

Periyar: Forging a Gendered Utopia

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Abstract

The category of gender has perennially found itself at the margins because of its social location across South Asia. Albeit heterogeneous by nature, women have borne the burden of history, community, tradition and even geography being violently mapped across their bodies. No wonder that the past two centuries has witnessed heated debates on the women's question in the region ranging from the Altekarian paradigm to the valorized mother figure who is ever nurturing and generous. Many social reformers both male and female sought to battle orthodoxy, religious chauvinism and caste-based status-quoism widening the contours of gender justice in the process. The tropes revolved around consent and coercion, public battles over scriptural legitimacy and contentious traditions. The reformers were treading on delicate grounds as the sacred domain of the 'home' had to be kept immune from any polluting winds of 'western' ideology. This article is an attempt to tease out E.V. Ramasamy Naicker's (Periyar) radical understanding of the gender question and his efforts to create an alternate epistemology to question existing socio-cultural realities. It concludes by arguing that this gendered utopia is also a work in progress.

Keywords

Caste, self-respect movement, gendered utopia, Periyar

Mapping Utopias

Utopias have generated ecstasy and fear in equal measure and human history has witnessed multiple ideas and discourses which promised to usher in a utopian age. In the Indian context, the most radical version of utopia was formulated by Sant Ravidas (c. 1450-1520) in his song 'Begumpura'- a city without sorrow. He envisaged it as a casteless, classless urban society in contrast to Gandhi's idyllic village of 'Ram

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Rajya'. 'Begumpura' described a land with no taxes, toil or harassment, where there is no hierarchy but all are equal. Finally, calling himself a 'tanner now set free', he proclaims that he wanders freely with his friends: the right to walk anywhere in a settlement, city or village, is a unique matter for Dalits.²

However, it was with the publication of Thomas More's 'The Best State of a Commonwealth and the New Island of Utopia' between 1516 and 1518, which provided a label for the imagination of an ideal society. His utopian vision included the humanism of the Renaissance, balancing it with reason, a 'New World', a geographical space lying to the west of Europe which would help the latter to overcome corruption and greed, warfare and inequalities and help to usher in collective ownership of resources. This would enable Europe to create a just society. This space was not yet sullied or plundered by European ravenousness.

An important intervention in the understanding of utopias was made by Karl Mannheim in his 'Ideology and Utopia'. He pointed out that while both ideologies and utopias had emerged from a political struggle of different social groups, the difference was that where ideologies reflect the interests of the ruling groups and so obscure realities in order to stabilize society, certain oppressed groups are intellectually so strongly interested in the destruction and transformation of a given condition of society that they unwittingly see only those elements in the society which tend to negate it.³

Gail Omvedt observed that utopian imaginings are found at a lower level of society. Thomas More composed his work in Latin which is an exception. In the Indian context, utopian visions were seldom in Sanskrit but rather in the language of the masses.⁴ This also explains the lack of proper documentation as writing as a skill was not permissible to the common people in India. Many of these visions were in the form of poems, ballads and songs which were orally transmitted through generations. Often utopias were envisaged on religious lines, a heavenly city for the chosen few who remained faithful to all the sacraments. In the brahmanical vision of the 'golden age', humans need to pass through numerous cycles of birth and death to attain salvation. A Bodhisattva imagined 'Sukavati', a land of joy in which all would find liberation. Likewise, Tukaram talked of Pandharpur and Kabir composed verses dreaming of Premnagar—a city of love or Amrapur where people will attain immortality.

Thus, the imagination of utopias located in the uncertain future carried within kernels of an alternative reality and a possibility of social transformation. Very often they inspired ordinary people to strive to create a better life for themselves. These musings transcended binaries of gender/language/geographies and social locations. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein imagined 'Ladyland' wherein women were well versed in science and technology, including armed conflict and their knowledge enabled them to control natural resources. Her evocative portrayal of a feminist utopia in 'Sultana's

²Gail Omvedt (2008). *Seeking Begumpura: The social vision of anti-caste intellectuals*. Navayana Publications, p. 7.

³Karl Mannheim (1936). *Ideology and utopia: An introduction to the sociology of knowledge*. (Trans.) Louis Wirth and Edward Shils, New York: Harvest Books, p. 40.

⁴Omvedt, op. cit., p. 15.

Dream' countered the fetters on women's access to public space during her lifetime. Similarly, Pandita Ramabai sought to create a community of women in her 'Mukti Sadan' or the abode of freedom wherein widows would farm the land, harvest crops, get educated and publish various writings. These autonomous spaces sought to re-imagine womanhood and their agentiality when the only resolution was to re-integrate them into patriarchal structures.

The above mentioned imaginations can be located within the prism of colonial encounter wherein Indian traditions and customs fell afoul of the Western notions of liberty and equality, especially on the question of gender. The debate followed a familiar terrain of scriptural injunctions on women and their hallowed role in society. Rarely did the structural understanding of gender relations conditioned by the socio-cultural environment find mention. Hence, Partha Chatterjee's familiar trope of the home and the world which he argued was the means through which the nationalist resolution of the women's question was arrived at, dominated the gendered reading of colonial history.⁵ In Chatterjee's theoretical framework of the self/other, he introduces a new binary opposition—between home/world, public and private domains and argues that the nationalist counter-ideology separated the domain of culture into the material and spiritual. The colonised had to learn the techniques of Western civilisation in the material sphere while retaining the distinctive spiritual essence of the material. These new dichotomies, it is argued matched with the identity of social roles by gender; and during this period the 'new woman' came to be defined within this frame and therefore as distinct from the common lower class female, further he argues that in the nineteenth century, the woman's question had been a central issue but by the early twentieth century this question disappeared from the public domain. This is not because political issues take over but because nationalism refused to make women's question an issue of political negotiation with the colonial state. Chatterjee argues that the changes in middle class women's lives were outside the arena of political agitation and the home became the principal site of struggle through which nationalist patriarchy came to be normalised. Thus Chatterjee concludes that the nationalists had in the early decades of the century 'resolved' the woman's question, all subsequent reworkings of the women's question by Dalit and working class women, thus come to be precluded. The period marked by Chatterjee as the period of the 'resolution of women's question'; as we shall note later—is the very period in which women's participation in the Ambedkarite movement was at its peak. But in Chatterjee's framework, such movements would be dismissed as Western-inspired, orientalist, for they utilised aspects of colonial policies and Western ideologies as resources.⁶

Feminist historiography made radical breakthroughs in teasing out the redefinitions of gender and patriarchies, i.e., to say in 'pulling out the hidden history swept under the liberal carpet of reforms'.⁷ Feminist renderings of history have been ever since

⁵P. Chatterjee (1989). *The nation and its fragments: Colonial and postcolonial histories*. Bombay: Oxford University Press.

⁶S. Sarkar (1997). *Writing social history*. Oxford University Press.

⁷S. Vaid and K. Sangari (eds.) (1989). *Recasting women*, New Delhi: Kali for Women.

concerned with comprehending the linkages between reforms and the realignments of patriarchies with hierarchies of caste, class, ethnicity, etc. Vaid and Sangari make a significant distinction between the ‘modernising of patriarchal modes of regulating women’ and the ‘democratizing of gender relations’ both at home and the workplace.⁸ They underline both the revolutionary potential and inherent contradictions that the democratising movements constituted for peasant and working class women. While these democratising movements are seen as heralding ‘class rights for women’ as ‘against and over’ simply familial or caste-related identities; the histories of the non-brahmin democratic movements, ever so crucial to the emancipatory discourse on caste and gender come to be overlooked. This is true of most of the renderings of feminist history of modern India; though there are notable exceptions.⁹

The anti-caste movement of the nineteenth and twentieth century produced trenchant critiques of the socio-religious and political ethos of Indian society and also provided a radical epistemology to create a new world. Scholars who have reflected on the gendered politics of the non-brahmin movements have pointed out “limitations in theory itself in dealing with diversities and subalternity” and argue that in a scenario where gender intersects with caste and class, the theory and methods used “should generate knowledge from the margins”.¹⁰ As part of the Self-Respect Movement, which was a counter to the Brahmin-dominated Congress party in Madras Presidency, Periyar deliberated deeply on the gender and caste issues of his time and sought to forge a new semantics for the same. His speeches and writings worked to create a discursive context which enabled women to be part of the public domain and express their politics in various forms. In 1935, the Self-Respect Movement sought to set up a women’s centre at Erode and Periyar reflected as to how from 1929 onwards, informally women would visit his house to discuss their social and personal lives. Periyar also articulated on sexuality, masculinity, the need for a new aesthetics which would prove to be more liberative for women. His writings and active social interventions through political movements worked towards visualizing a gendered utopia. The journals and newspapers published as a part of the movement helped to give voice to many ordinary men and women to express their concerns through letters, articles, prose and poetry. Gradually, as argued by V. Geetha, women Self-Respecters turned into active historical agents, making and remaking their everyday lives and hence history.¹¹

The engagement with Periyarist politics delineates paradigmatic shifts in understanding subaltern perspectives on gender. S Anandhi observed that: “According to Periyar, while marriage and chastity were key patriarchal institutions, patriarchy as such was ubiquitous, pervading spheres like language, literature and gender-based

⁸Ibid.

⁹Sharmila Rege (2019). *Debating Dalit difference*. (Eds.) Sunaina Arya and Aakash Singh Rathore, Routledge Publications, pp. 158–159.

¹⁰S. Anandhi and Meera Velayutham. (2010). Rethinking feminist methodologies. *Economic and Political Weekly*. Vol. 45, No. 44/45. p. 40.

¹¹V. Geetha (1991). Gender and political discourse. *Economic and Political Weekly*, February 16, p. 388.

socialization".¹² For V. Geetha, "experiences of the Self-Respect Movement help in theorising the position of those feminists who are critical of and do not wish to ground identity in family and community, and who look to a comradeship to root a new and radical female subjectivity".¹³ Sarah Hodges furthers the argument that "the Self Respect movement also based its campaign for transforming society at a key site of its production: the family and its domestic spaces".¹⁴ For Periyar, reforms within the family spaces were crucial to create an egalitarian society, unlike social reformers of the dominant communities who sought to 'protect' the sanctity of the home from any reformatory influences. He deconstructed the secular and sacral power of the priestly community and conversed in the idiom of social justice. He was convinced that, "just as how Brahmanism condemns a very large portion of the working population to shudrahood so it has condemned women to the servitude of marriage... To the extent that a woman lives up to the norms of a chaste and ideal wife to that extent she accepts and revels in her slavery".¹⁵ If women are to be truly liberated, this gender-biased and enforced practice of chastity need to be abolished and in its place, gender-neutral, egalitarian and voluntary practice of chastity need to be established. Forms of marriage which in the name of chastity force the partners to continue and endure a loveless life, should be abolished. Religion and law which prescribe patience to women in the face of husband's brutalities should go. The social dictatorship which forces women to suppress their true love and affection for the sake of chastity compels them to continue living with someone should be abolished.¹⁶

A New Conjuality

In response to the colonial critique of Indian social customs, especially on the practices of sati and enforced widowhood, efforts were made by the social reformers to construct a new companionate marriage wherein the wife would be educated enough to be part of her husband's life-world. The women, especially from the upper class and upper caste required to be recasted into new behavioral norms. The Brahma Samaj attempted to negotiate with the marriage rituals, do away with the priestly monopoly and the burden of dowry while retaining the 'saptapadi' (ceremonial turns around the sacred fire by both the bride and groom which solemnizes the marriage and gives it religious sanctity). But the Samaj was unwilling to desert Hinduism, but willing to become liberal and respond to the impact of western faiths.¹⁷ The Arya Samaj too facilitated inter-caste marriages but the orthodoxy of the Hindu priest is not challenged and

¹²S. Anandhi. (1991). Women's question in the Dravidian movement, c. 1925–1948. *Social Scientist*, Vol. 19, No. 5/6. p. 26.

¹³V. Geetha (1998). Periyar, women and an ethic of citizenship. *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 33, No. 17. p. WS15.

¹⁴Sarah Hodges (2005). Revolutionary family life and the Self Respect movement in Tamil south India, 1926–49. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol. 39, p. 257.

¹⁵Anaimuthu (1974). *Thoughts of Periyar*. Trichy, p. 178.

¹⁶Kudi Arasu, 18 November, 1928.

¹⁷http://freemarriage.com/articles/brahmo_samaj_wedding.php, accessed 10th January, 2022.

they did not seek to provide alternative, humanist marriage practices.¹⁸ However, the prevalent idea was to retain the structure of caste endogamy to ensure the honour of the family and the society. The idea of ‘consent’ was nonexistent and considered alien among many Hindu communities as marriages were endogamous and child marriages were the norm. In 1885, 22-year-old Rukhmabai refused to cohabit and solemnise her marriage with her husband Dadaji Bhikaji that had taken place when she was just 11 years old.¹⁹ In 1889, Phulmoni Devi, a ten-year-old child bride bled to death after her husband (who was twice her age) forcibly consummated their marriage. The case, *Queen-Empress vs Hurree Mohun Mythee* on 26 July, 1890²⁰ in the Calcutta High Court generated debates around the vexatious issue of consent, the travails of child brides, and the agency of women.

Periyar questioned the practice of referring to traditions to validate marriage rituals among the Tamils which were very utopian for his times. He was not bothered about the gods, customs or habits of the ancient Tamils as these ideas could not be considered rational. “Were not the people of the Stone Age better than those of the barbaric age? Similarly don’t you think that the people of the 20th century have better knowledge and experience than those people who lived 4000, 5000 years ago? Are not people of the modern age put to the necessity of changing their ancient ways of life? So it has become absolutely necessary for us, social reformers, to keep away from the talk of ancient Tamils. Moreover in the present day human society, we the rationalists do not depend on any old, antiquated, obsolete information about the ancient Tamils”.²¹ The Self-Respect movement also conceived of marriages free from priestly control, the chanting of Sanskrit mantras which the majority did not understand, and to do away with the tying of the ‘mangalsutra’, the sacred thread which symbolizes the sanctity of the marriage tie. But this was not considered as the sole sacrament of the marriage knot. The practice of ‘kanyadaan’ or gifting of the bride was also critiqued. Personally, Periyar was vehemently opposed to the tying of the knot or ‘thali’. Delivering a speech at a Self-Respect Marriage, he said pointed out, “It is said that the thali is tied around a woman’s neck so that others are alerted to the fact that she is married and that in fact, she is the possession of so and so (thus establishing beyond doubt, the question of ownership). The thali has the function of ensuring that no other man desires her. Should not a man’s marital status be made equally obvious? Is it not necessary for us to know to which woman he belongs so that we do not wrongly desire him? Therefore, the thali ought to be tied around the necks of men as well. To single women out for such a deceptive ritual practice should invite our condemnation. It should be stopped

¹⁸Meena Dhanda (2012). Runaway marriages: A silent revolution. *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 47, No. 43, p. 105.

¹⁹Apurva Vishwanath, As SC looks again at conjugal rights, recalling Rukhmabai, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/as-sc-looks-again-at-conjugal-rights-recalling-rukhmabai-7409834/>, *The Indian Express*, July 18, 2021.

²⁰<https://indiakanon.org/doc/1410526/>, accessed September 16, 2021.

²¹Periyar: E.V.Ramaswami, *Self-Respect Marriages; The Periyar Self-Respect Propaganda Institution*, translated by A.S. Venu, 2021, pp. 8, 9.

at all costs.”²² Further, the ‘thali’ served to limit the mobility of married women and police their sexual desires. Such traditions continue to be practiced in many parts of India in various forms. To cite a contemporary illustration, the film *Bulbul*,²³ recounts the story of a child bride in Bengal. On the day of her wedding, she is being dressed up as a bride and made to wear rings on her feet. Upon asking why she should do so, she is told, “to prevent you from flying away”. Such metaphors testify to the arguments espoused by Periyar.

On the contrary, for Periyar, the idea of consent was more important and he argued that the groom and bride should agree for the marriage rather than the families/parents, thus giving them some autonomy over their lives. The open defiance of the orthodox marriage norms drew social ire and ridicule. An incident where a woman left her husband to marry another person who was from the movement led to a public scandal. Periyar’s biographer, Sitambaranar married a widow and the following vow was proclaimed, “Today our conjugal life that is based on love begins. From today I accept you my dear and beloved comrade as my spouse, so that I may consecrate my love and cooperation for the cause of social progress in such a manner as would not contradict your desires.”²⁴

Such a revolutionary vow refashioned the family with the novel vocabulary of conjugality. Terms like ‘love’ or ‘comrade’ were never used for intimate relationships which used to be based on hierarchy. Unlike marriages among other religious groups, Hindus considered marriages as not based on contract but a sacrament, without any possibility of a divorce. So, for Periyar to frame the institution of marriage within the contours of consent and desire was indeed a herculean task. He strived for a new terminology to promote female selfhood by negating the scriptural authority which devalued women. In the process, he critiqued the socialization process which laid stress on educating girls to be good wives and mothers, to emulate Sita, Savitri and other mythological figures known for their selfless piety. Instead, one should valorize and imitate women as role models who were good in sports, the arts and sciences and highly educated. Thus a new female subjectivity would emerge. For couples who were part of the Self-Respect movement, domesticity was no longer a virtue to be aspired for as they endured multiple hardships of travel, economic crisis and family displacements because of their commitment to the movement. For many women (Kunjitham, Neelavathi, Annapoorani, Minakshi) wifehood or motherhood was never a dominant narrative in their lives which as a long legion of even the most radical reformers have argued is the basis for women’s existence. Gradually, the distinctions between the private and the public realms were erased as the women activists started to reflect and articulate on wide-ranging social and personal concerns.²⁵

²²Kudi Arasu, 11 May, 1930.

²³*Bulbul*, June 24, 2020, directed by Anvita Dutt.

²⁴Kudi Arasu, 11 May 1929.

²⁵For details refer, V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai (2008). *Towards a non-Brahmin millennium, From Iyothee Thass to Periyar*, Saanya, p. 369.

Periyar's transgressive women interrogated the intimate spaces of the family and society. No wonder that this articulation of conjugality would lead to social tensions. The familiar bogey of women's uncontrolled sexuality and its repercussions were raised and how the movement was undermining the honorable ideas of chastity and femininity. The entire edifice of society would collapse if women preferred getting married based on their own choice. Surely, this went against the very notion of feminine modesty/shame. Feminine desire had to be appropriately policed so that it is channeled through motherhood. This was also in accordance with religious scriptures. As observed by Periyar, "to discipline love and desire and direct it along particular channels and orient them towards particular persons does not seem to us to have any justification. To desire is human. To control it is to practice a kind of slavery".²⁶ In a letter to the newspaper *Desabandhu*, a reader argued that if women were given property rights, she would not hesitate to leave her husband if he failed to give her children.²⁷ The transition of marriage from a sacrament to a social contract would deliver a deathblow to a caste conscious society. Such women would cause a moral panic in society.

Biology is not Destiny

The idea of sexuality is determined by socio-cultural mores and is experienced primarily as a manifestation of the norms and morals of a specific community.²⁸ Hence, sexuality is not simply an autonomous realm of the senses but is embedded in a social world structured and saturated by relations of power.²⁹ Such nuanced understanding on sexuality also critiqued the perspectives about biological determinism especially from the 1970s onwards for perpetuating stereotypes and prejudices in society. However, Periyar had his own understanding of gendered identities in society. He did not shy away from voicing opinions on subjects which were considered taboo. On the question of women's sexuality, the dominant discourse of reforms was to view them as asexual beings that were required to sublimate their desires to lead a virtuous life. There existed a sharp distinction between motherhood and female sexuality with the latter being channelized only into legitimate motherhood within a tightly controlled structure of reproduction which ensured caste purity (by mating only with prescribed partners) and patrilineal succession (by restricting mating only with one man).³⁰ Hence, the only legitimate expression of desire was through motherhood thereby criminalizing any other agential appearance of desire. In a poignant narrative, a Self-Respecter-Kamalakshi speaks for her own existence (What is in Store for Us) devoid

²⁶Anaimuthu, op. cit., p. 153.

²⁷V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai, op. cit., p. 368.

²⁸Meenakshi Thapan (1997). Introduction: Gender and Embodiment in Everyday Life. (Ed.) Meenakshi Thapan, *Embodiment: Essays on gender and identity*, New Delhi: OUP, pp. 1–34.

²⁹Margeret Jolly and Lenore Manderson (1997). Introduction: Sites of desire/economies of pleasure in Asia and the Pacific. (Ed.) Manderson and Jolly, *Sites of desire: Economies of pleasure in Asia and the Pacific*, University of Chicago Press, p. 26.

³⁰Uma Chakravarti (1993). Conceptualizing Brahmanical patriarchy in early India: Gender, caste, class and state. *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 28, No. 14, April 3, p. 581.

of love, desire and companionship. A child bride, her family did not have the money to complete the rituals to consummate the marriage once she came of age. She is languishing as a domestic slave whereas the person to whom she is married returned the symbolic offerings and is seeking remarriage. She cannot even contemplate remarriage. Kamalakshi questions as to which honorific would suit her—‘Mrs’ or ‘Miss’ as her life is in an indeterminate state.³¹

Periyar wrote a scathing critique of the hegemonic ideal of chastity which was constructed to keep women under bondage. He pointed out that if women had written the Dharmasastras or religious scriptures perhaps things would have been different. He noted that the depressed communities and women were systematically denied access to any forms of knowledge and were forced to lead a life of servitude. He did not accept that there were separate rights for men and women as their inherent natures were different. For Periyar, notions of femininity and masculinity were constructed socially and culturally. “Though women get pregnant and carry children in their wombs for ten months this does not make them different from men. With respect to qualities such as courage, anger, the power to command and the will to violence, women are like men. On the other hand, just because men do not bear children it cannot be said they differ from women in respect of love, peace and the ability to nurture.”³² “To make strength, anger and ruling ability solely male attributes and calm, patience and the ability to nurture life female ones is to say that bravery, strength and ruling prowess are characteristic of the tiger while the ability to care characterizes the lamb”.³³ In an explicit article, Periyar argued that masculinity degraded women. He was equally critical of the prevailing notions of femininity which made women subservient. To be truly emancipated, women needed to get rid of the onus of reproduction which renders them more vulnerable. In addition, the conventional idea of bodily aesthetics, decorum and morality only served to make women willing accomplices in their own subservience. He encouraged women to prove that they were also capable of taking on familial responsibilities and earning money.³⁴ Again, this was a discernible departure from the prevalent ideas, reinforced by scriptural authority which considered women as fickle-minded and susceptible to passions.

The moral universe constructed by the Self-Respect movement was highly gendered. Many women publicly spoke and wrote as to how men needed to ‘imagine’ the misery and torture inflicted upon women. One woman spoke as to how men should be ritually tonsured, veiled and consigned to the kitchen and lead the life of a widow. Another observed that women should question religious practices which discipline women’s conduct. There were many stories and poems written in the press questioning

³¹Kamalakshi (2003). *What is in store for us, The other half of the coconut: Women writing self-respect history: An anthology of self-respect literature (1928-1936)*. Ed. and Trans. K. Srilata, Kali for Women, pp. 28–31.

³²Kudi Arasu, 12 February 1928.

³³V. Anaimuthu (1974). *Thoughts of Periyar*. Trichy, p. 121.

³⁴Kudi Arasu, 8 February 1931.

the gendered conventions. This was evident during the debates on the Sarda Act and the Hindu Religious Endowment Act (popularly known as the Devadasi Abolition Bill) when the movement condemned the hereditary practice of sexual slavery. Interestingly Periyar pointed out that the binary of wife and whore exists for women but there is no word in the Tamil vocabulary for a male who lead a very licentious life. Indeed morality was never a part of masculinity. He considered chastity and depravity as constituting a peculiar kind of sexual code and signified the patriarchal control of women's bodies. Chastity insisted a woman could be possessed by only one man while the other sought to make a woman an object of public lust.³⁵

The public debates by the movement both in the press and Periyar's speeches obviously did not endear them to other nationalists who wanted to effect social changes while keeping the strictures of varnashrama or the caste order intact. In the process they devised their own epistemology of Brahmanical patriarchy and the gendered nature of caste practices. During his visit to the Soviet Union in 1931-32, Periyar witnessed novel changes in the institution of family and the emerging discussions on birth control.

From Motherhood to Parenthood

Needless to mention, motherhood is glorified both at the scriptural realm and also in popular culture wherein motherhood is the sole reason for a woman's existence. However, for Periyar motherhood and masculinity were social categories which need to be interrogated and if there exists true love between man and woman, then all responsibilities, except that of bearing a child should be equally borne by both. He lamented the fact that women were expected to desire jewellery and other adornment but never asked to exercise their mind power and value their intellect. Such cultural valorization of beauty and femininity were internalized by women who were then only praised for their physical fertility.³⁶ Motherhood was devised as a safe zone to harness women's desire. He linked the emphasis on motherhood to the emergence of private property and debunked the idea that motherhood was 'natural' for women. As the legality of the heir is crucial, it is vital to control women's bodies and hence women were forced into monogamous marriages. The triad of caste, private property and sexuality is the basis for the surveillance on women. Periyar argued that the biggest hindrance for women's autonomy was reproduction which made her dependent on men. The birth of the heir was essential not only to safeguard private property but also ensure a safe passage to heaven. Motherhood came under increasing pressure, for now it was significant for the reproduction of the patriarchal caste order in this world and also for its existence in the next as well.³⁷ His was one of the earliest formulations of conceptualizing brahmanical patriarchy. Further, he exhorted women to not depend on men for their own liberation. In his words, "Men's endeavour for the emancipation

³⁵V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai, op. cit., p. 378.

³⁶Kudi Arasu, 21 September 1946.

³⁷V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai, op. cit.

of women only perpetuates women's slavery and hampers their emancipation. The pretence of men that they respect women and that they strive for their freedom is only a ruse to deceive women. Have you ever seen anywhere a jackal freeing the hen of the lamb or the cat freeing the rats, or the capitalists freeing the workers?"³⁸ He was also self-reflexive and admitted candidly while writing the obituary of his first wife, Nagammai; he has not followed with Nagammai even 'one hundredth' of the ideas on women's liberation that he put forward.³⁹

It is essential to juxtapose Periyar's radical understanding of gender against the nationalist position which sought to make women more intelligent such that she will conduct her domestic affairs more skillfully. He rubbished Brahmanical notions of *kanyadan* (the gifting of the girl-child), which turned them into mere objects thus nullifying their subjectivity. The entire patriarchal edifice has reduced her self-worth to the servitude of marriage and the ideal of chastity. He was also aware of Malthusian arguments on population growth and urged women to learn about contraception which would help them to control their own bodies. Interestingly, Kudi Arasu carried the report of a survey conducted by an American University⁴⁰ and the translator argued that the university women were aware about birth control which is essential to plan one's life. Periyar wrote about the work of the Marie Stopes clinics and observed that childbirth should not be coerced and a condition to be endured rather, it's a matter of choice. He was adamant that childbirth led to women being enslaved to masculine social norms and frequently bearing children was detrimental for both men and women.⁴¹

Gradually, the movement fostered a new configuration of the marital world wherein the partners could formulate their marriage vows which spoke of respecting one another, which enabled women as equal partners with rights to property and power within the household, in short—an equivalent relationship. Women were free to leave abusive unions without the fear of any stigma. The caste prescriptions were ignored as also brahmanical rituals to consecrate marriages. The Self-Respect marriages could be dissolved and re-marriage was advocated for spouses, should they wish to separate or should one of them die. Further, these marriages were meant to free women from domestic tyrannies and the burden of unwanted and multiple pregnancies.⁴² After Independence, when C.N. Annadurai became the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu in 1967, he legalized the Self-Respect Marriages (Suyamariyathai) in 1968. It did away with the 'saptapadi', seven steps around the fire and brahmanical rituals. Simple ceremonies conducted in the presence of friends and families with the exchange of

³⁸Quoted in Sarah Hodges (2008). *Contraception, colonialism and commerce: Birth control in South India 1920-1940*, London: Routledge, p. 117.

³⁹Meena Kandawamy (Tr.) (2019). *Why were women enslaved*. Chennai: The Periyar Self-Respect Propaganda Institution, p. 14.

⁴⁰Kudi Arasu, 18 January 1931.

⁴¹Periyar (2012). *Women Enslaved*. (Tr) G. Aloysious, Critical Quest Publishers p. 7.

⁴²Viramani (2019). *Self-Respect marriage: Concept and history*, p. 45.

garlands and rings would be considered a valid marriage. In 2015, a Public Interest Litigation was filed before the Madras High Court to declare such marriages illegal. The Court dismissed the petition stating that Hindu rituals have been pluralist in nature and differs according to regional and cultural norms. The Self-Respect Marriages are not unconstitutional.⁴³

A Space of Her Own

One of the significant tropes of gendered utopias is the imagination of sheltered spaces wherein women can reflect and seek out new horizons. Pandita Ramabai conceived 'Mukti Sadan' and Begum Rokeya dreamt of 'Ladyland', zones where women could be free from the shackles of domesticity and fear of violence and exercise their agency. As the women of the Self-Respect movement travelled, became mobile and visible, they felt the need of their own space. As they debated on issues of caste, relevance of religion, etc., they felt a need to have an autonomous women's forum within the movement. There arose a demand to set up a centre where women of all communities would find space to follow their choices, even shelter them from unhappy marriages. They would learn to be economically independent. Many women were reluctant to work in mixed company and hesitant about the public domain. Such spaces would nurture women and provide a more enabling environment to them.

For a decade (1928-37) Kudi Arasu was a platform for men and women to espouse their radical views. There were critical commentaries on the veiling of women and whether it had any religious sanction. A sustained debate occurred on women's property rights, devadasi system, women's right to re-marriage, inter-caste marriages. There were translations from other journals describing the life of women in other countries. To illustrate: *Socialism and Women*;⁴⁴ one article argued that women are the original proletariat. Another author had apparently paid attention to the cooking tasks of women for the article wished for cooking chores to be made simpler. This would lighten women's burdens and they would have enough time and energy to educate their minds. The activist Neelavathi, who wrote the remarkable text, 'Women and Work' argued that women's work has been diminished by reducing it to merely reproduction. There is nothing about work that would make it essentially masculine. She also noted the dual nature of women's work, both in the domestic sphere and her work outside the home in various capacities. She wished that women also would be granted the dignity of labour thus questioning the very category of 'work' itself by arguing that it is not essentially male. Further she pointed out that women's workload has increased as they work beside men in all spheres—in factories, hospitals, tailoring, weaving, construction, vending and trading. Women were also doctors, teachers and journalists.⁴⁵ In yet another article, Neelavathi wrote eloquently on the horrors of

⁴³A. Subramani, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/self-respect-marriages-in-tamil-nadu-cant-be-declared-illegal-rules-madras-hc/articleshow/49725552.cms>, November 9, 2015. Accessed September 15, 2021.

⁴⁴Kudi Arasu, 15 November 1931.

⁴⁵V Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai, *op. cit.*, pp. 398-399.

untouchability and exhorted educated women to pick up the cudgels of reform and not live like frogs in the well. Women should never take the backseat when it concerns their own betterment.⁴⁶

The Self Respect women became adept in appropriating the vocabulary of the nationalist discourse. To illustrate: During the women's conference held under the aegis of the movement, Lakshmi Ammal gave an overpowering speech, "If men were to persist thus in not giving into women's demands for freedom and if they were to persist in their belief that women were their playthings' women will have no choice but to practice a policy of 'Non-cooperation' with respect to the men in their lives."⁴⁷ They cleverly linked the social with the political. Another activist, Minakshi tweaked the Gandhian technique of picketing liquor shops and those which sold foreign cloth. She exhorted women to ponder whether social or political freedom is more important for them. Women should offer satyagraha and picket the homes of the orthodox men who prevent any kind of reforms to better the lot of women.⁴⁸ It is indeed remarkable that the Self-Respect women could delineate the nuances of freedom and seek to create a gendered political domain.

Fissures in Utopia

Hence the Self-Respect movement sought to devalue the binaries of the inner and outer worlds. Many critiques had sought to fashion an utopia based on gender equality—Pandita Ramabai, Tarabai Shinde, Savitribai Phule, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, to name a few. Periyar sought to construct a radical epistemology to enable women to forge their subject-hood by articulating a novel universe based not on the myth of a glorious past but on a rational hermeneutics. However, certain policy initiatives from the 1930s onwards brought forth the latent patriarchal impulses of the movement and relegated women to a secondary position.

The gendered articulations of the Self-Respect movement encountered a huge challenge during the anti-Hindi agitations of the late 1930s. The Congress government in Madras Presidency decided to make the study of Hindi compulsory in the secondary schools under its jurisdiction in April 1938. This led to widespread protests and the emergence of language as the significant marker of identity. It also marked the beginning of Tamil nationalism as a mass movement. As argued by Sumathi Ramaswamy, language devotion in its pious, filial and erotic forms as an entry point into the study of Tamil linguistic nationalism, one that better explains why language (Tamil) was able to mobilize people from differing social, political, and religious and ideological locations in its cause.⁴⁹

Women also participated in the anti-Hindi agitation in large numbers through picketing, rallies, conferences and even going to prison but gradually a significant

⁴⁶K. Srilatha, op. cit., pp. 84-86.

⁴⁷Kudi Arasu, 11 May 1930.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Sumathi Ramaswamy (1997). *Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil India*. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 4-9.

transformation occurred. They were essentialized as mothers yoked to the service of Tamil nationalism, which was a masculine project.⁵⁰ Language itself was feminized as goddess, mother and maiden, with the motherhood image eventually becoming dominant with the ‘mother’ pleading, commanding, cajoling and appealing to her ‘sons’ to fight for ‘her’ honour.⁵¹ Thus, women’s individuality was subsumed under a larger narrative of Tamil devotion which privileged the maternal.⁵² Similar tropes were used during the Bengal Partition in 1905 and later during the Partition of the subcontinent in 1947 wherein the body of Mother India was being vivisected and she was desperately begging her sons to rise and unite in her defence. The gradual shift from caste to language as the sole signifier of identity during the Self-Respect movement meant that men were envisioned as discrete subjects and agents while women and their bodies became invested with a non-differentiated, universal meaning of motherhood.⁵³ A few decades earlier, women in the movement had actively engaged with the questions of caste-based inequalities and patriarchy and sought to create new epistemic regimes to create a counter narrative. Thus, the movement which sought to free women and their bodies from bearing witness to the integrity of the community, nation and race and to unsettle the naturalness of motherhood for women⁵⁴ began to marginalize their concerns. Women protestors were glorified as “mothers of the war against Hindi” while men were glorified as “heroes of the war against Hindi”.⁵⁵ The existing socioeconomic inequalities were glossed over under the overarching umbrella of Tamil nationalism which needed to confront the imposition of a hegemonic language.

The co-option of the movement within the patriarchal discourse of the anti-Hindi agitation has been explained by Anandhi S as the failure of the movement to instil a new anti-patriarchal consciousness among its followers as well as the uneven spread of anti-patriarchal consciousness within it.⁵⁶ Thus, the dormant patriarchal values reasserted itself when the suitable opportunity presented itself. The moral universe of the movement could not withstand the challenges posed by electoral politics. Periyar held very distinctive ideas on the notion of love and matrimony as left to the individual’s choice. He spoke on the concept of ‘free love’ which he observed during his visit to Russia. He pointed out that men and women living together without getting formally married was prevalent in Russia because the idea of private property was absent. Due to property and the worry of inheritance, we have laws related to legal heirs and inheritance in our society and families are forced to play this game.⁵⁷ One cannot help acquiescing with Urvashi Butalia when she pointed out that “the

⁵⁰V. Geetha. The story of a marriage: Being a tale of self-respect unions and what happened to them. www.academia.edu, accessed 15 January 2020.

⁵¹Sumathi Ramaswamy, *op. cit.*, pp. 110–112.

⁵²*Ibid.*, p. 188.

⁵³Uma Ganesan (2011). *Gender and caste: Self-respect movement in the Madras Presidency, 1925-1950*, Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Cincinnati, p. 187.

⁵⁴Refer V. Geetha, *The story of marriage*, *op. cit.*

⁵⁵Ganesan, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

⁵⁶Anandhi S, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

⁵⁷Periyar, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

same motherland which came to signify ‘home’ and ‘country’ for men had a different meaning for women. For Indian women, the process of nation-making was not one of finding an identity; rather it was simply one where old, existing patriarchies, old models of hierarchy and control, found new expression. Women were left very much where they were before—and perhaps even worse off.⁵⁸

In both public and private domains, Periyar foreground equality and mutual self-respect. However, today his persona has been reduced to an atheist and a smasher of idols and his radical ideas on women’s subjectivity have been sidelined. It is imperative that Periyar’s ideas on gender be widely debated in the public as there has been an increasing backlash on gendered freedoms. Despite the fact that political parties owing allegiance to the ideals of Periyar and the Self-Respect movement have been at the helm of affairs in Tamil Nadu for many decades, the annihilation of caste and patriarchy as an ideological project has been shelved. The Self-Respect Movement was renamed the Dravida Kazhagam in 1944. In 1949, some of his closest aides formed the Dravida Munetra Kazhagam as they wanted to enter the electoral fray. Though various welfare measures were passed for women, politics remained largely masculinised and women were relegated to the familiar tropes of mothers, wives and sisters. The actual political representation of women in politics is actually very less.⁵⁹ The brahmanical value system against which Periyar protested has gained ascendance. To illustrate, in 2005, during an interview to a Tamil magazine, an actor had commented that ‘no educated man should expect his wife to be a virgin...’. This led to vociferous protests that reference to live-in relationships as a norm was unacceptable, derogatory to women and against Tamil culture.⁶⁰ This underlines the moral panic female agency would invoke and the ideological bankruptcy of the political parties that claim to follow Periyar’s ideals as the latter failed to contest such narratives.

The state has also witnessed many honour killings,⁶¹ when young couples belonging to different caste groups have been killed by families for daring to break caste endogamy. The father of the young girl who was killed to redeem the family’s

⁵⁸Urvashi Butalia, “Mother India”, <http://www.newint.org/features/1996/03/05/mother/>
Accessed 15 February 2020.

⁵⁹The rival alliances led by the DMK and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam both fielded considerably fewer female candidates compared to the last state elections. The AIADMK went from 30 to 17 female candidates (nine of whom contested seats reserved for Scheduled Castes), and the DMK from 18 to 11 (six of whom contested in SC constituencies). The total number of women elected also fell—only three secured seats for the AIADMK and six for the DMK, in the 234-member assembly. Vignesh Karthik Kr and Pulari Meera Baskar, Towards Equal Terms: The way forward for the Dravidian parties is through increased women’s representation, <https://caravanmagazine.in/politics/women-dmk-aiadmk-tamil-nadu-election>,

⁶⁰A. Vaidyanathan, Khushboo pre-marital sex comments: All cases dismissed, April 29, 2010, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/khushboo-pre-marital-sex-comments-all-cases-dismissed-416539>

⁶¹Priya Ramani, ‘Evidence’ Kathir: making Dalit politics inclusive, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/evidence-kathir-making-dalit-politics-inclusive/article66329565>.
ece, January 7, 2023.

honour observed that ‘his caste is more important than god’.⁶² When Dalits seek to make use of constitutional provisions and ameliorate their conditions, they have been systematically targeted.⁶³ The state has remained a mute spectator to such heinous crimes. Ironically, Dalits have also adhered to such obnoxious customs. There was also a report of a kangaroo court being run in Thogarapalli panchayat wherein the community head of the Scheduled Caste village, who is also a DMK⁶⁴ union secretary levies fines on couples who marry for love.⁶⁵ Unfortunately, such discourses are becoming the norm elsewhere in the country also. About 40 students of a women’s college in Maharashtra’s Amravati district pledged to desist from “love marriage” on the eve of Valentine’s Day. They also pledged against giving or receiving dowry during marriage. The last line of the oath reads, “I am taking this oath for a strong and healthy India.”⁶⁶

Such statements circulating in the public domain reflect not only a sense of moral panic but also the gradual churning of a counter-revolution to counteract gendered equalities which visionaries like Periyar had envisaged. Unfortunately, the novel framework of the self-respect marriages are also limited to those who identify themselves as Hindu and not popular amongst other communities. For inter-faith couples, there is no legal recognition if they wish to marry in the self-respect fashion. The radical imagination and vocabulary of Periyar’s movement, especially where gender politics was concerned has diminished into a narrative wherein women are considered as unequal citizens. The humanist envisioning of Periyar for an egalitarian society is still a work in progress.

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Kavitha Muralidharan, Across Tamil Nadu, Caste Violence Has Increased During the Lockdown, Say Activists, <https://thewire.in/caste/tamil-nadu-caste-atrocities-lockdown>, 3rd May 2020, Accessed 15 June 2020.

⁶⁴Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, a political party which is based on Periyar’s values and thoughts

⁶⁵P.V. Sridivya, “Kangaroo Court puts Price on Union of Love”, *The Hindu*, New Delhi, 7 December 2022.

⁶⁶Vivek Deshpande, Day before Valentine’s Day: 40 college girls administered oath against love marriage, *The Indian Express*, February 15, 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/wont-do-love-marriage-amravati-students-made-to-take-oath-on-valentines-day-eve-6268226/#:~:text=About%2040%20students%20of%20a,or%20receiving%20dowry%20during%20marriage.>