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## **A Feminist Perspective of Lakshmi Kannan's *Muniyakka***

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### **Abstract:**

Lakshmi Kannan is an eminent Indian scholar, a bilingual writer who writes under the pseudonym 'Kaveri'. She also writes poetry in English. She has voiced out for the voiceless in her short stories. The women in her stories are unforgettable in their struggle towards self-realization, committed to a specific feminine sensibility, strongly willed, pathetically and rebellious kind of revelation of a new and unexpected dimension of an ordinary simple reality. Lakshmi Kannan's main focus is to expose the marginalization of women in the Indian society. She tries to expose the desperate condition of the wives who suffer from the domination of their husbands. In this story *Muniyakka*, Lakshmi Kannan shows the inner psyche of *Muniyakka* and the struggles faced by her from all the men connected to her life i.e her husband and sons. Lakshmi Kannan has portrayed the protagonist *Muniyakka* in such a way, that it kindles the reader to think about the condition women face, especially the treatment of widows in the contemporary society, how they are discriminated by their own family and in the society.

**Keywords:** Silence, alienation, feminine, respected, ill-treated, search for identity and self.

Feminism is a women's movement which emerged in the late 1960's which deals with the theory of the political, economic and social equality of the sexes. Toril Moi differentiates 'feminism' as a political position, 'femaleness' as a matter of biology and 'femininity' as a set of culturally defined characteristics. The aim of feminism is to fight against patriarchy and sexism and it focuses on marginalization of women where women are thrown to the secondary position in the society. Most of the feminists believe that our culture is a male dominated culture, being organized in such a way which favours the interests of men.

Feminist writers try to expose the fact that patriarchy has always tried to silence and repress women. Patriarchal oppression consists of imposing certain social standards of femininity on all women, in order to make the women believe that the chosen standards for 'femininity' are natural, thus a woman who refuses to conform can be labelled as both unfeminine and unnatural. Under patriarchy, the male is always the victor and woman is always depicted as a loser. According to the male dominated society, a woman is either passive or she does not exist.

Raj Ram Mohan Roy was a man but he strived hard for the welfare of the oppressed women in the society, he agitated against sati and women's enslavement. Some of the lesser-known early agitators on women's right were Pandita Ramabai of India, who attacked Hindu orthodoxy and spoke

up for women's freedom. Kartini was a pioneer of women's education and emancipation in Indonesia. The issues which present day feminist are rising in South India are issues of dowry, violence against women, rape, denial of equal wages, discriminatory personal laws, the use of religion to oppress women and the negative portrayal of women in the media, all of these are local issue. "She comes from a basically patriarchal group makes her a member of the subordinate group" (Kannan 531). Women are the last to be loved and the first to be hated. Social system is framed by the ideology that man is superior to a woman; women should be controlled like puppets by men and are part of man's property.

Lakshmi Kannan is an eminent Indian scholar, a bilingual writer who writes under the pseudonym 'Kaveri'. She also writes poetry in English. She has voiced out for the voiceless in her short stories. Lakshmi Kannan's stories are orderly evocative and explores the lives of women in India and Indian women in abroad. The women in her stories are unforgettable in their struggle towards self-realization, committed to a specific feminine sensibility, strongly willed, pathetically and rebellious kind of revelation of a new and unexpected dimension of an ordinary simple reality. Lakshmi Kannan's fiction has been extensively translated into English, Hindi, Marathi, French and German.

Lakshmi Kannan, a feminist and a social reformer tries to visualize a picture of a widow, Muniyakka, who has been battered and torn by her husband, sons and destiny. She focuses on various shades of feminism and brings to light, the oppression, suppression and marginalization faced by the educated, uneducated, urban, and rural and so on. She means to say that oppression and patriarchy knows no bounds and that it's biased, unjust, grasp, extends to all women alike. Most feminists believe that our culture is a patriarchal culture, the culture which is framed in favour of the interests of men. Lakshmi Kannan's main focus is to expose the marginalization of women in the Indian society. She tries to expose the desperate condition of the wives who suffer from the domination of their husbands. Patriarchy is prevalent all over the world, but more intense in India. Feminists aim at uprooting the social evils done to women in the name of tradition, culture and religion.

In this story Muniyakka, the protagonist Muniyakka, a widow abandoned by her three son's lives in a hut with a sense of solitude in her heart. The alienation of her children has made her psychologically muted so she mutters always without any hesitation in order to pour out her emotions. Children use to make fun of her by calling her, the walkie-talkie! She works very hard in order to live her life. The only family which gives her respect and shows some love towards her is the Rama Rao's family, apart from them there is no one to care for her.

In other words, Muniyakka does not exist to her sons, they are happy with their family without Muniyakka. Even though her son don't notice her, she is very caring and eager to see her sons and grandchildren. When she visits them, she is treated no better than a beggar. In place like India, hospitality or *xenia* is given rime importance, but Muniyakka is not given even a small bowl of broth during her visit. She never expects them to treat her like a God, rather she just wants them to show some respect from them, even that is denied to her. Women without husband and widows are

not respected in the society. What is more heart breaking is the fact that own children abandon their own widowed mother.

In this story Muniyakka, Lakshmi Kannan shows the inner psyche of Muniyakka and the struggles faced by her from all the men connected to her life i.e her husband and sons. The patriarchal society has set some norms for women under the norms girls should not be sent to school to study, rather they should be encouraged in household work and to take care of their siblings, to get married soon, to worship their husband as God and to remain silent when they are ill-treated by their husbands and in-laws. Muniyakka is taught by these so called norms.

Muniyakka just like any other women might have dreams about her marriage but all her dreams are shattered when she marries Bairappa. She is stunned once she comes to know about Bairappa's habits of drinking, smoking and gambling. Before the marriage her parents are least bothered about her wish towards her marriage with Bairappa. In most Indian societies the parents feel that it's their obligation to get their daughter's married off as soon as possible. The bringing up a girl child is seen as a burden rather than a pleasurable experience.

Further in the life of Muniyakka complications arise when her husband Bairappa stops going to work. The family condition becomes so bad that she has to work hard in order to look after her family. Muniyakka then starts doing menial works like sweeping, mopping, washing vessels and clothes, cleaning the courtyard from house to house in the neighbourhood. If she has been educated she would have been capable of earning more money but she has been deprived of education, in which she only knows the menial work which she does whole heartedly. She is sincere in her work and never gives a chance for anyone to speak ill of her work. As the days pass, her husband's habits and evil ways takes complete control over him. As a result Muniyakka is seen as an object, a sexual being and ill-treated in order to give her earnings for him to buy alcohol.

Lakshmi Kannan's portrayal of the events in the story is so realistic. It depicts the reflection of the everyday events of many South Indian villager's lives, especially women. The males in the society think of their wives as they are obligated to them and can do anything to them as their wish, they are like puppets in the hands of their husband and unable to live their own dreams. Bairappa too treats Muniyakka as his property and enjoys her hard earned money. Lakshmi exposes how Bairappa squashes all the hard earned money of Muniyakka and leads a nomadic, carefree life.

Muniyakka loves her children to such an extent, even though she leads a harsh life because of her irresponsible husband, she is very much concerned to fulfil the requirements of her children. She has never deprived them of education or any other basic needs. Lakshmi Kannan describes the loving nature and feminine aspect of Muniyakka. As every women in this world longs for true love, similarly Muniyakka craves for true love from her husband but in vain. Bairappa leads a worthless life and finally dies. Muniyakka is consoled thinking that her children will take care of her in future and will love her. But her children abandons her and never understand the sacrifice and her love towards them, as soon as they are married, her three sons are controlled by their wives and left their mother alone.

Muniyakka's sons never have any love towards their mother, like their father, they too utilize her to the most and needed her support until they have been married. But once they are independent and married they abandon her just like crushing a piece of paper and throwing it in the garbage bin. Muniyakka has three sons and has raised them well. But in her old age she has no one to take care of her. Lakshmi Kannan throws light on the fact that in modern days the condition of widows in the society is like that of Muniyakka, most of their children use their parents support like a ladder to reach the heights, but once they reach that height, they forget everything which made them come to that position in flying colours. They look at the past like seeing someone who doesn't exist on this earth.

The nature of man itself is to show supremacy over a woman whether he is a son or husband. Muniyakka's sacrifice are in vain, she is treated her like a rug and once she is worn out they forget her love and leave her to rot and fend for herself. Muniyakka is a pious woman and a faithful wife; she has been fully devoted to her husband even though he was a drunkard. Bairappa dies at an early death, in case it's the opposite like Muniyakka dies and Bairappa lives, immediately he would have married another woman to satisfy his sexual pleasure and to live by her earnings, he would have not cared for his children and they would have been like orphans.

After the death of her husband, Muniyakka is a devoted wife which is evident when she conducts the *shraddha* every year in remembrance of her husband and to appease his departed soul. She prepares fish curry, tenderly cooked cabbage, sweet buns made with jaggery, spiced rice, a small bottle of toddy and a packet of his favourite brand of bidis. The rites of Bairappa's *shraddha* has to be performed by Muniyakka's sons but they are least bothered, so Muniyakka does all the rites instead of her sons.

Muniyakka has a beautiful glow on her face due to the round kumkum on her forehead, flowers on her hair, a clean cotton saree wrapped around her body, a contrasting picture to her usual haggard self. Only on this day she is allowed to wear all this stuff of a 'sumangali' or a traditional married woman. This 'sumangali' way of dressing is forbidden for a widow according to the Hindu system, the patriarchal society forbids women to dress according to their desire, a widow should wear only white and she should shave her head so as to not attract any one, many restrictions are enforced upon the widow which turns out to make them pessimistic and to tie them down to slavery. To wear colourful dresses and adorn ornaments are most women's desire. But when a woman becomes a widow all her dreams are shattered, she has to abide by the rules laid by the Phallogocentric society.

The alienation of her children causes a sort of mental conflict herself, a sort of loneliness overshadowed her which can be seen when she eats the food ravenously, thinking of her pathetic condition. When she was young, she had deep faith on the Lord of snakes, Nagaraj! She used to ask for a son when she was young, the result is that she has three useless sons and now she mocks other women who come to pray for a son. Here Lakshmi highlights the desire of every woman, the want of a male child and not a female child, sex discrimination is done even before the foetus is developed in the womb. Women fast, do hard penance, pray so hard to get a male child and not a female child, the women's mind is contaminated by the masculine power directing them.

Muniyakka lives alone in a hut like a human being in an isolated place without anyone to interact with her, she is surrounded with trees and flower gardens. The coconut trees sway around, with their 'hair' loosely flying in the breeze at night. It seems like the devil is dancing in darkness, Muniyakka is not frightened on seeing the scene but rather enjoying the dance. By viewing the beauty of nature, it enables her to forget the sorrow for a while, the nature is a comforter and the only companion for her.

Muniyakka is always busy doing her work from early morning till evening, she gets some time to rest in the afternoon instead she uses this time to help the gardener in watering the plants. She used to water the entire garden which caused her body to ache. The very sight of the flowers and fruits of the garden, made her feel enriched. The trees and plants reminded her of her children, she substituted her love for her children with the trees and plants.

Through the story Muniyakka, Lakshmi Kannan has portrayed the protagonist Muniyakka in such a way, that it kindles the reader to think about the condition women face, especially the treatment of widows in the contemporary society, how they are discriminated by their own family and in the society. In recent times most Indian families do not prefer keeping their parents with them instead send them off to orphanages or aged homes since they consider them to be of disturbance to them. Most of the old people are ill-treated by their own children in their homes as unpaid labourers. In their old age, they become cooks, housekeepers and babysitters.

At the end of this story, Muniyakka in the lonely hours of the night experience a sort of transformation in herself. She becomes one with nature and feels the excitement, amidst the divine nature. She philosophically asks many questions within herself saying 'who's a devil and who's not a devil? Who am I? And you? Who the devil are you? Where are we going? How far.... And for what? (110).

Lakshmi Kannan, a modern short story writer, who emerges as the spokesman of the urban as well as rural woman in her stories, explore the feminine subjectivity and applies the theme that ranges from childhood to complete womanhood. These women writers say that feminism means putting end to all the sufferings of woman in silence. She portrays the complexities between a man and woman relationship. She has tried to explore the psychological aspects of the lead protagonist. Lakshmi Kannan portrays the search for identity and self of Muniyakka. Her unanswered questions pose a poignant statement, at the conclusion of the story.

The purpose of a widow's life in India is questioned: the very existence of a woman is also left for dissection. Muniyakka is lost within the dense greenery of Raja Rao's backyard. Her life will forever remain, encased within the backyard of another house, toiling for daily bread.

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