

FEMININE SPEECH TRANSMISSIONS: AN EXPLORATION INTO THE LULLABIES AND DIRGES OF WOMEN

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Selvy Thiruchandran, 2001, *Women's Education and Research Centre, Colombo.*

Women have been historically ignored as creators of culture. Or rather, let me clarify this statement – women have been ignored – as creators of mainstream culture – in the form of ‘high culture’ – consisting of art, literature, music, dance, drama, sculpture, architecture etc. This has been facilitated to a large extent by the fact that women have been historically situated in sites of disadvantage: throughout the ages, they have been usually less formally educated than men; they have rarely taken to socially-sanctioned, culture-based professions – for the most part due to patriarchal ideologies and gender unequal socio-cultural practices that have stymied their growth, and restricted them to specified areas within the home, and the community. At the same time, women are poor as a gender, they constitute a subaltern class, and for that reason they have not possessed the finances, the raw materials, the equipment and artistic training required for cultural production. Moreover, women have been – as a matter of course – burdened with multiple roles and responsibilities related to their gender identities that allow them little time and leisure, little space and privacy, and more crucially, little encouragement or support, to develop their intellects and abilities, so as to aspire to create culture – in the professionalized and public sense that we know.

However, this did not mean that women didn't write, or paint, or sing, or even dance, in accordance with both local and international standards of culture. It means that even when they did, their cultural works were overlooked or undervalued or denigrated by cultural pundits and specialists, or regarded as marginalized compositions, which were generally pre-classified as ‘women's work’, to be estimated from that perspective. It means that sometimes, women's contributions have been deliberately suppressed. As, it is observed that until recently, women's creations were not purchased by museums and exhibited, or included into conventional anthologies and literary canons, or critically assessed with the same seriousness of purpose that would be applied to the work of a man. Women creators' lives have not been considered sufficiently worthy, or of sufficient significance for biographical focus. As a result of all these factors, perhaps, the greatest artistic achievements of women have been irrevocably lost to history.

Yet, with the crystallization of feminist consciousness during the last few decades, and its formalization into disciplines of women's studies throughout the globe; as well as the resultant presence and politicization of women's movements, there has surfaced a growing interest in women – and the spotlight falls on their occupations, their interests, their bodies, their psyches, their politics, and their culture. Consequently, it becomes remarkably evident that apart from women's contributions – to what can be perceived as mainstream culture – there are other cultural spaces customarily occupied by women that are seldom acknowledged, hardly defined, and rarely, if at all, studied.

These forms of culture are generally confined to the peripheries of ‘high’ culture, or ‘fine arts’; and are not bestowed with cultural merit, being generally deemed ‘lesser’, and perhaps made subordinate as ‘folk’ art or folklore. Instead, they are, on the whole, existent in women's communities, taught and passed on from mothers to daughters, and practiced in day-to-day life, as living arts, that are ever-present in women's consciousness. Undoubtedly, they do not subscribe to the maxim of ‘Art for art's sake’ or masquerade as ‘pure’ culture that is untainted by the forces of commercialism. Rather, what is being alluded to here, is the assortment of creative activities that women have historically excelled in – by and large with a functional purpose in mind – which in itself offers an alternative account of artistic impetus. For, women's culture has ranged from creating crafts for economic purposes and community based cultural rituals, to domesticity-centred creative practices.

Selvy Thiruchandran's two monographs on lullabies and dirges collated together in *Feminine Speech Transmissions – An Exploration into the Lullabies and Dirges of Women* is an enquiry into exactly two of these unacknowledged categories of tradition that are effectively dominated by women. And therefore, need to be contextualized alongside feminist attempts of actively seeking, sanctioning, appraising and appreciating these lost and forgotten genres of alternative cultures – such as oral narratives and historiographies, folk tales and oldwives tales, songs and poems, ditties, folklore, proverbs, riddles and even gossip. These are occasions when women have not only created, but where they have also had a greater responsibility in the preservation of culture – through oral dissemination.

Sri Lanka lays claim to a protracted tradition of oral communication. This can be related on the one hand, to the formal verbal transmission of Buddhist discourses amongst the clergy, until it was documented in scripture-form around the 1st century BC. On the other hand, there is a common bank of folklore in the form of various lullabies, nursery rhymes, game-verses, dance tunes, and agriculture-based songs (of weeding and harvest); speech transmissions – which are prevalent in many geographical quarters, and which span all three – Muslim, Tamil, Sinhala communities – despite the difference in the language of transmission. At the same time, other folk traditions that are specific to a particular locality, ethnicity, or caste, can also be distinguished, such as dirges – customary to Indian and Sri Lankan Tamils as well as other groups. For instance, certain Catholic communities in the coastal areas of Negombo who practiced a variant form of the dirge (sometimes by women for money); the *paasana geetha* – again a religious cum folk practice of this same community; *Vessanthara kavi* recited particularly in the Kandyan regions; the *pal kavi* of rural farming communities – to name a few.

In her book, Dr. Thiruchandran focuses on songs from Tamil-speaking regions – those sung by the Tamils of the North of Sri Lanka, the Tamils and Muslims in the Eastern Province, and the Tamils from the hill country areas. The writer's exploration is divided into two sections. The first part – the "Tallattu" refers to women's lullabies – generally sung after a birth, and during the first couple of years of life. The second segment, entitled "Oppari" – looks at the dirges – vocalized by women at a death – usually of a loved one. Thus, structurally, the book can be seen to trace the mores of women's participation at two most critical moments in life – that of birth and death.

From a feminist angle of analysis, the speech transmissions of lullabies and dirges are understood to be located in the more personal domestic sphere – perceived as being in opposition to the more public, official forms of cultural production. The reason for this lies in the fact that throughout the ages a majority of Tamil women were essentially confined to the home and the family, and were allowed only restricted access to public/community life – on account of gender-unequal ideologies and cultural traditions. Of course, while there were always class/caste exceptions of women who were able to move freely in society, and actively participate in public life, this book, however, is an exploration of the more private, intimate forms of culture, practiced by women in Tamil-speaking communities.

As introduced by the author, the commonalities of the two genres, the tallattu and oppari, lie in that they are forms of oral transmission. Both literary strains possess certain traditional and modern contents and features that indicate their growth and continuity over the years. Sometimes, different versions of the same literary piece are possible. Usually, the literary works cannot be traced to their authors, but remain anonymous; consequently, the period of origin is unknown. At the same time, both the tallattu and oppari are sung or recited or chanted as free verse – in regional dialects.

Lullabies – soothing bedtime rhymes and songs belonging to the oral tradition, are a characteristic of virtually every culture and every home with children. Tallattu, in essence, are attempts to reflect and record women's lived experience of motherhood. Dr. Thiruchandran in her book considers the fundamental ways in which Tamil-speaking women throughout the ages have utilized and expanded the medium of the tallattu. Not merely to express the customary measures of maternal love, caring, comfort and valuation, and to educate the child; but also as an agency to convey the bonds of kinship relationships, the primacy of religious faith and ritual vis-à-vis the child, the affinity to the diversity and abundance of nature, and the prevalent social and cultural expectations of womanhood and motherhood. Consequently, the tallattu is seen to span from simple prattle-verse to more philosophical instruction for the child.

The author also highlights the associated imagery utilized in the tallattu – particularly as the brevity of the form calls for the essential fusion between the themes and the images. References to the great Indian literary traditions and to the Hindu pantheon of gods as well as to Islamic prayer are given specific attention in tracking the differences in the contributions of the various communities to the tradition of tallattu. In this context, the writer continually makes links between the issues/imagery in the works to the social conditions affecting the women creators; thereby, tracing the way in which their socio-cultural milieu is conversely reflected in, and restrictive to their vision. As such, the verbal culture portrayed is considered to be part of the subjective consciousness of the self.

In comparison to the lullaby, dirges by and large, are taken to be songs of lament – usually of a lyrical mood. In western culture, the earliest dirges can be traced to Classical Greece – to the Epicedium – a mourning song sung over the dead. A more ceremonial type of dirge – the *nenia* (a song of praise for the departed) was chanted in Roman funeral processions where, sometimes, professional wailing women were hired for the occasion (as were in this country). In the annals of English literature, there are occasions when the dirge was developed into lyric poems of varying sorts such as the old English *ubi sunt*, the pastoral elegy, the threnody that is sung in memory, the simple lament, or the Gaelic *coronach* of Ireland and Scottish Highlands that is the most analogous to the Tamil oppari.

Oppari in direct translation means 'to make a noise together' – thus the practice of women crying and lamenting together at a funeral is termed oppari. It is deemed to have ritual status – hence the prevalence of professional women mourners who 'wail and beat their chests' for payment. Here, it must be observed that the tradition of expressing one's grief visibly and volubly is, for the most part, expected of women to the extent that if a woman fails to communicate grief when required, she can be judged as not realizing certain stereotypes of womanhood.

The book explores women's creativity and contributions to the genre of oppari. Accordingly, the writer points out the varying functions of the practice in Tamil culture – as a mode of social

broadcast, its status as a ritual, its symbolism as political and personal protest, its capacity to signify social rank, its private value as a form of catharsis as well as its power to offer comfort. Through her work, Dr. Thiruchandran establishes the versatility of the oppari by considering the ways in which women utilize it – not only to articulate grief for the departed, but also to express a gamut of their feelings – in regard to anger over family disputes; social belittlement of widowhood; anticipation, loneliness and sexual desire of the single woman; bonds between mothers and daughters and so on. Thus, as argued by the writer, from a tradition of being a collective lamentation of women at a funeral, oppari can also become an elegiac demonstration of individual women's feelings – in other words, spontaneous oppari outbursts of song are conduits for women's subjective responses to various events.

On the whole, when approaching the two literacy forms, the author conveys her acquaintance with a number of critical paradigms – from incisive Marxist analysis to feminist theorizations; from conventional literary criticism to anthropological and sociological premises, which serve to provide a resourceful theoretical framework to the subject.

At the same time, throughout the two studies, Dr. Thiruchandran quotes extensively from numerous tallattu and oppari, thereby,

affording the reader a personal glimpse of the dynamism of these two forms of oral transmission. In this context, any limitation to the work (as noted by the author herself) has been in the accessing of material for examination – due to the fact that most of the pieces have been obtained from what has been already published. At the same time, from the critical perspective of conventional literary analysis, even though the translations (which prioritize meaning over form or prosody) can diminish the overall impact of the relevant piece – it does not detract from the fundamental objective of the writer to investigate the socio-cultural content of works that have in effect been ignored for generations.

By unearthing this virtually lost tradition of women's lullabies and dirges, and by bringing it to public scrutiny through her critical intervention, Selvy Thiruchandran is practicing one of the foremost feminist scholarly actions of instituting and validating women's work. By disregarding established conventions that are partial to patriarchal touchstones; in fact, by attempting to value these women-specific genres, the writer is, in the long run, contributing greatly to the emergent feminist tradition in this country of re-conceptualizing and restructuring exactly what constitutes literature, the arts and culture. All together, this book then forms part of a broader political act of integrating women's expressions to mainstream culture. ■

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Resolutions from the International Conference on Women, Peace Building and Constitutional Making

- 1. We, the participants of the International Conference of Women, Peace Building and Constitutional making came together in Colombo, Sri Lanka (2-5 May 2002) to exchange ideas on issues relating to women, Conflict and peace negotiations, rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts.**
- 2. We unequivocally condemn state and non state actors responsible for the pogrom in Gujarat, India and express complete solidarity with women's and other groups in India who are attempting to bring an end to impunity and to bring shelter and humanitarian services to the victims.**
- 3. We demand an acknowledgement of the crimes against humanity in Gujarat and an official apology from the state government for its failure to protect the lives of its citizens.**
- 4. We strongly urge the immediate decent and equitable relief to be rendered to all the survivors of the atrocities, currently living in inhuman camp conditions. We demand that criminal proceedings be initiated immediately against all perpetrators of the brutal violence, especially against women and children in Gujarat. We also demand that adequate steps be taken to enable a secure return to their homes and places of work, for the survivors, as well as to provide comprehensive security to them.**