

***The Conflation of Public and Private Spheres into  
“Womanspace” in Sarah Joseph’s Writings: Through  
Histories of Women-writing***

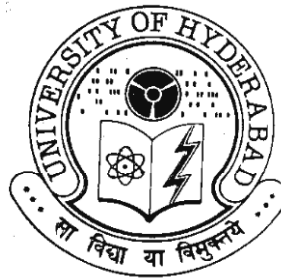
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## **Conceptual Terrains: The Public, the Private and “Womanspace”**

One of the major stereotypical images associated with Keralam is the image of an educated and emancipated woman. Along with this comes the assumption that women in Keralam are quite out-going and that the public sphere is accessible to them. This is the image that is deliberately constructed and circulated. However, many recent reports have inquired into this question and have found that the public sphere in Keralam is still hostile to women.<sup>1</sup> The dominant public sphere, which had accommodated women (sometimes for brief periods) in its activities at different historical junctions, also suspended their involvement later.<sup>2</sup> It carefully projects these historical junctures as highlights of its progressive aspect. Women’s movements had a major role in puncturing the exclusiveness of the public sphere, not just in Keralam but in most societies. Writings by women have been largely influential in this activity and these writings have greatly reflected the attempts on the part of women to access the public sphere. As a writer who has been writing for the past four decades and as an important proponent of the feminist movement in Keralam, Sarah Joseph’s writings map these developments in history as well as their influence on her.

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<sup>1</sup> Many articles and reports carried by periodicals in the past two decades and many recent research studies point to the kind of hostility and exclusion women face in the various public spaces of Keralam.

<sup>2</sup> The nationalist movement and reform movements had women’s involvement to a large extent. However, women were treated as symbols of culture and tradition within these movements. These moments of involvement and activism from the part of women were projected later as a gender-inclusive nature of the movement. Partha Chatterjee speaks of how Indian nationalism resolved its women’s question after attaining independence. I will be discussing it later in the chapter in relation to women and the public sphere in India.

This study, “The Conflation of Public and Private Spheres into ‘Womanspace’ in Sarah Joseph’s Writings: Through Histories of Women-writing,” tries to examine the conflation of public and private spheres in the wake of the women’s writing in Keralam, especially in the works of Sarah Joseph. I see her work as reflecting the steady evolution of women’s writing as a counterpublic<sup>3</sup> against the backdrop of the dominant public sphere over a period of time. I discuss the history and formation of this space with reference to important moments in the histories of women-writing in Keralam and use Sarah Joseph’s works to demonstrate the complex workings of this space, which I choose to designate as “womanspace” for critical purposes. The study focuses on how women-writing became a multilogue that voiced itself against the privileged male-dominated public sphere and the ways in which it has had impact on a contemporary woman writer in order to discuss the current implications of this space. Womanspace, formed as a critique to the dominant public sphere, is constituted mainly of privileged and middleclass women. Therefore, it has proved repressive in some contexts that involve caste and minority issues, and thereby giving rise to other counterpublics.

As a reader of Malayalam literature, I began to take note of Sarah Joseph’s writings during the 1990s. I remember that unlike the writings of other contemporary writers, these stories constantly reminded me of my identity as a woman. In addition, her writings

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<sup>3</sup> I borrow this term from Nancy Fraser, who uses it to denote the public spaces shared by non-dominant groups and which functions as critiques of the dominant public spheres. She uses it as “subaltern counterpublics” to suggest such spaces shared by women, working class, etc. in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe against the bourgeois public sphere. I avoid the use of “subaltern” here, considering the new dimensions of the term where the validity of socially privileged middle class women being included in “subaltern” is questioned. Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text* 25.26 (1990): 61.

also gave me a sense of the history of female characters and of writings by women who have been always there, almost neglected, and therefore form part of a discontinuous tradition. It was uncomfortable at least in the beginning to be reminded of my gender identity and the long-forgotten women characters as I was trained to look at literary texts as mere products of a certain aesthetic sense and imagination. Like many other women who “had to go out” and interact in public spaces, I started identifying with Sarah Joseph’s stories, that specifically dealt with women’s issues. Her writings marked spaces that were occupied by women and their current implications, thereby offering a critique of the dominant society and the spaces owned by it.

With the publication of her first novel, *Alahayude Penmakkal* (1999), as well as her other short story collections, Sarah Joseph became an iconic woman writer by 2000. Mainstream writers and critics who had dismissed her writings as banners of feminist ideology, accepted her as a writer of literary calibre. Even those who appear averse to the very notion of women-writing, accept Sarah Joseph as an accomplished writer as well as an icon of women-writing. Her later writings became more focussed on identities, going beyond gender to discussions of class, caste and religious identities within gender identities, making me think about the multiple identities that one has to carry. Yet, the possible questions of authenticity and the implications of the portrayals of “the other” made me feel uneasy about her writings, even while it gave insights about my own identity. She was criticised by new groups—socially less privileged groups—those for whom Sarah Joseph as an activist and writer claimed to work/write for. These critiques problematised the “authenticity” and “legitimacy” of an upper caste privileged writer



cum activist articulating complexities of caste, class and religious minorities. They helped me sort out my own unease with the writings of Sarah Joseph. They also enabled me to problematise the way in which I related to Sarah Joseph's writings and the gendered identity presented in them.

In spite of these very important critiques, I believe that Sarah Joseph's contribution to Malayalam Literature as a writer who fought for a space for women and their writings—as a mainstream writer who articulated issues of caste, gender and religious identity—ought to be recorded. Sarah Joseph's interventions in literature underscore the importance of re-inventing a history of women-writing. Her writings, apart from other issues, deal with the complexities of the public/private dichotomy. It is very important to know the kinds of reconfigurations and conflations of spaces that occur in the writings of a woman writer who herself occupies different spaces and roles like a teacher, writer, academician, activist and, a woman who carries out her domestic roles. These are the reasons why I feel that Sarah Joseph's work ought to be studied in its complexity and with its “problems.”

This chapter looks at the theoretical terrains of the public/private dichotomy and its development over the years, which offer a basis to the understanding of women writing and feminism as counterpublic spaces. Here, I discuss the liberal political notion of public/private spheres, the criticism on the Habermasian framework by Western feminist scholars, the public/private, spiritual/material, inner/outer dichotomy used by the postcolonial theorists in the context of the Indian nationalist movement, and the re-

ordering of social space in relation to gender. Both the feminist and postcolonial streams enable the study to come up with a framework, as the former gives a feminist perspective on the dichotomy and the latter gives the perspective of a postcolonial, gendered, and multi-ethnic subject. The womanspace I discuss here is the conceptual space that arises in women's writing as a result of constant negotiations between the private and public spheres.

Women's writing in Keralam, which emerged as a result of colonial modernity and women's education, was a major breakthrough in accessing the male-dominated public sphere. One reason could be the fact that the act of writing does not require one to make any public appearances; in other words, it can be done even while physically confined to the private sphere. However, a certain amount of education and social agency is quite essential to become a writer. The public/private dichotomy generally evokes the notion that men belong to the public sphere and women to the private sphere. This leads to the assumption that women's writing is all about the private sphere or personal life. I identify women's writing as a counterpublic by looking at how at different junctures it negotiates with the private and public spheres, challenging the dominant public sphere. This negotiation happens as women's writing tries to bring private matters into the public space and vice versa. The study, while focusing on the conflation of the public/private spheres in the writings of women from mostly middle-class backgrounds, also offers a critique of it in relation to subaltern perspectives.

The public/private dichotomy in socio-political theory evidently has its origin in Western political thought. Many a time, one would find objections from academic circles while using theoretical frames of Western origin to study a research problem. But I believe that it is important to study and contextualize Western political notions of democracy, politics and citizenship through the colonial experience of the Occident as this approach also explains the current implications of most of the theoretical frames in a postcolonial context. In its liberal political sense, the public/private dichotomy equates the public with the “masculine” and the private with the “feminine.” This spatial differentiation is also reflected in literature. It is conceded that women’s writing, especially early writings by women, deal with the private domain, as different from male writers who articulated their political/social concerns through literature. The basis of the concept of the public and the private could be traced back to Hobbes <sup>4</sup> and Rousseau,<sup>5</sup> where both attempt to explain the origin of the legitimacy of government and the State.<sup>6</sup> The concept has been restructured and rearticulated over the years. However, Habermas’ theorization on this concept is the usual point of departure in contemporary discussions. Critiques of Habermas, framed by feminist scholars and postcolonial theorists, show us the exclusionary frames of the concept. The concept also maps the changes brought in by the gradual co-option of women into civil society. This could also be viewed as one of the more important theories that reflect the changes in the social contract and also one which problematises the gendered nature of political and civil rights.

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas Hobbes was a 17<sup>th</sup> century British philosopher. His work *Leviathan* is believed to have laid the foundation of Western political philosophy from the perspective of the social contract theory.

<sup>5</sup> Rousseau was one of the most influential thinkers of 18<sup>th</sup> century European enlightenment. His major work on political philosophy is *The Social Contract*.

<sup>6</sup> Nick Crossley, *Key Concepts in Critical Social Theory* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2003) 209.

Almost all theorizations on the public/private are derived from the Habermasian concept of the public sphere, in which the public sphere denotes political and social activities under the overall jurisdiction of the government and the State, and the private sphere signifies the realm of the household, of home, and of personal or family relationships.<sup>7</sup> Habermas' work concerns the rise and fall of the 18<sup>th</sup> century bourgeois public sphere of Western Europe and relates readily to problematizing the public sphere. He defines the public sphere as "a sphere which mediates between society and State, in which the public organizes itself as a bearer of public opinion."<sup>8</sup> The bourgeois public sphere, according to Habermas, works as a forum to influence the decisions of the State authority and to regulate civil society.<sup>9</sup> He refers to the private sphere only as the other half of the dichotomy. Another important 20<sup>th</sup> century political theorist who has worked on the public sphere is the German-Jewish, Hannah Arendt. Arendt's view too lacks a feminist approach on the issue. Her approach elucidates the way in which men achieved a new form of political self through action, in the context of the French revolutionary public sphere. Arendt also does not speak about the way in which women were excluded from public activities and denied their rights.<sup>10</sup> Landes, while examining Arendt's contribution, contends that a democratic, feminist reconstruction of the public-sphere theory needs to take account of the gendered construction of embodied subjectivities within both public and private life. In her work *On Human Condition*, Arendt draws on

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<sup>7</sup> Nick Crossley, *Key Concepts in Critical Social Theory* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2003) 209.

<sup>8</sup> Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into the Category of Bourgeois Society* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1989) 49.

<sup>9</sup> Civil society, a composition of civic and social organizations, is believed to be the basis of a society as opposed to the structures of state and institutions of market. Recent researches reveal the exclusionary frames of civil society and public sphere.

<sup>10</sup> Seyla Benhabib, "Models of Public Space: Hannah Arendt, the Liberal Tradition, and Jurgen Habermas," *Feminism, the Public and the Private*, ed. Joan B. Landes (Oxford: OUP, 1998) 66.

the Aristotelian distinction of the *oikos* (the private realm of the household) from the *polis* (the public realm of the political community), and argues that matters of labour, economy and the like properly belong to the former, not the latter. The emergence of necessary labour, the private concerns of the *oikos*, into the public sphere—what Arendt calls “the rise of the social” has for her the effect of destroying the properly political, by subordinating the public realm of human freedom to the concerns of mere animal necessity.<sup>11</sup>

One can notice that most of the political philosophers who wrote on the social contract theory were obsessed with idealising the public sphere and failed to crack the gendered nature of it. Even when the dichotomy is between the public and the private, most of these theorizations focus on the public sphere, leaving the private sphere unexplored. The private sphere was defined against the public sphere. However, not speaking about the private sphere also makes a statement about the gendered nature of society. Habermas’ emphasis on an ideal, democratic, accessible and non-state-dominated sphere of public life, and Arendt’s version of a political life that ensures equality, freedom and novelty, offer two perspectives that address the split between the two spheres. The split between public and private life in modern society, which has been addressed by both Habermas and Arendt in different ways, has become central to feminist analysis. Neither of them speaks of the exclusion of women from public life, or examines the functioning of gender difference.

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.iep.utm.edu/a/arendt.htm>

One way of dealing with the idealised public sphere and the much neglected private sphere for feminist theorists is to deconstruct the idealist public sphere by identifying its exclusionary frames. Seyla Benhabib critiques the rigid, gendered boundary established by Arendt between the public and the private, as well as the masculinist and class implications of the public space. Habermas' model of discursive politics operates to reinstate the public/private boundary that has led to the exclusion of women. Benhabib argues that a theory of the public sphere must take into account difference—especially the differences in the experiences of male and female subjects in all domains of life.<sup>12</sup> Geoff Eley observes that exclusionary operations were essential to liberal public spheres in Western Europe as this public sphere was fostered by “civil society.”<sup>13</sup> Gender exclusions became natural as women were never part of civil society during that time. Eley suggests that the public sphere was a masculinist ideological notion that functioned to legitimate an emergent form of class rule. This connection between civil society and the public sphere in Western societies explains the idealizations of the public sphere. Scholars like Joan B. Landes, Mary Ryan, Geoff Eley and Nancy Fraser contend that Habermas' account idealizes the liberal public sphere. They argue that, although in theory the constituent institutions of the bourgeois public sphere were accessible to all, it was constituted by a number of significant exclusions.

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<sup>12</sup> Seyla Benhabib, “Models of Public Space: Hannah Arendt, the Liberal Tradition, and Jürgen Habermas,” *Feminism, the Public and the Private* ed. Joan B. Landes (Oxford: OUP, 1998) 72.

<sup>13</sup> Geoff Eley, “Nations, Publics, and Political Cultures: Placing Habermas in the Nineteenth Century,” *Culture, Power, History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory*, eds. Nicholas B. Dirks et al (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993) 310-312.

Joan Landes contends gender as the key axis of exclusion by arguing that the bourgeois public sphere in France was constructed deliberately in opposition to a more woman-friendly salon culture that was stigmatized as “artificial,” “effeminate,” and “aristocratic.”<sup>14</sup> Her essay, “The Public and the Private Sphere: A Feminist Reconsideration,” surveys many of the questions opened up by a critical feminist engagement with Habermas’ work from the standpoint of the gendered development of public and private life in eighteenth-century France. She argues:

Habermas overlooks the strong association of women’s discourse and their interests with ‘particularity,’ and conversely the alignment of masculine speech with truth, objectivity, and reason. Thus he misses the masquerade through which the (male) particular was able to posture behind the veil of the universal.<sup>15</sup>

Fraser suggests that Habermas failed to study “non-liberal”, “non-bourgeois” public spheres even in the context in which he studied it.<sup>16</sup> Mary Ryan’s study shows that there were elite bourgeois women involved in constructing a counter civil society of alternative woman-only voluntary associations ingeniously using the names of domesticity and motherhood for public activity. (61) Ryan also notes that, for some less privileged women, access to public life came through participation in supporting roles in male-dominated working class protest activities. Such revisionist historiographies show that there were a host of competing counterpublics including nationalist publics, popular

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<sup>14</sup> Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text* 25.26 (1990): 59.

<sup>15</sup> Joan B. Landes, “The Public and the Private Sphere: A Feminist Reconsideration,” *Feminism, the Public and the Private* (Oxford: OUP, 1998) 142.

<sup>16</sup> Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy” *Social Text* 25.26 (1990): 60.

peasant publics, elite women's publics, and working class publics contemporaneous with the bourgeois public. The relations between bourgeois publics and these "other" publics were always "conflictual". (61) Fraser intervenes:

I propose to call these subaltern counterpublics in order to signal that they are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs. The counterpublics emerge in response to exclusions within dominant publics, they help expand discursive space. (67)

It is interesting to note the conceptual difference of the public/private dichotomy in Liberal and Republican political argument. In Liberal political thinking, privacy is associated with freedom. Liberals defend the individual's right to privacy against interference by other persons or the state. Contrary to this, Republicans consider the private to be hidden as they associate it with the body and its needs. At the same time, they associate the public with freedom or activities for a common good.<sup>17</sup> These two traditions are important as feminism has borrowed from both these traditions, without agreeing with any of the propositions completely. These contradictory propositions have helped feminism to unfold the complexities associated with the public and private to some extent. Feminism proposes to focus political attention on the private sphere and challenges the tradition of keeping the body and sexuality hidden from view. Feminism, by advocating contact between "private" and "public", upsets the dichotomous nature of the two spheres.

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<sup>17</sup> Joan B. Landes, ed. "Introduction," *Feminism, the Public and the Private* (Oxford: OUP, 1998) 1.



As a further step to focusing on the exclusionary frames of the idealised public sphere, feminist scholars turned their attention towards the private sphere. Most of the theorizations on the private sphere have emerged as a result of this. Women's being confined to the private sphere in most modern societies, makes feminist theory inevitably concern itself with the public/private dichotomy. However, the involvement of feminist theory and feminist movements with the liberal political notion of public/private becomes prominent in second wave feminism<sup>18</sup> of the West, with its slogan "the personal is political" (1). This idea challenged the conventional notions of the domestic sphere, family, and personal life. The interventions were essentially different from that of first wave feminism<sup>19</sup> and its interventions to public/private spheres. First wave feminism recognized the significance "in bringing about a change from 'private' to 'public' patriarchy, via the struggle for the vote, for access to education and the professions, to have legal rights of property ownership, rights in marriage and divorce and so on."<sup>20</sup> Therefore, the struggle marks a shift from private confinement to the accessing of public spaces and rights. Second wave feminism marked the private sphere as a site of sexual inequality, unpaid work, and discontent. Betty Friedan in her landmark work, *The Feminine Mystique*, records the problem of ideal housewives of the post Second World War period in the United States and other advanced industrial societies as a "problem that

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<sup>18</sup> Second wave feminism refers to a period of feminist activity which emerged in the 1960s and lasted through the 1970s.

<sup>19</sup> First wave feminism refers to a period dated to include pre-nineteenth century activities concerning the rights of women.

<sup>20</sup> Jane Pilcher and Imelda Whelehan, eds. *Fifty Key Concepts in Gender Studies* (London: Sage Publications, 2004) 52-53.

has no name.”<sup>21</sup> A woman’s multiple roles as wife, mother, sexual companion, worker, and a political subject, disturbs the definite dichotomous nature of the public/private divide. Feminist scholars who have addressed the public/private dichotomy regard feminism as having made an important contribution towards a more egalitarian private and public sphere, by giving public utterance to women’s private problems that do not have names. Joan B. Landes points out that although women and feminists are always assumed as “preoccupied with personal life,” it is feminism that has contributed to the theory and practice of a more robust and democratic public space. “As the slogan, ‘The Personal is Political’ attests, a feminist movement moves in two directions, placing the gendered organization of both public and private space at the centre stage.”<sup>22</sup>

Second wave feminism’s focus on the “personal” brought special attention to the domestic sphere, issues like marital disharmonies, domestic labour, women’s sexuality, home as a space, etc. Men’s remunerated labour was juxtaposed with women’s unpaid domestic labour. Lynne Walker distinguishes domestic labour from men’s labour as follows:

The so-called ‘ideal divide’ which separated the legitimate spheres of men and women was deeply drawn between the public (masculine) world of remuneration,

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<sup>21</sup> Betty Freidan, “The Problem that has no Name,” *Making Sense of Women’s Lives: An Introduction to Women’s Studies*, eds. Lauri Umanski and Michelle Plott (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000) 158.

<sup>22</sup> Joan B. Landes, ed. “Introduction,” *Feminism, the Public and the Private* (Oxford: OUP, 1998) 1.

work and recognition and the private (domestic) realm of home and family responsibilities which were undertaken for love rather than money.<sup>23</sup>

This called for more attention to the domestic sphere, which became synonymous with the private sphere. The focus on the domestic sphere placed the white/middle class woman at the centre of discussion, and to an extent failed to address other issues of identity like race and class that are involved. Davidoff speaks of the power relations within the domestic sphere—between husband and wife, husband and servants, wife and servants—to explore different dimensions of power.<sup>24</sup> However, the domestic sphere remained as a site of multiple oppressions. It also represented a site that is subordinate to men's spaces in spite of the politicization. Davidoff suggests that the fact that women's roles as nurturers and caretakers continue to be central to feminine identity although many middle class women could do away with much of such manual work with hiring domestic help, amounts to the subordination of domestic sphere.<sup>25</sup>

The social contract theorist, Carole Pateman, criticizes the arguments of Habermas and other political theorists of the past for assuming the exclusion of women from politics, and regarding them and their confinement as “natural” subordinates to the domestic sphere. Pateman proposes that the social contract was a fraternal contract, from which women were completely excluded. According to her, “the meaning of the individual and

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<sup>23</sup> Lynne Walker, “Home and Away: The Feminist Remapping of Public and Private Space in Victorian London,” *New Frontiers of Space, Body and Gender*, ed. Rosa Ainsley (London: Routledge, 1998) 65.

<sup>24</sup> Leonore Davidoff, “Mastered for life: Servant and Wife in Victorian and Edwardian England,” *Journal of Social History* (Summer 1974): 406-426.

<sup>25</sup> Leonore Davidoff, “Regarding Some ‘Old Husbands’ Tales’: Public and Private in Feminist History,” *Feminism, the Public and the Private* ed. Joan B. Landes (Oxford: OUP, 1998) 172.

social contract depend upon women and the sexual contract.”<sup>26</sup> Such feminist interventions have helped later theorists to engage with the private sphere which include one’s domestic, personal, and sexual backgrounds. Pateman analyses women’s citizenship in modern welfare states from the perspective of the patriarchal division between public and private life. She finds faults with the leading theorists of democracy for ignoring the sexual division of labour, along with women’s dependent status. She says: “They treat the public world of paid employment and citizenship as if it can be divorced from the private sphere.”<sup>27</sup>

Leonore Davidoff also addresses the construction of masculine and feminine identities with the institutional development of separate spheres. Focusing broadly on nineteenth-century England, she proposes that gendered notions of public and private also interact with the institutions of private property and the market, as well as with notions of rational individualism. Davidoff charts the gendered creation of various public domains that have the rational man at the centre and the embodied woman at the periphery. Observing that the masculine domination of the public was never unproblematic, she calls attention to nineteenth-century British women’s participation in the semi-public realm of “the social” as charity workers or volunteers, and their roles as feminist political activists. Here, we can see how women subverted their womanly roles to extend their space as charity workers and volunteers to access public spaces. At the same time, these interventions were not completely public or political in nature. The above theoretical interventions

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<sup>26</sup> Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988) 221.

<sup>27</sup> Carole Pateman, “The Patriarchal Welfare State,” *Feminism, the Public and the Private* ed. Joan B. Landes (Oxford: OUP, 1998) 247.

suggest that the public/private dichotomy is no longer used strictly as a binary. Fraser argues there are several more senses of privacy and publicity in playing this binary:

“Publicity” for example, can mean 1) state-related; 2) accessible to everyone; 3) of concern to everyone; and 4) pertaining to a common good or shared interest. Each of these corresponds to a contrasting sense of privacy. In addition, there are two other senses of privacy just hovering below the surface here: pertaining to private property in a market economy; and pertaining to intimate domestic or personal life, including sexual life. (71)

All these interventions demystify the Habermasian notion of the public/private dichotomy and recommend the democratisation of public/private spheres. Sherry Ortner opines that the general notion of linking women’s associations with the domestic context amounts to their identification with the lower order of social and cultural organization.<sup>28</sup> She states that until the symbolic structures of gender are dismantled, achieving equality in public and private spheres will not solve the problem. She suggests that democratizing these two spheres will not place the woman on par with the man, as even in the private sphere, the man assumes a superior position to the woman. Marilyn Lake points to an interesting contradiction between male and female views of citizenship, where male citizens expect the State to facilitate their engagement in public life while resisting interference with their assumed authority in the private domain.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Sherry B. Ortner, “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture,” *Feminism, the Public and the Private* ed. Joan B. Landes (Oxford: OUP, 1998) 27-33.

<sup>29</sup> Marilyn Lake, “The Inviolable Woman: Feminist Conceptions of Citizenship in Australia, 1900-1945,” ed. Joan B. Landes *Feminism, the Public and the Private* (Oxford: OUP, 1998) 226-231.

The historical and cultural contexts in each society reveal transformations in gendered contents of public and private life. Modern oppositional movements like feminism, postcolonialism, subaltern studies and other forms of identity politics have contributed to the complex historical, symbolic and practical effects of the organization of public and private life. None of these merge these two spheres but modify the dominant version by analysing the compositions of these two realms. While family as well as individuals tread on the public sphere, there are certain hazy contours to privacy issues that generate contradictory ideas. Landes points out that it becomes complex when those who argue for individual rights also advocate the use of state power to regulate the individual body and to restrict personal freedom. She adds that therefore it is the responsibility of feminists “to safeguard personal identity and the body, while re-valuing the private sphere.”<sup>30</sup> Seyla Benhabib observes that the most adamant defence of the private necessarily involves bringing “private matters to public light.” (3)

A close examination of private life reveals the several layers within it. Moving away from using ‘private sphere’ and ‘domestic sphere’ interchangeable terms, words like domestic, personal, and sexual, qualify the private sphere further. A study on spaces allotted for women and occupied by women should map these layers within the private sphere, while also charting intermediary spheres like the social and economic, along with the political and public spheres. In a world of constant contestations of spaces, the meanings of public and private also shift, defining and redefining themselves, one against the other. It is at this point that along with the implications of gender identity, other

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<sup>30</sup> Joan. B. Landes, ed. “Introduction,” *Feminism, the Public and the Private* (Oxford: OUP, 1998) 3.

identities like race, ethnicity, nationality, religion and caste shift from the private sphere to enter public notice.

The present study is undertaken in the context of identity politics, and it is difficult to sideline the importance of identity politics while problematising the dichotomous nature of public/private spheres. Identity politics has served as a crucial critique of feminism when white, middle class, heterosexual and university-educated feminists attempted to bring all women under the banner of sisterhood. Wendy Brown examines the public/private dichotomy in the context of identity politics. She asks how a radical democratic politics performs when the very differences that are suppressed under the rubrics of liberal philosophy and universal humanism are embraced by marginal groups and individuals in late-modern democracies.<sup>31</sup> As Landes infers from the arguments of Brown:

Identity politics becomes more significant as it has the potential to affirm publicly aspects of our private selves, to rescue identity from being ignored as a merely ‘private’ feature of our selves.<sup>32</sup>

Anne Phillips extends Brown’s discussion by looking at specific political challenges posed by identity politics to the actual workings of democratic institutions. While liberal democracies have traditionally followed the practice of tolerance to accommodate difference, this no longer seems adequate. Advocates of what Phillips calls the “new

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<sup>31</sup> Wendy Brown, “Wounded Attachments: Late Modern Oppositional Political Formation,” *Feminism, the Public and the Private* (Oxford: OUP, 1998) 450-454.

<sup>32</sup> Joan. B. Landes, ed. “Introduction,” *Feminism, the Public and the Private* (Oxford: OUP, 1998) 15.

politics of presence” demand equal public importance, “not just permission for private digression.”<sup>33</sup>

Feminist interest in exploring the implications of historical, cultural and social foundations of the public/private dichotomy has theoretical as well as practical purposes. Initially, it was dissatisfaction with the way in which social reality was mapped as dichotomous. By deconstructing universalised assumptions and understanding non-state forms of cultural and political organization, feminism studies the patterns in this mapping and attempts to exceed the dualistic model. Feminist interventions also reveal the ways in which public and private divisions have been drawn in the past and continue to be drawn in the present by examining the questions of public and private life. Further, these interventions and feminist practices have revitalized democratic theory. Increasingly, questions of recognition and representation, culture and interest, equality and justice are discussed in terms of the gendered organization of public and private life.

We see that before the intervention of feminist scholars, the public sphere in Western societies remains as a utopian vision of philosophers and political theorists. Feminist inquiries of the public/private dichotomy not only demanded attention to the private sphere and its politics, but also demystified and deconstructed the utopian versions of the ideal public sphere. They spoke about the exclusionary frames and gender biases of the theory and pointed out the possible egalitarian and democratic distribution of roles

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<sup>33</sup> Anne Phillips, “Dealing with Difference: A Politics of Ideas or a Politics of Presence,” *Feminism, the Public and the Private* ed. Joan B. Landes (Oxford: OUP, 1998) 489.



against the strictly dichotomous notion. These studies also trace the gradual inclusion of women into the public sphere. The compositions of public and private spheres change with spatial and cultural factors, the dividing line becomes porous. However, the lines between these two spheres have been drawn and redrawn and this act involves power. As Nancy Fraser points out, “not everyone stands in the same relation to privacy and publicity; some have more power than others to draw and defend the line.”<sup>34</sup> The play of power is very crucial in defining and accessing these spheres. This characteristic of public and private spheres prompts feminist theory to go beyond the universalised notions of freedom as accessible to everyone equally, even among women. The power vested in each individual, depending upon the social, cultural, racial, and gender privileges, decides the freedom to access these spheres, or more specifically the public sphere. This is where identity politics interventions become significant by suggesting a look at the divisions and power variations within women. The interventions of postcolonial as well as Black feminists have questioned the very notion of private/domestic sphere, from the point of view of a privileged white/first world woman. The public/private distinction provides a valuable lens through which to view issues of gender identity, and divisions within this identity. While feminist inquiries focus on spaces occupied by women, postcolonial theories on public/private dichotomy reflect the history of the colonial as well as postcolonial experience of a nation along with the gendered nature of that experience. As the study also includes a postcolonial context, it is very important to look at the equations

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<sup>34</sup> Nancy Fraser, “Sex, Lies, and the Public Sphere: Reflections on the Confirmations of Clarence Thomas,” *Critical Inquiry* 18 (Spring 1992): 611.

of this dichotomy explored by postcolonial critics, apart from the frames of feminism and identity politics.

An equivalent proposition to private/public dichotomy put forward by liberal political theory is the proposition of *akam/puram* distinction in *Tolkappiyam*, the oldest Tamil work on grammar and poetics that dates back to between 100 B.C and 250 A.D. A.K Ramanujan in his analysis of classical poets discusses the distinction between *akam* and *puram* (interiority and exteriority) in Tamil.<sup>35</sup> *Akam*, a gloss for house in Tamil also refers to the self and womanhood. This is logically contrasted with *puram* or the exterior or outer domain that includes spaces outside home like the street or the yard and also activities like war and governance.<sup>36</sup> *Tolkappiyam* does not talk about the *akam* and *puram* distinction as social contract directly; they are presented as terms of thematic distinctions in poetry. Yet it leaves a clear suggestion towards the existence of a gendered division of society in most of the civilizations, even in early centuries.

In the context of India, the discussion on the dichotomous relationship between the public and the private sphere is initiated mainly by the Subaltern Studies group. Many historians have found women's involvement in the colonial public sphere as well as postcolonial Indian society interesting and have researched how women created a separate and "problematic space" for themselves. Two aspects have defined or/and problematised

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<sup>35</sup> A.K. Ramanujan, "Afterword," *Poems of Love and War* (New Delhi: OUP, 1985) 235.

<sup>36</sup> Seemanthini Niranjana localises the private-public dichotomy in the context of her study of everyday life of women in two villages of Karnataka, as "olage-horage" which refers to the 'inside-outside' matrix, while inquiring into how gendered bodies and spaces are produced in their everyday practices. See, Seemanthini Niranjana, *Gender and Space: Femininity, Sexualization and the Female Body* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001).

women's involvement in nationalist movements—one is the reform movements and the other is Gandhi's ideology and notion of womanhood in relation to the nation. However, Gandhi's notions cannot be read separately as they were part of the nationalist movement. Nationalist movements in various parts of the country may have varying stories to tell with reference to the women's question, and most of it is yet to be explored. As Tanika Sarkar points out:

Recently historians have started to explore how, within a subaltern domain of politics women created a separate and problematic space for themselves. We still need to fill out our notions about how these processes and departures were conceptualised on the basis of new, sacred principles that nationalists constructed to reorder terms of human relationships.<sup>37</sup>

Partha Chatterjee's proposition that the nationalist project dichotomised the cultural domain into inside/outside, spiritual/material, home/world, with the woman representing the home; and the home (spiritual domain) becoming the catalyst of the nation's distinctiveness that has to be protected from the politics and impurities of the outer world, is considered among the first of its kind in the context of India. Partha Chatterjee's article "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question" discusses the sudden disappearance of women's issues from the public agenda towards the end of this century after India's attainment of freedom.<sup>38</sup> He suggests that this disappearance is due to the fact that nationalism resolved the women's question as per its historical project.

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<sup>37</sup> Tanika Sarkar, "Nationalist Iconography: Image of Women in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Bengali Literature," *EPW* (November 1987): 2011.

<sup>38</sup> Partha Chatterjee, "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question," *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*, eds. Kumkum Sangari and Sudhesh Vaid (Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989) 233.

Chatterjee applies the material/spiritual, public/private, inner/outer, world/home dichotomy to say that the Bengali *bhadralok* accept the superiority of western science and civilization in the material or outer domain, while holding the spiritual or inner domain superior to the West; hence un-dominated and sovereign. (238) This dichotomy clearly demarcates the public and private identifying social roles by gender. It is within this ideological frame that nationalism attempted to answer the women's question. Chatterjee's argument is useful in the analysis of the women's question in relation to the Indian middle class. However, in his essay "Caste and Colonial Modernity: Reading *Saraswativijayam*", Dilip M. Menon questions this framework by applying it to the experiences of lower castes in understanding colonial modernity. He says that the simple dichotomy of inner and outer, tradition and modernity that Chatterjee adopts fails, since lower castes are excluded from the inner space of tradition itself.<sup>39</sup> He writes:

Their access to colonial modernity is mediated through their entrapment in the domain of a tradition within which they can only be subordinates or outcastes. On the other hand, it is this very modernity that allows them access to the knowledge of that which subordinates them. (292)

M.S.S. Pandian advances a step further in his essay, "One Step Outside Modernity: Caste, Identity Politics and Public Sphere". He says that although Chatterjee's argument opens up new possibilities about nationalism in the colonial context by recovering a space of national imagination for the colonized, the very domain of sovereignty claimed by

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<sup>39</sup> Dilip M. Menon, "Caste and Colonial Modernity: Reading *Saraswativijayam*," *Studies in History* 13.2 (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1997) 292.

nationalism is used to subordinate subaltern social groups such as lower castes, women and individuals belonging to marginal linguistic regions.<sup>40</sup> Pandian suggests that only by “unsettling the boundaries between the spiritual and material, inner and outer, could the lower castes (and women) contest the logic of exclusion inherent in the so-called national culture and talk caste in the colonial public sphere.”(1737) Such endeavours of unsettling the binaries give rise to a sphere of politics outside the modern civil society/public sphere.

Reform movements can be considered one of the main components of the nationalist movement that problematised the public and private dichotomy in colonial as well as postcolonial India. Reform movements added to the contradictions within the nationalist movement. While the nationalist movement always presented the glorious and golden traditions of the country, reform movements demanded a change in these traditions and this change came from within, as a result of the influence of modernity and education. These reforms redefined women’s spaces while keeping intact the boundaries between the woman’s world and the man’s world. The redefining not only defined woman’s space but also woman, who was placed as the preserver of national culture and as a resistance to the coloniser’s culture. The new woman had patriotism as an added quality. In other words, patriotism was termed a new womanly quality. C. Rajagopalachari wrote:

If our womanhood is made to lose direction, then the nation’s defeat would be complete. If, like the so-called enlightened, westernised Indian man, the Indian

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<sup>40</sup> M.S.S. Pandian, “One Step Outside Modernity: Caste, Identity Politics and Public Sphere,” *EPW* (May 2002): 1736.

woman also takes western education and changes her own nature and religion, then our subjection would be extended from outside to our innermost core.<sup>41</sup>

Women had the moral responsibility of preserving the purity of the spiritual domain, i.e. the home. The home envisaged by the nationalist as well as reform movements also was new.

The woman was to create a new kind of home which would be the nucleus of the new nation. Sarojini Devi, writing at the time of non-cooperation, summed up the scope of such work: 'Whatever we can do from within our homes, we will do all of that.' (2014)

As in second wave feminism in the West, in the nationalist movement too, the home became an important site of discussion. Home and domesticity became synonymous with the private sphere. These sites were portrayed and presented as new sites of struggle with new missions attached in relation to the freedom struggle. The drawing of lines between public life and domestic life was also done with the representation of religious and traditional female characters. One such, Tanika Sarkar finds, is Kali in Bengal who used to be employed as a common imagery intending to represent the strength of womanhood. However, she finds that the Kali image represented certain contradictions within nationalism. The two modes of representing Kali indicate perhaps an inner tension within nationalism about the principle of female strength and about the violence and destructiveness latent in it. (2012)

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<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Tanika Sarkar, "Nationalist Iconography: Image of Women in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Bengali Literature," *EPW* (November 1987): 2014.

Sarkar finds that Gandhi's vision of women's participation further problematises male/female realms. In Gandhian struggles, in which men's participation was maximum and women's presence was minimal, "the strategy remained persuasion effected by dramatic spectacle of suffering – a traditionally feminine strategy." (2013) According to Madhu Kishwar, Gandhi viewed home as a political facilitator of the nationalist movement, making home and the family, sites of the nationalist struggle.<sup>42</sup> However, this view again burdened women with more moral responsibilities:

Even if the woman is not given a direct role in the public domain, the moral initiative given to her must irrevocably alter notions about hegemony and authority within the family. The fact that the male patriarch regains his moral status through the intervention of woman must ultimately transform earlier models of patriarchal power by making it crucially dependent on the woman's superior understanding.<sup>43</sup>

The formation of the public and private spheres is a differential process which takes place at several levels: the discursive, the linguistic; the political and the economic, and usually in relation to other classes. The process of the formation of the private sphere as an alternative to Western materialism surfaces at the beginning of the nineteenth century and gets reflected in the nationalist discourse which establishes a series of dichotomies like male/female, inner/outer, public/private, material/spiritual etc. The metaphor, "family" was used frequently to define women – the new community of patriots, suggesting that

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<sup>42</sup> Madhu Kishwar, "Gandhi on Women," *EPW* (October 1985): 1691.

<sup>43</sup> Tanika Sarkar, "Nationalist Iconography: Image of Women in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Bengali Literature," *EPW* (November 1987): 2013.

they would have larger scope for activities within it. (2014) Therefore, the domestic sphere became an intermediary sphere where the preparations for the movement were taking place. However, this new woman was referred to as a metaphor for both the unviolated and chaste inner space; and the possible consequences of its surrender. We can also read this as an instance of blending tradition and modernity. As C.S. Lakshmi identifies:

...tradition is not static, its content keeps changing and it contains within it elements that oppose it. Its boundaries keep getting erased and re-formed. But the 'notion' of an unbroken tradition is constant. And attempts are made to write this notion of tradition on the body of the woman to dictate its movements, needs, attire, aspirations, and spheres of existence even while the body is moving along time, space and history. These attempts are born of a need to perceive women as those who authenticate a cultural or a national identity and as guarantors of the purity of this identity.<sup>44</sup>

As tradition and modernity can stand equivalent to spiritual/material, inner/outer, private/public, it is possible to argue that the division of public and private continues to exist and surface as a notion, whereas the re-ordering and conflation of these spaces happen simultaneously.

...but what is more interesting and immensely complex which we can glean from narratives and writings of/on women, is that the two worlds, in everyday life and

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<sup>44</sup> C.S. Lakshmi, "Bodies Called Women: Some Thoughts on Gender, Ethnicity and Nation," *EPW* (15 November 1997): 2953.



dealings, constantly run into each other blurring the boundaries. But the notion of separateness is maintained. (2954)

Nevertheless, one cannot deny the fact that the notion of separate spheres does affect the re-ordering/conflation of these spaces. C.S. Lakshmi further clarifies:

All the activities of women had to be rendered feminine for them to be accepted... And women's functioning in the outside world had somehow to be accommodated into a certain logic of what is termed feminine to make it seem like a continuation of her historical and cultural role. Such notion of separateness also created a mental image of women 'coming out' for a specific purpose and then 'going back' to where they really belonged. (2954)

Distinct from the notions of Western feminists who criticise the Habermasian notion of the public/private dichotomy and recommend an egalitarian and democratic re-ordering of public/private life, C.S. Lakshmi points out practical reasons for the existence of the private and public spheres separately, even in the present moment. She juxtaposes the notional upholding of private and public spheres with the everyday conflation of the public and the private. Feminism in India has imbibed its theoretical frames from both the Western feminist theory/movement as well as the socio-political movements in India. Like in Western societies, in India too women have been kept away from the public sphere. As Anuradha M. Chenoy points out, even at present, "Women's reality, despite their presence and intervention in the public sphere, is confined largely to its margins.

They therefore continue to be regarded as symbols of the private.”<sup>45</sup> It becomes more difficult and complex to combat this problem of limited or nil access to the public sphere by women with the onset of citizenship. Simone de Beauvoir expresses her disappointment with citizenship by talking about the “insufficiency” of political rights granted by “abstract rights.”<sup>46</sup> Joan Scott explains the argument of Beauvoir further:

Citizenship had made women men’s equals as subjects before the law in a formal, procedural sense, but it had failed to win for them autonomy—social, economic, or subjective. The issue was not that of substantive equality (though de Beauvoir was concerned with securing that too). There was simply no carryover from women’s status as abstract individuals to their status as “sovereign subjects,” as autonomous beings fully in possession of themselves. In this sense, the vote was only partial victory.<sup>47</sup>

Even while accepting women as citizens, the State is unclear about the special consideration that is entitled to be given to its female citizens over male citizens. The same dilemma is faced when there is a demand for reservation for women. Joan Scott describes the situation as the “inescapable paradox” of a feminism which demands formal equality for women while emphasizing their difference precisely, as the grounds for

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<sup>45</sup> Anuradha. M. Chenoy, “Women and the Breakdown of the Public Sphere,” *Civil Society, Public Sphere and Citizenship: Dialogues and Perceptions*, eds. Rajeev Bhargava and Helmut Reifeld (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005) 365.

<sup>46</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974) 151.

<sup>47</sup> Quoted in Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, “Introduction: Women, Citizenship, Law and the Indian State,” *The Scandal of the State: Women, Law and Citizenship in Postcolonial India* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003) 18.

substantializing the equality, speaking in the name of “women.”(16) J. Devika, while commenting on women’s limited access to the public sphere notes:

Citizenship’s promise of equality may then be seen as premised on a masking of ascriptive, structural, and historically emergent inequalities and differences rather than dismantling them. Specific existential contexts of individuals are seen as irrelevant for the status of citizenship.<sup>48</sup>

Partha Chatterjee discusses the “sudden disappearance”<sup>49</sup> of women’s issues from the postcolonial public debate in India. However, it is interesting to note the transformation of the meaning of the term “women’s issue” in the postcolonial context. C. S. Lakshmi points out that many issues like the Devadasi issue, maternity and child welfare and social hygiene—were termed “women’s issues.” This transformation is not just a phenomenon that occurred in postcolonial India. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan writes:

The new international standards and indices of women’s welfare and status sponsored by the United Nations and its agencies, which reflect each nation-state’s priorities in the health, welfare, development, enforcement of legal rights, and protection of women and thereby indicate its unequivocal responsibilities in these areas, have become influential “universal” indicators of “human development” levels.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> J. Devika and Mini Sukumaran, “Making Space for Feminist Social Critique in Contemporary Kerala,” *EPW* (Oct. 2006): 4469.

<sup>49</sup> Partha Chatterjee, “The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question,” *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, eds. Kumkum Sangari and Sudhesh Vaid (Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989) 233.

<sup>50</sup> Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, *The Scandal of the State: Women, Law, and Citizenship in Postcolonial India*, (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003) 3.

This takes us back to the beginning of the chapter where I have explained the high visibility of women in Keralam's much circulated stereotypical image and the paradoxical limited access to the public sphere by women. We see a deluge of such progressive images of women in different forms in the public debates of Keralam, especially in the mid-twentieth century. J. Devika notes how women figure as an important image in the discourse of development since the mid 20th century "as a way to represent Kerala as the utopia of social development."<sup>51</sup> Rajeswari Sunder Rajan writes about the politics of statistics on women in the colonial context, as follows:

The "status of women" has served as a crucial signifier in different contexts. For the colonial state, for instance, it indicated the degree of a colonized people's civilizational backwardness or progress. The British colonial government's measures to improve the condition of Indian women were therefore pressed into service to legitimize its rule, while at the same time these interventions, carefully planned in relation to different sections of indigenous patriarchy, left large parts of it untouched as the domain of the "private."<sup>52</sup>

Anyway, this newfound interest in women's issues signifies complex patterns, especially with reference to the social contract theory that got relocated from the West along with the idea of democracy and citizenship. But though this visibility seems to break the structure of the existing public sphere, it also uses women as symbols of the private sphere, overtly. Women-writing becomes significant here as it marks shifts in the social contract theory by showing the various possibilities of conflating different spheres of the

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<sup>51</sup> J. Devika and Mini Sukumaran, "Making Space for Feminist Social Critique in Contemporary Kerala," *EPW* (Oct. 2006): 4469.

<sup>52</sup> Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, *The Scandal of the State: Women, Law, and Citizenship in Postcolonial India*, (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003) 3.

life world. I look at those shifts that are reflected in writings by women in Keralam, especially Sarah Joseph, to understand the complexities that are woven around different social spheres.

Most of the works on Keralam's modern society still largely work with the Habermasian notion of public/private spheres. Feminists have always questioned patriarchy's attempts to confine women to the domestic sphere. Devika argues that in spite of the achievements in development, literacy and women's education, the ideal modern society in Keralam comprises the public and domestic domains. She argues that this could be because "gender appeared as a 'natural' alternative to *jati*-based social order; gender was seen to be based on something concrete and even unambiguous, i.e., sexual difference."<sup>53</sup> Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall explore how this new sexual division of labour underpinned the successes of the early nineteenth-century middle class, a class spurred on not simply by pursuit of profits but by a dream of domestic bliss. The same could be applicable to the emergence of the state-sponsored notion of an ideal family and domestic bliss, different from the notions of joint family, matriliney etc. This does not mean that in the society of Keralam, women do not have or did not have any access to the public sphere. The access to the public domain was largely restricted to institutions like schools, hospitals, charity organizations, etc. Upon surveying the writings of women, one can see the development of womanspace in women-writing and the extension of it through such institutions into the public domain.

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<sup>53</sup> J. Devika, *En-Gendering Individuals: The Language of Re-forming in Twentieth Century Keralam* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2007) 172.

One of the main propositions of feminist theory towards the social contract theory and the dichotomous relationship between the public and the private spheres is the existence of intermediary spheres like the domestic sphere, which is different from the private sphere. However, experiences of women of different social locations differ in the case of this sphere as well. Experiences of women from working classes and lower caste backgrounds are different from the experiences of the middle-class woman's life, which is largely confined to the home. While examining the works of women from middle class families, one might find that the discussions centre on the domestic sphere. Two books released in the last decade—one, C.K. Janu's autobiographical account and the other, Nalini Jameela's autobiography—stand out from the rest. While the former shows how gender difference is an insignificant problem for a woman from a tribal community compared to other threats like social discrimination, displacement, etc., the latter demonstrates how the life of a sex worker can hardly claim any domesticity. The works of women from marginalised sections published recently, demonstrates how the existence of the domestic sphere is a middleclass phenomenon. Such writings also counter and collapse the middle class construction of a monolithic representation of "domestic" and project a counter space. However, the "womanspace" I discuss here largely deals with the domestic sphere and negotiations of it with other spaces like religion,<sup>54</sup> caste, community, region, etc.

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<sup>54</sup> This study discusses religion in relation to community rather than as a separate entity. The third phase of Sarah Joseph's writings (discussed in Chapter 4) which focuses on community identity mainly deals with Christian identity, especially Syrian Christian identity. The study focuses more on community as it is possible to argue that in the case of Christianity in Keralam, community identity comes foremost to the religious identity. It is through community that one makes sense of religion.

Therefore, by womanspace I mean these continuously shifting and contested spaces occupied by women, formed by negotiations between different spheres. These spaces acquired and occupied by women do not function like dominant publics. These spaces carry a counter power that challenges the functioning of the public sphere, and therefore function as “counterpublic”. The counterpublic I examine here is mainly constituted by the writings of women from middleclass backgrounds. This counterpublic, using colonial modernity and modern education as ladders to access the public sphere, operates in creating an alternative critique of patriarchy–colonial as well as regional. While using the term “womanspace” to denote the reordering of the social contract theory and the spaces that it suggests, I would like to clarify that it is not used as an umbrella term to denote all other counterpublic spheres that have been created to challenge the public sphere. “Womanspace” could be of multiple interests and the attempt is not towards sabotaging other counterpublic spheres that are formed by men or women who would identify with their caste/class identities above their gender identity.

Thus far I have explained the conceptual framework of the womanspace that I would be examining in the works of Sarah Joseph; the next chapter will contextualise these concepts within the history of Malayalam women writing at different junctures. The first chapter identifies moments in the history of Malayalam women writing that are crucial to the evolving of a womanspace. The second chapter looks at the short stories of Sarah Joseph, the trajectory of her writings from those confined to the private sphere to those which take private matters to the public space of discussion, or the private scrutiny of the public sphere itself. The chapter looks at the blurring of the dividing lines between the

public and the private spheres in Sarah Joseph's works. The third chapter looks at the stories and a novel written by Sarah Joseph based on the Ramayana, in her attempt to read the text as a tool of political domination. Here, she shares the point of view of the Dravidian movement and particularly that of Periyar E.V. Ramasami, the main proponent of the movement, to view the text as a political tool of Aryan domination. The chapter will also look at the kind of public sphere that the Self Respect movement offered for women. In the context of identity politics, it looks at different kinds of publics that come into play in these works. The fourth chapter looks at the three novels of Sarah Joseph which deal with women's engagement with public spaces like region, religion and community, while also focusing on private spheres like personal matters, domestic space, the kitchen, sexuality, etc. The chapter also engages with the problem of the merging of public/private spheres through attempts by women to democratize both these spheres. The conclusion discusses the limitations and exclusionary frames of this womanspace envisaged by Sarah Joseph and other middle class women writers in Malayalam by looking at two sample texts by two women from non-middle class/ upper caste backgrounds. The study tries to argue that while mainstream feminism tends to draw more upon established female identities, narratives from non-privileged or non-middle class women deconstruct the established notions of femininity and free women from the constraints of pre-existing definitions.

Contrary to the ongoing assumption that Comparative Literature involves comparing two or more literatures that was part of a modernist project of universalization, I follow the line of Andre Lefevere and Douwe Fokkemma and perceive literature as a cultural code.



The comparative aspect of the work is not just limited to literature studied in relation to literatures or writers from other languages, but also concerns literature studied in connection to its socio-political aspects, where literature is viewed as a cultural signifier. With a “differential” concept added to it, Comparative Literature as a discipline promoted the study of regional literatures with different cultural backgrounds and subjects that are usually not accommodated within the rigid frameworks of other disciplines. Gurbhagat Singh, in his essay “Differential Multilogue: Comparative Literature and National Literatures,”<sup>55</sup> talks about this concept and records this development as follows:

Comparative Literature has now to take a leap from the era of locating “universals” and “identity” to the era of recognizing and elaborating differences, the era in brief of, *differential multilogue*.

Therefore, Comparative Literature is envisaged as a discipline which does not have a defined and rigid framework any longer. On the other hand, it concentrates on the analysis of specificities, particulars, and multiplicity of contexts related to the production of literature. Gurbhagat Singh comments on this project of Comparative Literature as follows:

Although it is the general character of the literary sign to self-assert and open to “appreciate” the structures of difference, it is in cross-cultural interliterary or interdisciplinary relationships, especially during the moments of crisis that the paradoxical/dialectical opening to others occurs maximally. The maximally opened sign becomes signifier through its play with inter- and cross-cultural

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<sup>55</sup> Gurbhagat Singh, “Introduction,” *Differential Multilogue: Comparative Literature and National Literatures* (Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1991) 1.

signifieds, is the object of comparative literature whose theory and practice we still have to develop, if there can be any paradigmatic term, it may be tentatively called *differential multilogue* that includes both the generative principle and the system of comparativity (11).

One can see obvious comparative aspects in the juxtaposition of the public sphere and the private sphere, the dominant public sphere and the counterpublics formed, and so on. Nevertheless, Sarah Joseph's works also include a comparative aspect. The writer as well as her writings are read in relation to the works of other writers (old as well as contemporary), social milieus, political environment and available histories to map the similarities, differences, continuities, influences, etc.

## Chapter 1

### Through Histories of Women-writing

In this chapter, I try to trace the development of “womanspace” through the presentation of select moments in histories of women-writing, projecting those as a counterpublic against the dominant public sphere in Keralam. The intention of the re-coup is to demonstrate the evolution of a womanspace that materializes in the writings of Sarah Joseph and I intend to demonstrate it in this thesis by analysing her writings. This work is not a retrieval of submerged histories; it looks at the existing histories of women’s writing and women writers and the politics therein, to trace the evolution of a spatial construct. I look at how, at different junctures, the dominant public sphere tried to eclipse it in different ways and how at different junctures it spoke the language of negotiation in an attempt to appropriate this space. I draw instances mainly from women’s fiction and women fiction writers, although I refer to women who wrote poetry while discussing early women writers. The chapter primarily draws on the *pennezhuthu* controversy, which will be discussed in detail, to look at how it changed the historiography of women’s writing, how it changed the images of certain writers and writing trends, etc. I also discuss K. Saraswatamma, Rajalekshmi, Lalithambika Antharjanam and Madhavikkutty (Kamala Das) as important writers who took part in narrativizing the making of “womanspace.” This study specifically locates Sarah Joseph’s conscious women-writing within this tradition of resistance and strives to show how her writings contribute to the women’s cause through a merging of the public and the private.

Women's writing emerged in India as a new site of research and critical studies in the 1980s, as a result of the feminist movement and as a consequence of growing interest in feminist historiography. Feminist historiography, which consciously reflects upon the writing of history from a feminist standpoint,<sup>1</sup> emphasized the importance of examining writings by women. Seemanthini Niranjana points out the significance of women's writings as follows:

As a discursive practice, women's writing is situated within the wider cultural context of patriarchy and its structural manifestations. Despite the varying specificity of content under different modes of production, patriarchy can be described in terms of the dominance of the male and a corresponding marginalization of women. In such a circumscribing milieu, women's writing assumes importance as response to patriarchal relations within patriarchy itself. It may provide a unique record of the systems which shapes and contains the life stories of women.<sup>2</sup>

She identifies women's writing as a site of struggle "which involves both dominant perceptions of social reality and the resistances to it" (78). In this sense, women's writings become significant documents in the analysis of women's spaces, which demonstrate the making and remaking of these spaces while recording their resistances to the outside world. Feminist historiography, while deconstructing dominant ways of writing women's history, considers women's writing itself as history writing. It would be appropriate to state at this point that I use both the terms women-writing and women's

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<sup>1</sup> <http://frank.mtsu.edu/~kmiddlet/history/women/femhist.txt>

<sup>2</sup> Seemanthini Niranjana, "Themes of Femininity: Notes on the 'World' of Women's Fiction," *New Quest* (March-April 1989): 74.

writing in my dissertation. By women's writing, I mean writings by women. Women-writing is usually used to denote the phenomenon of women's writing and its emergence as a new discipline within Women's Studies. I also use women-writing as a literal translation for the Malayalam word *pennezhuthu*, which I will discuss later in this chapter.

I use the term "histories"<sup>3</sup> to mean different streams of history-writing that approach women-writing based on ideological positions, the changing socio-cultural milieu, etc. For example, the history of Malayalam literature written by Ulloor S. Parameswarayyer lists some of the women writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>4</sup> He identifies each of them as the wife, mother or daughter of some poet or scholar of the time. Although in today's context, this might help us to understand the socio-cultural background of the writer, the attitude suggests that these women writers are important only because they are related to some of the male poets and scholars of the time. Until the late 1980s, women-writing in Keralam was perceived only as part of mainstream literature. The criteria used to evaluate them were also those of the dominant literary culture, which always had its own biases and preferences. Therefore, women writers who questioned dominant values or moved away from those were excluded from its narrative. Mary Ellmann refers to this critical practice of male academics and literary public as "phallic criticism,"<sup>5</sup> where women's writings were judged using the dominant literary criteria. "Women writers"

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<sup>3</sup> This kind of an understanding about history, not just as a single authentic version, but as many versions with different ideological and political positions, was brought in by subaltern historiography.

<sup>4</sup> Ulloor S. Parameswarayyer, *Kerala Sahitya Charitram Vol IV* (Thiruvananthapuram: Kerala Sarvakalashala, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> Mary Ellman, *Thinking about Women* (New York: Harcourt, 1986) 6.

itself is a category that came into existence recently. Earlier, there was no such category. Each woman writer was forcibly related with her male contemporaries or judged against/in comparison with them. Therefore, women writers of every generation did not feel a collective sense of identity as “women writers” since they were rarely viewed as a recognizable group which flourished alongside the dominant literary culture. What Elaine Showalter, in her work, *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), observes seems true of the women-writing scene in Malayalam. Showalter says:

...each generation of women writers had found themselves in a sense, without a history, forced to rediscover the past anew, forging again and again the consciousness of their sex. Given this perpetual disruption and also the self-hatred that has alienated women writers from a sense of collective identity, it does not seem possible to speak of a “movement.”<sup>6</sup>

Niranjana points out that projects that attempt to examine women’s writing should treat it not so much as an instance of literary representation, but as a “cultural form.”<sup>7</sup> She says this kind of an approach suspends both literature, as an essential category, and the use of literature as a discursive field where cultural meanings are negotiated, reproduced or modified (74). Dominant versions of history either neglect even the minimal presence of women, or mention some women who have never disturbed the frames of the dominant social order. One of the main agendas of feminist historiography is to counter these dominant versions of women’s invisibility explained as women’s incapacity to be in the

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<sup>6</sup> Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977) 11–12.

<sup>7</sup> Seemanthini Niranjana, “Themes of Femininity: Notes on the ‘World’ of Women’s Fiction,” *New Quest* (March–April 1989): 74.

public sphere. However, Joan Scott points out that feminist historiography which strains to counter this kind of stereotyping of women by the dominant society tends to send a contradictory message while making an argument towards the equal treatment of women and men. She writes:

Typically, this approach has involved substituting positive examples of women's capabilities in place of negative characterizations. Countering stereotypes has built a tension into the writing of women's history. On the one hand, an essentialising tendency assumes (with feminism's opponents) that there are fixed characteristics belonging to women. (The disagreement is over what they are.)<sup>8</sup>

She contends that this kind of positive stereotyping and metaphors of visibility do not explain fissures in history when we are countering a history that showed only neglect to women's enterprises. Nor does the recovery of ignored facts explain it. Scott recommends a historicising approach that stresses on differences among women and even within the concept of "women" as an alternative method (1). She continues:

When the questions of why these facts had been ignored and how they were now to be understood as were raised, history becomes more than a search for facts. Since new visions of history depended on the perspectives and questions of the historian, making women visible was not simply a matter of unearthing new facts; it was a matter of advancing new interpretations which not only offered new readings of politics, but of the changing significance of families and sexuality. (3)

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<sup>8</sup> Joan Wallach Scott, ed. "Introduction," *Feminism and History* (Oxford: OUP, 1996) 1.

Histories of women-writing point to the fact that “writing” itself was an act in the “public sphere”, that happened most of the time as a result of some kind of access to the public. At the same time, it became a reasonable hobby for some privileged women, as it did not require the writer to go into the public. The history of women-writing in Keralam has direct links to education, print culture and colonial modernity that received currency by the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Literary works in Sanskrit by women from royal families are available, which date back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Ulloor S. Parameswara Iyer describes Kuttikunju Thankachi (1820–1904), daughter of Irayimman Thampi<sup>9</sup> as the first poetess of Keralam<sup>10</sup> Most of the works of this period by women did not include any experiences of the writer herself as a woman. They were mainly imitations of writing styles that were set by male writers and scholars. A work that stands apart in this respect is Thottakkattu Ikkavamma’s (1844–1921) *Subhadrarjunam*, a verse drama. She asserts the power of women’s literary creativity in the beginning of her work as follows:

Didn’t Bhama, the darling of Krishna, wage battle?

Didn’t Subhadra hold the chariot reins once?

If women dare all these,

How can they not be fit

Just for the famed art of poetry? (100)

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<sup>9</sup> This way of identifying a woman writer as some famous person’s daughter, wife, or mother by Ulloor has been criticized by many people, as mentioned earlier.

<sup>10</sup> Jancy James, “From Veneration to Virulence: A Case for a Women’s Literary History in Malayalam,” *Social Scientist* 23.10-12 (Oct.–Dec. 1995): 99.



In his review, C.P. Achyuta Menon praised the work for its social importance and said that the writer deserves to be called “*Tunchathezhuthacchan* of womankind.”<sup>11</sup> He stated that women may aspire to become literary authors, not by availing any “special concession” but solely on the basis of “literary merit” (269). But what was this literary merit? This definitely referred to standards set by male scholars and writers, where women’s writing was viewed as substandard, narrow and personal with no social significance. K.M. Kunhulakshmi Kettilamma, writing in 1915, said that to be able to write, women need not only linguistic abilities but also “life experiences” which may be acquired only if women have “social freedom” (270). This remark signifies the identification of the public sphere by women as distinct from their space, as a space denied to them but one that they have every right to access.

Women from most of the dominant communities, who had access to education, started writing by the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They wrote in journals and magazines in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Susie Tharu and Lalitha identify the period as “a high point of women’s journalism and in almost every region, women edited journals for women and many hundreds of women wrote in them.”<sup>12</sup> There were several magazines like *Keraliyasugunabodhini* (1886), *Sarada* (1904), *Lakshmibai* (1905), *Mahilaratnam* (1916), *Mahila* (1921), *Sahodari* (1925), *Mahilamandiram* (1927), *Malayalamanika* (1931), and *Stree* (1933) during this period, and different journals for

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<sup>11</sup> Thunchath Ramanujan Ezhuthachan is a 16<sup>th</sup> century Malayalam poet, known as the father of Malayalam Language. Sarah Joseph, “Kanneerum Kinavum–Vimochanavum: Streepaksha Chinta Malayalasahityathil,” *Nammude Sahityam Nammude Samootham* Vol 2, ed. M.N.Vijayan (Trissur: Kerala Sahitya Academy, 2001) 269.

<sup>12</sup> Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha, *Women Writing in India: 600 BC to the Early Twentieth Century*, Vol 1 (New Delhi: OUP, 2000) xviii.

women from different communities<sup>13</sup>. Most of the journals carried articles written by women on issues like health, education, child rearing, family, etc. All these writings, which basically took off from the writings of some male reformers reflected the attempt to create a model Malayali woman by mixing tradition and modernity in appropriate quantities. However, these attempts could be viewed as early attempts at bringing “private” issues into “public” notice. But the private that was being constructed across communities and identities, comprised largely of an ideal middle class woman who was educated, homely and suitable for a modern educated man.<sup>14</sup>

Jancy James notes that the shift from verse to prose in women’s expression is related to women’s education.<sup>15</sup> Women writers like Lalithambika Antharjanam (1909–1985) and K. Saraswatamma (1919–1975) used prose efficiently and frequently, although there were writers like Mary John Thottam or Sister Mary Beninja (1901–1985), Koothattukulam Mary John (1905–?), Kadathanattu Madhaviyamma (1909–1999), and Balamaniamma (1909–2004) who wrote in verse. For most of these women writers, education functioned more as an indirect means of access to the public sphere than as a means to merely read and write. Unlike earlier women-writers who wrote in Sanskrit, women who had access to modern education expressed their own experiences in their writing, in their own languages.

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<sup>13</sup> C.S. Chandrika, *Keralathile Streemunnnettangalude Charitram* (Trissur: Kerala Sahitya Academy, 1998) 52.

<sup>14</sup> J. Devika, *En-Gendering Individuals: The Language of Re-forming in Twentieth Century Keralam* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2007) 295.

<sup>15</sup> Jancy James, “From Veneration to Virulence: A Case for a Women’s Literary History in Malayalam,” *Social Scientist* 23.10-12 (Oct.–Dec. 1995) 99.

Women from different communities experienced the influence of reform movements and modernization differently, as many communities underwent reforms at different points of time alongside the nationalist movement. Community reform movements like *Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana* (S. N. D. P) *Yogam* founded by Sri Narayana Guru aimed at reforming the *Ezhava* community, *Sadhujana Paripalana Sangham* formed by Ayyankali for the support of *Pulayas*, *Catholica* Congress of Catholic Christians, *Keraliya Nair Samajam*, *Nambootiri Yogakshema Sabha*, etc., influenced the life and lifestyle of people in Keralam. These movements also influenced the literature of the time. Kumaran Asan,<sup>16</sup> who was influenced by Sri Narayana Guru and was working for S.N.D.P., articulated reformist ideas which rejected discrimination on the basis of caste and gender. *Nambootiri Yogakshema Sabha* which had the project of “making *Nambootiri* human, and *Nambootiri* woman free” also had its limitations. A by-product of the Nationalist movement, the *Sabha* condemned the plight of *Nambootiri* women, but also set the boundaries within which they had to confine themselves. The reform movement, as mentioned in the first chapter in relation to the Indian nationalist movement and to women, also placed several new responsibilities on women. V. T. Bhattatirippad, one of the main proponents of the *Nambootiri Yogakshema Sabha*, wrote in his famous play *Adukkalayil Ninnu Arangathekku* (*From Kitchen to Stage*), as follows:

For the well-being of man, let the woman remain weak. But, it is in her shoulders  
that the weight of the great establishment called family rests; being a mother she

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<sup>16</sup> Mahakavi Kumaran Asan was one of the famous triumvirate poets of Keralam in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Sarah Joseph identifies Asan as the first male writer who empathised with women. In works like *Leela*, *Chandala Bhikshuki*, and *Chintavishtayaya Sita*, Asan expresses his sympathies with the female protagonist. Sarah Joseph, “Kanneerum Kinavum–Vimochanavum: Streepaksha Chinta Malayalasahityathil,” *Nammude Sahityam Nammude Samootham* Vol 2, ed. M.N. Vijayan (Trissur: Kerala Sahitya Academy, 2001) 269.

should have kindness in her heart, essential for the growth of the community; pieces of her silk cloth may have to be taken, to tie the wound of the nation ....”<sup>17</sup>

As it is obvious in the above comment, reform movements to improve women’s condition were merely extensions of the nationalist ideology and were meant to selectively modernize women to suit the new educated man. This was specifically the case of upper caste communities which were part of the nationalist movement. Women’s roles as homemakers were emphasised with the break of the joint family system and the introduction of the nuclear family. At the same time, these reforms gave women access to the public sphere. However, this access was for a short period or was a temporary state, as woman was placed as an integral part of the “home”. This suggestion is very much implicit in the title of V.T. Bhattathirippad’s revolutionary play *Adukkalayil Ninnu Arangathekku* (*From Kitchen to Stage*). This signifies a spatial shift from the kitchen to the stage. At the same time, the word “*Arangu*” (stage) suggests that it is not a permanent shift. It is temporary and one has to come back to where she belongs. The *adukkala* or kitchen too did not remain the same. The kitchen became an important site in the making of a homely, educated, middle class woman. Male and female reformers insisted on the importance of kitchen in the making of a new woman and nation. One of the main women reformers of the *Namboothiri Yogakshema Sabha*, Narikkattiri Devaki Antharjanam wrote about the importance of the kitchen in her article titled “Sthreekal Adukkala Upekshikkaruthu,” (Women should not give up the kitchen).<sup>18</sup> She argues that women should have the right over the kitchen and see it as a means to empower and free

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<sup>17</sup> All translations are mine unless otherwise mentioned. V.T. Bhattathirippad, *Adukkalayil Ninnu Arangathekku* (Kottayam: DC Books, 1994) 78.

<sup>18</sup> Narikkattiri Devaki Antharjanam, “Sthreekal Adukkala Upekshikkaruthu,” *Sthree Onnam Lakkam* (Idavam 1108) 24–25.

themselves. She adds that the space should be considered a way to render service to the world (24). Most of the articles promoted women's education, although they stressed the benefit of either becoming successful housewives or social workers. The ideal woman imagined by most of the reform movements, continued to be a middle class, homely, educated woman. This trend persists even now in most of the women's magazines and periodicals.<sup>19</sup>

*Women Writing in India: 600 B.C to the Present, Volume I & II* (1991), an anthology edited by Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha, is a groundbreaking work that offers critical insights as well as instances of women's literary ventures, spanning 2600 years. The collection is also significant because it includes about 200 texts by women from 11 Indian languages, translated into English. The book introduces new sensibilities in its view and treatment of writings by women. Tharu and Lalitha, in their "Introduction" to *Women Writing in India*, state the aim of a project of surveying the histories of women writing as an attempt

to create a context in which women's writing can be read, not as new *monuments* to existing institutions or cultures, but as documents that display what is at stake in the embattled practices of self and agency, and in the making of a habitable world at the margins of patriarchies reconstituted by the emerging bourgeoisies of empire and nation...We are interested in how the efforts of these women shaped the worlds we inherited, and what, therefore, is the history, not of authority, but of

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<sup>19</sup> *Vanitha, Grihalakshmi, Mahilaratnam*, etc. continue to be in the making of a modern middle class woman, who is the perfect blend of tradition and modernity.

contest and engagement we can claim today. But we also ask, what was the price they paid in these transactions, what did they concede, and how do those costs and those concessions affect our inheritance.<sup>20</sup>

This kind of an engagement with women-writing expands the possibilities of women-writing by opening up an array of critical questions that frame women's writing:

these include questions about the contexts, structured and restructured by changing ideologies of class, gender, empire, in which women wrote, and the conditions in which they were read; questions about the politics, sexual and critical that determined the reception and impact of their work; questions about their resistances, the subversions, the strategic appropriations that characterized the subtlest and most radical women's writing. (15)

Thus, women's history can provide a critique of dominant historiography. For such a historiography, even instances of so-called phallic criticism function as materials to map women's spaces. The comment on Kochattil Kalyanikutty Amma's travelogue, *Njan Kanda Europe* (The Europe I Saw), by the renowned writer Sanjayan in 1930s can be cited as a very good example of this. He suggested that the book only needs a correction in its title, as *Europe Kanda Kalyanikutty Amma* (*Europe that saw Kalyanikutty Amma*).<sup>21</sup> J. Devika says that Sanjayan's comment reflects "his fear of female individuation and public presence."<sup>22</sup> Devika translates Sanjayan's suggestion for change of title "Europe Kanda Kalyanikutty Amma" as "Kalyanikutty Amma, who saw Europe." However, the

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<sup>20</sup> Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha, *Women Writing in India: 600 BC to the Early Twentieth Century Vol I* (New Delhi: OUP, 2000) 39-40.

<sup>21</sup> Sanjayan, "Shreemati Teravathu Ammalu Amma—Oru Anusmaranam," in *Sanjayan—1936le Hasyalekhanangal Vol III* (Kozhikode: Mathrubhumi Publications, 1970) 64.

<sup>22</sup> J. Devika and Mini Sukumar, "Making Space for Feminist Social Critique in Contemporary Kerala," *EPW* (October 2006): 4471.

title can also be translated as “Kalyanikutty Amma, who Europe saw.” This meaning of the title takes us further to questions of self, agency, travel and access to the public sphere in relation to female identity. This also gives us the assumption that Kalyanikutty Amma, who travelled to a different place and culture, “indulged” in describing herself, contrary to the travel writing norms which narrate the new place and travel experiences.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, her work stands as a document attesting newly achieved access to public place for some women – a privilege which was also rare in the case of a dominant male. The travelogue also stands as an example of women’s writing that subvert a male/dominant genre as a space to inscribe her self. Only a renewed and sensitized feminist historiography sees this as an expansion of womanspace. This should be read not only as a history of women’s writing or women’s spaces, but also as a document in relation to colonial education, modernity, and women’s social mobility.

Perhaps in this context, one needs to discuss the *pennezhuthu* controversy, and how it changed the historiography of women’s writing. I am suggesting that it is possible to identify this as one of the important moments which highlighted the importance of such histories. Although the literal meaning of the term *pennezhuthu*<sup>24</sup> is women-writing, it has somehow carried a negative connotation in Kerala society and in the academic circles of Keralam, unlike the term “women-writing”. The term was introduced in 1990 by K. Satchitanandan, a well-known poet and critic in Kerala, as a critical category in his

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<sup>23</sup> It was not possible to find a copy of Kalyanikutty Amma’s book.

<sup>24</sup> The use of the term “*pennu*” which clearly has connotations of informality (in contrast to more formal and sanskritised words like “*stree*,” “*mahila*,” etc.) could even be seen as disrespectful when used in the public sphere. Yet, it was also a self-conscious usage, which tried to break the brahminical, sanskritised images of “good womanhood” and at the same time, call oneself by the derogatory terms which could be possibly used against oneself.

“Foreword” to a collection of short stories written by Sarah Joseph, *Papathara (The Floor of Sin)* which floated feminist ideologies. This gave rise to a controversy over the term. The term was introduced as a critical or theoretical category, although it failed to function as such. What Satchitanandan meant by *pennezhuthu* is still unclear because, in his analysis of the story “Mudithayamurayunnu” (“The Dance of the Possessed Hair”), he uses “*écriture féminine*” and “feminine writing” in brackets to convey the sense of the term, *pennezhuthu*. The concept “*écriture féminine*,” proposed by feminist scholars like Helene Cixous, suggests that texts written by women attempt to undermine the dominant phallogocentric logic by focusing on differences rather than similarities present in the female world, deal with open-ended textuality and break open the closure of the realm of binary opposition. *Écriture féminine* gives more importance to the effect and interpretations produced by the text. “Feminine writing” is the term used by Elaine Showalter in her essay, “Towards a Feminist Poetics” to refer to the first among three phases of women writing in English Literature. In this phase, women imitated male literary culture. The second phase “feminist,” denotes a period where women protested against patriarchal values through their writings, and the third is the “female phase” which emphasizes self-realization. Satchitanandan’s way of equating the term *pennezhuthu* with *écriture féminine* and feminine writing is contradictory in nature. As a literary critic, then, he fails to give *pennezhuthu* a specific theoretical locale and uses it as an umbrella term which may variously designate “*écriture féminine*,” “women-writing,” “feminine writing” and “feminist writing.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Roopa Antony Thachil, *Contemporary Women Short Story Writers in Kerala in the Context of Women Writing in India*, diss., University of Hyderabad, 2000, 4.



In Malayalam literary circles, the term failed to be viewed as a critical category, may be because of these initial ambiguities. The controversy over *pennezhuthu* was focused mainly on the derogatory and abusive meanings of feminism and women-writing. The use of the term as an umbrella-term to denote writings of all sorts by all women was barely considered or problematised. This persistence in viewing *pennezhuthu* as substandard or derogatory, shifted attention from the real problems, and relocated it to comparatively shallow issues with the use of the term. Many contemporary women writers disowned the term maintaining that their writings did not come within the purview of this term. Except for Sarah Joseph and C.S. Chandrika, none of the women writers agree with the term, although some, like Geetha Hiranyan, refrain from rejecting it altogether. Here, we could dwell on the details of the responses of contemporary Malayalam women writers and juxtapose their stories to bring out the contradictions in their statements regarding *pennezhuthu*. While articulating very relevant concerns of feminism and feminist writings, most of these women writers refuse to associate themselves with these ideological positions. Chandramati says about *pennezhuthu*:

It is a very bad word. I do not agree with it. First of all, it is a word created by a man. Satchidanandan is the one who introduced the word. It was launched by him in the Foreword to Sarah Joseph's collection, *Papathara*, where the Foreword was longer than the collection itself. If it was Sarah Joseph who introduced this word, I would not have been so much against the term...This kind of categorization will discriminate women from the mainstream. It gives protection to those women writers who are part of sectarian politics...Even if I get a position a little below in

the common list of writers, I will not complain. It is better than being the first one in the list of women writers.<sup>26</sup>

This shows that the writer is concerned with being excluded from the mainstream if she associates herself with *pennethuthu*. At the same time, it is also obvious that she understands women as victims of exclusionary politics, a ploy implemented by the mainstream. Let us see how she articulates in her story, “Kavithayude Katha” (The Story of a Poem), the problems of a woman who aspires to write. The story begins:

Sushama is writing a poem. The first lines of it take birth on paper as follows:

“I remember you in my eyes, always moist with a tear.” These lines could be written by anyone from *Edappalli* poets to post-modern poets. If at all these lines have some speciality, it is due to the fact that it is written by a woman. The common problem of the reading public that includes Sushama’s husband Raghuraman is their attempt to find autobiographical elements in writings by women. For example, if Raghuraman sees these lines, he will not find Sushama that innocent...Now it must be clear that each of Sushama’s poems takes birth surpassing adverse conditions. One thing we need to notice is the fact that Sushama is standing and writing the poem. On the table where a white paper and a stubby pencil rest, there are also a wooden board, half-chopped ladies’ fingers and a knife. (59)

The story progresses as Sushama fills the paper with many more lines, while finishing household chores. But when she hears the sound of the auto rickshaw in which her

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<sup>26</sup> Sridevi. K. Nair, ed. *Malayalathinte Kathakarikal* ( Kottayam: DC Books, 2002) 56–57.

husband and children come back home in the evening, she tears her poem into small pieces. The story ends thus: “Those who want to read Sushama’s poem completely can pick up pieces of it from between the lines of this story, keep it together, and read.” (64)

We could read this story as the story of women writing. The history of women writing, I suggest could also be retrieved by reading between the lines of available writing. This story states that Chandramati is aware of the fact that women’s writing is different because of the contexts and situations in which it is produced. However, she is cautious about being branded as a votary of *pennezhuthu*, as it might exclude her from the larger reading public. Thus the story functions against her claims about creativity. Ashita’s opinion about *pennezhuthu* is also not different from Chandramati’s:

In my case writing is a communication that happens between souls. Through writing a writer is touching the reader’s (*vayanakkaran*) heart/mind. One writes with one’s hand. There is no difference between a man’s hand and a woman’s hand. There is no need to explain the matters of heart/mind in relation to the body.

(34)

But Ashita’s writings are also about women’s experiences, and a writer touches the mind of the reader only through writing about these experiences. For a woman writer, it is the experience of her identity and body. Given this, how can it be possible to distinguish between body and experience? One of the most controversial woman writers, Madhavikkutty (Kamala Das) also does not approve of the term *pennezhuthu*, using the same argument. She says:

I just can’t tolerate the word. The use of that word insults all women. What kind of gender difference is there for women? There are organs which make woman a

woman. But nobody writes using those organs. Then why is it called *pennezhuthu*? (132–133)

Madhavikutty's comment articulates the general notions about women, gender and writing. This was the main criticism of *pennezhuthu*, a criticism of the fact that it distinguishes writings on the basis of the sex of the author. Showalter's argument embellishes this point, by asking whether there is any value in considering the sex of an author.

...although genius may be sexless, an artist's potential cannot be realised without the freedom to explore individual perceptions of truth. All women have been forced to interpret their experience in men's terms and have been intimidated into describing sensations that do not exist. How much they and we have lost as a result cannot yet be determined, but a new feminist criticism assumes that a woman writer's point of view will reflect authentic feminine experience to the degree that her society has allowed her to define it.<sup>27</sup>

B.M. Suhara also does not agree with the use of the terms *pennezhuthu*, feminism, feminist writing, etc. However, her story, "Bhranthu" (Madness) is another example of this contradiction, where she demonstrates how a housewife who takes a day off from her daily chores is labelled as a mad woman by her own husband.<sup>28</sup> This reverts us to Showalter's formulation:

...the relationship between women writers and the feminist movement has generally been strained. Women writers have had enough to contend with fighting

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<sup>27</sup> Elaine Showalter, ed. "Introduction," *Women's Liberation and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc., 1971) 5.

<sup>28</sup> Sridevi. K. Nair, ed. "B.M. Suhra," *Malayalathinte Kathakarikal* ( Kottayam: DC Books, 2002) 213-215.

for their own artistic autonomy without taking a public stand on behalf of feminism. Often they have sought to defend themselves against imputations of unwomanliness by repudiating their more radical and demanding sisters.<sup>29</sup>

Young writers like Priya A.S. and Sitara do not talk against the use of the term *pennezhuthu* although they do not say that what they write is *pennezhuthu*. Sitara says: “It is a term which is misunderstood the most, these days. Many people have distorted notions about *pennezhuthu*. According to me, *pennezhuthu* is writing that takes the side of women and women’s issues.”<sup>30</sup> This suggests that she understands the term as a critical category. Like modernism or post-modernism, it is also a category where it is the critics’ discretion to call a work modern, post-modern, women-writing or feminist writing. We do not have any writers who claim that their work does not come under post-modern literature.

What we have here, is four groups among women who write about the *pennezhuthu* controversy: women writers who are against *pennezhuthu* because they do not want to be excluded from the mainstream (Ashita, Chandramathi, Gracy, Madhavikkutty, B.M. Suhara), writers who do not claim or disclaim it but regard it as a legitimate critical category (Sitara, Priya A.S., Geetha Hiranyan), women writers who think that it is a powerful term that articulates the strength of such writing and attribute an all-encompassing character to it (Sarah Joseph, C.S. Chandrika), marginalized women whose

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<sup>29</sup> Elaine Showalter, ed. “Introduction,” *Women’s Liberation and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc., 1971) 4.

<sup>30</sup> Sridevi. K. Nair, ed. “Sitara. S,” *Malayalathinte Kathakarikal* ( Kottayam: DC Books, 2002) 188.

writings shook the foundations of middle class women writers and flattened the all-encompassing nature of *pennethuthu* by bringing out its exclusionary politics (C.K. Janu, Nalini Jameela).

In spite of the term's inadequacy as a critical category, and alleged exclusionary politics, *pennethuthu* has contributed towards deconstructing the gender-neutral concept of the literary writer and influenced the historiography of women writing. Writing women's literary history that happened as part of the *pennethuthu* controversy stressed the need to apply different criteria while studying or writing women's literary history. This was recommended not as a special allowance, but as a methodology to explore the possibilities of women's writing. This was to fill the gaping fissures which the dominant literary culture left within women-writing and its history. There was an upsurge in the re-publications of works by women-writers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century after this controversy, and many major publishing houses in Malayalam undertook such projects. The works of K. Saraswathamma (1919–1975), which had been long forgotten, were republished in the 1990s with a critical introduction highlighting the feminist aspect of her work. Similarly, the works of Rajalekshmi (1930–1965) also got republished during this time. Periodicals carried articles on these writers.<sup>31</sup> The refiguring of these two women writers and their works in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century is important as both were victims of the selective amnesia of the Malayalam literary patriarchy. Studies like *Keralathile Stree Munnettangalude*

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<sup>31</sup> It is also interesting to note that unlike their contemporaries, Balamaniamma or Lalithambika Antharjanam, these women did not restrict their discussion to motherhood or domesticity. By writing about education, the workplace, academics and politics, they opened up spaces that were closed for women generally.

*Charitram* <sup>32</sup> (*History of Women's Movement in Keralam*, 1998) by C.S. Chandrika, funded by the Kerala Sahitya Academy, were also undertaken around this time. Another development was the reservation of many major contemporary women-writers to have their works included in the category of *pennezhuthu*. Collections of stories by male writers focusing on women-characters also came out during this time. The collection *Zachariayude Penkathakal* <sup>33</sup> (*Women Stories by Zacharia*, 2001) is an apt example. Though the term *pennezhuthu* was not seriously viewed as a critical category in Keralam, it was from this point that a quest for versions of the history of women-writing emerged. Titles like K.P. Ramanunni's short story collection, *Purushavilapam* <sup>34</sup> (*He-Laments*) also attracted attention in this context for its clearly visible maleness and chauvinism.

Lalithambika Antharjanam, patronised and appreciated by the dominant literary history also become important in relation to this new historiography that followed the *pennezhuthu* controversy, which tried to view her writings in a different light. Although Antharjanam had limited her activities within the confines of the society and community, feminist historiography does not dismiss her as a conventional writer. This methodology renewed the interest in Antharjanam with new interpretations by looking at how even within these constraints, Antharjanam articulated subversions in subtle ways. For example, Antharjanam's criticism of the controversial character Tatrikkutti in "Pratikara Devatha" ("Goddess of Revenge") is always referred to as an instance of her anti-

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<sup>32</sup> C.S. Chandrika, *Keralathile Streemunnnettangalude Charitram* (Trissur: Kerala Sahitya Academy, 1998).

<sup>33</sup> Zachariah, *Zachariayude Penkathakal* (Kottayam: DC Books, 2001).

<sup>34</sup> "Purushavilapam" is a story where two men nostalgically remember their "loving" grandmothers and sweet lovers in their village against their modernised wives. They remember how those women considered them great and were at their service. K.P. Ramanunni, *Purushavilapam* (Trissur: Green Books, 2005).

feminist stand. She states: “Although it raised a furore, it did not show a right path. Dear sister, aim will not justify the path. While acknowledging your courage and self-respect, I reject you.”<sup>35</sup> This need not necessarily suggest the writer’s belief in male moral values. While writing or re-tracing the history of women-writing, what emerges importantly is not Antharjanam’s willingness to accept extant social prejudices, but her choice of the theme itself. By writing a story on a very controversial and historically important issue (especially for the women’s movement), the writer made sure that it was recorded, and not lost forever. Her own view is only of secondary importance to the historiographer. Reading these subtle subversions can bring out the mysteries within such writings and writers, which are otherwise cleverly camouflaged by dominant trends in literary history writing.

In the context of feminist historiography, *Women Writing in India* is a landmark work, which includes writings from popular as well as long-forgotten women writers, and provides a concrete theoretical foundation for feminist historiography. However, even at their best, these enterprises can only be representational with reference to regional literatures. In this sense, the new historiography that surfaced in the context of the *pennethuthu* controversy can be considered as regional efforts at recasting women’s writing. The revival and republication of K. Saraswatiamma’s and Rajalekshmi’s works not only added to the richness of women’s writing, but also brought out the exclusionary politics played by the dominant literary culture and the reasons behind it. Therefore, the

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<sup>35</sup> Lalithambika Antharjanam, “Prathikara Devatha,” *Thiranjedutha Kathakal* (Kottayam: Sahitya Pravarthaka Sahakarana Sangham, 1966).



revival was a leap made towards the excluded and neglected writers and their writings. Sarah Joseph, all through these years, maintained her *pennezhuthu* stand. She says that she has appropriated *pennezhuthu* as a crusade.<sup>36</sup> Sarah Joseph places herself in the lineage of women writers who were excluded and abused by the dominant culture. In the introduction to *Papathara* (1990), she proclaims:

Malayalam women writers were challenged and insulted when they questioned values of the dominant culture. Nobody said anything against them when they were occupied with *bhajana*, *kummi*, *thiruvathira*, romantic love, etc. But, Saraswatiamma, Rajalekshmi and Madhavikutty were stoned when they rebelled against their sexuality being decided and defined by the dominant culture. I am also choosing their path.<sup>37</sup>

Apart from Saraswatiamma and Rajalekshmi, Sarah Joseph considers Madhavikutty (Kamala Das) also as her predecessor, although Madhavikutty was not a victim to the selective amnesia of the dominant literary culture. However, she and her writings were abused and insulted by the dominant literary culture for another reason: for writing openly about women's desires and sexuality.

As Jancy James points out, "In the entire history of women's writing in Kerala, Saraswatiamma's is the most tragic case of the deliberate neglect of female genius."<sup>38</sup> Saraswatiamma, who was born to an upper-caste and reasonably wealthy family, did not lead a "normal" life. She was an educated, single, working woman, who lived alone and

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<sup>36</sup> Researcher's Interview with Sarah Joseph in May 2005.

<sup>37</sup> Sarah Joseph, *Papathara* (Trissur: Current Books, 1990) 7.

<sup>38</sup> Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha, *Women Writing in India: 600 BC to the Early Twentieth Century Vol I* (New Delhi: OUP, 2000) 165.

questioned the patriarchal values of society through her writings. She was not part of any movement. However, even after being the author of a novel, a play, several articles and about ninety short stories, her death was reported in newspapers as follows: “Palkulangara K. Saraswatiamma (Retired Local Fund Inspector) died at 7:45 pm on 26.12.75 in the General Hospital.”<sup>39</sup> There was no mention of her being a writer. This could also be because she had stopped writing about fifteen years before her death i.e., in 1960. However, her male contemporaries were never meted out such negligent treatment. Saraswatiamma had severely criticised existing patriarchal values. As a result, she was alienated in literary circles and was disregarded by the critics. She was rated by many as a *purushavidveshi* (man-hater). The reason for this response can be read in her own words as:

The social condition of the time was such that one had to accept the authority of man. A woman should always position herself below the man. I was not ready to accept this. I was ready not only to defend myself, but also to fight back. That’s why they call me a man hater. (1014)

Saraswatiamma consciously tried to change all notions that were traditionally ascribed to women—femininity, subservience, etc. She used sharp wit and sarcasm to criticize patriarchal values. While making fun of patriarchy, she also made fun of women characters who acted like puppets in the system. By adopting a style which underscores sarcasm, she surpassed the moulds of writings by women and women-writers. In her

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<sup>39</sup> K.S. Ravikumar, ed. *K. Saraswatiammayude Sampoorana Kritikal* (Kottayam: DC Books, 2001) 1023.

article, “Purushanmarillatha Lokam” (A World in Which There are No Men), Saraswatiamma writes about a situation when there is no man:

The ultimate truth is that a greater damage will be done to literature and language. There will not be any scope for romance if women remain without men. Think about the plight of literature without romance. Forget those who enter the fray of literature keeping their hatred towards men as an asset. (976)

Saraswatiamma was the first Malayalam woman writer who identified woman as a victim of male exploitation and called for open warfare against patriarchy. Her extrovert nature, bold opinions, free interactions, and lifestyle as a single working woman were not acceptable to society.

Another victim of exclusion and neglect, Rajalekshmi, was born in 1930 in Palakkad. She completed her Masters in Banaras Hindu University. Rajalekshmi’s life and work demonstrates the other side of the proposition that writing itself is an act that gives women access to the public sphere. Through her experience, it became clear that the act of writing, which could be viewed as an attempt by a woman writer to access the public sphere, is viewed by the public as the personal experience of the woman-writer. Unlike Saraswatiamma, Rajalekshmi wrote about lost love, relationships, extra-marital affairs/attractions, all of which were interpreted and consumed as her own experiences. Her novel, *Oru Vazhiyum Kure Nizhalukalum*,<sup>40</sup> (*A Path, Many Shadows*) won the Kerala Sahitya Academy award in 1960. Rajalekshmi committed suicide in 1965. In 1960, she requested to stop the publication of her novel *Uchaveyilum Ilam Nilavum* (*Afternoon Sun*

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<sup>40</sup> Rajalekshmi, *Oru Vazhiyum Kure Nizhalukalum* (Trissur: Current Books, 2002).

*and Moonlight*) while it was being serialised in *Mathrubhumi* Weekly. She burnt the manuscript of this novel before her death. Before committing suicide she wrote in a note: “I cannot help writing. I will continue writing if I am alive. When I write, there may be similarities and likenesses of incidents and lives which others may know.”<sup>41</sup> C.S. Chandrika notes that it is a significant lesson that no male writer was compelled to commit suicide in this society because he wrote about people around them (57). However, she was pushed into the folds of forgetfulness after some time. M.T. Vasudevan Nair, a famous Malayalam novelist, screen-play writer, and a Jnanapeeth awardee, in his introduction to her short stories, writes about Rajalekshmi’s death, that “the one who died is not a human being, but an artist.”<sup>42</sup> Although this underlines her acceptance as an artist or writer, it consciously underplays her identity as a woman. One can see that Rajalekshmi, who never proclaimed open warfare against patriarchy, is more liked and accepted than Saraswatiamma. By representing her as a loner who was depressed for unknown reasons (a characteristic feature of an artist), dominant literary history negates her importance as a woman writer.

Both Saraswatiamma and Rajalekshmi wrote about unconventional womanspaces like educational institutions, workplaces, libraries, etc. Saraswatiamma wrote a story titled “Ramani,” as a reply to Changampuzha Krishnapilla’s most famous work *Ramanan*.<sup>43</sup> She criticised the romantic notions and misogynistic attitude of the poet expressed in the

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<sup>41</sup> C.S. Chandrika, *Keralathile Streemunnnettangalude Charitram* (Trissur: Kerala Sahitya Academy, 1998) 57.

<sup>42</sup> M.T. Vasudevan Nair, “Ekantha Pathika,” *Rajalekshmiyude Kathakal* (Trissur: Current Books, 1993) xi.

<sup>43</sup> *Ramanan* is a lament on the death of Edappalli Raghavan Nair, a contemporary and friend of Changampuzha. *Ramanan* was written when Changampuzha was only twenty. The poem is of the pastoral elegy type.

work. This shows that she considered herself equal to the male writer, of equal calibre. However, it was difficult for the dominant literary culture to accept both these women as equal to any male writer of the time. The exclusion of them and their works from the literary history serves as an index of the exclusionary politics, the status of women as well as women writers, etc. Referring to such instances of exclusion, Elaine Showalter points out:

Because the literary professions were the first to be opened to women, the status of the woman writer has long served as an index of a society's views on female abilities and rights. Although writing has never been regarded as an unfeminine accomplishment, women writers have always encountered more critical resistance than men. This is so primarily because literary creativity has seemed to rival biological creativity in the most direct way. Normal female creativity, in other words, was expected to find its outlet in childbirth and maternity.<sup>44</sup>

The dominant literary public could not accept both Saraswatiamma and Rajalekshmi, as they showed more features of a writer than of a woman. The spaces that were opened up through their writings, distinct from the middle class domestic space, records the resistances of women while contesting for a space in the public. Therefore, these two women can be considered pioneers of opening up a space for women through the conflation of public and private spaces.

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<sup>44</sup> Elaine Showalter, ed. "Introduction," *Women's Liberation and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc., 1971) 3.

Madhavikkutty, one of the most controversial of all Malayalam women writers, is the first woman writer in Malayalam who articulated issues related to women's sexuality in literature. She was also born in a family where many had chosen writing as a career. Her mother Balamaniamma was a famous Malayalam poet. Madhavikkutty's autobiographical work *Ente Katha (My Story)* shook the foundations of Malayali morality. She was a fierce critic of morality, and attacked it in her writings. For instance,

There is a reason why I do not respect or consider the kind of morality that is circulated among us. The foundation of it is the transient body. The real morality should have human mind as its foundation. I view society and its morality as distorted things.<sup>45</sup>

She has also been attacked by the mainstream and excluded from it because of the nature of her writing. As Sarah Joseph puts it, in the new history which is written after reviewing the moments of women writing, Madhavikkutty's writing functions as a landmark. However, it is interesting to note that now, in the light of the *pennethuthu* controversy; Madhavikkutty is appropriated by dominant literary culture. An advertisement for a collection of short stories by Madhavikkutty which appeared in *Mathrubhumi Weekly* in 2006 reads:

Amidst those who attain contemporary status through asserting feminism through interviews and public statements, the feminine mind that reaffirms femininity through writing...Stories which fathom women's public and private sorrows

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<sup>45</sup> C.S. Chandrika, *Keralathile Streemunnnettangalude Charitram* (Trissur: Kerala Sahitya Academy, 1998) 58.

better than anyone else. Creations that reject male authority but do not travel to the poisonous poles of man-hating...<sup>46</sup>

Here, *pennethuthu* (which is blamed for all those ills mentioned in the advertisement) and Madhavikutty are juxtaposed. This juxtaposition, beyond its ability as an advertisement or comparison or judgement, functions as an attempt to appropriate the space created by the writer away from the dominant literary culture.

Unlike Saraswatiamma, Rajalekshmi, or Madhavikutty, who belonged to upper middle class families with access to education and literature, Sarah Joseph belonged to a middle class Christian family. She was born in 1945 in Trichur district. She got married when she was 14 years old. However, she continued her studies and started working as a teacher in a school. She completed her studies through correspondence courses, with Malayalam as her main subject. In 1978, she joined the collegiate service. She describes herself as “a college lecturer who has never attended college.”<sup>47</sup> She joined Govt. College Pattambi as a lecturer in Malayalam. By then, she had already started publishing stories in magazines. However, Pattambi became a turning point in her life as she involved herself in the activities of student groups and theatre groups. She became part of many progressive ideas and movements. She says that the Pattambi Government College had a major role in changing her life:

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<sup>46</sup> J. Devika and Mini Sukumar, “Making Space for Feminist Social Critique in Contemporary Kerala,” *EPW* (October 2006): 4472.

<sup>47</sup> Sarah Joseph, “Ormakal Chitrashalabhangalalla,” *Bhashaposhini* Varshikapathippu (2005): 20.

Pattambi, which was coloured in blood red with the strength of revolutionary movements and unified vigour of the leftist movement, is responsible for the deep changes that happened in my life. (20)

She became active in campus theatre along with her other colleagues. In 1985, a women's organization named "Manushi" was formed in Pattambi College and Sarah Joseph was one of its founder members.<sup>48</sup> Manushi, showed interests in women's issues beyond the capacities of a campus organization. Manushi took up issues like the case of Balamani from Trissur, who was expelled from the region and stripped in public by upper caste men over a land issue. Manushi also looked into dowry deaths, the rape of a fifteen year old girl in Muthalamada, beauty contests, and organised protests and strikes. Sarah Joseph's involvement as a feminist activist during this period marks a major shift in her writing career.

Sarah Joseph falls into this lineage of mistreated women writers like Saraswatiamma, Rajalekshmi and Madhavikutty who fought against patriarchal structures of society, because she has also experienced exclusion, insult and appropriation as a writer. As a writer who has written for the past four decades, her writings have undergone various changes. We can see many phases in her writing where her ideology changes in keeping with her involvement in the feminist movement and in social activism. One can identify three phases in Sarah Joseph's writing career. These cannot be categorized as three clearly distinct phases as we can see that they overlap. However, her early short stories

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<sup>48</sup> C.S. Chandrika, "Keralathinte Stree Charithram," *Malayalam*, (Thulam 1175): 196-226.



written in the '70s and early '80s, feminist stories written in the late '80s and '90s, and her novel phase which started in the late '90s and continues till date, can be taken as three different phases. These phases also share similarities with Showalter's proposition of the three phases of women-writing—feminine, feminist, and female phases—which I have discussed earlier in this chapter. Showalter's proposition of three phases denotes different degrees of participation in the public sphere, with the first suggesting being within the confines of allotted spaces, the second phase denoting resistance and protest to access other spaces, and the third one signifying a blend of many spaces in search for a space of their (women's) own. While Showalter's formulation of the three phases refers to women writers in Britain, the three phases of Sarah Joseph's work signify different phases in her writing career. The first phase of her writing career can be traced in her early short stories where the narrative is confined to the domestic sphere. The feminist short stories that appeared in *Papathara* and subsequent collections can be regarded as the second phase. The third phase of writings includes her later writings—mainly the novels. Sarah Joseph's works will be analysed in the next three chapters to map the growth of these spaces and themes in search of a womanspace.

## Chapter 2

### Towards a Feminist Self

In this chapter, I examine the short stories written by Sarah Joseph, in an attempt to sketch the trajectory of her writings, from stories that are confined to the private sphere to those which take private matters to the realm of public scrutiny. More than concentrating on the aspect of genre, as a much sought-after genre for women writers; the chapter concentrates on the thematic as well as stylistic developments in relation to the public/private spheres and their conflation into womanspace in the stories. These stories constitute the first two phases of her writing career.<sup>1</sup> The stories of the first phase are written from the 1970s to the early 1980s, whereas the stories of the second phase are written from the late 1980s to the 1990s. The first set of stories belong to three short story collections—*Manassile Tee Matram* (1977), *Kadinte Sangeetam* (1979) and *Nanmatinmakalude Vriksham* (1989). The second phase includes stories that have appeared in four short story collections—*Papathara* (1990), *Nilavu Ariyunnu* (1994), *Oduvilathe Sooryakanthi* (1998) and *Kadithu Kandayo Kantha* (2001). Analysing these short stories gives us a picture of the changes that have been wrought in the writer's ideology, her involvement in the feminist movement, activism, notions on the function/role of literature and writer, etc. The first phase of the stories was written before the writer became conscious of her feminist self. In the stories of the second phase, her feminist self and ideology are consciously articulated. The changes in the trajectory of

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<sup>1</sup> I have mentioned this in the previous chapter in relation to Showalter's division of the three phases of women-writing.

her writing not only indicate the development in her writing, but also represent changes that occurred in the writings of women in Malayalam.

One could use the analogies of “feminine” and “feminist” phases employed by Elaine Showalter to index these two different phases.<sup>2</sup> The stories from the first phase are confined to the narration of an unproblematic private sphere. The stories of the second phase portray characters who try to come out of the set frames of the private, and subsequently problematize the public/private bifurcation. In this chapter, I try to analyse the different ways in which the writer maps different kinds of spaces occupied by women in her writings. The stories, in my opinion, provide crucial insight into the structuring of female identity as well as textualisation of women’s worlds. The analysis is divided into two sections: the first section deals with the early short stories of the writer and the second section looks at what I have referred to as the second phase.

## **Section I**

### **“When Sarah Joseph was not a Feminist”<sup>3</sup>**

Early stories are a practicing school. A beginning to tell stories. One does not know what to say or how to say. Whatever comes out is made into a story. The wildness and beauty of an untamed and unpruned bamboo grove! As the one who tells the story grows and changes, stories inside the mind too grow and change.

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<sup>2</sup> Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

<sup>3</sup> Title used by V.R. Sudheesh, a Malayalam critic, in his introduction to the republication of early stories of Sarah Joseph, “Sarah Joseph Feminist Allatha Kalathu,” *Kadinte Sangeetham* (Kozhikode: Olive Publications, 2001) 15.

My stories too have grown and changed. There have been changes in the structure, narrative style, ideology, outlook etc. Thus, journeying through one's stories become journeying through one's life itself.<sup>4</sup>

Sarah Joseph writes this about her early stories in one of the republications of her early short story collection. Her statement acknowledges the transformations in her writings as a result of change in ideology, outlook and activism. A journey through her writing, as she puts it, gives us a picture of the making of a woman writer within a particular social milieu. The initial writings of Sarah Joseph were no different from stories that emerged in the mainstream. However, from the history of women writing and the feminist movement in Keralam, it is quite obvious that writing itself was equivalent to activism. The language in these early stories is rich with imagery, although it still had not acquired the sharpness and spontaneity seen in her later writings. These stories portray characters that are caught up in the miseries of life. There are few, if any, attempts to escape from the more traditional frames. The narrative tackles predictable everyday situations of domestic life and records responses of the characters to these situations. Seemanthini Niranjana points out that these narratives are very important in relation to mapping women's worlds. According to her, such writings from women effect a narrativization of ordinary everyday life, participating in its making as well.<sup>5</sup> Within this narrativization, we see how women, who are shaped by tradition and social structure, operate within these contours, and how they comprehend the construction of their own identity. I see, in this light, the early stories of Sarah Joseph as making a statement about the patriarchal, familial

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<sup>4</sup> Sarah Joseph, "Adyakala Kathakal Veendum Vayikkumbol," ("While Reading the Early Stories Again") *Kadinte Sangeetham* (Kozhikode: Olive Publications, 2001) 13.

<sup>5</sup> Seemanthini Niranjana, "Themes of Femininity: Notes on the 'World' of Women's Fiction," *New Quest* (March-April 1989): 74.

ideology and the norms of domesticity. They are captured in her writing about the curbs on space, movement and time in the lives of women.

The character Vimala in “Manassile Tee Matram”<sup>6</sup> (“Only the Fire in the Mind”) keeps encouraging her husband to write and not to allow his growth to be stunted by the monotony of routine life. He is often heard saying that he does not have any peace of mind. He goes out for work every day, visits places, but continues to complain. He realizes, in time, that she is the only one who understands him, but never makes an effort to understand her. She does the daily chores at home, goes to school for work, and comes back home to resume her work. She thinks this is not the life she wants, but consoles herself by saying that she is helpless.

I am losing myself. I am being lost to myself. Under the water pipe when I wash vessels, near the kiln, on the verandas of primary classes, in the tiring culturelessness of the bedroom, I am losing myself bit by bit. (21)

Vimala’s constant reminder to her husband not to lose his self, is ironically indicative of the loss of her own self. It is also a kind of resignation from her part to do anything to revive it. The story ends when the house catches fire with Vimala inside. Her husband, who was not there, comes to see the house on fire. Vimala hears her husband shouting her name miserably. But she makes no effort to escape. She says: “I don’t feel like escaping, dear! Anyway, what would I get from escaping?” (23) This denial and neglect of one’s own self here can be seen as a site of resistance. The very image of the house and Vimala

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<sup>6</sup> Sarah Joseph, *Kadinte Sangeetham* (Kozhikode: Olive Publications, 2001).

stand as symbols of the domestic sphere, while her husband who comes from outside symbolises the public sphere. Vimala's husband's feelings have an outlet in this domestic space, whereas Vimala's fears and sorrows have to burn with the house.

Similarly, in "Mazha,"<sup>7</sup> (Rain) Padma too shares the feeling of complete helplessness. She knows that she is ill-treated by her husband all the time. Once when she decides to stand in the rain against her husband's will, he closes the door on her face. He says: "Women should not have such arrogance." (67) She contemplates death, but decides to live for her children.

I don't have any strength to take this neglect. She murmurs. How insignificant am I here! How lonely is it here! God! She lifted her hands. I will die. She thought. My poor children! There is no one for them. (68)

The story presents the misery of a woman within the family who does not have any choice but to stay back. "Swapnathinte Thoovalukal"<sup>8</sup> ("Feathers of Dream") portrays another helpless figure, Satya, who waits for her husband's permission to visit her own mother. He takes her along finally, abusing her verbally all the way. He walks in the front, maintaining quite a distance from her and the children.

He starts walking fast. So fast that she or the children cannot reach near him! Is this distance necessary? She asks herself. Is such a big distance really necessary between him and them? (115)

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<sup>7</sup> Sarah Joseph, *Kadinte Sangeetham* (Kottayam: DC Books, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Sarah Joseph, *Kadinte Sangeetham* (Kottayam: DC Books, 2005).

Both these stories narrate the helplessness of women and the male domination that they experience within the institution of the family. However, these are not presented strictly as problems of male domination, but as nameless sorrows combined with the existential troubles of women. More than describing the domestic chores or women's labour, these stories focus on women's personal sorrows that come from confinement and neglect. Therefore, the domestic space is presented as a space that represses these feelings of women, leaving them bereft of articulation.

In "Oru Uchakku Shesham"<sup>9</sup> ("Following an Afternoon") once again, we find a character caught up in these spaces. The protagonist, tired of her routine life, decides to pull all the furniture to the middle of the room one afternoon in her unbearable wish to see a change. She says: "A change is always good. Very good. But until the monotony at the end of every change is disturbed, one will not experience peace." (101) Boredom and monotony are presented as congruous with family/domestic space. The "housewife" becomes an important image in the narrativization of domestic space with an educated, financially independent working woman (though not present in the narrative), presented as an alternative.

Similarly, Krishna in "File-ukal"<sup>10</sup> ("Files") fights with her husband for coming home from the office every evening with a bundle of files. She complains that he does not show any interest in household activities. This is a typical situation in mainstream writing.

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<sup>9</sup> Sarah Joseph, *Kadinte Sangeetham* (Kottayam: DC Books, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> Sarah Joseph, *Kadinte Sangeetham* (Kozhikode: Olive Publications, 2001).

Sarah Joseph also does not seem to give fresh dimension to the old story. The story, however, is written from the point of view of the husband. He calls Krishna's brother to complain about her. Towards the end, we see him cooling down his anger on seeing Krishna. He sees her shapely figure and finds her attempts to become a mature housewife, funny. Krishna's femininity rescues her from her husband's anger. Here, femininity is not presented as "that which is marginalised by the patriarchal symbolic order"<sup>11</sup> as Julia Kristeva puts it. Femininity is presented here as power since it is valued by patriarchy as a virtue. Though it is a quality that may be presented as empowering, it actually defines and confines one's movements.

"Dinantham"<sup>12</sup> ("End of a Day") is a story that is different from these stories. The protagonist is a woman who is divorced from her husband who is also her colleague. She feels relieved at the decision, whereas her husband feels gloomy and tired. What irritates her more is people's attitude in general. She thinks:

People were just looking only at them. She felt that people do not have individual concerns, but only one concern, which is about her and Jayadevan. What is the need for people to be so concerned about her and Jayadevan? (47)

Her husband tries to be nice to her, thinking she will not be able to manage alone. She finds it unbearable when he repeatedly asks whether she is sad. She says she does not feel sad or happy. The sympathy and concern, combined with scorn, exhibited by people towards a woman who decides to live alone is effectively presented in the story.

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<sup>11</sup> Toril Moi, "Feminist, Female, Feminine," *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*, eds. Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (London: Macmillan, 1989) 125.

<sup>12</sup> Sarah Joseph, *Kadinte Sangeetham* (Kozhikode: Olive Publications, 2001).



Although the problems are presented as psychological dilemmas of individual characters, together, these stories underscore the universality of women's experience as housewives, mothers, and other familial roles. Almost all characters belong to the middle class, and spend most of their time inside the home.

In spite of presenting a number of women characters as completely helpless and powerless, these stories touch upon the discourse of femininity, representations of power structures, control and submission, within the private sphere. As Niranjana points out, "the effectivity of women's fiction lies in its projection of the everyday world as consensual, disallowing or papering over the cracks in social discourses."<sup>13</sup> Even those stories which do not have female protagonists attempt to present male perspectives in a women's way. Sarah Joseph has written many stories in the early phase with male protagonists. Stories like "Jwala" ("Flame"), "Nishabdatha" ("Silence"), "Sayahnam" ("Evening"), and "Kadakkilikal" ("Birds") have male protagonists, and these take up themes like old age, parental love, lust, revenge, etc. Her stories "Tazhvara" ("Valley") Parts I and II, are an effective portrayal of the relationship between father and son. These stories also include public places like the market, roads, toddy shops, etc., as spaces occupied and used by male characters. It is important to keep in mind the period when these early stories were written. It is a decade after K. Saraswatamma stopped writing, and it was also the period during which writers like Rajalekshmi, Lalithambika Antharjanam and Kamala Das were writing. The short story had not yet emerged as one

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<sup>13</sup> Seemanthini Niranjana, "Themes of Femininity: Notes on the 'World' of Women's Fiction," *New Quest* (March-April 1989): 85.

of the most popular genres. Male writers dominated the literary field through the use of nuanced narrative techniques and styles. Kamala Das was the only woman writer who invited controversy by writing about sexuality, explicitly. Sarah Joseph wrote during a time when one's writing was not acknowledged as part of a person's politics. So, the writings reflect a notion of literature as part of the creative pains of a writer.

These stories, which can be called the pre-feminist stories of Sarah Joseph, were not popular or widely read in the '70s and the '80s which was the time when they were written and published in the periodicals. Sarah Joseph too was not known to many as a writer. These stories were published as collections only by the '80s, after she had begun to gain popularity as an activist. Most of the early stories published in periodicals are not available now. The three collections, *Manassile Tee Matram (Only the Fire in the Mind)*, *Kadinte Sangeetam (Music of the Forest)* and *Nanmatinmakalude Vriksham (The Tree of Virtue and Vice)*, are out of print. However, republications of these stories have come out in two collections, since. One of the main republications titled *Kadinte Sangeetham (Music of the Forest)* appeared in 2001 with an introduction by V.R. Sudheesh, a critic and writer. The introduction by Sudheesh is titled "When Sarah Joseph was not a Feminist." It is quite clear from this title that it is the *pennezhuthu* controversy and subsequent feminist assertions that had led to such a nostalgic glance at the early stories written by Sarah Joseph, which did not talk about gender identity explicitly. These stories as well as their republication should be read in relation to the *pennezhuthu* debate in Malayalam, and regarded as signs of the evolving of Sarah Joseph, an icon of *pennezhuthu* writing. The stories become relevant primarily in relation to her later

stories/writings, and are reflective of the reading public's changed attitude towards her initial writings, when the writer and her writings took turns which the larger public did not approve of. Sarah Joseph started writing in the early '70s. Her first short-story collection *Manassile Tee Matram* was published in 1977, followed by *Kadinte Sangeetham* in 1979 and *Nanmathinmakalude Vriksham* in 1989. We see that most of the stories in these collections are different from the stories that appeared in *Papathara* (1990), thereby marking the beginning of the *pennezhuthu* era. The republication along with V.R. Sudheesh's introduction locates the politics of this "nostalgia" on the part of "malestream" public. The aim here is to understand how these stories circulate as part of the attempt to criticise the feminist self of the writer. The feminist writings are said to have an agenda, whereas those which are not, are considered more creative.

The republication of the collection *Kadinte Sangeetham* (2001) appeared after Sarah Joseph received critical acclaim through her first novel, *Alahayude Penmakkal* (*The Daughters of Alaha*) and proved that she was "not merely a feminist writer" as classified by the mainstream public. To mark this successful phase of the writer's career we see in the first page a few lines from *Alahayude Penmakkal* in Sarah Joseph's own handwriting.

The Amara creeper grew like that. Now is the blooming season for it. White and violet coloured flowers. Black flies. Blue bumblebees. Green coloured breeze.

Welcome to this Amara pandal, all of you.<sup>14</sup>

There is a quiet suggestion that these initial stories are her beautiful "Amara pandal." However, she says that she did not initiate the idea of republishing and that it was the

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<sup>14</sup> Sarah Joseph, *Kadinte Sangeetham* (Kozhikode: Olive Publications, 2001) 12.

idea of V.R. Sudheesh. Sudheesh, in his introduction to the republished stories, titled “Sarah Joseph, Feminist Allatha Kalathu” (“When Sarah Joseph was not a Feminist”), underscores the politics behind the republication, obvious. He writes:

The stories in the collections *Manassile Tee Matram*, *Kadinte Sangeetham* were written during the 1970s. It was a time when feminism and *pennezhuthu* or feminist readings and women’s movements were not active in Malayalam. The stories Sarah Joseph poetically wrote during this time were on false notes of conjugal life and broken love affairs. The focus of these stories is the troubled and boring lives of women who could not afford to have a self. The troubled souls of women in silence are portrayed in these stories. In the ’80s, when women’s movements started in Keralam, the writings and outlook of Sarah Joseph too started changing. In stories like “Oro Ezhuthukariyude Ullilum,” “Muditheyyamurayunnu,” “Papathara,” “Dambatyam,” which fought against the patriarchal system, a language that saw men as enemies started to show up.<sup>15</sup>

V.R. Sudheesh’s introduction pronounces his preference for the pre-feminist self of Sarah Joseph. He also appreciates the later phase of Sarah Joseph’s writing (novels) which speaks of larger power structures in society, not just the monolithic patriarchal structure. He calls the women characters of the early stories, “panic-stricken women.” (17) Women’s problems are largely articulated in an existential style here, according to Sudheesh and he prefers it to her feminist writings which states women’s issues more clearly and strongly. The writer, we can see, is aware of his preferences when she writes:

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<sup>15</sup> Sarah Joseph, *Kadinte Sangeetham* (Kozhikode: Olive Publications, 2001) 16.

At least some people have expressed their opinion that early stories like “Kadinte Sangeethan,” “Train,” “Kadakkilikal” are better than the stories from collections like *Papathara*. Those people have a dislike of bringing feminist ideologies into stories. For me, I see early stories as the reasons for the kind of stories which appeared in *Papathara*. (14)

It becomes clear, in other words, that there is an anti-feminist agenda behind the republishing of these stories and the writer is aware of that. While examining different layers of the public and private spheres in Sarah Joseph’s writings, we see how these stories play an important role by demonstrating the more distinct and secluded family/domestic sphere. The stories do not necessarily have female protagonists. There are male protagonists: old men, children, men who suffer from existential problems, etc. However, women characters who are confined to the domestic space appear frequently even in these stories. Unlike in her later writings, where gender and community identities become significant, the take on women’s lives in her early short stories adheres more to a liberal humanist note. Objecting to the profusion of women-characters in her later stories, Sudheesh says, “All of them happen to be born as women.” (17) Such contentions spell out the kind of exclusion that the writer was subject to as a feminist writer. Recasting her as a better writer during her pre-feminist writing phase is one way in which the feminist self of Sarah Joseph is questioned. In his article “Kadukal Thirichupidikkuka” (“Recapture the Forests”), Dr. S.S. Sreekumar takes the same line as V.R Sudheesh. He writes:

When I think from a reader's position, I like the Sarah Joseph who wrote *Kadinte Sangeetham*, *Manassile Tee Matram*, and *Nanmathinmakalude Vriksham*. She would say that it was just a practice field of her literary ventures like *Papathara*. She might feel uncomfortable at the thought that the women in her early writings were mere prototypes of tolerance. Stories like "Muditheyyamurayunnu" portray women who fight back and have self awareness. But in reality, these slogan-shouting stories suppress a bigger social movement by exhibiting fake revolutionary characteristics.<sup>16</sup>

He finds the second and third phases of Sarah Joseph's writings which include novels like *Alahayude Penmakal*, "consolation prizes" for a state like Keralam where women are exploited physically and culturally. According to him:

Even in the phase of her sincere attachment to feminist ideology, Sarah Joseph could not write stories like "Mazha" and "Swapnathinte Thoovalukal"<sup>17</sup> which explore the intensity of male-domination. (52)

While concluding, he wishes she regains enough strength to win back those forests. But in reply to these criticisms, Sarah Joseph says that not assuming a position can also be a political position. As a study which traces the thematic as well as ideological shifts in Sarah Joseph's writings, examining the nature of her early stories is crucial. In the literary scenario of Keralam however, these stories were re-discovered and discussed mainly in contrast with her *pennezhuthu* stories, to establish that the early stories were more creative and enjoyable.

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<sup>16</sup> S.S. Sreekumar, "Kadukal Thirichupidikkuka," *Grandhalokam* (April 2005) 50-52.

<sup>17</sup> Stories in the early collection.

## Section II

### “To Write Fearlessly about the World of Women”<sup>18</sup>

The second phase (*pennezhuthu*) of Sarah Joseph’s writing demonstrates the function of women-writing as a feminist practice. Written during and after her days in Pattambi and her involvement in Manushi’s activities, these stories show an activist approach to women’s issues. The stories try to occupy spaces that were not allowed for a woman to inhabit, as different from the inescapable monotonous life of women narrated in the stories of the first phase. These stories also demonstrate how the writer’s direct involvement with women’s lives through activism and engagement with feminist theory reframed her writing. This phase includes four short story collections—*Papathara* (1990), *Nilavu Ariyunnu* (1994), *Oduvilathe Sooryakanthi* (1998), and *Kadithu Kandayo Kantha* (2001). The stories in these collections locate women’s lives within its correct politics consciously, yet spontaneously. They explore the multiple roles of women such as child, wife, mother, sexual companion, worker, and political subject in the frames of family, marriage, love, domesticity, sexuality, caste, aesthetics, etc.

Through these writings which come under *pennezhuthu* rubric, what Sarah Joseph brings into discussion is an adapted version of second wave feminism in the West. Differing from the normally accepted notion that women write about “the private sphere,” Sarah Joseph’s women characters of the later writings politicised the private sphere, blurring the borderlines of the accepted bifurcation between private and public. By writing about

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<sup>18</sup> Quote from Sarah Joseph in Sarah Joseph, *Papathara* (Trissur: Current Books, 1990) 7.

the politics of family, marriage, sexuality, body, love, and the domestic sphere, Sarah Joseph appropriates the slogan, “personal is political” in her own terms, thus opening up a politicization of the private space. It is interesting to note that the usual criticism that women write only about the private sphere is dismantled not by writing about the public or by inscribing the private according to mainstream frames, but by entirely rewriting the private. Joan B. Landes states the function of feminism as follows:

Feminism offered women a public language for private despair. Consciousness-raising groups and feminist organizations provided women a route out of private isolation and into public activism. Breaking the silence of personal life, feminists sought the grounds for a more egalitarian private and public sphere.<sup>19</sup>

This function is applicable to women writing also. The second phase writings of Sarah Joseph, as she admits, are a follow-up to her activism. It is captivating to see the connections and differences of these two phases separated by the activism phase and the way the literary public (predominantly male) perceives these changes. Her profession as an academic appears to have assisted her to incorporate ideological and theoretical developments into her creative work.

When a person changes his/her writing, what is reflected is a change in attitude regarding the act of writing itself. It includes re-defining oneself, one’s writing, the function of writing, the ideology behind it, and notions of aesthetics. However, in the case of a writer like Sarah Joseph, the major reworking was to deconstruct the notion of the *ezhuthukari*

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<sup>19</sup> Joan B. Landes, ed. “Introduction,” *Feminism, the Public and the Private* (Oxford: OUP, 1998) 1.



(woman-writer) itself. The construction of the image of the *ezhuthukari* as an educated, beautiful, and apolitical self created by the *ezhuthukaran* (male-writer) or the dominant values that produce him, had to be dismantled first.

In the first story of the groundbreaking collection *Papathara*– “Oro Ezhuthukariyude Ullilum” (“Inside Every Woman-Writer”)–the woman-writer is a middle-class housewife who is preparing to go to her aunt’s place (an imaginary site), where she has a room of her own to sit and write. Although her husband reminds her that this is a figment of her own imagination and calls her a mad woman, she makes plans to go to Mabel aunt’s place before he returns from the office. She thinks to herself:

I am planning to make a very serious theme into a novel. There are unclear shadows of it in the corridors. It makes me restless ... Purushothaman will order me to continue writing the way I have always written. Whatever I have written so far are just a few poems of praise, prayer songs, and love songs.<sup>20</sup>

This story marks a shift in ideology in women-writing and Sarah Joseph’s own writings. The narration describes her writings, her aspirations in writing, her ambitions and so on. I see this story, in some sense, as directly reflecting Virginia Woolf’s call, “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.”<sup>21</sup>, in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929). The protagonist in the story is in search of a room of her own to sit and write:

I cannot bring out my words without extreme privacy. What I want is a labour room. A room which is not attached to anything, except a single door out.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Sarah Joseph, *Papathara* (Trissur: Current Books, 1990) 52.

<sup>21</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own, Three Guineas* (Oxford: OUP, 1998) 4.

<sup>22</sup> Sarah Joseph, *Papathara* (Trissur: Current Books, 1990) 52.

Here, we see a woman who is in search of a space of her own, in an attempt to abandon the space allotted to her. However, the protagonist in Sarah Joseph's story is not shown as achieving that. Nevertheless, what she ultimately finds is inconsequential; the story gives importance to the aspect of protest and revolt. For a woman, a space of one's own is a hope or a dream. Along with emphasising the importance of having one's own space, the story also disowns existing women's writings patronised by the dominant reading public, and deconstructs the notion of the silent, apolitical woman writer.

Consider Paul Zachariah's "Orezhuthukari Apaharikkappedunnu"<sup>23</sup> ("A Woman-Writer Gets Kidnapped"), where the woman-writer is a young, beautiful woman who has had three love affairs. She lives alone. The narration mainly focuses on her beauty. There is no mention of her writings; what she writes or; why she writes. *Ezhuthukari* is just a romanticised self of a woman. The only thing she is shown as writing is a letter to one of her lovers. A major part of the narration deals with her meetings with ex-lovers, her beauty and her body. Zachariah's character represents the image of a woman writer fantasized by the dominant literary culture, while the woman writer in Sarah Joseph's "Oro Ezhuthukariyude Ullilum", deconstructs this image with one of a non-glamorous mad woman. We may remember films like *Meghamalhar*<sup>24</sup> which juxtapose the image of a woman writer promoted by the dominant patriarchal culture and a *penneshuthu* writer, to finally conclude that the non-feminist writer is more talented and creative. Sarah

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<sup>23</sup> Paul Zachariah is a much-acknowledged male-writer in Malayalam. Zachariah, *Zachariahude Penkathakal* (Kottayam: DC Books, 2001).

<sup>24</sup> *Meghamalhar*, Malayalam movie directed by Kamal which came out in 2001.

Joseph's story, we could say, is reminiscent of ideas put forward by *Madwoman in the Attic*.<sup>25</sup>

Another of her stories, "Orezhuthukari Swayam Vimarshanam Nadathunnu" ("A Woman-writer Criticises Herself"), forwards an apolitical, aesthetic woman-writer, Nileena Mathai, who reproduces dominant values.<sup>26</sup> She is the person who proclaims herself to be on the side of beauty/aesthetics, to those who come to raid her house during the Emergency,<sup>27</sup> when asked whose side she is on. During Operation Blue Star<sup>28</sup> in 1984, she writes a poem about a blue diamond which her Swedish friend sent her. During the Indo-China war of 1962, she speaks of the dishes that can be made from macaroni. These articulate how the writer's concerns are shaped and maintained by the dominant society. In Sarah Joseph's words:

She chose silence when tribal people were beaten up in the streets of cities. She chose ignorance when Janu<sup>29</sup> stood there carrying her dear one's dead body without having a place to bury it. "Janu? Who is that woman?" (28)

Here, she tries to criticise not just a privileged woman-writer who is completely ignorant of what is happening around her, but the dominant male-oriented public sphere which

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<sup>25</sup> The authors juxtapose the ideal angelic women and rebellious unkempt women in their discussion about Victorian literature. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

<sup>26</sup> Sarah Joseph, *Kadithu Kandayo Kantha* (Trissur: Cosmo Books, 2001).

<sup>27</sup> The Emergency refers to several states of emergency around the world. The Emergency in India was a 21-month period, from June 1975 to March 1977, when President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed declared a state of emergency upon advice by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, which bestowed on her the power to rule by decree, suspending civil liberties and elections. This was one of the most controversial political conditions in independent India. Indira Gandhi and her party lost in the 1977 elections, following this.

<sup>28</sup> Operation Blue Star in 1984 was a military operation ordered by Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister, to remove Sikh separatists who were allegedly amassing weapons in the Golden Temple at Amritsar.

<sup>29</sup> C.K. Janu, leader of Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha, is an important figure in Keralam's socio-political scenario who fights against the injustices of State and dominant culture on Adivasis.

encourages her and praises her for being so. Nileena Mathai is made unfit for the public sphere by the public sphere itself; they contain her by offering her celebrity-status. This story is at time cited as an instance of where a feminist criticises a woman writer/woman. Sarah Joseph responds to this as follows: “I do not believe that women are beyond criticism. A woman should deconstruct her own self which is constructed through incessant conditioning.”<sup>30</sup>

“Ezhuthimaykunnu Lokavum” (“The World too Writes and Erases”) is another story written by Sarah Joseph on the theme of the woman-writer. It is about an old woman-writer, who has been long forgotten, who is on her death bed.<sup>31</sup> Kalyaniamma, the writer, lives alone and is taken care of by a servant woman. Kalyaniamma is most of the time in a half-conscious state. She keeps reciting poems. The last element of her creative energy is left unrecorded and unwritten. The servant becomes irritated with the old woman’s recitations, but she is the only one left for Kalyaniamma to show her emotions to. We see the reporters from a TV channel arriving in pursuit of interviews from the dying writer. The servant goes out to buy something as they may have guests and the TV people come in when the servant is not there. They take photos, and honour her with silk, as she sits there not knowing what is going on. These stories mark the different states of women-writers – the non-established, mad woman-writer in “Oro Ezhuthukariyude Ullilum”, the apolitical, aesthetic woman-writer in “Orezhuthukari Swayam Vimarshanam Nadathunnu” and the ignored, long-forgotten woman-writer who gets some token

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<sup>30</sup> My interview with Sarah Joseph in May 2006 (unpublished).

<sup>31</sup> Sarah Joseph, *Kadithu Kandayo Kantha* (Trissur: Cosmo Books, 2001).

appreciation in “Ezhuthimaykunnu Lokavum.” And this indeed is the main shift that is seen in the second phase of Sarah Joseph’s writing—the emergence of a woman-writer. Different facades of the act of writing and what it means for a woman are explored in these stories. In the early stories, we see women who encourage their husbands to write. Here, the understanding of the role of a woman writer is more as a socially responsible individual. It does not recommend the reproduction of existing values. In her “Introduction” to *Papathara* she makes this clear:

I am proud of being born a woman. I think it is lucky to be living in a time which listens to the promises of women. Because I am not a male writer (*ezhuthukaran*), I do not have to reproduce existing dominant values. Such writing is against woman, as it is against those who belong to lower castes, as it is against those who belong to a different race and colour. My duty is to write fearlessly about the world of women where women do not have any right over their own body as a result of male domination. Protest against dominant values. Rewrite values and lives. There are millions and millions of people who protest against discriminations done in the name of race, caste, class and clan. The realisation that I am one among them is the pride that I cherish as a woman-writer (*ezhuthukari*).<sup>32</sup>

The new role assumed as a responsible woman writer reviews existing spatial patterns in society and intervenes so as to disturb the gendered social order. As a result, the stories explore the private/public fold, and tread on sub-spaces like private, personal, domestic, social, and political, in search of a “womanspace.”

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<sup>32</sup> Sarah Joseph, *Papathara* (Trissur: Current Books, 1990) 7.

Similar to the agendas of second wave feminism in the West, Sarah Joseph's *penneshuthu* stories make, "Personal is political" apparent in operation. These stories articulate and politicise women's problems "that have no name", which are only narrativized in the early stories. The narrativization in the second phase engages the private sphere and related experiences, in an attempt to expand women's realms. In the effort to give articulation to the so-called private issues in the public sphere, the stories of the second phase take family, notions of conjugality, and the institution of marriage, love and women's sexuality as important themes.

The family is one of the spaces that underwent and is still undergoing rapid reconstruction in women's writing to articulate the reality of sexual subordination. In a modern society, the family is one of the most effective institutions exercising control over individuals. The state, as well as patriarchal society, uses this institution to the maximum to set up a social order as per the convenience of the dominant culture. Marriage, sexuality, notions of conjugality, etc. come within the purview of this institution. A liberal view of the family remains dominant and sees it as the unquestioned core of social life; as a space which needs to be kept apart yet protected from the public sphere. Feminists' notion of the family goes against this view and understands it as one of the most oppressive sites for women. The development of the notion of family in feminist ideology as an oppressive site can be explained as follows:

As feminist knowledge developed and became more sophisticated throughout the 1970s, the family came to be an important object of analysis. For many, it was the crucial site of women's oppression, the space where, unheeded by the world

outside, women were at the mercy of fathers or husbands; where the law of 'patriarchy' held its most primitive form. Feminism's scrutiny of the 'private' sphere was one of the things it considered to be unique about 'sexual politics'; that social arrangements notionally based on kinship and romantic love could be viewed askance as part of patriarchy's repressive regime.<sup>33</sup>

The second phase stories of Sarah Joseph explore conjugality, love, marriage and sexuality as sites of exploitation within the family.

One of the very first stories that discuss family as a decayed system is "Scooter"<sup>34</sup> which was published in the collection *Papathara*. The scooter, a middle class nuclear family vehicle of the '80s, is used as a symbol of the family. The family comprises the husband, wife and their child, where the only emotion the couple shares is hatred. He finds her disgusting because of her fast fading beauty. She feels irritated with him as he never offers her a hand while carrying the child. In one instance in the story, they are off on a picnic, but the scooter, which is very old, breaks down in the middle of the journey. Picnic is tacitly accepted as a modern symbol associated with the nuclear family, but the vehicle, figuratively as well, meant to transport the family to modernity is old and outdated. The narrative states: "While passing the busy roads in the city, she holds her husband's shoulders to make young women jealous (91)." Although for an outsider the couple appear as an ideal family, what they have towards each other internally is relentless hatred and disgust. The statement, "In the sunny afternoon, their gazes met,

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<sup>33</sup> Jane Pilcher and Imelda Whelehan, eds. *Fifty Key Concepts in Gender Studies* (London: Sage Publications, 2004) 43-44.

<sup>34</sup> Sarah Joseph, *Papathara* (Trissur: Current Books, 1990).

emitting fire,” (91) expresses the hatred they feel for each other. She succeeds in moving the scooter while his attempt to do the same fails. This enrages him and he urges her to take care of the child. According to Satchitanandan, this act provokes him not just because in its performance of the woman’s power over the man’s, but more as an intrusion into the man’s world. His instruction for her to take care of the child is a call to return her to her rightful world, the woman’s world (41). She dreams of taking a lift from a young man and leaves with him in full view of her husband. The scooter emits a bad smell everywhere and people ask them to take it away. In the end,

They pushed him and her towards the scooter. They lifted the decaying dead body of the scooter and kept it on the heads of husband and wife, before both of them could escape. (99)

The family is presented as an inescapable institutional bind for an individual regardless of the individual’s consent. Satchitanandan reads the scooter as a symbol of a completely decayed relationship.

The Scooter symbolises the decayed state of their conjugality. Even if they want to escape from it, they cannot. Society will force it on them ... The narration reveals the horrifying truth behind the ideal family performance of the middle class. (41)

Along with the suggestion that existing family structures are decayed, Sarah Joseph also sensitises us to the brutality within a seemingly protective system.



“Dambatyam”<sup>35</sup> (Conjugality) likewise portrays a couple enveloped in the absence of communication with each other for years. The man, in this case, acknowledges his lack of responsibility. Nevertheless, he remains the same. The only way for the woman to show her emotions are by making loud noises with vessels, throwing vessels around while washing or arranging them, and vigorously grinding and grating ingredients. The man realises that his wife’s plight is not justifiable but he does not have a solution for the problem. He concludes by saying that they are an incompatible couple, whichever way one sees it. Here, the criticism of the institution of family comes from within the space of the family. The story focuses on a man’s perspective of a woman’s plight within the institution. He is sympathetic, but the writer seems to make a statement on the limitations of comprehending the plight of a woman from a man’s perspective.

The story, “Chhayapadam”<sup>36</sup> (“The Portrait”) unravels the injustices that prevail in a large, old, aristocratic landlord’s family (*tharavadu*). The family decides to have a portrait of the great grandmother who is in her 80s. Her grandson, an art student named Chithran, takes up the cause. The great grandmother tells him the untold/hidden history of the family, the injustices perpetrated by Chithran’s great grandfather, her husband, and his brothers, the women servants and the lower caste people who worked for them. She, who was constantly glorified as the ideal wife, by revealing these experiences to her grandchild, revolts against the oppression she was forced to suffer. She says:

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<sup>35</sup> Sarah Joseph, *Papathara* (Trissur: Current Books, 1990).

<sup>36</sup> Sarah Joseph, *Papathara* (Trissur: Current Books, 1990).

When your grandfather died, my biggest worry was: how would I cry. What will I cry about? The big family was waiting to support me if I cried loudly and to sprinkle water on my face if I fainted. I stood there like a piece of wood. Finally, thinking I do not have anything to cry about, I cried. (84–85)

“Snehakarunyangalal”<sup>37</sup> (Through Love and Pity) deconstructs the notions of the ideal family and the ideal woman, by foregrounding familial dissonances and disharmonies. The story narrates a daughter’s realization of her parents’ relationship. The father dies after being bedridden for many months. But the mother continues to clean and wash the room and his things just as she did when he was unwell. This supplies the picture of an ideal woman who lost her mind after the death of her husband. But, in the course of the narration, the reader learns that she loses her mind while taking care of her husband whom she never liked. The daughter, who had seen her mother burning their wedding photo, finds and reads brief notes her mother wrote while her husband was on his deathbed. She writes:

In his fever, he lies weak and naked. As if seeing a strange wild animal, I stood on the door step, frightened. In a spasm of disgust, hatred and repulsion, I thought of killing him that moment...I feel contempt towards my own self when seeing him like that. He does not have any right to be like that in front of me. Who is he? What is he? I remembered many reasons as I tried to cry. Even those reasons which made me easily cry out loudly before are also not making me cry in this hour of disgust. (55)

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<sup>37</sup> Sarah Joseph, *Nilavariyunnu* (Trissur: Current Books, 1994).

These notes can be seen as juxtaposing of what a woman mechanically does as per the expectations of society with what goes on inside her mind. Once again, it is her writing, the brief and cryptic notes, that helps her daughter understand her feelings.

“Ikloni Mandokkiyil Koottayottam”<sup>38</sup> (“Group Running in Ikloni Mandokki”) is a story that takes place in an imaginary State. The country goes to the polls on the issue of diffusion of the family. In a poll, which is conducted honestly and exceptionally well, a majority of the people decide for the diffusion. The president Isappollum Manassu announces it. The writer then describes what happens in Ikloni Mandokki, in the absence of family as follows:

It is like a festival in Ikloni Mandokki everyday. People go for picnics with children. They work only half time. The reading rate has gone up. Even those who do not have ration cards have started reading. The soap operas on the TV caught fungus, as there were no people to watch it. Painting, poetry, cinema, theatre, arts – all these excelled world standards. (15)

The story is an imagined one, but sarcasm brings out effectively as it is an unrealistic world. The allegory the President uses at the beginning of the story, of mud pots owned by an old woman, Kooli, symbolises society’s predicament. Kooli, who finds pleasure in washing and keeping one pot on top of the other, gets up one day to find that the pot at the bottom has broken with no reason, causing all other pots to break as well. The suggestion is that the family resembles Kooli’s mud pots.

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<sup>38</sup> Sarah Joseph, *Kadithu Kandayo Kantha* (Trissur: Cosmo Books, 2001).

The story, “Goodnight”<sup>39</sup> opens with a conversation between a couple—Jayanthi and Chandran, who wake up in the middle of the night as they and their three year-old son are bitten by mosquitoes. They consider buying “Goodnight” mosquito repellent or a mosquito net, but they laugh at the possibility of it. They go on to discussing extending the room and buying a double cot. A little later, as they are no longer sleepy, they start making love. The woman suggests going to another room and closing the door behind them. They imagine it is the previous day’s film they watched that is influencing them. The son awakes and feels around for his parents; he starts crawling. Suddenly, there is the loud noise of a vehicle applying a brake. Their son sits in the middle of the road, blinded by the headlights of the lorry. Only towards the end of the story does the reader come to know that the family portrayed in the story lives on the streets. It is their dream to own a house, have a bedroom, etc. However, unlike other stories, we see a couple who do not live in hatred. The family in its material terms is projected here as a dream. The family in all the stories is presented as a space from which there is no escape, for man or woman. However, the woman is always in a subordinate position. She is captive within it, while the man always has an outer world he can access. Unlike Sarah Joseph’s early phase stories, these articulate problems more definitely and powerfully, presenting them as women’s issues.

Marriage, especially in the Indian context, is another site which is indelibly attached to structures of patriarchy, tradition and values. The advent of modernity has made very little impact on this site, as the values never change. Sarah Joseph has written a couple of

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<sup>39</sup> Sarah Joseph, *Kadithu Kandayo Kantha* (Trissur: Cosmo Books, 2001).

stories that criticise and satirise this condition. “Anne Mary-yude Kalyanam”<sup>40</sup> is a story about Anne Mary’s wedding. A key point of the story is that Anne Mary is absent through the length of the story, only appearing in the end. The writer employs this story to make fun of the social system that makes the role of the bride incidental to her wedding. Anne Mary, as well as her family members, is educated and modern. However, when it comes to marriage, age-old traditions, the new market, etc., wealth and pride are all that matter to the family.

The story opens with a list of things that Anne Mary’s father is giving to her fiancé as dowry. The list, however, has nothing for Anne Mary. The story dwells on the list of guests which include ministers and major politicians, the list of jewellery that weighs a few kilos, hundreds of silk sarees, videographers and photographers, beauticians, catering service people, many priests and bishops. Her parents’ fight about which section of the families should be accorded more importance than other sections. When her mother realises that her family is not given enough importance, she insults her husband, saying that her family is more superior to his as they were Brahmins before they were converted into Christianity whereas his family attained wealth and fame only recently. In an attempt to respond to this allegation, he slaps her. Anne Mary was not at home when these decisions were taken. She has exams and is away in her hostel. Anne Mary’s view of the entire goings-on is presented only at the end of the narrative. Anne Mary does not like her fiancé Shomy Koshy. She does not like his extremely fair complexion and flabby cheeks. Shomy Koshy goes to meet her in the hostel. She doesn’t like the embarrassed

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<sup>40</sup> Sarah Joseph, *Nilavariyunnu* (Trissur: Current Books, 1994).

look he wears or the cheap jokes he cracks to cover up his discomfiture. More than these, she experiences a nauseating sensation when she sees him putting his fingers inside his nose. She strongly suspects that his M.B.B.S. degree is fake. Anne Mary has been brought up with such obedience that she would not even dare her opinion of and repulsion towards the groom. So, the next day after Shomy Koshy proclaims that he likes Anne Mary, their fathers finalise the alliance.

Anne Mary received a letter from her mother informing that her marriage is getting decided only after two days. She made a paper rocket with the letter and flew it to the sky knowing that even if it had reached on time there was nothing she could do. (21)

At the end of Anne Mary's wedding day, she enters her room and finds that everything has changed there.

She pushed away the cot where she should lie listening to the cheap jokes of Shomy Koshy. In the corner of the room, there were big vessels and other things made of gold and silver, which her father gave to Shomy Koshy. She placed herself inside the golden vessel along with other things and tried to close her eyes and sleep. (21)

This story criticises the present combination of tradition, modernity and the market-value attached to the institution of marriage. It also criticises the present state of women in Keralam, who are educated but not allowed to pursue their own choices. We may recall that Zachariah, the male-writer, has written a story along similar lines titled,

“Manashastrajnanodu Chodikkam”<sup>41</sup> (“Let us ask the Psychiatrist”). The story is in the form of a letter written to a psychiatrist by a young woman named Asha Mathew. She considers herself an innocent woman. She introduces herself:

I am not a revolutionary or intellectual...I have lived obediently listening to my parents, respecting teachers and elders, loving my friends and family, lived following the laws of the Church and priests all the time. I have not felt romantic even towards Mohanlal whom I like the most. My only wish is to live as an ideal wife like my mother with a good husband like my father. I think my father knew that I did not have any intention to take up any job when I studied English Literature or joined for B. Ed, but just wanted to learn and read something I liked and have a nice time with friends until I got married. (25)

Zachariah’s character, unlike Sarah Joseph’s character, is in a difficult psychological dilemma. She realises that she can hardly get to know a person through the normal course of marriage. We see Anne Mary, on the other hand, as resigned to the whole process of marriage and responding as if she were one among the many material benefits her husband gains or is to gain from her father. She no longer considers herself a person. Asha Mathew’s dilemma, as she puts it, dismantles the peace and quiet of her family. Asha Mathew sees her shift from her family to another family as a migration (*Kudiyettam*).<sup>42</sup> Unlike her grandfather, however, she refuses to migrate to a place without knowing its terrains. There is a class difference between the two characters. Anne

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<sup>41</sup> Zachariah, *Zachariahude Penkathakal* (Kottayam: DC Books, 2001).

<sup>42</sup> *Kudiyettam* refers to the mass migration of people (mainly Christians) from the central Travancore districts to Malabar towards the close of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The literal meaning of *kudiyettam* is migration. The character Asha Mathew’s grandfather is portrayed as migrated from his native place in central Travancore to Malabar.

Mary's is from an upper middle class family whereas Asha Mathew is from a middle class family. Sarah Joseph's presentation focuses on the situation where a woman is made an outsider at her own wedding. Zacharia's story presents the situation of a young woman who is made to go and stay in the groom's house after they she is married, not just as an individual dilemma, but as a dilemma caused by collective migration. Sarah Joseph's narrative does not attach any faith to marriage as an institution; whereas Zachariah's narrative, through the dilemmas of the character, suggests that it can be made better.

Many of Sarah Joseph's stories present women in subordinate and resisting positions within such spaces. Anne Mary's resistance, we see, comes through her indifference. There are also stories like "George Kuttium Chila Sthreekalum"<sup>43</sup> ("George Kutty and Some Women") which explore the possibility of how these institutions define men who are supposedly privileged. In this story, the protagonist is a man from an upper middle class Christian family, whose uncle is a Bishop. He is a college lecturer who gets a job through his Uncle's contacts. Georgekutty too faces a dilemma when his family, including the Bishop, start looking for alliances. They advise him to be practical and look for a wealthy bride rather than seek a beautiful one. Georgekutty on the other hand, cannot think about accepting a woman who is not beautiful, as his wife. The Bishop also makes fun of him for his infatuation for his colleague, Alice Umman. So, Georgekutty starts meeting eligible candidates still troubled by the dual pressures of being practical or succumbing to his romantic notions. However, when he starts meeting women, his notions change. He meets three women. The first one asks him about the author of a

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<sup>43</sup> Sarah Joseph, *Nilavariyunnu* (Trissur: Current Books, 1994).



historical work called Chithra Keralam, since he is a history lecturer. Georgekutty comes out of the room unable to answer. The next woman he meets, shows him a picture on the computer monitor, and asks him to identify a war between two nations that happened in the second century B.C. The third woman, who wears a green dress and matching accessories, asks him about his opinion on the environmental issue in Laloor. Georgekutty has a high fever on his way back. He is seen chanting answers to several general knowledge questions. He stays inside his room for three days. On the third day, the Bishop comes to meet him as he refuses to speak on the phone. And we see Georgekutty coming out wearing the old cloak of a Capuchin priest. His mother cries loudly on seeing this, thinking that the fever has affected his brain. The bishop, who is saying his prayers, thinks that he is being subject to a vision. The story ends when Georgekutty asks his mother “Woman, what is the relation between you and me?” (50) – a quote from the Bible, Jesus’ question to Mary. The bishop in the story is completely materialistic, and continues to serve his family. The figure portrayed here, in the bishop is extremely relevant in present day Keralam. There have been many scandals against some bishops attached to the Church who own many educational as well as financial firms. The bishop appears in Sarah Joseph’s tale as a modern version of a Chaucerian character.<sup>44</sup> The note that Sarah Joseph supplies at the end of the story confirms this: “The Bishop in the story is a mere product of imagination. No bishop late or alive shares any likeness to this bishop.” (50)

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<sup>44</sup> The Bishop reminds us of a Chaucerian character in terms of the way he exercises ecclesiastical powers to access material comforts. Vincent. F. Hopper, trans. *Chaucer's Canterbury Tales (Selected): An Interlinear Translation* (New York: Barron's Educational Series, 1977).

Georgekutty's dilemmas are shown to be doubled as even beautiful women begin to manifest their other, somewhat strange facets. Apart from having to contend with the dilemma of his romantic expectations and the family's practical ones, Georgekutty seems to struggle to cope with what appear to him as radical changes in the very nature of women. He wonders at when and how these transformations occurred. While the story makes an obvious point about marriage as a business, the emphasis remains on an educated man's notions about an ideal modern woman who remains traditional.

Romantic love is another frame within which women are stereotyped. In a way, these projections form the basis of man-woman relationships. A de-romanticization of this exposes power structures within it that cater to the needs of the dominant culture. The story "Pranayam"<sup>45</sup> ("Love") deals with love and the inescapable violence that goes with it. The story revolves around two lovers. One day, the man comes home with a knife and tells the woman that he wants to kill her. She does not feel threatened, but notices that he looked pathetic except for the knife in his hand. She does not want to know any reasons about his desire to kill her. According to her,

...there need not be a rational reason for killing. Love itself is a good reason.

While suffering from unbearable love, it is possible to kill each other. Or else, when one burns from jealousy and intolerance towards one's lover. (22)

The story makes obvious the politics of love, acts of possessiveness, and the intolerance and jealousy it generates. Moreover, the story explores the violence involved in love and

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<sup>45</sup> Sarah Joseph, *Nilavariyunnu* (Trissur: Current Books, 1994).

desire, the flimsy boundaries between them. The story also criticises the standard treatment of love in literature as platonic and idealistic.

Love often exudes poison. With difficulty, we try to make it sweet-smelling. I was not just his lover, but a gold coin which only he had the right to handle. A gold coin which he could put in his pocket for however long he wanted, lock it in the locker and hide it from others, and make change and spend it according to his wish...Like a toy which one fears to lose, I tried to hide him from the eyes of the world by keeping him close to my heart. We hunted each other with painful suspicious watch in daylight. A cruel hunting which never allowed crossing the borders drawn by the eyes. My aim was to make his world shrink as much as possible. (23)

Towards the end of the story, we see the woman moving away from his attempt to stab her and in turn consoling him. He takes out a small doll from his pocket and gifts it to her, saying he brought it for her just in case he was not able to kill her. The story effectively articulates the violent feelings that are part of love and desire, but we see an idealistic end. There is obviously a kind of role performance here: a kind and affectionate woman and the symbol of the doll make it powerful.

The same view of love can be seen in “Coffee House” and “Oduvilathe Sooryakanthi” (“The Last Sunflower”). Regina in “Coffee House” says: “Love! It is like the five sacred wounds inflicted on wrists, feet and chest. Therefore it is unbearable to suffer again.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Sarah Joseph, *Oduvilathe Sooryakanthi* (Trissur: Current Books, 1998) 55.

Susanna, the lover of Vincent Van Gogh, in “Oduvilathe Sooryakanthi,” is in a mental asylum. She knows that her disease is love, but still finds herself terribly overcome by it. Susanna finds that all paths are closed for her. She records her feelings as such:

Love is misery. It needs weak people, who either cannot stay firm or leave for good. It really is a blind alley. Love closes all the ways that lead to the outside world. Even if it gets rotten, dirty or starts stinking from within, it decays in the cells, making it impossible to throw it out or cut it off. (90)

Coming to the aspect of sexuality, women’s sexuality, repressed and never discussed openly, was a main site of discussion for second wave feminists. Women’s sexuality and its repression emerge from power structures within marriage and family. Women writers started articulating this problem very recently. Sarah Joseph has many stories that discuss the sexuality of women. “Muditheyyamurayunnu”<sup>47</sup> (“Dance of the Possessed Hair”) is a story where a woman’s long hair becomes the symbol of her sexuality, energy, lust, independence and female self. Long hair for a woman in Keralam is often identified as an attribute of beauty. However, Lalitha’s long hair scares her father, brother and her husband as she refuses to carry it the way a “proper” woman should. It becomes an image which challenges male domination. We can read here that whenever women express their sexuality, it is threatening for men. They see the woman as an evil character in such situations. Lalitha’s husband Sanathanan brings *Manthravadis* (necromancers) to drive the evil spirit away. They suggest that cutting her hair is the only way to drive the spirit

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<sup>47</sup> Sarah Joseph, *Papathara* (Trissur: Current Books, 1998) 55.

from her body. A woman who articulates her sexuality can never be accepted as a sane and normal person in a male-dominated society.

Jessy, in “Coffee House” expresses her sexuality, which makes her lover John Cletus suspect that she had sex several times before. She rejects him: “I cannot take it anymore that when you take off my clothes, I am a dame and when I take off my clothes, I am a whore.”<sup>48</sup> In a similar view, the protagonist of the story, “Nilavum Sarpangalum”<sup>49</sup> (“Moonlight and Snakes”) by C.S. Chandrika declares that her lust is her love. Sarah Joseph’s stories make it obvious that the politics of love is very much related to family and sexuality. A male-dominated society always polices women’s sexuality. They shape it, consume it and control it if it tries to have its own articulation. Maythil Radhakrishnan, a male writer, in his story “Udal Oru Choozhnila” (“Body, An Encompassing Ground”) writes:

Can a woman ever hide her nakedness? Every binocular is focused towards where she takes off her clothes. However far she is, her organs are in close-up. Even when shut in a dark cell, she is a blue film that runs in some man’s mind.<sup>50</sup>

However, Regina in “Coffee House” can be seen as complicating this notion of nakedness. She asks:

What is nakedness? Is it the one that you see when one takes off the clothes? Does an amputated breast titillate you..? It was exhibited in a tray. My mother’s

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<sup>48</sup> Sarah Joseph, *Oduvilathe Sooryakanthi* (Trissur: Current Books, 1998) 49.

<sup>49</sup> C.S. Chandrika, *Ladies Compartment* (Kottayam: DC Books, 2002).

<sup>50</sup> Maythil Radhakrishnan, *Vimatham: Prathikathakal* (Kottayam: DC Books, 2003) 170.

nakedness became public. Yesterday they removed her second breast also. Now she is naked like the sky.<sup>51</sup>

This statement gives a completely different meaning to nakedness and its usual equations with sexuality.

Rape is a major issue that surfaces in issues of sexuality. Maythil Radhakrishnan's "Udal Oru Choozhnila" and Sarah Joseph's "Ee Udalenne Choozhumbol" ("When this Body Encompasses Me") which was written as a reply to Maythil's story discuss gripping features about rape. Maythil's character Kokila, a sales girl who goes from door to door, was raped by a man called Nachilan in his own flat. Kokila is portrayed as enjoying it; or rather her body takes it as a pleasurable experience. What made her worry more than anything was "the painful finding that our bodies often cheat our minds."<sup>52</sup> Sarah Joseph's story on the other hand, speaks of the confusions of the protagonist Radhamani who is raped. These confusions arise in her mind as a result of multiple experiences -- the rape, the story "Udal Oru Choozhnila" by a male writer which she has read, the advocate's arguments against her in court and her experience of her own body from childhood. Usually, after every crime, the limelight captures the accused/criminal. However, in rape we see a contradiction in the situation. Sarah Joseph's story asks: "Instead of following Murukeshan (the accused), what makes a person follow Radhamani?"<sup>53</sup> However, in Maythil's story, Kokila is followed. The story gives a list of reasons why she was raped, but it does not talk about why Nachilan rapes her. Sarah

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<sup>51</sup> Sarah Joseph, *Oduvilathe Sooryakanthi* (Trissur: Current Books, 1998) 55.

<sup>52</sup> Maythil Radhakrishnan, *Vimatham: Prathikathakal* (Kottayam: DC Books, 2003) 171.

<sup>53</sup> Sarah Joseph, *Nilavariyunnu* (Trissur: Current Books, 1994) 70.

Joseph's story too does not follow the culprit directly. But, more than the person who does it or the advocate who examined each frame of the case like a blue film, the story sees the male writer as the real culprit. The advocate's accusation that it was partially pleasurable for Radhamani leaves her confused. Maythil, in the case of Kokila, assumes that it may have been pleasurable for her and does not go beyond that. Sarah Joseph finds it unfair on the part of the male writer to assume this about the experience, because even the one who commits the rape also, is completely unaware of what the feelings of the victim are. "Agni" ("Fire") by Sithara S. assumes a different standpoint altogether, on the issue. Priya, a middle class working girl is raped by three people on her way back home late in the evening. She has seen the culprits before. She attempts to escape in the beginning, but later gives up. The writer does not present the experience as painful or pleasurable. What Priya feels is insult; her body is likened to disintegrating wooden furniture. But, she guiltily realises that even when she is insulted, she does not always feel insulted. There is the suggestion of a partial participation, but it is not presented as a taken-for-granted assumption. In the case of Kokila, the male writer assumes it to be pleasurable, and in the case of Radhamani, the victim, she is confused with the easy assumption on the part of the writer as well as the advocate. Sithara's story stands different in the way the protagonist deals with the experience. The narrative says:

After the culprits leave, Priya gets up. She remembers the advertisement in Doordarshan on rape. "Do not wash away the dirt. By washing it away, you are

destroying the proof.” However she takes a long bath thinking ‘Such ads are necessary. But they do not specify the kinds of dirt that you should not wash.’<sup>54</sup>

The act of Priya reminds us of the controversial statement that Madhavikutty (Kamala Das) once made. She asked the rape victims to wash their bodies using disinfectant and to forget about the incident. Priya does not go to court, sceptical of the efficacy of the judicial system. She applies leave the next day and relaxes. The next day, on her way back she meets the men who raped her. One asks her whether she enjoyed it. She tells him:

You were not at all good. You are not strong enough. I don’t think you will be able to satisfy a woman completely. She turns to the other and says: ‘But I liked you very much. You really are a man. (195)

By saying this, she takes revenge by puncturing the male ego and male sexuality. She also makes a dent to their male-bonding. “Agni” not only targets the society and men, but also challenges the state and legal system in a new way. Sarah Joseph’s conviction about the role of a woman writer is seen in the way she replies to Maythil’s story. It is a conviction that makes a responsible woman writer protest against encroaching on women’s body and its spaces.

Female identity is a crucial point of reference in the stories of Sarah Joseph’s second phase writing. These stories concentrate on the roles of women within a patriarchal structure. The women characters never show any fascination for a man’s life; they want

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<sup>54</sup> Sridevi K. Nair, ed. *Malayalathinte Kathakarikal* (Kottayam: DC Books, 2002) 195.



to live and experience freedom as women. The resistance towards continuing in subordinate positions is manifest in these stories. Through the making and remaking of women characters, Sarah Joseph is actually trying to create a new system. Women's body, its spatial and temporal existences and dimensions are rewritten. This new space that is envisaged and the modality offered towards achieving it, are marked as counterpublic spaces that disturb existing social systems. It is a counterpublic in the sense that it provides a critique of the dominant public sphere.

Although most of the stories consider gender identity more important than racial or ethnic identities, there are some stories that talk about the politics of caste. Postcolonial feminism speaks of racial/ethnic identity and the question of gender. Later interventions in feminism by African American women and postcolonial subjects urge feminism to be self-critical about the universalizing of womanhood. Therefore, critiquing caste is a way to acknowledge feminisms – an awareness that women's experience need not be identical all the time. "Viyarpadayalangal" ("Sweat Marks") is one such story that speaks of the experience of caste. "Viyarpadayalangal" brings out the politics of reservation lists and merit lists in educational institutions during the time of admissions. The protagonist is a Dalit girl who files a complaint with the admission committee for including her name in the reservation list when she is eligible to be included in the merit list. She does not want to complain, but Chandrika, a newspaper agent and well-wisher, urges her to do so. She is scared. She also worries about her appearance, which does not match the mainstream aesthetic sense. The admission committee tries to trick her by saying that it is better she is included in the reservation list as she is the first one there, whereas in the merit list she is

only second. They also tell her that it is not good on her part to file a complaint like this, as she has to study here and they have to teach her. She takes the complaint forward, leaving behind sweat marks in the dust-filled corridors of the reputed institute. Prof. Tevan, a Dalit faculty member of the college feels guilty for not being able to help the girl. Prof. Tevan thinks that even his inability to react comes from his forefathers who stood stooping in front of landlords. He remembers his daughter Namitha who blames this lineage for the unnecessary fear that creeps in her every now and then. It should be noted that the professor's name is Tevan, a colloquial version of Devan. The watchman of the college, a Nair by caste, calls him "mash" (a colloquial version of "master") whereas he calls others, "professor". His wife, Renuka, who is an upper caste woman, asks him to change his name to Devan, which would hide his caste identity to an extent. The ends on the following note, "the smell of ploughed fields continues in Namitha, but she says she will not exchange it even for all the fragrances from Paris."<sup>55</sup> This is the only occasion in the story when there is an assertion of Dalit identity. Through this story, Sarah Joseph unveils the politics of caste in educational institutions, pertaining to merit/reservation lists.

"Attappadi"<sup>56</sup> discusses the problems faced by the Adivasi community in the Idukki district of Keralam. It deals with the exploitation and violence by mainstream society on Adivasis. Writers like P. Vatsala have written a number of short stories and novels on the adivasi issue. This was a major issue in the 1990s. The issue, however, is yet to be

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<sup>55</sup> Sarah Joseph, *Kadithu Kandayo Kantha* (Trissur: Cosmo Books, 2001) 33.

<sup>56</sup> Sarah Joseph, *Nilavariyunnu* (Trissur: Current Books, 1994).

solved. It continues and no valid measures have been taken by the government to resolve the issue. The story speaks of the sexual exploitation of a young woman called Nanjamma by a merchant, an agent of mainstream society. Apart from sexual exploitation, the story also dwells on exploitation of labour and resources, by these agents. The story addresses the horrors in the minds of women and men in Attappadi. Each day, they fear something bad is going to happen. We see Nanjamma throwing a bundle of clothes from which a head with a golden tooth rolls out. The head lies in the middle of people waiting for the police to come. It also suggests that the police and government come to the rescue only when something happens to people who belong to mainstream society.

The story, “Velutha Nirmithikalum Karutha Kannadiyum”<sup>57</sup> (“Fair Artefacts and Black Mirror”) is the abrupt manifestation of the subaltern self in Amminikkutty, a third class sales girl cum sweeper at a cosmetic shop, when she is abused and insulted by the shop owner, Pavamani Iyer. E.P. Rajagopalan attempts to read this story in relation to space, self and image.<sup>58</sup> Amminikkutty tries to refute her subaltern self by repeatedly making herself adhere to mainstream notions of beauty and appearance. There are several occasions in the story where Pavamani Iyer insults her for her dark complexion. Amminikkutty does not recognise her complexion as part of her self/identity. According to C. Ayyappan, a person becomes a Dalit only when he/she and the society both recognize that he/she is a Dalit. One cannot become a Dalit by birth or certificate alone.

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<sup>57</sup> Sarah Joseph, *Papathara* (Trissur: Current Books, 1990).

<sup>58</sup> E.P. Rajagopalan, “Swathvam: Bimbavum Kannadiyum,” *Granthalokam* (April 2005) 32.

What is important is the person's self awareness and social status.<sup>59</sup> Amminikkutty's Dalit identity becomes visible when she is insulted by Pavamani Iyer. Her workplace makes her feel ugly all the time. But, the mirror-seller in the local festival tells her that she resembles Vada Kurumba, a subaltern goddess. E.P. Rajagopalan suggests that it points to Dalit aesthetics. "It is a proclamation that our god is not in the same complexion or shape as the upper caste god." (34) The function of the cosmetic shop is to popularise mainstream upper caste notions of beauty and complexion and sell them as products, thereby stating that anything different from these, are ugly and bad. The hierarchy in the cosmetic shop is as follows: at the top is Pavamani Iyer (the employer cum oppressor), followed by Gautam Kumar (sales representative), then come the first and second class sales girls, and at last Amminikkutty. Amminikkutty considers Gautam Kumar as her saviour, one who rid her out of her "ugly appearance." However, he also functions as the agent of Pavamani Iyer as well as that of the market. The other sales girls as well as customers are the product models of the market. Amminikkutty is ultimately enslaved by the market and by Pavamani Iyer through these complex equations. She breaks free of the enslavement when she regains her self and beats Iyer. E.P. Rajagopalan sees a parallel between Amminikkutty and Mahaswetha Devi's character Dopdi in the sense that both characters try to counter the oppressor with the selves they were insulted for being. Dopdi was insulted as a woman and as a tribal. She was ultimately raped. But she uses her dark naked body to attack her oppressors.<sup>60</sup> The text says:

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<sup>59</sup> C. Ayyappan as quoted by E.P. Rajagopalan in "Swathvam: Bimbavum Kannadiyum," *Granthalokam* (April 2005) 34.

<sup>60</sup> <http://www.museindia.com/showcont.asp?id=113>

Draupadi's black body comes even closer. Draupadi shakes with an indomitable laughter that the Senanayak simply cannot understand. Her ravaged lips bleed as she begins laughing. Draupadi wipes the blood on her palm and says in a voice that is as terrifying, sky splitting, and sharp as her ululation, What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?

She looks around and chooses the front of Senanayak's white bush shirt to spit a bloody gob at and says, There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed of. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on, counter me come on, counter me?

Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid.

Here Draupadi is not flaunting her naked body; she counters her attackers who are responsible for her naked state by being in a state of nakedness out of her own choice. Amminikutty, insulted by Pavamani Iyer, reacts to the situation with the same severity as of the subaltern goddess Vada Kurumba, which she always rejected. Her identity is asserted through her instinctive retort.

The last three stories discussed here treat ethnic/caste identities on par with gender identity. These stories show a shift in focus from women's roles to different identities within the category of women. "Viyarpadayalanga" gained critical acclaim for its treatment of caste identity. But, the story was also criticised for being a mainstream rendition of the politics of caste. In keeping with the same logic that women's experiences cannot be truthfully rendered in literature by men, one should also realize

that the experiences of a Dalit cannot be represented by a non-Dalit. K.K. Koch, an important Dalit critic in Malayalam criticises the story as follows:

“Viyarpadayalanganal” is written in the guise of presenting the Dalit self. The criterion for the self is inferiority or the attitude of caste subordination. The Dalit representations in the story are a thin, dark girl, who looks at everyone with fearful eyes, a resident of the Ambedkar Colony and who scored distinction in S.S.L.C exam, and Professor Thevan who shivers with fear during crucial situations which require protest.<sup>61</sup>

He argues that the story is a product of upper caste notions/prejudices about Dalits. He writes:

The story, which excludes Dalits from history and exhibits them with pre-conceived notions of dirt and stink, does not move an inch forward from conventional Dalit/non-Dalit writings. In the absence of a brotherhood that should be taken up while presenting women-Dalit subject presentation, this decontextualised portrayal becomes an example of the Dalit representations by upper caste intellectuals, more than talking about the attitude of the writer. (85)

These critiques provide us with valuable tools to analyse the spaces of resistance created by feminism, providing checks as to how inclusive and accommodative it is. They also ask the question whether feminism assumes itself to be authoritative in talking for others. However, Sarah Joseph remains one of the first writers who have shown sensitivity to issues related to caste and minority other minority groups. This shift to the field of direct

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<sup>61</sup> K.K. Koch, *Vayanayude Dalit Padham* (Kozhikode: Poorna Publications, 2005) 85.

identity politics from stereotyped women's roles offers another dimension to her feminist rendering of the stories. One has to perhaps sympathetically view Sarah Joseph's efforts as trying to open up closed spaces.

### Chapter 3

#### **Recasting the Marginalised: Reading Sarah Joseph's *Ramayana* Stories in the Context of the Dravidian Movement**

The chapter intends to look at how Sarah Joseph attempts to retell the *Ramayana* in some of her short stories by subverting the dominant versions of the text to offer both feminist and subaltern critiques of it. The chapter also looks at how Sarah Joseph has taken a line similar to Periyar E.V. Ramasamy's readings of the *Ramayana* and the ideology that constitutes the Dravidian movement in South India, particularly in Tamil Nadu. These stories were written during the second phase of Sarah Joseph's writing career. I organise these stories as a different chapter in order to discuss their thematic relevance as it adds another dimension to her feminist concerns.

Retelling the *Ramayana* has been part of the literary and performative traditions in India and South Asia, although many of those are still left unexplored. However, there have been works that have examined and analyzed some of these diverse narrative traditions in opposition to the conventional view that holds the *Valmiki Ramayana* as the standard and authentic text. These retelling traditions throw light on multiple versions and possible interpretations. A close examination of these retelling traditions, which are part of certain ideological, cultural and political positions, reveals that they also persuade the reader/listener to think along different ideological lines. These retelling traditions can be considered as expressions that try to critique the dominant version, even while thriving under/within the dominant version. Different versions of the *Ramayana* therefore signify the varied attempts on the part of different cultural identities to deconstruct a monolithic



construction. In this context, retelling a particular text becomes part of a movement, foregrounding a certain ideological/political position. The chapter attempts to look at how Sarah Joseph has made use of the mode of deconstruction of the text, available in Periyar's work, to counter a monolithic text. It pauses to identify how her methods of deconstruction, which extend from Periyar, have created many sub-texts or subversions. The chapter focuses on seven short stories and a recently written novel written by Sarah Joseph. The short stories—"Karutha Thulakal" ("Black Holes"), "Taikulam" ("Mother Clan"), "Kathayilillathathu" ("What is Not in the Story"), and "Asoka" focus on Manthara, Soorpanakha, Sambooka and Sita respectively, exploring different aspects of identity and treating the *Ramayana* as a text of political domination while also reversing the conventional understanding of villain and hero as suggested by Periyar. "Oru Prayopaveshathinte Katha" ("The Story of a Self-Willed Spiritual Death") portrays a sad and dejected Angadan, son of Vali, after Rama kills Vali. "Bhoomirakshasam" ("Earthly Demon") gives a picture of the earlier encroachment on the part of the Aryans on Dravidian land and its women, by narrating the story of Araja and Dandhakaranya. However, "Kantharatharakam" ("The Forest Star") reveals some thoughts of Rama and Lakshmana. The story "Jathigupthanum Janakigupthanum" ("Jathigupthan and Janakigupthan") could be considered a political allegory set in the present time, which uses instances and quotations from the *Valmiki Ramayana*. The novel *Ooru Kaval* (*Guarding the Homeland*) gives the version of Angada and the Vanara clan on the Rama/Ravana war.

The writings of Sarah Joseph, a feminist activist and a professor of Malayalam, I would like to reiterate, consistently comprise current debates on identity politics. Therefore, the writer's subjective position becomes very important. Moreover, if we examine the retelling traditions, the social location from where the narrating ensues, is one of the main deciding factors in defining the text. Sarah Joseph's subjective position in relation to her attempts in retelling the *Ramayana* is multi-layered. Apart from being influenced by Periyar's readings of the *Ramayana* and the ideology that spread as part of the Dravidian movement which manifest her identity as a South Indian, her position in retelling also stems from her ideological position as a feminist. Therefore, it becomes possible to categorize her attempts as constitutive of feminist myth-making. Nabaneeta Deb Sen expounds on the relation between women and epic:

Epic poets the world over are men singing the glory of other men, armed men, to be precise. In a study I did a couple of years ago, I noticed that out of the thirty-eight basic things upon which most epic narratives of the world are based, only nine are associated with women. The ideals of the epic world obviously do not have much to share with women, nor do the women enjoy the heroic values. There is little they can do there—other than get abducted or rescued, or pawned, or molested, or humiliated in some way or other.<sup>1</sup>

Nabaneeta Deb Sen further explains her experiences of reading versions of the *Ramayana* narrated by women. She describes different versions of the *Ramayana* written by women

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<sup>1</sup> Nabaneeta Dev Sen, "Lady Sings the Blues: When Women Retell the Ramayana," [http://www.ninapaley.com/Sitayana/Manushi\\_LadySingstheBlues.html](http://www.ninapaley.com/Sitayana/Manushi_LadySingstheBlues.html)

and approaches they assume. She identifies four different approaches, in a sample of the existing versions of the *Ramayana* by women.

1) You could tell it like it is, by borrowing the traditional eyes of the male epic poet, as Molla does in her 16th century Telugu *Ramayana*. Or 2) you could tell it like it is, looking at it with your own women's eyes, as Chandrabati does in her 16th century Bengali *Ramayana*. Or 3) you could tell it like it is by borrowing an ideological viewpoint as Ranganayakamma does in *Ramayana Vishabriksham*, rewriting the Rama tale from the Marxist point of view. Or 4) you could tell your own story through the story of Sita, as the village women of India have been doing for hundreds of years.<sup>2</sup>

Molla, a woman who belonged to the shudra community, rendered a perfectly classical version of *Ramayana* and challenged the upper caste court poets. More than the theme, it is the identity of the writer as a woman and a shudra that offended the dominant sections of society. Chandrabati's *Ramayana* took sides with Sita and criticized Rama from a woman's point of view. Ranganayakamma rewrote the *Ramayana* from the point of view of Marxism, an ideology she believed in. But society was not kind to these women writers. The Brahmins opposed the reading of Molla's work in the royal court, whereas critics rejected Chandrabati's work as weak and incomplete. Ranganayakamma was ostracized socially for attacking the sacred text. We see that Sarah Joseph's versions of the *Ramayana* follow all the approaches mentioned by Nabaneeta Deb Sen except the first one.

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<sup>2</sup> Nabaneeta Dev Sen, "Lady sings the Blues: When Women retell the Ramayana."

Another aspect is her identity as a Christian. How would one locate *Ramayana* stories written by a non-Hindu writer, especially if they contain a deeply critical perspective? Barbara Metcalf suggests how in the second half of the nineteenth century, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians criticized the religious beliefs of their opponents through hyper-literal readings of mythical texts.<sup>3</sup> Paula Richman considers Periyar's readings of the *Ramayana* and his attack on orthodox Hinduism to be part of the same technique (191). *Jain Ramayana* and *Buddha Ramayana* also belong to this category, which criticize the Hindu religion. Sarah Joseph's retellings are not exactly the result of a hyper-literal reading of the *Ramayana*. However, her identity as a Christian would have helped her to subject the text to a more radical analysis. Moreover, it is likely that her familiarity with Malayalam Literature, given that she was a teacher, made available to her opportunities to close-read the *Ramayana*. She offers:

While studying and teaching the *Ramayana*, I used to imagine so many *Ramayana* stories... With our own justice, each one will examine the justice system in the *Ramayana*. That is how many *Ramayanas* take birth. Different *Ramayana* stories, that are told differently based on differences in race, region, gender, class, etc., ask the question 'who is the righteous man?' When Seeta, Soorpanakha, Sambooka and many other characters ask the question 'is Rama the righteous person?' different *Ramayana* stories take birth.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Paula Richman, *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* (Oxford: University of California Press, 1991) 190.

<sup>4</sup> Sarah Joseph, "Ezhuthalare, Kathayil Njangalude Idamevide," *Puthuramayana: Ramayana Kathakal Veendum Parayumbol* (Trissur: Current Books, 2006).

I place Sarah Joseph's retellings within the contexts of existing as well as currently developing retelling traditions in Southeast Asia, India, South India and Kerala. Different versions of the *Ramayana* are available in Balinese, Cambodian, Chinese, Japanese, Lavosian, Malaysian, Thai and Tibetan languages. Many versions of the *Ramayana* are available in most of the Indian languages and in languages like Tulu, which do not have a script, as well as in tribal languages like Bheeli and Santali. In Sanskrit, there are about 25 versions of the *Ramayana*.

There are a number of versions of the *Ramayana* in Malayalam as well. Cheeraman's *Ramacharitam*, Niranam Ramapanikkar's *Kannassaramayanam*, Ayyappilla Asan's *Ramakathappattu*, Punam Namboothiri's *Ramayana Chambu*, Ezhuthacchan's *Adhyatma ramayanam*, Keralavarmaramayanam, Azhakathu Padmanabha Kurup's *Ramachandravilasam*, Kottarakkarathampuram's *Attakkatha*, *Ramanattam*, Oduvil Shankarankutti Menon's *Ramayanamanjari*, Kadathanattu Krishnavariyar's *Bhasharamayanachambu*, Mannantala Neelakanthan Mosse's *Ramayanam Attakkatha*, Kumaran Asan's *Balaramayanam*, Kunchan Nambiar's *Ramayana*-based *thullal*<sup>5</sup> *kritis*, translations of *Tulsi Ramayana*, *Bhasa Ramayana*, *Kamparamayana* etc. Different genres inspired by the *Ramayana* include lullaby, vanchippattu (song sung during boat race), tiruvatrappattu (sung during a particular dance performance), puppet shows etc. There are several plays that concern themselves with different instances in the *Ramayana*: *Seetha Swayamvaram* (Kodungallur Kunjikuttan), *Mandhodari* (Sardar K.M. Panikkar), *Adbhuta Ramayanam* (M. Neelakanthan Moos), *Seetaharanam* (N. Sankaran

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<sup>5</sup> Thullal is a traditional dance from South of Kerala, in which a story is enacted through dance and music.

Nair), *Bhasharamayanam* (A. Govindapillachattambi), *Ravanaputran* (Pallathu Raman), *Lankam Ravanapalitam* (Madasserry Madhavavariyar), *Ramarajabhishekam* (E.V. Krishnapillai), *Pushpavrishti* (Tikkotiyan), *Kanchanasita*, *Lankalakshmi* and *Saketham* (C.N. Sreekantan Nair).<sup>6</sup> There are also a number of poems written by modern poets which interpret incidents from the Ramayana variously. Apart from Kumaran Asan's "Chintavishtayaya Sita," there are poems like P. Kunhiraman Nair's "Sita Devi," Sugathakumari's "Innathe Sandhya," Punalur Balan's "Samarpanam," Pala Narayanan Nair's "Tamasaakananangalil," Vishnunarayanan Namboothiri's "Lakshmanan," Balamaniamma's "Vibheeshanan," Vayalar's "Ravanaputri," Ayyappapanikkar's "Sabari," K. Satchidanandan's "Ahalya" and "Janaki Poru" etc.<sup>7</sup>

The spirit of challenging the *Ramayana* characterize many of these texts, but can be specifically found in "Chintavishtayaya Sita," a poem by Kumaran Asan, a twentieth-century poet.<sup>8</sup> In "Chintavishtayaya Sita," we see Sita, living in Valmiki's ashram after being abandoned by Rama, questioning Rama's actions as an individual as well as a ruler. She takes the position of his wife as well as his subject (praja) and judges his actions. C.N. Sreekantan Nair's play *Kanchana Sita* is another twentieth-century literary work that interrogates Rama's deeds. In *Kanchana Sita*, not only Sita, but Urmila, Kausalya, Bharatan, Hanuman and Valmiki challenge Rama and his actions. They stress on the point that a justice system that does not take human emotions into consideration is after

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<sup>6</sup> K. Satchidanandan, "Sarayanangal," *Puthuramayana: Ramayana Kathakal Veendum Parayumbol* (Trissur: Current Books, 2006) X.

<sup>7</sup> K. Satchidanandan, "Sarayanangal," *Puthuramayana: Ramayana Kathakal Veendum Parayumbol* (Trissur: Current Books, 2006) X.

<sup>8</sup> Paula Richman, "Introduction: Whose Ramayana it is?" *Ramayana Stories in Modern South India: An Anthology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008) 20.

all no justice. Hanuman chants “Jai Sitaram” and says: “Are Sita and the kingdom opposing forces? A kingdom without Sita! Like a man without a soul...”<sup>9</sup> Another venture along similar lines is filmmaker G. Aravindan’s movie, *Kanchana Sita*. The film was not made for commercial audiences and therefore was included in the category of parallel cinema. Aravindan’s film does not present Sita in human form. She is represented as Nature, its movements, changes and so on. She speaks in the film through the changes of Nature and its silences. The film maker also uses tribal men to portray the role of Rama, Lakshmana and Bharata, to denote the indigenous nature of the *Ramayana* story.

Reportedly there are versions of the *Ramayana* existing among adivasis in Wayanad, Kerala. They are, however, not published. A different version of the *Ramayana* is prevalent among the Muslims in Kerala, known as the *Mappila Ramayanam*. *Mappila Ramayanam* is said to have been composed in the twentieth century in north Malabar by an anonymous Muslim. T.H. Kunhiraman Nambiar, an exponent of Vadakkan pattu, recollects some of these from his boyhood days, sung by a supposedly insane person Hussankutty<sup>10</sup>. In the *Mappila Ramayanam*, Rama is a Sultan and he is named Lama. The available text includes episodes such as “Hanumante Poonkavana Pravesam” (“Hanuman’s Entry into the Garden”), “Ravanante Pranayabhyarthana” (“The Proposal of Ravana”), “Soorpanakhayude Chamanjorungal” (“Soorpanakha’s Dressing-Up”), “Soorpanakhayude Pranayabhyarthana” (“Soorpanakha’s Proposal”) and “Hanumante

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<sup>9</sup> Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan, trans. *Retelling the Ramayana: Voices from Kerala* (New Delhi: OUP, 2005) 82.

<sup>10</sup> “A Different Song” *The Hindu*, August 2005.

<http://www.hindu.com/fr/2005/08/12/stories/2005081201210200.htm>

Poonkavana Naseekaranam” (“Hanuman’s Destruction of the Garden”).<sup>11</sup> The language and imagery employed in the *Mappilapattu*<sup>12</sup> are resonant of the social fabric of the early Muslim community. Sources suggest that the *Mappila Ramayanam* cannot claim antiquity, considering the language of the compositions and given the fact that Father Camille Bulcke, author of the *Ramakatha*, does not mention this version<sup>13</sup>.

There are many versions of the *Ramayana* available from ancient, medieval and modern India. However, the commendable retelling traditions that need to be acknowledged here are the versions from women and subaltern sections of the country. Velcheru Narayana Rao examines the *Ramayana* songs sung by upper caste women in Telugu which, even while belonging to the framework of the dominant text, interrogate Rama’s sense of justice with relation to Sita. He terms these songs “Seethayanas.”<sup>14</sup> These songs are predominantly sung in private gatherings of women held in the backyards of Brahmin households or sung during daily chores. Prominence is given to women characters and roles of otherwise obscure women characters like Santha (elder sister of Rama), who is not mentioned in the dominant version. Reference to rituals, women’s daily chores, pregnancy, motherhood, female bonding, etc. can be found in these songs. Rao also talks about the *Ramayana* songs sung by non-brahmin/lower-caste women, which emphasizes the glories of Ravana, Lanka and so on. Rama, in these songs appears only as a

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<sup>11</sup> T.H. Kunjiraman, ed. *Mappila Ramayanavum Nadan Pattukalum* (Kottayam: DC Books, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> Mappilapattu or Mappila songs are popular folk song genre rendered in Arabic-laced Malayalam, predominantly by Mappila Muslims in the Malabar region of Keralam. Balakrishnan Vallikunnu and Ummer Tharamel, *Mappilapattu: Padhavum Padhanavum* (Kottayam: DC Books, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> Camille Bulcke, *Ramakatha*, trans. Abhayadev (Trissur: Kerala Sahitya Academy, 1978).

<sup>14</sup> Velcheru Narayana Rao, “A Ramayana of their Own: Womens Oral Tradition in Telugu,” *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*, ed. Paula Richman (Oxford: University of California Press, 1991) 130.



devotional refrain whereas the role of a hero is bestowed upon Ravana (132). Nabaneeta Deb Sen explains the selection of themes from the *Ramayana* by women as follows:

It is natural in women's retellings of the *Ramayana* for them to pick and choose their episodes; they are not interested in the heroic epic cycle, which has no relevance to their lives. If what they create is fragmentary, it is because their lives are fragmentary. For them, it is the whole story. It reflects a woman's world in its entirety.<sup>15</sup>

The multiplicity of these traditions is becoming increasingly neglected or sidelined as a result of the homogenization of culture, resulting in what could be called cultural loss. Romila Thapar argues on a similar note while discussing about the televised *Ramayana*, as an expression of the mainstream, marking a project of homogenisation to create a “national culture.”<sup>16</sup> She suggests that such homogenization of culture forces other versions to become irretrievably submerged or marginalized. Since there is little evidence that any one rendering of the *Ramayana* could stand as the original text, as *the* *Ramayana*, it is difficult to understand the reason behind the State’s choice of *Ramayana* for nation-wide telecast. Thapar suggests that when the State acts as a patron of the arts, it often favours dominant groups in society. Each *Ramayana* then, comes with the signature of the social location and ideology of the respective group that appropriates it. These appropriations and retellings are fashioned by deliberately reinventing the story and

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<sup>15</sup> Nabaneeta Dev Sen, “Lady Sings the Blues: When Women Retell the Ramayana,” [http://www.ninapaley.com/Sitayana/Manushi\\_LadySingstheBlues.html](http://www.ninapaley.com/Sitayana/Manushi_LadySingstheBlues.html)

<sup>16</sup> Romila Thapar, “Foreword,” *Questioning Ramayanas: A South Asian Tradition*, ed. Paula Richman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) viii.

selectively dismembering/decontextualising particular incidents or by adding incidents that adhere to particular ideological positions.

In the context of the above background of retellings, I will briefly explain the significance and characteristic feature of Periyar E.V. Ramasami's exegesis of the *Ramayana*. Periyar started the Self-Respect Movement, a radical anti-caste movement in 1925 in Tamil Nadu. It was a movement against caste, Brahmanism, religion, cultural domination of North Indians on South Indians, and the rule of men over women.<sup>17</sup> Periyar interprets the *Ramayana* as a text of political domination on the part of North Indians/Aryans on South Indians/Dravidians. Periyar's readings of the *Ramayana* are developed in two works: *Iramayanapathirangal* (*Characters in the Ramayana*), *Iramayankurippukal* (*Points about the Ramayana*) (p 180). The gist of his ideas in these two books is translated into *The Ramayana: A True Reading*. This chapter draws from the later English text and not directly from the Tamil versions. He reads the story of the *Ramayana* as a vehicle to spread awareness about the cultural domination of North India. In his comments on the *Ramayana*, he reverses the very story and uses it for spreading his anti-North Indian ideology. He challenges the conventional understanding of villain and hero, by demythologising Rama and presenting Ravana as the real hero. He deconstructs the image of Rama as an exemplary and divine character. In *Iramayanapathirangal*, Periyar criticizes thirteen major characters from the *Ramayana* on the basis of the deeds they perform. He cites fifty incidents of apparent improper

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<sup>17</sup> Paula Richman, "E.V. Ramasami's Reading of the Ramayana," *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* (Oxford: University of California Press, 1991).

behaviour on the part of Rama, which include coveting the throne of Ayodhya, killing Vali, his treatment of Sita, his attitude towards Sudras which is manifest in the killing of Sambooka and so on. Meanwhile, he portrays Ravana as a monarch of the ancient Dravidians, a responsible political leader. He substantiates this point by providing details from the *Ramayana*. According to Periyar, Ravana was forced to avenge his sister's disfigurement. Ravana's death was possible only because of his brother, Vibheeshna's betrayal. He subjects the now standard *Ramayana*, a text with mythical features, to scientific analysis in order to highlight the anachronisms of the text. The manner of Periyar's criticism is unconventional, and yields dramatic interpretations. His intention was to disseminate Dravidian ideology among the masses, not the scholars. However, one could say that his interpretation has precedent in Chittalai Chattanar's *Manimekalai*, a 6<sup>th</sup> century Buddhist text, *Jain Pratipuranas*, Vimalasuri's *Paumachariyam* and other texts in this vein.<sup>18</sup>

Norman Cutler observes a close connection between the Tamil Renaissance movement that took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the Dravidian movement. The Tamil Renaissance marks the rediscovery of many early Tamil classics, their editing and publishing. This also becomes a moment in the evolution of Tamil cultural and political identity. The Dravidian political agenda emphasised the antiquity of Tamil civilization and its essential independence from Sanskrit culture.<sup>19</sup> K. Nambi Arooran observes that there was an intimate relationship between the Tamil Renaissance

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<sup>18</sup> Paula Richman, "E.V. Ramasami's Reading of the Ramayana," *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* (Oxford: University of California Press, 1991).

<sup>19</sup> Norman Cutler, "Three Moments in the Genealogy of Tamil Literary Culture," *Literary Culture in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*, ed. Sheldon Pollock (Oxford: OUP, 2003) 288.

and the ways in which Dravidian sentiments arose. And the Dravidian ideology was formed mainly on the basis of the ancient glory of the Tamilians, revealed through literature (288). What Periyar does is use the Ramayana as a tool to forward his ideology, just as his opponents (the Aryans) had done, but his use of it entirely subverts and deconstructs their use of the same text.

I will now examine the details of the *Ramayana* stories written by Sarah Joseph and show how she has attempted to retell the *Ramayana* from the perspectives of different characters in the text. The protagonist of Sarah Joseph's story "Black Holes"<sup>20</sup> is Manthara-Kaikeyi's maid who is portrayed in the *Valmiki Ramayana* as a liar, scandalmonger, and spy. However, in "Black Holes," Manthara is portrayed as a subaltern woman, a victim of power and intrigue, who is forced to act as a spy for her survival. The writer, by assuming Manthara's viewpoint, deconstructs Ayodhya's image as an ideal kingdom. She also makes us look at the traditional sage-like characters Dasaratha and Vasishtha in a completely new light. The story dwells with Manthara's escape from Ayodhya on the night of Rama's coronation, after she was blamed by everyone as the cause of all misfortunes. Ayodhya, to her, is not the ideal kingdom, but a stage set for a game of power. She says:

What a supreme stage Ayodhya is! An unusual play was being performed where everyone takes on the role of the *sutradharan*. Naiveté was written on the faces of all actors and actresses. The white clothes that spoke of extreme satwa. The

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<sup>20</sup> Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan, trans. *Retelling the Ramayana: Voices from Kerala* (New Delhi: OUP, 2005).

canine and tusk alone kept hidden and invisible from the spectator. ‘I am the *sutradharan*,’ the character Dasarathan says, dancing and holding on to the curtain. A face overflowing with compassion. Gentle, sweet words. The great tradition of *Raghuvamsam* should be preserved. For that, the eldest son Rama alone should be crowned...The Kekaya king, Aswapathi, bursting with anger, waiting to rush from the green room to the stage. ‘I am the *sutradharan*. Dasaratha on stage is old, lustful, and a cheat. Only after he promised the kingdom as bride price did I give my young daughter in marriage to him. Ayodhya is Bharatan’s. If he does not keep his word, there will be a war.’ Between the stage and the green room stands another character holding the curtain. It is Vasishtan, taking the role of *sutradharan* ostensibly to uphold the honour of Ayodhya! Aswapathi should never reach the stage. So he dances blocking the door of entry. (101)

She sympathises with Bharata for not knowing how he is exploited. She says: “The sword that he raised against his mother must be piercing his own throat now. A world of fathers ordering their sons to raise their axes and swords against their mothers’ necks to preserve power.”<sup>21</sup> Manthara, in the standard version that circulates, is ugly, old and poor. She has to protect herself. She does not have any help or divine weapons with which to defend herself. She says: “For that, one should have secret assignations with *devas*. Also, *devas* preferred very beautiful women. And then there was penance! But could starving people find time for all that?”(99) Here, by locating Manthara as a person from the lower strata

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<sup>21</sup> Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan, trans. *Retelling the Ramayana: Voices from Kerala* (New Delhi: OUP, 2005) 101.

of society, Sarah Joseph brings out the politics of power experienced by a subaltern woman, whose very position enables such a politics as well as the organization of power. Manthara's version of the story throws light on the darker and uglier side of the ideal kingdom of Ayodhya and the kings of the renowned Raghuvamsa. Periyar also criticizes Dasaratha and Vasishtha. He describes Dasaratha as a person enslaved by passion, as someone who broke promises and acted irresponsibly. The main charge against Vasishtha is for participating in the plot to crown Rama. The charges made by Periyar against both the characters are developed in the story "Black Holes."

One can see an interesting connection between the stories "Black Holes" and "Asoka" as the first one speaks about the victor's (Rama) kingdom and the second one speaks about the loser's (Ravana) kingdom. While in the story "Black Holes", Manthara's version reveals the misdeeds that take place off-stage in Ayodhya, in "Asoka," the protagonist Sita announces "all glories are rightfully Lanka's" (113). "Asoka" portrays the incidents that occur in Lanka where Vibheeshana, Ravana's brother, is made king after Rama kills Ravana. Lanka, destroyed completely after the war, looks sorrowful and frighteningly silent. Vibheeshana informs Sita that Rama wishes to see her after her bath. Sita says to Vibheeshana that she wishes to see her husband without taking a bath. However, Vibheeshana is helpless since it is an order from the victor. In Sarah Joseph's words:

The odour of the sin of fratricidal betrayal in his breath disturbs Sita. The new master of Lanka was struggling to hold his neck erect, crushed by the crown grown lustreless with the smeared blood of his brothers.<sup>22</sup>

This is one of the main charges that Periyar makes against Vibheeshana. He argues that Vibheeshana betrayed his brother Ravana and led him to his death in order to gain the throne of Lanka. Periyar also criticizes him for not avenging the mistreatment his sister had to endure from the Aryans. He writes:

To commend a wrong-doer of many horrible blunders as an honest, just and brave man and to despise his own brother (Ravana) who treated Sita while in his custody honourably, as a vicious man—all these were not without ulterior motive of defrauding his brother Ravana and taking possession of Lanka. What can all these be, but selfishness and mean mindedness.<sup>23</sup>

In a manner distinct from the many texts that describe Sita and her beauty, Sarah Joseph describes Sita as follows:

Clay, battered and destroyed by continuous onslaughts of snow, rain, sunlight, lustful gazes, destructive stares, falling one upon the other on her face, neck, hands, breasts, navel, waist, legs and feet. Scars of severe brutalization, scabs of drying tears, wounds of humiliation. Trailing in mud and dust, hair so matted that

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<sup>22</sup> Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan, trans. *Retelling the Ramayana: Voices from Kerala* (New Delhi: OUP, 2005) 108.

<sup>23</sup> Dr. K. Veeramani, comp. *The Ramayana—(A True Reading): Collected Works of Periyar EVR* (Chennai: The Periyar Self-Respect Propaganda Institution, 1981) 636.

the strands could not be separated. Nails grown long. Skin drying and peeling off.<sup>24</sup>

Sita, alone in her misery, feels closer towards the women in Lanka. Sita, although an Aryan woman, is also the victim of the justice system of the Aryan male. Here, Sarah Joseph deftly inserts a feeling of sisterhood between Sita and Vibheeshana's women. They console Sita by holding her in their arms. They say: "This is not our justice, we, a subjugated people. This is the order of the victor" (110). Sita wonders:

Whose was the sin? Was it that of Aryan virility that had slashed the nose and ears of a lower caste woman who dared to make the mistake of begging for love? Or was it that of the justice of the subjugated, which seeking revenge, laid hands on the woman and the land of the dominant? Finally who suffered the result of the sin? (111)

Sita shrinks with humiliation for being led as a culprit into the presence of the victor. He says: "I did not win this war to reclaim you. The insult inflicted on me and my clan..." (113) At this moment Sita identifies herself with Lanka. She thinks: "The soil flung aside contemptuously by the victor is Lanka. Sita and Lanka are one and the same." (113) However, in Periyar's take on the *Ramayana*, Sita is presented differently from Sarah Joseph's intervention to the story. While Periyar charges Sita for allegedly feeling attracted to Ravana and for being unchaste, Sarah Joseph uses Sita to voice out the differences in justice systems followed by the Aryans and the Dravidians and to highlight

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<sup>24</sup> Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan, trans. *Retelling the Ramayana: Voices from Kerala* (New Delhi: OUP, 2005) 108.



a potential of a possible alliance between upper-caste women and the subalterns/subaltern women.

Differences in the justice systems of the Dravidians and the Aryans and the problems that result when one system forcefully replaces another, are voiced in the story “Mother Clan.” In “Mother Clan,” Sarah Joseph goes a step further to show how biased, male-centred and brahminical the Aryan laws are, compared to the Dravidian justice system which follows Nature. It tells the story of Soorpanakha, Ravana’s sister, after her encounters with Rama and Lakshmana. In most of the *Ramayanas*, Rama orders Lakshmana to mutilate Soorpanakha, after she proclaims her love and makes advances to Rama at Panchavati. In some tellings of the *Ramayana*, Lakshmana cuts her ears and nose and in some other tellings he cuts her nose and breasts. Sarah Joseph follows the second version. In “Mother Clan,” Soorpanakha’s breasts become a symbol of female sexuality. It throws light on Rama’s attitude to women and female sexuality, which is also normalised in Indian culture. The writer juxtaposes two different kinds of attitudes regarding women in Rama—one about protecting women and the weak and another about the tendency to criminalize and penalize women’s sexuality which is beyond man’s control. Soorpanakha finds the attitude of the Aryans alarming and strange. She says:

The tree blossoms because of passion. The forest blooms because of passion. If a woman’s passion is denounced as wrong and harmful, it is the fruit-bearing earth that will suffer... In my forest no man has shown cruelty to any woman. Filled with passion, if a woman approaches a man and he is unable to fulfil her desire, he would speak to her as he would to his sister and show her another direction.

King Ravana has never lifted his sword to turn a woman's body into a barren land.<sup>25</sup>

In the story, Soorpanakha is found waiting for Ayomukhi who is expected to arrive with 10,000 women to forge an attack on the Aryans. She fumes with the insults she had to endure from the Aryan male. She says:

They severed the very roots of my clan; insulted my colour and race; despoiled my body and speech. They butchered the root and source of my breast milk. The roots of my clan and blood! (119)

From Ayomukhi, Soorpanakha finds out about the fall of Lanka. She states that not a single woman from the expected 10,000 turns up, fearing Vibheeshana. After hearing from Ayomukhi about Lanka's fall, Soorpanakha asks:

'Cheeta?' (Sita). Ayomukhi whispers: 'They did not cut off her nose and breasts, but for the sin of having spent her days fearful, weeping, in King Ravana's garden, they prepared a blazing coal-fire and asked her to jump into it!'(125)

Listening to this, Soorpanakha roars with laughter. Soorpanakha laughs as she finds how unjust Aryan laws are to their women, let alone its injustice towards Dravidians and Dravidian women. The main charges that Periyar makes against Rama are his ill-treatment of Sita and the mutilation of Soorpanakha and Ayomukhi. Periyar contrasts Rama's treatment of Dravidian women (Thadaka, Soorpanakha, Ayomukhi) with Ravana's treatment of Sita. His identification of Ravana as the noble and righteous king of ancient Dravidas is promoted in Sarah Joseph's story.

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<sup>25</sup> Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan, trans. *Retelling the Ramayana: Voices from Kerala* (New Delhi: OUP, 2005) 120.

A marked difference one can see in the positions assumed by Periyar and Sarah Joseph is their attitude towards Sita. Even while taking a strong anti-Aryan stand, Sarah Joseph identifies Sita as a victim of the justice system of the Aryans. She, being an object of exploitation, identifies with the other objects who were exploited—the Dravidians and their land. However, some scholars find the charges that are raised by Periyar against Sita a bit ironic as these criticisms are based on the *dharmaśāstra* text – the Laws of Manu, which he burnt along with the picture of Rama in 1956.<sup>26</sup> Periyar’s negative interpretation of Sita is not a reflection of his anti-woman stand because his primary concern in deconstructing the *Ramayana* was to question Aryan supremacy mediated through the text. Moreover, he is known to be one of the very important reformers in this century. Periyar’s writings and speeches given as part of the Self-Respect Movement, questioned all traditional images of women. Apart from advocating widow remarriage and women’s education as did many reformers of the time, he de-ritualised marriages and stood against the system whereby women had to wear symbols of marriage (1956). C.S. Lakshmi points out that Periyar’s vision did not materialize completely, even within the movement, as women were not able to entirely abandon certain recognised and accepted roles that they had internalised. V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai have studied the role of women, especially Brahmin women in the movement, and the different dimensions of it.<sup>27</sup> K. Srilata’s work provides important insights about submerged histories of women’s

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<sup>26</sup> Paula Richman, “E.V. Ramasami’s Reading of the Ramayana,” *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* (Oxford: University of California Press, 1991) 182.

<sup>27</sup> V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai, *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium: From Iyothey Thass to Periyar* (Calcutta: Samya, 1998).

involvement.<sup>28</sup> However, one could assume that the demoralization of Sita by Periyar using the same Aryan morals works as an effective strategy to convince the masses. What Periyar attempts to do is to use Aryan morals to criticize Aryan heroes. He condemns Rama, Lakshmana, Dasaratha, Vasishta, and many other characters by employing this method. Although Sarah Joseph uses the mode of deconstruction employed by Periyar in recasting each Ramayana character in a different milieu, unique concerns render Joseph's retelling attempts as distinct from that of Periyar's. Periyar used his retellings and recastings to campaign for the Dravidian ideology to the popular reader, whereas Sarah Joseph's attempts are more women-oriented. Periyar's attitude about women expressed through the Self-Respect Movement would give us an idea that the demoralization of Sita does not come as part of his notions about a woman being pure, but as a means to attack the *dharmasastra* and an ideal woman character created through the influence of that text. Periyar used more popular ideologies for deconstruction, whereas the retellings by Sarah Joseph are more feminist and academic in nature.

"What is Not in the Story" portrays the meeting of five children—Rama and Sita's sons Lava and Kusa, the Shudra sage, Sambooka's daughter and son, and the Brahmin boy who got back his life after Rama murdered Sambooka for practicing asceticism—with the sage Valmiki in Naimisharanya. They all meet in the forest as Rama's sons are going to recite the *Ramayana* in Naimisharanya, Sambooka's children too are going there to sing about Sambooka's tale, and the Brahmin boy has lost his way during his search for his

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<sup>28</sup> K. Srilata, ed. *The Other Half of the Coconut: Women Writing, Self-Respect, History* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003).

lost calf. They share their stories and realize how their stories are interconnected. Lava and Kusa, along with Valmiki, reach an open space in the forest, where they prepare to rest. They hear a song in the distance and Kusa asks Valmiki: “Everyone names you as the first poet. Then how can there be this song?”<sup>29</sup> Later they learn that Sambooka’s children had sung the song. This question opens up the possibility of the existence of older *Ramayana* stories, and acknowledges the existence of other *Ramayan*s than the *Valmiki Ramayana*. After meeting Valmiki, Sambooka’s daughter asks him:

‘Writer, why didn’t you give us place in your writing?’ For the first time, during the journey through the forest, Valmiki fell into a deep meditation. Slowly a termite hill grew around him and covered him. (133)

Valmiki does not answer the question. The story ends as follows:

Did Unni get his calf back? Perhaps he did. Till his next death he may have lived suffering the pain of sleeplessness. In Naimisharanya, Sita’s son recited the *Ramayana* and they were the focus of the eyes and ears of all who listened, says the narrator of the epic. But what we do not have any information about is Sambooka’s children. Did they reach Naimisharanya? After the recital of the poet’s version, did they sing their version of Sambooka’s story? We do not hear anything of them in history, epics, or even oral folklore. (136)

The writer uses this story to ask questions about the politics of omission and simultaneously points to significant gaps in the standard narrative. It also gestures at the

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<sup>29</sup> Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan, trans. *Retelling the Ramayana: Voices from Kerala* (New Delhi: OUP, 2005) 132.

possible multiplicity of versions and their loss, a result of the spread of the dominant culture.

“Jathigupthan and Janakigupthan” is vastly different from the other four stories. It could be considered a political allegory. Although not linked directly to the *Ramayana*, the names Janaki, the forest, and verses from the *Ramayana* used ironically suggests that it is a parody of the *Ramayana*, intended to make fun of contemporary politics and bureaucracy. Jathigupthan and Janakigupthan are the new incarnations of Rama and Sita in Kaliyuga. Janakigupthan is hysteric and her hysteria is a favourite subject of the media. Jathigupthan is portrayed as having severe constipation problems. This is the result of a curse given to him by Janakigupthan in their previous life. Janakigupthan and Jathigupthan appear as if they constitute a well-known scene from the *Ramayana*, where Sita asks Rama why he carries weapons even in what appears to be a harmless and beautiful forest. Sarah Joseph at this juncture, uses the same verse from the *Ramayana*, as a narrative technique to take her readers back to the myth. Janakigupthan curses Jathigupthan for not paying attention to the question: “Because of your passion for weapons, in Kaliyuga you will suffer from severe constipation.”<sup>30</sup> Jathigupthan’s main concerns are his constipation and his wife’s hysteria. Throughout the story he appears naked, desperately trying to cover himself with weapons. Jathigupthan’s personal assistant, who we see is frequently slapped by him, draws a parallel between the current bureaucratic system and monarchy. The story exposes the absurdity of contemporary

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<sup>30</sup> Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan, trans. *Retelling the Ramayana: Voices from Kerala* (New Delhi: OUP, 2005) 139.

politics and the triviality of bureaucracy. This could be one of the ways of retelling the *Ramayana* in modern times, where the ideal images are again destroyed. It deconstructs the text by trivializing its high-sounding verses, exposes the marital discord in the relationship, and the fears of a leader and power-monger.

“Bhoomirakshasam”<sup>31</sup> is a story about the pre-*Ramayana* times of Aryan invasion on subaltern lives and women. Dandhakan, son of Ayodhya’s king Ikshvaku, who encroached the forest land and forced his rule among the Danava tribes, comes to Dandhakaranya and accidentally sees Araja, the daughter of the Asura sage Sukracharya. He forces himself on Araja and rapes her, not paying attention to her please to leave her alone. Sukracharya, while coming back, sees that the forest, which was in full bloom, is now completely destroyed. Trees have shed their leaves and flowers, all the greenery had turned grey. Slowly they heard the sound of something falling like rain from the sky. And for seven days continuously the soil rained on Dandhaka’s kingdom. Cities, people, and houses—everything went under the earth.

Araja, feeling the insult and pain, kept her ears close to earth and listened to the thunders of Spring. The land around her was still green and alive with trees, birds, water, and breeze.

For several thousand years, not even a single blade of grass sprouted in Dandhaka’s kingdom and it was called as Dandhakaranya. People were terrified to go near that. (37)

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<sup>31</sup> Sarah Joseph, “Bhoomirakshasam,” *Puthuramayana: Ramayana Kathakal Veendum Parayumbol* (Trissur: Current Books, 2006).

There is an obvious association between woman and nature in this story. But more than that, it records the Aryan invasion of subaltern land during pre-*Ramayana* times. It also records the arrogance and lack of respect towards others' lives on the part of an Aryan male.

“Oru Prayopaveshathinte Katha” tells the story of Angadan, the son of Vali who was killed by Rama. Angadan, his father dead and his mother and country under the control of his father's brother Sugriva, is ordered to head the group which searches for Sita. In their journeys to unknown and unfriendly terrains “in search of a woman who none of them have seen or would recognize” (44), Angadan remembers a golden past when his father was alive. The story narrates the Aryan colonization in Kishkindha, Vali's kingdom, from the point of view of Angadan.

In a recent novel, *Ooru Kaval*,<sup>32</sup> Sarah Joseph revives the same plot to deconstruct the much valorised episodes of the search for Sita. The novel focuses on Vali's kingdom and its culture, thwarted by Aryan invasion. Characters like Thara who was forced to become Sugriva's wife after Vali's death and Maruti (Hanuman) are given prominence. The novel narrates how Aryans under the leadership of Rama make use of Sugriva's desire for Kishkindha's throne to impose their domination on the Vanara clan. The novel which has the same theme as that of the short story lacks precision compared to the latter. However, this is a theme that has relevance to Dravidian ideology as Periyar cites the killing of Vali as one of the most unjustifiable acts of Rama.

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<sup>32</sup> Sarah Joseph, *Ooru Kaval* (Trissur: Current Books, 2007).



The story, “Kantharatharakam,” I think, is crucial because it redefines the ideology behind Sarah Joseph’s *Ramayana* stories. The story tries to express the thoughts of Lakshmana after Sita is abducted by Ravana. Lakshmana is convinced about their actions against the Rakshasa clan, but he remembers how Sita was against coming to Dandhakaranya on the requests of sages. He also remembers how his anger which resulted in the mutilation of Soorpanakha has caused the abduction of Sita. He recollects how, like Sita, his mother Sumitra and step-mothers Kousalya and Kaikeyi used to criticise sages for inducing violence among young children. In Sarah Joseph’s words:

Why do sages give weapons to children and make them do things? Sages have powers to kill any mighty Rakshasa. Then why are they making children kill them? Sumitra asks. “The fate of Kshatriya,” answers Kousalya.

Rama and Lakshmana have heard their mothers and wives talking among themselves, objecting to the widespread use of weapons and criticising a justice system that concentrates on killing innocent people. However, Rama and Lakshmana are portrayed as those who classify such attitudes as womanly, and of the weak-hearted. Here we can also see the attempt on the part of the writer to view Rama and Lakshmana as victims of *sanatana dharma*. They believe it is their duty and follow it blindly.

Looking at all the characters with sympathy was definitely not Periyar’s mode of telling the story. Therefore, the ideological similarity that we find between Sarah Joseph and Periyar is limited. Periyar’s de/reconstructions had a strong motif because it referenced a movement, more specifically, a people’s movement. Sarah Joseph’s stand in “Kantharatharakam,” may appear as if she were assuming Rama and Lakshmana’s

perspective, the very villains of Dravidian ideology put forward by Periyar. But this does not mean that Sarah Joseph's intention is to retell the story along lines of the dominant versions. More than looking at Rama and Lakshmana sympathetically, Sarah Joseph here attempts to look at the internalization of the ideology and its source. In this sense, Sarah Joseph's retellings function more like a woman's version of the *Ramayana*, the kind put forward by Navaneetha Deb Sen. However, they go beyond the agendas of feminist retellings to incorporate racial and ethnic identities. In her writings, these stories mark an ideological shift, a manoeuvre that inaugurates discussions of caste.

Retelling the *Ramayana* has been an ongoing project in several research circles, and Sarah Joseph's undertaking can also be included in this category. The stories have appeared in English translation as *Retelling the Ramayana: Voices from Kerala* (2005). Although the book identifies different versions of the *Ramayana*, it continues to attach these retelling traditions to the *Valmiki Ramayana*, while placing that text in the centre. It does not abandon the idea of considering the *Valmiki Ramayana* as the text from which all other *Ramayanas* descended. From the cover illustration she uses (*Sita Bhumi-pravesh* by Raja Ravi Varma), to the dedication of the text by the translator (Dedicated to her mother who taught her from age seven, to recite the *Ramayana* flawlessly and rhythmically, without making any mistakes), the book appears to contradict its own content. As a result, the English translation reproduces the dominant and re-subverts the subversion, while presenting it to a foreign audience. *Retelling the Ramayana: Voices from Kerala* also includes a play called *Kanchana Sita (Golden Sita)* by C.N. Sreekantan Nair. The Malayalam book contains only Sarah Joseph's stories, which include three

more stories that are based on *the Ramayana*. The Malayalam book is named, *Puthu Ramayanam: Ramayana Kathakal Veendum Parayumbol* (New Ramayanam: Retelling Ramayana Stories). It does not carry a dedication and the cover illustration does not suggest any scene from the traditional *Ramayana*.

Periyar's attempts to critique North Indian cultural domination through criticizing their religious/cultural icons like the *Ramayana*, is still carried out by the Dravidar Kazhagam, the party established by him in 1944. Although Periyar's opponents and the supporters of the dominant culture mock his attempts, his method still continues to be the most popular and mass movement against the *Ramayana*, Rama and other Aryan cultural symbols. Its appeal to the comprehension of the common people makes it different from other similar attempts. Sarah Joseph's attempts, which are a result of her feminist and activist sensitivities, are definitely influenced by Periyar's readings of the *Ramayana*. Both these retellings, along with countless versions of the *Ramayana* from different locations, demonstrate how a particular text has been used as a way to normalize and standardize the dominant.

These three renderings—Periyar's interpretation of the *Ramayana*, Sarah Joseph's retellings, and the English translation of Sarah Joseph and Sreekandan Nair's writings—address different publics. Periyar's public was constituted by people, the masses. He used the deconstruction method, to awaken the masses from Aryan indoctrination. It is not creative, imaginative or aesthetically appealing. It is done based on pure reasoning and ideological commitments. And these renderings were part of a political or social

movement. The public that Sara Joseph addresses is a literary/reading public. This kind of writing is also political as it spells out the political stand and views of a writer. What both Periyar and Sarah Joseph are trying to do is to question the dominant justice system. Sarah Joseph tries to fragment the text into many versions. And Sarah Joseph, unlike Periyar, is not part of the Dravidian movement.

The different nature of the publics<sup>33</sup> addressed by the translation and the Malayalam collection is obvious from the author's note in both the texts. The author's note in the English collection focuses on the doubts that form in a child's mind while listening to stories from the *Ramayana*. She writes:

All the versions of *Ramayana* that children hear and read were filled with cruel rakshasas and rakshasis. They had been obstructing yagas, and attacking hermits. I continue to read and study that Raman killing them has become even a child's need. The death of every rakshasa is marked by devas showering flowers. Children love flowers. The innocent children desire the noiseless, painless showering of flowers (which trickle like honey on their heads) to a shower of arrows, the rivers of blood, and the jingling of weapons. As they grow up, some children may read and believe that the killing of the rakshasas signifies the victory or the defeat at the end of clan conflicts. That is the kind of reading that I also did. My reading is that all killings of rakshasas need not end in a 'victory' of human/divine beings.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> By publics, I mean different kind of interest groups in the public sphere.

<sup>34</sup> Sarah Joseph, "Author's Note," *Retelling the Ramayana: Voices from Kerala*, trans. Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan (New Delhi: OUP, 2005) xiii.

She further explains what makes her see the side of characters like Sita, Soorpanakha, Sambooka etc. She says that, for her, Sita and Soorpanakha are two aspects of the loss of love in 'Rama Rajya.'

Oh, certainly! All children have doubts. When the 'laws and justice' that prevailed centuries ago do not coalesce with modern practices of justice, children feel confused. Only for a short span of time can we fool children offering lessons and prayers with the use of force. Truly, it is from the doubts arising from a deeply pained self that my 'Ramayana Stories' were born. (xv)

The author's note is titled "Writer, where is the place for us in the story?" in Malayalam. Here she details the politics of *Ramayana* and its justice systems.

We can see that there is no work which has traveled so vibrantly and widely through speech and narratives like the *Ramayana*. The sources of *Ramayana* stories never get over, regardless of how much ever it is consumed. For each generation the *Ramayanam* becomes a different one. Each period and region owns its own readings. With each one's justice, they measure the justice system of the *Ramayana*. That is how many *Ramayanas* take birth. All the versions of *Ramayana* that have been told from different locations like race, caste, region and gender search for an answer to the question, who is the complete human being.<sup>35</sup>

According to her, a different version of the *Ramayana* is born when Sita, Soorpanakha, Sambooka, and Nature challenge vibrantly the standard view of Rama as 'a person' who is 'brave' and 'good.' She offers:

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<sup>35</sup> Sarah Joseph, "Ezhuthalare, Kathayil Njangalude Idamevide?" *Puthuramayana: Ramayana Kathakal Veendum Parayumbo* (Trissur: Current Books, 2006) vii.

Rama stories become so vibrant and radiant because the characters in the boundaries mark themselves and search for a place in the story asking the ancient poet “writer, why haven’t you acknowledged us in the story?” The *Ramayana* is seen by generations as a touchstone for regional and temporal justice systems and cut it across with a new sense of justice. This will continue to be an unstoppable process. Each *Ramayana* story will be told as a new *Ramayana*... (vii)

The cover of the Malayalam collection has the picture of a bronze face on fire, whereas the cover of the English version has a painting by Raja Ravi Varma named *Sita Bhumi-pravesh*. Although the translator touches upon the Dravidian take of the stories by saying that:

Both are written from a woman’s perspective. Both bring out the political context of Aryan versus Dravidian, the upper castes versus the lower castes, rajya dharma versus the dharma of love and human relationships. Both emphasize the importance of questioning tradition and having a new outlook with regard to the language and literature of the land,<sup>36</sup>

her dedication nullifies this view: “To My mother who taught me, from the age of seven, to recite the *Ramayana* flawlessly and rhythmically, without making any mistakes.”<sup>37</sup> A more interesting observation that one can make of the English collection, is the imprint used at the beginning of each section, of an artistic bow and arrow. And we can locate a reaction to this image in Sarah Joseph’s “Taikulam” and “Oru Prayopavesathinte

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<sup>36</sup> Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan, “Translator’s Note” *Retelling the Ramayana: Voices from Kerala*, trans. Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan (New Delhi: OUP, 2005) xxiv.

<sup>37</sup> Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan, trans. *Retelling the Ramayana: Voices from Kerala* (New Delhi: OUP, 2005) 17.

Katha.” The image stands as the ultimate symbol of Aryan cunningness and shrewdness.

Soorpanakha says:

There are many weapons made of copper and iron in my people’s worksheds—swords, spears, axes—an endless number of weapons. As for the arrows! King Ravana is not fully aware of the strength of those arrows, that fell in the Dandaka forest like hail. Arrows pierced the chests of Kharan and other fighters and cut through to the other side, as they rushed, howling and holding their weapons aloft. In the time it takes to blink, those heroes fell like small mountains, their heads and torsos scattered, their chests and faces pitted with holes. I have no arrows that are as weightless as feathers, and can yet pierce rocks and speed off. (120)

Not many literary works have reflected the “Dravidian” feeling/identity of Malayalees in Malayalam Literature. When I read Sarah Joseph’s short story, “Taikulam” (“Mother Clan”), which portrays Soorpanakha as the main character, what caught my attention was the assertion of a Dravidian identity. Although the movement is centuries old in Tamil Nadu, it has had only a minimal presence in Kerala. Many Malayalam poets sang about Tamil being the mother of Malayalam language, while writing it out in Sanskritic Malayalam. In “Taikulam,” Sarah Joseph uses a kind of Malayalam which is a mixture of Malayalam and Tamil. This, for me, offered an entry point to connect Sarah Joseph’s *Ramayana* stories and the Dravidian movement. Later, in my interview with her, she said that she has been influenced by the writings of Periyar and that had motivated her to explore the Dravidian identity in texts like the *Ramayana*. However, Sarah Joseph has not mentioned Periyar and his influence anywhere else. These stories have appeared in

different times, and in different collections spanning 1990–2003. Only in 2005 was it put together as a collection in English. In Malayalam, it was compiled only in 2006 with the title *Ramayanakathakal Veendum Parayumbol* (*On Retelling the Ramayana*). However, in my opinion, in both the editions, the critical comments offered did not highlight the Dravidian import of these stories, though the word is used a couple of times.



## Chapter 4

### Rewriting Women's Spaces: Domestic Spaces, Region, Community and Religious Institutions

This chapter inspects the third phase (reminiscent of Showalter's female phase) of Sarah Joseph's writings, mainly the corpus comprising her three novels that form a trilogy. Moving away from the first and second phases of her writing discussed in the previous chapters, the third phase signifies a merge of many spaces to form womanspace. These confluences enhance the scope of "womanspace." Through the analysis of these novels, the chapter tries to explore different dimensions of public and private spheres, and how their conflation is effected while dealing with region, the domestic sphere, religion, community, etc. It considers how the writer makes an effort in these novels to articulate and address the problems in contemporary feminist practices by rewriting and redefining these spaces in terms of gender. The three novels—*Alahayude Penmakkal*<sup>1</sup>(1999), *Mattathi*<sup>2</sup> (2003), and *Othappu*<sup>3</sup> (2005)—focus on women's experiences and attempt to redefine spaces to accommodate and expand women's spaces. This chapter will investigate the different manifestations of the public/private sphere portrayed in these novels in relation to its current theoretical implications. The novels are studied in comparison with literary writings by other writers, which explore similar themes. Finally, the chapter will discuss the inclusiveness of the space for women that is envisaged by Sarah Joseph.

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Joseph, *Alahayude Penmakkal* (Trissur: Current Books, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Sarah Joseph, *Mattathi* (Trissur: Current Books, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Sarah Joseph, *Othappu* (Trissur: Current Books, 2005).

Sarah Joseph, an iconic and widely celebrated writer of *penneshuthu*, rewrites the set notions of region, community, family and religion in mainstream literature. She also pushes the boundaries of *penneshuthu* which accommodated writings that focused mainly on gender identity. Her interventions through the trilogy put forward the idea that gender is not a homogenous category and that there are power structures within it. The chapter examines three novels, *Alahayude Penmakal*, *Mattathi*, and *Othappu*, to demonstrate how the writer maps other identities like caste, community and region along with gender identity. Sarah Joseph also charts how these identity formations span the themes of region, its colonization, family and domestic space as also political affiliations of religious institutions. Sarah Joseph was finally accepted as a “proper” writer, not just a *penneshuthu* writer with her first novel, *Alahayude Penmakal*, which was published in 1999. It gained critical acclaim due to its narrative style, spontaneity, language etc. The novel also fetched her the Kerala Sahitya Academy award in 2003. Different from her *penneshuthu* short stories where community/caste identity of a character is secondary to gender identity, *Alahayude Penmakal* attempted to re-write the history of Christianity in Kerala by providing many histories of the community and the region. The three novels— *Alahayude Penmakal* (Alaha’s Daughters), *Mattathi* (a word used in one particular region in Kerala to denote a woman who is made the ‘other’ in her in-laws’ family), and *Othappu* (again a colloquial expression that means a bad example) – which the writer describes as forming a trilogy, share a common region and therefore a common regional history, but are set in three different times. They attempt to redefine spaces with an aim to reclaim ‘male’ territories, and expand them as women’s spaces. The continuity exhibited

within these three novels, enables the tripartite narrative to create the effect of a meta-narrative.

Contemporary theories for the last decade are peppered with many discussions that centre on the problems of gender and feminist practices. Susie Tharu's and Tejaswini Niranjana's "Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender"<sup>4</sup>, Sharmila Rege's "A Dalit Feminist Standpoint,"<sup>5</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty's "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Scholarship,"<sup>6</sup> and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Discussion: An Afterword on the New Subaltern"<sup>7</sup> are some of the seminal works that point at the problems of viewing feminism and women as a homogenous category. I would like to use these theoretical discussions as a point of departure to discuss how these problematic configurations, which are generated as a result of viewing feminism as a homogenous category, are effectively handled in Sarah Joseph's novels.

Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana discuss the new visibility of women in the political as well as social spectrum starting in the early 1990s. They argue that this new visibility accommodates humanist practices that legalize bourgeois and patriarchal interests, resulting in contradictions within gender analysis. Through the metonyms of the anti-

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<sup>4</sup> Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana, "Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender," *Subaltern Studies IX*, eds. Shahid Amin and Dipesh Chakrabarty (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Sharmila Rege, "A Dalit Feminist Standpoint," *Gender and Caste: Issues in Contemporary Indian Feminism*, ed. Anupama Rao (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> Chandra Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Feminist Review* 30 (Autumn 1998).

<sup>7</sup> Gayatri Spivak, "Discussion: An Afterword on the New Subaltern," *Subaltern Studies XI: Community, Gender and Violence*, eds. Partha Chatterjee and Pradeep Jagannathan (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2000).

Mandal<sup>8</sup> and Chunduru<sup>9</sup> agitations, the rise of the Hindutva, the anti-arrack movement in Andhra Pradesh, and governmental initiatives to promote contraceptives for women, Tharu and Niranjana demonstrate how the feminist movement is disabled by hegemonic mobilizations and how this confounds the possibility of alliances between feminism and democratic political initiatives. They propose that only “the shaping of a feminism capable of a countering hegemonic politics”<sup>10</sup> can do away with these contradictions. Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s article discusses the monolithic, universalizing and essentializing constructions of women in the third world by Western feminism. She suggests:

An analysis of ‘sexual difference’ in the form of cross-culturally singular, monolithic notion of patriarchy or male dominance leads to the construction of a similarly reductive and homogenous notion of what I shall call the ‘third-world difference’—that stable, ahistorical something that apparently oppresses most, if not all the women in these countries.<sup>11</sup>

While criticising the discursive production of the third world woman which erases geographical and historical specificity, Mohanty recommends a decolonising and reorienting of contemporary feminism. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her essay, “Discussion: An Afterword on the New Subaltern”, critically examines the ‘new

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<sup>8</sup> The agitations in which both upper caste men and women participated, following the announcement of the then Prime Minister V.P. Singh in August 1990 regarding the implementation of 27% reservations for Backward Castes, in government service and public sector, as per the recommendations of the Mandal Commission report.

<sup>9</sup> The incident that took place on 6 August 1991, in the village of Chunduru in coastal Andhra Pradesh, where thirteen Dalits were murdered by upper caste Reddys.

<sup>10</sup> Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana, “Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender,” *Subaltern Studies IX*, eds. Shahid Amin and Dipesh Chakrabarty (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2000) 260.

<sup>11</sup> Chandra Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” *Feminist Review* 30 (Autumn 1) 63.

subaltern' which stems from the monolithic woman-as-victim notion and remarks on how women's issues assume the position of an international dominant which is the product of nationalism and modernity.<sup>12</sup> She describes the endeavours of organizations like the United Nations as "efforts to bring the world's women under one rule of law, one civil society, administered by the women of internationally divided dominant."<sup>13</sup> She suggests that only a women's history that patiently learns from below can deconstruct this new subaltern. Sharmila Rege's "A Dalit Feminist Standpoint" portrays the problems of contemporary feminism in India more explicitly. She speaks of the tendency to universalize women's experience and womanhood, paying the price of excluding Dalit/marginalised womanhood.<sup>14</sup> Rege points at how mainstream feminist theory develops around three crucial categories—woman, experience and personal politics—which prove inadequate to explain the experience of all kinds of women. She writes:

Though powerful as political rhetoric, these categories posed theoretical problems. The category 'woman' was conceived as being based on the collective state of women being oppressed by the fact of their womanhood. As the three categories were deployed in combination, it often led to exclusions around race, class, caste and ethnicity. (90)

These academic interventions as well as women's movements from marginalised sections have prompted feminism to reconfigure its frames and move away from its 90s stand.

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<sup>12</sup> Tejaswini Niranjana, "Nationalism Refigured: Contemporary South Indian Cinema and the Subject of Feminism," *Subaltern Studies IX*, eds. Partha Chatterjee and Pradeep Jagannathan (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> Gayatri Spivak, "Discussion: An Afterword on the New Subaltern," *Subaltern Studies XI: Community, Gender and Violence*, eds. Partha Chatterjee and Pradeep Jagannathan (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2000) 322.

<sup>14</sup> Sharmila Rege, "A Dalit Feminist Standpoint," *Gender and Caste: Issues in Contemporary Indian Feminism*, ed. Anupama Rao (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003) 90.

Sarah Joseph, also an academic, has reviewed and reworked her frames in the later stage of her writing career, as is apparent in her novels. An analysis of these frames will help us look at the possibilities and limitations of the efforts at reconfiguration. The shifts that can be seen in her writings from the first two phases to the third phase attests a constant reviewing of frames on the part of the writer to be more inclusive while dealing with women's issues. The initial phases of writing assume a certain kind of universality of women's experiences, while the other identities are at play only in the background. The writings of the third phase place women within the multiple folds of society such as region, family, community, caste, etc. Inequalities among women are portrayed to demonstrate the operations of patriarchy on women in terms of caste, community and ethnicity. Theoretical interventions from inside and outside the mainstream feminist movement, has enabled a theorization of necessary reviews and amendments the movement has to make to become more inclusive. Sarah Joseph says that *Alahayude Penmakkal* is an attempt to map the lives of those who occupy the margins of society. The spaces that are portrayed in the novels are mainly spaces inhabited by women, which bring out the resistances and subversions within it, along with a sense of belonging. However, the analysis of her novels helps gauge whether the writer's attempts to render a more inclusive space have indeed materialised.

I would like to outline the stories briefly before I present my analysis of them. *Alahayude Penmakkal*, set in the 1950s and 60s is the story of a small region called Kokkanchira and its inhabitants. The novel unfolds through the eyes of an 8-year-old girl. The narrative focuses on Annie and her family. Annie's family includes her mother, grandmother, three

aunts, her uncle who is a Tuberculosis patient, their neighbours who like Annie's family come to live in Kokkanchira because they were cast out the city space, and histories of Kokkanchira. The history/histories of Kokkanchira are narrated in *Alahayude Penmakkal* after Annie is insulted in school because she belongs to Kokkanchira. In response to the humiliation, Annie decides to change the name of the place. Kokkanchira means ghost land, and Kodichi angadi, the street where Annie lives, means bitch's market. She is often seen feeling ashamed of being a resident of places with such dirty surroundings and names. The writer narrates the history of Kokkanchira by employing oral narrative methods, which are very different from the form of mainstream, male-constructed history. Rewriting history is not a novel idea and has been recommended and practiced by many. However, in *Alahayude Penmakkal*, the histories of Kokkanchira are used to extend the space of women's history, through the narratives of subaltern women. The first inhabitants of Kokkanchira, a barren place that was used to dump waste, rubbish and dead bodies of unidentified persons, were scavengers and they were followed by many others whom the city rejected. The various versions of Kokkanchira's history include: the story that Annie's mind told (what she imagines), Ammama's (Annie's grandmother) oral *kathacharitram*, the story told by the scavengers, and the story of a butcher's shop.

There are more versions of it, recorded by many. Fisherfolks, brokers, small-scale thieves, arrack-makers, body-sellers—Kokkanchira was filled with those whom the city rejected. The city was also growing. Annie's family also belongs to those who were rejected by the city.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Sarah Joseph, *Alahayude Penmakkal* (Trissur: Current Books, 1999) 34.

This history of Kokkanchira that is narrated is maintained as a counter-history to the mainstream version that circulated. Instead of a monolithic history, several versions of the history or histories are presented. And these histories are told by those who have lived experience of it. After listening to these multiple versions of Kokkanchira's history, Annie decides that it is not correct to change Kokkanchira's name. In course of time, the city grows and engulfs Kokkanchira, pushing those whom it had rejected to the boundaries. Places get renamed. Streets like Kodichiyangadi, where women spoke and fought noisily, are replaced by neat and clean Martha Mariam Roads. *Alahayude Penmakkal* is about the colonisation of Kokkanchira and its marginalised lives, by the city. What is made explicit through the construction of such a counter-history is not just another side of the history, but also another portrayal of the region itself.

*Mattathi* is set in the 1970s and 80s in the same region. The place is no more Kokkanchira—it is Mariyapuram. Here, the protagonist is a young woman in her late teens, Lucy. She lives with an 80-year-old relative of hers, Brigita, who is rich and unmarried. Lucy serves the purpose of a servant for Brigita. School and college are depicted as resting places for Lucy, where she is free of housework. Lucy's only friends are Cherona, the washerwoman, and Sundari, Lucy's classmate, who is a Dalit. Lucy does not have the freedom of movement Annie had in *Alahayude Penmakkal*. Mariyapuram does not have the breadth that Kokkanchira had. Lucy's world is restricted to the kitchen and backyard, whereas Brigita's world consists of the front portion of the house. For Lucy, the house faces the backyard. She knows all the small details of the kitchen. We see how she explores the possibilities of this space since other spaces are not



accessible to her.<sup>16</sup> Here, the kitchen begins to represent a region. Through characters like Brigita, Lucy, Cherona and Sundari, the power structures among women are made obvious. Along with recording the lives of these characters, the changes that are brought in Mariyapuram through economic and social changes are also underscored. The novel ends when Brigita's relatives push Lucy out of the house after Brigita's death. The novel also functions as a mirror of the social and political changes that took place in the 70s and 80s in Keralam.

*Othappu* is the story of a socially and economically privileged woman (Margalita), who leaves the nunnery after spending some years there as a highly respected nun. The "ideal" family of Margalita does not welcome her back. We see the very institutions of religion, family and society, which had accorded her a privileged position and a place of pride, abandon Margalita when she leaves the Order. The other characters of this novel are people like Augustine, a priest who refuses to stay confined to religion and serve the poor, Brother Manikyan who gives holy services outside the Church to protest against the upper caste Church, Rebecca, a relative of Margalita, who lives in the streets and speaks about god, and the family of Yohannan Kasheesha—a priest of another denomination who provides food and accommodation for Margalita. Another main character is Kareekkan, a Catholic priest and a friend of Margalita. Kareekkan falls in love with Margalita and marries her, but always fears society. Margalita, who is refused a job by her brothers in the school which was established by her father, takes up the job of sweeping the ration

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<sup>16</sup> Seemanthini Niranjana's article too looks at the role of everyday activities in domestic sphere and expanded spaces within it in the reconfiguration of public and private spheres. Seemanthini Niranjana, "Themes of Femininity: Notes on the 'World' of Women's Fiction," *New Quest* (March-April 1989).

shop for a livelihood. We see Margalita pregnant and at the same time taking care of an orphan child, living in a house with a single room, at the end of the story. She claims that she is happy with her life and the novel ends there.

The novel deals with a woman's fight against religious and social institutions. It challenges the morality imposed by the church, its casteist attitudes and the hierarchies that structure these institutions. The story portrays a woman's search for her freedom and space within male-centred institutions. Unlike the other two novels, the space explored in *Othappu* is a supposedly male space. It offers an expansion of spaces assigned to women-writers by treading on spaces that are clearly male, but focusing on the struggles of a woman caught within these patriarchal structures.

In these three novels, we see a juxtaposition of nation and region. The word Sarah Joseph uses for region is "*desham*."<sup>17</sup> *Desham*, although it indicates a cultural and geographical area within the nation, gives a more local sense and suggests having indefinite boundaries unlike the nation. It resists the hegemonic apparatuses of the modern nation. In *Alahayude Penmakal*, Trissur (the city) is a distant place. The vastness of the region is the vastness of Kokkanchira. The boundaries of Kokkanchira are fuzzy. The nation comes into the narrative in the form of Gandhi, Gandhism, Nehru, the Congress party and Communism. In *Mattathi*, Mariyapuram (the new name for Kokkanchira) is closer to Trissur. Only some old connections of Kokkanchira separate it from Trissur. The people

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<sup>17</sup> *Desham* in Malayalam means region. In languages like Hindi, the word *desh* is used to refer to nation as well.

of Mariyapuram celebrate Independence Day and feel the pangs of patriotism when they salute the national flag. In *Othappu*, there is no Kokkanchira or Mariyapuram. There is again no reference to the nation directly. However, the nation is all-pervasive. We see its apparatus present ubiquitously. Margalita's brother is the mayor of the Trissur Corporation. The capillary nature of State power becomes obvious through these developments, where the region present in Alahayude Penmakal dissolves to become a part of the nation and its activities. Thus, we can read the trilogy as the genealogy of a region which is obliterated by the nation. And this genealogy is constructed from the memories of women, mainly women from socially and economically deprived sections.

*Alahayude Penmakal* attempts to rewrite the history of Christianity in Kerala by providing a wide range of histories to the community and region. This novel, unlike the other two novels in the trilogy, does not deal with Syrian Christian community. Ammama recollects their lineage as follows: "Sixty-four Christian families were brought to Puthanpetta to live there. We don't belong to that group. We come below that."<sup>18</sup> Unlike *Mattathi* and *Othappu*, which speak about the contradictions in upper caste Syrian Christian society, *Alahayude Penmakal* deconstructs the existing mainstream history of the Christian community, including Syrian Christians, and reconstructs it through the eyes of subaltern characters. Therefore, the narrative of the novel remains different from other Syrian Christian narratives, which speak of their heritage, lineage, etc. and it reveals the contradictions within mainstream Syrian Christian narratives which come through in other novels. Caste hierarchies within Christianity are delineated explicitly in

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<sup>18</sup> Sarah Joseph, *Alahayude Penmakal* (Trissur: Current Books, 1999) 115.

*Mattathi*, mainly through the dialogues of Brigita. In her conversation with the Gulf-returned newly rich Oppan who tells Brigita that he had visited her house in his childhood, she states that she was averse to allowing recently converted people inside her house.<sup>19</sup> *Othappu* gives an account of a more institutionalised casteist attitude of the Church in the distribution of power, positions etc. Brother Manikyan, whom the church did not permit into priesthood because he belonged to a lower class, marks his protest by serving poor people. Sarah Joseph calls it “Karutha Kurbana” (Blacks’ Mass).<sup>20</sup> *Karutha Kurbana*,<sup>21</sup> a book written during the same time by a non-upper caste priest, reveals the presence of caste hierarchies within the institution. Sarah Joseph has attempted to accommodate and represent these lone voices as rising against repression in her novel. These representations of caste discrimination surpass the level of mere depictions of reality, as they take acknowledge the veiled histories and recent historiographies that uncover them.

In addition to being a narrative that is different from the mainstream Syrian Christian narratives, the novel demonstrates historical narration through women’s eyes. The point of view the narration assumes strictly adheres to the world of women’s lives. For example, the fourteen KDs<sup>22</sup> in the region appear three times in *Alahayude Penmakkal*. The first incident is when they follow Annie’s aunt Nonu, who was going to Trissur to

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<sup>19</sup> Sara Joseph, *Mattathi* (Trissur: Current Books, 2003) 46.

<sup>20</sup> Sara Joseph, *Othappu* (Trissur: Current Books, 2005) 148.

<sup>21</sup> Fr. Aloysius. D. Fernandes, *Karutha Kurbana* (Trissur: Bishop Dr. Paulose Mar Paulose Foundation for Socio-Cultural Development, 2005).

<sup>22</sup> KD is a local usage meaning “rowdy.”

sell homemade bread. She starts running when they follow her. When she reaches a bridge, she jumps down.

Shocked, the KDs stood on the bridge...help, help...All fourteen KDs cried loudly. None of them knew how to swim.<sup>23</sup>

Another instance is when Kokkanchira was affected by cholera. The KDs also suffered from Cholera.

They also got stomach ache. Without taking the knife, without tying their kerchief around the neck (which is the trademark of KDs) they ran to the hospital (79)

Towards the end, the KDs also disappear with Kokkanchira as the city limits grow and engulf the region. The plight of the KDs is described in the novel as follows:

After Kizhakkekotta Tomakkutty's son demolished the butcher's shop and put it for sale, the worst affected were the KDs. The KDs do not have an existence away from the verandah of the butcher's shop. They tried to find verandahs of other shops. But nobody permitted them. 'We do not have anything against you people. But the business will be affected. No woman would come to the shop,' said the shop keepers. (126)

No youth came forward to join. Some became part of a martial arts school. One fell ill. One person converted to the Pentecostal mission and the rest were scattered and left for other places. Sarah Joseph reflects on this uncommon mode of story-telling.

In *Alahayude Penmakal*, women are those who experience history. The writer, Annie, Ammama—these three are women. The three instances in the novel related to the KDs are the history experienced by women. Otherwise, while mentioning

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<sup>23</sup> Sarah Joseph, *Alahayude Penmakal* (Trissur: Current Books, 1999) 49.

14 KDs, how many fights, murders, lootings they have indulged in, how many times they went to the jail—all these would become important. However, these details are not important for these three women.<sup>24</sup>

Women's versions of histories are projected as counter narratives of the dominant version of history. Marking women's lives and experiences as the basis of their version of history, women's history historicises the so-called unimportant and not-noteworthy as its subject. Sarah Joseph writes about the politics of the dominant history as follows:

...History is always like that. It will not give space to some truths. 'All that is really a headache': said History. How many tiny small things are there in this world? How can you accommodate all that in history? Those things can be said only through films or stories. Why should it be through history? History needs serious subjects. War, murder, invasion, and things like that.<sup>25</sup>

*Alahayude Penmakkal*, by rewriting the conventional forms of historiography and concepts of nation formation, offers itself as a form of resistance against modernist provinciality. The novel is narrated from a subaltern perspective and brings in the issue of how marginalised populations are consciously excluded from the modern accounts of the nation. Tamil Dalit woman writer, Bama's *Sangati*,<sup>26</sup> shares a similar and probably more powerful narrative of subaltern spaces. In *Alahayude Penmakkal*, Annie knows the history of Kokkanchira from Ammama, her grandmother. In *Sangati* too, the young protagonist knows the world from the stories of her grandmother, Muthiyamma. The regions presented in both the novels have boundaries set by social stigma—in *Alahayude*

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<sup>24</sup> Researcher's interview with the writer May 2006.

<sup>25</sup> Sara Joseph, *Mattathi* (Trissur: Current Books, 2003) 24.

<sup>26</sup> Bama, *Sangati*, trans. into Malayalam by Vijayakumar Kunissery (Kozhikode: Mathrubhumi Books, 2008).

*Penmakkal* lines are drawn along categories of class and caste whereas in *Sangati* it is caste that decides the boundary of the region and where people live.

Sarah Joseph envisages Annie's family in terms of 'womanspace'. It is unique and unlike the stereotypical family image comprising father, mother and children. It is different from the male-dominated, confined family in the first phase of Sarah Joseph's writings or the repressing and suffocating family in the second phase. Other than Kuttipappan, Annie's paternal uncle, everyone else in the family is a woman. Annie's father left her mother when Annie was only nine days old, and nobody knew where he went. The only information available about him is that he is a Communist. So, the family is completely dependent on women's labour. Annie's elder aunt, a widow, is a local midwife and hers is the only substantial income in the family. Her younger aunts work in a button company which makes buttons for the uniforms of soldiers. After the war, the button company is closed and they start making buttons and laces for tailors in the city. Before becoming a midwife, Annie's elder aunt used to make 'appam' and sell it to people. After she loses her midwife's job with new hospitals and doctors coming in, she and Annie's mother start carrying lunch for office-goers. All these could be considered as extensions of domestic labour.

In *Mattathi* also, a stereotypical family is absent. Brigita and Lucy are the only inhabitants of the house. Brigita, an 80-year-old single woman, often makes fun of family and marriage and concludes that she could live her life the way she wanted because she did not opt for either of this. Lucy, however, dreams about a family with a lot of people

because she has no one. However, she is also subject to dysfunctional families as in the case of Cherona and Sundari, where the family is seen as not providing any support. A modern nuclear family is also introduced to Lucy through Celina, Brigita's niece who is settled in Bombay, and comes to stay at Brigita's house with husband and child. In *Othappu*, we see that Margalita loses her space in her family. The framed photograph of the family in the front room, which was taken before she left the nunnery, functions as an ironic image of the contradictions within. However, the family that Margalita dreams to have with Kareekan and her children (one her own and another adopted) has the structure of a stereotypical family, although it is never realized.

Since the space is envisaged as 'womanspace,' women's experiences are embellished and are abundantly available through the novel. For instance, consider that Kunjila's being a local midwife, allows the family access to details of delivery, labour pain, etc on a daily basis.

Kadinjul (first delivery), labour pain etc are words that Annie is exposed to everyday. She does not know what exactly these are. She tries to guess it. However, from whatever she hears, she understands this much – that delivering a baby is one of the most difficult and painful things in the world...delivery...whosever it is, however far it is, Annie has noticed that everybody in her family gets tensed and prays—especially if it is the first.<sup>27</sup>

These experiences and sorrows attain universality within specific contexts as women's experiences. The space shared by Lucy with the washerwoman Cherona, Lucy's

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<sup>27</sup> Sara Joseph, *Alahayude Penmakkal* (Trissur: Current Books, 1999) 39.



classmate Sundari, Brigita's niece Celina, in *Mattathi* are examples of this. In *Othappu*, Margalita shares this with a woman she finds in the hospital veranda, her cousin Rebecca who behaves like a prophet in the Old Testament, Sr. Abelamma, etc.

*Mattathi* also explores another level of women's experiences and the spaces they inhabit by suggesting that domestic spaces can hold infinite possibilities or minutiae. The kitchen becomes the pivot of narration. Vessels, the well, the long door-less window through which Lucy can see the backyard of the house, the cattle shed, the fowl, the vegetable garden, the process of cooking, recipes of dishes—all these occupy the novel in vivid detail. In this respect, *Mattathi* is one of the rarest works in Malayalam—it heavily underscores the space of the kitchen. And by focusing on the kitchen and the activities therein, the narrative highlights women's labour which is rarely recognized as labour. In this way, *Mattathi* deals with a completely different space. It engages entirely with a domestic space and the domesticity of the kitchen. There are not many literary works that focus on the kitchen as a space. There are works like M.T Vasudevan Nair's *Nalukettu*<sup>28</sup> which includes instances where he nostalgically remembers the taste of some dishes prepared by his mother when they were in poverty. However, the narrative never goes beyond the nostalgic feeling to explore more about the space or the person who made it. Madhavikkutty's (Kamala Das/Surayya) works to a great extent reflect on the domestic space and the kitchen, although from a third person's perspective.<sup>29</sup> The young protagonist of the narrative spends most of her time with the servants of the house.

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<sup>28</sup> M.T. Vasudevan Nair, *Nalukettu* (Trissur: Current Books, 2002).

<sup>29</sup> I have taken the stories that are included in the collection titled *Varshangalku Munpu* to discuss the domestic sphere narrativised in Madhavikkutty's writings. Madhavikkutty, *Varshangalku Munpu* (Trissur: Current Books, 1989).

Although these accounts do not consciously present the politics of the kitchen and the domestic space, they provide enough material for that. In Madhavikkutty's narrative, we can find individual spaces allotted to each character. The movements of each character are decided by the unwritten rules of the family. We see the young girl's grandmother who moves in and out of the kitchen to the front rooms. The way she functions in both these spaces is different. She is more authoritative in the kitchen whereas she becomes very docile and subdued in the front room where Madhavikkutty's uncle sits. The kitchen and the backyard hold gossip<sup>30</sup> and information that are not supposed to be heard by a child, which is what intrigues her enough to go there. The cook, who is a man, often laments about being there and doing a woman's job. There are other women servants whose access to each space is determined by their caste. While women of the family, except for her grandmother, rarely come to the kitchen, they read literature or are busy following Gandhi, the kitchen space is replete with gossip, sex talk, and the like. The kitchen is also a space where people express their opinions about many things ranging from a neighbour's life to politics. To an extent, Madhavikkutty explores this space and the role plays that operate within a family; but the narrative itself does not engage the space of the activity other than acting as a listener or viewer. Udayakumar writes about the involvement on the part of protagonist in Kamala Das' story "Soap Nirmanam" (Soap Making, 9–15) as follows:

In this story, we see the presence of the narrator or the subject 'I' very rarely. The narrator is silent or invisible in the narrative world of the story. She is just an

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<sup>30</sup> Seemanthini Niranjana makes a very interesting observation on the act "gossiping" as an invisibilized form of agency that helps to maintain and define boundaries. Seemanthini Niranjana, *Gender and Space: Femininity, Sexualization and the Female Body* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001) 94.

observer who stands near Ammamma, her grandmother. The story just records the conversations of her grandmother, servants and guests. The subject 'I' of the autobiographical account merely functions as an eye or ear or a sense that is unaware of the self.<sup>31</sup>

Domestic space is often perceived by mainstream feminism as a place to which tradition binds women and therefore it is a space from which women should acquire freedom. This may be true in many cases; but works like *Mattathi* show a different side of the picture. The protagonist of *Mattathi* feels quite at home in this domestic space. She looks at it as her private space. Her experiences, pleasurable as well as painful, are bound to that space. She owns that space although she does not have any ownership over the house. Mainstream feminism views the kitchen and the domestic space as spaces owned by tradition and observes the interactions and activities that occur in this space with suspicion.

Udayakumar states that Madhavikkutty's narratives complicate this relationship between tradition and domestic space. When Madhavikkutty's Ammamma participates in the activities of the kitchen, it is difficult to say that it is a womanly interaction that is occurring. But when men participate in the activities in the kitchen, by rejecting the usual, set cultural codes, it expands the possibilities of kitchen and domestic space. This is very true in the interventions of Kali Narayanan Nair and Shankaran, the two cooks of Madhavikkutty's Nalappattu household. In *Mattathi*, the activities open the possibilities of

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<sup>31</sup> Udayakumar, "Smarana, Atmakadhakhyanam, Stree: 'Varshangalku Mump'inte Aspadamakki Chila Chintakal," *Samakaleena Kavitha* 1.3 (July-September 1993) 265.

the female self, not conscious of the feminist or feminine self.<sup>32</sup> Women's activities in the kitchen appear to be part of the traditional role-play. But the same space has the ability to make space for the self. It is not a third person's account like Madhavikkutty's narrative. The kitchen in the narrative functions like a vast region, with its minute details and it is Lucy's private world. Even when she has access to the outside world, she yearns for the privacy of this space. Unlike the very few literary works that describe the kitchen and the domestic space, *Mattathi* goes into minute details of activities that play out in the kitchen. It includes recipes, the activity of cooking, the structure of different vessels, cooking space and everything that relates to cooking.

This intervention on the part of Sarah Joseph to politicise the kitchen and domestic space is reflected in two articles by her—"Nammude Adukkala Thirichu Pidikkuka"<sup>33</sup> (Recapture the Kitchen) and "Bhagavadgitayude Adukkalayil Ezhuthukar Vevikkunnathu"<sup>34</sup> (What Writers Cook in Bhagavadgita's Kitchen) written in the late 1990s. As the titles suggest, the kitchen is seen as a space of domination and resistance. In "Nammude Adukkala Thirichu Pidikkuka," Sarah Joseph traces the history of the kitchen as a central space to early societies and clans. She says that the kitchen in the present society however is a site of multiple repressions. She writes:

Who owns the kitchen? The male dominating ideologies have claimed that the kitchen is the forte of woman. The scope of exercising her skills of management

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<sup>32</sup> Here again, I draw from Showalter's proposition of the three phases—feminine, feminist and female.

<sup>33</sup> I have used the English translation for citations as the bibliographical detail of the Malayalam article is incomplete. Sarah Joseph, Recapture the Kitchen, *Recapture the Kitchen* Trans. from Malayalam by V.S. Anilkumar and Ann George (Chennai: Centre for Women's studies, Madras Christian college, 1999).

<sup>34</sup> Sarah Joseph, *Bhagawadgitayude Adukkalayil Ezhuthukar Vevikkunnathu* (Kozhikode: Secular Books, 2000).

and maintaining power are limited to the four walls of the kitchen. In spite of limiting the world of women like this, the monopoly of power in the kitchen has never been transferred to women. Even in this domain of hers, the decision regarding what and how much she must cook is taken away from her hands by power centres and multinational companies.<sup>35</sup>

The kitchen in *Mattathi* is free from this kind of male-domination. Lucy feels that the kitchen is her own space, although Brigita divests her of these powers to an extent. According to Sarah Joseph, male-domination and its demands have never acknowledged cooking as a creative art for a woman where she could explore her creativity depending on her taste preferences. Vijayalakshmi, a character in one of the short stories, is in search of this creative talent of hers. When she leaves her job to devote more time to cooking, her husband wonders how backward his wife is when it comes to progressive thoughts in women. But she replies that it is laying the foundation after the struggle.<sup>36</sup> Her husband is not able to comprehend this act of Vijayalakshmi's because he does not view cooking as a creative art. However, the kitchen and the interiors in *Mattathi* provide Lucy a sense of security. Lucy leaves the house after Brigita's death, "like a child which comes out of the womb to the world of noises and blinding light."<sup>37</sup> The article, "Bhagavadgitayude Adukkalayil Ezhuthukar Vevikkunnathu" talks about caste and other kind of power relations in the kitchen space through the narration of one of her childhood experiences. Sarah Joseph writes:

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<sup>35</sup> Sarah Joseph, "Recapturing the Kitchen," *Recapture the Kitchen*, trans. from Malayalam by V.S. Anilkumar and Ann George (Chennai: Centre for Women's studies, Madras Christian college, 1999) 1.

<sup>36</sup> Sarah Joseph, "Veykunnathum Vilambunnathum," *Kadithu Kandayo Kantha* (Trissur: Current Books, 2001) 58.

<sup>37</sup> Sara Joseph, *Mattathi* (Trissur: Current Books, 2003) 215.

The most insulting knowledge I discovered when I was in the fifth standard was that I could not enter the kitchen of my friend Gita's house. I got to know that it was because Gita is a Hindu and I am a Christian, and if Christians enter a Hindu kitchen, the Hindus become impure.<sup>38</sup>

She also realises that she does not experience the same problem in the houses of lower caste Hindus. The kitchen we see here is under the control of dominant ideologies; it becomes a space that reproduces the values of the dominant section of society. Sarah Joseph urges us to move towards a denial of these ideologies to recapture a kitchen that is democratic, as one similar to the early societies. She writes that, although we need to boycott a kitchen that is a site of multiple dominations, a kitchen which is a central and important space of men and women, like the one shared by tribal people, should be recaptured.<sup>39</sup>

However, when we read narratives by C.K. Janu,<sup>40</sup> or even Bama's<sup>41</sup> autobiographical accounts, one significant difference that we note is the absence of the kitchen or the minimal presence of the domestic space. This directs us to the fact that this is a space that is mainly upper caste/middleclass in nature. In Janu's narrative, she mentions that the concept of family is not similar to the mainstream concept of a man, woman and their children. She speaks about how she and her friends carried out what was normally termed

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<sup>38</sup> Sarah Joseph, *Bhagawadgitayude Adukkalayil Ezhuthukar Vevikkunnathu* (Kozhikode: Secular Books, 2000) 7.

<sup>39</sup> Sarah Joseph, "Recapturing the Kitchen," *Recapture the Kitchen*, trans. from Malayalam by V.S. Anilkumar and Ann George (Chennai: Centre for Women's studies, Madras Christian college, 1999) 6–7.

<sup>40</sup> C.K. Janu is the leader of Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha, which struggles for the redistribution of land to Adivasis. Her autobiographical account is written in the told-to mode. Bhaskaran, *Janu: C.K. Januvinte Jeevithaatha* (Kottayam: DC Books, 2002).

<sup>41</sup> Bama, *Karukku*, trans. from Tamil by Lakshmi Holmstrom (Chennai: Macmillan, 2000). The original of this text in Tamil was published in 1992.

men's labour and stayed together in a house. Domestic space is not as vast as it is in middle class homes. In Bama's narratives too, either their profession is as domestic labourers or it is similar to what is considered primarily male labour. Women do not sit at home like the "respectable middle class women." They go out and work like men. Cooking elaborately is not possible due to poverty. However, even when it is within the frames of middle class lifestyle, Sarah Joseph's accounts of the kitchen and the domestic space open up different possibilities left unexplored by other women writers. The difference in the genres that encase these accounts – Sarah Joseph's being fictional and the other two texts being autobiographical—becomes unimportant for this study, which examines literature as a cultural code. However, Sarah Joseph in her memoir says that *Alahayude Penmakal* is the story of her region and childhood memories, and it has autobiographical elements in it.<sup>42</sup>

*Othappu* deals with a woman's fight against religious and social institutions. The character Margalita does not have a space of her own. Therefore, her journeys are through spaces that are usually allotted to men. The only space she has for herself is her own mind. The vastness of this space, i.e., her mind, makes her experience spaces of social as well as religious institutions as limiting. There is no access to the domestic space for Margalita, as she fails to limit herself to spaces that are allotted to women. Her explorations are out in the man's world. However, in *Alahayude Penmakal* where most of Annie's family members are domestic labourers, there is no mention of their own

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<sup>42</sup> Sarah Joseph, "Ormakal Chitrashalabhangalalla," *Bhashaposhini* Varshikapathippu (2005): 27.

domestic space or kitchen. Here they experience this space in their life outside home and thus somebody else's private/domestic space becomes their workplace.

Bama's *Karukku* and Sarah Joseph's *Othappu* share a major similarity on the grounds that both the novels deal with protagonists who are nuns and who left the Order. Both are unhappy with the Order as they had different expectations of it when they had joined it. Bama's novel is an autobiographical account where the narrative flows spontaneously in and out of memory and experiences. *Othappu* is a novel consciously written by the writer to record the resistance on the part of a woman to religion and its institutional structures, and a woman's search for her own space. *Othappu* also consciously tries to accommodate academic discussions on caste and patriarchal structures in Christianity; there is a consistent effort to deconstruct dominant ways of writing history. Within the confines of the Order, the women of both the novels grow dissatisfied with the way the church serves humanity. However, there are enough differences between the two texts to make Bama's novel stand out as more realistic and Sarah Joseph's as largely idealistic. The main difference is in the identity of the protagonists. Margalita, the protagonist of *Othappu*, is from a very privileged background whereas the character in *Karukku* belongs to the Dalit community. This difference is reflected in their attitude towards the concept of service. Margalita wants to escape from all kinds of selfish thoughts that were generated from the 'family.' She says to her father:



Family is a prison of emotions. Selfishness is its foundation. My mother, my father, my husband, my children, my property...I want to escape from this wretched selfishness.<sup>43</sup>

But, in *Karukku*, the protagonist has a much more practical attitude towards service and why she wants to get into the Order. She has contradictory feelings about joining the Order.

More and more the thought grew in my mind that I should become a nun, and teach those who suffer that there is a Jesus who cares; to put heart into them and to urge them onwards. At the same time, I also was aware that even if I became a nun, I might never be allowed to act in this way. All the same, however hard I pushed it away, the idea grew stronger.<sup>44</sup>

The people whom Margalita wants to serve do not have an identity. They are the nameless, faceless poor. She could not remember anyone she knew who needed her service. She feels insulted when her father, who was the only one who discouraged her from joining the Order, tells her that if she thought having a family was selfish, she could as well have served Ayyappan and his family, a poor and sick neighbour of theirs. Her family was very happy about her decision, and it was a matter of prestige for them. Bama on the other hand, was aware of the double standards of the Church even when she decided to join the Order. But she did not have to think twice about whom she was going to serve. Those she was to serve had always been before her very eyes – her community,

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<sup>43</sup> Sara Joseph, *Mattathi* (Trissur: Current Books, 2003) 56.

<sup>44</sup> Bama, *Karukku*, trans. from Tamil by Lakshmi Holmstrom (Chennai: Macmillan, 2000) 90.

her people. She leaves the Order when she realises the institution does not support her wish.

I made my first vows with many hopes and thoughts in my heart. I dreamt that I would share my life with the poor and the suffering, live and die for them. Instead, I was sent to a prestigious school, and asked to teach there...All the children there came from wealthy families. The convent too was a well-endowed one. And the Jesus they worshipped there was a wealthy Jesus. There seemed to be no connection between God and the suffering poor. (91-92)

Except for the fact that both of them were in the Order and left it, the reasons each of them has for joining and leaving the Order were completely different. Margalita develops her own ideas of family, service to humanity, religion etc. Kareekkan, the priest who leaves the Order to marry Margalita, is not able to cope with Margalita's notion of a family. He runs away, unable to take society's bitterness. Kareekkan in a way is presented as a coward who values society's opinion highly, whereas Margalita comes off as one who does not. The narrative outlines the difference in their family backgrounds too. For Kareekkan, he and his family could attain some respect in the society only after he became a priest. Margalita is presented as a bold and beautiful woman and we see that the other characters cringe in her presence. She feels gloriously alienated from the world she lives in. Sarah Joseph's novel *Othappu* criticises the Church and its institutional paraphernalia minutely. However, it fails to criticise Margalita—a product of the Church's upper caste lineages, affiliations, and biases. There are situations where she fails to practise what she preaches about serving people. When Margalita goes to meet Brother Augustine, who lives like an ascetic and serves the poor, she cannot live up to the kind of

service he does for society. He takes care of people who live near the sewage, bathes them and gives them food when they are unwell. Margalita cannot handle anything ugly or dirty. When Augustine asks her to help him change the clothes of a poor dying woman, she thinks:

‘No...if it is some other kind of service...I will be able to do it patiently...’

Margalita wanted to puke. The dark and dirty sides of life scared Margalita.”<sup>45</sup>

The main difference between *Alahayude Penmakkal* and *Sangati* is in the way both the texts talk about caste in Christianity. Annie’s grandmother Ammama is well aware of the lower social status they hold as they are not converted by St. Thomas like Syrian Christians. She also criticises the Church and priests for being biased towards socially and economically privileged members. There is no critique of conversion offered from the side of the converted. A more sophisticated critique is provided in *Othappu*, regarding conversion. But *Sangati* offers a stronger and more effective critique of conversion than *Othappu*, through Muthiyamma and her daughter, although they are not educated or modern. The critique is applicable at different levels. One is about the monogamous marital relationship that is mandatory for Christians. Muthiyamma’s daughter says:

If we think closely, it was nonsense to get converted to Christianity. If we were Hindus at least we women would have had the right to get rid of our marriage if the man proves bad. <sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Sara Joseph, *Mattathi* (Trissur: Current Books, 2003) 137.

<sup>46</sup> Bama, *Sangati*. trans. into Malayalam by Vijayakumar Kunissery (Kozhikode: Mathrubhumi Books, 2008) 99.

This critique obviously does not sit well with pro-Hindu sentiments as it does not speak of the upper caste Hindu marriage concept, where the woman is supposed to remain monogamous and dutiful to her husband. What she suggests as a better option is their own community which offers that particular freedom to a woman. Another critique of conversion comes with the realization that even after getting converted to Christianity, which advertises itself as a religion where everyone is equal, the status of the people from the lower strata of society remains the same.

What happens in the Church? We are the ones who sweep and clean the whole Church. And when people from other castes come, we have to give way to them. We clean the place and they get to go and sit in the front. I was sick of seeing this and once I asked about this to a nun. Do you know what she told me? If we clean the Church, we will be blessed. We will have god's grace. They have to trick us in the name of God. Don't they need any blessings? (116)

Bama, in an interview says that Christianity also follows the same caste system as Hinduism.

Whatever Brahmins do in Hinduism, upper caste Christians do in the Church. They will be educated—priests, nuns. And power over everything rests in them... The only benefit of conversion was accessing education. That is why I was educated. Those Dalits who did not get converted did not get educated. Christian missionaries give a lot of importance to health and education. And people like us have benefited from that. (131)

*Othappu* puts forward a variety of arguments against the Church and its institutional functioning. It takes into account caste system in Christianity, as the power and control of

Church rests with the upper caste Christians. There are people like Brother Manikyan, a Dalit priest, who is not accepted by the Church. However these interventions by Sarah Joseph remain at the level of politically correct academic interventions that sympathise with the cause. But Bama's interventions are from the side of the victim or subject, and thus transcend the level of a sympathetic approach.

All the three novels of Sarah Joseph reflect the socio-political changes of the time in which they are set. These narrations are envisaged by the writer as women's versions of the socio-political changes of the novels temporal spaces. Annie's family, we note, is so diverse. When it comes to politics, Annie's father is a Communist and her uncle is a Gandhian. Ammama, although she is a believer, supports her elder son. Annie's mother hates Communists, as she was abandoned by her husband, a Communist. Her hatred towards Communists is manifested during the *Vimochanasamaram*<sup>47</sup> (The Liberation Struggle strikes organised by the Catholic Church against the first Communist party-led ministry in Kerala). Annie's mother does not know what this agitation is for. She just knows that it is against Communists and she passionately joins the protest, considering herself to be victim of Communism. Nowhere in the novel is it mentioned as *Vimochanasamaram*. It is narrated through Annie's mother's involvement, the slogans that she shouts during the protests, the names of Communist leaders like Joseph Mundassery and EMS Namboothiripad discussed in relation to the protest, etc. There are other Communist sympathisers like Kurumba, a neighbour. Quarrels between different

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<sup>47</sup> *Vimochanasamaram* in Kerala's history is a political agitation started in 1958 against the first Communist government in Kerala, following the introduction of an education bill by the then education minister Joseph Mundassery. It was organized by the Catholic Church along with the Nair Service Society. E.M.S Nambootiripad was the chief minister.

denominations of the Church also surface in the domestic space. In the quarrels between Annie's mother and Ammama, who belong to different denominations, many historical facts that are specific to Christianity in Keralam surface with relation to each of their denominations. They always fight about the Coonan Kurishu Sathyam<sup>48</sup> (Coonan Cross Oath) that happened in 1653 which made the Catholic Church split into two denominations, and hold each other responsible for the split. Each one makes fun of traditions specific to the other's denomination, although they belong to the same family. The Emergency, the newly visible marked difference between rich and poor, modernity, problems in marriage and issues like dowry, the emergence of the Pentecostal mission, TB as an incurable disease—the novel gives us women's versions of all these issues. Many of these issues that take place in the public sphere seep into the narration from time to time, but it is narrated in the way in which it relates to the lives of women on a day-to-day basis. Caste, community and religion are all discussed in relation to women's lives and their involvement with these institutions. What Sarah Joseph narrates through this is a situation similar to what Paule Marshall describes in her article, "From the Poets in the Kitchen."<sup>49</sup> Marshall, while describing the lives of women in her community who worked as domestic labourers, narrates how the then contemporary politics and social issues came into the conversation of the supposedly uneducated women. She writes:

They raged against World War II when it broke out in Europe, blaming it on the politicians. "It's these politicians. They're the ones always starting up all this lot of war. But what they care? It is the poor people got to suffer and mothers with

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<sup>48</sup> Coonan Kurishu Sathyam was taken in 1653 by a group of St. Thomas Christians, reacting to the persecution of their Church by the Portuguese colonials and Jesuit missionaries. This resulted in the split of the Catholic church in Keralam into different denominations.

<sup>49</sup> Paule Marshall, "From the Poets in the Kitchen," *Callaloo* 24 (Spring 2001): 627-633.

their sons.” If it was their sons, they swore they would keep them out of the Army by giving them soap to eat each day to make their hearts sound defective. Hitler? He was for them “the devil incarnate.” (629)

Therefore, the kitchen is portrayed as a site of oppression as well as a site which explores the possibilities of women’s expression. It is portrayed as a world of women, which is formed as a result of the conflation of personal as well as public interests.

Alaha’s prayer—recited by Ammama to exorcise evil – features as a major image in the novel that juxtaposes subaltern involvement in a religion or faith, against an organised and autocratic faith demanded by the Church. The prayer is passed from one generation to the other through women, unlike in the Church where men have the agency to correspond with god. However, Annie’s mother who blindly believes in the Church, operates as an agent of the Roman Catholic Church. She considers this prayer to be satanic and against the church and God. *Mattathi* reflects changes like Gulf migration, nuclear family, the Naxal movement, Hippy culture—all of which were characteristic of that time and region—and offers several versions of those movements from different kinds of women. *Othappu* speaks about the market, globalization, power structures, and protests against the Church from lower caste Christians.

These novels surpass the narrative sensitivities of urban, middleclass, feminist perspectives regarding caste, gender and identity, when compared to other writings in Malayalam. The writer explores spaces that are treated by dominant narratives as unimportant and confined, and demonstrates their richness and plurality. However, a

comparison of these novels with *Karukku* and *Sangati* gives us an idea about the limitations of the frames used by Sarah Joseph. *Sangati* and *Karukku*, apart from their thematic similarities to *Alahayude Penmakkal* and *Othappu*, function as useful tools to analyse the configuration and limitation of the space created in Sarah Joseph's novels, in their attempt to bring the margins to the centre, by focusing on the culture and life of Dalits in Tamil Nadu.

Published about a decade before Sarah Joseph's novels, Bama's novels reconstruct the history of people who were not allowed to have a space of their own. *Alahayude Penmakkal* and *Sangati* can be compared on the grounds that both texts attempt to narrate the history of marginalised people. Both the texts employ oral narrative methods—an old woman as the story teller and a young girl as listener—and the history of a community is reconstructed through this. However, while Sarah Joseph's attempts are focused on exploring the vastness of the region, Bama attempts to portray how the lives of people from the Paraya community are limited and confined to areas allotted to them by upper caste people. The vastness of space is presented to the reader as a space that is not explored or experienced.

*Othappu* and *Karukku* have protagonists who leave the nunnery after spending some years there as nuns. Both come out as a result of their dissatisfaction and disillusionment with religion and its institutions. In *Othappu*, Margalita joins the order with some idealistic notions about service to humanity and God. She enjoys the privilege of being a nun from the privileged section and earns people's respect mainly for this reason. She



notices the caste biases of the Church. But she leaves the convent as she doesn't find a space for her spirituality, which is again idealistic. Bama's character joins the order with a much more direct ambition. She wants to serve the poor-people from her own community. But she is not allowed to serve people the way she wishes. She finds the Order's notions of service to be superficial and fake and leaves the order. Both the characters and their act point in completely different directions. This shows how women, both Christian nuns, have different concerns and viewpoints. *Mattathi*, which takes a closer look at the domestic sphere, does not share any commonalities with Bama's works as her works show how the domestic sphere is a privileged middle class phenomenon.

The spaces that are discussed in relation to women's lives in these three stories open up the possibilities of womanspace. In this world of women, hierarchies and differences between women have been effectively portrayed by the writer. This world is about the spaces that are occupied by women, spaces that are hard won through resistances and subversions. These explorations become landmarks in the context of mainstream women writing, and at the same time point towards the non-inclusiveness of the experience of the other women. These novels, when compared to other mainstream writings, expand the possibilities of multiple spaces by exploring local regions and domestic spaces and by rewriting the family and community in terms of women's perspective. Therefore, these novels explore the current implication of these spaces in relation to women's lives, thereby facilitating a womanspace.

## Different Tales, Different Spaces

They taught my first lessons in the narrative art. They trained my ear. They set a standard of excellence. This is why the best of my work must be attributed to them; it stands as a testimony to the rich legacy of language and culture they so freely passed on to me in the wordshop of the kitchen. - Paule Marshall<sup>1</sup>

One of the challenges associated with working on the writings of a contemporary writer, is that one needs to review and rework the framework of the study to incorporate the ongoing shifts and changes in the writings and ideology of the writer in a constantly shifting socio-political scenario. Since Sarah Joseph attempts to reflect these socio-political changes in her writings, it raises more challenges. However, this study offers contemporary views on the changing scenario of Sarah Joseph's ideology and works. It locates her writings within the framework of contemporary trends of critical analysis. When I took up this study, Sarah Joseph had published only two novels. The third and fourth novels, and the Ramayana stories as a separate collection along with its translation into English came out after I undertook this study. The shifts in her writings and ideology, along with critical comments from others, have often changed the initial trajectories of this study. Writings from other women writers, especially those from outside the folds of the dominant culture, have helped me in reviewing and reframing my argument, enabling me to critically look at the construction of a space for women in Sarah Joseph's writings. A separate chapter on the Ramayana stories and the

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<sup>1</sup> Paule Marshall, an American writer of West Indian origin, in her essay "From Poets in the Kitchen" attributes her writings and language to her childhood experiences of listening to her mother and her friends who sat around the kitchen table talking about matters varying from personal issues to politics in their common, domestic vocabulary. Sarah Joseph too uses this kind of a language and vocabulary by writing in a dialect specific to the region and community. Paule Marshall, *Callaloo* 24 (Spring 2001) 633.

juxtaposition of her works with writings from other unconventional women writers came about as a result of this.

An important contribution that the study makes is to recognise Sarah Joseph's writings as constructing a "womanspace" that places women's lives within their historic and discursive contexts. I see her writings as undergoing complex shifts, revising their frames of reference, and assuming various political positions to make the womanspace she envisages a more inclusive one. Interventions from outside these spaces should be considered valid criticism to widen the concerns of women's writings as well as women's movements.

Theoretical frames of the public/private dichotomy and its current implications are reviewed in the introduction. I have provided the view points of Western as well as postcolonial theorists on this frame. The notions of the evolution of the public and private spheres are mapped out in an attempt to trace the incorporation of women into the public sphere and the consequent politicization of the private sphere. The introduction discusses the works of Western feminists on the public/private dichotomy to enable the framework to analyse the shift of the private to the public sphere through women writers and their works. The works of postcolonial scholars have reviewed the formation of the public sphere in India with its current implications through the involvement of women in the freedom and reform movements. Sarah Joseph's works are placed in the contexts of interactions between the Indian state and women, the implications of women's visibility, and the resistances and negotiations between tradition and modernity. Within these

multiple contexts, the study views women's writing as a counterpublic that brings private matters into the public sphere while seeking the right to safeguard individual choices and rights. These interventions from women's writings as well as women's movements have therefore upset the borders of the public and private spheres to offer a critique of dominant culture and society.

The first chapter, "Through Histories of Women-writing," looks at the formation of this counterpublic through resistances and negotiations. Selected moments from the history of women's writing in Malayalam are reviewed to map the formation of this space using the *pennethuthu* controversy as a point of reference. The chapter examines how Sarah Joseph, the iconic woman writer in Malayalam, becomes an important episode in reviewing the much-neglected history of women's writing in Malayalam, by making a conscious attempt to reflect on the exclusionary politics of the dominant public sphere and women writers who were victims of it. This chapter also brings in the reform movements and struggles which defined and redefined women's spaces.

The second chapter, "Towards a Feminist Self," analyses the first two phases of Sarah Joseph's works and discusses how her activist self contributed towards writings that consciously articulate women's issues. While the first phase of stories dealt with the situation of women confined to the private sphere, who lack visibility and the ability to offer resistance, the second phase of stories portrayed women trying to come out of established systems, marking a space of struggle and resistance. The second phase stories advocated a separate sphere of sisterhood, similar to the feminist phase of women's

writing propounded by Elaine Showalter. This chapter also focuses on how Sarah Joseph rewrites the notions of *ezhuthukari* (woman writer) in Malayalam literature, dismantling the moulds of a woman writer envisaged and circulated by the dominant public sphere. By portraying a middle class unglamorous woman in creative labour, she makes a statement against standardised and established notions of the woman writer in the literary public.

The third chapter, “Recasting the Marginalised” analyses Sarah Joseph’s Ramayana stories which also constitute the second phase of her writing, as articulating another dimension of her feminist concerns. These stories also mark a shift in her ideology by moving to a more specific notion of womanhood which is constructed within the frames of caste, community, ethnic and racial identities, unlike the early stories within this phase which focused more on women’s roles. I have placed Sarah Joseph’s retelling of the Ramayana within the context of similar narrative attempts from South Asia, India and Keralam. The chapter also reads Sarah Joseph’s stories within the context of the Dravidian movement and its proponent Periyar E.V. Ramasami’s interpretations of the *Ramayana*. Sarah Joseph’s retellings, which are influenced by Periyar’s readings, are viewed as an instance of a woman’s retelling of the *Ramayana*. The chapter also discusses the different kinds of public addressed by the various retellings. In this sense, these stories can be viewed as an intermediary phase between the second and third, in her move to write about the self-discovery of women within their own space.

The fourth chapter, “Rewriting Women’s Spaces,” examines Sarah Joseph’s three novels that form a trilogy, rewriting the notions of region, domestic spaces, community, and caste in relation to women’s lives. The novels record women’s spaces in different temporalities and contexts, by narrativising women’s experiences and forwarding analyses of culture. This phase shares similarities with Showalter’s proposition of the third phase of women’s writing – the female phase of self-discovery. The novels reflect on the history of community, region, domestic spaces, and women’s lives in the scenario of changing socio-cultural backgrounds. These narratives also trace the negotiations between tradition and modernity. In this chapter, I have reviewed the writings of non-middle class/ non-upper caste women writers on similar themes, especially the writings of the Tamil Dalit woman writer, Bama, to critique the space envisaged and constructed by Sarah Joseph in her writings.

Most of the writings from upper caste/ middle class/ privileged women writers which project feminist concerns are criticised for their attempts to universalise women’s experience based on their perceptions. Sarah Joseph’s writings, especially her later work, acknowledge the differences between woman as a monolithic category, and woman as a heterogeneous category, impacted by caste, community, ethnicity and so on.<sup>2</sup> Sarah Joseph attempts to assume the identities of “the other” to provide counter-dominant versions, to present “effective” and “truthful” accounts. We could read this moment in

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<sup>2</sup> Stories like “Viyarpadayalanganal” (Sweat Marks) record the caste-ridden nature of the education system and question the so-called progressive society of Kerala. Annie’s family and their neighbourhood in Kokkanchira (*Alahayude Penmakal*), Cherona (a washerwoman), Kurumba (a working-class communist woman), Sundari and Chandru (classmates of the protagonist) in *Mattathi*, Kareekkan (the protagonist’s husband who belongs to a non-upper caste Christian family), Rebecca (who sleeps in the street and assumes herself to be a prophet), Brother Manikyan (a lower caste priest) in *Othappu* represent these other selves.

the same vein as the feminist critique of men assuming a woman's guise in their writing. These accounts of "the other" in Sarah Joseph is very much part of the counterpublic space that she envisages. Given this situation, Bama's narrative offers a critique of the space of "the other," rendering the counterpublic envisaged by Sarah Joseph as strictly an imagined one.

More recently, two ground-breaking autobiographical accounts released into the public sphere can be regarded as pursuing but also extending from Bama's narratives and therefore having implications for the imagined counter narrative produced by Sarah Joseph. Sarah Joseph's own views on these books act as useful tools to test her ideological positions. The told-to autobiographical accounts of Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha leader C.K. Janu<sup>3</sup> and sex-worker/activist Nalini Jameela,<sup>4</sup> pose multiple challenges to prevalent patterns of women's writings in terms of genre, theme, concerns, and spaces discussed. These texts are significant in many ways and contain multifarious dimensions of the present socio-political scenario. I use these two texts with a particular interest in mind; as narratives that offer a strong critique of middle class/ upper caste/ privileged women's narratives and the spaces they occupy.

Sarah Joseph's view regarding her writing and role as an activist stress the need to stand with the 'powerless.' Her own rewritings of the conventional image of a woman-writer through stories like "Oro Ezhuthukariyude Ullilum" state that all women can write. This echoes the ideology that constituted Second Wave feminism in the West which

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<sup>3</sup> Bhaskaran, *Janu: C.K. Januvinte Jeevithakatha* (Kottayam: DC Books, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Nalini Jameela, *Njan Laingikathozhilali: Nalini Jameelayude Athmakatha* (Kottayam: DC Books, 2005).

considered memoirs, letters, and diaries as women's writing. Ironically, Sarah Joseph's view that books like Nalini Jameela's should not be viewed as literature, contradicts her own deconstruction of *ezhuthukari*. She says:

It should not be viewed as a literary text. Women are marginalised, and people like Nalini Jameela are marginalised within the category of women. It is commendable when they tell their story and write about their experiences. My only disagreement is with the argument that prostitution is an occupation.<sup>5</sup>

If the writings from marginalised sections cannot be called literature, women's writing cannot be called "literature" either. Sarah Joseph's views about literature lose their counter narrative nature here. By not accepting prostitution as an occupation, she refuses to acknowledge certain kinds of labour similar to mainstream society's rejection of domestic labour as labour. Nalini Jameela, who is in her fifties and has not even had the privilege to finish her formal schooling, says that she is a *laingika thozhilali* (sex-worker). The term sex-worker or the Malayalam equivalent *laingika thozhilali* acknowledges prostitution as a profession, or occupation. By rejecting the use of the word "sex-worker," Sarah Joseph, who considers sex-work as one of the most exploited sites, fails to acknowledge the notion of work, so also labour, as being inherently exploitative.

On the other hand, with relation to Janu's location we see that Sarah Joseph has been an active sympathiser of Adivasi land issues. To record her protest in the Muthanga

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<sup>5</sup> Researcher's interview with the writer in May 2006.



incident<sup>6</sup> in 2003, where the state unleashed violence against the Adivasis involved in land struggle using police force, she returned her award to the Kerala Sahitya Academy.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, her support can be regarded as belonging to a space that is outside the spheres of struggle. While Sarah Joseph can only operate as a sympathiser,<sup>8</sup> and therefore can be located outside the movement, Janu's own work is inextricably tied to the movement.

The two texts together offer a significant framework to critique the 'womanspace' discussed in this study in relation to public/private spheres, as these texts come from locations that are outside the dominant culture as well as the counter-space envisaged in Women's writings. These two texts challenge the very definition of middle class/ upper caste woman as "the woman." Both Janu and Nalini Jameela do not share middle class women's experiences of the private sphere. Such writings could also be used to counter and collapse the middle class construction of a monolithic representation of "domestic" and can function as a counter space to this. Unlike Sarah Joseph's or other privileged women's narratives, which start their journeys from the private sphere, these narratives are envisaged as documents to be circulated in the public. The writings of Janu, Nalini Jameela and Bama are written in direct support of the movements they are associated with. Writings of dominant women may afford support to a movement in course of time,

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<sup>6</sup> In the context of land encroachments on the part of dominant society on the land and lives of Adivasis, Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha conducted a land occupation under the leadership of C.K. Janu in Muthanga, in Wynad district, Kerala in 2003. The occupation ended in massive police violence in which an adivasi and a policeman were killed. This came to be known as Muthanga incident.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.hinduonnet.com/2003/03/22/stories/2003032205030400.htm>

<sup>8</sup> For instance, Sarah Joseph's reference to Janu in the story "Orezhuthukari Swayam Vimarshanam Nadathunnu," as a person who raises important issues related to social and political spheres of Kerala, is different from Janu's efforts in raising these issues.

just as Sarah Joseph's writings later became identified with the feminist movement. This aspect opens up new avenues that might lead us further to reconfigure spaces that are fast becoming normative in women's writing.

In the light of reading the told-to narratives of Janu and Jameela as representative of an emergent genre in women's writing, it inaugurates a rethinking of historical moments like Marumarakkal Samaram<sup>9</sup> (agitation for the right of lower-caste women to cover their breasts), Kallumala Samaram<sup>10</sup> (agitation rejecting the tradition of lower-caste women wearing ornaments made of heavy stones and glass pieces, symbolic of their subordination), and certain peasant movements,<sup>11</sup> which can be viewed as articulations and forms of political expressions peculiar to Channar women and Pulaya women. While these moments are recognised as constitutive of the women's movement in Kerala, scant attention has been paid to this specific nature of their articulation. As Joan Scott suggests, differences among women is an analytical category of feminism, and these two

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<sup>9</sup> One of the early instances of women protesting against patriarchy is Marumarakkal Samaram also known as Channar lahala (Mutiny of the Channar caste) on Channar women's right to cover the upper part of the body. Women who belonged to lower castes including Ezhava women, pulaya women, etc were not allowed to cover breasts or cover below the knee. Towards the end of the 1820s some Channar women who were converted to Christianity started covering their breasts. These women were attacked by upper caste men in public. The struggle lasted for almost three decades. The official order, permitting Channar women to cover the upper part of the body, was delivered in 1859. It was one of the very first instances of protesting against casteism, and upper caste male domination. Channar lahala or Marumarakkal samaram is very important to the history of the women's movement as it set a precedent for the demand of women's rights and reform movements. This is also one of the early instances of dress reform in Kerala, which was later taken up by other communities. See N.K. Jose, *Channar Lahala* (Vaikom: Hobby Publishers, 1979) and Chandrika, C.S. *Keralathile Streemunnnettangalude Charitram* (Trissur: Kerala Sahitya Academy, 1998) for more information on this.

<sup>10</sup> Kallumala Samaram is another similar instance when Pulaya women refused to wear heavy necklaces made of stones and glass pieces, a marker of their caste imposed by upper caste patriarchy in 1904. Here too women were attacked by upper caste people for breaking away from the traditions.

<sup>11</sup> Many peasant movements were made successful by lower caste women through their participation in the struggles. During 1907-08, Pulaya women collectively participated in peasant movements against landlords and suspended their work for a year, demanding pay-raise, job-security, to stop violence against women, and for their right to walk on roads.

particularly independent streams of feminism can be used to study “the conflictual processes that produce meanings.”<sup>12</sup>

On a concluding note, this study has helped me review my own notions of feminism and the impact of identities like caste, community, and ethnicity on gender. While Sarah Joseph’s narratives underscored the necessity of knowing and placing oneself in one’s own history, the narratives from less-privileged women emphasised the presence and importance of other histories. Understanding these conflictual histories and spaces, is therefore exploring my own past, while also deconstructing it.

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<sup>12</sup> Joan Wallach Scott, ed. “Introduction,” *Feminism and History* (Oxford: OUP, 1996) 4.

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