

# THE STORY OF MY EXPERIMENTS WITH WRITING LIFE: PROBLEMATIZING THE FEMININE PEN?

B. Chandrika

Literature, I teach my students In the Hudsonian style, holds a mirror up to life. But, I add in the Chandramati manner, that this mirror is often concave or convex. The reflection it gives the reader may not be quite truthful to the original. The question of authenticity in treating the facts of life in fiction is as old as the first fiction itself But when life is treated as such by writers of fiction, life winds itself back on the writer. This is especially so if the writer is a woman. I am going to share with you some of the experiences I had as a practitioner of the genre.

I began my career of writing rather early in life—at the age of 12 and I started with something that any one can write – criticism. It is said that *naatakaantyam kavityam* (the playwright ends as a poet); but in my case it was *niruupanaantyam katha* the critic ends as a fiction writer). From 12 to 22 years it was non-stop writing of fiction for me. Some of the stories were critically acclaimed and I basked in a wonderful fan mail. But then there were problems waiting for me.

I was an unmarried girl—a saleable commodity. My family was worried that my sale-value in the marriage market would go down with each story I write about love and man-woman relationship. How can an unmarried girl write a story like “*Malathinu Veliyil*” (Outside the Borough)? It was a story published in *Mathrubhumi Weekly* (1972) when I was an undergraduate student. The protagonist is a woman who goes out in the evening to the beach all alone. That itself was an unimaginable concept in these days — a girl on the beach alone in the twilight. Now literature and films are full of such girls-, but then — I am 50 years old now, whereas when I wrote the story I was hardly 18. My heroine’s attraction for the opposite sex, her plotting to win over her friend’s fiancé — all these were relishing topics for the critics, but far from being relished at home.

The troubles at home brewed stronger as I dared into yet wilder zones of female experiences. In the “respectable” families of Kerala, there was a practice of isolating girls for 5 to 7 days when they menstruated. There were even separate huts built for the purpose called Anchaampura. Things were not so bad at my place, but my friends used to come up with miserable stories of their being isolated for no fault of their own. The path, the “un-clean” body and the isolation – they were irresistible themes for me and I came up with the story “Murukkumpoovukal” (The Scarlet Flowers of the Murukku Tree). The tree of Murukku has flowers of flashing scarlet– people would not even look at them for long for fear that they might get conjunctivitis. I took those flowers as a symbol for menstruation and wrote the story about two couples. One of the men is a coward, and, intimidated by his conventional mother, confines the wife to Anchaampura. The other man, his brother-in-law, whose wife is also sent there by the mother, sneaks in at night and takes his wife out, asking her, “Should we waste such a beautiful night?”

I was a postgraduate student in the Government Women’s College when Vanitha published the story. It created such a furor, this time not only in my family, but in college too. A teacher of mine, a spinster who had crossed the forties, yelled at me openly in class – “Aren’t you ashamed to write such dirty stuff after studying Keats and Emily Dickinson?” My mother asked ‘in despair, “What are you upto?”

I was terribly humiliated for glorifying the female body thus, or, as Helene Cixous has said, “the body.” Now, when a girl like Sithara writes about a gang-raped girl in her story “Agni” and mentions the sanitary napkin which the male hands of the rapist remove after a moment of hesitation, she is acclaimed as being the bold, genuine female spirit. Sithara was unmarried when she published the story, and she has not written about any harassment on account of writing “Agni.” Times have changed so fast that Sithara is now hailed as the champion of the women’s cause.

The straw that broke the camel’s back came with the story of the twin sisters that I published in *Malayalanadu*. The relaxed morals of one of the twins was more than what society could put up with. “Does it ever strike these delightful creatures that their little fingers were made to be kissed, not to be inked? . . . Are there no stockings to darn, no purses to make, no braces to embroider? My idea of a perfect woman is one who can write, but won’t.” The famous words of George Lewis! I decided to be the PERFECT WOMAN. It was silence for me – a silence that lasted 18 long years!

I returned to the scene in 1993 with the pen-name of Chandramati and was noticed again in the literary world that was now brimming over

with writers. It seemed as if every one has suddenly become a writer. They were using, jargons like Modernism, Postmodernism Srtucturalism and Deconstruction. 18 years ago they were fighting over terms like Existentialism and Alienation. Terms change, I noticed with interest, but people don't. M. Mukundan who had kindly defined modernity to young writers like I a decade ago, was now busy defining postmodernism to a baffled audience.

The stories I wrote first as Chandramati - like "Aryavartanam", "Devigramam and "Nilathil Poru"—were realistic but with a difference; some critics have categorized them under the label "New Realism" along with stories by some other writers too. As a teacher of critical theories in the post-graduate classes of my college, I too was familiar with all the jargons of Post-modernism. Armed with them I entered the field with my first Post Modern story -"The [Post-modern] Story of Jyoti Viswanath." At the outset of the story itself I pointed out that the adjective "Post-modern" is "intended as a signpost to critics, who, otherwise, would attach it only to writers of their choice." I hope it is evident that the story was intended to ridicule Postmodernism 'in Malayalam. Let me quote one more part from the beginning of the story to substantiate my point:

"The reader is given full freedom to read this story without any prior sanction from the author, at one sitting or piecemeal. The reader can stop reading now itself and decide not to read it at all. If by any chance you are continuing to read, please feel free to break the reading wherever you like. Such exorbitant freedom will be given only by Milan Kundera or Italo Calvino or some of our writers who imitate them. You can even edit this story or re-write any of its paragraphs."The author's satirical intentions, I hope, are obvious.

Jyoti Viswanath turned me overnight into a recognized post-modern writer in Malayalam. Established writers and critics acknowledged my existence and the name of Chandramati started appearing in critical articles on Malayalam fiction. When I declared that the story was written to ridicule Postmodernism, the readers took the statement as a big Post-modern joke. I ignored them in the Post-modern way and continued to write as I liked.

What intrigued me was the fact that so many of the postmodern gimmicks imported from the West were already present in ancient Indian literature. While working (on deputation from the college) as Executive Editor of the Sahitya Akademi project on Medieval Indian Literature, I was really surprised to note the self-reflexivity of some of the narratives and the metalepsis employed in the narratology of certain works like Mahabharatha , Ramayana, Panchatantra, Vikramaditya Tales etc. Ved Vyasa

and Valmiki appeared as characters in their works and actively interacted with the characters of the stories – like Federman in English or Kochubava in Malayalam in the 20th century! So what is the relevance of the term “originality”? Is originality only a recycled matter? It is a question that still intrigues me.

The literary scene, by the time of my re-entry, had become fragmented into several categories. One of them was women’s writing, Lalithambika Antharjanam and Saraswathiyamma, two former writers of Malayalam, can be said to represent two parallel strands of women’s short fiction in Malayalam. The women writers of today can be categorized as belonging to the one or the other, depending on the moderate or radical stances they adopt. The radical writers grouped themselves under the umbrella of *Pennezhuthu*, a rough transformation of *écriture féminine*. I had to resist the mantle from descending on me. Women’s writing is a good term, self-explanatory. But unfortunately, the term *Pennezhuthu* was not exactly sexual politics in Kerala, for here it had acquired a political colouring too. I am not an activist—certainly that is not my way—and I have had no political leaning whatsoever. I had always voted for the best woman, not looking at the party. I agree with Matthew Arnold that a writer should be above all sorts of political and religious biases, that he or she should have the virtue of disinterestedness. That is the main reason why I am against *Pennezhuthu*. The non-idealized pictures of women in some of my stories like “Saisavam” (Childhood) and “Daivam Swargathil” (God is in Heaven) have been bitterly attacked by “female feminists” as anti-women stories. But I have to present the convex, concave as well as the true pictures of life.

I have my own reasons for taking a strong stance against *Pennezhuthu*. Other than the political link that makes it unpalatable for the non-conformists, such a labeling marks it out the mainstream for men and leaves only the margin for women. Also, under this umbrella term, third-rate women writers basking in the political patronage will come up as major writers, leaving the real meritorious ones to struggle for survival. Reservation for women may do good in politics, but not in the field of writing – that is my personal belief.

Writing for me, has been therapeutic too; It was one of the means by which I recently survived the onset of a fatal disease. Again that was a dull period in my creative life, for being under chemotherapy I was press-shy. I never published any thing I wrote. Or it would be better to say that I never wrote anything to publish. I kept a journal in which I faithfully recorded – sometimes in prose, sometimes in verse—all my physical pain, mental fears and trepidations, as well as my spiritual dilemma. All the love

and kindness showered upon me, all the unkind words some of the visitors dropped - all found their way as poems, short sketches and entries. Once the crabs left my body for, good, I was able to put them to shape as a booklet -An Interval in the Land of the Crabs.. This will shortly go to press. When The Malayala Manorama published it in their annual number, it elicited unprecedented response from my readers. The cancer patients thanked me for giving them a ray of hope; the others said, coming from the pen of a creative writer, it reads like fiction. Little do they know that it is my survival tactic.

Let me assert that I am a woman writer, conscious of the issues that women have to face in present society, and reacting to them through my fiction. The problems that I had to face at the initial stages of my writing are no longer there 'in full force, and I en' 'JOY the sight of the young women writers enjoying their freedom. Since writing the body" is no longer taboo, they unleash their pens, shocking the male world. Wanting to be different and distinct I have left it behind me. Now I have resorted to humour and satire as more effective weapons for my social reflexes.

To conclude, writing life in a society that is going haywire offers its own challenges. Narrow fundamentalist feelings have begun to control life in general now. If one of the bad and ugly" characters in any story by any writer belongs to any religion s/he will be accused of being biased against that particular religion. One cannot produce characters out of thin air-, one has to locate and place them somewhere and this has become a major problem for the present writer. I have fictionalized this dilemma of the writer in the story "Uttaraadhunika Katha Prathisandhi" (The Crisis in Postmodern Story). Perhaps fictionalizing dilemmas would be the best way to overcome them.