



RESEARCH ARTICLE

AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS HISTORY: A READING ON PATHIKAYUM VAZHIYORATHE MANIDEEPANGALUM

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Abstract

Autobiography in the Indian context holds a special place as a source of historical understanding. Women's autobiographies are becoming increasingly important as source of self-perception as well as providing insights into gender relations, social structure, political and social change and so on. This paper critically examines the autobiography of Kochattil Kalyanikutty Amma, Pathikayum Vazhiyorathe Manideepangalum and throws light on the importance of autobiographies in recovering women's voices and experiences often excluded from traditional histories. It explores the role of a woman autobiography as a source of historical knowledge and how it helps in the reconstruction of feminity.

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Introduction:-

Autobiography in the Indian context holds a special place as a source of historical understanding. They capture individual experiences within the broader narratives of colonialism, independence, social reform, and cultural transformation. Autobiographies serve as a source of history by providing first-hand accounts of individuals' experiences, offering unique insights into the social, cultural, and historical context of a particular period. These personal narratives can capture emotions, perspectives, and details that might be absent from more formal historical records. Autobiographies enhance our understanding of historical events by adding a human dimension and shedding light on the impact of broader historical forces on individual lives.

Autobiographies contribute to cultural history by capturing the lived experiences of individuals within specific cultural frameworks. Autobiographies from marginalized or colonized individuals offer postcolonial insights. They provide alternative perspectives on historical events, challenging dominant narratives and highlighting the impact of colonization on personal and collective identities. They reflect the social, cultural, and political context of the time, revealing how broader events impact individuals. Through them, the life of the individual becomes the history of society. They serve as an important source for social and historical study. A writer's experiences and imagination are not solely his own but are products of his social environment.¹ It is the interplay between individual consciousness and social consciousness that makes these works possible.

Women's autobiographies are becoming increasingly important as source of self-perception as well as providing insights into gender relations, social structure, political and social change and so on. Private or personal writing often become the medium through which women's consciousness expresses itself. They not only document events but record feelings and attitudes. A close reading of these texts helps in the reconstruction of feminity as seen from the point of view of the subject.² Autobiography localizes the very program of much feminist theory-the reclaiming

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of the female subject -even as it foregrounds the central issue of contemporary critical thought-the problematic status of the self.³

Autobiographies can bring attention to marginalized or less-documented experiences, contributing to a more inclusive historical narrative. Uma Chakrabarti while discussing on the studies of Pandita Ramabai felt that her task was not to “retrieve forgotten histories but to express the histories of suppression.”⁴ Women autobiographies are a part of a process of recovering or retrieving women’s history. They also provide helps in the reconstruction of femininity. Gerda Lerner’s warning that ‘the history of notable women is the history of exceptional, even deviant women does not describe the experience and history of the mass of women’ illustrates the generally accepted caution.⁵

This paper critically examines the autobiography of Kochattil Kalyanikutty Amma, Pathikayum Vazhiyathe Manideepangalum and throws light on the importance of autobiographies in recovering women's voices and experiences often excluded from traditional histories. It explores the role of a woman autobiography as a source of historical knowledge and how it helps in the reconstruction of femininity.

Kochattil Kalyanikutty Amma, though little-known in Kerala today, was one of the most vocal, bold and well-read feminists of the first generation in Kerala. She paid an enormous price for her unbowed attitude, but her life was so much richer for the expansion of the mind she gained through travels all over India and in Europe as well as her deep interest in the most exciting debates of her times, including contraception, women's rights and nationalism. Kochattil Kalyanikutty Amma (1908-1997), also known as Mrs. C Kuttan Nair was born in Thrissur. She was graduated in Science from Queen Mary's College, Madras and had a long career as a teacher which proved quite turbulent especially towards the end. She was prominent as a contributor to magazines and known for her keen interest in women's education, active participation in the All India women's conferences and support for contraception.⁶

Kalyanikutty Amma is remembered for two of her books: *Njan Kanda Europe* (The Europe I Saw) published in 1936, that gives an account of her travel to Europe immediately before the onset of the Second World War, and *Pathikayum Vazhiyathe Manideepangalum* (A Wayfarer and a Few Beacon Lights) brought out in 1991, and won the Kerala Sahitya Academy Award for best autobiography in 1993, which sketches the major events of her long life.⁷ It is the nature of the travel, the place and time at which it is undertaken, the class and gender of the person undertaking it and most important, the intent and purpose behind it that make one travel different from another.

Njan Kanda Europe engages the readers through the transnational dialogue it initiates with the turbulent political milieu of the times, problematising the very genre of travel writing for the first time in Malayalam. The boldness of the language employed has the characteristic of a public speech, something Kalyanikutty Amma was very fond of in her life, probably due to the immense power of agency that it guarantees to the speaker during the performance. *Pathikayum Vazhiyathe Manideepangalum* traces the personal encounters that shaped the intensely political self-projected in *Njan Kanda Europe*, a second journey that the writer's self undertakes while working through the recesses of her memories.

Njan Kanda Europe begins with the statement, “It was my first journey by ship.” It is a matter-of-fact report and leads us to the details of life in the ship before embarking on an account of the cities of Europe. Interestingly, major sections from *Njan Kanda Europe* find their way into *Pathikayum Vazhiyathe Manideepangalum* that opens with an account of the untimely death of Kalyanikutty Amma's beloved brother.⁸ The journey of life was never the same for her or her parents after that. We can see here that the travelogue and autobiography become intimately connected in her mind. The traveller, the wayfarer as Kalyanikutty Amma prefers to call herself, sets us thinking of the course of the journey of her life from a starting point to the final destination that all journeys follow.

Writing at a time when the nationalist consciousness was at its peak in India, we can see in Kalyanikutty Amma's autobiography a virtual parade of the leaders of the national movement from Mahatma Gandhi to Annie Besant, Sarojini Naidu, Subhash Chandra Bose and V.K. Krishna Menon. However, there is a reticence on the part of Kalyanikutty Amma in giving her personal impressions, even when she is talking about V.K. Krishna Menon, for whom she expresses great regard. However, in the second half of *Pathikayum Vazhiyathe Manideepangalum*, Kalyanikutty Amma recounts the traumatic experiences she had to undergo because she was cheated by those whom she trusted.

In her autobiography *Pathikayum Vazhiyathe Manideepangalum*, she writes, she studied in Queen Mary's College, Madras in the early 1920s and remembered vividly the many great women and men she heard and met in the city which shaped her deeply cosmopolitan outlook. The famous events of interdining organised by the eminent anti-caste reformer from Kochi Sahodaran K Ayyappan caused paroxysms of rage to lash the caste - elite dominated town of Thrissur from 1917. Kochattil Kalyanikutty Amma, who participated in one such event in the mid-1920s, gives a first-person account of it and the consequences she had to face afterwards, in her autobiography.⁹

After marrying C. Kuttan Nair, a prominent figure in the political arena of Travancore, she became actively involved in the All India Women's Organization and worked alongside prominent women leaders such as T.C. Kochu Kuttiamma, Ambadi Karthiyaniamma, and Parvathi Ayyappan. She took a firm stand for her husband, who was imprisoned as part of his political activities. She also writes about her travels in Europe in the mid-1930s. She had, in the 1930s, written an account, in English and Malayalam, on this trip, as part of a women's delegation invited by the International Student Service, called 'A Peep at Europe' in English and *Njan Kanda Europe* in Malayalam. In her autobiography some chapters of this book have been included.

She writes that her mother strongly believed that the greatest wealth parents could give their children is education and that both sons and daughters have equal rights to it. She also believed that it is appropriate to arrange the children's marriages only after they have completed their education, and that the children's preferences should be taken into account in marriage matters. And it is clear that these thoughts may have influenced Kalyanikutty in her public life.¹⁰ She believes that to regain the high standards we have lost in the field of education, campus politics must be removed from it. Along with this, guidebooks should be discarded, and leaders among students who teach their peers should be eliminated. Besides, she harshly criticizes the efforts by Malayalis to neglect the mother tongue and teach young children foreign languages.¹¹

She mentions that the British authorities, who were ignorant of Indian culture, provided us with historical lessons that fostered immense admiration for their own history and disdain for India. Besides, during that time, the speeches of Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore, as well as works like V.D. Savarkar's biography, "Indian War of Independence," and *Life in the Andaman Cellular Jail*, and also the brutal measures undertaken by the British authorities to suppress the Khilafat and Mappila Rebellions helped to reveal the true nature of foreign dominance.¹² She also exposes the blatant lies compiled under the name "British Indian History." She identifies the history taught by the British about Tipu Sultan, including the forced religious conversions and other tales of destruction attributed to him, as mere fabrications. Along with that, she highlights the largely overlooked book "England, India, Afghanistan," published in 1879, which details the true objectives of the British arrival in India. The book contains a statement that begins with, "We have conquered Hindustan not for the benefit of that country....." emphasizing their true intentions.¹³

Protracted issues of women's representation, co-education, birth control, compulsory motherhood, women's right over her body, and so on that Kalyanikutty Amma raises receive barely perceptive answers from Gandhiji.¹⁴ The interview that Kochattil Kalyanikutty Amma had with Gandhiji gives valuable insights into the conservative views espoused by the nationalist leadership and the radical views of a feminist public intellectual. History has recorded that undeterred by the words of Gandhiji, Kalyanikutty Amma continued to champion the causes she considered crucial to women's freedom. One almost gets the impression that she wrote the autobiography in her late 80's because she wanted to leave a record of how those who had power took advantage of her essential goodness.

Autobiography thus, has become an ideal vehicle to carry women's issues and experience. This genre is also chosen by women to express the deference and resistance. Women's autobiographies are tools of self-representation of their personal histories. Women have used them to represent their realities and their feminist concerns. Their autobiographies have defied the set norms of language and aesthetics and have instead moulded them to speak of lives that have broken out of the ordinary. Traditionally an autobiography is understood as a formal document where the narrator describes the events and personages who may have influenced her towards an awareness of the self. Simultaneously it also constructs a certain image of the self the narrator wants to project to the world. *Njan Kanda Europe* and *Pathikayum Vazhiyathe Manideepangalum* present a complex portrait of epistemic shifts and political change, the making of a nation and the unmaking of principles, of travel and life lived the uncompromising manner, but what remains with us is the picture of a woman, proud, obstinate, unyielding and lonely.

Autobiography as history offers a unique and valuable perspective, enriching our understanding of the past through personal narratives. While it presents challenges in terms of bias and reliability, its strengths lie in providing intimate, detailed, and diverse accounts of historical events. By critically engaging with autobiographies, historians can gain deeper insights into the complexities of human experiences and the multifaceted nature of history.

Endnotes:

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