

A GENDERED SPACE: THROUGH THE EYES OF A MEDIEVAL SANDESHAKAVYAM

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Abstract: Space serves both as a tool of analysis and a medium of References as the paper tries to explore the notions of power, morality and domesticity as represented in medieval *Sandeshakavyams*. While *Unnuneelisandesham*, a Manipravalam message poem composed in 12-13th century C.E. will be the primary text taken up for analysis, other Sanskrit and Malayalam and Manipravalam texts of the same period has also be used to provide for comparative analogies. the paper seeks to argue for the use of space as an effective tool for historical and gender analysis as it cracks open new portals and insights into historical situations and seeks to bring to light certain female characters (who the texts refers to as *Nayikas* or heroines) who effectively challenged social stereotypes.

Keywords: Gender, literary texts, *sandeshakavyam*, space

Introduction: Space constitutes, creates and reconfigures even as it is constituted, created and configured. Space is also monumentalized, classified, segregated and hierachialised. The idea of space is defined by limits, notions of access and permeability, materiality and a sense of location. The ordering of space is as much a product of human agency as it is societal structures and institutions at work, and most of all, space is gendered, be it the pews of a Church or the Men's and Ladies' section at a supermarket or the interior of a medieval household. As social scientists have argued, space can be read as a language with its own grammar and vocabulary. If a space is analogous to language, I would like to argue that it is a language in which the nouns are barely gender-neutral. It is also a language which has changed or moved on with the times; the notion(s) of space; be it in terms of physical territoriality or mental geography has seldom remained static. Space assists in defining a sexual division of labor; it reproduces attitudes towards sexuality and body. Another major issue that has arisen is how space affects and is articulated through the body.

Spaces are inherently gendered since they serve as metaphors for social divisions and as mnemonics for internalization of gender roles and norms. Spatial ordering plays an instrumental role in the internalization of hierachialised power structures through daily practice and social memory. The concept of feminine or masculine space has been valorized through literature and aesthetics and the divisioning of space with References to gender seems to have been practiced from time immemorial. This doesn't mean that places remain crystallized as feminized and masculinized spaces ,these are also marked by varying levels of porosity; hence spaces are also transgressed ,transcended(or trans-gendered) and stretchable.

A *Sandeshakavyam*, as it essentially deals with physical and imaginative movement over space linking terrain to terrain, landscape to landscape and

mind to mind, gives us an interesting entry point into the conceptualization and sense of space as perceived by the social formation it belonged to. Any *Sandeshakavyam* is a message in verse conveyed through a medium between two people separated by distance. Physical movement through space, it could be a journey or movement inside the household speaks volumes not only about the social ordering of space, but also about social codes of conduct and divergent local practices and traditions. Since the medium or the messenger moves from a particular location to the next covering a range of distance, he/she or it is in an enviable position of having experienced space and its impact in a 'personal' but detached way.

Sandeshakavyam: Of Love and Letters

Though scholars of Indian literature have noted in passing the courtly provenance of the great bulk of Sanskrit literature known as a *kavya* and art historians have noted the courtly influence on much visual art, very few, if any studies until very recently have taken this context s seriously. This is in spite of the copious number of texts that are both available and accessible. Moreover these text deals with issues that may suggest how the 'elite culture' was popularized and internalized by a complex and diverse audience. Daud Ali argues that if the court was a complex agency, then it is possible to read courtly literature, even in its most eulogistic mode as addressing a variety of composite agencies necessary for its operation. Sheldon Pollock has argued that the spread of the Sanskrit language through the medium of the Sanskrit *kavya* led to the development of a 'global cultural formation 'which bound the intelligentsia of a fairly widespread geographical expanse under a common aesthetic. If language indeed is the vehicle and dispensing medium of aesthetics, does *Manipravalam* which was an admixture of two languages serve an amalgam of two aesthetic worlds? Sandeshams or messages are old as literature itself; be it Rama sending a message to Sita

through Hanuman or Nala sending a message through a swan to Damayanti or Gabriel delivering God's message to Mary – the common narrational motif that has been in use and that too effective use is that of - the message being carried across from the sender to the addressee through a certain somebody or something invoking curiosity. *Sandeshakavyam* as genre of literature emerged in the 'Indian' context with Kalidasa's Meghdoot.

Kerala in the medieval era witnessed a plethora of *Sandeshakavyams*, Poornasaraswathy's *Hamsasandesham*. (14th century), Uddanda Sastrikal's *Kokilasandesham*, Payyanur Bhattathiri's *Chakorasandesham* (15th century) etc. While most of the Sanskrit works have been recovered, only two Manipravalam works have been recovered – *Unnuneelisandesham* and *Kokasandesham*. The pioneer in this field seems to be *Unnuneelisandesham* which sort of set the pattern for the rest.

Unnuneelisandesham

Unnuneelisandesham is said to be the first Manipravalam Sandeshakavyam. Even though certain scholars have placed it in the long line of Sandeshakavyams which came out in response to and in the tradition of Kalidasa's Meghdoot, K.M. George, eminent literary critic in Malayalam argues that *Unnuneelisandesham* varies from Meghdoot in structure and content. There is no one opinion on the literary, linguistic and historical aspects of *Unnuneelisandesham* among the scholars who have worked on it. Aiyappa Panicker opines that *Unnuneelisandesham* is the best among the early Manipravalam works. He argues that even though the work is inspired from Meghdoot, 'it is no mere imitation, the emotions depicted have a genuine note, their depth and intensity and create an abiding impression in the mind of the reader, and the poet, well versed in the craft of poetry, uses choice words and felicitous expressions to paint colorful pictures of persons and situation.'

The work is mainly reconstructed on the basis of three manuscripts; the main among them being the Palmyra leaf manuscript which is held by Ambalakkattu Karunakaran. There is also a paper manuscript available at Madras University .A manuscript was also discovered by Ulloor Parameshwaran Pillai. Shuranad Kunjan Pilla opines that there is no other text which illuminates the history of early Medieval Kerala with such lucidity as that of *Unnuneelisandesham*. What differentiates *Unnuneelisandesham* from the other Sandeshakavyams such as *Kokasandesham*, *Bhramarasandesham*, *Kokilasandesham* [in Manipravalam] and *Sukasandesham* in Sanskrit is the fact that in this particular text, it is a person who takes the message from the lover to the beloved, and since the person is no other than the next in line to

the throne of Thripappur, the women, men and things that he comes across engage with him in a dialogic interaction which is different from the reception and perception of people and things by a bird or a cloud for that matter!

Unnuneelisandesham poses many challenges to anyone working on it, but these in no way discounts its historical utility. There are not only issues with interpolated verses, but also with the interpretations. Some of the pertinent questions that remain about the text is - its date, authorship, whether it concerned 'real' people [as the ruler of Travancore and his brother are mentioned in it], is it a Sandeshakavyam or a *Aachicharitam*, who the intended audience of the text were and most importantly- where can we place the text in the socio-cultural narrative of Kerala history?

Unnuneelisandesham: the Blurb

The hero and the heroine are asleep, at their residence at Vatamatira, when there comes a Yakshi smitten with the pangs of love who forcibly takes away the hero through the sky towards the south. When they reach the Patmanabha temple at Thiruvananthapuram the hero manages to escape from the clutches of the Yakshi. Here, he meets with Aditya Varma and requests him to take his message to his beloved, Unnunili. Aditya Varma makes the journey from Thiruvananthapuram to Kaduthuruthy and the latter part of the work describes his journey and the sights and sounds that await him as he makes it to the Nayika's home.

There are also References to Manipravalam Sandeshakavyam in *Unniachirutevi charitam* and *Unniachicharitam*, hence the period of *Aachicharitams* and *Unnuneelisandesham* may have been the same. Taking into concern all the internal as well as external details, the work can be more or less attributed to the latter half of the 14th century AD.

Gender and the Text

This paper attempts to understand the insertion of gender in both the narrative space and consequentially its manifestation in the spatial organization gender as described in the text. It seeks to analyze whether there were exclusive domains in the particular society the text is dealing with. It will also look at the ordering of space in the household, i.e. at Viramanikyam at Mundackkal – whether there was a divisioning of space according to gender {the front and exterior space being a male zone while the interior being devoted to women as per popular imagination}. One of the primary issues that will be dealt with will be that of category of prominent women called as the Achis who find conspicuous mention at various nodes of the text. It will be argued that they need to be viewed as a distinct category separate from temple women such as *Devadasis*,

Kutthathis, Tevaradiyar etc; their prominence arising either from agnatic or affinal relation with royal household or their prowess in the arts or both. A general argument of the paper will be that women as a gender category should not be thought of or analyzed as a monolithic group as the medieval text(s) sure does not treat them as one.

The primal issue with the text is of course the controversial figure of the Nayika and the other women who met Aditya Varma, the messenger on his journey from Thiruvananthapuram to Kaduthuruthy section of scholars which includes who have worked on the text argue that these women belonged to the category of Devadasis/Kutthathis and that their interactions with the prince who was also the messenger point to the social and moral decadence of the time in which the text was composed. Another section which includes Shuranad Kunjan Pillai ‘sanitizes’ the heroines and argues that they were neither Devadasis nor Kutthathis ,but were women devoted to their husbands and families[*Kulastrees*]. What is peculiar is the fact that the entire discourse on women or Nayikas mentioned in the text is conceptualized in binary items: either as erotic figures or as domesticised housewives. The possibility of women being something in between the categories or beyond it is not at all looked into.

I would like to argue that the *Unnuneelisandesham* as a Sandeshakavyam essentially deals with movement through gendered worlds, from a more or less masculinized space of the Patmanabha temple at Thiruvananthapuram to that of the Nayika’s house Viramanikyam at Kaduthuruthy, which is an obviously feminine space. Tyagi opines that the households actually link space with traditions – on the one hand, its physical presence roots it in the society that it exists in, and on the other, it carries with it age-old traditions that continue through it and get reformulated in different chronological spaces. The text can also be called as journey from the external to the internal or domestic domain. The metaphors and the imagery used to describe the temple and its vicinity even though it creates a sense of sacrality, also creates a sense of conflict or aggression. Imagery such as that of the cool breeze, *Madana* and cuckoos and orchards which are usually used to create a sense of placidity or romance are imbued with ironical meanings which infuses the setting of a battlefield where the narrator is being murdered. It is also the meeting point of Aditya Varma, the messenger and the narrator of the story, two men who not only have mutual respect ,but also some sort of a hierarchical link – i.e. that of a protector or lord and one whose sorrow has to be eliminated by the other. Hence, this can be conceived of as a masculine space because of the temple’s

representation as the meeting place of men as well as the imagery connected with it.

In contrast, Viramanikyam, Unnunili’s house at Mundackkal is constructed as a feminine or feminized site where the female presence is not only dominant, but it is the only presence. The house is marked with its locus being the sorrowing Unnunili with her main maid Cheriyathu and other female servants; the absence of the male is glaring. It is also noted here that the absentee husband is not so much the focus of the *Uttarabhagham* which deals with the Mundackkal house and Unnunili’s grief, but rather the deteriorating condition of Unnunili’s health and beauty is emphasized rather than centering on Nayaka. It is also emphasized here that the feminine space must not be equated with an eroticized space; it is a sexualized and gendered space, but it is not the same as an eroticized space. Ruby Lal on her work on the domestic life of the Mughals rightly points out that all the studies on the Mughal harem has concentrated on the “pleasure principle” rather than assessing the harem as a domestic space where power relations were not only constituted ,but also reinforced and reconfigured.

In Unnuneelisandesham we come across a series of Achis starting with Unniachi who Aditya Varma meets before embarking on his journey, Nanni who comes to meet him en route at Kollam, Cherukara Kutthathis whom the narrator advises him not to be delayed by; Cherukara Unniadi who may welcome him to her house ,Illayachi who stands beside the path at Kandiyur,Kurangattu Unnunili who comes to meet him at Kayamkulam, Unnichakki-the Sea Woman who may delay him,Kurangattu Chirutevi,Kandamkulam sundari who is not to be met and finally Cheriyathu who is the second in line at the Mundackkal house. Elamkulam Kunjan Pilla argues that all the females that Aditya Varma meets on the way are Devadasis since they are located near temples. Of all the Nayikas that are mention, only Unniadi is mentioned to be an exponent at dance, moreover there not even casual References to the other women being associated with dance or music. There is also no mention of any of these Nayikas being devoted to any deities, much less being wedded to any deity or temple or of them being associated or taking part in any temple-ritual. In light of the evidence from the text, it is highly inappropriate to strait-jacket these women under the masking term of temple -women.

Conclusion: *Unnuneelisandesham* must be used in the reconstruction of Kerala’s past not only to understand the perceptions of the Medieval society on Space, Gender and Identity ,but also power structure, domestic life and the social formation at large. It endows us with a unique entry point into the social relations of the early centuries of the medieval

times. It is also hoped as obviously argued through the paper that gender should be treated as a monolithic category, but must be analyzed as a complex entity having multiple layers of power

hierarchies and sub categories and how this in turn is negotiated through the most effective medium of space.

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