

Is Pantry, an Attribute of Subjugation or Liberation or Royalty? A Study of Lakshmi Kannan's "Islanders"

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Abstract

Lakshmi Kannan's story, "Islanders" deals with Pangajam, the upper-class home maker, who toils from dawn to dusk to take care of her family—Sitalakshmi Ammal, mother-in-law, Chitra, her child and her husband, Raghu. Amidst her routine life, she rarely finds time to breathe and very alert about running the home. She could be called as a traditional Indian woman in one sense and she is the mother to all the victims on the other. She sacrifices all day and night to lift up her family. She is adored by the family well. Is she oppressed in the household? Does she enjoy the real freedom as a woman in the household? or Is she conscious of her royalty? This paper addresses all issues.

Key Words: *home maker, traditional Indian woman, oppressed, freedom, sacrifices.*

Lakshmi Kannan's story, "Islanders" set during the rainy day, narrates the story of an indentured home maker, Pangajam who is presented as a stereotypical Indian woman who is housed on the fourth floor. The story exposes the norms of patriarchy and also the direct subjugation of woman in the domestic arena. Her world confines with preparing coffee for her mother-in-law, her husband and taking care of her daughter. She, in her mother-in-law's words, is "so capable and resourceful" (16). Her husband perceives her as "one can count on her for skilful planning, an organized way of working and good execution too" (16).

Pangajam is presented as a woman who possesses all the good qualities of a traditional wife. Usually, the daughters-in-law in the Indian households are not cordial with their mothers-in-law for a number of reasons. One of them could be stated in the patriarchal nation like India that there is a belief in many households that the boy child is regarded as the gift of God who has the quality and sole rights to continue their family line. The boy child is considered as an asset of the family. But what happens at Pangajam's household is different. Her mother-in-law is very cordial, cares for her grandchildren very well. As a lovable daughter-in-law, Pangajam supports her mother-in-law when she admonishes her

grandchildren “your *patti* (grandmother) has been arguing with both of you only for your own good” (15).

Pankajam’s residence becomes an island due to continuous rain. The life of all the people is completely shattered: “there were screaming mothers, swirling waters, old people, sick people, just about everybody who perished along with their huts, children cried out in hunger, their cheeks sucked in . . . If this is a reality called flood there was another reality called death” (17). While mulling over this, she reacts with abhorrence: “*Why do I have this coffee, a routine, totally avoidable 11 a.m. beverage?*” (17).

The dreadful effect of the rain is displayed as “bodies of the dead floated on the waters. Thirsty children furtively drank up the dirty water . . . Thirty-two people from a district vanished without a trace, many of them were mothers of children, some were fathers, others were the elderly ones, their sons, daughters and other relations” (17). Pankajam’s motherly love is revealed through her mother-in-law “is there a way I can become a mother to all those children? Can I become a daughter or a daughter-in-law to some of them?” (17). To fulfill the needs of her family members, she “waded through knee-deep waters to shop for all things . . . She has gathered and stacked up the pantry with enough grocery and good to last for fifteen days” (17). Raghu, her husband, appreciates her effort: Like Noah in the Bible who stacks up his Ark, you’ve also stacked up our pantry” (18).

Pankajam retires in the pantry after her work. Her story reveals that the womenfolk of Tamil Nadu took refuge “in a dark, stifling room . . . It probably gave them a space and a transient freedom in which they could smell their own thoughts and perhaps relieves the futility of their dreams of liberation” (18). Lakshmi Kannan not only renders the situation in which “one sees a fake sense of freedom in the atmosphere of middle-class homes. Nobody expects or wishes women to stay cooped up any more in the pantry or the kitchen” (18) but also highlights the place of woman from pantry to the living room. Woman’s freedom is curtailed very much even in the living room.

Pankajam thinks that the “pantry is always an upper middle-class woman’s smelly secret” (19). She enquires herself of an alternative space in which she could enjoy her freedom: “*Why don’t I think of a pantry a woman’s private affair, or maybe, her personal secret? No, it’s a bit of both! It’s a private, odorous interior, but it’s a shameful secret*” (19). She earns a huge approval and appreciation for filling up the pantry from her family.

When she suggests the idea of offering cooked food for the surviving people, she resembles the mother to all humanity. But, she is looked upon by Raghu, her husband scornfully. He acquires the practical reality and reminds her of her role in the family: “It’s

true, floods make for a cruel reality. But the admirable way you've taken care of your family the way you tend your children and all of us in fact, doesn't that also strike you as another reality" (20). Listening to the reaction of her husband, she starts counting numbers to reduce her anger and "all her secrets of the wheat, the milk powder and other things laughed at her under the bright light" (21). She hides her originality and controls anger. She has only the pantry to find peace and solace.

She takes refuge in the pantry. When Raghu visits the pantry, she bursts out with anger: "Lunch, dinner, it's eating and more eating all through the day! Don't people have any other . . ." (21). She thinks of giving them something to eat. Here, her attitude is like optimistic and finds fault with her husband for fulfilling only his needs and not caring others. Her pantry "hid her dirty secret" (21).

The first part of the story projects Pangajam as a submissive and responsible homemaker. In the middle, she cares for the flood-victims, and towards the end, all she imagines disappear all of a sudden and her conscience awakes her identity and she is reminded of "her status as an upper-class homemaker" (22). All her thoughts revolve around "the victims" of the flood. Her imagination and thoughts end with herself, depicting her hypocritical attitude.

Pangajam is given no space to express her views and acquires "transient freedom." She is treated as the "other." Judith Butler, in her *Gender Trouble* recalls Simone de Beauvoir's opinion: "one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one" (1). She conceals her inner thoughts of liberation and becomes a conventional homemaker. She enjoys freedom only by carrying out the household duties and fulfilling the expectations of the family. She is not worried about her present status. She is not conscious of the oppression she faces at home. In spite of member in the orthodox family, she restricts herself by not exposing her original behavior to the members of the family. She is very obedient to her husband, is cordial to her mother-in-law and lovable and caring with her children. Apart from these, she is aware her royalty. Therefore, she could only imagine the suffering of others and unable to understand and realize them. She lacks the first-hand knowledge about others because she always stays away from the people who reside around her. Her status in the society does not permit her think beyond her limit and comfort. The patriarchal society who lives in also curtails her role as a liberated woman. All these features refer to her hypocritical outlook of the upper-class homemaker.

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