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Feminist Concerns In Sarah Joseph's *"In Every Woman Writer"*

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Abstract

Sarah Joseph, one of the most articulate writers to have emerged from Kerala, is often identified with the rise and spread of feminist consciousness in her home state. Winner of the Kendra Sahitya Academy Award for Alaahayude Penmakkal (Daughters of God the Father) the first of the trilogy, (others being Mattathi and Othappu translated as Othappu the Scent of the Other Side) she brought to fiction written in Malayalam an utterly new sensibility and language that challenged the limits of expression and the selection of themes as a woman writer. Comparable to the iconoclastic impact of Madhavikutty (Kamala Surayya), Sarah Joseph is the founder of Manushi, which functioned as a consciousness raising group across the state, building strategies of resistance to the normative impositions on women's life in the 1980s. The paper analyzes the feminist concerns related to the creative aspects of women and how marriage and the consequent gender related expectations act as deterrents to the creative impulses of women. It has also within its scope the methods and manners of countering the prescriptive roles assigned to women which allow women neither contexts nor tools for self expression. Some attention is also paid to the female bonding that is seen as a space that allows a counter narrative to withstand the pressures of conformity.

Keywords: Female Bonding; Creative Space; Marriage; Open-ended Narratives.

The article is an attempt to assess the ways in which Sarah Joseph presents women as sources of exceptional strength, understanding and resistance to patriarchal patterns of discourse that are of a prescriptive nature. The concepts of motherhood, female body, marriage, parenting, gender roles assigned to women in the Indian context, domesticating women through religious expectations, familial structures, educational limits, and glass ceiling phenomenon, all systematically prevent women from attaining the power to rename,

relocate and reclaim themselves. One of the earliest feminist voices to incorporate environmental consciousness into her writing, Sarah Joseph offers an uncompromising vision that rejects facile solutions and false optimism when it comes to issues of women and nature. In many respects she shares the concerns of Virginia Woolf who is seen as "the founder of modern feminist literary criticism" (Goldman 66).

In one of the early stories, "In Every Woman Writer", which has the tone of a feminist manifesto, with its Woolfian echoes, Sarah Joseph writes of the restrictive tendencies to which women as writers are subjected to in a world of gender dominance. The story begins with the persona announcing her decision to leave the house and go to Mable Auntie's house. She announces she has telegrammed Mable Auntie about her plan. She makes it clear that at least this time she will definitely walk out on her husband leaving the children to his care suggesting that there have been such attempts in the past. The story exploits the bifocal vision possible by juxtaposing two views, one, of the persona of the narrative, and the other, the narrative that may be termed as Purushotaman's, the husband of the narrator. The dominant ideology represented by the male figure in the form of Purushotaman offers reactionary positions including that of emotional blackmail in the guise of benevolent maternal responsibilities. One of the central questions in feminist thought is put as follows "Is it possible to be both a mother and an autonomous individual?" (Allen 1). Sarah Joseph also takes up this question what Allen calls" maternal dilemma" (1). The regulatory forces that determine conceptualization of the female are embodied in the figure of Purushotaman who is the agency of the gender hierarchy. Against the actuality of the home with all its images of domestication, boredom, predictability and monotony, Sarah Joseph presents the figure of the house of Mable Auntie which offers the persona all that is denied to her in her home. The house of Mable Auntie, thus is presented as a counterforce and space that has liberatory potential. The figure of Mable Auntie and all that she stands for may be seen as a threat to the dictates of patriarchal forms of control and hence is unthinkable to Purushotaman. What fails to fall within the definitions of the gender role ascribed to women according to patriarchy is explained away as insane or irrational and this story is no exception. Purushotaman wishes to see Mable Auntie as a projection of his wife's imagination; for him she is hallucinating and hence bordering on insanity. Sarah Joseph argues through the figure of Purushotaman how patriarchal discourse denies critical and creative space to women. Rather than addressing the concerns that women have, let alone be receptive them, gender dominance eliminates all possibilities of discourse. In fact Sarah Joseph presents Purushotaman and his wife as representing two antithetical standpoints with no possibility of a dialogue. The positions are presented as mutually exclusive with the views of Purushotaman representing the dominant patriarchal ideology. Dissenting voices are silenced by the hegemony of patriarchy.

The figure of Mable Auntie which offers a space of escape, consolation and self definition for the persona is interesting in that , Mable's life, as the narrative progresses, one comes to know is noted for a number of absences. There is no male figure in her life, nothing is said about her source of livelihood, she has no children, and there is no reference to her status that is married or single. In fact there is very little information about Mable. Whatever is given is only in relation with the thoughts of the speaking persona and only those aspects of Mable that interest the narrator and only those matters in which Mable differs from the narrator form part of the narrative. Mable's house also offers the narrator a space for a male figure who is sharply opposed to and differentiated from Purushotaman. Jayadevan, the name which echoes the Jayadeva who is the author *the Gitagovinda*, a friend of the narrator is one who encourages the narrator in her intellectual pursuits and who acknowledges the narrator's existence as a writer and at the same time who does not believe that bonds other than love and marriage are possible between a woman and a man. Mable's wish to see a romantic relationship between the narrator and Jayadevan is dismissed by both the narrator and Jayadevan according to the narrator.

Purushotaman represents the other pole of existence which does not allow women any existence other than the one that is traditionally assigned to them. The oppressive atmosphere of the home, bound by gender expectations is juxtaposed with an image of the narrator speaking of genuine existence as possible only in the imaginative world which in this case is the one possible only through the characters that are created by the narrator. Sarah Joseph implies that a life in the fictional world is the only one where true life is possible when one is forced to live in a world that is totally hostile to the creative aspect of a woman. The narrative space that exists in the mind of the persona is life affirming and sustains the narrator. In fact the narrator goes to the extent of declaring that she now lives only in her writing. Such a position adopted by the narrator again challenges the generally accepted hierarchies associated with reality where the external world is prioritized over the internal one.

The narrative space that the narrator cherishes in the story is again placed against the physical space in which she is fated to live. This space is presented as stifling and continually converging to such an extent that the narrator experiences a trapped feeling. The domestic space with its gender expectations is not conducive to the narrator's creative impulses and Sarah Joseph treats this domestic space in a very realistic manner with its elaborate descriptions of the drudgery of marital responsibilities from a woman's perspective. Space, as the narrator experiences it at home, becomes a surreal and nightmarish experience that crushes the narrator. Open spaces away from home, and the public sphere which the narrator occasionally enjoys create an altogether different world where the narrator is at comparative

ease and enjoys greater latitude in her thoughts and movements. Such spaces are experienced by the narrator with a sense of relief and a feeling of release. Yet the narrator is seen in such spaces only for short durations and the literary circles are found not very open to female writers. The narrator attributes her inability to participate which she traces to a childhood experience:

> I have a panchaloha anklet that eats into my flesh. My mother had it specially made for me soon after I was born. Since it did not grow and though I continued to, it got buried as I grew up and the anklet screamed out loud and rushed around in the flesh and lay many little anklet eggs. When I sit for a long time with my legs hanging these small anklets would rush through, crying aloud their existence and pushing me down into the unbearable burns of pains. (54, my translation)

The experience of being bound and chained right from being born as a girl child is presented in the form of the anklet that multiples as the child grows suggesting the innumerable constraints that bind a woman. The aesthetics that such literary spaces put forward also are found to be bearing the impact of gender dominance and consequently, aesthetics determined by the male. Feminist concerns and aesthetic preoccupations both in form and content are inadmissible in such spaces. Yet the narrator speaks of such visits to the world of male writers and realizes there is little concern in that world about women or their problems. The narrator thinks of Mable Auntie's city which she sees as better than her own:

> I can definitely participate in the gatherings of the writers in Mable Auntie's city. I might not be able to say anything in such gatherings but my mind will lap up everything like a desert drinks up rain. How shameful it is to be kept away on the basis of smooth skin and soft body! With the burning mind that I have that can take in anything, I cannot keep away for the sake of protecting my skin. It should not be repeated. I need to have more than dashing teacups to express my anger. (55)

She returns with the realization that her own voice has to be freed from such dictates of the literary world dominated by men and expresses her strong conviction that women should not be pushed to the margins solely on the basis of their anatomy.

One gets the impression from the narrative that it is not the first time that the narrator has gone to Mable's home. Many a time she has gone and many a time she was detained by her husband. Towards the end of the narrative the reader is given to understand that unlike the earlier visits this one is final in that she does not intend to come back. Sarah Joseph

suggests a sense of a radical departure and a feeling of discontinuity from the past in the words of the narrator. The narrator articulates urgency in rejecting the past and expresses her desire to unlearn the past. The discontent with the status quo is unequivocally present in the thoughts of the narrator.

Sarah Joseph raises relevant questions about female autonomy, creativity, body, the need to interrogate relations of power and gender, gender and sexuality, maternal roles versus artistic inclinations, strategies of containment and deliberate construction of consensus with regard to the life of women. She raises though she does not dwell on it at length, the question of female autonomy as unquestionably linked to economic independence which Woolf states directly in *A Room of One's Own*: "All I could do was to offer you an opinion upon one minor point - a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction"(7). Though the narrator entertains a thought about Mable's financial situation the narrator does not seem to be much bothered about it. As the title indicates, the woman writer is the focus and social fabric is allowed into the narrative in so far as it is related to the concerns of a woman as a writer. Sarah Joseph in this story opens up feminist concerns that were taken up by Kamala Das in her poetry and which later writers addressed in almost all genres.

The female body that appears in the story is one that is circumscribed by traditional gender roles. It is situated within the discourse of domesticity with all its corollaries. The female body as a site of resistance, as a source of dissent and a space to register protest does not figure in the story, though in later writings, both short stories and novels there is a deliberate foregrounding of the female body in its various phases. "In Every Woman Writer" the body is not erased but neither is it fore-grounded. The militant and activist dimension that the body takes in Sarah Joseph's later writing is absent here. Body appears minimally in this story and what is being done to it through various methods of containment figures in this narrative.

With a descriptive title like "In Every Woman' Writer" the narrative's central focus is on writing. The story presents the difficulties that a woman writer faces, not just the physical difficulties that pose a challenge to writing but also takes into account the need to widen the thematic concerns of writing. The narrative is also about the need for inclusion of themes that are hitherto addressed and the necessity of discarding some of the timeworn themes. The traditional expectations associated with a woman writer are rejected in the wake of a consciousness that becomes increasingly aware of the limitations of such expectations and the underlying power relations that eventually determine the fate of a woman writer. By adopting narrative techniques and by creating characters that do not succumb to simplistic definitions of women that are given wide currency by narratives engineered by hegemonic

male discourses, Sarah Joseph in "In Every Woman Writer" shows writing itself is resistance, more than that, it is existence itself.

Space appears in another form in this narrative which is equally important as the social space offered by Mable Auntie's house and has the same symbolic value of Mable Auntie's house. The sea that is visible from her house stands for all that is absent or denied in the narrator's house. Whereas the home does not offer her a congenial space to express her creativity, the sea offers her an atmosphere in which the narrator finds it easy to take a self-reflexive mood. It allows her space to reflect on the processes of writing, to revisit her own ideas about writing, how far she has changed and to what extent she should modify or think about new themes. Such thoughts are inimical to the domestic sphere/space which she is forced to share with Purushotaman. Sarah Joseph's descriptions of these two houses i.e. that is the house where the narrator lives with her husband Purushotaman and the house of Mable Auntie to which she wishes to escape demand some attention. The former is presented as cold, man-made and unnatural. The images used to describe the house suggest lack of life. The corridor in which the narrator lies thinking about her work that she intends to write is shrouded in darkness, there are mysterious shadows, and finally it shuts of light and wind. The situation is similar to the life of women as described by Mary Cavendish:

> Women are Restless with Labour, Easeless with Pain, Melancholy for want of Pleasures, Helpless for want of Power, and Dye in Oblivion for want of Fame; Nevertheless, Men are so Unconscionable and Cruel against us, that they Indeavour to Barr us of all Sorts or Kinds of Liberty, as not to Suffer us Freely to Associate amongst our Own Sex, but would fain Bury us in their Houses or Beds, as in a Grave; the truth is we Live like Bats, or Owls, Labour like Beasts, and Dye like Worms.(143)

The narrator feels the walls moving towards her , converging from all sides making her gasp for breath and thrash her legs on the floor. In fact it is the antithesis of life. The grills and the walls convey a sense of cramped up spaces, with little mobility and a sense of being imprisoned. Luce Irigaray's observations are relevant here:

> Everywhere you shut me in. Always you assign a place to me. Even outside the frame that I form with you. . . . You set limits even to events that could happen with others. . . . You mark out boundaries, draw lines, surround, enclose. Excising, cutting out. What is your fear? That you might lose your property. What remains is an empty frame. You cling to it, dead. (24-25)

Elaborating Irigaray's observations Frances Devlin-Glass and Lyn McCredden write:

> Irigaray's notion of the frame - frame of the house, the home, the shared image - is a human one, formed of you *and* me. It is movable and expansive, but

> therefore it can also be moved to exclude, to shut in, to limit. Such boundary-marking is read as part of patriarchy's exercise of power, a power connected to ownership arid a deploying of identity politics that must know itself as *against* the other and fails to embrace what "could happen with others." (4)

On the contrary, Mable Auntie's house is presented through images that carry connotations of life not death. The house is imagined as organic and contrary to the space limiting atmosphere of the house in which the narrator lives with her husband; this one is space liberating where the vision is not impeded. There are no walls, and the house, the reader is told is made of very thin and flimsy partitions and instead of grills there are only veins, throbbing veins. Mable Auntie's house creates the impression of a house full of life, vibrant in its existence and of a very welcoming nature. The narrator writes of the house of Mable Auntie:

> Mable Auntie's house doesn't have walls. It is made of beautiful, light strange screens. It has no grills or locks. It has only veins, a throbbing network of veins.
>
> .Endlessly open beach is its background. There I have my own room with three windows that open on to the horizon, where I can read and write. Mable Auntie never throws dirty linen on my thoughts. She doesn't put a millstone on the ideas that gradually form in me. (52)

The fate of women in marital space is succinctly expressed by Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*

> To begin with, always to be doing work that one did not wish to do , and to do it like a slave , flattering and fawning, not always necessarily perhaps, but it seemed necessary and the stakes were too great to run risks; and then the thought of that one gift which it was death to hide - a small one but dear to the possessor ,.... perishing and with it my self, my soul – all this became like a rust eating away the bloom of the spring, destroying the tree at its heart. However, as I say, my aunt died; and whenever I change a ten-shilling note a little of that rust and corrosion is rubbed off. (43)

Woolf again thinking of the lack of books by women in the shelves of great universities observes about the causes of the absence:

> But for women, I thought, looking at the empty shelves, these difficulties were infinitely more formidable. In the first place, to have a room of her own, let alone a quiet room or a sound-proof room, was out of the question, unless her parents were exceptionally rich or very noble, even up to the beginning of the nineteenth century. Since her pin money, which depended on the goodwill of

> her father, was only enough to keep her clothed, she was debarred from such alleviations as came even to Keats or Tennyson or Carlyle, all poor men, from a walking tour, a little journey to France, from the separate lodging which, even if it were miserable enough, sheltered them from the claims and tyrannies of their families. (58-59)

The narrator sees Mable Auntie's house as the space to escape from the tyranny of her family and the house is noted for the absence of the ordinary things of a typical household. There are significant absences - no mention of the backbreaking, tiring, monotonous work that is present in every house but seldom taken into account and rarely appreciated, the kitchen with all its depressing paraphernalia, and the laundry that inevitably falls on the woman as part of gender roles typically assigned to women. Anne Finch, the Countess of Winchilsea, in her fine poem "Introduction" sums up the general fate of the women of her period but is not limited to her own:

> To write, or read, or think, or to enquire,
> Would cloud our beauty, and exhaust our time,
> And interrupt the conquests of our prime,
> Whilst the dull manage of a servile house
> Is held by some our utmost art and use (238)

And the patriarchal reproach for anyone who wishes to write follows:

> Alas ! a woman that attempts the pen,
> Such a presumptuous creature is esteemed,
> The fault can by no virtue be redeemed.
> They tell us we mistake our sex and way;
> Good breeding , fashion, dancing, dressing , play,
> Are the accomplishments we should desire; (238)

What is at work here as in the relation between Purushotaman and his unnamed wife is the conflict between prescriptive gender roles and the conflict that arises when such roles are questioned by women. The house where the narrator lives with her husband is servile house as Winchilsea would term it. On the contrary, the kitchen in Mable Auntie's house is often replaced by take-aways which are arranged periodically. In a sense Mable Auntie's house is the opposite of the narrator's house. If one is the reality against which she struggles continually with her attempts though often futile, the other is the desire, the wish. The impulse is the impulse to escape to Mable's Auntie's house to survive as a writer which she thinks is possible only in Mable's Auntie's house, something unthinkable in her own house. The narrator is troubled by the thought that she might think of her children:

> At Mable Auntie's house there could be situations when the thoughts of the children may sadden me. After twilight falls when darkness visits the surface of the sea my life would wander over the sea like a helpless lullaby. My heart will suffer the deep grief over the separation. But I have to recreate myself through a release. (53)

This release is the result of a conviction that one finds in Woolf's essay on "Professions for Women" where she writes of her mother which in turn is a rejection and consequent destruction of the mother image which is inimical to the aspirations of a woman who wants to be a writer:

> She was intensely sympathetic. She was utterly unselfish . . . in short, she was so constituted that she never had a mind or wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. I turned upon her and took her by the throat . . . Had I not killed her, she would have killed me. She would have plucked the heart out of my writing. (59)

What one finds here is the maternal dilemma which the narrator overcomes by the promises of Mable Auntie's house with its space conducive to creative activities. The narrator imagines herself lying, listening to the roar of the sea and thinking deeply about her own literary creation.

Given the patriarchal expectations regarding maternal roles it invariably collides with other roles: Allen's comments on Western societies are applicable to other societies as well:

> Only since the turn of the twentieth century has freely chosen motherhood been perceived as a realistic—though still often unattainable—aspiration. But the choice is too often between motherhood and other forms of self-realization. Women still assume the chief responsibility for the family, and do most of the work of reproduction and child-rearing. This "double burden" restricts their participation in economic, social, and cultural life and is now the major source of gender inequality in Western societies. (1)

The narrator understands that reproduction and child- rearing are to be discarded in the process of becoming a writer since both are serve patriarchal interests. Sarah Joseph writes: "It is time to make it known that I suffer love as piece of sputum that fell on my face and motherhood as metal chain that tightens on my face" (52). The narrator here has come to a state of realization where she cannot glorify romance or motherhood. She cannot view motherhood as "the most perfect realization of human potential that the species has reached" (Key 222). Her action echoes Patterson's words:"The only rational attitude toward what society has made of motherhood is to refuse it"(25).

Sarah Joseph underscores the idea that in every woman writer's mind there will be a Mable Auntie's house, the existence of which is considered essential for a fuller and richer life. And in every man's mind there is this constant denial of such houses as hallucinations or workings of an irrational or insane mind since it challenges all his assumptions about home, marriage, wife and mother, writer and it is only natural that the men will continue to arrive at such fallacious conclusions and women will continue to resist them with their own creations with little regard to what male world dictates to them in so many insidious ways.

> I slammed shut the door behind me and turned around and looked at Purushotaman. He stood there on the steps of the verandah lost in thought. Someone has punished him. Who and what it is he has to find out, I am helpless.
>
> I walked swinging my hands. My hands touched the horizons and came back to me. Winged wind ruffled and provoked my hair and the hem of my dress. My hair was let loose and it flew and touched the sky and my dress swirled around and covered the earth. (56)

The end of the narrative resists closure. A formal closure is avoided which is indicative of the resistance to traditional narrative structures that do not allow endings to remain open and consequently open to multiple interpretations even of widely divergent nature. The open ended narrative suggests opening up of the narrator's life to possibilities hitherto denied to her on the basis of patriarchal dictates. The final image of the story carries ideas of freedom and movement, of flights of imagination and an escape from all that is against a woman, particularly a woman writer. The hair let loose suggesting a liberation of the feminine (which forms a central theme of two of Sarah Joseph's stories "Muditheyyangal" and "Muditheyyamurayunnu") with the dress falling to the earth as the wind blows, and the sense of open boundless space implies a rejection of all restrictive and prohibitive practices that are at work which play a significant role in consolidating and fossilizing female behavior in all its entirety.

The creative processes of writing that appear in the narrative share a profound affinity with female biology. Writing becomes a feminine activity in the sense of labour, the act of giving birth to a life. A space or a room to give birth, images of return to the mother and mother's womb, all these, define writing as deeply rooted in the body. To many of the radical feminists the female body is the only space from which writing happens, This space again is farthest from the house in which the narrator lives, which she eventually leaves and if at all it has affinity with any other sense of space it is the space offered by Mable Auntie's

house where the body is freed from the constraints of the marital space and where writing becomes possible according to the demands of a feminist consciousness.

The text puts forward the idea that along with certain creative friendships (with Jayadevan) the female bonding that exists between the narrator who is unnamed and Mable Auntie is essential for the narrator to realize her creative life. Purushotaman, unlike Jayadevan (though Purushotaman explains away Jayadevan as yet another hallucination of his wife) is impervious to the writer in his wife who is seldom given the chance to articulate and consequently express herself which makes his wife's struggle to escape, sensible, though Purushotaman fails to realize it. For him it is only madness both literal and figurative. That he could be the cause of her desire to escape or the madness that she suffers as he terms it never occurs to him, and as the narrative comes to a close there is the image of the unnamed narrator looking back and seeing her husband standing lost in thought. No remorse touches the unnamed narrator; rather she feels that he is the cause of her fate as he has also internalized the value systems of the hegemonic male discourses on women. That she is nameless means that she could be anyone having no name or being nameless she could have any name or could be any woman who wishes to be a writer but who finds herself against a society that does not want her to be or to have a name of one's own or a room of one's own.

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