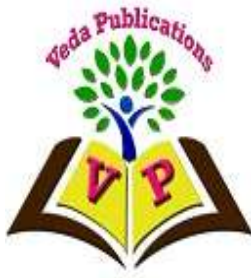




## THE TRAGEDY OF BEING MODERN: SRIKRISHNA ALANAHALLY'S *GENDETHIMMA*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the negotiation of tradition and modernity and its consequences for women's freedom and sexual desire. It proves that modernity becomes very problematic as it is desirable on political grounds and undesirable in matters relating to women's freedom. The present paper highlights a tension between modernity and tradition in *Gendethimma*. Here, Srikrishna Alanahally describes the threat that Maranki poses to her husband's family and to the village folk generally because of her modern ways, and her refusal to submit to the norms of caste, class and gender. Her influence eventually leads to a social revolution in the village, but not before she and her husband pay for it with their lives. The paper examines the conjunction of non-conformism and sexual desire in complex ways, neither upholding Maranki's modernity nor denouncing it altogether. Thus, if it views traditional ways as retrogressive, it views modernity as socially disruptive. Woman's right to sexual desire is privileged, no doubt, over patriarchal control, but at the same time leads to tragedy. Thus, Alanahally presents the issue as a complex human problem that denies resolution.

**Keywords:** *Tradition and Modernity, Gender Issues, Patriarchal Society, Women's freedom.*



## INTRODUCTION

Colonial rule significantly challenged the traditional values of Indian society, especially those relating to the status of women. The western concept of modernity, supposedly based on the linked concepts of universal freedom and equality, was counter to what the British saw as a caste-ridden, male dominated social order. The Enlightenment privileging of reason, which was the foundation for the concepts of universal equality of all human beings, did not extend to these 'inferior' races. Indians, therefore, were held to be a barbaric, superstitious people ruled by such irrational customs as sati, child marriage and the caste system.

The argument in support of colonial rule was that since Indians were not fit to govern themselves, the British would rule over the country till it became civilized and was at par with the European nations. Only when Indians were fit to rule themselves would the British depart. The nationalists and the Indian reformers, therefore, strove to reproduce the Indian state on western lines, so that India could be considered a modern country fit for self rule. The abolitions of *Sati*, increasing the age of consent for marriage, remarriage of widows, modern education of women and abolition of caste were some of the ways in which India was sought to be modernized. However, these changes were at odds with traditional norms of gender, under which women were in a relationship of dependent inferiority to men. On the other hand the nationalists would argue that if all human beings equal; Indians are equal to the Europeans and should be given freedom. On the other hand, equality for all meant that women should be treated as equal to men, which the native patriarchy was not willing to concede.

In this context, modernity proved very problematic, as it was desirable on political grounds but undesirable in matters relating to women. As Partha Chatterji (1989) argues, the nationalists solved this contradictions by distinguishing between a public domain of the states, its institutions and their functioning and of a private domain of the home and hearth. Men were assigned the public domain, where modernity was a sign of value, while women occupied the private domain as the custodians of traditions. True, women were also encouraged to be

"modern" to the extent that they were expected to be educated but they had to remain "Indian" in matters of dress, conduct and the observance of wifely virtues.

Maranki, the wife of Gendethimma, brings a number of changes to the traditional lifestyle of her in-laws' household, which affects the whole village of Gauwally. She encourages her husband to expand his trade by the introduction of fancy goods and often accompanies him to the city to help him select them. Her modern values lead her to reject traditional morality, and she thinks nothing of having extramarital affairs. Rather, she rather takes pride by saying that her beauty has attracted an educated person of high caste. Gendethimma at first does not believe the rumour that some of the villagers spread about Maranki's affairs with Shivanna, a school teacher of high caste. But one day he returns home unexpectedly from Gauwally and catches her in the act. Unable to accept his wife's infidelity he commits suicide. Maranki, finding no other way, also takes her own life

Srikrishna Alanahally's *Gendethimma* exhibits a tension between modernity and tradition. It describes the threat that Maranki poses to her husband's family and to the village folk generally because of her modern ways, and her refusal to submit to the norms of caste, class and gender. Her influence eventually leads to what can only be described as a social revolution in the village, but not before she and her husband pay for it with their lives. Maranki's transgression calls the norms into question. Maranki's modern ways are perceived as a threat not only because they contradict traditional mores but also because of her gender: as a woman, she is expected to conduct herself within the prescribed rules. Most importantly, however, it is her refusal to submit to the norms of chastity- her defiant desire for sexual fulfillment- that is the most shocking. In asserting her sexual freedom, therefore, Maranki threatens to subvert the very foundations of the social order.

Gendethimma, a resident of Salundi, comes from a poor family belonging to the Parivar caste, one of the lower rungs in the caste hierarchy. Goolanaika, his elder brother cultivates the land owned by his family, while he adds to the family's



income as an itinerant hawker. He carries essential commodities in a basket and sells them in the nearby village of Gauwally. Beginning with only betel leaves, betel nuts and chewing tobacco, he gradually expands his trade "to include kerosene lamps, matches boxes, salt, jiggery, eucalyptus oil, musk pellets and things that appealed to children, such as crackers, sugar candy, fried gram, coloured tops, glass marbles and other such articles" (Alana ally 1998:2. Subsequent references are to his edition and are parenthetically indicated in the text by page numbers). Then comes his marriage to Maranki, a sophisticated woman who has seen city Ways and with a will of her own. Instead of adjusting to the ways of her in-laws, Maranki tries to change them earning at first the admiration of her mother –in –law but subsequently incurring their wrath. When the bitterness between Maranki and in- laws reaches a climax, the two brothers decided to live separately. Now that she has Gendethimma all to herself, Maranki works on him to change his lifestyle and his business dealings. Under her guidance, Gendethimma includes new ware-cosmetics, fancy clothes and under garments for women-which were tabooed in the villages. His customer snares the daughters and daughter-in-laws, who buy these wares in the absence of their husbands and mother – in – laws. When these secret goings- on are discovered, Gendethimma is publicly disgraced and compelled to pay a hefty fine which he can ill –afford. Early the next morning he leaves Gauwally, never to return. Meanwhile has a secret affair with Shivanna, an upper caste school teacher of her village. Gendethimma does not doubt her fidelity, even when he hears rumors of her affair. But when he returns from Gauwally after being disgraced their, he catches the lovers unaware. They had not expected him to be back so soon and Shivanna had spent the night with Maranki. Unable to accept his wife's infidelity, Gendethimma takes his own life by jumping into a pond. Maranki too kills herself soon after she learns of Gendethimma's death.

Thus, the paper finds a number of themes that come together in *Gendethimma*. One is the impact of western modernity in native tradition; the trouble begins with Maranki's attempts to change the life style of her husband and her in-laws. Another theme

linked to the first, is the impact of the urban life style of the village; the source of Maranki's modernity is not the colonial state and the reforms she initiated but the city, Mysore Nunjangud. A third relates to caste and gender: Maranki's transgressions are because of her refusal to submit to the norms regarding the conduct of women and lower castes. The character of Maranki becomes the focal point at which the three themes intersect. Maranki's transgression and the consequences can be best understood through the contrasts that she presents with her husband and the others in the village.

In presenting the story of Maranki's revolution, therefore, Alanahally seems to question the validity of the code of *Stridharma*, especially in modern times. G.S Amur's introduction to the novel suggests that this is its central theme: "the qualities generated by the conflict between tradition and modernity and the role of sexuality in human life" (1998: vii). According to Amur, the process of modernization began with "our encounter with all its ambivalence this complex encounter of modernity and tradition, rural and urban spaces and the subversive sexuality of woman.

While Amur's reading of the novel is unquestionable, it is necessary to look at the politics that frames Alanahally's portrayal of Maranki- if not to fault it, at least to understand why she must eventually be presented as a doomed character. In revealing the sharp contrasts between Maranki's modern habits and the slovenliness of the villagers of Salundi and Gauwally, Alanahally is clearly sympathetic to her. The sweeping changes that she triggers are good, in a world where tradition perpetuates backwards and ignorance. The novel ends on a positive note with regard to the outcome of these changes:

There was a time when the inauspicious, doom - laden forces of the elder's imagination had raided the village in the face of their persistent efforts to thwart them, now, on the contrary, the village had actually invited those same forces to enter. There was once a single Maranki for the whole street, or rather for the whole village. Now there were many Marankis in every house. (168)



Maranki's death, therefore, has not been vain, for the village has opened up to the forces of change. Women are no longer ruled by a rigid code that denies them pleasure, even when such pleasure is innocent. The emancipation that she brings about assures Maranki' a place in the villages memory, and they recall her tragic life with "deep sigh." Yet Alanahally portrays Maranki as a woman driven by sensuality, a "bitch goddess" who is concerned solely pleasure that she must exact all cost. She is the nymphomaniac of male fantasy, whose utter selfishness is starkly contrasted with the selflessness of her husband. Alanahally's portrayal of Gendethimma as childlike- not only does he behave like a child, it is with the Mudda that he is completely at ease- is significant in this context: Maranki's excessive sexuality is contrasted with Gendethimma's sexual innocence. This idealization of Gendethimma's life before marriage is contrasted with his downfall after he marries Maranki.

### CONCLUSION

The present paper states that in justifying the control of women's sexuality Hindu patriarchy presents Striswabhaba as innately selfish, duplicitous, lascivious and manipulative-description that seems to fit Alanahally's Maranki to the dot..Far from subverting the stereotype of the immoral woman, Maranki seems to confirm it and her punishment appears well deserved in this context. Even Amur concedes it when he notes: "Maranki's lone moral act is her decision to put an end to her own life." If this is true, implying that she is otherwise totally immoral, how can he argue that the outstanding merit of the novel is its refusal to take sides and pass facile moral judgments" (1998 :xii) ? Is Alanahally's- and Amur's judgment of Maranki's moral status profound, simply because her character is conceived as complex? How impartial is a "refusal to take sides," when politics demand commitment? Amur's observation that Gendethimma presents a new image of woman, not as a passive object ... but as a gendered subject who plays the role of an active agent" (1998:viii),proves quite problematic when put this way. The paper proves that in Maranki, Alanahally certainly questions the traditional norms relating to women's conduct; but his questioning is circumscribed by his inability to relinquish the stereotype that he challenges.

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