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DISSEMINATING THE IDEALS OF EMPOWERMENT: A Comparative Study of Early and Present-day Women Magazines of Kerala

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Abstract

Women magazines are considered as a crucial apparatus in spreading the ideals of women empowerment. Malayalam woman magazines since the late 19th century attempt to communicate the significance of the creation of self-worth among women through mediums of education and economic independence, which would enable them to make decisions and choices on things that, affect their lives. On the other hand neither these women magazines nor the women writers were completely free from the clutches of patriarchal preoccupations. The present study is a comparative analysis of early and contemporary women magazines in Malayalam shows a shift their focus from being a space for healthy debates and spreading the ideals of modernity and empowerment to glossy pages filled with attempts to fit the modern, educated Malayalee women into the frameworks of gender stereotypes, but wrapped in the image of a successful modern Malayalee woman.

Keywords: Women empowerment, Kerala, Women Magazines

INTRODUCTION

Females constitute half of the world population. Yet they are considered as a weaker, subordinate session in the society and face inequalities almost everywhere they go. Creating an egalitarian society by empowering the women is a major concern these days. Governments incorporate various policies and action plans to ensure the active participation of women at various levels and there are attempts from individuals and organizations to make the women aware about their actual inferior condition and to improve their situation. Empowerment of women is a concept that has wide popularity, and many scholars attempted to define the term. Naila Kabeer says that, “women empowerment is about the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such ability” (Kabeer, 1999). In other words, it is when the woman has the right to make decisions on her own. Empowerment in this sense is a gradual process and it has various aspects.

United Nations Development Program points out the components of women empowerment. They include having a sense of self-worth, right to make choices, access to opportunities and control over their own lives. (UNDP, 2008). To make these ideals practical, it is crucial to make women aware about their self-worth, their abilities and about what they can do improve their own lives by grabbing opportunities that are available to them and to create new opportunities. Creating an awareness or consciousness among the women can be done

through various methods. Writing and literature are considered as a vigorous tool that can contribute to the creation of consciousness (Reineke, 2011) among people. In all the societies that think about and act on women empowerment, one can trace the presence of a considerable amount of writings by women for their fellow women.

Though empowerment as a concept gained wide popularity only since 1980s, it would be wrong to assume that the attempts to empower women began only after that. Here empowerment must be understood as “principles, such as the ability of individuals and groups to act in order to ensure their own well-being or their right to participate in decision-making that concerns them” (Calvès, 2009). Women who were considered as second grade gender was denied the right to make choices even about the things that affect only them. Empowerment, as term itself indicates is about power. Power in many scenarios makes people accept conditions as they are (Lukes, 1974), thus thinking that this is how things are supposed to be. This makes creating awareness among the groups consider themselves as inferior a crucial factor in the process of empowerment.

Kerala, which considered as a model state in the case of women empowerment provides a clear picture of women attempting to spread the ideals of empowerment by making use of the print media available to them since late 19th century. At present Kerala has the highest female literacy rate, with a large number of educated and employed women. The renaissance and social reforms that took place in Kerala since late 19th century, as a result of the colonial modernity is seen as foundation stone to these developments. The colonial education created a literate community in here and the modernization and social reform in Kerala are interrelated since the print media aided in the contribution of the spreading the modern ideals (Vinayan & Raj, 2019) and the values of renaissance. Even today magazines are considered as a tool of in the process of empowerment. This paper tries to trace how the women magazines in Kerala contributed to make the women aware about the principles of empowerment and looks into today’s ‘complete women magazines’ with an intention to look what empowerment means to them.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Scholarly enquiries on the role of women magazines in Kerala are becoming popular recently. One major work on the writings of women to in the late 19th and early 20th century is J Devika’s *Herself: Early Writings on Gender by Malayalee Women, 1898-1938*. This is a compilation of the translations of writings of Malayalee women in various magazines by pointing out the things that they considered as worthy for other women to think about like importance of female education, women and literature, liberation of women, equality of sexes and economic independence (Devika, *Herself: Early Writings on Gender by Malayalee Women, 1898-1938*, 2005) This also include the conservative narratives about maintaining the image of an ideal women in the terms of patriarchal constructs. Another work, *Making Space for Feminist Social Critique in Contemporary Kerala*,

which has been co-authored by the same scholar (Devika & Sukumar, 2006), talks about how the women writer, the major themes and their writings were accepted by the society- both by men and women.

Meera Velayudhan's *Changing Roles and Women's Narratives* (Velayudhan, 1994), talks about the modernity brought by colonialism and modern education and how it affected the narratives by women and about women. It also deals with some of the major debates that took place in these early women magazines. *Vanithamasikakal Valarcha, Parinamam* by looks into what has changed about the women magazines over a century. It talks about the how the women magazines changed its central ideas from the modern renaissance values to the 'commercialized image of women' (Ramya, 2016) by analyzing and comparing the women magazines *Sarada* and *Vanitha*.

EARLY WOMEN MAGAZINES

Publication of a magazine for women, *Keraleeya Sugunabodhini*, began in Kerala in 1885 by a group of male reformers and but was discontinued within six months. This restarted in 1892 (Raghavan, 1985). But first magazine for women edited by women, *Sarada*, started in 1904. T B Kalyani Amma, T C Kalyani Amma, Rani Sethuparvathi Bai were some of the persons associated with *Sarada* (Ramya, 2016). These magazines were followed by *Lakshmi Bai*, *Mahila*, *Kaumudi*, *Mahilaratnam*, *Muslim Vanitha* and *Stree* to name a few. These magazines stated that they are for women readers. On the other hand it's been argued that they tend to address a Hindu, particularly a Nair, woman most of the times (Antony, 2013). This does not mean only they were the readers. It's been assumed that the readers are the women who try to shape themselves into the 'ideal ones' (Devika & Sukumar, 2006) in the dawn of colonial modernity. These magazines dealt with a variety of issues, mainly with two- how self consciousness can be cultivated by inculcating the ideals of renaissance and reforms in Kerala by a women, to prepare herself for making her own choices and on the other hand why and how it's important to shape oneself to fit into the image of the ideal Malayalee women like the puranic figures of Sati and Sheelabati (Kumari, 2001).

The analysis of the early women magazines points out the focus on the issue of female education by the writers. As education is essential for creating self-consciousness among women by equipping them with knowledge about their own capabilities and about the opportunities they have, it has a prominent role in empowerment (UNFPA, 1994). *Keraleeya Sugunabodhini* incorporated a poem on women education in the first edition itself (Kumari, 2001). Articles were published on the importance of *sthree vidyabhyasam* (female education) and on the type of education women must be receiving. In an article published in *Lakshmi Bai*, P K Karthiayani Amma advocated for gender specific education, which will enable women to be superior to men, so that women will not give up on performing the feminine duties assigned to them (Vinayan & Raj, 2019).

The question of women's interests and choice in marriage is another topic took up by writers. Mrs. K Kannan Menon held that women should have a say in selecting a husband (Kumari, 2001), which was supported by some other women writers in the later issues. K Lakshmiyamma in an essay titled *Purushadharmam* stated that women and men are equals and another writer Kunchiamma strongly advocates for the right to make decisions and to have choices just like men in social, familial and economic matters (Ramya, 2016), which is the core idea of the whole concept of empowerment. In an article published in *Matrubhumi* weekly K Kalyanikkutty Amma points out the obstacles in achieving equality between genders including the lack of rationality, absence of industrial culture, and inaccessibility of knowledge of contraception (Devika, 2020). In short, the women writers back then made a clear analysis of the reasons behind the backward status of women and proposed the best possible ways through which they can be overcome. They were in many senses on par with the modern day feminists. They knew what leads to empowerment of women.

All the contributors to the women magazines, however, did not challenge the traditional systems and nor advocated for the independence of women. Many were abide by the existing power hierarchy and gender roles which limited women's space into the kitchen. Many demanded for education that can foster the feminine qualities of women (Vinayan & Raj, 2019). Essays appeared on importance of women remaining as the 'ideal ones' in large numbers (Ramya, 2016) as there was tension about educated and empowered women liberating themselves from the holds of the traditional society, which always wanted to maintain its order with the man as patrons.

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN CONTEMPORARY MAGAZINES

At present Malayalee women has access to numerous magazines including one of the largest magazines in India by circulation, *Vanitha*. It's been more than one century since the publication of first women magazine for women in Malayalam. What changed when it comes to the issues that are important to women is worth considering. All over the world, magazines are considered as a tool to spread the ideals of women empowerment by spreading the awareness and by providing platforms for the underrepresented voices of women of various cultures and spaces, both online and in print. The Malayalam women magazines claim that they address the needs and represent the modern changing women. It would be interesting to look into what are the ideals they are claiming to proclaim and what do they actually say.

An analysis of *Vanitha*, the largest women magazine in India in terms of circulation, shows that the women they address are the ones who are educated, from well to do families, and 'modernized' but who hold onto the values of the womanliness very strongly. In a 120 pages edition, more than one third of pages are dedicated for advertisements, especially the gold and clothing, along with the products that are essential in a household for maintaining the hygiene or making the cooking easier and food tastier. *Grihalakshmi* another popular women magazine has roughly 100 pages and only one tenth of pages are dedicated for advertisement. They are of the

kitchen products along with gold and dress. The major contents are interviews of film stars, television stars and other people related to the entertainment industries. Occasionally interviews and life stories of some women who fought the obstacles and survived and who made path breaking victories are also appeared. Recipes of various dishes ranging from 10-15 pages are included and in festival seasons it goes up. Fashion, make-up and other beauty tips also find a considerable space in the pages. How to be an effective and successful parent, especially a 'perfect and smart' mother, appears in every edition in different forms with 'special tips'. There are certain issues that focus on fashion alone. One thing to be noted about these recipes and fashion are most of them are not even affordable to the women from 'not so affluent families'. This gives an indication to the category of 'expected readers' of these popular magazines.

There are interviews of women who are successful in their careers or had achieved path breaking victories. They are presented as role models. One thing majority of such articles share is that how they manage their workspace and home simultaneously, successfully and effectively. They point out that it is important not to make home secondary¹. On the other hand when the interviews are of a male politician, film star or a business person, how their partners manage the family because they are busy and focus on the work or activism is presented with an air of pride. Even their resignation from the jobs and discontinuing education are presented as honourable 'sacrifices'². Keeping aside the claims that are being made about the empowered Malayalee women, the leading women magazines in Malayalam stick on to an ill-defined concept of empowerment. Even when they state that women can lead the world, by pointing out prominent women leaders and others, they reassert the idea that a woman can be an ideal model only when she performs her 'womanly' duties.

Subscribing to the gender stereotypes and attempting to reinforce them can be considered as the major feature of today's woman magazines. Instead of calling out the unequal power relations that exist in the society and within our families they are presented as something worth appreciating. Considering the wide popularity of these magazines even a small attempt from their parts to make a change will receive huge attention of the public. Despairing trends that can be noted in these magazines are the near absence of room for discussion on the topics that goes beyond the gender stereotypes. The earlier magazines provided a space for heated debates, comments, and ideas (Ramya, 2016) that can be considered as 'revolutionary' even today. Women politicians, intellectuals and the 'first generation of feminists in Kerala' (Devika & Sukumar, 2006) contributed regularly to these magazines. Thus a creative discussion on independence of women and women empowerment took place there. Today the pages devoted to them are only the interview columns. Consequently, awakening the feminine qualities becomes the centre of focus not the ability to make choices and decisions. They fail to convey the idea that being a working women does not make one an empowered women.

¹ Various interviews published in Vanitha on successful women in 2018, 2019 and 2020

² Interviews published in Grihalakshmi and Mahilaratnam in 2019 and 2020.

CONCLUSION

The early Malayalam women magazines were influenced by the modern ideals emerged as a result of colonial modernity. The educated women found the magazines as a platform that can be used to create awareness among their fellow women about the importance to cultivate the ability to make choices and why acquiring knowledge and economic independence are crucial for this. But this spirit did not grow with time. Today, after more than a century since the publication of first Malayalam women magazine, an attempt to place women back into the frameworks of 'womanly woman' who successfully manages the household while being a working woman who's interested only in fashion, cooking and pleasing others. It is possible to assume that the popularity of the image of an ideal woman has influenced these magazines tremendously. Instead of attempting to initiate small changes, they opted to go with the flow. Another reason that can be pointed out for this is about the contributors or the authors of writings appear in these magazines. The feminists and intellectuals do seem to prefer to write in magazines or weeklies for general readers. Women magazines, on the other hand, added the flavor of entertainment to their contents, probably with an aim to increase their circulation and to enhance their profit.

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