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Representation of Women's Liberation in Malayalam Short Stories Written
by Women Writers: An Analysis of Sara Joseph's "Inside Every Woman
Writer" and Sithara S's "Agni"

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Abstract

Historically, patriarchal systems based on social, religious, and economic power have defined women as the "other" in relation to the male "self," placing them under men. Through a variety of literary interventions and socio-political movements, this strongly ingrained gender hierarchy has been questioned. In Kerala, women's resistance to systematic oppression and domestic confinement has been articulated via Malayalam writing, especially in the genre of short fiction. By highlighting the lived realities of women and challenging patriarchal norms, female writers like K. Saraswathi Amma, Rajalakshmi, and Lalithambika Antharjanam to later voices like Madhavikkutty (Kamala Das), Sara Joseph, K.R. Meera, Priya A. S., and Sithara S. – have made a significant contribution to feminist discourse.

This paper analyses the portrayal of women's liberation in two short stories in Malayalam: "In-side Every Woman Writer" by Sara Joseph and "Agni" by Sithara S. Through thematic and character analysis, the research investigates how these tales illustrate liberation as intellectual awakening, emotional resistance, and self-assertion against social, cultural, and domestic limitations. Through an examination of how female subjectivity and agency are depicted in these works, the study contends that modern Malayalam short stories act as a significant platform for reinterpreting women's identity and promoting gender equality within the socio-cultural context of Kerala

Keywords: Women's liberation, Malayalam short fiction, patriarchy, feminist writing, female subjectivity, resistance.

Introduction

The economic, religious, and social authority of men sanctions the enslavement of women. The gender hierarchy that evolved over the ages in history within human society placed males superior to females and even opposite to them. Women are defined as the "other" when compared with men who

are seen as the “absolute self.” This wrong notion that undermines women as secondary citizens and inferior to men have been questioned by various socio political and literary movements over the past few centuries. Literature always played a vital role in revealing the plight of women from the very beginning of the liberation movements. The literary history of Kerala also has a story of tremendous support for the liberation of women from the patriarchal regulations and subjugation. Especially the genre of short fiction in Malayalam immensely supported the freedom of women through the writings of both male and female writers. Undoubtedly, the major role was played by the women writers who proclaimed the liberation of women through their excellent works.

At present, the powerful medium in Malayalam to represent the concerns of women and their various issues is short stories. The most significant women writers or the pioneers of the women’s writing in Malayalam begins from the writers such as K. Saraswathi Amma, Rajalakshmi, Lalithambika Antharjanam and carried out by Madhavikkutty (Kamala Das), Sara Joseph and the modern and postmodern writers including K.R. Meera, Priya A. S and Sithara S and many more. The works of these writers explores the seamy side of women’s life and questions the notions of still prevailing patriarchal regulations and controls over women. This paper is an attempt to specifically deal with the representation of women’s liberation in the short stories written by the female writers in Malayalam literature. Two short stories, “Inside Every Women Writer” by Sara Joseph and “Agni” by Sithara S are analysed with special reference to the themes and portrayal of female characters to deal with the topic in detail. There is a plethora of short stories in Malayalam which portrayed powerful female characters and the influence of these stories in bringing an almost equal status for all genders in Kerala society is worth of mentioning.

It would not be incorrect to say that for these writers, the freedom denied became the inspiration to write immensely on the liberation of women. Lalithambika Antharjanam whose writings established the feminist phase of Malayalam literature wrote in her autobiography:

When the door to the outside closed, the door inside opened. My vision became introspective. I saw many things at close quarters. I listened, touched, and felt...Crying without tears, life without breath, rooms in which blood was never splattered; not human beings, but shadows and statues. They move in stylized manner. It may be said that they moved inertly. Their smiles and tears are alike. Helpless victims that cannot even feel the pain of this pathetic life. Their pains and emotions flowed into me. (Jancy 101)

Most of the women writers who wrote tremendously on the individuality of a woman by attacking the patriarchal notions which confines women within the four walls of a house and perceive them as inferior to men has faced similar circumstances in their life.

The themes explored by these writers include the confinement of women within the stifling boundaries of a house, denial of her freedom to express herself, wrong practices like dowry, domestic and sexual violences against women and similar issues concerning women. The short fiction has become the most effective medium to be an eye opener for the so-called civilized Kerala society. The two stories which focused on this paper are excellent portrayals of liberation of women from all kinds of exploitation and oppression.

An Analysis of “Inside Every Woman Writer” by Sara Joseph and “Agni” by Sithara S as the representation of women’s liberation.

It is not even a century since the voice of women was heard in Malayalam Literature. Despite the long tradition of mother God worship and matriarchy, it took a long time for the women to acquire a place for herself in the seven century long literary history of Malayalam. With the second half of the twentieth century the prominences of poetry in literature gradually diminished; Prose acquired importance. This is, in a way, related to the spread of democratic ideals. It was in this backdrop that

short stories became prominent. It gave room for female writers. It was during this period that works which asserted the identity of women appeared for the first time in Malayalam. Lalithambika Antharjanam heralded this change, followed by K. Saraswathy Amma. As a woman, Lalithambika Antharjanam penned down the realities of anti-women practices especially in Namboothiri community. K. Saraswathy Amma portrayed the rebellion of wronged womanhood. We see a triumph of Malayalam short story in the works of Madhavikutty. Sara Joseph is positioned next to Madhavikkutti who is also a profound writer and social activist.

Madhavikkutti, popularly known to Malayalam readers with this name and for her poems in English readers, she was known as Kamala Das. When she converted herself to a Muslim in 1999, she adopted the name Kamala Suraiya and she died as a Muslim. She was a member of the famous Nalappatt family which is known for its literary contribution. She got married at the early age of fifteen and all the nuances of feelings and experiences as a young bride and housewife is portrayed in her path breaking autobiography 'Ente Katha' or 'My Story,' the English translation. Her works especially short stories exposed several issues concerning women and perhaps there is no other writers in Malayalam who depicted the depth and intricacies of the minds of women so profoundly. She talked about sexuality, lesbianism and the so-called taboo matters without any inhibition or hypocrisy. The plight of women who are controlled by the men and the male dominated society was a major theme in her writings. Her short stories like Sooryan, Pakshiyude Manam, Neyppayasam ect., explored the theme of liberation of women.

Sara Joseph is one of the most significant writers of fiction in Kerala today; a leading figure in the women's movement she made possible a path breaking of women's writing. Her major works include short story collections like *Only the Fire Within* (1977), *The Music of the Forest* (1979), *The Ground of Sin* (1990) and incisive novels like *Alaha's Daughters* (1999) and *Gift in Green* (2011). In her preface to *Papathara* she has openly declared that she is proud of the fact that she was born as a woman and she enjoys being a writer especially a woman writer. She fearlessly talks about the experiences of women, their anguish, pain, and turmoil. About her writings, V. C Harris observes: "Her fiction is generally concerned with the many vicissitudes of women's experience, and it ranges from explicitly position-taking, polemical works to more subtle, fine-tuned representations of the political and cultural contexts of women's lives." (Kumar and Chery 115).

The story "Inside Every Woman Writer" is multilayered, in that on the one side it articulates the problems and prospects of a woman writing, and on the other it takes up the issues of dreams and fears, especially of women, in the contemporary scenario. This story is originally written in Malayalam (*Oro Ezhuthukariyude Ullilum*) and was translated into English by Dr. V. C. Harris. The name of the protagonist is not given instead Sara Joseph aptly chose a collective noun – a woman writer; she is not merely a character but the representative of any women who aspires to be a writer.

The protagonist who wishes to be writer is denied of freedom to write and a peaceful atmosphere to develop her ideas.

"After a series of verbal duels, I decided to leave," the story begins with this sentence and it is her strong decision to leave home and her family to pursue her writing career. Purushothaman, her husband does not allow her to engage in writing as there are a lot of domestic works to do at home and further, he expresses his dislike in her attempt of writing on new subjects other than love- Radha-Krishna love. He wants her to follow the old conventional and convenient way of writing. He tries to defeat her by showing extreme anger and this emotional tactic is not new to her. She used to write immensely about love and she has developed a brilliant chemistry which can make one feel that illusion is reality. But her works were rejected by the male writers screaming that when the world was hungry, love was an extra expenditure (117) its then she wants to try new subjects.

In reality, the male writers, the norm of the literary pantheon do not want to acknowledge her ability as a writer and condemns her by criticizing the content of writing. The name of the husband, Purushothaman, is also a carefully chosen name which literally means an ideal man (Uthamapurushan) which is quite ironical in the context of the story. Purushothaman is a typical representative of the male-dominated hegemonic system and is very much reluctant towards considering his wife as an independent intellectual being. He is the sole authority who gives orders and controls the activities of the protagonist. "Purushothaman would order that I need not write anything different; that I continue write the same old stuff." (117)

The endless domestic works and domination of the husband are not at all suitable for her creative mind instead it gives her terrific suffocation. Her home seems to be a prison rather than a peaceful environment. The following lines from the story reflects this pathetic situation. "The walls of the corridor shook and moved. Before I could even start worrying, the walls crept towards me and crushed me. Air and light were shut out of the corridor. Unable to breath, I beat my limbs in vain against the walls which looked possessed and were crushing me"(116). The major prerequisite for a writer is a peaceful environment to sit and reflect on her thoughts and develop it into an artistic work. Here, as an aspiring writer, the protagonist is completely devoid of any positive atmosphere. Her intense desire for a peaceful place is vivid in the lines; "If I can curl up in the primordial darkness and silence of my mother's womb, I can bring out my words in great secrecy. What I need is a labour room. A labour room which has nothing to do with the outside world" (116).

After describing all these thoughts, Sara Joseph introduces a fictional place called Aunt Mable's house. The woman writes loves to be in Aunt Mable's house to foster her writing skills because there is no one puts a grinding stone on the ideas that take shape in her mind. It is an allusion to Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* where she argues that a woman writer should have money and a room of one's own to write fiction (90). The woman writer further says that "Aunt Mable never spreads dirty linen over my thoughts" (116). K. Satchidanandan, a poet and a critic opine, "the house on the seashore is an interior space for woman to manifest the inner freedom of her self," and "the fantasy about Aunt Mable is a fanciful metaphor for female solidarity" (Mathew 224)

One of the major factors that hinders the freedom of the woman writer is the unending chores at home. The vessels piled up under the water tap, Purushothaman's undergarments piled up in the bedroom, the Punaloha ring given by her mother... are all horrific images and harsh realities that hampers her freedom. In Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* she openly talks about the domestic restrictions imposed upon a woman. Few tasks are more like the torture of Sisyphus than housework, with its endless repetition: the clean becomes soiled, the soiled is made clean, over and over, day after day." (qtd. In Arya 3) "Woman is shut up in a kitchen or in a boudoir, and astonishment is expressed that her horizon is limited. Her wings are clipped, and it is found deplorable that she cannot fly. Let but the future be opened to her, and she will no longer be compelled to linger in the present. (qtd. In Arya 4).

Coming to the end of the story, the woman writer plans to leave home before the arrival of her husband. She thinks of her children for a moment but soon she convinces herself that it is not her duty alone and she is determined to follow her passion. The last part of the story is almost like the declaration of her liberation. "Now I walk with an absolutely free movement of my limbs. My hands touch the horizon and come back. A winged wind stirs free the strands of my hair and folds of my clothes. My hair unlooses itself, soars and touches the sky, and my skirt whirls around in a wide, wide circle and covers the earth." (121) Sara Joseph not only gives the declaration of the freedom of the women writer but also the punishment to the patriarchal superiority. "... Purushothaman is standing at the doorstep, lost in thought. Somebody has punished him." (121) Here, Sara Joseph uses stylised language which tries to negotiate a 'trance-level' of experience which seeks an escape from the extremely stifling and painful constrictions imposed by patriarchy on women, especially women writers. "Like Nora in

Ibsen's Dolls House the woman writer also leaves her home for fulfilling her dream, for recognising her individuality. The act of leaving her house is an open declaration of her freedom, her individuality. The woman writer now starts unwinding her dreams. She breaks the year-old submissions that were folding her and she resists against the patriarchal norms which creates obstacle in fulfilling her dreams" (Arya 5)

K. R. Meera's story "The Vein of Memory" also portrays the similar theme in a different storyline. Thus, among the finest Malayalam short stories which celebrated the liberation of women from all kinds of shackles of exclusion "Inside Every Woman Writer" has a significant position.

"Agni" an excellent short story by the blooming Malayalam writer Sithara S takes a different path of rebellion against the patriarchal dominance and violence against women. She brought forth gender problems and daring women tribulations in her writings. Agniyum kadhakalum, karutha kuppaaayakkaari, veyilil orukaliyehzhuthukaari, Sithara-kadhakal are her major works. Agni (Fire) is the story which located Sithara among the notable women writers in Malayalam. It is a story that has been critically acclaimed by moralists without any digestion.

Agni is the story of Priya the girl who is gang-raped by three men. The typical women, in such a situation, should think about suicide. She would feel completely devastated and would begin to hate herself. But Priya subverts all the conventional practices and psychological understandings about a victim of cruel rape. Priya says to the man who raped her that he does not have enough potency to satisfy a woman entirely. This kind of a phrase to a man who raped her is a path breaking revolution, a kind of massive explosion. Her powerful reply is self-motivated, extraordinary and the moment where women realize the boundaries of the body and concentrate on her core – the inner self. The man who raped her is defeated by the indomitable spirit and inner strength of Priya and we see in the end he transforms into a meek, vulnerable character who begs pardon for his crime.

When the attacking gang took off even her sanitary pad, she felt that she was the most humiliated woman in the world. From such an unfathomable grief and humiliation, she takes a rebirth as a phoenix. The very next day the first man asks Priya "How was yesterday." She replies to him without any hesitation that "You were not enough" (91). This unexpected reply was a massive blow to that man and Priya sarcastically smiles at him whenever she meets him there onwards and thereby push him into the abyss of humiliation and guilt. The second one was from rich family. She replies to him that "I like you very much" (92). She passes by touching his cheek saying that "You are a real man" (92). Whenever he sees her, he looks at her and laughs with pain. The third one who is a beard man voluntarily confesses his mistake and apologizes. He waits for her one evening after work and cries in front of Priya and begs pardon. She smiles and sends him in peace.

What to do if a girl is raped by three people in an evening at a lonely place? How long she should lie on the ground without even clothes on where they left off. Coming back from such a trauma is obviously difficult. But there are some like Priya. Sometimes they must come back to take a revenge. Sithara has left the climax of the story for the readers. There is a psychological condition called Stockholm Syndrome in which a certain prisoner feels a worshipful intimacy with those who keep them in prison. We come across a similar situation in the story. But it is not the mental condition that persuades Priya to behave in such a way but the realization of the real self as a woman. Her life is not bounded to any physical restrains or the norms of the society like the sanctity of the virginity of a woman. The character Amrutha in Madhavikkutty's story "Sooryan" is like Priya. A body which will be fed by worms or eaten by fire should not be given many magnitudes, says Amrutha.

Kavayathriyum Krishikariyum and Charakku are other two notable stories by Sithara which celebrate the emancipation of women from oppression and fear. The positive resistance shown by women in onslaughts against them is an inspiring lesson for all women facing different kinds of violence and subjugation. In an interview given to Maorama Sithara says, "Our problem in all ages is

the hesitation of women to show their true potential. They are always bogged down by fear and shame. Women should break the limits imposed by society. Education and economic independence are helping them to overcome those inhibitions. They need to show the courage to resist the onslaughts and stand by their convictions. They must react boldly by realising their strengths and weaknesses." (Lal)

Along with the writers mentioned above who enriched Malayalam Literature, there are other contemporary bracket story tellers like K. R. Mallika, K. P. Sudheera, B.M. Suhra, C. S. Chandrika, Sarada, K. R. Meera and the list go on. They adopted a different narrative style which inscribes or criticizes the not yet portrayed aspects of women. As far as the present literary scenario of Kerala is concerned the emergence of new, talented writers and selection of themes concerning multi-dimensional social and political issues are hopeful. The active involvement of the women in the various mass movements and their day-to-day intervention in the society is the signal of the changing scenario of women's rights and equal participation.

Conclusion

The current Kerala society demands soulful discussions on the status of women. Though Kerala society enjoys the privilege of being known as the civilised, literate, and rich in culture society there are brown areas that need attention and reform. The violence against women especially rape attempts are serious matter of concern. Domestic violence, dowry, early marriages are still stand as the bitter realities. Literature is a major tool through which writers can depict all such atrocities faced by women and bring forth serious, effective discussions and resolutions in the society. Malayalam literature contributed tremendously to the development and reforms in the society. In the contemporary literary scenario of Malayalam, the genre of short fiction enjoys the prominent position and acts as the prime agent of change through literature. Especially the women writers have more room to express their concerns regarding socio political events. As Jancy James rightly observes about the short fiction in Malayalam in her article Women's Literary History in Malayalam, the most powerful medium of feminist expression in Malayalam today is the short story. Manasi, Sara Joseph, Valsala, Grecy, Ashitha, Shobha Warriar – the list is not very long but their literature is on a par with some of the fiercest discourses in feminism. (Jancy 104)

As the representation of the real spirit of the time, the two short stories that discussed in this paper in detail are excellent portrayals of women's liberation. Despite dealing with two different situations, the female characters of these stories are strong, rebellious, and liberated from the control by any external forces. The woman writer of Sara Joseph's story is liberated from the mundane, suffocating life of her family and the character Priya of Sithara's story has liberated from the fears and humiliations of a rape victim. These two characters are really inspiring and symbolizes the challenge that have to be accepted by all other women who are in trouble, faces oppression and wants to be liberated.

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