

Rajam Krishnan  
and Indian Feminist  
Hermeneutics



# Rajam Krishnan and Indian Feminist Hermeneutics

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Cambridge  
Scholars  
Publishing



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This book first published 2017

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-2995-1

ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-2995-3



*Rajam Krishnan (1925-2014)*



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## FOREWORD

RAJAM KRISHNAN

.....it is not an exaggeration to state that the sociology of women has been inadequately documented, since sociology is almost synonymous with masculinity. Religious texts and other major works have never been enunciated from a woman-centered perspective, since women are hardly accorded a human status and continue to be devalued as mere objects of pleasure and as child bearers. Even as we proceed into the twenty first century (these essays were penned in 1995) women still continue to battle for lives from their fetal stages to their graves. Why is it so? Both men and women remain indispensable and reciprocal in this world. Why is it then that a woman hardly receives human rights and dignity? Akin to gold and soil, women are also perceived as objects of acquisition, childbearing and labor. Although it is proven that women are in no way inferior to men, they are still ruined and chattelised, which has almost become a “dharma” as exemplified in numerous stories, *puranas* epics, etc. These essays seek to interrogate the facts behind such biased views.

The human race had not evolved without a mother, since motherhood remains a primal power. Contemporary genetic mappings of biological anthropologists trace the evolution of the first human being to a primitive tribe of Central Africa. The male sperm lacks “cells”. Women’s ovarian eggs multiply for impregnation. Research proves the wonder of women’s menstruation, which is actually a self-cleansing process that in fact disinfects the ovary. Matriarchal cultures opine that nature has thus endowed women with such miraculous powers that accord her a primal status so much so that she is transformed into a cosmic *Sakti* that moves the multitudes of the universe. But in the passage of time, men enslaved women by placing their "selves" in a position of centrality as illustrated through numerous stories, *puranas* and *itihisas*. In fact, patriarchal imagination has generated myths wherein a male god divided himself into a male and a female principle and created the first woman. According to such bigoted norms, the God of creation was himself created from the navel of a male god sans the necessity of a female ovary. The story of the birth of progeny from the third eye of the god is also no different. Such

tales stand testimony to the male dominance in imaginative and cultural lore. Patriarchal bias has deeply percolated into the human psyche to such an extent that women hate their own female off springs and aid in smothering them. Ironically, this is perceived to be a naturalized process of human behavior. Under these circumstances, it is necessary for us to re-visit and interrogate our *puranas*, *kavyas* and stories as they indirectly reinforce such patriarchal value systems. These writings are not aimed at causing pain to anyone's feelings; rather they are directed at interrogating our "sanctioned lives" from a revisionist perspective.. . . .

# A VOICE REGISTERED

C S LAKSHMI

In 1953, when Rajam Krishnan won the Kalaimagal award for her novel *Penn Kural* I was not yet nine. *Kalaimagal* with its scholarly editor Ki. Va. Jagannathan, referred to as Ki Va. Ja by everyone, was considered a literary magazine and it made its appearance in our house every month without fail for my mother was an avid reader of Tamil fiction. *Penn Kural* was about non-communication in a traditional arranged marriage, and about how a woman caught in the politics of the family tries to find love in a marriage. Even though I was a young child, I read the novel as it was serialized in *Kalaimagal* and although the novel was a very subtly written psychological exploration of a marital situation, I could feel the resonance within myself although I could not understand what I was responding to. I re-read the novel later in my teens and understood what an extraordinary analysis of life in a family it was. Its title *Penn Kural* was also unusual, for it meant a woman's voice and the novel was about a woman trying to find her own voice in a marriage. This aspect of a woman needing to voice her opinion was what appealed to me most when I re-read the novel.

In later years I found that many girls of my age had been touched by the writings of Rajam Krishnan. In 2002, when Rajam Krishnan came out with *Uthara Kaandam* after a series of crises in her own life like the death of her husband and her having to shift many residences, we admired her not only for her never-say-die spirit but also for not giving up her pursuit of understanding women's history and locating it within the history of nation. I would like to dwell on this novel for a while before talking about the essays written in 1995 which form the content of this book. The reason why I would like to do it is because the novel shows Rajam Krishnan's relentless pursuit to give centre space to women and their voices.

Writing about *Uthara Kaandam* in my column *Different Registers* in *The Hindu*, I wrote:

1. There are not many writers who would take up a theme and do thorough research on that and then turn it into fiction. Turning field work into fiction has been attempted by very few writers. This is because this involves travel, preparing field notes and then weaving a story around it. But there is one writer who has done this for many, many years and she is Rajam Krishnan. I have had differences with her in terms of the story she has woven around the field notes she has collected. But I have always admired her for her energy and guts to venture into different areas and experiences and making them come alive in her fiction. She can go to Thanjavur and write about the life of farmers who stand in the slush of the fields and do agricultural work; she can be in Goa and write about the independence of Goa. She can write about the women in the salt fields and she can also write about women in politics who have been forgotten by history. She can write about the life of fisher folk and she can also write about people who live in the mountains. Behind all these novels are authentic and well-researched field notes, which can make any anthropologist proud....

*Uthara Kaandam* is a kind of a culmination of all her thoughts on the nation and its politics. It is a novel woven with complex images of politics, leaders, freedom fighters and their lives. More than anything else, it is a novel which exposes degraded human lives and forsaken Gandhian values. In the introduction she says that the novel is about everyone and everything that she has known in these 78 years. Rajam Krishnan feels that the politics of Tamil Nadu has degraded to a level where women, despite being referred to as "thai" and "thaikulam" are the worst sufferers. The powerless and economically inferior women get victimized, whereas those in powerful positions in the society become easily a part of the cutthroat politics whose aim is quick money, limitless power and personal gains. The novel is a collage of images of people who have staked their personal lives to hold on to the values which they believed the freedom struggle taught them, contrasted with images of a generation of leaders and hangers-on who have absolutely no concern about these values for they don't exist in their vocabulary or agenda. At the centre of the novel is Thayamma, who is 80 years old, looking back at her past while experiencing the hard realities of her present life. Brought up by a Gandhian couple, she has to face the indignity of begetting a son who turns politics into a vulgar game of power-grabbing at whatever cost. He has scant respect for women, but occasionally he comes to ask his mother to live with him for her staying alone at that age may encourage adverse comments from his political rivals.

*The most touching characters in the novel are Ramunni, Sayabu, Subbiah, Sambu Athai and the Gandhian couple. Romania and Sayabu die early in the novel, but their voices and tears seem to haunt the novel. Ramunni escapes being hanged for his Marxist views in his young age when the Communist Party was underground. He dies a powerless, poor man and when Thayamma visits him after a while, he begins to weep bitterly. "The hangman's rope would have been better for me. Our dream of a "Bharata Samudayam", where there is equality, democracy and non-violence is now shattered," he says. The term "Bharata Samudayam" is one the poet Bharati used to hail the nation. And Ramunni's weeping becomes the metaphor of his generation.*

*The novel ends in a highly dramatic way when Thayamma decides to leave her house along with a much-exploited young working girl and go to the village where the Gandhian couple had initially raised her. The village has just experienced caste riots after a young girl and a boy from different castes run away from home to marry and they are found out and killed. But in the village, is also a sub-inspector who knows about the history of the Gandhian couple and there is also an old ally whose children have settled down in the U.S. and elsewhere who has come to settle down in the village. And, in a typical Rajam Krishnan style of hope emerging out of nowhere, there is also a group of youngsters from various parts of India, one of them from the family of the bold Gandhian woman who had initially given succor to Thayamma, who swear that they will try to bring values back into the life and politics of the nation. Thayamma's life has come one full circle and she is there where it all started and hope is born again within her, like a new life. The inspector returns her bag with her white sari safely. There is not a spot on the sari and it is white with no stains. The white sari becomes the symbol of all that is held sacred by her and its return brings hope, which she had almost lost.*

*The unstained white sari is also Rajam Krishnan's message of not giving into oppression and injustice of any kind as a person and as a writer.*

It is important to understand the passion and commitment with which *Uthara Kaandam* was written in order to know the spirit behind the essays in this book. Rajam Krishnan was a prolific writer (even at the age of almost 90 she talked in a feeble voice about her works with the same passion, although occasionally she forgot whether she had already written them or was still to write them. "So much more to write... " is what she murmured every time I saw her) and wrote fiction based on field research on a variety of subjects which have now become crucial for discussion. She wrote about dams before activists like Medha Patkar took up the issue

of big dams and life around dams. After many novels and short stories, around the nineties she felt that it was important to deal with the position of women in Indian culture and critically view how the degradation of women is not a later phenomenon but something that has been part of its mythology and inherent in epic texts. It was necessary to do this for after Periyar's book *Penn En Adimai Aanaal?* (Why did Women Get Enslaved?), for there was no book in Tamil for popular readership which dealt with such issues. She did this in a series of essays which were very well received.

The essays, one after another, break the myths surrounding women and her central role of reproduction, and her body which is in constant ownership to be bound and redeemed by men like in the case of Ahalya turned into a stone by her husband and redeemed by Rama, another man. Rajam Krishnan begins with origin myths and then writes extensively about mythologies and epic texts, including *Silappadhikaram* and questions the veneration accorded to Kannagi for an exaggerated act of revenge. She also praises women poets of the Sangam age like Avvai but while writing about the women Bhakti poets she admires Akkamahadevi and her ways of devotion to Shiva, but is not enamoured by Karaikkal Ammaiyar who turns into a ghoul merely because her husband cannot look upon her as a wife anymore since she has become a glorified devotee of Shiva who can perform miracles. Karaikkal Ammaiyar is an icon in Tamil culture when they talk about the power of a woman who is acclaimed for her spiritual pursuits. Rajam Krishnan mercilessly tears apart this exalted image accorded to Karaikkal Ammaiyar.

Rajam Krishnan also writes about prejudices within religious practices including Buddhism. She writes in great detail about the attitude towards widows and the pain of widowhood. She deals with the process of commodification of women and follows it with a critical analysis of national idols like Vivekananda and Gandhiji. She speaks about Vivekananda's obsession with Indian womanhood and women like Sita and similarly criticize Gandhi for imposing his views on Kasturba and sees Kasturba as the woman who struggles within marriage for a place for herself.

Rajam Krishnan's inability to accept some of the major failings of Indira Gandhi and her view of Indira Gandhi as a woman who struggled against the odds to give a place for India in the international map, may seem to some, as the only discordant note in this book of essays. Although she criticizes the imposition of Emergency and her indulgence of her younger son's excesses, perceives Indira Gandhi a determined administrator at a crucial phase in the history of the nation and as a pioneering modern

Indian woman leader in the male dominated political turf. Rajam Krishnan's admiration for Indira Gandhi is shared by many of not only her generation but also the later generation. The image projected of Indira Gandhi was that of a strong woman who was capable of dealing with the power bestowed on her. In Tamil Nadu whose Dravidian politics many, including Rajam Krishnan, were vary of, maybe she felt the need to project the image of Indira Gandhi as someone who rose above regional politics to view the nation as a whole.

The final essay reveals her concerns about the human condition which have always been central to all her writing. The essays in this book were read by many who had no access to feminist theoretical concepts and analysis of women's issues in the context of feminism, in Tamil. Translating them into English may not give a new perspective to current feminist discussions, but it will certainly reveal the historical importance of these Tamil essays which became, along with her other essays, an important text in Women's Studies and as such they provided an important historical link in intellectual history.

Having written these essays Rajam Krishnan must have still felt that she had not said everything that had to be said about women, culture and nation. So in 2002 she publishes *Uthara Kaandam* which in a way completes these essays at the fictional level where the strong and powerful woman is Thayamma, brought up by a Gandhian couple who returns to the same village where she was brought up to work with a group of young people from various parts of India to bring values back into the politics and life of the nation. Thayamma is not just the begetter of sons, although her name doubly emphasizes (Thai and Amma) the mother; she is someone in the image of Rajam Krishnan herself; of her generation and temperament. She is the mother turned feral to safeguard things other than children. She is the new woman who thinks beyond her own.

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## RAJAM KRISHNAN AND THE INDIAN FEMINIST HERMENEUTICAL TRADITION

The recent demise of Rajam Krishnan on the 20th. October 2014, at the ripe age of 90 has genuinely created a literary void in the domain of Indian literature. A mammoth writer whose hardly received the limelight that she ought to have had, she undoubtedly poses a challenge to many writers in the decades to come owing to her extensive output in multiple genres. A novelist, essayist, translator, biographer, playwright and a creative social anthropologist, it is indeed breathtaking to survey the multiple roles donned by her in an age when women were forced to live within constrictive domains. Her literary oeuvre clearly evinces her ceaseless diatribe against the predominant phallogocentric mode of creativity. Although her fictional works have received a certain amount of attention by critics and academic researchers in the Tamil language in which she originally penned her works, her insightful essays which establishes her credibility as a literary critic and theorist has hardly received much attention. Often mentioned in the passing along with her novels, it is indeed a serious literary and academic lacuna if one were to read her creative works alone without grounding themselves in her critical works, especially her literary essays which forthrightly express her attitude towards Indian women, nature and culture succinctly. What strikes the most about her works is her hermeneutical approach that re-visits and re-interprets time-tested customs, beliefs and thought processes that have continually undermined the status of the Indian women. Through her essays, Rajam Krishnan has successfully engaged in acts of consciousness-raising against such outmoded systems which have continuously demeaned the status of women.

A hermeneutical legacy is an intrinsic aspect of Indian thought and knowledge systems. Hermeneutics is basically a process of decoding, whereby the essence of cultural and religious texts is unveiled, analyzed and deciphered thus simultaneously benefiting linguists, philosophers, social scientists and literary artists each from their particular vantage points. In India, in the field of grammar, the *Vartikas* of Katyayana and the *bhasya* of Patanjali remain landmark interpretations. The Vedantins' explication of the *Prasthanas* Traya-the *Upanisads*, *Brahmasutras* and the

*Gita*, Adi Sankara's interpretations of the same, and later Abinavagupta's *Abinavabharati* (an exposition of the *Natyasastra*) are just a few instances of the Indian hermeneutical tradition. The western hermeneutical tradition has its origins in Aristotle's *De Interpretations*, the slightly later Talmudical hermeneutics, followed by Biblical expositions. The later significant interpretations lay in the Apostolic age, the medieval interpretations of the Bible and its modern elucidations by Martin Luther, John Calvin and the like. A more contemporary twentieth century existential philosophical interpretation of Heidegger and his disciple Paul Ricoeur are significant contributions to this epistemic process. A cursory glance at the Indian and Western hermeneutical traditions, illustrates the fact that all religious, aesthetic and cultural texts have been interpreted from a male perspective since all knowledge was synonymous with male prerogative and male privilege. A deeper perception reflects the marginality accorded to female existence, their place in schools of knowledge and their liminal positions in interpreting these texts. Such writings are transformed into sites of epistemic generation, perpetuating cultural codes through direct and indirect means which influence human thought for generations. Since knowledge was a male bastion, its interpreters were also male who unfortunately misrepresented androcentric norms as being universal. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Man-Made World: or Our Androcentric Culture* (1911) explodes the myth of the societal fixation on masculinity. In fact, a female-centered perception was earlier construed as a "deviance"- that is seriously challenged by contemporary feminist philosophers across the globe. Whether oriental or the occidental, it was a long-felt need that women needed their own perspectives on epistemology, to break open the glass ceiling that had oft confined their thought. In the Indian scenario, any analysis of cultural codes, sacred texts, mythological figures, etc. need to be analyzed from the vantage point of our indigenous customary practices and ethos. The need for an Indian perspective has been long felt. True, that women remain an oppressed lot globally and that the dominant Anglo American and Eurocentric models of feminist discourses remain partially applicable to the Indian scenario also. But a perceptive interpretation of Indian religious texts and cultural codes needs to be posited against the grain of Indian culture which makes the emergence of an Indian feminist theoretical perspective rather imperative.

- (i) Basically, the theories of Indian womanhood need emanate from its native soil so as to aptly articulate its specific socio-cultural experiences, unique systems of bondage and its specific milieu.

- (ii) These theories often compliment the dominant models of feminist discourse while also acting as a counter-discourse to them. They complement the prevailing theories in adding another paradigmatic model to the larger corpus while also acting as a counter-discourse, since the western models often indulge in acts of epistemic hegemony that negate the existence of non-white, non-European, non-English speaking third-world women's discourses. Under these oppressive circumstances, these nativistic voices authentically articulate the hitherto oppressed women's voices in their own regional tongues.
- (iii) Thirdly, such theories often provide the needed critical tools for the vast corpus of contemporary research in the Indian women's writings. To interpret a literature with non-native theoretical models may not be dispensed as an erroneous fallacy, but the fact remains that there prevails an oft-felt, the unarticulated need for our own native theories and interpretations which may imbue a greater definiteness to the process of elucidation of our culture, ethos, epistemes and practices.
- (iv) Nativistic women's theoretical discourse does at times spawn a postcolonial feminist school of thought in which the perpetrators of the theories often remain beneficiaries of colonial English education. Akin to their male counterparts like Aurobindo, Tagore, Gandhi and Nehru who dexterously mastered the colonizers' tongue effectively only to overthrow them, women theoreticians like Mahadevi Verma in Hindi and Rajam Krishnan in Tamil have articulated their gendered situatedness in their vernacular tongues, to effectively strike back at the dominant patriarchal culture.

The Indian feminist hermeneutical theories in the contemporary sense of the term were born precisely at this point of time when the male folks were questioning the colonizers' hegemonistic rule in our country. Women intellectuals, while inquiring the imperialistic powers also interrogated the power structures like patriarchy and our religious-cultural textual codes that so sought to demean their womanhood. A feminist hermeneutical perspective leads to a re-reading of the scriptures, moral codes and social-cultural customs from a feminist perspective. These interpretations do not merely infer upon gender-specific biological experiences like childbirth and the like; rather its focus is on primary women's experiences like devaluation of their personhood under patriarchal domination and their instinctive right to a life of dignity. In this context, mythological episodes and stories of women's experiences serve as critical paradigms for

critiquing sexist ideologies and also for the production of novel images of womanhood that are affirming of women's autonomy. The modes of a feminist hermeneutics approach are manifold. Basically, a **Radical** or **Rejectionist** approach may deny the authority of the divine texts. A **Neo-Orthodox** or **Critical approach** may accept the prophetic nature of these texts and consider these works as taking the side of the oppressed women. Seen from this perspective, Draupadi's disrobement scene are a classical instance of how a distressed woman is rescued by a benevolent man. A **Historico-Critical** approach may ensure a historical understanding of the original intention of the author. The interpreter is presented with a fundamental and a literal reading of the texts. A feminist hermeneutical interpretation of this approach may easily comply with the socially sanctioned cultural norms and hence view the incidents delineated in the texts as historico-cultural compulsions. A **Revisionist** approach asserts that these "sanctioned" texts are not by themselves misogynist, but remain patriarchalized by interpreters who project their androcentric cultural bias on the "sanctioned" texts. Hence the feminist hermeneutical school of thinkers attempts to liberate these texts from the fetters of patriarchal interpretation to advance women's freedom. Finally, a **Reformist** or **liberationist** approach entails within itself a deep consciousness of patriarchal chauvinism in the religio-cultural texts and interprets the same to emancipate women as well as all marginalized sections. Despite their superficial differences, the underlying aim of all these approaches is to re-write and re-interrogate "sanctioned" texts, cultural codes and signifiers from a woman-centered perspective and to reveal its innate androcentric bias.

A pioneering figure in this larger domain is undoubtedly Irawati Karve. Her seminal works include *Kinship Organization in India* (1953), *Hindu Society: An Interpretation* (1961) and *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch* (1967). The third among these is her most influential work, where she depicts a gallery of characters from the mammoth Indian epic-the *Mahabharata*, at a human level, susceptible to normative errors, passions and the like. The characters are analyzed from secular, scientific and socio-anthropological perspectives, who respond to human situations in times of antiquity. As the eminent critic Norman Brown, W. mentions: "Like the noble figures in Greek epics and tragedies and in Shakespeare's chronicle plays, they exhibit a wide range of human feelings and passions-love, devotion, bravery, chivalry and also hatred, envy, rage, violence, deceit, cowardice, unchivalry, injustice, censurable conduct even by the prevailing standards." (Foreword to *Yuganta*). Karve's earlier books entitled *Kinship Organization in India* and *Hindu Society: An Interpretation*, analyze

the Indian kinship structure in a diachronic manner while also probing into the different facets of Hinduism. An influence of Karve is undoubtedly evident in Rajam Krishnan's present work that has been taken up for translation. Although Karve analyzes the epic figures of the *Mahabharata* from a human perspective, she does not render any specific feminist perspective into her characters. Rajam Krishnan fills this void by analyzing the epic figures in the *Mahabharata*, the Vedas, women from Tamil epics and Cankam Tamil poetry, from a gendered perspective. She clearly analyzes the patriarchal bias in Indian thought that derogates Indian womanhood. Her essays begin with a genealogical analysis of the evolution of human society and the gradual evolution of patriarchy in the Indian socio-cultural ethos. It is a penetrating probe into the psyche of Indian patriarchy that has systematically sought to inferiorize women. The author recourses to a methodical study of patriarchal value systems which remain deeply embedded in Indian thought through her analysis of wedding rituals, our speech habits, socio-cultural habit formations, our mythological figures and thus transmutes her thought into a critique of overarching grand discourse of patriarchy against which all her essays launch a powerful tirade. Rajam Krishnan's essays are of paramount importance in the current world of hermeneutical inquiry since she adapts multi-dimensional approaches like social, cultural, anthropological and literary perspectives with a powerful simultaneity that often disturbs the readers' smugness. One clearly evinces a logical structure in her thought. The first three essays in this volume analyze the primal place accorded to motherhood in Indian culture and the gradual commodification and debasement of the same under the garb of hospitality.

To Rajam Krishnan, women's greatest liberation is from their ovarian destinies. Sita and Draupadi are the two epic characters who receive a special treatment in her essays. It is rather a significant co-incidence that Rajam Krishnan's delineation of Draupadi in these essays and the eminent Oriya writer Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni* (a novel based on a feminist re-visioning of the inner trauma of Draupadi) were published in 1995 and 1996 respectively. On the lines of Karve, Rajam Krishnan also analyzes Sita and Draupadi from a socio-anthropological perspective to describe the injustices meted out to the mythico-historical Indian women who remain the arch figures of Indian womanhood. But she differs from Karve in imbuing a strong woman-centered perspective to her analysis. A probe into the literary imagination of Indian women poets, especially the Bhakti women poets like Mahadevi Akka, Karaikkal Ammai and Antal deserves a special mention. While the author is all praise for Antal's creative imagination, she also unfailingly presents a novel dimension by refuting

the fact that such gynocentric verse which delineates the *viraha* (erotic yearnings) Bhakti in her *Nacciar Tirumoli* could not have been composed by a 12 year old child reared in an ambience of brahminical orthodoxy. Rather, she considers Antal as having been reared in a sect that has mastered the fine arts. However, the author is not free from moments of divergent judgement also. Her opinion regarding the Bhakti of Karaikkal Ammai as being inferior to that of Akkamahā Davy is personally unacceptable to me given the fact that Karaikkal Ammai remains the lone female saint in the Tamil Saiva historical canon who had deliberately renounced her beautiful form to willingly embrace a ghoulish demeanor in order to attain the Lord's holy feet. I firmly contend that through her transformation, she has transcended her second sex status. Recent scholarship on Ammai like Elaine Craddock's *Siva's Demon Devotee* (2010) and Karen Pechillis *Interpreting Devotion: The Poetry of Karaikkal Ammai* (2012) does greater justice to the sublime compositions of the unique poet and enhance our understanding of her poetry from a lofty perspective which it rightly deserves.

From an innate appreciation of the poetic genius of religio-literary figures, Rajam Krishnan suddenly leaps forward by a few centuries when she deftly analyses the personality of Indira Gandhi and her ascension in the Indian political arena which was hitherto a male turf. Some may doubt if Indira Gandhi is a cultural figure to be interpreted in a hermeneutical analysis. But a serious thought would enlighten us with the fact that this iron woman of India was not merely a political figure, but one who had re-defined Indian notions of womanhood in the post-independence era. Despite our agreement/disagreement with her political policies, one cannot differ over the fact that she transformed Indian notions of womanhood. One would definitely stand amazed at the patriarchal preference for a male child, which had dominated Nehru's family! Indira Gandhi then, had to wage a stiff war against patriarchal bias since her birth. Although the author appreciates this first modern Indian woman leader for her political sagacity and acumen, she is also not blind to the inherent faults in Indira which indeed remained serious blemishes in her personality. Regardless of her imperfections, her ascension in the Indian political scenario is indeed remarkable to the author. The essays form a circular pattern when the author reviews the position of women in the larger process of social evolution in her concluding essay. From the pre-historical era of the first essay to the current state of affairs in the culminating essay, the author has made an effective analysis of the Indian feminist hermeneutical tradition that is rather illuminating.

In discussing the Indian feminist hermeneutical tradition, I am reminded of a Kannada folktale entitled *Flowering Tree* which has been narrated by A.K. Ramanujan in *The Flowering Tree and Other Oral tales from India* (New Delhi: OUP: 2004). A brief summary of the story runs as follows. There was once an old woman with two daughters. The youngest among them had the power to transform herself into a tree, offer flowers that were unique and sweet-smelling, and then re-transform herself into a human being if she was kept in a clean environ and offered two pitchers of water. Most importantly, she requests that she be handled with extreme care. She does these things in secrecy to supplement her mother's meager income first. Slowly, the prince of the land discovers the truth and he marries her. Every night she is transformed into a tree at her husband's behest, offers him sweet smelling flowers for conjugal bliss and then re-transforms herself into a woman. Slowly, her sister-in-law discovers the truth and she commands her to be transformed into a tree. But the greedy woman mishandles her to such an extent that she is deformed and becomes a mere "thing". The prince searches for her in far-off lands until he finally discovers her by accident. She requests him to pour some water on her so that she could be transformed into a tree. After she does become one, she instructs the prince to mend every part of her after which water is poured and she is once again re-converted into a perfect human form.

Seemingly naive as the story may appear to many, this Indian folktale embeds within itself the essential conception of the Indian woman as a female principle of creativity, re-production, generation, a *Jani* and a creator by herself. The *Rigvedic* praise for *Aditi* the Primordial mother is based on her powers of generation of a new life. Slowly women's original position degenerated until we hear of women being gang-raped in buses, mutilated and murdered. Going back to the Kannada folktale, the only condition laid by the young girl to people who who desire her flowers, is that they handle her gently. But when the damage is done, it is rather difficult for her to re-gain her normalcy. Like the maimed tree, the Indian woman is also deformed within sanctioned norms. Puranic lore, epics and all religious texts have steadily reinforced her mutilation. When entire generations of human beings remain fed with such biased epistemes, physical and psychological violence is an inevitable consequence. She who once held an ascendant position in the early Rig Vedic times has now been relegated to an object to be mutilated and consumed by greedy patriarchal powers.

One needs to study not merely sociology and anthropology but probe into our own knowledge systems, to analyze the steady, schematized downfall of the Indian woman. Only such methodical studies could lead to

an orderly counter action that may set-right the imbalance among the genders. Probing into our “knowledge” systems like the epics, *Puranas*, oral narratives, etc. is one such move to unearth the bigoted visions that so tend to subdue women. The need is greater given the fact that women continue to live in what Gilman would label as a *Man-made world*. Women’s life is itself perceived only in relation to men, as is their personal, social, economic and psychological development. Gilman succinctly states that “mankind meant mankind” (Gilman 33). A gender-sensitized and gender-tolerant ambience thus needs to be created whereby all the genders work towards a holistic natural order that may bestow greater tolerance amongst them. Individuals then need to be educated with unbiased knowledge systems to re-write the existing epistemes which seek to belittle women.

The hermeneutical tradition scarcely witnesses textual interpretations executed from a feminist perspective and hence it is crucial to possess that vision which actually investigates and empowers thought. The feminist hermeneutical method seeks to interpret scriptures, religious texts, cultural works, epics, and practices, the written and oral forms of communication from a woman-centric perspective, thereby highlighting the serious lapses, gaps and misrepresentations of women that are circulated as cultural norms/codes that demean her status. It further questions patriarchal sanctions, interrogates religio-cultural texts, analyses the deeply-embedded value systems and gender bias in both the written and unwritten texts while also re-visiting the sanctioned knowledge domains. It decenters androcentric/universal knowledge systems and ushers a reformatory thought, whereby a more gender-friendly and integrationist approach is greatly appreciated. Women remained triply marginalized from the society, from the process of epistemic creation and the episteme itself. The above mentioned tripartite discrepancy needs to be eradicated so that posterity is bestowed with a bigotry-free knowledge that seeks to level all gaps. The process is however assiduous since the method seeks to create a total upheaval of deeply-ingrained and “time-tested” normative codes that are often misquoted as possessing “divine sanctity”.

When Subramanian Bharathi created his masterpiece *Panchali Sabatham* (Panchali’s Vow), he was interrogating the divine status accorded to the *Mahabharata*, which like many other Indian *Puranas*, myths and legends also subjugated women. When Bharathi’s Panchali enters the hall, she is not the shy, demure Draupadi of Vyasa who silently endures the multiple injuries inflicted on her body/psyche. A powerful *Shakti* and an embodiment of India, even the heavens remain shocked when she is pawned. Refraining from abject negation, she is:



Youthful Uma, Kali herself, so strong  
 The original Shakti with the terrible bow,  
 The Mahamaya that destroys illusion,  
 (Nandakumar 167)

Even as the charioteer conveys to her the news of her being summoned to Duryodhana's court, she flares up thus:

Whose words do you speak? Is it tradition  
 for women of the warrior clan  
 to enter the Hall of Gamesters?  
 (Nandakumar 167)

She further chastizes him thus:

After losing himself, the king  
 had no right to wager me  
 Having been enslaved by the game,  
 by which law could he play again?  
 He's reduced to a slave, while I'm still  
 Daughter of Drupada  
 Once he dwindled into a slave  
 What right had he to a wife?  
 (Nandakumar 169)

Such powerful re-visionist accounts by seers like Bharati undoubtedly laid the foundations for contemporary Indian feminist hermeneutical thought which is actively widespread in a plethora of Indian vernacular writings today both in its critical works and the creative domain. Such writings aim at waging a stiff resistance to phallogocentric thought and seek to reinstate a strong woman centric perspective which has hitherto been absent in human thought as reflected in the epistemes generated down the ages.

In the west, a feminist hermeneutical stance is prominently asserted in their critical texts like Mary Daly's *The Church and the Second Sex* (1975) which analyses the religious power structures of the Catholic Church. More recently, systematic works on a feminist philosophy of religion aim at decoding the gender bias in the religio-cultural traditions of the west. Pioneering works in this sphere include the Oxford philosopher Pamela Anderson's *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion: The Rationality and Myths of Religious Belief* (1998) and Grace Jantzen's *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (1999). These critics examine the traditional religio-social and cultural structures of the western world from a psychoanalytic, poststructuralist, postmetaphysical and epistemological

frame work thereby underlining the need for a revisionist perspective. It would not be an exaggeration to state that the Indian feminist hermeneutical position emerged almost simultaneously with the western feminist hermeneutical school, for Indian women were also openly interrogating our cultural codes, hegemonic value systems, our epistemic centers like the *Puranas*, *Vedas* and lore that attempted to subdue and enslave them. The thought attained a higher impetus in the post-independence era owing the greater participation of women in the multiple domains of Indian life. One needs to only think of the eminent Hindi litterateur Mahadevi Varma whose essays like “The Curse of Womanhood”, “The Modern Woman” and “The Hindu Woman’s Wifehood” have had a powerful sway on its readers.

Rajam Krishnan’s creative genius is simultaneously inspired by both western literary masters like Shakespeare, Dickens, Pearl S. Buck and others like Kalidasa, Subramania Bharathi, Pudumaipittan and others among the Indian writers. Her feminist hermeneutic stance is intense in its style since she effectively critiques the time-tested Indian knowledge systems, evolutionary myths, *Vedas*, *Puranas* and the unwritten lore of Indian thought. Most importantly, she questions two arch-texts of Indian thought: *The Rig Veda* and the *Mahabharata* and critically evaluates them for their deep patriarchal bias. Born in 1925 in Musiri of Trichy dt., T. Nadu, she is a prolific novelist, short story writer, dramatist, travel writer and critic. Her first short story was published in the year 1942. Since then she has created a large corpus of literary works which number to 36 short fiction and fiction, 300 stories, 20 plays, 2 biographies, travelogues and numerous other literary essays. Her first full-length fiction entitled *Sudandira Jothi* (The Torch of Liberty) appeared in parts in 1948. But it was unfortunately banned and hence the fiction did not see the light of print in its entirety. This unfinished fiction hardly finds any mention in the list of the author’s works. Hence, her first fiction is generally considered to be *Penn Kural* (Women’s Voice) (1963) which was published by the Kalaimagal Press, Chennai.

As a creative writer too Rajam Krishnan is imbued with an immense sense of social consciousness. She reposes enormous faith in the potency of the pen to reform humanity. Refusing to yield to the pressures of print capitalism, she self-published her later works. As a revolutionary thinker and researcher, her fiction is not merely the imagination’s creative child since she pens them after undertaking deep and painstaking research in the respective field. Rightly did Malan the Tamil writer comment on her death that she was far from indulging in a facile “armchair imagination.” In many ways a trendsetter, she was a pioneering Indian woman socio-anthropological creative writer since her fiction focused on the hitherto

undepicted sections of the society like the *Badugas*, the salt pan workers, the slum dwellers, jungle dacoits and small-time criminals. Her Dickensonian eye for detail combined with a strong social commitment is evident in all her large corpus of works. In an interview she once stated:

I do not fully subscribe to the view that works of fiction  
Are all products of the imagination. I, at least internalize real  
life“visions”, let them play on my heartstrings and  
bring them out as literary compositions . . . I keep going  
on in search of new areas and new experiences.

(The Hindu, Jan 4, 2004)

These lines express the writer’s capacity to “drink life to the lees” and to move into the unending horizons of thought. Her close association of life with literature and the deep reformatory zeal that she has inherited from Bharathi offer a fresh perspective into her fiction and also her non-fictional works. As a polyglot, she strove for the translation of regional literatures into other Indian languages. She has translated Bihari folk songs for the Sahitya Akademi. Apart from translating numerous Malayalam short stories in Tamil, she has also translated the Malayalam classic, *Kalignakalam* of Kesava Menon in Tamil. She has also represented India in numerous delegations abroad on creative writing.

Rajam Krishnan's creative oeuvre was an instinctive response to her times. Though born in the colonial times in the year 1925, nearly all her writings could be located in a post-colonial India at a time when the Tamil literary scenario was in a transitional state of attaining modernity. Literature for/by women was fast evolving. Writers of both sexes created literary pieces that were concerned with the upliftment of women. For instance, *Pratapa Mudaliyar Charitram* (1879) of Vedanayakam Pillai has as its protagonist Gyanambal who is educated, intelligent and confident. The trend continued in his other works like *Suguna Sundari Charitram* and also in B. R. Rajamayyar's *Kamalambal Charitram* (1893). Both Pillai and Iyer were concerned with women's reformation and progress. A strident promoter of women's rights, his *Padmavathi Charitram* (1898) and *Muthu Meenakshi* (1903) advocated for women's privileges and education. Numerous journals also flourished. A significant, but short-lived group of writers who were concerned with women's progress and education in Tamil Nadu was the *Manikodi* group. It comprised of writers like Thi.Ja.Ra. Si. Su. Chellappa, Ka.Na.Su.La.Sa.Ra., Pudumai Pittan and the like. These reformatory writers penned extensively on themes like widowhood, women's education and the like. Ku.Pa. Ra. is a significant writer, who pioneered in depicting the sexual freedom of modern Indian

women. His unfinished novella *Verottam* (1969), presents a heroine who realizes the need for ovarian independence of women, a theme that runs through many of Rajam Krishnan's creative and critical writings. The general tendency of the age was to romanticize women. Leading journals of the times like *Kalaimagal* and *Ananda Vikatan* had columns for women, which often contained prescriptive norms for them by leading male writers like V. V. S. Iyer and Kalki. C. S. Lakshmi's *Face Behind the Mask: Women in Tamil Literature* (1984) refers to notions like "clinging-creeper", "educated, yet unassertive wife", "uneducated and tongue-wagging queen of the house", "sweet wife", "loving mother" as the predominant images of women which were in circulation in the writings of those times (46). Later there emerged entire magazines brought out for women by men. The most notable among them are *Penmadhi Bodhini* and *Chakravartini* which prescribed standards like *karpu* (chastity) and education for women.

A significant landmark in the annals of Tamil women's writings lies in the emergence of journals for women by women. The most notable among them include *Hitakarini* (1909) started by Pandit Visalakshi Ammal, Revu Thayaramma's *Penn Kalvi* (1912), Vai. Mu. Kodhai Nayaki Ammal's *Jagan Mohini*. She later started the Jagan Press which brought out writings by women. Subsequently, Maragatavalli Ammal's *Maadhar Marumanam*, Gugaipriyay's *Mangai* and *Pudumai Penn* were some of the other journals that advocated the cause of women, though they still circulated a traditional, romanticized image of women. They were "modern" in the sense of advocating women's political participation and women's enfranchisement. An attempt at creating a non-traditional image of women was undertaken by male writers like T. Janakiraman, Sundara Ramaswamy and Indira Parthasarathy. These were serious attempts at creating non-traditional and realistic images of women.

A host of women writers emerged in the Tamil literary scenario at this precise moment. The most notable among them was Lakshmi. Often compared to Jane Austen, Lakshmi's domain was also largely the home and domestic life. A woman doctor in a largely male dominated profession, she has somehow scantily focused on the professional struggles of the women of a new generation. Therefore her fiction, which was primarily concerned with domesticity and marriage was divorced from her own experience of struggling in a largely male territory. The other lesser known but committed writers include Tamarai Kanni, Saroja Ramamoorthy and Vasumati Ramaswamy, who primarily catered to women's experiences in their works. After the 1950's the most prominent woman writer was undoubtedly Rajam Krishnan.

Rajam Krishnan's gamut of creativity is unique in the domain of Tamil writing. Her literary lineage could be traced to that of A. Madhavaiah who had launched a strong tirade against superstitions and stiflement of Indian women. He had vociferously argued for women's rights. Hence, it is of little surprise that Rajam Krishnan's writings also bear the indelible stamp of women's liberty. Her personal circumstances only added to her zeal. Married to Muthukrishnan, an engineer when she was barely fourteen, and her existence as one of the daughters-in-law of a large joint family, the hurdles to her intellectual progress were many. Hardly having passed the high school, her penchant for creativity stood unabated:

Forced into family life at the young age of fourteen, I remained barred from progress in multiple domains like education, intellectual progress and music. My writings were born out of a struggle for self-recognition. I had no support system initially and hence I wrote with immense apprehension. My initial writings . . . [were] in the kitchen of the large family. (Nalini Devi 10)

She later shifted to Ooty. She acknowledges the encouragement she received from her husband in her literary forays. The isolation and heavy coldness of the place made her engage in creative activities since she wrote between 6-9 in the evenings.

Her literary oeuvre, born out of an intense struggle, was actually spurred by her chance reading of the *Indian Women Auxiliary Cops Journal* immediately after the II world war. On being propelled to contribute to that journal, she penned an English short story entitled *Bonus* in the year 1946 under the pen name Lohini. The other pen names adopted by her include Kaveri and K. Mitra. She later created numerous essays and short stories in *Hindustan Times* until she was triggered by the zeal to create literary works in her mother tongue. The overarching themes in all these works are the rightful place of women in contemporary Indian society and social reform. Rajam Krishnan's reformatory fervor is evident in her early Tamil works also. In 1946, she wrote her first short story in a journal edited by SA. Viswanathan (Savi), and she later created her fiction *Sudandira Jothi* which appeared in parts in the same magazine. Her first work of renown is *Penn Kural* which focused on the stifled voice of the Indian woman in the large family system.

Rajam Krishnan also owes the distinction of having expressed her creativity in multiple genres. Apart from fiction and essays (which we would discuss slightly later in this essay), she is also a creator of novellas, short stories, plays and fables. She has penned 15 novellas, the significant ones, including *Pavitra*, *Thanga Mull*, *Manidhanum Jyothiyum*, *Irudhiyum*

*Thodakkamum*, *Oru Devanin Kathai*, *Alaigal* and the like. She has also penned more than 200 short stories. Between 1952-1953, some of her stories were broadcast on the radio. Rajam Krishnan has also created fables to parody the inherent human evils. For instance, in the fable called *Kaakkaan* she uses the metaphor of crows to depict the debased human nature in the contemporary society. Her biography on Dr. Rangachari is a seminal work in the genre of Tamil biographies owing to her painstaking research. An inherent theme in all her works includes her attempt at reformation of the human society and the particular predicament of women. Her writings often remain openly didactic, more so in her fiction where her characters act as mouthpieces of the author's penchant for restructuring human society.

Her fiction and short stories are a product of her assiduous research. She writes after having spent at least 6 months in the respective field. When one surveys her fiction, one clearly perceives the evolution of her style. From being a writer of domestic fiction in her earlier works she is the first Tamil writer to have created well-researched social fiction. Her fiction is born out of a deep social consciousness where creativity is no mere embellishment or entertainment, but a powerful weapon of social change. Novels dealing with regional themes have existed in Indian vernacular writings. For instance, the Marathi novel *Bangarvadi* (1954) by Vyankatesh Madgulkar and the Malayalam novel *Chemmeen* (1956) by Thagazhi Sivasankara Pillai reflect the lives of the region. The writer's first-hand knowledge of the anthropology, topography, demography, history and geography of the chosen region bear an indelible mark of authenticity to her works. Her first work on regional themes (which is a product of her profound research), is *Kurinji Then* which analyses the lives of the Baduga tribes in the Nilagiris where she had stayed with her husband. Commenting on the rigorousness of the task involved, she mentions thus:

It was an extremely difficult task to depict the changes involved in the lives of the ancient tribes of the Nilgiris. It involved a lot of field work and research. In fact, the tribal members were apprehensive of cooperating with us owing to fear. I still continued to create *Kurinji Then*, owing to persistent efforts. (cited in Govindaraj 11)

*Valaikkaram* (1969) is based on the lives of Goan fishermen and their struggles. A novel that has won the Soviet award, it is a mammoth work of 728 pages that depicts the liberation of Goa from Portugese colonialism. The novelist has arduously conducted first hand interviews with participants in the struggle for liberation, their experiences in Angola, the