

**INTERROGATING DOMESTICITY: MALAYALAM SHORT STORY IN
TRANSLATION**

Indu Rajasekharan
Assistant Professor of English
Government College for Women,
Thiruvananthapuram
indurajasekharan9@gmail.com

Abstract

Fundamental to feminist thought, patriarchy underscores the marginalised position of women in relation to men shows that gender disparities exist in institutional structures such as the family. Domesticity. Feminism argues that woman are marginalised due to the patriarchal structure of society. This paper deals with issues of marginalization of women, their lack of agency, of voice and their subjectivity as reflected in Malayalam short stories. The texts under scrutiny are the English Translations of Sarah Joseph's Mazha (Rain) and Madhavikutty's Neippayassam(Rice Pudding). The paper attempts to analyse how women have been treated and what their roles have been in their social context. Women connotes marginalized group that has historically suffered exploitation within and outside the family.

Key words: Feminism, femininity, woman

Malayalam short story has ever been an eminently popular form for communicating individual and social issues. Though with its not so expanded scope, continuity and design, it has tried to accommodate the diversity of themes that depict the complexities of human experiences. Women writers in Malayalam have significantly reconstructed life in its modern day conflicts by going against the grain of portraying women as both stereotypes and victims. They are engaged in a more focused reality by delineating them as individuals who are perceptive to the socio-political changes. Feminist interventions in Malayalam literature have certainly back lashed the hegemonic initiatives and conservatism. Women writing in Malayalam addresses the shared experiences of women rather than showcasing an assimilative mode relating them to their immediate situation. Most women writers combine social activism with writing ,reaffirming women's voices bringing forth the power relations and gender politics in the social sphere. This paper attempts to analyse Sarah Joseph's *Mazha* translated into English as *Rain* by Anitha Devassia and Madhavikutty's (Kamala Suraiyya's) *Neypayassam* translated into English as *Rice Pudding* by the author herself from the perspectives of gender and culture, exploring the feminist strategies of appropriating the social sphere and introspecting woman's place in the sphere of domesticity which entraps her.

Sarah Joseph is a feminist activist and leading writer in contemporary Malayalam literature. She has initiated “Pennezhuthu”(Women writing) in the feminist discourse in Kerala and has brought to the surface, the socio-political subjugation and economic exploitation of women through her works .She has five short story collections and three major novels. The translation of her novel, *Othappu* won the Crossroad Award for translation in 2011.

Her works address women’s issues and their resistance to the patriarchal order. Her female protagonists strive for attaining freedom and liberation. Choice ,for her women, is a liberative force which help them overcome the tensions of their times.To say that her works are mere documentations of diverse experiences of women is to delimit her stretch.Instead,her works are sites that foreground strong and independent women who mock at their own marginalized conditions with the realization that their situations are also constructs of the patriarchal system,thereby defying patriarchy by breaking their constraints.

Padma, in Sarah Joseph’s *Rain* is fed up with domestic chores and household duties.Hence,nature for her is the sole outlet that offers a free outlet in contrast with the artificial construct of the house which limits her agency.That nature and women are both being continuously and strategically dominated is one of the basic tenets of ecofeminism.Not only this,but also a parallel condition is visible where their roles in society are being completely neglected despite the fact that they are so life nourishing.In the story,Padma herself is a metaphor for nature since she is exploited and abused.The name “Padma”, means lotus and apart from the name’s connotations with nature and as her name symbolizes,she becomes the space where the sole virtue related to knowledge and wealth is guarded and treasured-that of humility.Thus,it is this significance associated with the deep rooted lotus which is re-visioned and subverted in *Rain*.It is here that Sarah Joseph’s intervention as a social activist and as a writer finds maturity as can be discerned further from the story.She delineates three character types.The husband, nameless thoughts arrogant and contemptuous,Padma,the protagonist wife who is angry and disappointed and the children,the nameless girl child and her sibling,Suresh who are innocent and straight forward.The focus of the story is the transference of arrogance and contempt from the husband to the family,a transference of patriarchal thoughts and ideologies which the family resists.As a victim of the postmodern sensibilities,his disturbing tactics aimed solely at his family members become successful.His indifferent attitude gets manifested and transferred as is seen in the acts of Padma when she carelessly crushes the nestling and when her daughter scornfully discards the efforts of her brother’s attempts at making paper boats instead of appreciating the creative skills.Padma,meanwhile feels a sense of social isolation being cut off from the social sphere rigorously shouldering the responsibilities of the family fulfilling the gender roles as a wife and mother.

What is curious about Sarah Joseph’s treatment is the very feminine essence of sharing and caring that forms the thematic of this story.The routine household activities which make any wife leave bored and frustrated are not at all mentioned in the story.The narrative but tries to depict the

protagonist as one who has acclimatized herself to all the acts which gender conditioning has presented to her as natural. This is indeed a paradigm shift in the history women writing in Kerala and has to be read along the lines of social inclusion of women, paving the way “to the stage from the kitchen.”

The title, *Rain* itself is suggestive of the motive for the actions of the characters. The sense of dampness that pervades the entire text of the short story is allegorical of the essentialist qualities in the protagonist. It is at a superficial level, one that represents the distress and disappointment which permeates the minds of the characters which is in fact the sub-text of the story. The mechanical acts of the husband are also in contrast with the creative and compassionate acts of the children and Padma. It is Padma's sense of loneliness/social isolation that enables her to retain her voice. This alienation from the external world makes her empowered and helps in her metamorphosis into an assertive woman from a silent one. The cry at the end of the story is therefore, her voice against the system and her first sign of subversion of patriarchy that has victimized her. It is again the voice of patriarchy that compels her to crush the nestling. When her husband sees her standing out in the rain, getting drenched and calls her “whore,” (565) she ends up crushing the nestling. The power relations are downplayed by her every moment the husband raises his eyebrow or voice. In the domestic set up, the husband mediates power as his figure is evocative of the social being. He has access to everything latest, newspapers and pop music and this is just one more instance of the materialistic views which he upholds while she is very simple. Like this, the story is built up on a series of contrasts, a subversive strategy employed by the Sarah Joseph, cleverly pointing to the binary oppositional constructs, the polarities of the variables of gender, a condition of being either male or female. The imageries of movement are contrasted with static imageries. “The rolling of the boat,” “the swirling of the muddy water” and “the rolling of the nestling” (563) are in contrast with the calm and silent mental state of Padma. Again, the imageries of lightness are contrasted with that of hardness, the playfulness against the dampness. Padma returns to the natural world, showing her courage against male oppression. The story highlights woman's association with fertility and man's environmental abuse. It is her association with nature which raises her consciousness of the victimization of women. Her deep sympathy for nature and her wish to regenerate through nature from disintegration is effectively portrayed. Sarah Joseph, here, portrays woman as assertive individuals and not just as “the other” in relation to man.

It is the contemptuous attitude of the husband that compels her to crush the nestling. This act is a symbolic one of demolishing the very concept of “the home”, the family and the deconstructive critique of the very social institutions that crumble a woman's desires and imagination. The act is also one that destroys her innate essence of compassion. The act is opposed to her name and substance as a woman—one of the preservers, of the one who is rooted and above all the seat of the prototype mother. Here, it is the anger that comes to the fore which she has repressed for a long period. Suddenly, she is overtaken by a sense of remorse and regrets for an act for which there is no atonement. The hand also emerges as a significant image, intertextual with Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, with the intertextual element subverted as the act here is by accident.

Kamala Surayya was the one of most distinctive voices among women in Kerala and wrote under the pseudonym, Madhavikutty in Malayalam. She has been as skillful and consummate as a short story writer as she has been as a writer of fiction. Her short stories unravel the psychological world of woman and depict incipient feminist concerns exposing the oppressive mechanism of patriarchy that victimizes woman. Her memoir, *Balyakala Smaranakal* is very much the account of the recuperative events of the past and what is discussed is her experiences of womanhood. Her novels are concerned with woman's position in the family and society and present us with women characters who challenge traditional definitions framed by cultural institutions. Her autobiography, *Ente Katha*, translated into fifteen languages blazed the reading public because of her blatant discussions on female sexuality. Her writings attack the hegemonic pattern of gender relations and articulates the differences experienced by women. She endorses the female struggle for equity and gives voice to women, make them speak and react to patriarchal subjugation. Madhavikutty's genius lies in initiating feminist consciousness in Malayalam and in establishing a kind of female sensibility.

The woman in *Rice Pudding* is nameless. We get a pen portrait of the dead woman through the narration which is composed of two perspectives-that of the writer, a third person narrative and of the dead woman's husband, mainly through his reminiscences. While the narrative positions her in the past, in the domestic domain, examining her "absence", the reminiscences of the husband runs counter to it, situating her in the present, exploring her "presence". How woman's social exclusion and thereby her subordination are naturalized is Madhavikutty's concern in the story. Madhavikutty, here, questions the nature of the boundaries of the private and public spheres and therefore, the bifurcation of the narrative. This multilayered narrative gives the reader every scope for intervention and introspection in/of the gender disparity in the family, specifically on the gender roles, woman is often assigned with.

The dead woman is defined by the social perspective, which is seen in the third person narrative. The capabilities, creative, aesthetics and sensibility of the woman is clearly stated when this narrative presents her as very adept in the art of homemaking. She is once again defined by the individual perspective of the husband where he perceives her as only the construct of the wife who notwithstanding his failures in his career and his inability to create a happy atmosphere at home has stood the test of time supporting him and taking care of their children. The genteel irony in the story is the question he seems to ask her when he gets tormented at her death, "Have you forgotten that today is Monday?" (395). The husband in spite of his wife's death is only conscious of her role as a wife. In fact, this is the role which she has subverted with her death and which identity she has neglected when death embraced her.

The cultural thematic of the story is the gender role of the wife which is exclusively confined to the domestic domain. The suppression of female identity in a patriarchal set up, where woman's identity is viewed only in relation to her duties and gender roles are questioned in the story. The story, however, is not a complaint on the parity-question in man-woman relationship. On the other

hand, it is the critique of a society which conditions woman as lover, wife and mother, makes her fit into these roles and carry out her tasks. The woman, even when she was alive is portrayed as one who is acutely conscious of her roles. She is pictured as one with no independence and also as one who is denied of the opportunities for free expression when she was alive. The third person narrative examines the hardships endured by the woman and her discontentment with life. This is further substantiated by Madhavikutty's use of food imagery as a dominant metaphor. The rice pudding which she prepares on the morning she dies is relished by her kin unaware of her fate. The food imagery gives life to the dead woman, stressing the labour for which she is not repaid. What figures prominently in the story is the reconstruction of the myth of the mother as the ultimate nurturer as her child, Unni remarks: "Yes, she is the best cook in the world" (397). In *Rice Pudding*, it is the absence of the woman which puts the husband into a state of identity crisis. The husband is unwilling to take up the responsibility of the household. This is emphasized by the statement, "He envied her freedom" (396). The woman's death takes place when she was sweeping the floor. Interesting enough is his thought that "it would be wrong to eat food touched by death" (397) and this superstitious feeling prompts him to cook food for his children.

The phallogentric foundations of the institution of the family is challenged in the story since what demarcates male from the female is the gender role one plays in the family and one that which is smoothly passed on to the next generation. Madhavikutty's works are unique in the medium she works with. In her works, along with the typical nuances she employs in making her craft perfect, the gender categorization which is also seen as part of the male constructed language and the implicit assumptions of male superiority created therein are neatly deconstructed. What is more noticeable in Madhavikutty are her female characters who are all empowered in their own rights. They have sharp and distinct voices. Even though the woman's language is confined to the private spheres, Madhavikutty's treatment makes it loud and pronounced. Social conditioning build borders around woman and the strength of Madhavikutty's women is that they are able to transcend these traditional bondages.

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