

Women, Cultural History, Memory and Myth:A Lakshadweep Chronicle

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Abstract: The cultural history, memory and myth of Lakshadweep are closely related to the lives of the island women. But the matrilineal patriarchy at work in the society acts as a shackle that tames the thoughts and experiences of women. This article looks into the ways in which this powerful system of matriliney serves as a tool to dictate the norms of patriarchy and has prevented women from gaining visibility and voice across the ages. It traces the trajectory of women's oppression as a colonial and post-colonial subject, using select pieces from Lakshadweep oral literature.

Keywords: matrilineal patriarchy, Lakshadweep literature, post-colonial subject

Patriarchy alludes to male domination in both public and private spheres. A patriarchal society bestows absolute superiority to men and, to some extent, limits women's human rights also. Feminists use the term 'patriarchy' to describe the power relationship between men and women as well as to find out the root cause of women's subordination. At the core of all feminist theories lies a critique of patriarchy as a system that discriminated against women as well as an advocacy that women should receive equal opportunity and rights as men in social, economic and political fronts. Such equality became a functional principle in Indian society after independence in 1947, with the adoption of a Constitution that promised equality, freedom, protection from discriminations based on gender or religion. It is significant that with Indian Independence, Lakshadweep was declared as a Union Territory, which was a turning point in the lives of Lakshadweep and its women. As a region which had been in the clutches of the colonial masters, the island has a great story of resistance and survival as well.

Literature often reflects the cultural assumptions and attitudes, including attitude towards women, their status, roles and expectations, across different periods in a society. Though Lakshadweep is a matrilineal society, the role of women and their lived experiences are

influenced by patriarchal ideas. Hence, this article will touch on the power politics of gender and related issues of discrimination, stereotyping, objectification, social stigmatization and oppression.

Preserving Memories through Folk narratives

Almost all societies across the world perpetuate their traditional customs, culture, history, rituals, beliefs, stories and songs through their cultural memories. Memories were once preserved and transferred to successive generations through an oral tradition and now, through print and digital media. Lakshadweep too has a very rich oral tradition, especially of Mappila songs and folk songs. The distinct style of this folk tradition reflects the very soul of the island. There were specialised groups of women who performed Mappila Mylanchi songs during *Oppana* (a dance performed by women during wedding ceremonies) at Muslim weddings. Their performances were inevitable at marriage gatherings, *Sunnaths* (male circumcision ceremony) and any other special occasions. These groups travelled from island to island for performances and lived like nomads. This resulted in the widespread dissemination and popularity of folk songs. Certain families, as custodians or retainers of these songs, have always enjoyed a considerable stature in the cultural life of the island.

Many folk songs depicted life experiences and routines of the islanders in a simple language. The launching ceremony of new *Odams* (small fishing boats), journey through the sea, *Padaari* (the period of delay for boats to return to the islands due to heavy rainfall), sharecropping – are all conveyed through songs, along with dreams, romance, rivalry and revenge. For instance, one of the songs included in *Lakshadweepile Nandanpattukal* (Folksongs of Lakshadweep) compiled by Dr.M. Mullakkoya, captures the grief of a wife who is afraid of *Padaari* or any kind of mishap to her husband:

Kalam EdavanjarAhirmasath
Cherayumkalppattuadangiya kalam
Chokkiyumkoodupanitha kalam
Koya ante barishampettenkil
Vedanayentethadiyilkudungum
Eriyalokarkadalilumchadum. (40)

The woman in the song is forced to bid farewell to her husband who goes sailing in the sea during the beginning of a heavy rainy season. Usually rainy season is a time for navigators

to stay back at their homes with their family and enjoy their private life. But, here, the man has decided to go to work, and so, has to separate from his wife. The separation haunts her mind and the pain and mental agony born out of this kind of a separation from the mate, weakens her body. The song captures the feelings of women who stay back at home. The women are depicted as obedient and submissive, soft-hearted and emotional. They do not have an identity of their own and are not strong enough to handle adverse situations. The song gives an insight into the gender roles practised in the island – women were supposed to engage in the household chores while men went out to work and dominated the public spheres.

“Abhilashangal” (Dreams) is a folk song in which the central character, Beevi is asked about her wishes in life after her first menstruation. She replies that she wishes to wear new dresses and ornaments and to go out with her friends to see the seashore. Then she would like to go shopping at Sufi Bazaar. Soon after the fulfilment of each desire, she is asked by her lover, what next? She replies that she wants to get married, make love and have a child. Clearly, patriarchal conditioning is so deeply etched in her mind that she cannot think of a goal beyond marriage and children. Having a family life is mandatory for an ideal girl; she cannot have dreams and aspirations beyond that. Evidently in these songs, women are represented as weak and vulnerable, easily manipulated or put into danger. Women are stereotyped virtually as “damsels in distress” who are physically beautiful yet weak – these female characters are icons of beauty and often introduced as “eye candies” – unable to withstand temptations or persuasions and cry in each and every forlorn situation.

“Omanappoovi” is another folk song, in which the girl is requesting her father not to sell their Odam. She asks him to sell her instead of the Odam (boat) and find a remedy for their poverty. This indicates the low self-esteem of girls brought up in conservative patriarchal families. She sacrifices her life in order to provide a life for her family members. It is considered to be the duty of an “ideal woman” to sacrifice herself for the well-being of her family. Such women easily fit into the mould of “Kulasthree” (a woman who upholds the prestige of her family). They were confined to the house and their discussions were mostly related to domestic affairs. The ideas of spirituality and religious practices were exclusively the power products of men, and women were not allowed to engage in discussions regarding them or performances. All the public spheres were the monopoly of men. Women had no public space to discuss their matters.

The myth of chastity and Lakshadweep women.

Kattuvili is an art form performed by island women in connection with the journey and the *Padaar Of odams*. This was performed as an offering to the winds by chaste women for the safe return of *odams* back to the islands. Women assemble near any *dargas* (shrines of saints) or *makbaras* (cemetery of saints where people usually come to pray) and distribute *dharmakkanji* (porridge-like food item usually served to people) among the natives. After that, women gather to sing and dance, addressing the wind.

AkkattumKattilla

IkkattumKattilla

Keelavadakkepoyi

Veeshiadikatte

Allah kollookatte. (44)

Women usually bend and sway their bodies along with the beat of the song and act as if they float with the wind and sea waves. This performance is meant to propitiate the winds and the waves, to safeguard their kith and kin from probable sea accidents. Women observe this performance as a kind of ritual or a prayer for the well-being of their fathers, sons and husbands. It is considered the duty of a woman to participate in this performance in order to show her care and concern for her menfolk. She is supposed to preserve her modesty and suppress her desires and sexual urges for the sake of her husband.

The myth that the chaste behaviour of a woman on land decides her man's fate at sea is prevalent in the island. As R. Bhagyalakshmi states in her article "Myth of Chastity as a Patri-centric Clutch on Women" sums up, these myths have often led to the oppression and subjugation of women:

The lives of women are governed and ruled by the frames and norms of morality that are being created by the patriarchal society. Chastity is one such norm created by andro-centric society and it always remains the yardstick or a tool to measure the femininity of women.

(1)

This very idea of chastity is a *modus operandi* of any androcentric society and is mainly executed with the staunch support from elderly women in families. Upholding chastity along with service to the husband as an ideal wife and perpetual giver is commended by the patriarchal system. Such myths indicate the power politics in a manipulative patriarchal society. These myths and related rituals are used as a tool of oppression and subjugation by patriarchy. The essence of this myth is seen with culture specific modifications in many other parts of the country and the world.

Early records of the chronicles of culture

The cultural history of Lakshadweep points to very brave women who tried to assert what they wanted to do with their life and acted to fulfil their choices. They had clear-cut notions about their religious faith, beliefs and choices. Hameedath Beevi, for instance, was a person who believed in Hazrath Ubaidulla, a religious preacher and accepted Islamic belief for the first time in the island. Later, she married Ubaidulla and settled in Amini Island. Also, in the local history of Lakshadweep, the first resident of the Bitra Island is believed to be a woman. Though her whereabouts remain untraced, she is lauded for her courage to live in an island all by herself. These stories are transferred from generation to generation through oral tradition and songs.

With the establishment of an ideological state apparatus like family, the fundamental unit of a patriarchal society, women automatically became subordinate. Despite the matrilineal system, the socio-cultural obstacles faced by women hinder the empowerment of women. Matrilineal families basically transmit the property through the female lineage. That does not mean that property is transferred from one female member to another; but it is done through a male descendant. Apparently, the ownership and power do not necessarily remain in the hands of these women. Regarding the family system in practice in Lakshadweep and Minicoy, William Logan in his *Malabar Manual* quotes H.M Winderbotham and says:

As for the children which their wives bear to them, if they be girls they abide with the mothers; but if they be boys, mothers bring them up till they are fourteen, and then send them to the fathers. Such is the custom of these two islands. The wives do nothing but nurse their children and gather such fruits as their island produce: for her husband does furnish them with all necessaries. (1004)

Historically, women have held both active and passive roles in Lakshadweep. In some stories, they are the cause for certain actions, in some they are the victims and in yet other stories, they are the game-changers and king-makers. There is a story of a princess of Chiraikkal family being saved from drowning in the river by a Muslim youth, at a time of strict caste related untouchability and excommunication. He gave her his *mundu* (sarong-like attire wrap around the waist, usually used by men) to cover her body with. The princess got polluted as she was touched by a Muslim man and also received *mundu* from him, the latter of which echoes a marriage ceremony. The king who came to know of it asked his daughter to convert to Islam and marry the man. She was given Lakshadweep islands and

some parts of Kannur as her wedding gift. She established the Araikkal dynasty and became the first AraikkalBeevi who ruled over Kannur and Lakshadweep regions.

In this version of the story, the princess was not given the opportunity to explain her side of the story and the king was not willing to listen to her point of view. He simply gave a judgement that would erase the shame incurred by his family. The opinion of women was neither asked nor welcomed. Even a princess did not have the freedom to decide her own life. Later, Araikkal Beevi tries to establish a rule that is completely under her will and decisions. She could not sustain the matriarchal power for long and power was transferred to male members. Out of the forty three rulers of Araikkal, just fourteen are female.

The matrilineal families have a huge role in naturalizing the ideology of patriarchy. Thus the society accepts the acculturation process of women as inferior and submissive, while men as powerful and dominant. From early childhood onwards children imbibe this kind of a gendered matrix and this idea is transmitted from generation to generation. The concept of gender is no longer binary. Gender is multiple and liberal. But, Lakshadweep is a hetero-normative or hetero-fascist society. No other genders are recognized by this society.

Women as Subalterns and Subordinate Subjects

During the Portuguese rule, several girls and women were taken away by Portuguese men to use them as sex slaves. In the short story “Arthanadam” by P.I.Kalpeni, a girl named Sainaba was kidnapped by the Portuguese navigators. On a fine morning, Hassan Kakka heard a big hue and cry. People were running for their lives as they saw the arrival of the Portuguese ship towards their island. People called out that “*Bellakkara Sayibina Kappal Bayinde, Ellarum foyi maranjo.. Ella fennikalummaranjo, Farankikappalbaintafolo..*” (Here comes the ship of White men, everybody run and save your life. Hide all our girls, here comes the Portuguese ship). The patriarchal society sees women as inferior and insignificant in comparison with men. Thus, she cannot even protest or escape from the hands of white men and is taken away as a sex slave. In short, the women were doubly oppressed both by the colonizers and the patriarchal hegemony. This double marginalization made them subalterns and their voices were silenced. We cannot find any female freedom fighter or a warrior from the islands during the colonial rule under Portuguese, Dutch or British. No narratives are available regarding the contributions of women towards their country.

In “*Can the Subaltern Speak?*” of Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, the writer manifests the Indian woman’s subaltern position, her inaccessibility to ‘voice’ and her ‘silenced difficult space of abjection.’ Since women are twice colonized, the most oppressed of these women can be seen to be in the position of the subaltern. Spivak observes that there is no space from where the subaltern subject can speak. In the case of Lakshadweep, the women’s voices were at first heard only through the writings of men. But, these voices were not the testimonials of the experiences of real women. The female characters in the novel *Kolodam* by Ismath Hussain have traditional gender roles and their identities were subsumed within the households. These women are forced to marry from their own castes to ensure the purity of upper caste. As women are considered to be the “torch-bearers of culture”, these women were kept under strict rules of patriarchy.

After the Independence of India in 1947, improvement in the health care facilities, spread of education, job assistance from different employment schemes, and associations enhanced the all-round development of women, all leading to the transformation in the lives of women. The autobiography of the first lady doctor from Lakshadweep Padmasree Dr. S. Rahmath Beegum titled *Avismaraneeyam* indicates the radical changes that happened in Lakshadweep after the independence of India. Rebellions against child marriage, discrimination in the name of caste and denial of educational rights were many. The inclusion of island women in almost all the spheres and sectors revealed their inner potential. The provisions for divorce and remarriage, the introduction of banking facilities, ship and aircraft connectivity, and communication facilities, all had a positive impact on the lives of women as well.

Spivak proposes the use of a “strategic essentialism” by including the subaltern voice of the marginalized and silenced, as a strategic and necessary position to speak and to be heard. Women of Lakshadweep, being in a marginal position, began to speak of their lives, dreams and aspirations at first through silence and later, through their own words and works. The emergence of female writers to voice their thoughts and ideas is a proof of that. They resisted the false representations and began to redefine their gender roles in a new way. The ethos of resistance is reflected in the narratives of the 21st century. The change in perspectives happened through the rapid globalization and technological boom. A Neo-colonial situation generated a never ending reference to the colonizer’s lifestyle and women began to adapt to this standardized, yet monopolized environment. Even then, the women are complacent with their limited freedom granted by the patriarchal religious system. The novel by Sunidha Ismail titled *Rains in the Island* portrays strong female characters and presents a cross section of present-day Lakshadweep society.

Conclusion

Matrilineal societies are often mistakenly connected with female empowerment. In the development orbit, many presume that women in these societies have more rights and access to property. The property may be transferred to women, but the ownership is transferred from the mother's brother to the nephew and by no means to women themselves. The intervention of patriarchy here results in the loss of power and subjugation of women. Matrilineal family system of Lakshadweep facilitates naturalization of patriarchy and acculturation of women as inferior. The role of women in preserving cultural memories and myth-making along with their position in the cultural history of Lakshadweep is significant. The ruthless manipulation of matrilineal patriarchy along with colonialism created doubly marginalized women. The spread of education after Independence enabled women to enter into the public domain, which was previously dominated by caste and gender power politics. The emergence of female writers is a positive sign of those changes happening in the Lakshadweep society, even though religious-bound matrilineal patriarchy still prevails in the island as an obsolete machinery to impede equal opportunities for women.

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