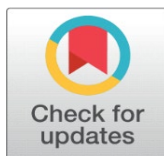
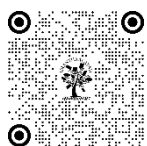


# ELITE SUBALTERNITY AND WOMANIST RESISTANCE: A STUDY OF LALITHAMBIKA ANTHARJANAM'S AGNISAKSHI

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the dual oppression faced by Namboodiri Brahmin women in early 20th-century Kerala, as depicted in Lalithambika Antharjanam's novel *Agnisakshi* (1976). Drawing on Alice Walker's idea of Womanism and Clenora Hudson-Weems' theory of Africana Womanism, the study analyzes how the protagonist, Thethikutty, navigates the constraints of patriarchal Namboodiri society and starts a journey of self-discovery and social activism. The analysis highlights the novel's portrayal of female bonding, the struggle for education and autonomy, and the ultimate embrace of a Womanist ethos that transcends individual liberation to encompass communal well-being. The study argues that *Agnisakshi* offers a nuanced understanding of "elite subalternity," where women within a privileged caste are subjected to unique forms of gendered oppression, and shows how Womanist principles provide a framework for resistance and empowerment.

**Keywords:** Womanism, Namboodiri, Kerala, Lalithambika Antharjanam, *Agnisakshi*, Patriarchy, Elite Subaltern, Gender, Caste, India, Feminism, Africana Womanism, Antharjanam

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The oppression of women under patriarchal structures has been a central concern for feminist theorists globally. While mainstream feminism has often been criticized for its Eurocentric bias and focus on the experiences of white, middle-class women, alternative frameworks like Womanism, as articulated by Alice Walker, have emerged to address the intersectional nature of oppression, particularly concerning race and class. This paper examines the specific context of Namboodiri Brahmin women in early 20th-century Kerala, a community marked by its unique position of "elite subalternity," where women, despite belonging to the highest caste, faced severe restrictions and subjugation within their own households. Lalithambika Antharjanam's novel *Agnisakshi* (Fire, My Witness, 1976) provides a powerful literary representation of this lived reality, offering a rich text for exploring the complexities of gender, caste, and resistance within a specific socio-historical context.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: WOMANISM AND AFRICANA WOMANISM:

This study draws on the theoretical framework of Womanism, as developed by Alice Walker, to analyze the experiences of Namboodiri women in *Agnisakshi*. Walker's Womanism, first articulated in her short story "Coming Apart" (1979) and elaborated in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983), provides an important lens for understanding

the intersectional oppression faced by Black women and women of color more broadly. Walker defines a "Womanist" as a Black feminist or feminist of color who is "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" and who "loves herself. Regardless." (Walker, 1983, p. xii). Crucially, Walker's famous phrase, "Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender," signifies that feminism is encompassed within the broader ideological umbrella of Womanism, which centers race and class alongside gender.

This analysis also incorporates Clenora Hudson-Weems' idea of "Africana Womanism," which further emphasizes the importance of family and community in the struggle for liberation. Hudson-Weems argues that Africana Womanism is "family-oriented," focusing on race, class, and gender, while feminism is often "female-oriented," primarily addressing issues related to biological sex. This distinction is relevant to understanding the experiences of Namboodiri women, whose struggles were deeply intertwined with the dynamics of their families and community.

### **3. HISTORICAL CONTEXT: NAMBOODIRI WOMEN IN EARLY 20TH-CENTURY KERALA:**

The Namboodiris, the Brahmin caste of Kerala, held a position of significant social and religious authority in the early 20th century. They were major landowners and were considered the "keepers" of Hindu scriptures and the caste hierarchy in the region. In the 1920s and 30s, although the Namboodiri community constituted less than 0.5% of Kerala's population, they owned about 15-20% of the arable land. This economic power translated into significant social and political influence. However, within this powerful community, Namboodiri women, known as Antharjanam (literally "one who lives in the interiors"), faced severe restrictions and were often limited to the domestic sphere. The lives of Namboodiri women were governed by strict patriarchal norms and customs and practices such as, Early Marriage: Girls were often married off at a young age, sometimes too much older men. For example, historical records suggest that about 30% of Namboodiri women were married before the age of 15 in the early 1900s.

**Polygamy:** While the eldest Namboodiri male could marry within the caste to continue the family lineage, the younger male siblings entered into relationships called Sambandham with women from the Nair community. The children of such relationships did not belong to the Brahmin caste. It is estimated that over 60% of Namboodiri men practiced some form of polygamy.

**Seclusion:** Women were largely limited to the inner courtyards (Nalukettu) of their homes, with limited access to the outside world.

**Denial of Education:** Formal education was generally denied to Namboodiri women. Literacy rates among Namboodiri women were below 5% in the early 20th century, compared to over 20% for women from other communities in Kerala.

**Widowhood Restrictions:** Widows, including child widows, faced brutal ritual seclusion and were forbidden from remarrying. They had to shave their heads and wear only white garments. Historical accounts indicate that about 10% of Namboodiri women were widowed before the age of 20.

These practices, although less statistically documented than those for broader populations due to the insular nature of the Namboodiri community, created a unique form of oppression for these "elite subaltern" women. The term Antharjanam itself, signifying their confinement, poignantly captures their marginalized status within their own community.

### **4. AGNISAKSHI: A WOMANIST READING OF ELITE SUBALTERNITY:**

Lalithambika Antharjanam, herself a member of the Namboodiri community, provides a powerful critique of these oppressive practices in her novel Agnisakshi. The novel narrates the life of Thethikutty, a young Namboodiri woman who rebels against the limits of her traditional upbringing and starts a journey of self-discovery, social activism, and ultimately, spiritual seeking.

#### **4.1. THETHIKUTTY'S REBELLION AND THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY:**

Thethikutty's journey in Agnisakshi is negotiating her identity within and against the constraints of her social context. Her initial struggle is to reconcile her desire for autonomy and self-expression with the expectations of a dutiful

Namboodiri wife. This struggle is manifested in her relationship with her husband, Unni Namboodiri, who, despite being kind-hearted, represents the traditional patriarchal values of the community.

The novel portrays Thethikutty's gradual awakening to the injustices faced by women within her community. Influenced by her progressive brother, P. K. P. Namboodiri, and her own observations of social inequalities, she begins to question the norms and customs that limit her. Her act of leaving her husband's home to join the Indian freedom struggle signifies a radical break from the traditional role prescribed for Namboodiri women.

## 4.2. FEMALE BONDING AND WOMANIST SOLIDARITY

A crucial part of Agnisakshi is its portrayal of female relationships, particularly the bond between Thethikutty and Thankam, Unni Namboodiri's sister through Sambandham. This relationship highlights the potential for solidarity and mutual support among women across caste lines, a central tenet of Womanism. Despite Thankam's lower caste status, Thethikutty treats her with respect and encourages her education and personal growth.

Their relationship embodies a Womanist ethos of sisterhood and mutual empowerment. Thethikutty's support enables Thankam to defy her father's authority and pursue her studies, showing how female solidarity can challenge patriarchal structures. This cross-caste female bonding, although limited in scope within the narrative, foreshadows the broader social transformations that eventually challenged the rigid caste hierarchy in Kerala.

## 4.3. FROM SOCIAL ACTIVISM TO SPIRITUAL SEEKING:

Thethikutty's involvement in the freedom struggle and her subsequent work with Gandhi mark her commitment to social justice and her desire to contribute to a larger cause. However, her disillusionment with the post-independence political landscape leads her to a path of spiritual seeking, where she takes on the identity of a sanyasini.

This shift can be interpreted through a Womanist lens as a continued search for self-discovery and meaning beyond the limits of conventional social roles. While Thethikutty's spiritual journey might seem to be a retreat from the world, it can also be seen as an attempt to find an alternative space for self-realization and to connect with a deeper sense of purpose. Spirituality and connection to a higher power are integral parts of the Womanist ethos as defined by Walker.

## 4.4. MOTHERHOOD AND THE FULFILLMENT OF WOMANHOOD:

The novel's conclusion, where Thethikutty finds a sense of fulfillment in her encounter with Thankam's son and granddaughter, highlights the importance of motherhood and intergenerational connection within a Womanist framework. While Thethikutty herself does not experience biological motherhood, her emotional response to Thankam's family suggests that she finds a sense of completion and purpose through this vicarious experience. This ending underscores the Womanist emphasis on the interconnectedness of life and the importance of nurturing and sustaining future generations. Thethikutty's journey, from rebellion to social activism to spiritual seeking, ultimately culminates in an affirmation of the values of love, compassion, and community, which are central to a Womanist vision of a fairer world.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Lalithambika Antharjanam's Agnisakshi offers a profound exploration of the lives of Namboodiri women in early 20th-century Kerala, revealing the complexities of their "elite subaltern" status and their struggles for agency and self-determination. Through the character of Thethikutty, the novel shows how Womanist principles of resistance, solidarity, and self-discovery can empower women to challenge oppressive structures and forge their own paths.

Agnisakshi serves as a powerful testament to the resilience of women in the face of adversity and the enduring relevance of Womanist thought in understanding and addressing the intersectional nature of oppression. The novel's enduring legacy lies in its ability to illuminate the hidden histories of marginalized communities and to inspire continued efforts towards social justice and gender equality. By centering the experiences of Namboodiri women, Agnisakshi expands our understanding of the diverse forms that patriarchy can take and the multifaceted ways women resist and negotiate their identities within oppressive systems.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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