

A Study Of Man-Woman Relationship And Gender Politics In C.S. Lakshmi's Short-Stories

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This paper analyses how C.S. Lakshmi portrays the home sphere of India's patriarchal society, the man-woman relationship, and gender politics in her short-stories. The stories discussed in this study portray everyday events as subtly political, illuminating women's struggles to change their circumstances by defying male authority and society's prejudices. The premise that social development is slow yet potentially beneficial supports C.S. Lakshmi's opinions on man-woman relationships. In order to address the disparities that men and women suffer in their psychological development and in their day-to-day circumstances, the author examines the constellation of familial interactions. The women in her stories are not moving towards a western worldview but rather are reforming and reconstructing their female identity as they examine Indian tradition. They depart from stereotypical role models, showcasing innovation and resourcefulness, and defining a new femininity, which calls for the emergence of a new masculinity.

Keywords: Identity, Patriarchal, Man-Woman, Gender, Femininity.

Introduction

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The world at present is witnessing a rapid and radical social transformation especially in the institutions of marriage and family. For a very long time, women have been given the duty of maintaining the stability of marriage by submission, selflessness, and dedicated service to their husbands and families. The patriarchal structure is crumbling due to the increasing status and shifting roles of women. Today, there is conflict between men and women over how gender should be perceived and lived. In the human mind, the roles of man as provider and defender and woman as nurturer and server continue to occupy a significant position. The contribution of the man to the family is recognised, but not that of the woman. This patriarchal power and status disparity between men and women gives rise to "sexual politics."

Sex is a status category with political overtones, where male and female roles are characterised by dominance and subjugation, respectively. The biological and stereotypical societal roles that men and women have been playing throughout history have resulted in such

a disparate distribution of power. Men bridge the two worlds, the domestic and the public, but women are typically restricted to the household. Men have never realised that the only reason they can engage in social activities is because women tend to their personal needs. Women have begun to share social duties with males, but this has not altered how society views women.

C.S. Lakshmi is one of the most influential writers of modern Tamil literature. She writes with awareness since she addresses common or relevant concerns. She does not battle to have a distinct identity or personality, but she wants people to notice and recognise her feminine characters and issues. In her writings, she creates her own language. She undoubtedly provides a completely new perspective to contemporary Tamil writing. She has created a fresher, more liberated style of Tamil writing that more accurately captures the reality of women. She uses a variety of storytelling styles in her stories, depending on the type of subject matter in each one. Her writing is audaciously experimental.

A detailed examination of C.S. Lakshmi's short-stories indicates her strong concern for women's oppression and struggle as a result of men's patriarchal attitudes inside the structures of marriage and family. Her female followers are observed to react with greater aggression and candour. Some of the male characters are discovered to have their sense of superiority shaken by the resourceful women nearby. Feminist studies assert, among other things, that unless gender attitudes are changed at the individual and family levels, it may be challenging to achieve the same in the public and societal spheres. The cultural and parental expectations placed on young males and girls have a significant impact on how stereotypes are formed. Proverbs are a crucial teaching tool in Tamil culture for instilling morals in young people. Many proverbs place men and women in separate categories of superiority and inferiority. As noted by C.S. Lakshmi in her book *The Face Behind the Mask*, one may find in Tamil proverbs an attitude of real exaltation, encouragement, appreciation, and support extended towards the male, while an attitude of pity, condescension, indulgence, indifference, neglect, and mock-exaltation shown towards the female. Gender politics can already be seen in the following:

The birth of a girl seems to have always brought disappointment. A Tamil proverb in perfect rhythm says that if a boy was born, he will be a dear; the birth of a girl, however, can only be likened to that of a buffalo. Even a king with five daughters would become a mendicant, goes a proverb. An honourable house needs only a girl to ruin it, warns another proverb. A girl is a decorative piece whereas the boy is the preserver of the family's prestige and hence certain Tamil proverbs indicate a stern upbringing for a boy to prepare him to be the head of the family, and an indulgent one for a girl: For affection a girl and for property, a boy. Beat and bring up a boy, and pamper a daughter.

(2)

Politics introduced throughout a child's upbringing affects both male and female youngsters as they mature into adults. Most C.S. Lakshmi's short-stories show how the patriarchal culture of India fosters this wrongdoing. The short-stories - "Gifts" of *A Purple Sea*, "Vultures" (Vallurukal), "The Darkness of Loneliness" (Thanimai Enum Iruttu) and "Wings Get Broken" (Siragugal Muriyum) of *Wings Get Broken*.

The short-story “Gifts” is about the heartbreaking dreams of a young woman from the middle class who is longing to get married and the pretence of complacency of a middle-aged married woman who is housebound. A young journalist from Delhi travels to the south of India to conduct interviews with women for a piece she is writing about them. She is met at the train station by Chidambaram, a typical young villager, who drives her to his brother’s home for a half-day visit. He is depicted by C.S. Lakshmi in the conventional masculine role of woman’s protector. He is worried that she will arrive at her destination safely even if he is seeing her off to another town:

Chidambaram brought her bus ticket. ‘You will be all right, won’t you? Ganapathi will certainly meet you there. He’ll take you home as soon as his work is finished. He’s not here at the moment... That’s why... You’ll reach there safely, won’t you?’ ‘I got to this place from Delhi, didn’t I? Of course I’ll be all right.’

‘But alone...’

‘Don’t worry. I’m fine.’

Before the bus finally got going, he said to the conductor, ‘She’s new to this place. Please make sure she gets off at the right place.’

She could hardly breathe. Protection is a form of oppression too. I can only protect you if you stay at home. As soon as you come out and breathe the air that I breathe, danger surrounds you. Terrifying dangers stand at all eight points of the compass, mouths open, ready to devour you. Look how much I care about you, how concerned I am. (7)

Evidently, oppression becomes associated with protection. Women are kept within their homes by men out of concern for their safety, where they are forced to live in constant dread and uncertainty. While the male serves as the guardian and expresses concern for the protection of his mother, wife, sister, and daughter, he also turns hostile towards other women and poses a threat to them.

C.S. Lakshmi portrays Chandra, Ganapathy’s younger sister, and explains the dreams and expectations of an adolescent. Chandra is questioned by the journalist about her conception of the prospective husband:

‘What sort of husband do you fancy?’

‘...Are you asking me what sort of man he should be? Well, he should be a good man.’

‘Meaning? That he shouldn’t drink or smoke? Or what?’

‘He mustn’t get angry. He mustn’t threaten me.’

‘What do you really want after you are married? Come on, let me make a list.’

...She had her list, sure enough:

‘I want to walk along the streets outside, every day.

I want to eat a plate of snacks in a restaurant.

I want to walk into a shop and choose my own sari.

I want to go to the cinema.

I want to see lots of places.’ (9)

The girl enumerates her ‘wants.’ But the middle-aged Chidambaram sister-in-law, whose life is spent in the tedium of a kitchen, has already foreshadowed what she would actually receive.

Her buried desires were all unfulfilled. She once expressed a desire to visit the seaside when in a delusional state due to a sickness, but her husband's response was merely a smack. She began cooking when she was ten years old and had only done that for forty years. As she speaks with the journalist, the idea of a woman as a nurturer in contrast to a male as a defender emerges:

‘What is this report you are writing?’

‘About women.’

‘What is there to write about women?’

‘How they live. What work they do. What they think about their lives’

‘What do they think? We bore our children. We fed them.’ (5)

C.S. Lakshmi expresses the message that the young girl's wedded life won't be any different from that of the other woman by contrasting the two female characters in the novel. Along with thousands of dosais, iddlis, vadais, appams, vegetable dishes, and chutneys, the girl will cook throughout her life to develop her productive skill. These women are made into slaves by their illiteracy and economic dependence. Their joy is contained only in their dreams. They persevere in order to realise their spouses' aspirations.

The situations that married women face are most painfully portrayed by C.S. Lakshmi in her stories “Vultures,” “The Darkness of Loneliness,” and “Wings Got Broken.” In these stories, the women protagonists manage their houses, typically with less resources and greater restrictions. As a result of being raised with patriarchal ideologies, their spouses and other male family members are found to be overbearing and oppressive. Despite appearing to swallow her resentment, the female lead in each of these tales demonstrates her ability to resurrect herself from the inside out and declare her uniqueness. Surprisingly, in India, this is the only reliable and admirable female role model she may look up to in order to survive. However, a woman's inner strength might also be mistaken for a weakness.

Most frequently, women are portrayed in literature as crafty and cunning creatures, such as temptresses or sorceresses. Like how a vulture, wolf, or tiger that preys on helpless beings is projected onto a man. Sharma Babu, a rapacious businessman who is only concerned with increasing his wealth, is the subject of the short-story, “Vultures.” He has no compassion for the poor peasants, who are left at the mercy of his ration shop, which is simply used to store and not distribute rice and wheat. The woman is severely upset by her husband's outrageous and suspicious actions towards her in addition to disliking his miserliness. She expresses her emotions to her daughter Shailu, whose perspective the story is told from. Gopal Babu, a former acquaintance of Shailu's mother, pays them a visit. The boy and his mother engage in a spirited chat as she smiles widely. However, the father starts to wonder about their romance. After the visitor has left, he coerces her into swearing on a little vial of the holy Ganga water kept in their pooja room to affirm her chastity. He rapes her afterwards. The daughter recounts this excruciating scene:

Screaming from the depth of her abdomen, she spit on his face. He took a step backward out of shock, and then slapped her face forcefully with his rough hand. Amma did not defend herself. Giving two more blows on her face he lifted her and took her to his room. After that incidence her voice itself became changed taking a metallic quality in it. When she spoke, her voice

sounded lifeless like a metalpiece falling on the floor. After that Brahmara was born. (85)

One day, when Sharma Babu sends away an elderly man whose pregnant daughter dies of malnutrition, all the wife's suppressed rage and shame come bursting out. She visits the shed in the backyard that night to find the stored grain of rice and wheat. She urges the peasants to come and get the grains as she rips open the gunny bags. However, she is killed when an irate Sharma commands his servant to strike the intruder even though it is his wife. The dual aspects of violence - gender and class prejudice - are addressed by C.S. Lakshmi.

The protagonist of "The Loneliness in Darkness" experiences alienation from his own wife. The main character's spouse, Renganathan, must travel for more than twenty days each month, leaving his newlywed wife, Aruna, to live in her own imaginative world. Aruna struggles to establish relationships with her neighbours because she moved to Delhi from a different state and speaks a different language. Her emotional distance from her husband grows with time as a result of their physical separation. She creates an imaginary husband and lives with him since she is a very sensitive and imaginative person. The shadow grows so vivid and personal that the actual is obscured. Inability to leave her realm of dream when Renganathan must return from his tour after almost a month, Aruna takes additional sleeping pills.

Renganathan appears in this tale more as an archetype than as a distinct character. He is the quintessential Rama, prioritising social life over domestic life. Aruna portrays the image of a disillusioned and betrayed wife, whereas Renganathan portrays that of an uncaring husband. A husband's betrayal needs not always involve infidelity. Even failing to express his concern, empathy, and emotional support to his wife in a visible way could cause him to lose her trust. In the setting of India, Aruna can make the reader think of Sita from Ramayana. Sita expresses her outrage at Rama by jumping into Mother Earth's abyss in response to his preference for his job as monarch above that of a husband. This is a representation of a woman withdrawing into the recesses of her mind to vent her rage at an uncaring husband.

The main character in "Wings Got Broken," Chaya, is shown as having dreams that turn to misery after marriage. She hopes to achieve marital harmony and bliss by riding on the "wings of Pegasus," as the Tamil title suggests, but the wings are destroyed by her unaware, uncaring husband Bhaskar, whose calculative, middle-class attitude ruins her dream of a passionate marriage. She and her family are initially impressed by the similarity of their names, Bhaskar, and Chaya, which denote the light and the shadow, two aspects that cannot be separated. She envisions herself and Bhaskar as the protagonist and heroine of a Tamil film:

There had been the daydream about hurting her fingers while slicing vegetables. With a smile, he would bandage them for her. One day he would slap her on the cheek - No, no, not the cheek; she didn't want her face disfigured - He'd slap her across her back. Not for any fault of hers. Later she could sob and weep her heart out. He: 'Could it have been this hand that hit you...' etcetera, etcetera. Another daydream. In all of them, she suffered for him; he finally melted. Of course, her dreams were strictly within what was permitted to a Hindu woman. (27)

However, soon after learning of Bhaskar's stinginess and insensitivity, Chaya feels empty inside. She begins creating fictitious laws regarding husbands. The most terrible of these regulations applies to husbands who make love to their wives indifferently, like blocks of

wood: "A law: A husband who makes advances when he is not wanted...Husbands who caused their wives such afflictions should be given houses in the red-light district in perpetuity" (35). When Chaya realises that her husband prefers her because she is constantly available and without charge, she feels worse than a whore. Chaya tried to convince Bhaskar early in their marriage that interpersonal connections are more valuable than material possessions. However, the true disaster strikes when she realises that she, too, has developed a calculative nature like Bhaskar:

From the shadows of her mind, some realizations began to shake themselves free, like apparitions of the night suddenly brought to light for a few seconds, by a flash of lightning. Why did she get such a satisfaction out of opening her bank-book and looking at the totals? Her self-awareness became like black devils pointing their fingers at her and crowing, 'You are like that too' (35).

Their lone child, Sekar, too develops a sense of financial responsibility. He is tempted to ask his mother for a bicycle after his classmate Mohan receives a three-wheeler for finishing first in class. Without saying that he wants a cycle, he asks his mother innocently if it is too expensive. "Do you not agree, Amma?" (31). Chaya loves for her son to roll around on the floor while wanting a bicycle so she may console herself with the thought that at least one family member is completely unrestrained. Chaya is concerned that Sekar could develop into yet another Bhaskar. She therefore desires to live apart from Bhaskar and with her son. She wants to soar across the vast, imperturbable silence of the skies that she spreads her wings. Only it can sustain her life. But as she gets closer to giving birth to her second child, she realises that such a goal is impossible to fulfil. She would never be able to handle two kids in a separate home if she did not have financial independence. She does, however, derive a perverse delight from knowing that the addition of the second child will result in the calculative husband having to pay additional expenses.

In this lengthy short-story, C.S. Lakshmi depicts the unhappy life of Chaya's mother as a subplot. No less onerous than her daughter's life is hers. Important family matters, such as the marriage of her daughters, are never discussed with her. She is not pleased with the decision to pair Chaya with Bhaskar. But nobody, not even Chaya, pays attention to her. Her marriage had a rocky beginning. She once played the "veena" for her elderly neighbour, a great music lover, shortly after her marriage at the age of fifteen. Her husband was frank in telling her that all she owned was his to keep and that she should only play the "veena" in his presence. Ironically, he did not even understand the basics of classical music. She intentionally snapped the "veena" strings that night because it reminded her of "breaking her own Tali and throwing it away" (53). She responds to her husband's oppression in this way. The husband's ownership mindset and irrational assumption that men always know what is best for women - who should slavishly follow the husband's unchangeable orders - are made clear.

The depiction of women in C.S. Lakshmi's stories as autonomous beings with minds, aspirations, and executive capacities provides a counterpoint to the confused, angry, and perplexed image of men: while women solve their identity crisis on their own terms through the discovery of selfhood, men become aware of losing their identity; while women work hard to bring their lives under their control, men discover that their lives are slipping out of their control.

Gender studies continue to debate how gender politics are produced through power politics. Man controls women because of their inferior physical strength and demands that they remain his dependents. For the reason, the connection between a man and a woman is even compared to that of a master and a slave. A world full of injustice and illogic was spawned by patriarchal impositions. To create an egalitarian society, the women's liberation movement seeks to correct the gender power disparity. The woman looks to benefit from this procedure in that she has already felt helpless. Therefore, any advancement in her status will be interpreted as a recognition of her worth. A male, however, has a different sensation. He can perceive the advancement of women as a sign of his own value being diminished. But it's important to know that by maintaining a balance of power between the sexes, man stays in his position. He is joined by the woman, who becomes his equal half.

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