

ONE BEE AND FOUR FLOWERS: POLYGAMY AS DEPICTED IN MALAYALAM LITERARY WORKS

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ABSTRACT

Polygamy was a contentious issue within Muslim community always; the reformers within the community were battling for the ban of it, while orthodox religious leaders were adamant to preserve it at any cost. The Quranic principle, that a Muslim man can have up to four wives in special circumstances, has been misinterpreted in different ways and it has been taken as a license for a man to satisfy his licentiousness and thereby to threaten his wives. Literature as well as cinema has given adequate representation to this evil within the society or in other way it has played a crucial role in perpetuating the anti Islamic idea that a man might have wives to his heart's content. The paper tries to analyze the depiction of polygamy in some Malayalam novels.

KEYWORDS: Polygamy, Patriarchy, Malayalam Novels

Those who imagine polygamy to be handy cover for promiscuity are apparently off the mark. If polygamists share one quality, it is that, polygamy aside, they are extraordinarily strait-laced.

Molly Ivins.

Polygamy is a question of controversy among Muslims in India, and Islam is considered to be harnessing the wishes of women by allowing men to marry according to his wishes. Patriarchy supports men in marrying women of his choice by manipulating Quranic verses according to his whims and fancies. In other words, they safeguard the vested interests of men in this, and turn blind to the miseries and hardships of women. They often quote the verses from Quran to support their arguments. The verse most frequently referred to with the subject of polygamy is Verse 3 of Surah 4 (An-Nisa Women).

If ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, Marry women of your choice, Two or three or four; but if ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one, or (a captive) that your right hands possess, that will be more suitable, to prevent you from doing injustice.

— *Qur'an, Sura 4 (An-Nisa), Ayah 3*

At first indication, this can be construed in many special ways, depending on one's motive. Nevertheless, it is essential to comprehend the verse in framework of both the Qur'an as well as the sequential backdrop when it was out in the open. These Verses were revealed after the Battle of Uhud, in which many Muslim men were slaughtered leaving behind widows and orphans. Accordingly, many dispute that these Verses have been revealed because of God's concern for the welfare of women and orphans who were left without husbands and fathers who died fighting for the Prophet and for Islam.

It is a stanza about gentleness towards women and their children; it is not about men or their sexuality and his other interests.

Yet, many instances are reported from Kerala itself where man marries another woman as his second or third wife and often without the knowledge of his first wife and children. It comes to the general observation that men who belong to upper class or below poverty line are usually opting second spouse, as the rich can easily hide the consequences of second marriage. The educated and employed middle class are not in much favor of second marriage. With the advent of gulf emigration and with the consequent heaping of money, the rich misused the Quran verses on polygamy. In other words, religion is mistuned in the hands of patriarchy and the rich. The poor marries more than one woman also for financial reasons. They want to use the money they may get in the form of dowry. There are religious leaders who encourage polygamy on religious basis. They even argue that by giving consent to the second, third or fourth marriage of her husband, she is gaining heaven for herself, her husband and for his other wives too. But for the women who become the victims in this marriage alliance, this life becomes hell. The humiliating factor here is that though they are using Quran verses on protection of orphans and women, often they are not marrying orphans but women from lower financial background and there is no lack of men as it was in the time of war during Prophet's time.

In most of the cases, the lust of man becomes the reason for the polygamy. When a woman becomes sick or crippled or when she fails to keep her conjugal duties, her husband can marry another woman but same is not allowed for woman, even if her husband become crippled. She has to live the life of ascetic, as if she has no womanly feelings or physical appetite. The appalling state of things were revealed when an important religious leader declared that a man needs more than one spouse as he will not be able to control his sexual feelings during the days of her menses.

Saheera Thangal's *Rabiya* focuses on the theme of polygamy in detail. *Rabiya* begins with a debate in which ulema justifies polygamy saying a man can marry up to four women though it is subject to some conditions. Even an educated Muslim professor argues for polygamy saying Islam made it permissible for men so that it will prevent him from illegal sexual relations. The real predicament of women can be seen from the lines from this novel.

They give some trifle sum in the name of Mehar and takes ten times of it in the name of dowry. If a girl is born as the daughter of a poor parent it aggravates her predicament. They will not get suitable alliance even after passing the marriageable age. So when a proposal from rich men comes, they do not bother whether it is his second marriage or not. No one asks her whether she is ready to share her husband on alternative days.

The titular heroine of the novel is a college professor who had endured the same. She tells the experience of her student whose husband married another woman as he cannot avoid sex during her period days. Quran had asked to ensure equality among his wives but Rabiya says they may be given equality regarding the number of children and in the case of property but they cannot give equal care to the feelings of their wives. Rabiya also makes a dig at those men who marry again just because their first wives cannot give birth to male children.

Who will understand the pangs of her lonely mind? How can she keep watching her husband closing the door of their bedroom with another woman? How can she give the tea to her man next day who is coming out of another woman's bedroom? Even if we suppose, they live in two separate houses, who can adjust with a man who comes stealthily to her?

Rabiya also is a victim of polygamy, whose husband goes for job for five years. Rabiya waits for him with her daughter but he comes back with a new wife. Rabiya brings her husband and his new wife to her home, even though all accuse her for that. The acquiescent nature of Muslim women is seen in the comments of her neighbors.

But these men always need new women and it is permissible in our religion too.

.....

My man is out of station for half of month on the pretext of areca nut business. He has got another woman. He had brought her too for the marriage of my elder daughter. I asked her why she did not slit open my neck. Then she told me that my husband and children belong to her.

She had hooked my husband who had got six children by me. My husband got angry with me for fighting with her and told me he will sleep with both wives on other sides and he locked room from within.

Oh my god, how can we call him husband! Even butchers will be kinder to their prey. They will give them water before skinning them alive.

Rabiya also speaks about her aunt, who got divorced at the age of 60, when her husband married a young girl as his fifth wife. She couldn't bear the insult and she broke down mentally. Rabiya's husband's second wife, Hasna also is fooled by him. She didn't know about his first marriage. She also had got painful memories on her childhood, where she, her helpless mother and brother had been thrown out into street once their property is lost. Hasna's mother also wails that at the age of sixteen, she had been married to fifty year old man. She was sold by her parents and brothers who wanted to get money from her rich husband. She describes her frightening experiences with her husband, the threatening from his first wife and how she and her children had been deserted by her step sons, once her husband was dead.

Old men's marrying young girls was not an exceptional thing among Muslim Community of that time. In *Smaraka Shilakal* by Punathil Kunjabdulla a passing description is given on this atrocity done on Muslim women.

'Mammathu Hajji of Palappura died.' Everyone was shocked. The old men were especially shocked. He was walking along this way till yesterday. He had thrown away his nephew from his home for stealing three rupees from his pocket one week ago. One month has not passed since he married sixteen year old Biyyathu.

In Sini Najeeb's play *Kafar Jinn* too, this is nicely portrayed as seen in the following words,

Meena: "This so called gentleman Haji Sahib, he has got four wives with him. It is the house of third wife which is seen there."

Doctor: "It is not new to my community. A rich man can buy any number of wives.

Meena: "But this man has not bought that woman. Instead he poisoned the first husband of that lady"

Doctor: "What are you saying?"

Meena: " Things do not end there. His third wife who is called M.L.A Pathumma has got a daughter Ramlabi who had been taken to take care of his fourth wife and he made her pregnant."

Moidu Padiyath had pointed a lot on the injustices in Muslim community. His noted works like *Umma*, *Aadarshangale Maarikolluka* etc were written on instant divorce, polygamy and marriage age difference between bride and groom.

In *Nilavu* by B.M Suhara too, an instance of polygamy is seen. When a man called Avullakka starts a relation with another maid servant of his employer's family and she gets pregnant, they are asked to marry, as it is allowable for a man to marry as much four wives.

In Vayalar Ramavarma's *Ayisha*, the young heroine milkmaid Ayisha is married off to the butcher Adruman as his third or fourth wife. But when he divorces her, she is thrown to the streets and becomes a prostitute.

A poignant description of polygamy is seen in the novel, *Burqayillaatha Nadi* by Lesin. M

Grandmother died precisely two months after grandfather's second marriage. She was not that much ill. She just died hearing sighs, breath and jingling of bangles from the next room. Life resumed in this land without waiting for the sun rise or without even giving a thought over that. Married life is something which can be untied and avoided effortlessly. The life of woman is expected to spend in cooking for their men, looking after him and his children and in satisfying his lust at night. She had to be satisfied with what she gets, and should think of them as blessings, then have to deliver and look after what he had deposited in her wombs, have to deliver and deliver till she loses her figure, and when she is in her death bed, witnesses her husband bringing another woman, yet unable to protest dies without any complaints.

And on the third day of the burial of her first grandmother, the second grand mother took the charge of the house. She was enjoying the honeymoon with a man who is of her father's age. Because he was the youngest in her life. To a person who does not even know her father's name even, all men belong to one gender. They have got the license for rape through the nikah procedure. So it is her responsibility to do the servile job for him. Though she had shown same servility in two earlier relations, they had died soon. But she was a bit afraid that the first wife of her husband is alive, but what can she say, when the elders of her family take a decision?

CONCLUSIONS

Polygamy weaves a net of tears for the women. Often the women have no choice but continue as his first wife for the sake of her children. In most cases, they might have been married off at early age itself and they might not have any source of income or the education enough to pursue a job. Or by the time her husband brings a new wife, the first wife might have grown older that she cannot find employment easily. So she has to sacrifice her joys and feelings for her children. In a patriarchal society, woman often stays at her husband's home but when a second wife comes, her situation becomes pathetic and she might have to go back to her parental home, where often she becomes a burden to her family. She has to live in constant penury and sometimes they seek asylum in prostitution or in suicide. As for the second wife, sometimes she becomes a prey in this without knowing that she is going to become someone's second wife, or even if she knows she succumbs to this kismet as she or her parents have no means to provide dowry. Thus she selects this life of ignominy due to lack of education, financial backwardness poverty, social insecurity etc. another group of women who become easy prey are the women who get converted into Islam. Though real statistics of polygamy among Muslims of

Kerala is not available, it continues to be a live theme in literature and movies.

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