, and latter under the pressure of the self-assumed role of “the perfect woman” (“Author’s” ix-x). It is indicated in the story that though Sushama’s poem is not a profound piece of literature, it deserves special attention because it is written by a silenced woman^v (92). As Urvashi Butalia points out, notwithstanding the strangulation, the writing of poems “provides the oxygen” in the life of Sushama, otherwise it would have been very difficult for such sensitive women to live in the claustrophobic atmosphere of family and society^{vi} (10).

The story also exposes the patriarchal double standards prevailing in the middle-class society of India, where men prefer to marry a girl like Sushama who they think is docile and “excellent at culinary arts” instead of a truly modern woman who demands equal rights (“Story” 93). This is reflected in the character of Reghuraman who appreciates a radical woman like Shriranjini with whom he can go to a coffee house or chat over a cup of tea, but as a wife his first choice is Sushama who “does not talk much and follows his instructions” (93). He even fantasizes “different parts of her [Shriranjini’s] body as if they

belonged to Sushama” (93). But as a wife she is unthinkable, “let feminists be the wives of others” (94). Maitrayee Chaudhuri underlines the typical Indian mentality when she remarks that “the ideal woman” is considered “a judicious blend of traditional qualities of domestic skills, knowledge of religious rituals ... and modern abilities acquired through education and employment opportunities” (“Indian” 278).

The Silver Platter of Salome

“The People’s Court” raises similar issues by making an effective use of irony and satire. The story is in the form of a mock inquisition in which the protagonist Mable Simon faces a charge for not discharging her “worldly duties faithfully” (“People’s” 58). She is an employed woman and a writer who writes under the pen-name Salome, but that does not hold any value for her family. During his testimony before the jury, her husband Michael Joseph describes that she has been “a very strange girl right from the beginning” who has “her own opinions and theories about everything” and is “not interested in anything a woman ought to be interested in” (58). He blames her because of her preoccupation with reading and her inattention to household chores such as keeping the house cob-web free, making his bed, cooking his favorite dishes, and for not fulfilling her family responsibilities properly (59). In his opinion, she is good for nothing as she does not know basic things like cooking a chicken curry or sambar or making pickles. He goes to the extent of saying that she does not “even know how to deliver a baby in a normal manner” pointing to the fact that their son was born of a Caesarian section (59). Like Sushama’s husband Reghuraman, Michael Joseph also wants her to be a good wife, mother and homemaker without recognising her individual aspirations.

The jury takes a serious note of these accusations and questions her on several things such as whether she understands

the meaning of being a woman, whether she is religious, etc. It bombards her with questions to investigate her knowledge on things like the price of gas cylinder and broiler chicken, household remedy for wasp-bite, the quantity of washing powder used in a month, name of the nearest grocery store, the vegetable used for aviyal, the market which sells fish at the lowest price, etc. (60). When she is not able to answer these questions, the jury comes to the conclusion that her “irresponsible ways” have caused Michael “huge grief and despair” (61). It asks her what she has “done to make [her] ... life as woman meaningful” (61). The reader cannot fail to notice the irony when the jury does not attach any importance to the facts revealed by her about the double-promotion in her office, the money she earns, or the publication of her writings. In the jury’s opinion, these things are of no use to her husband and son, who should be her primary responsibility. The satirical strain which runs throughout the story reaches its climax in the verdict announced by the jury. The jury dictates—

Put down the silver platter of Salome and be only Mrs. Michael Joseph, wife to Michael Joseph and mother to his son. Learn to cook chicken-curry and sambar, his favorite dishes. Wash his clothes. Keep the house clean for him. Look after his son. Treat your career as a mere hobby. Be a good wife and good mother, unto the last day of your life on this earth (61).

The story exposes the patriarchal mind-set of a conventional society. In the words of K. Satchidanandan, this story “sums up the situation of a creative and intelligent woman in a conservative patriarchal society whose norms are reinforced by religion” (21). The unnamed jury represents the written and unwritten codes to be followed by women in such a society. In the verdict of the jury, the husband is considered the centre around which the life of the wife should revolve. Even the child she gives birth to is not considered her own but of her husband.

There is also a hypocrisy lying at the heart of such a mind-set. The jury boasts that they are aware of the likes of Freud and Fromm, and give sexual education to their children from the very start. But as far as their views on women's role in society are concerned, they are still archaic and retrograde.

Mable might not live up to the expectations of her husband or the jury, but she shines in the eyes of the readers for the firmness of her character. She puts up her case resolutely without being subdued by the jury, and registers her protest matter-of-factly against the accusations levelled against her. She is not openly rebellious like Sushma, but her inner strength and independent thinking are at display throughout the story. Balan also draws our attention towards Mable's writerly instinct which, like Sushama's, overtakes her mind when she is alone. However, while in case of Sushama the writerly impulse is kept hidden from the world, whereas Mable is already an established writer under her pen-name, and vividly expresses her creative side in front of her husband and the jury. She tells how her mind is filled with "the state of bliss" when she encounters "the black and terrible beauty of the night", and how "slowly Salome wakes up inside [her]" and "begins her dance ... with a silver platter in hand" (59).

The Sigh of Savitri

"The Fifth One" is again an experimental story in which Balan enters the domestic zone to showcase the loveless and taken-for-granted life of a housewife. The story revolves around the suicide attempt by Savitri who decides to end her life after twelve years of her dreary marriage to Satyanesan. She does not want her family to be involved in "the scandal of suicide", hence plans everything meticulously to make her suicide under the running train look like an accidental death (70). Savitri does not directly accuse anyone for her intended suicide, nor does the narrator tell us anything about it except for the ironical remark

that which woman is not “looking for a means to escape” (71). However, it soon becomes evident that it is her undignified existence which has compelled her to take such a step. The reader witnesses the protagonist approaching towards the moment of her planned death on the railway track, but there is an anti-climax in the end. The train falls off the bridge before it reaches the spot where Savitri is standing, leaving her unhurt. Barring a few indirect hints, Balan leaves it upon the reader to surmise the whole situation. When the train is just about to hit Savitri, a “sigh rises from her unawares, scattering the molecules in the air” (76). Since there was no tornado witnessed by anyone, the train is supposed to have been swept over by the woman’s sigh. Experts presume that some “tornadoes cannot be perceived by the naked eye; just like a sigh” (76).

The author has apparently used suicide as a tragicomic trope instead of a realistic incident. However, the story powerfully divulges the suffocating and loveless environment of the household which can force a woman to take such a step. In contrast to the mythological couple Savitri and Satyavan who are known for their love and devotion to each other, the husband and wife in this story share a monotonous relationship sans any warmth. Though she tries to fulfil her duties as a wife and mother, she is often accused of being “irresponsible” in front of other members of her family. She always remains in the want of love, respect and dignity as an individual. On the day of her supposed suicide, she asks her husband to have breakfast together only to be snubbed in return, “What’s so special about today? Is it time for my obsequies, or yours?” (74). Since it is the last day of her life, she feels a strong desire to touch her husband, the man who “destroyed her virginity...gave her two children in quick succession...[and] then withdrew into his naturally monotonous existence and threw her out into the foul world of duty” (74-5). As Balan’s other protagonists, Savitri too does not openly rebel against society or aspire for “the liberated status of the New Woman”. She only wants to “live in peace with

a fistful of dreams” (75-6), but even that is not granted to her by the patriarchal society.

I Know How to Live My Life

In “The Optical Illusion” too, Chandrika Balan presents similar patterns of patriarchal attitudes towards women. The story revolves around a young unmarried female narrator, belonging to a lower middle-class family comprising four unmarried sisters including the protagonist, their widowed mother and an elder brother who is the head of the family. She is dissatisfied with her family life where her brother constantly reminds her that the sisters are a burden on him. When she is diagnosed with a refractory error, her brother wants her to purchase “a frame with the lowest price” (78). But, going against his will, she buys for herself the best-quality frame – made of the shell of a sea creature – with the money she earned by offering tuitions in the neighborhood.

She is shown as a powerful character whose inner voice bids her to “not hesitate to obey the dictates of [her] mind” (78). She is not the one who is easily subdued by her brother or society. She raises her voice against the head of the family when he tries to infringe on her freedom, “don’t think that you can hold me with reins ... I know how to live my life” (83). But there is another side to her character as well which is reflected when she exclaims, “I don’t want to do anything ... I just want to sleep in the arms of Sudhi [with whom she is betrothed]” (89). Balan gives special place to such eruption of emotions and weak moments when her characters seek love and care from the opposite sex.

This story also operates at the level of fantasy which Balan has deftly dovetailed in the plot. The narrator undergoes a metamorphosis under the impact of the sea-creature in the frame, and is endowed with an unusual power over others. Nobody in

the house or the neighborhood is able to look into her fierce eyes. Anyone who comes under her spell becomes her subordinate. Significantly, the story hints that the metamorphosis is not an external injection of strength but the unveiling of the hidden power inherent in a woman or what is called Shakti. As in “The Fifth One”, in this story too the hidden strength of a woman is hinted at through a creative plot innovation. This is not to say that it is glorified disproportionally. In fact, it is due to Balan’s controlled use of language, deft handling of irony and humor, and creative narrative turns that make these stories achieve the desired effect and leave a powerful impact on the readers.

Conclusion

To conclude, it can be said that Balan’s stories portray the dilemmas and struggles of the lower-middle-class Indian females who, despite being educated and strong-willed, could not completely liberate themselves from the fetters of family and society. However, they do put up resolute fights against patriarchy from within, and negotiate their domestic spaces and everyday realities in their own subversive ways. While eschewing the restraining framework of *pennezhuthu*, Balan’s representation suggests that the experiential reality of women is far more complex and variegated, and hence it requires innovative use of language and writing techniques to capture this. Her stories might not be ‘radical’ in the conventional sense of the term, yet they evince a powerful aesthetic of subversion as well as upliftment. On the one hand, Balan’s subtle delineation of the mental anguish of ordinary women compels one to think the gender problems prevalent in society, on the other, the enigma she creates around her characters makes the reader see the dormant potential of a woman. Thus, these stories not only touch the raw nerve of the experience of being women in contemporary India, but also open up gendered spaces of society and raise pertinent political questions.

End Notes

- i Most of this criticism, which came from liberal humanist critics like M Krishnana Nair, Guptan Nair and authors like T. Padmanabhan, G.N. Panikkar etc. was based on conservative and unsustainable accusations like pennezhuthu being an alibi for women writers of ‘low creativity’ to gain easy success, a kind of ‘reservation’ as remarked by Padmanabhan.
- ii Gita Hiranyan’s response to the question whether she is a feminist goes as, “I am the female of the human species. I’m called a woman just as he is called a man. I possess all the emotions and feelings he is endowed with – anger, hatred, love, sorrow, vengeance, contempt, ridicule and the like. I cannot act alike at all times” (qtd. in Nair xv).
- iii The writers who have rejected outrightly or shown reservations towards the label ‘feminist’ for themselves or their writings include such stalwarts like Kabita Sinha, Mahasweta Devi, Sivashankari, Krishna Sobti, Qurratulain Hyder, and Sashi Deshpande, all of whom uphold women’s cause in one way or the other in their writings.
- iv In her analysis of Malayalam literature and literary criticism, J. Devika identifies the presence of what she calls “the male ‘homoaesthetic circles’” – “informal but hierarchical intellectual-cultural networks of literary communication” in which mostly “male critics, authors, readers, publishers ... participate” (9). Over the period of time, many such circles have been formed around particular ideologies or around individual authors and critics, which attempted to “consecrate” successive generations of women writers through various strategies (9-11).
- v In “The Story” there is a foil to Sushama in the character of Shriranjini, who is an employed woman, more assertive and

open. She too writes poems, but they – unlike Sushama’s poems – carry fierceness and anger typical of the feminist writing. Balan’s story however follows the poem of Sushama more assiduously than that of Shriranjini for the reason that the latter has already been recognised and awarded, while the former is not fortunate enough to see the light of the day.

- vi Balan reveals in one of her interviews, “Sometimes life chokes me and I struggle for breath. My writing is a desperate attempt to have a life-giving breath” (qtd. in Nair 2012, xiii).

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