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PROBLEMATISING CHASTITY AND DISSENT IN PATRIARCHY: A STUDY OF WOMEN IN
SARAH JOSEPH'S "OTHAPPU"

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ABSTRACT

Wifhood as an affiliative category undergoes several idealisations to maintain its stature in the gendered patriarchal society. Accordingly it is categorised into two based on performance of the gender role – the chaste woman and the recalcitrant woman. Every woman living in a patriarchal society is in a continuous struggle to maintain and preserve the former status by virtue of coercion. Sarah Joseph is a contemporary Malayalam woman writer who addresses gender and environmental issues through her works. *Othappu* or *The Scent of the Other Side* features two women caught up in the web of patriarchal norms of living. They evade being defined as “chaste” by their non conformity to patriarchal rules of behavioural action. The paper attempts to trace their transgression and project how it culminates to their dissent to patriarchal social norms.

Keywords: Chastity, wifhood, women sexuality, Christian morality, *The Scent of the Other Side*

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Chastity refers to the state or practice of restricting sexual contact to a single person lawfully wedded. Shaped by the moral codes of society, it emphasises on sexual abstinence before marriage and exercising complete fidelity to spouse after marriage. It also requires one to be morally clean in ‘thoughts, words, and actions.’ Apparently, due to societal proclivity towards patriarchy, chastity becomes an issue only for the ‘female body.’

While the idea of female chastity and its necessitated importance in conjugal life are passed on to generations through myths and societal rules, chastity ceased being a personal/family value and has developed into a public virtue. This reification process was hastened by cultural norms instituted by the patriarchal society, demanding sexual purity specifically from the part of women. David Hume in his *Treatises* identifies female chastity as an artificial virtue, motivated by its social utility. The moral obligations attached to sexual behaviour are generated by social utility of this behaviour: female chastity is in “the general interests of society” (Gardner 332). Also, the social interest in the chastity of women is stronger than that of men and any misconduct from their part is punished severely. The notion arises “from education, from the voluntary conventions of men, and from the interest of society” (qtd. in Gardner 333)

Societal interests, which insist on female chastity, include:

- Need to ensure security of paternity
- The male need to know that his property is being passed on to his biological offspring
- Consolidation of family honour and class status (reflects culture and upbringing)

Wifehood, similar to motherhood is an affiliative category in that the society maintains certain gender specific expectations of an ideal wife from a woman entering into a marriage contract. An ideal wife is expected to be chaste, pious, devoted, respectful and submissive to her husband. Hence female chastity coerces women to perform certain gender specific roles monitored by canonical or civil laws. Control of female sexuality thus prepares ground for gendered power relations in favour of the male.

The fetish for female chastity operates at two levels – performance and suppression. Women are forced to perform the role of an ideal wife subjugated to the husband and acquire the approval of the patriarchal society. Again she is made to suppress her sexual instincts and de-sex herself in order to assert her purity in thoughts and conformity to patriarchal norms of cultural behaviour. This paper intends to analyse the fetish for female chastity within Syrian Christian community in Kerala as represented in Sarah Joseph's novel *Othappu*. Christianity promoted ideals of virginity and chastity from early 5th C AD. In their culture, celibacy and purity were valorised whereas sex and desire became policed (Mottier 18).

Raveendran suggests that the Victorian morality norms that spread in the European countries in 19th century proliferated to the Kerala society through missionaries and English education. By confining sexuality within family as a means of reproduction alone, morality concerns in this regard became internalised and women started to avoid addressing sex and sexuality in their writing. Further he states that by forcing women to practise abjection of sexuality, men acquired the sole possession over the woman's body. The body was 'other'ed in the sexual experience of women. (163-165)

Towards the latter half of 20th C, very few women writers in Malayalam started writing boldly against patriarchal norms operating in conjugal life and female sexuality. The rich tradition of women writers beginning with Lalithambika Antarjanam, Saraswathiyamma and Rajalekshmi figures Kamala Das and Sarah Joseph as its descendants in 21st century. Among them, Sarah Joseph is of supreme importance in her delineation of womanly issues within minority communities and caste/class hierarchies.

Sarah Joseph is the most notable among contemporary women writers in Malayalam, an ardent social activist and feminist writer. Through her novels she addresses women's issues and sentiments of various oppressed minorities. She uses her writing for social causes including environmental issues and deposition of dominant exploitative groups. *Othappu* (2005) is the third of her trilogy after *Aalahayude Penmakal* (1999) and *Maatathi* (2003). The novel is translated into English by Valson thampu as *Othappu: The Scent of the Other Side*. It features a feminist understanding of Christian spirituality and woman's sexuality. The foreword to the book written by Dr. Jancy James observes that the novel unveils the birth pangs of a feminist spirituality, counterpointing itself to the aberrations of a male dominated society that is hypocritical, materialistic, vain, cruel, and cowardly, as also a 'bhakti' that steers clear of fixed places of worship, godmen, set prayers, and pujas (xxx).

Othappu is the story of a nun who decides to step out of her convent life and free herself from the shackles of religious and societal norms because she feels herself not ready to pursue the vocation in all the ardour it demands. Margalitha is faced with protests from her family and society which treat her as a black sheep. The title 'Othappu' means 'going astray' or 'scandal'. Further, it portrays two women characters struggling within the confines of a patrifocal cultural norm. However, Rebekka who has transcended boundaries of caste and class gets sidelined as the focus of the novel falls entirely on Margalitha, her niece. Sarah Joseph has unequivocally presented the fetish for female chastity in the patriarchal Kerala society through the two women.

Rebekka is Margalitha's aunt, Chennere Varkey Master's sister's daughter. In her prime, her beauty transcended the world and Puthukkat Thomas Vaidyar came to seek her hand in marriage. He was famous for curing mental illness with his panacea. Vaidyar married her in his late 30s bewitched by her beauty. They were dissimilar in every possible way. The more he understood this gulf, the more he became upset. Further, her aversion to the foul smelling antidote and lack of sentiments towards the doctor made him uneasy. Thus he

concluded that she had a secret lover. "The sign of that treachery was on her face. Vaidyar pestered her to name her secret lover. Not only on the first night, but on every night thereafter. Flint firm, Rebekka neither admitted nor denied having a lover (Joseph 29-30). Rebekka is not ready to perform the role of ideal wife or justify herself to satisfy the male jealousy of Vaidyar. This infuriates him and establishes his doubts on her.

Her cool disdain in not fighting back infuriated Vaidyar all the more. If only she had said something, he could have derived further mileage from her words. But what could anyone do with a hardened slut who remained unconcerned even on a quaking mountain? All this was not a great secret, after all.

Beneath her cool insolence lurked a secret lover, a confidence that fed her impudence. (30)

Her indifference makes him tighten the security around her. He employed spies to investigate her past history. But nothing gave him evidence to support his accusation and this heightened his resentment. "Thomas Vaidyar was sucked into a storm of male mistrust" (30). Finally he succeeds in breaking her will and making her cry by applying his "vicious potion" into Rebekka's eyes. He shouts, "This'll settle your mad lust!" (30)

Rebekka is forced to flee from that house. However, later she returns to the same place as a dutiful wife on Vaidyar's insistence. In course she gives birth to two babies but with each birth, her beauty increased. Vaidyar grew anxious and is unable to carry out his vocation. His sole concern becomes her sexuality and chastity. As their income dwindled Rebekka is forced to work with Nasthikan George in his drama company. This further creates gossip among the people regarding her virtue.

Tongues began to wag. There was nothing people left unsaid: wild stories spread. As a result, the relatives of Vaidyar and Rebekka alike were furious at her for becoming a 'drama woman'. They treated her as an outcaste and vowed never to let her set foot within their four walls... Both groups were sure that Nasthikan George was keeping her as his woman. (33)

Her assertion of her individuality (when she hesitates to lip sweet words on her husband's ear or submit to his male pride) makes her an outcast in the society ruled by gender norms. She challenges the male hegemony in gendered power relations. The recalcitrant woman is hence ostracised by the society as a form of punishment and warning to the rest of her species.

Margalitha too faces a similar insult in the hands of the society and her lover Karikkan. Margalitha walking out of the seminary is viewed as an assertion of her sexuality. She is shunned by the society for turning the wrong, evil path. Even before she doffs her holy cloak and veil, Margalitha is warned of the possible consequences of her stray/transgression from nun's duty and chaste life. Aabelamma her mentor and superior says, "The lure of the cesspool appeals deeply to our lower instincts" (Sarah 5-6). The threatening innuendo frightens and cripples Margalitha. Later, as suggested, she faces the wrath of her family and society. She is disowned by her mother and brother and ostracised by the villagers.

Chapter 16 – 'Where does Augustine Sleep?' brings out the scepticism in the mind of Karikkan. He meets Margalitha again at Augustine's after he abandoned priesthood. The thought of Margalitha living there with another man Augustine without any definite relationship tortures Karikkan's patriarchal complex and middleclass fetish. When the moment comes when he no longer can hold back his authoritative gaze from monitoring the situation, he succumbs to his male fetish. "Giving up the day long struggle to hold back the question, Karikkan ventured to ask: 'Where does Augustine sleep?'"(167). Margalitha doesn't answer the query. Instead she traces it back to the doubt each male maintained on his female. "Margalitha despised the question. Its origin lay in an age old curiosity. It smelled sour, burped, rancid indigestion. She said nothing" (167).

As is the popular Christian belief, Karikkan thinks that women are unable to control her sexuality and Margalitha's stay with Augustine inevitably would have sprouted an illegitimate relationship between them. Karikkan reveals men's indomitable desire to control women's sexuality through the question. When he realises that his urge is divulged before a woman, he feels ashamed and restrains from further questioning. However, in the next moment Karikkan asserts his male dominance over Margalitha through a sexual intercourse. He wants to make sure that he still possesses the right over her body.

Margalitha and Rebekka stand outside the patriarchal norms of "cultured women" through the assertion of their sexuality and individuality. They are not confined by rules that govern the society or gender

relations. They evade cultural definitions and transcend femininity ideal. They render the insistence of the society and their male counterparts on female sexuality as superfluous by rejecting the pressure for performance over their body. However, some critics feel that Margalitha is still confined within patriarchal ideals of femininity as she submits her body to Karikkan (Thomas). Nevertheless, Margalitha and Rebekka question the general accepted premises of insistence on female chastity in Kerala society.

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