



# Challenging Traditional Constructs: A Feminist Reading Of Anita Thampi's Poem Sweeping The Front Yard.

Arya P A

Assistant Professor

Chinmaya College of Arts, Commerce and Science, Kochi

Anita Thampi is a renowned Malayalam writer and translator. Her works are noted for post-modernism. She in her works represents middle class women who is an epitome of sacrifices and responsibilities which are assigned to her by the patriarchal society. In sweeping the front yard the poet gives us a picture of a woman who wakes in the early morning to clean the front yard. While she is sweeping the front yard the whole family is sleeping peaceful whereas her responsibilities have already started. The way she cleans the mud sprouts is described as sweeping away memories. Before the newspaper comes, she completes her work and what she gets for the whole programme is back aches. And the reward for hardships is a cup of coffee with dregs. The patriarchal society has enlisted a whole lot of duties for the women to perform in the society as well as in the family. They are neither appreciated nor acknowledged. The society upholds the notion that men for work and women for household. Even now when women go out and earn money just like men their responsibilities has not lessened. Women sacrifices their life and dreams for their family. And these sacrifices go unrecognized and unpaid.

**Key words:** patriarchal, society, responsibilities, notion, unrecognized

Anita Thampi is a Malayalam writer and translator, born in Alappuzha, Kerala. Her first poetry collection is *Muttamatikkumpol* published in 2004. Her other works are *Azhakillaathavayellam* (2010) and *Alappuzha Vellam* (Alappuzha Water, 2016). She has also translated the works of the Australian poet Les Murray, Italian writer Carlo Collodi, Spanish poet Juan Ramon Jimenez and Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti. She has also penned lyrics for Malayalam movie Kanyaka Talkies. Her works have been translated into English, German, French, Swedish as well as various Indian languages. This poem 'Sweeping the Front Yard' is the translated version of *Muttamatikkumpol* by J Devika, a historian, social critic and feminist working in CDS, Trivandrum as an Associate Professor. Famous Malayalam poet K.Sachithanandan as also translated this poem.

The poet presents before us a picture of a woman who is cleaning the front yard of her house in the early morning. This is a conventional image that we usually encounter in any village in Kerala in the early morning. Before the morning sun rise the woman has to clean the front yard. When she is working all other members of the family are sleeping. The society upholds certain rules and responsibilities for women. In order to fit in a social order she has to play certain roles. Our patriarchal society always want to control women and exercise their power over them. They always want the women to fit in within the framework of the society. For this man

is given the role of the powerful, the bread winner of the family and women to be submissive and obedient taking care of the household.

In *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millet has also focussed on the relations of power between man and woman. “When one group rules another, the relationship between the two is political. When such an arrangement is carried out over a long period of time it develops an ideology (feudalism, racism, etc). all historical civilizations are patriarchies: their ideology is male supremacy”

The poem showcases the monotony of mundane household chores of a woman in a patriarchal society. The poet also reflects on the pathos and loneliness of the roles she has been assigned to fulfill by the society. Most of the duties performed by the women often go unnoticed and unpaid. She has been doing such jobs over the ages. The poem also shows how women sweep away unwanted memories of the past with a scratch mark just to remind of her existence retaining the painful memories like backaches.

The poem begins with the act of sweeping the front yard and it is described as a sweeper girl’s morning dance. The house is having a vast front yard and she is compelled to clean it waking up in the early morning when the whole house is sleeping. The duties of a woman start even before sunrise.

Sweeping done

Dawn alights

Light falls, and the eyes

Of the house open.

It is to this clean sight, the house opens. But nobody recognize the work done by her. The poet further describes the front yard with

No footprints

No fallen leaves

How clean is the front yard!

There is great disparity in the gender roles assigned by society to men and women. In order to showcase the dominance of patriarchy, they set rules and rights according to their interest. According to Britannica, Gender role is a culturally and socially determined set of expected behaviours, attitudes and characteristics based on concepts of masculinity and femininity. In society women are expected to behave in a particular way. Women often remain silent and suppressed. They are always marginalized. There is no equality in labour or duties among man and woman. The society still follows the principal ‘Men to rule and women to be ruled’. Patriarchy always considers women as the other. Women are oppressed economically, politically, socially and psychologically. Male superiority can be viewed along with Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics*, where the term ‘politics’ shall refer to “power-structured relationships arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another” (23). Sex is the symbol of political power. A disinterested examination of our system of sexual relationship must point out that the relationships between the sexes, is that of dominance and subordination what goes largely unexamined, often even unacknowledged in our social order, is the birth right priority whereby males rule females. (25)

In the poem for all the work a woman does what she gets is backpain.

“Then for cleaning the shreds she rises

So thirsty she’d drink the coffee to its very dregs

The reward for her hardships is a cup of coffee with dregs.”

According to Luce Irigaray, “this culture which admits only one sex does not consider women as belonging to a different sex. Instead it views women as ‘lesser men’, inferior or defective” (Post Structuralism and Postmodernism,117). In *A Literary Representation of the Subaltern: A Woman’s Text from the Third World*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak speaks: As long as there is this hegemonic cultural self-representation of India as a goddess-mother (dissimulating the possibility that this mother is a slave), she will collapse under the burden of the immense expectations that such a self-representation permits. (96)

Society expects women to be an epitome of endurance and strength. She is like a Goddess ever giving and not expecting anything in return. And what she receives for all the compromises she made in her life is nothing. The famous feminist and writer, Simone de Beauvoir also makes an appeal to women to rebel against what may be described as alienation from themselves.

### Work Cited

Thampi, Anita. “Sweeping the Front Yard.” Poetry International, [https://www.poetryinternational.com/en/poets-poems/poems/poem/103-19138\\_Sweeping the Front Yard](https://www.poetryinternational.com/en/poets-poems/poems/poem/103-19138_Sweeping_the_Front_Yard). Accessed 29 March 2024.

Millet, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. London: Virago, 1977. Print.

Spivak, Geriatric Chakrovorty. *A Literary Representation of the Subaltern: A Woman’s text from the Third World*. New York: Routledge, 1988. Print.

Keralavarma. *Cross Currents: The Evolution of Literary Movements*. Trissur:Current Books, 2013. Print.

Payne, Laura. "gender role". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1 Mar. 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/gender-role>. Accessed 20 March 2024.