

From Sati to Establishing the Tinnevelly Church: Women Empowerment and Social Reformation in Madhaviah's *Clarinda*

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Abstract

The Clarinda Church at Palayamkottai, Tirunelveli, Tamilnadu, South India, holds a history that is overlooked in regional historiography. It is built on the roots of early feminism and women empowerment when a woman named Clavirunda Bai of Tanjore, the widow of a Maratha Brahmin, was saved from the practice of Sati by an English Officer named Henry Lyttelton, who took her to Palamcottah (today's Palayamkottai) in the erstwhile Tinnevelly District of the Madras Presidency. Embracing the universal values of Christianity, Clavirunda Bai gets baptised by the German Protestant missionary Christian Friedrich Schwartz of the English Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK). Her name is registered in the Palamcotta Church Register of 1780 as Clorinda or Clarinda. She goes on to build a church, which is known to date by her name, offering solace to the desolate. Clarinda Church is known to be "the first Church erected in connection with the Tinnevelly Mission" (Caldwell). She is known for her service in the region by building schools and wells and mobilising women.

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Novelist A. Madhaviah fictionalises this historical account in his 1915 novel Clarinda: A Historical Novel. The present paper analyses the aspects of women empowerment and social reformation in the novel, where the protagonist escapes Sati and is empowered and empowers people through education.

Keywords: sati, clarinda church, history, women empowerment, social reformation

Introduction

Anantanarayanan Madhaviah's *Clarinda* is a historical novel that is written in the style of Victorian English novels, tracing the life of a cult figure in the history of the Protestant Church in the present-day Palayamkottai, Tirunelveli, in Tamil Nadu. The plot is set in the years spanning from 1746 to 1785 in pre-independence South India, especially in Tanjore and Palamcottah. The novel is set in the historical backdrop of the Maratha and Vijayanagara invasions. The narrative opens with the battle of St. Thome, also known as the battle of Adyar, which "marks a major leap in the First Carnatic War (1746-1748) that establishes early British dominance on the east coast of the Indian subcontinent" (Senega 21). "Madhaviah's life-long tirade against child marriage and the ill-treatment of widows in the Brahmin community is attributed to the traumatic impact on him of the death of his sister, 10 years older than him, at the age of 16 while being delivered of her first child," writes Viswanathan in *Frontline*.

Manic Senega, in her MA project under the guidance of Prof S. Prabahar of Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, makes a new historicist reading of the text, analysing the aspects of historicity and textuality in A. Madhaviah's *Clarinda*. Her observation on the life of Clarinda is worth quoting in the context of the present research problem of women empowerment and the eventual social reformation:

The novel intrinsically deals with a young widow, who falls a prey to child marriage, undergoes the seizure of her own dowry, and dodged sati in close call. Despite all the ordeal, Clarinda stands strong, voices against caste and gender discrimination and pioneers social reform and equality in a society that lagged in reformation. The story of Clarinda is the first of its kind that narrates the expedition of the widow who thrives and excels in a male chauvinistic Brahmin society. Clarinda is Madhaviah's woman champion who strives through all the odds and wins her place in the society despite being a woman and a widow in a society where women are locked inside in the name of custom and tradition. Clarinda becomes an inspiration to other women in the society to publicly defy the injustices committed on women. (Senega 16)

Clarinda is designated as "the mother of the Congregation of Tinnevely" (Dhivya 253) for her pioneering attempts in spreading Christianity and the social reforms that were associated with it. Waha considers that Madhaviah's *Clarinda* "promotes educational opportunities for Indian women and advocates involving Indian women themselves in that social reform work" (251).

Women's Social Status and Traditional Constraints in Historical Context

In the context of the period depicted in Madhaviah's narrative – the late 18th century – women were often confined to domestic roles and their autonomy was severely curtailed by patriarchal structures. Traditional practices such as child marriage, the prohibition of widow remarriage, and the dowry system were pervasive. High-status widows were expected to undergo *sati* (self-immolation) as a sign of honour and clan pride. Women were often denied education, and their social interactions were heavily regulated. The economic plight of many women, particularly those from lower castes, was dire, often involving poorly remunerated and sexually exploitative labour. The Devadasi system and the prohibition of the right to wear upper garments by women of lower castes add to this point.

***Sati*, the burning alive of widowed women**

Etymologically, “sati” means “chaste woman” or “good wife,” being derived from Hindi and Sanskrit sources (Madan). The practice of sati, where a widow is subjected to being burned along with the funeral pyre of her deceased husband, is deeply entrenched in the psyche of the people of pre-reformatory India and more so in that of the women. This is justified in the narrative as Madhaviah records the conversation between the womenfolk:

That is what my husband too said, and so he sent me to speak to you and advise you,” replied Sona Bai, pleased with her own superior wisdom and holy mission. “Young or old, there is nothing left in this world for a Brahmin wife after her lord’s death. You know you are accused of such horrible sins against your husband, rightly or wrongly, and you are forbidden even to minister to him on his death-bed. How can you better prove your own innocence, if you are indeed innocent,- the all-seeing God and your own heart can alone know the truth,—or expiate the sin, and above all earn for yourself a better birth and a happier fate hereafter, than by becoming a sati, and mounting his funeral pyre? (153)

The incident recounts how the women suppress themselves by reinstating the narrative of devotion to their husbands. Thus, the women themselves reinforce each other to suppress themselves in front of the men and the larger patriarchal system. Though sati is glorified by women themselves, the practice is not always voluntary; rather, the widow is forced to commit suicide by jumping into the funeral pyre of her husband (Roy 96). To rationality, it is an utmost display of “unparallel(ed) barbarity” (Senega 26). According to Roy, “The practice of ‘Satidah’ has undermined women’s right to life, liberty and survival. A woman was considered a person related only to her husband, whose existence was supposed to cease with the death of the husband” (96).

Lyttelton’s criticism of sati is an instance of Western rationality that aided the natives to ward off the inhuman superstitious practices that were at vogue during the pre-colonial era in India. Madhaviah records Lyttelton stating, “If you have no old maids, you have young widows doomed to life-long celibacy; and as for female,

chastity, I should say that such extraordinary safeguards are not very complimentary to your women. Worse even than infant-marriage, is the barbarous custom of *sati* which you have, and which is the greatest blot on your civilization” (81), which he utters in a conversation with a sanyasi who justifies the practices of Hinduism. The section serves as a clash between the West and the East in terms of the ideas of rationality. Clarinda’s reformatory attitude is pruned thanks to the ideals exemplified by Lyttelton.

Clarinda and the Genesis of the Tinnevelly Church

Being saved from performing *sati* by an English sepoy named Henry Lyttelton after the death of her husband at Tanjore, Clarinda (formerly Clavirunda Bai as per Madhaviah’s narrative, though in common discourse her original name is said to be Kokila) comes to Palamcottah with Lyttelton and is influenced by the ideals of Christianity. The transfer of Lyttelton to Palayamkottai was because of his providing refuge to Clavirunda despite her lot’s insistence to hand her over to them to be immolated. He was unable to formally marry her because of his contract with the English East India Company, which forbade marriage till the end of his service in the British army (Christadoss 11–13). Frykenberg notes of her character thus: “there can be no question of Clorinda’s high status, strong personality, personal affluence, and learning” (162), which entitles her to be called Rasa Clorinda (Royal Clarinda). When Christian Friedrich Schwartz visits Palamcottah in 1778, Clarinda approaches him for baptism, which he denies, stating her unconventional life with Lyttelton. Meanwhile, she carries on immense service to the locals of Palamcottah, and after repeated insistence, Schwartz agrees to baptise her. Later in 1785, the small cathedral built by Clarinda was consecrated by Schwartz, following which Clarinda organised social reformatory initiatives such as the establishment of the first school in Palayamkottai to educate the children, and other institutions to empower women. She also led the digging of two wells around the church, of which the earlier one is denoted as “*Pappathiammal kinaru*.” However, in a recent interview with the catechist of Clarinda church, it is noted that neither well is in use today (Robinson). Digging of wells has a history of caste discrimination associated with it, as people of lower castes were prohibited from drawing water from the wells used by upper castes. Clarinda’s wells were open to all regardless of caste and creed, explains the catechist.

Clarinda’s service to the upliftment of the people of Tinnevelly is selfless and dedicated to a higher cause of social reformation. Firming a strong foundation in the Protestant church of India, the narrative notes Clarinda’s service as follows:

Her charities increased, and she freely and generously spent the vast property Lyttelton had left her in relieving human suffering. With the growing success of her labours in the cause of Christianity, the absence of a Protestant Church at Palamcottah which had a considerable congregation, native and European, troubled her mind; and in the year 1783, she conceived the idea of supplying the desideratum at her own cost. Close to the spot where her beloved lay

buried, she built a small chapel, which exists to this day, and which was the first Protestant Church in what is now numerically the greatest Christian district in all India. (Madhavia 244)

Following the initial efforts of Clarinda, Schwartz encouraged the congregation of Tinnevely by sending the trained native missionary Satyanathan from Tanjore under whose guidance and the striving of the first Shanar Christian convert and catechist of Tinnevely David Sundaranandam, which resulted in mass conversions in view of social mobility and the formation of villages of refuge for protection from orthodox forces which resisted conversion to the new faith (Caldwell 55–122). David led a migration in 1799 to establish ‘Mudalur’, the First Town, which is “the first of a series of Christian colonies that served as ‘Towns of Refuge’ for the converts,” writes Dhivya in her doctoral thesis on Protestantism in Tirunelveli District (10–11).

Missionary-led Social Reformation and Empowerment for Women

A core tenet of missionary work was the promotion of female education, viewed as essential for individual upliftment and societal transformation. Clarinda’s initiative in starting the first school in Palayamkottai is an early testament to this, as she focused on female literacy. Institutions like the Sarah Tucker Training School for women (1858) and the Sarah Tucker College (1895), the first college for women in the Madras Presidency, provided crucial educational avenues. These institutions of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) played a vital role in the empowerment of women besides establishing other institutions that led to social reformation such as the founding of a printing press in 1847, the CMS Industrial School in 1854, the Palamcottah High School in 1867, the Usborne Memorial School in 1878, the Church Missionary College in 1880, the Palamcottah School for the Blind in 1890, and the Florence Sainson School for the Deaf in Palamcottah in 1895 (Daugherty 75).

Conclusion

Leading the Protestant Christian church in early Tirunelveli for a woman who overcame two of the time’s greatest hurdles for women empowerment – child marriage and sati – is indeed an inspirational account to be passed on to generations. Being an empowered woman herself, by breaking the societal chains that confine women to kitchens and wells, Clarinda kick-started social reformation through the establishment of schools and training institutes, which remains a significant milestone in the history of women’s rights in India.

Senega’s comment on Madhavia’s recording of the social reformatory movements in pre-independent India is a succinct encapsulation of the relevance of his writings:

Madhavia as a social writer records the social, historical, regional, and religious happenings, changes and transformation that take place in the society. He champions women’s rights through literature and has used his literary talents to help change people’s attitudes towards the misogynistic customs, enhancing the humanism of Tamil society. His contemporary society

suffers from several social evils like female illiteracy, child marriage, sati, disapproval of widow remarriage, polygamy, untouchability, gender discrimination, and inequalities on the basis of caste. He is a radical with profound distaste for the irrational, pseudo-religious customs prevalent in upper caste society. He problematises these evils in his works and by doing that he tries to create reformation, and to bring social changes. His brilliant critiques of the hypocrisies of Hindus and Christians, Indians and Westerners has won him a wide circle of readers. He chooses the novel as an ideal medium to articulate his views on humanism and gender equity. He urges that greater attempts should be made to provide finer system of education for women, the non-elite classes and for the lower castes. (12-13)

Reformative movements by means of sensitising the consciousness of people through literature, art, journalism and other media result in political activism leading to reformative measures. In the case of sati, the reformative voice of Raja Ram Mohan Roy culminated in the Bengal Sati Regulation of 1829 and the Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act of 1987, which criminalised even the glorification of sati. Therefore, materialisation of reforms is motivated by illuminating the masses through education, which bestows empowerment on them.

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