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## **From Unnimaya's Standpoint: A Sociological Commentary of the Malayalam Movie 'Parinayam'**

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### **Abstract:**

The paper is a sociological, literary and feminist reading of the National award winning movie, *Parinayam* (1994). The movie depicts the lives of Namboodiri women and their social, cultural, moral conditioning in the society. The movie *Parinayam* directed by Hariharan, is an adaptation of the Malayalam novel '*Smartha Vicharam*' by Kuriyedath Thathri. It is an empathetic portrayal of the silenced voices of women inhabiting the *Namboothiri* households and the social and moral conventions of patriarchy that confined to the dark spaces of Brahmanical *Illam*. The film focuses on perspective of a woman by narrating her journey, the challenges posed by her community, the effects of the male-oriented societal system and its impact on her life. Dorothy Edith Smith CM is one of the pioneers of the Standpoint theory. The major notion of the standpoint theory is the knowledge that an individual possesses out of his life and experience depends on his subject position or stand in the society. The study emphasizes on the standpoint of a seventeen-year-old Namboodiri girl, Unnimaya, married to a sixty-four-year-old Namboodiri. This paper is a commentary on the events and the practices carried out in the movie from the standpoint of Unnimaya and the impact of ruthless conventional practices on the central character. A sociological interpretation is significant as it throws light on the dark lives led by those women who never made it past without being able to break the shackles of patriarchy.

**Keywords: Standpoint, patriarchy, bifurcation, ruling, objectivity.**

## **Introduction**

*A widow is perpetually terrified of laughter than of tears. What do you know of the sores and scars that are inflicted upon our minds, Heads of Priests? It is the smoke from this fire that is always burning in the racks of the Namboodiri chambers.*

Lalithambika Antharjanam; 1940

The paper is a sociological, literary and feminist interpretation of the National award-winning movie of 1994, *Parinayam*. The movie is an adaptation of the Malayalam novel '*SmarthaVicharam*' (inquiry of conduct) by Kuriyedath Thathri. The movie portrays the life of a *Namboodiri* woman inside the *Namboodiri* household after being widowed and pregnant through an illicit affair. *Parinayam* directed by Hariharan, after its release in 1994, bagged four national awards in separate sections, Best Film on Other Social Issues, Best Screenplay, Best Music Direction, Special Jury Award for Cinematography, and several State as well as Film Fare Awards. The recognitions won by the movie brought it to the forefront of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Malayalam cinema. The *Namboodiri* community follows the age-old customs and traditions, especially practices of inquiry of conduct even to the present day. Though there has been a variation in the rigorous execution of the customs, it is still carried out in many parts of Kerala. Though there are various other contemporary movies on the subject, *Parinayam* exemplifies the journey of a widowed *Namboodiri* woman and her social standing in a visceral manner. The movie depicts the life of women inhabiting the *Namboothiri Illam* (ancestral Brahmanical house) and the social and moral conventions of patriarchy that keep them confined to the dark spaces of the time-honored Brahmin ménage. The setting of the movie is the 18<sup>th</sup> century *Namboodiri* '*Illam*' inhabited by the community leaders or '*Smarthans*'. *Smarthans* occupy the prestigious *Palakunnathu Illam* to arrange the inquiry of conduct or '*Smarthavicharam*'. This practice had been followed and imposed mostly by the elderly class of *Namboodiris* up to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The protagonist of the movie, is the seventeen-year-old girl Unnimaya. She had been married to a sixty-four-year-old *Namboodiri* who died of old age soon after their marriage. Unnimaya, along with the other two widows restrained to the huge ancestral house following the death and forbidden to leave the house in any manner. Unnimaya with her dreams and hopes for a blooming life crushed, finds solace in

an artist, Madhavan, a frequent visitor of the house. The result is a secret love affair that blossoms in Unnimaya's life which leaves her pregnant. This leads to 'Smartha Vicharam' and renouncement by her community. The film attempts to give out a female perspective by focusing on her journey, the challenges posed by the community, the effects of the male-oriented societal system and its practices on her life and other experiences.

The development of feminist standpoint theories was during the 1970's from Marxist feminist thought and feminist critical theoretical approaches. The focus of these theories is on the epistemological, methodological approaches to the existing feminist readings. Feminist standpoint theories place connections between political and social power and knowledge. Dorothy Edith Smith CM, a renowned Canadian sociologist is one of the founders of the Standpoint Theory along with Nancy Hartsock, Hilary Rose, Sandra Harding, Patricia Hill Collins, Alison Jaggar and Donna Haraway. These theorists joined together to formulate a conceptual and theoretical framework on women's lived experiences, particularly experiences of (caring) work, as the beginning of scientific enquiry. The crux of their theory is the emphasis on factual experience, power and epistemology and the importance of social systems in the generation of knowledge.

The American theorist Sandra Harding coined the term 'standpoint theory' to mean the theories of knowledge that emphasize on women's knowledge. Smith has attained acclaim for being one of the originators of the Standpoint theory, which was first introduced by Patricia Hill Collins with regard to the Black feminist standpoint. Collins introduced the Black feminist standpoint in her book, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990). The major notion of Smith's standpoint theory is, the knowledge an individual possesses out of his life and experience depends on his subject position or stand in the society. He or she sees what they see, depending on the stand or the subject that they are in. The view of the world that one experiences along with the 'other' world view is conditional to the location of the stand. It propagates the ideology that every individual has his own standpoint with respect to gender and that affects the experience of their reality. The three significant pointers of the theory are; no one can have complete objective knowledge; no two people can have the exact same standpoint and the standpoint from which one speaks should never be taken for granted.

### **Loopholes of Objectivity**

The movie *Parinayam* depicts the life and standpoint of a seventeen-year-old Namboodiri girl, Unnimaya, accused and found guilty of adultery in the hands of a patriarchal lineage. She enters the *Illam* or the household, marrying a sixty-four-year-old *Namboodiri* possessing socially acclaimed patronage. From the beginning, she is subjected to stringent practices and conduct of patriarchy by her husband, her brother and even the fellow women in the household. The male standpoint or the masculine point of view is the dominant ideology and it is considered as the objective voice of the main stream society. The eldest *Smarthan* in charge of conducting the inquiry insults the girl in public. '*Dosham vanna saadhanam*' (the impure object) is the term used to identify her. Women are referred to by the name, *Antharjanam* (the people inhabiting the inner chambers) and in this case, Unnimaya is addressed as *saadhanam* (inanimate object). The movie opens with the conduct of *Smarthavicharam* on Unnimaya and the maid accompanying her in the *Arappura* (the inner chamber) that she is locked up in. The inquiry is conducted by the community leaders or *Namboodiris*, (*Smarthans*). They find it a good opportunity to gloat about their wives and mistresses, consuming delicious traditional feast every day, occasionally going over to taunt 'sadhanam' (object) that is to mean, Unnimaya. The girl's family has no say in the trial or in any matter that concerns her after she has been married off to a family. They are mere spectators to the sinner's fate. According to Dorothy Smith, truth and knowledge are grounded in the foundational moments in which the social comes into being through language and through concept of a standpoint's denied access to objective knowledge has been shown here through the sensory ground that human organisms share.

Unnimaya's standpoint has been acknowledged by no one except for a maid in the household. She is also befriended by Kunjunni, the eldest son of her husband. The maid and Kunjunni becomes a friend and acquaintance to her, moreover the only friendly faces in the house. Other than the Kunjunni, no male member of the family shares or comprehends Unnimaya's standpoint; hence none exhibit the comprehensive knowledge of the event as much as her. Every other character has a subjective view depending on their social standing. The viewers are left to ponder over the scenario, being the audience to the story.

### **The Split in Conscience**

The next concept that Smith explores in this theory is the bifurcation of consciousness. This refers to a split between the worlds, first as one would actually experience it, the second, the

dominant or prevalent view to which one must adapt (the masculine point of view). Unnimaya stepped into the *Illam* as a girl with hopes and dreams which were shattered in the face of her husband's demise. Widowhood shoves her among insolent women (the other wives) and blank walls. She had been fascinated by the arts since young age and hence, she is drawn to Madhavan, with his charms and eloquence and alluring portrayal of mythological characters. She found herself experiencing deep shades of love for the first time only for it to be broken abruptly by her pregnancy. All the shades turn grey as her lover recedes from the picture and she is left alone, facing the *Smarthan*. During the inquiry of conduct the maid is questioned on the actions of the girl. Following this, the religious leader questions Unnimaya. Framed as a prostitute and discarded as an object not worthy of any humanistic consideration, she is thrown out of the *Illam* at the end. It is then that she finds herself and her position in the society. The world as one would come to terms with it, is different for Unnimaya and her lover, Madhavan.

The affair between them had been the only a source of happiness in her life after marriage. At an early phase in life, Unnimaya was forced to give up on the pleasures or even the basic rights of a woman on account of her widowhood. Though both are equally responsible for the action they committed; only Unnimaya faces the reprimand and is banished from her family. Madhavan is given minimum focus in terms of social wrath and religious sentence. He begs her not to reveal his name while being questioned, thereby falling in dignity from her life. She says,

*“Madhavante vann veshangalonnum kaanan saadhichitila. Ippo Bheeruvasham kandu.”*

(I have never been able to watch your master pieces on stage. Now I saw one, the one of a coward.)

(Parinayam.01.43.24)

She refuses to have even water while locked up in the *arappura* as a mark of her revolt against the society and patriarchy. The split between the worlds is portrayed in Unnimaya's conscience where she alone is sentenced for an action committed by both and she is forced to adhere to the persisting masculine ideology that imposes the punishment on her.

## Discourse as an Influence

The final concept that Smith puts forth in relation to the theory is the relations of ruling. This term refers to not only the established systems of power in society like the bureaucracy, administration, management, professional organization and the media but also to the scientific, technical, cultural complex of discourses that intersect, interpenetrate and coordinate. Political, economic, religious and cultural discourses too play a major role in the power play of the society. The official rule book of caste, referred to as the *Shasthras*, has prescribed strict codes of conduct for both men and women of different castes and communities.

To the Smarthan's statement that widows are not supposed to get pregnant, Unnimaya smartly asserts that,

*Vedangal oke marranuo pandithanmar? Vedam srishticha Vyasamuni puthrolpathanam nadathiyath vidhavakalil alle?*

(Have the head priests forgotten the Vedas? Have you forgotten that the writer of the Vedas had children from widows?)

(Parinayam, 01.56.03)

The sin committed by the woman, along with the treatment meted out to them, the justification of the ordeal they have to go through, are said to have been written down in the ancient religious and social texts and discourses of the community. The justice system has no women members either. There is also the reference to the 'other' texts here are indeed the progressive and revolutionary writings. Reading these texts or associating with them in any way is considered as a taboo.

## Conclusion

*Parinayam* reflects the terms of Smith's Standpoint theory in various ways. Modern society and its developments emerged later though even at present women are termed as mad, infirm and witch-like for showing humanly tendencies. On the contrary, a very different treatment had been meted out to a man who had been involved in the same act.

While the inquiry is being conducted Unnimaya responds with her head held high that she did no sin.

*Garbham undakum. Prasavikkum. Sthreekale srishtichirikunnath angane alle?Ath eeshwarante kuttam.*

(Yes, I am pregnant. Women get pregnant and bear their children. If that is a sin, then The God who created us, is the sinner.)

(Parinayam, 01.53.58)

Women are the victims of the stereotypical, patriarchal society which marginalizes and subjugated them for centuries. This movie demonstrates the predicament of a *Namboodiri* woman living in a conservative, and rigorous society with details entailing every event in the story. A sociological interpretation is the need of the hour as it is read in a light of the subject position of the protagonist along with her perspectives. The movie attempts to bring out the dark lives led by those women who never made it past the wooden doors and died unknown and unrecognized by the world. Any knowledge of experience pertaining to any section of community of the society needs to be validated from the standpoint of the individual around whom it is centred. Other standpoints cannot be objective as is perceived. In a developing society like ours, meanings and narratives constructed are essential discourses to our comprehension and perspective of the world. Standpoints stipulate objectivity and thereby, are prominent in shaping the reality of every individual.

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