

## “The Widow and the Wife”: Debating the ‘Woman Question’ in *Muthumeenakshi* (1903)

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### Abstract

In this article, I look at the radical Tamil reformist novel, A. Madhaviah’s *Muthumeenakshi* published in 1903. This novel which dealt with common reformist issues of the time such as widow-remarriage and female education still struck a more radical note from the other reformist novels of the day in its support of the re-marriage of the widow who was not a virgin. In this paper, my attempt is to situate *Muthumeenakshi* amongst the other social reformist novels of the day and trace where the novel conformed to and departed from the other reformist novels. Through this, I plan to complicate the commonly held assumptions about social reform by bringing out the contradictions within the reformist project as well as explore the variety of positions within it and trace the aftermath of the reformist debates in India’s later history, especially in the nationalist discourse.

**Keywords:** Social Reform, Early Indian Novels, Tamil Novel, Woman Question, Widow Re-marriage, Female Education.

### Introduction

The social reform chapter in Indian history, for a long while, had been considered as “a boring though easy interlude, interrupting the more exciting or taxing chapters on nationalist struggle and the colonial economy” (Sarkar and Sarkar, 2007, p.1). The narrative of social reform, until almost the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, had mainly concerned itself with a few familiar figures like Rajaram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. In this narrative, the reform movements mark the beginning of the Indian Renaissance when a civilization that had been under stupor for long awakens to a new life under the aegis of a group of educated Indian young men who drew their inspiration from an English education which had opened their minds to the world outside. The British government, in the history text books, usually appeared in the role of a benevolent ruler who helped the Indians rid their society of these evils, the abolition of Sati being the most celebrated example. The central protagonists of this narrative (apart from the reformers) were the anonymous “Indian” women bogged down by regressive customs and traditions whose liberation from these shackles forms the core of the reform story.

Recent scholarship has problematised this simple and straightforward reform narrative and has raised questions about many of its basic assumptions, whether it be the simple tradition-modernity dichotomy at the heart of this narrative<sup>1</sup> or the role of the British government in it<sup>2</sup> or its emancipatory rhetoric regarding women<sup>3</sup> or even the percentage of the Indian population that

came within its purview<sup>4</sup>. Of particular interest is the questioning of terms like “tradition” and “modernity” that were considered to lie at the heart of the social reformist discourse for many decades. Studies have questioned long-held beliefs about the “antiquity” of “the Hindu tradition”<sup>5</sup> which, in the popular representation of reform, had been lodged in a relentless battle with a “western modernity” that symbolized equality, freedom and other Enlightenment values. The claims of “modernity” have been similarly contested and therefore one can say that the social reform discourse can no longer be thought of as an “uncomplicated” discourse.

My larger area of focus in this article regarding the social reformist discourse is “the woman question” that the different movements sought to address. By the phrase “the woman question”, I am referring to the perception that develops during this period that the “Indian woman” is oppressed by a variety of forces in the “traditional” society and that something has to be done to bring about an improvement in her condition. The discourse about the “woman question” in India was part of the larger debates about the same in Europe. In fact, the nineteenth century is often regarded as “an age of women”, for all over the world “their rights and wrongs, their ‘nature’, capacities and potentials were the subjects of heated discussion” (Kumar, 1993, p.7). In India, the discourse about the “woman question” was often debated in relation to the Indian woman’s low status and the degeneration of the country. The improvement in one, it was claimed, would lead to the improvement of the other. The emerging discourse of India as “Bharat Mata” or “Mother India” was also in many ways related to this.

The ‘woman question’ also played a major part in the modernity vs tradition debates that raged in the nineteenth century. Meenakshi Mukherjee (2002) writes, “Women became the site for the contestation between traditional norms and norms of modernity. Between the reformers who propagated widow-remarriage and women’s education and the traditionalists who resisted these efforts to ‘destabilise social order’, women came to be a central concern of nineteenth century literary and social discourse” (p. xiv).

### **Social Reform and the Novel**

One way to understand how the “woman question” was played out in the reformist discourse is to analyse some of the social reformist novels written during this period in the Indian languages. Recent studies into the origins of the genre of the novel<sup>6</sup> have pointed out that the social reform movements were one of the important influences on the development of the genre (Menon, 2002, p. 41; Ramachandran, 2001, p. 29). The genre was used effectively by many writers of the period to embody their reformist ideals and the woman question came to play a central role in their works.

For instance, Shivarama Padikkal (2002) writes, “Fashioning of a new ‘secular self’ and transformation of a traditional society into a modern and modernising one was always linked to the project of rethinking woman’s role in family and society. The novel as a mode of writing was an ideal vehicle to articulate this project” (p. 212). Thus what he stresses on is the adaptability of the genre of the novel for forwarding the reformist agenda. The reform movements of the day, in their attempt to transform the society into “a modern and modernising one”, thus had to, at some level, articulate the redefinition of the woman’s role in family and the novels that carried the reform agenda reflected these basic concerns of the reform movements. These early novels also often worked as manuals of conduct, especially for women, and even in cases where they moved beyond this “avowedly didactic intention”, “the projection of ideal womanhood remained in some cases part of the unstated agenda” (Mukherjee, 2002, p. xv).

Like in other parts of the country, the new genre of the novel was used to espouse the cause of social reform in the Madras Presidency as well. Some of the earliest novels written in

Tamil such as *Padmavaticharitram* (1898), *Pratapamudaliarcharitram* (1879) and *Muthumeenakshi* (1903) were either explicitly social reformist or had elements of social reform woven into them. The reformers of the time used the medium of the novel to raise awareness about the various social evils like child marriage and the pitiable condition of the Hindu widows besides emphasizing the need to educate the populace, especially the women who were being seen as the shapers of the destinies of their families as well.

Whether it be Veeresalingam’s Telugu novel *Rajasekhara Charitramu* (1880) or Venkat Rao’s Kannada novel *Indirabai* (1899), the amelioration of the pitiable condition of the widows was a central concern of many of the South Indian social reformist novels. At that time, in Southern India, the situation of child-brides and widows, especially among the Sanskritic upper castes, which are dealt with in these novels, was quite pathetic.

Early marriages in southern India were the norm among most castes, but *kalyanam* (prepuberty marriages) and *ritu shanti kalyanam* (postpuberty nuptials) at menarche were peculiar to the Sanskritic upper castes. Patrilocal customs meant that teenage brides commonly faced drudgery, frequent childbirths, and early death. In an age marked by epidemic mortality of young men (who were more vulnerable to disease as they were not cloistered), these ritually sacred castes were blighted by the shadowy presence of thousands of virgin widows. Often a young widow remembered wedding garlands and fine clothes but not the groom, even though his death meant she was ritually shorn of hair, wore drab mourning attire, was forbidden to remarry, was outcast from auspicious events, and subsisted on family charity. (p. 101)

Madhavia’s *Muthumeenakshi* (1903) needs to be situated in such a social set up. It tells the story<sup>7</sup> of the child widow Muthumeenakshi, who, after a life of suffering, finds happiness with her childhood friend Sundu, an educated man who believes in treating his wife as an equal.

In my paper, my attempt is to situate Madhavia’s *Muthumeenakshi* among the other social reformist novels of the day and trace where the novel conformed to and departed from the other reformist novels. Through this, I plan to complicate the commonly held assumptions about social reform by bringing out the contradictions within the reformist project as well as explore the variety of positions within it.

### **The Widow Question in the Reformist Fiction**

While in the popular narrative about social reform, reformers and the traditionalists appeared to be on opposite sides of the battle when it came to widow-remarriage, the reality was that “the two sides in this dispute were not always clearly defined” (Mukherjee, 2002, p. xiv). This was because “even the liberal intellectuals often felt uneasy about applying their enlightened principles to actual situations” (Mukherjee, 2002, p. xiv). This reluctance to engage with the widow question at a deeper level was shared by the reformist fiction of the time as well. For instance, the progressive Gujarati social thinker Govardhanram Tripathi, the writer of the massive four volume Gujarati novel *Sarasvatichandra* (1887-1900), “despite being a champion of the cause of women, could not finally get his widowed heroine married” (Mukherjee, 2002, p. xiv).

Tridip Suhrud in his reading of *Sarasvatichandra* traces this to Tripathi’s own ambiguous position on the issue. In his biography of his daughter titled *Lilavati Jivankala*, discussing her opposition to widow-remarriage, Govardhanram, while refusing to take a personal stand on the issue, left enough hints to make one suspect that his “ultimate stand was in favour of maintaining the existing social order” (Suhrud, 2002, p. 205). Govardhanram admitted that while the reformers who were advocating caution in the case of widow re-marriage had sympathy for the widows and

were aware that “by obstructing such marriages they were not performing their duty by these widows”, they were compelled to do so by the fear that “sanctioning it might have undesirable consequences” (p. 203). Further articulating these fears, he quoted Professor Bhandarkar who believed that “(a) the good of the nation and society does not depend upon the happiness of a few widows, and (b) there are already existing mechanisms of man-woman sensual relationships. By creating one more avenue, the moral fabric of civilised conduct might be threatened” (p. 203).

Thus even progressive novels of that time that depicted the pathetic condition of the widows were hesitant to advocate widow-remarriage as a solution. Even when widow re-marriage was advocated in the reformist novels, it was generally that of a virgin widow. In fact, *Muthumeenakshi* is one of those rare reformist novels that advocated the remarriage of a widow who was not a virgin and thus not a potential subject for the reform project. Critics consider this to be one of the factors behind its colder reception by the public<sup>8</sup> compared to Subramania Bharati's novel *Chandrikayin Kadai* (Chandrika's Story) which also promoted remarriage, albeit of a virgin widow (Raman, 2000, p. 103). The contrast in the public reception of the two novels, I believe, is an indication of the limits within which the mainstream reform project of widow remarriage functioned.

### **Through the eyes of a Child Widow: Madhaviah's *Muthumeenakshi* (1903)**

*Muthumeenakshi*, though differing in this respect, does share many of the concerns of the other reformist novels. For instance, like many of the social reformist novels that dealt with the travails of the Brahmin woman, *Muthumeenakshi* too operates on familiar motifs – the female child's yearning for education, the child-bride, the travails of widowhood and widow remarriage as the reformer's panacea to the evil. However, another difference it has from some of the other reformist novels in that it is told in the first person through the recollections of the reformed woman, Muthu. The autobiographical tone that the novel employs not only helps in giving greater immediacy and intensity to the events as they unfold, but also gives greater force to the depiction of the narrator's feelings. The retrospective aspect woven into the very structure of the autobiography also helps the author in contextualising the events which though they centre around the younger self of the narrator are actually narrated by the older self. However, though the voice of the older narrator intervenes here and there, the narrative relies for its effect on the point of view of the younger self.

Muthu is a child when she enters into marriage with a thirty year old man and it is the child's point of view, the child unable to comprehend the social mores and customs the adults unquestioningly accept, which is skilfully made use of by the author to challenge the validity of the existing mores and codes. In other words, the child's point of view acts as a defamiliarising device. Take for instance the description of Muthu's feelings at her wedding. She is too young to register the enormity of the event and its connotations and is unperturbed by it. Instead what wounds her to the quick is the greater fuss made over her step-daughter's marriage which is held at the same *pandal* to a man just a few years older than her. “It was she and her bridegroom who were lifted shoulder-high, borne along on palanquins ... It was they who were fussed over and made much of! Nothing like that happened to me, and it hurt me very much” (Madhaviah, 2005, pp. 149-150).

This contrast between the two girls that begins with their weddings follows Muthu and her step-daughter into their later life as well. While her step-daughter leads a “happily married life” (albeit with a husband not too faithful to her), Muthu is not only deprived of all the pleasures of a married life, but also becomes a widow soon after and has to further undergo the travails of widowhood.

What makes possible such incompatible matches between child-brides and bridegrooms far too old for them is the system of bride price. In this system, even elderly bridegrooms could get young brides provided a higher bride price was paid. This is how Muthu’s fifty year old father gets to marry Kuttiamma, a thirteen year old girl, who was meant to be his son’s bride. Muthu is similarly married off to her husband on the latter’s paying a higher bride price. Thus, in a system where matches were made only on the basis of economic factors, conjugal felicity was the last thing on anybody’s mind.

Madhaviah criticizes the traditional family set up for treating the new bride more as a beast of burden than as a daughter-in-law. She is a virtual servant who has to be at everybody’s beck and call. The in-laws’ house is a veritable hell for Muthumeenakshi who is not provided proper food despite having to do all the housework. Her mother-in-law has only harsh words for her and is bent on fitting the child-bride into the procrustean bed of her wishes.

However, Madhaviah explores an uncharted territory in social reformist novels when he takes up the issue of marital rape. Muthu’s mother-in-law’s greatest wish had been to see her grandson before she died and was therefore trying her best to hasten the onset of puberty in the girl. When they all came to nothing, she sends Muthu to sleep in the store room and later sends her son into the same room. Muthu, completely unaware of her mother-in-law’s intentions, is therefore taken by surprise.

The horror is perpetrated on Muthu in a cage-like store room that “had just one door, no windows at all. It was eight feet long, four feet wide, and five feet high. If I stood up straight, I would knock my head against the ceiling, small as I was” (Madhaviah, 2005, p. 156). The experience leaves Muthu with the bitterest of memories. “Thinking back over it, it must have been what happened that night that made me hate my husband and my mother-in-law as much as I did. The crudity of the assault, the outrageous humiliation inflicted on me –that was the chief cause” (Madhaviah, 2005, p. 156).

Madhaviah’s heroine Muthu is faced with a terrible fate, but aided to a large extent by her education, she tries to take things into her own hands. Thus her writing a letter to her brother the very next day threatening suicide if he does not take her away is her attempt to put an end to the exploitation. Muthu’s resourcefulness is brought out by the author in her asking her brother to pay an *anna* to receive the letter as she has no stamp, postcard or money to send it properly.

For Muthu, unlike the heroines in other social reformist novels like *Indirabai* where the threat of sexual violence is one that comes from the outside, it is posed from the inside of the home itself – by her own husband. The very idea of a woman being sexually violated by her husband or her feeling hatred and resentment towards him for forcing himself upon her (which was then considered “natural” in the domestic scheme of things) was unheard of and this is what makes *Muthumeenakshi* different from the other social reformist novels of the day.

However, Muthu’s efforts to take control of her fate cannot succeed in a community where the wife is regarded as the husband’s property and Muthu is sent back to her in-laws’ house as soon as she attains puberty. One can compare her case with that of another nineteenth century wife Rukhmabai who, citing incompatibility, had refused to consummate her marriage with the man she had been wedded to as a child (Forbes, 1996, p. 69). However, her attempts to chart a path unheard of for a Hindu wife caused great outrage in her community (Forbes, 1996, p. 69). Her belief in the British judicial system was also found to be ill founded as an English court ordered her to stay with her husband (Forbes, 1996, p. 69). Only a very few radical reformers, like

Pandita Ramabai, lined up in support of her stance and protested against the injustice done to her (Forbes, 1996, p. 69).

It is no wonder then that despite abhorring her in-laws' place, Muthu has to return to it and has to bear the taunts of being barren as well. Madhaviah records the psychological and physical demands made on a Hindu woman to produce a male offspring. Her mother-in-law threatens her that if Muthu does not get pregnant soon, she will ask her son to take another wife and that Muthu will be chased out of the house. She is taken to temple after temple and made to walk endless circles around numberless peepal trees until her feet are tired out. The most horrible memory for Muthu with regard to her mother-in-law's attempts to get her pregnant is of being forced to swallow a "pillai poochi", a worm found in the marshy swamps, at least four to five times. The final strategy adopted by her in-laws is exorcism and Muthu is made to suffer physically as the exorcist inflicts a number of blows on her in order to drive out the evil spirit which he believes is responsible for her barrenness.

### **Reformist Novels as Domestic Novels**

The mother-in-law here acts as the custodian of tradition and its draconian laws, who stands as a hindrance to the development of proper conjugal relations between the husband and the wife. She does not even allow her son to spend time alone with his wife. This is an issue that recurs in many of the reformist novels like Krupabai Sattianadhan's *Kamala* (1894) and Muvalur Ramamirthammal's *Dasigal Mosavalai* (1936). In *Kamala*, Krupabai Sattianadhan attributes the lack of communication between the husband and wife in a Hindu home to the joint family system, especially the "mother-in-law's jealousy" that "prohibits the young people from having anything like liberty of speech or action in her presence" (Sattianadhan, 1998, p. 62).

Hence, it is interesting to note that the household which Muthu finally enters is one marked by the absence of the in-laws, one consisting of only her and her husband – a nuclear family. This is important as the man in the traditional home in reformist novels is viewed as being crippled and to a large extent emasculated by his "overbearing" mother. He has to cut this umbilical cord and step out of his mother's shadow to start his life with the "new woman".

One has to read the reinterpretation of the woman's role in the family as part of a larger reorganisation of the family life that occurs during this period. This was partly due to the changes that were being brought in the family as a result of the new administrative professions that had opened for the Indian men at this time. What Mytheli Sreenivas (2003) says, in the context of the readership of the Tamil magazines, about the changed circumstances as far as the "new elites" in the Tamil region were concerned can be said to hold true for most parts of India.

The decade of the 1890s witnessed the emergence of new elites . . . Professional, and especially administrative, occupations removed men's productive work from the home; moreover, since men from these groups often left rural areas and moved to Madras and other urban centers, their wives were in the position of creating households apart from mothers-in-law and other senior kin. In these new households, the conjugal couple was increasingly central, and women assumed greater responsibility for the care and early education of their children (pp. 63-64).

Viewing the reformist novels as domestic novels also helps us understand what can be seen as an integral part of the reform project – the delineation of the ideal domestic set up. It is no wonder then that many of the reformist novel plots revolve around the contrast deliberately worked out between the "good household" characterised by "positive" and "proper" relations between its members and the "bad household" where such "positive" relations are absent.

*Muthumeenakshi* like the other reformist novels of the time like *Indirabai* (1899) and *Meenakshi* (1890) is a novel where the “bad household” is characterised by dominating wives and mothers, and powerless husbands, sons and sons-in-law. The visualization of the “ideal household” in these novels starts with the setting up of a nuclear family, marked by the absence of dominating female figures. Thus these novels are also involved in formulating the contours of a new conjugal relationship in the place of the old conjugal relationship projected as “faulty” as well as inimical to the interests of the wives. The new conjugal relationship in these novels, frequently contrasted with the older one, is, marked by a more open interaction between the couple.

For instance, in *Muthumeenakshi*, Sundu insists on his wife addressing him by his name and acts as if he can’t hear her when she uses respectful terms of address. When one compares this with a traditional conjugal relationship, for instance as in *Indira Bai* where Indira was not even allowed to speak her first husband’s name, the radicalism of Madhaviah becomes apparent. The new conjugal relationship is also marked by open communication between the husband and the wife where they can talk freely on any topic. Sundu’s nursing his wife back to health on his own is another indicator of the difference their relationship has from the traditional one. Sundu takes on to himself a role a man in a traditional community would not have been expected to play – that of a nurse. As opposed to Muthu’s previous relationship which was a torture to her, the new relationship is marked by passionate love between the couple.

#### **Unasked Questions: The Limits in Madhaviah’s Vision of Reform**

Yet the new conjugality and the new family projected in these novels need to be interrogated closely to judge whether they are all that they claim to be. On the one hand, in some of the reformist novels, there is a close questioning of traditionally held notions on female morality<sup>9</sup>. This is true of *Muthumeenakshi* too where Madhaviah uses Sundu, his hero, as his spokesperson to rail against the double standards which operate with regard to male morality and female morality in a patriarchal society. Sundu, in his letter to Muthu, condemns the double standards of the men who consider it proper to marry as many times as they want while denying similar privileges to the womenfolk.

But what does it matter if this damned world accepts it [their marriage] or not? ... Men marrying for a second and third time, at their whim, when the first wife is yet alive! Men going to courtesans and prostitutes whenever they like, with the knowledge of the rightful wife, bringing them home to their own houses, entertaining them with feasts and carrying on! And such a shameless, dishonourable villain of a husband will suspect his wife of infidelity if she so much as looks at another man! (Madhaviah, 2005, p. 178)

On the other hand, like in the other reformist novels like *Dasigal Mosavalai* and *Indirabai*, *Muthumeenakshi* is peopled by dominating women characters who are presented as conniving and manipulative while the male characters get presented as weak-willed and are divested of agency when it comes to their actions that harm the women around them. In fact, those actions get presented as the consequences of the evil machinations of the manipulative women around them. Thus, it is hard to find positive women characters in the novel apart from Muthu, her paternal aunt, and Sundu’s sister Lakshmi. All the other women characters are portrayed as hell bent on making the lives of the other women in the household miserable.

One cannot dismiss this as an exaggeration for it reveals how patriarchy works through women. Thus Madhaviah is able to draw the readers’ attention to a system that forces women to internalise its misogynist values and makes them look down upon their own sex. The widowed aunt of Muthu’s sister Anandavalli who has undergone the travails of widowhood can hence rail

against the widow Muthu calling her an “unlucky mundai”<sup>10</sup> and give her the same treatment that was meted out to her.

However, one finds that the operation of the patriarchal ideology through the male characters in the novel is not at all explored in comparison with that of the female characters. Apart from Muthu’s first husband, there are no other negative male characters in the novel and even Muthu’s husband is shown as goaded to rape his wife by his mother.

The most striking of all the instances is however the one concerning Muthu’s step mother Kuttiyamma. Kuttiyamma, a thirteen year old girl, is initially supposed to be married off to a man just a few years older than her (Muthu’s brother). However, she has to face the unfortunate fate of having to marry his father, a fifty year old man who has been widowed twice. Though Muthu says she feels “unbearably sad and ashamed” to record how “she who was to have become the daughter-in-law became the wife”, not much sympathy is shown by the author towards Kuttiyamma after that (Madhaviah, 2005, p. 128). Instead, Muthumeenakshi’s father who is actually responsible for the fiasco as it was he who insisted on marrying his would be-daughter-in-law at the last minute, gets presented as a helpless victim at the hands of his greedy bride and her relatives.

Some of this ambiguity is also carried over into Madhaviah’s resolution of the widow’s question. An issue central to *Muthumeenakshi* is that of widowhood and Madhaviah takes great pains to show the physical and emotional torture a widow undergoes in a traditional Brahmin community. For instance, in her in-law’s place, while Muthumeenakshi is made to do all the house work, she is not allowed to enjoy the fruits of her labour and is shunned as an outcast. She is blamed for all the untoward happenings in the house and around. Sexual advances are also made towards her by her step-daughter’s husband. However, in contrast to other widowed characters, Muthu is no pure-hearted widow and thinks of using the latter to wreak her revenge on the in-laws even though she does not care for him in the least. “Yet one day, a thought did come to me: why not seduce him and run off with him somewhere? Just once ... and this thought arose only because I wanted so badly to avenge myself on my in-laws, It didn’t last, it just dried up all at once”(Madhaviah, 2005, p. 166). Muthu does not run away from her home with another man like in some of the other reformist novels of the day like *Kamala* and *Rajasekhara Charitramu*. Madhaviah, however, shows how real such a possibility is and interprets it as motivated by the widow’s desire to wreak revenge on the society for denying her all happiness.

Madhaviah is also aware of the damage the institution of widowhood does to the very psyche of the woman as she is taught to consider herself an ill omen. Muthu, in her brother’s home, internalises the warped ideas of her sister-in-law and the widowed aunt to such an extent that she comes to loathe herself. “I shrank from touching my beloved nephew .... What if, by the touch of a dreadful sinner like myself, something horrible were to happen to our precious child ...? It terrified me” (Madhaviah, 2005, p. 171).

Madhaviah, like the other reformers, sees widow remarriage as the solution to this problem. It is only in her second marriage that Muthu comes to enjoy a proper conjugal relationship. Sundu even sees her widowhood as a blessing as it has rendered her her own mistress. Madhaviah argues that there is support in the Sastras for widow remarriage. However, he refuses to be tied down by the dictates of any scripture and insists that one should only accept that which appeals to one’s common sense.

The Sastras? First of all, Sastras are for promoting happiness! ... it is God who has given us common sense and the faculty of discrimination! If you raise walls on two sides and lay a



road for a bullock-cart with ruts ready-made for the wheels, where is the need for the bullocks to have eyes? What kind of argument, what sort of justice, is this, to demand that we too should move only in the grooves of tradition? (Madhaviah, 2005, p. 179)

Madhaviah presents a realistic picture of the social ostracism reformers had to face. Muthu and Sundu, after their marriage, are ostracized by their community, a fate shared by many of the reformers of the day. Nobody comes to their house, Sundu cannot take part in any of the religious rituals and when Muthu falls sick, it is Sundu who nurses her back to health all on his own. However, they press on undaunted by any of the opposition.

Yet it is important to note that despite the greater egalitarianism in the new conjugal relationship between Sundu and Muthu, it is *not* a non-hierarchical one. Muthu is cast in the role of the wife-student and Sundu in that of the husband-teacher. Though there is open communication between the couple, there is no mutuality in the sharing of ideas as all the ideas flow from the husband to the wife, the wife’s role here limited to being a willing recipient of those ideas. This unequal relationship was partly a result of the times.

[A]fter 1850, young men left their sisters at home to study in Western schools catering overwhelmingly to boys. They studied Western secular and Christian texts, a new corpus of knowledge that was literally a closed book for homebound girls, unless family men opened the covers for their daughters. As a realist, ... Madhaviah portrayed the gender gap in this later era when girls had not only become clinging vines but also lagged scholastically behind boys. (Raman, 2000, p. 106)

While this may have been true, the higher education of the husband and his status as the reformer also meant that the conjugal relationship which was envisaged as egalitarian wasn’t totally one. For instance, while Sundu is an extremely progressive man for his time who breaks all traditional conjugal norms by insisting that his wife address him by his name, Muthu doesn’t for a second forget the debt she owes her reformer husband. As Muthu tells Sundu, “The debt I owe you, I can’t repay even if I strip off my skin to sew into chappals for your feet. In another birth I want to be your husband, and you must be my wifey – that way I can repay your debts” (Madhaviah, 2005, p. 186). What one cannot help but notice is Muthu’s recognition of the fact that she has to be born as the husband and Sundu as the wife to be in a position to repay the debt. One can see this as her recognition of the change in gender that a woman requires to occupy the powerful position of the “reformer”.

It is important to recognise the reform project as one that often ended up creating a hierarchical relationship between the male reformer and the female object of reform for female writers have often addressed this issue. For instance, Lalithambika Antharjanam (2009), in her stories, “Prasadam” and “Ithu Aashasyamano?” (Is this right?), that deal with the “reform” of the women in the Malayali Brahmin community which had grappled with the same social evils of widowhood and child marriage, explores this issue in detail as she presents reformed women characters questioning the reformers’ expectation of gratitude from them for having uplifted them. She wonders whether such an expectation is valid.

## Conclusion

Through my study of the novel *Muthumeenakshi* in conjunction with a number of other reformist novels of the day, my attempt has been to put under the scanner simplistic formulations that tend to gloss over the variety in the positions and viewpoints that are to be found in the reformist novels as well as the contradictions in the reform project itself. It is important to recognise the internal contradictions of the reformist project for the disappearance of the “woman question”

from the agenda of public debate in mainstream discourse, especially nationalist discourse, can be understood only if one takes these into account.

Partha Chatterjee (1989) in his influential essay “The Nationalist resolution of the Women’s Question” contends that “[this] is not to be explained by the fact that it had been censored out of the reform agenda or overtaken by the more pressing and emotive issues of political struggle. It was because nationalism had in fact resolved ‘the women’s question’ in complete accordance with its preferred goals” (p. 237). Nationalism, in its separation of the social space into the “outer/inner” (“world/home”) had created a material/spiritual dichotomy in which while the material world was the preserve of the men, the spiritual world (“the home”) was the exclusive preserve of the women. As per the nationalist ideology, it was left to the women to safeguard this sphere, “the inner core of the national culture, its spiritual essence” as the material domain was under attack from the European cultures (p. 239). The women were enjoined not to lose their essentially spiritual (i.e. feminine virtues) despite the changes in the external conditions which were held to affect the men to a greater or lesser extent (p. 239). The upper and middle class women were able to enter the public domain, which was earlier inaccessible to them, during the nationalist phase, but Chatterjee argues that such rights were granted to them after fixing boundaries for their conduct in the public sphere (p. 239).

Yet, there was also a regression when it came to the engagement with certain issues, like that of the condition of the widow. Rajul Sogani (2002) in her study of the Hindu widow in Indian literature sees the representation of the widow in nationalist literature as regressive compared to the same in reformist literature (p. 85). According to her, while reformist literature tried to expose the underlying injustice and oppression of social institutions, particularly that of widowhood by describing the travails a widow has to undergo in both her maternal and marital homes, nationalist literature used the figure of the widow as a vehicle for constructing the ideal Hindu nation (p. 85). She talks about how the majority of the nationalist novels portray the widow protagonist, untouched by desire or ambition, as the highest ideal of Indian womanhood, voluntarily rejecting her sexuality and dedicating herself to the service of the nation (p. 85).

A study of the social reformist novels takes us to the woman’s question that was once the heart of mainstream debates but then got relegated to the margins. That is why a radical social reformist novel like *Muthumeenakshi* still claims our attention since the new conjugality and family it envisions and the solutions it finds for the woman’s question point to the progressive mainstream discourses of the time that aimed at improving women’s lot in society as well as reveal the contradictions inherent in the reform project, which was egalitarian in principle, but wasn’t always so in practice.

#### Notes:

1. Sumit Sarkar and Rajat Ray (1985) in their article “Rammohun Roy and the Break with the past”, taking the instance of Roy’s earliest extant work *Tuhfat-ul Muwahhiddin* (c. 1803-04) which shows the clear influence of early Muslim rationalism, argue that attributing Rammohun’s rationalism entirely to a knowledge of progressive Western culture is “unhistorical” (p. 5). They write, “The Hindu intelligentsia of nineteenth- century Bengal (and maybe Rammohun too, to some extent, after he had mastered English) turned their backs entirely on such traces of secularism, rationalism, and non-conformity in pre-British Muslim-ruled India – and their historians have by and large faithfully echoed the assumption of a completely new beginning with the coming of English education.”(p. 5). What is questioned here is the assumption that secularism, rationalism and other

“humanist values” that are often hailed as the guiding principles of the reform movements came in with modernity through English education.

2. Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi (1986), analysing the British approach to the woman question in India argue that the British were highly selective both in their non-interference and in their liberalising (p. 30). According to them, while “the British parliaments and governor-general of India showed reluctance to intervene against sati, a practice with terminal consequences for women . . . they did not hesitate to wreak havoc on the matriliney which harmed no one and gave women certain freedoms” (p. 30). They attribute this differential treatment to the fact of sati being a practice of the higher castes, with whom the British had made alliances and matriliney’s being a form of family structure both the British and the patriarchal higher castes found immoral (p.30).
3. Lata Mani (1989), analysing the discourse on sati argues that women were neither the subjects (very little is heard from them) nor the objects (it is not *about* them) in this discourse. They, according to her were in fact the ground on which tradition was debated and reformulated (p.117-118). Lucy Carroll (2007), in her study of the functioning of the Hindu Widows’ Remarriage Act of 1856, has shown how the British imposition of this Act on Non-Hindu tribes (Rajbansis) who had no restrictions on widow-remarriage led to many widows losing their property to their husbands’ relatives who made use of certain terms within this Act regarding the property rights of widows for their own ends (p. 134).
4. Uma Chakravarty (1989), questions the golden age theory with respect to the rights of the Vedic Dasi and argues that in the context of the woman question, the entire focus on women in the nineteenth century had been on the high caste Hindu women whether it was to highlight her high status in the past or in to reform her low status in the present (p. 78-79). Kalpana Kannabiran, in her analysis of the official debate in the colonial judiciary on the Devadasi institution, extends the arguments of Uma Chakravarti further and contends that it were not just the Vedic Dasis who were pushed out of the colonial schema. According to her, all those women in colonial India “who could not lay claim to the genealogy of the Aryan woman – chaste, monogamous, high caste, pure” were also pushed out. (p. 59-60).
5. Chakravarty (1989) and Metcalf (2005), among many others have pointed to the construction of a fixed Hindu tradition that happened during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Indian past that was scripted during this period was one that had educated women who married only after they had reached maturity and could move about freely and participate in the social and public life of their time. See the theory of golden age discussed in Chakravarty (p. 32). Metcalf sees the ‘Hindu religion’ as being constructed and given a coherent shape in the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, particularly in the Hastings era, the scholarly activities of Organisations like the Asiatic Society of Bengal (founded in 1784) playing an important part in it (p. 10-11). According to Metcalf, in their attempt to make of Indian devotional practice “a coherent religious system possessing such established markers as sacred texts and priests”, in the line of Christianity, the early colonial scholars turned to the ancient Sanskrit texts to reveal “the doctrinal core of the Hindu faith” and “for advice in the interpretation of those texts to those whom they saw as the ‘priests’ of the religion, the Brahmin pandits” (p. 10-11).
6. The novel in Indian languages emerged as a genre owing to a confluence of factors such as : “ the nebulous influence of what the writers viewed as the English novel, the Reformist zeal of the Indian – particularly Hindu – writers which needed a form of prose narrative that was accessible to the literate common man, the innovation of the printing press and the coming into being of a substantial body of “reading” public different from the traditional “audience” of a poetical work, and the various literary traditions of a particular linguistic region” (Ramachandran, 2001, p. 28).
7. In the novel, Muthu’s days of suffering begin when her widowed father marries the girl who was meant to be his son’s bride. The step mother ill-treats Muthu and later leaves her husband when he refuses to meet the financial demands of her relatives. After her father leaves for Thiruvananthapuram to make money, Muthu’s brother Manian and his friend Sundu start teaching

her despite the initial opposition from her father. Muthu is married off to a 30 year old man and has to undergo a lot of suffering at the hands of her in-laws and husband. Though Muthu tries to escape from the place after being raped by her own husband, she is sent back there at the onset of her puberty. When her husband dies, her life becomes worse than hell and she is thrown out of the house by her in-laws after a failed suicide attempt. After undergoing further suffering in her brother's house where his wife and her aunt treat her as an ill omen, she happens to meet her childhood friend Sundu, falls in love with him and gets married to him with the blessings of her brother. Muthu, though she is socially ostracized, finds happiness in the company of her radical husband.

8. Though it came to be published only in 1903, Madhaviah had started writing the earlier draft of Muthumeenakshi as early as 1892 under another name Savitri Charitram. However, the book came to be widely available only after 1924 (Raman, 2000, p. 103).
9. For instance, in Chathu Nair's Malayalam novel *Meenakshi*, one of the women characters argues that had women been the authors of the "Smriti", they would have insisted more upon the men's behaviour and that prostitution will flee from the land if men become virtuous (Nair, 1890, p. 69).
10. "As the Tamil terms for auspiciousness—manam, mangalam, and kalyanam—are synonymous with marriage, Hindus held that a sumangali (married woman) brought prosperity to the family, while an amangali or mundai (tensored widow) brought misfortune. To be cursed as mundai was the worst insult" (Raman, 2000, p. 101).

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