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Politics of Gender and Governance: Female Personal Narrative as Cultural Discourse

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenal development in female education and empowerment is not reflected in their exercise of political power. In the developed as well as developed countries women's access to governance is minimal, particularly in India where social and public sphere is marked by class, caste and gender. Female life narratives form an apt platform to discourse on the intersection of gender, governance, and politics. Unheard voices of the past when rendered representation, open to the dim lit corridors of power which connivingly sabotaged the rights of half the population. The proposed paper attempts at analyzing the personal narratives or lived-in experiences of veteran female politician, AccammaCheriyar, of Kerala whose political career was trampled over by the male political clout. The narration, read in the light of the paradox of Kerala Model of Development founded on an enviable Gender Development Index and miniscule visibility in governance offers powerful insights into the entrenched gender ideology, enmeshed in the complexities of cultural, social, historical and political processes at work.

Keywords

Gender, governance, politics, autobiography, culture, history, representation.

Laudable advancements of women in myriad fields of life have not precipitated in female participation in political power or governance. Exploring the trajectory of women in politics, one may encounter the impediments confronted by them in legitimising their rightful space in state/national governance. Regardless of cultural disparities, gender gap is seminal in the corridors of political power across the world.

“Women's access to formal political space has been stymied”(Tadors 2). Most often, available female representation turns out to be an adroit masquerade with no impact on the de facto exercise of power. Reservation policies have curtailed female marginalisation from public sphere to an extent and quantified representation at the lower levels, but has not mitigated invisibility at the advanced echelons of power. The imperceptible agendas, networks, and conclaves impede women's ascendance to persuasive positions in formal politics.

Women's political pathways are obstructed by various structural, cultural, and attitudinal barriers (Tadors30). Historical subordination, lack of exposure and familial support, and role pressures distance women from the public sphere. Patriarchal societal structure crisscrossed with class, religion, caste, and political affiliation further regulate women's access to politics. Discrimination against woman operated by social institutions that define, legitimate, and execute women's subordinate position set them always at the peripheries of political and social power structure.

Life-history approach has been extolled as an effective tool in capturing the political pathways of women, “to understand how women define and understand politics, the relationship through which politics is mediated, and the contexts in which women operate” (Tadors 2). Comprehension about female

experience in the political arena necessitates “understanding politics by qualitative and life historical research that is grounded in women’s own narratives about their lives and an appreciation of the cultural dynamics of political life” entangled in the socio-cultural matrix of the milieu (Tadors x). It will expose the rugged terrain posing apprehensions and no-entry signs along the rough and zigzagging route which undermines women’s aspiration for political power.

Male-centric historical narratives concentrate on political history of action and power. Since history grounds on documents of past events, female contribution to and participation in history, as it goes unrecorded, unrepresented, or misinterpreted, becomes erased. As it is based on transactions and exercise of power, those outside the orbit of power remains redundant. The subordinated remains a voiceless, invisible subaltern in life as well as in history. National movement in India under Mahatma Gandhi mobilised massive female participation, as did any other mass movement, yet it failed to precipitate ripple effect in the governance which followed, thrusting the female again to the periphery. National historiography also alludes only to only those “great” women who were visible in the political forefront forming the meta narrative. The large number of tribal, peasant, and ordinary women who did extraordinary feats are silenced in the historiography. Hence the relevance of the personal narratives of the women involved for a counternarrative, history as seen not only from below but also a parallel version, the other side, or penumbral view of female agency. In the context of gender indifferent historiographic metanarratives, female life narratives form a platform, filling the gaps and breaking the imposed silence.

Given the complexities of the genre like form and technique, life writing has become a popular genre in India as well where the concept of individual self had been carpeted under the concept of the community. “The heterogeneity of contexts and cultures from which postcolonial life writing has emerged, not to mention the range of sub forms it operates within - from autobiography as conventionally understood, through memoir, to testimonio, diary, email and blogging,”(Gilbert xiv) has complicated the genre to a varied mixture of discourse and history, “the personal, socio-cultural, or the ‘historico-cultural’” (Stanton 99). It reveals the conflict between the private and the public, the personal and the professional.

A woman’s life can be rendered by herself, a biographer, or as fiction based on her affiliations. “Autobiographical discourse allows women to resist ... erasure by inserting a sense of “self” within a historical and social framework that otherwise accepts women’s invisibility or silence. In this context, autobiography becomes a political statement” (Nee 356). Alternative and varied attempts at autobiography functions as a counternarrative to accepted canon of the genre. Janet V. Gunn argues that “Third World autobiography’ differs in two respects from mainstream Western autobiography, both male and female. First it involves an unmasking or what ...[is] called a denostalgizing of the past; second, it orients itself toward a liberated society in the future. In the first respect, it is a form of resistance literature; in the second, it is a form of utopian literature” (Gunn 77).

The concept of personhood is a cultural specific. The “I” in postcolonial personal narrative, particularly female subjectivity, differs from its western counterpart since the impact of socialisation process based on cultural milieu that grounds on extended families will be different from a nuclear or dysfunctional family environment. Narrative personhood in female autobiographies is fragmented and relational rather than the centred and unified male subject position owing to societal expectations and role paradigms. The fragmented self is constructed to a new personhood through narration. Validating the othered experiences, David Hume opines: “I must be conscious that no one is so well qualified as myself to describe the series of my thoughts and actions”(Hume, qtd. in Misch 62). Though autobiography is self-centred, autobiographer plays the dual role as historian as the objectivity of history itself is critiqued.

The recent phenomenal growth in life writing jostling for acceptance presents the process as a shot at notching a place in the history, however infinitesimal it remains. Self-writing of women is deeply enmeshed in the socio-cultural milieu that fashions them. The apparently varied narrations of women plug certain perforations in the recorded history of the state, particularly the trajectory of the female in the political and cultural scenario of Kerala. The divergent word-selfies signal the development of the female

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self in a patriarchal framework. The experiential narratives of the other sex posit a critique of the state, politics, gender, and culture. The paper attempts to look through the celebrated image of the dominant, enlightened female subject/gendered self to posit the contested history of the female subject in opposition to the renowned Kerala Model which glorifies general development of the state on par with some European countries, though with low per capita income.

Stuart Hall considers culture as “the actual grounded terrain of practices, representations, languages and customs of any specific society” (Hall, qtdin Barker 7). Hence the everyday reality of experience, governed by the mores of the past or the present, forms a site for cultural discourse. Female autobiography thus offers not only a slice of history, but also a chunk of culture which is missing from the gender apathetic historiography. It offers valuable insights into the ordinary everyday life of common human, which is culture as exemplified by Raymond Williams’ definition of culture as “a particular way of life, whether of people, a period or a group” (Williams 90).

JeevithamOruSamaram, (*Life: A Struggle*), the autobiographical narrative of AccammaCheriyam, becomes a cardinal record of the unheard voice of an indomitable spirit hailed as “Jhansi Rani” and “Joan of Arc” of Kerala. Unlike other female narratives which are critiqued as a record of personal everyday life, Cheriyam’s narrative is a record of what happened in the dark corridors of power at the dawn of independence. Altering Shakespeare’s comparison of the world to a stage and humans as actors that strut and fret their hour upon the earth, Cheriyam always considered her life as a protest or battle and every one as soldiers involved. To her, life has been a prolonged agitation that would end only with her death. Hence the title *JeevithamOruSamaram*: “To fight against orthodox tradition, meaningless mores, injustice in the community, discrimination against the female, and everything against truth and justice has become a pattern of my life. I consider it as a responsibility” (Cheriyam 19). To understand such a personality demands an understanding about her childhood, socialisation, heredity and environment. Bringing out the contrast between the first and second half of the twentieth century, she dwells on the life of a Syrian Christian girl belonging to an aristocratic family.

Unlike a normative relational female narrative, Cheriyam offers her first person enunciation not as a platform for intimate confessions; she projects her political life as open book for others to see, peruse, and critique. She considers it imperative to excavate those unrecorded undercurrents that had capsized her political life, which lay deeply submerged in the depths of memory. The decision to break her silence of decades after her retirement from politics has a mission: “I elaborate on these experiences so that nobody who enter into the public sphere should retreat when they encounter such experiences” (Cheriyam 20). The retrieval of her personal narrative has become a crucial rhetoric in Kerala political and cultural history populated and operated by the elite, male doyens. The reclamation of women’s speech from the neglected archives of history will “redress the imbalances of mainstream historiography and ‘national’ literary traditions” (Rajan 84). Silence has been not used as a signifier of subalternity, but as an anvil to hone a potent mode of communication with posterity.

Kerala modernity, the child of missionaries, reformative movements, and benevolent monarchies, cashed in the spread of liberal education initiated by Christian missionaries. The beginning of the twentieth century witnessed turbulent social movements in the Malayalam speaking region, which later became Kerala, giving voice and liberty to a critical slice of the society which had been smothered by practices like untouchability, polygamy, polyandry, and matrilineality that thrived under the patronage of feudalism (Menon 181). The modernising agents transformed not only the community, but the ways in which individuals inhabited their private lives. By 1920s, though female education became prevalent thanks to the benevolent monarchy and the reformist missionaries, the public space continued to be gendered, with extensive public and domestic divide. The restricted entry of women into the public domain began only in the 1930s through educational and other “womanly” professions. “Autobiographies,” as Udaya Kumar observes, “provide a richly variegated body of testimonies to these changes in life practices” (Kumar 422).

Born in a wealthy Catholic Syrian Christian family at Kanjirappally in Travancore in 1909 as the daughter of KarippapparambilThommanCheriyam and Annamma, Cheriyam begins her narration by retreating to the roots of her family. Her life narration provides a glimpse of the socio-cultural tempo of

the time: “A girl born in an aristocratic Syrian Catholic family was surrounded by the restrictions dictated by the community. Life was a long list of restrictions: should not show your face outside the kitchen, no loud talk and laugh, breathe fresh air only when you go out to the church, the list continues” (Cheriyam 23). As was the normal pattern, her early life was confined to her home, school, and hostels run by nuns wherein she was always reminded of her gender, though her progressive parents, especially the father who considered the girls as assets and not as liabilities, insisted on all the eight children, including the three girls to be brought up as equals in a conducive atmosphere frequented with discussions on local, national, and world issues. Formation of personality is closely linked to the social environment which advances the self-awareness of the individual.

Unlike the customary pattern, the father desired them to scale great heights through education. After reaching a reputed position by self-efforts they could marry according to their wish, if they wanted to marry (Cheriyam 25). It is this promising liberal attitude that enabled them to acquire self-confidence and determination to move ahead which unfortunately was not the lot of the majority of their kind. The early part of the narration offers glimpses into the social life of the times, linking the personal with the regional or national. Narrating the kind of education that her father had in his childhood, she says how a Nair teacher was appointed to provide residential education to her father as schools were not there in the neighbourhood. “During those times Nairs never ate the food prepared by the Christians. Hence a Nair boy was appointed to cook” (Cheriyam 27).

No female name was heard during her childhood days in the fields of law, medicine, or engineering. She recalls: “awareness for female higher education or a suitable syllabus was conspicuous by its absence” (Cheriyam 29). Hostel life in the nunnery is described in detail with all its restrictions on the girls, the great flood of 1099 (Malayalam year), the dress style of the girls, offering vignettes of cultural pattern. Thus the reflective individual subject provides an intersection of autobiography and history as a useful tool for exploring the time, milieu, and space.

Graduating from St. Teresa’s College, Ernakulam, she became the Headmistress of St. Mary’s English School at Kanjirappally in 1933, after her attempt to join a school in Burma was aborted by her uncle guardian, following the death of her father. Her father had written a death will with ample provision for his wife and daughters, but the conservative patriarchal community was deeply irked as the female had no right equal to the male: “At that time equal inheritance of father’s property was not recognised, female had only the right of dowry” (Cheriyam 38). Anybody going against the cultural pattern would naturally have to bear the brunt of it. A dedicated teacher she was, the sari-clad figure wearing footwear, against the nuns who wore *mundu* and *chatta*, the customary dress code of Christian women, invited criticism from even the female: “that was the socio-cultural standard of the first half of the twentieth century”(Cheriyam 40). The experiential observation reflects the traditional attitude in a society on the threshold of a novel pattern.

It was her life in Thiruvananthapuram, the capital of Travancore, from 1934 as she joined in the training college that initiated her into politics and revolutionised her life. Travancore was a small state, known for its literacy, in the southern tip of the present state of Kerala, among the six hundred and more small kingdoms of India. The geographical entity of Kerala materialised only in 1956 as the union of Travancore, Kochi, and Malabar. Travancore in the 1930s was wrought with political unrest, public discontent, and discord. With the young SreeChithiraThirunalBalaramaVarma as king and Sir C. P. RamaswamyAiyar as Diwan, power was wielded by upper class Hindu bureaucracy which led to widespread nepotism and corruption leading to the discontent of the other communities like Muslims, Christians, and Ezhvas, not to mention the other marginalised. In 1938 State Congress was formed as a unified front to establish responsible government and peaceful protest against bureaucratic upper hand, with provision for adult franchise and the protection of the minorities. It was this agitation that actually heralded independent movement in the State.

The State Congress was declared illegal and its office bearers, members, and anyone suspected of association with it were arrested without warrant, and were viciously tortured. State Congress leaders were forbidden from organising or addressing in public meetings and were under surveillance. The arrest of Congress leader Kamala Chittoor who came to inaugurate Youth League Conference, an

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offshoot of State Congress, spurred the public to join the struggle. The press was gagged and State Congress was declared as illegal organization, confiscating their property. The Congress working committee dissolved to form Strikers' Union in its place and the President was designated as Dictator to lead the protest against the government. The people's agitation was a part of the national agitation against the British. Urged by her inner spirit to resist the injustice prevalent in the country, Cheriyan consented to become the twelfth President of State Congress, when the eleventh dictator was put behind the bars, well aware of the seriousness of the mission and the consequences, at the age of 29. She was entrusted with the responsibility of leading the historic mass rally to the palace of the Maharaja to revoke the ban on State Congress and to release its leaders.

With meticulous planning and precision, Thiruvananthapuram city flooded with thousands of people, clad in white jubba and Gandhi caps, on Sunday, October 23, 1938, the day of the birthday celebrations of the Maharaja. The streets were reverberating with slogans like "Bharat Mata ki Jai," "Mahatma Gandhi ki Jai" and "State Congress ki Jai." Standing in an open jeep, Cheriyan addressed the people. With over 20,000 people surging behind her, she marched to the royal palace to present the people's memorandum to the Maharaja. Refusing to be provoked by all state-engineered aggravations to stop the march, the protest continued till the government agreed on the release of the prisoners. It was her bold insistence to shoot her first that dissuaded Colonel Watkins from firing the people and compelling the King to sign the release of prisoners (Cheriyani103).

Identity itself is validated through certain givens: "My self, alongside similar selves, takes shape in relation to things defined as important, things accepted if not defined as important by me as an individual" (Huddart 1). The momentous historic march witnessed the birth of a committed warrior: "Thus 114 Thulam 7 became the proudest and joyous day in my life when I led the ocean of people. That was my political baptism. That gave me an opportunity to be proud of my country and its people" (Cheriyani103). When the political prisoners were released, she handed over the President's title to PattomThanuPillai, notching the image of a charismatic leader in the minds of the people which inspired many to join the freedom struggle. Without any political apprenticeship, where political skill and manoeuvring is learnt from the exposure through politically sensitive family itself just as it is proved in the case of many female political leaders in the subcontinent, Cheriyan sisters jumped into political cauldron at a younger age, self-spurred by the fervour for an independent nation and self-government in the state. The young Cheriyan who observed meticulously the pulse of the people graduated to the role of an agent. The social reform movements of the 19th century of India had gradually advanced to the nationalist movement. Anxieties by diverse sections in Kerala against certain social infirmities graduated them to social-justice awareness, which snowballed to be the foundations for the freedom struggle. The barricade between the public and private arena was temporarily adjourned or blurred in India during the freedom struggle, mobilising the male and the female to engage themselves in the resistance against hegemony, be it the local or national. Participation in the nationalist movement heralded a new consciousness in the women, drawing them out of their comfort zones. They were not passive spectators, but active self-effacing participants in the nonaggressive struggle for national freedom. Mostly hailing from educated, respectable families, they were conscious of their responsibility and were ready to be imprisoned. While marital status is usually considered as a buffer against rumours and cultural stigma against single woman in a country like India where marriage is considered as summumbonum and achievement of any woman, Cheriyan had overcome this by her reputation, integrity, and commitment, supported by the elite and progressive family.

The civil society movement, not limited to the urban centres, had its resonances spread across the nooks and corners of the state. Cheriyan travelled through the length and breadth of Travancore mobilising women to be *desasevikas*, those who serve the nation, rigorously training them, which again confirms female participation in the freedom struggle. Participation in the first annual conference of Travancore State Congress at Vattiyoorkkavu led to her imprisonment which failed to mitigate her indomitable spirit. Attempts to demoralise her in the prison using abusive language led to the intervention of Mahatma Gandhi. Her service extended to collecting food materials and clothes for the famine stricken places, installation of Charkacentres and weaving centres at various places. Traveling across the State

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mobilising women for Civil Disobedience Movement ended once again in imprisonment, which severely affected her health.

After regaining health from rest at Kodaikkanal wherein she got acquainted with Maria Montessori, Cheriyan got jailed for nine months and was released in April, 1947. In the first Universal Suffrage in Travancore held in February 1948, she was elected unopposed, one of the three women elected to the 120 member assembly. Yet when the ministry was formed, she was side-lined. Her autobiography alludes to operations behind the disappearance of this strong-willed woman who led the crucial protest from the post-independent political and state governance scene. She cites two occasions when the chance to enter the ministry was snatched from her: “I became fed up with politics. The experience I got from nation service is bitter. . . Those who worked together as a loving family in service of the nation started revealing their real face after attaining independence. Animal instincts were stirred. Became selfish and religious. Those who pushed women to the forefront during the agitation jostled them to the side and went ahead when encountered with power” (Cheriyan 177).

“Power is the common lynchpin” that governs or operates all gender and organisational associations with which man exercise control over woman validating certain deeply entrenched cultural norms, at the casualty of many others (Halford and Leonard 26). At the time of the exercise of power the organisational system of the political parties exposed their deeply permeated gender traditionalism. Cheriyan challenged the patriarchal structures and hegemonic institutions “to overcome the exclusionary web that inhibits [female] participation” (Kanchan 205). Women are supposed only to be standing in the forefront of agitation. Agitation and sacrifice for the women and positions of power for men, she comments. Fear of her rightful eligibility made them to slander against her accusing her of affiliation with the Marxist party. The same party leader who entrusted the party affairs with two women leaders while he was in imprisonment declaring his lack of confidence in men, now found the very women not qualified for leadership. Though her participation was very visible, and no one had such a long and sustained commitment, she was side-lined from parliamentary seat as well. The next chief minister appointed even a CID to watch over the movements of AccammaCheriyan which irked the committed and straight forward woman that she was ready to resign from all her positions if anybody had any suspicion regarding her integrity. Her application to contest the parliamentary seat for Meenachil, in Central Travancore, was rejected despite Jawaharlal Nehru’s intervention, with the announcement that she was only a volunteer and not a popular leader. But when the elected parliamentarian from the seat resigned from the same in a clandestine political move, making way for another to contest, angered veteran leaders like Cheriyan who thought it improper and led to her contesting as an independent candidate despite her imminent delivery of her first born of her late marriage with V.V. Varkey. She projects the hollowness of the party leaders as she was offered lakhs to withdraw her candidature. The church and the party stamped this veteran politician as Marxist. “Money power and church nexus operated to side-line those who sacrificed their blood, sweat and money for national independence”(Cheriyan 188). Thereafter she retreated to silence and returned only in 1967 to contest for Congress in Kanjirappally assembly seat, to prove that the leaders were wrong in labelling her as a Marxist. In 1972, V. V. Varkey and AccammaCheriyan were honoured with *Thamrapatram* (honouring one with a copper plate with inscription on it) by Indian government. They are the only couple in India, getting *Thamrapatram* for fighting for national freedom.

The news of the *thamrapatram* revived her blocked memories. Though she and her sister RosammaPunnose jumped together into the forefront of freedom struggles defying many an insult and defamation, when it came to the time of honouring with the *thamrapatram* even those who asserted and executed their power basking on the sweat and blood of veteran leaders like RosammaPunnose, conveniently forgot her name in their urge to include their own names.

Cheriyan’s comment at the end of her narration is a glowing tribute to every mother who has made her invaluable share in the freedom struggle: “In fact I consider the *thamrapatram* I got as a national recognition for my mother. If not for her extraordinary courage it would have been impossible for me to brave the army of CP and the scandals spread by the community at the same time” (Cheriyan 191). When two young women of 25 and 28 from an aristocratic family, entered the political arena in their passionate

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love for the country, when even the male of the noble families considered it below them to appear in politics, the storm it caused was not weak. “It was our Ammachy [mother] who had to suffer all these. Our family members themselves stamped her as woman who has sacrificed her daughters. But none of these ever troubled her. While we were in jail it was our mother alone who constantly boosted our confidence” (Cheriyian 195).

No single version of history can be considered categorically convincing. The evidentiary value of first person narratives has also been challenged on account of its subjectivity and problems of verifiability of its veracity. Yet one cannot easily ignore the historical dimensions of these narratives. What happened to Cheriyian is not a solitary instance, but a collective experience, a kind of public reminiscence. Her heroic image carved in the minds of the people enables her to establish a rapport with the readers to sensitise them. The female subject in the narration becomes more of a public figure presented in non-sexist, impartial terms, offering a pointer to the past, rather delving deep on private, gendered aspects of life.

“In optics there is a process called anamorphous in which an image is ‘distorted so that it can be viewed without distortion only from a special angle or with a specific instrument’” (Hornstein 51). The disfigured, misrepresented, unheard story of the female comes out in a novel, experiential angle through their own narration, be it oral or written. “Though essentially representations of individual personalities, autobiographies are bound always to be representative of their period, within a range that will vary with the intensity of the authors’ participation in contemporary life and with the sphere in which they moved”(Misch 69).

The expressions of experience is never the utterance of an isolated self, but of a relational self, a self embedded in a social matrix. Cheriyian’s attempt is an untapped resource to understand the politics of recorded history. It is an attempt to enquire how female “lives . . . are shaped by an epochal event, and how their experience of it enables a critique of political history and the means of writing differently”(Menon and Bhasin16). By self-expression, women transform themselves from mere objects of social discourse to articulating agents, resisting the silences and erasures. It is generally observed that they seldom accentuate on public affairs, professional scenario, but concentrate instead on personal lives, quotidian details, kith and kin. Cheriyian invalidates the perception that female life narratives never become logbooks/ registers of reality. Personal memory is used here as a spring board into cultural and social history. The life as lived in socially and historically tumultuous periods in the making of the nation merits reputation. The private is brought to the public domain to analyse in the present. The impact of the experience transfers power to the writing itself. It is neither a positive or pejorative or negative, but a unruffled evaluation of the past. Identity is formed at the crossroad between self-image and social recognition. It is a repository of memories

A careful study of the party manifestos of the major political parties reveals the lacunae between word and deed. They promise women all opportunities for increased participation in social and economic aspects, highlighting them as backward and oppressed section of society. Yet all are conspicuously silent on the issue of proportionate participation of women in politics as such. Different subaltern experience different levels of exclusion. Subalternity has been created through a rigid set of norms and practices. “Apart from erstwhile untouchables, there are other excluded groups like the tribes, religious minorities and women, who have been subjected to discriminatory denial of access to resources and opportunities” (Pankaj and Pandey 16). Despite limited avenues of participation on account of retrogressive cultural and patriarchal norms and mores, they were allowed a few notches ahead during the period of freedom struggle. Exclusion and inclusion into governance is governed by the mesmeric power of power.

Women who participated actively in the nationalist movement had assumed for themselves bold and daring roles without inhibition and were not particularly concerned about having disregarded the conventions applicable to their sex. Yet, in the post-independent Indian scenario, Constitutional guarantee of gender equality has not necessarily mobilised female participation in governance due to institutional and social hesitation. It is true that they exercise their political power in the elections as voters, but even in the exercise of the right to vote, the influence of the male members of their families

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can often be seen. Empowerment and assertion through education and a state-led policy measures have facilitated mobility of miniscule measure in governance. Yet, the huge election expenditure to be borne by the individual, if not backed by the party, retreat women from candidature.

The much-extolled Kerala Model of Development, couched on the high social gender development indicators in a low per capita income, stands contested now. The flattering GDI indices mask the gendered marginalisation reflected in the corridors of power, politics, and governance. The highly empowered image of the woman, which is show-cased as the parameter of the socio-cultural profile of the state has ironed out the other side of the profile. The social development and the consequent better status of women has not been reflected in their participation in public life, political sphere, and political leadership. Kerala society is known for its high female literacy, sex ratio, low fertility, and low infant mortality, yet the paradox of low female governance participation is baffling. Political participation, measured by the number of female members of parliament and female legislators, is one of the components the United Nations Development Programme to evaluate gender empowerment. The history of female participation of women in the labour union movement in Kerala and higher female literacy have not impacted on female access to governance at the state and national level. The proportion of women legislators has been less than 6 percent since the formation of the state in 1956 despite the fact that 50 percent of the total voters are women. What is striking about Kerala is that a particularly high level of politicization and democratic participation among the population as a whole has not reflected in the distribution of power. The paradoxical position of women in Kerala reflects a deeply entrenched patriarchal gender ideology and complex economic, social, political, and cultural processes at work that construct and buttress patriarchal norms and institutions in particular. Monica Erwer also points to how “high status of women stands...in contrast to what would be called political empowerment of women in the state, which means that acquiring a high status is not transferable to having the ability to participate in the decision making process in development” (Erwer 29).

“We see that women are still under-presented in the upper echelons of most organisations, and just as critically, still over-presented in the lower. Men still dominate organisations in almost every sense; in terms of jobs, status, rewards and opportunities” (Halford and Leonard 2). Making gender equality in governance will necessitate a national, institutional paradigm shift including the private and public realms. As Tadors recommends, rather than negating the experiences of women and shelving them as if they are politically ignorant, they should be equipped to bank on their experiences and resources in the informal arena for scaffolding their performance in formal politics (Tadors 10).

Female autobiography has turned out to be privileged site for discoursing on the intersecting genres of culture studies, literature, and history. It has been used as a tool to embark on an attempt to write themselves into history and to impact on the literature as well as culture. Current voices in women writing reflect “the complexity, heterogeneity, and diversity of lives and personalities” (Franz and Abigail 1). One gathers information about struggles for survival, restrictions, resilience, and resistance. We realise the ways in which race, class, and gender inequalities constrain the aspirations and opportunities of one set of people. Their ways of endurance, coping serve as pointers to hindrances and innovative or proven strategies to evade or transcend them.

“History and autobiography derive their value from rendering significant portions of the past as interpreted past” (Weintraub). They speak about the complex social relations characteristic of particular societies at a given point of time: “the mediations between society and individual life can be read both vertically for the coherence of life and horizontally, for the cultural expression of that life” (Murphy 131). The past is mediated or reflected or interpreted through memory. Montages of snapshots, slices of past are structured through revision and retelling to create a world misunderstood or misrepresented and bestow meaning and import to form repository for posterity and to guarantee cultural and historic immortality. From fragmented dispersed vignettes of memory, a fusion is effected, constructing a kaleidoscope of micro-culture. Living in a period of redefinitions, negotiations between the private and the public, between local and national, as Said observes: “Exile cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience” (Said 54). She crosses the framework of the political home to comment on the past. Living

outside the boundaries of that home, yet mentally within its framework, takes a recourse into the past to negotiate between gender and exclusion.

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