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## WRITING THE BODY: ECRITURE FEMININE IN SARAH JOSEPH'S NOVEL OTHAPPU

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### Abstract

This paper tries to bring into focus a great step taken by the feminists to overthrow the gender disparities in society by making a change in language itself. The French feminists like Helene Cixious, Julia Kristeva and Luci Irigaray in the 1980s proposed a new kind of language for women called *écriture féminine*. They found that the language is gendered and male centred. They termed it as phallogentric and found that it is incapable of expressing the Kristeva etc paved the way for many Indian writers. The literature emerged out of these concepts thoroughly over threw the existing system of patriarchy and the female writers expressed their own experiences and there by interpreted their experiences. One of the writers who took up the issue of female language and female writing is Sarah Joseph's in Malayalam Literature. This paper tries find out the peculiarities of the language used in expressing the female experiences.

**Keywords:** *Ecriture Feminine, Pennezhuth, Phallogentric, Male centred*

*Ecriture Feminine* is a term derived from the French journal *Psychoanalyses et Politique* in which the French feminist critics and writers like Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray used it for the first time in the 1970s. By this, they meant to name a 'feminine writing' that would challenge the discourse of the symbolic order in a counter- language appropriate to feminine desire and difference. It has the sense first of 'female', since the source of this writing lies, in Irigaray's view, in the biological female body and, second of 'feminist', since it is evidently antagonistic to operations of patriarchy inscribed in conventional writing. It

therefore suggests, by turns, an essentialist and social constructionist understanding of woman's identity. "In terms of its formal practice, *écriture féminine* would be experimental, subversive, spirited, playful, and excite something like the experience of *jouissance*" (Brooker 85).

Helena Cixous argues that language favours men by helping to shape a society in which women are rendered subordinate and often taught to keep silent; when they speak, men often do not listen to them properly, Helena Cixous first coined the term '*Ecriture Feminine*'

in her essay, *The Laugh of Medusa* where she asserts “women must write herself; must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies” (Ecriture Feminine. en . wikipedia. org/wiki as retrieved on 8 September 2012). Using Lacan’s ideas that the structure of language is centered by Phallus, and that language within the symbolic order is representational, where a single signifier is connected to a single signified. Cixous argues that the subject position of ‘women’ or the ‘feminine’ is on the margins of the symbolic, and thus less firmly anchored and controlled by the Phallus.

The idea of ‘Ecriture feminine’ comes from the idea, stemming from Freud, that women are incomprehensible, less moral, and less rational than men; Freud calls women ‘the dark continent’ and Cixous uses that as a metaphor to celebrate the lack of control possible over the position of the woman in the phallogocentric symbolic order. Feminine writing does not belong exclusively to females, however; Cixous argues that anyone can occupy the marginalized position of ‘woman’ within the symbolic, and write in *écriture féminine* from that position. Cixous asserts that *écriture féminine* comes from the female body, and that men can write from that position as well. She claims that *écriture féminine* serves as a disruptive and deconstructive force, shaking the security and stability of the phallogocentric symbolic order, and therefore allowing more play- in gender, writing, and sexuality- for all language- using subjects. Helena Cixous believes that man and women are different. And therefore, one can’t experience the life of the other. “It is the body that creates a new language of its own not simply body language but the language in point. A woman gets her own voice and asserts her desire defying the patriarchal canon” (Kumar Das 13).

American Feminist critic and writer, Elaine Showalter defines the movement as “the inscription of the feminine body and female

difference in language and text. *Ecriture Feminine* places experience before language and privileges non-linear, cyclical writing that evades the discourse that regulates the ‘phallogocentric’ system” (Showalter 179). The concept has interesting forebears. The following comment from Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* was first published in 1929:

But it is still true that before a woman can write exactly as she wishes to write, she has many difficulties to face. To begin with, there is the technical difficulty- so simple, apparently; in reality, so baffling – that the very form of the sentence does not fit her. It is a sentence made by men; it is too loose, too heavy, and too pompous for a woman’s use. (Woolf 145)

Virginia Woolf suggests that “ language use is gendered, so that when a woman turns to novel writing she finds that there is no common sentence ready for use”(Woolf 72).

For Luce Irigaray, women’s sexual pleasure ‘jouissance’ can not be expressed by dominant, ordered, ‘logical’, masculine language because according to Kristeva, feminine language is derived from the pre-oedipal period of fusion between mother and child. On the other hand, Irigaray expressed this connection between women’s sexuality and women’s language through the following analogy: women’s *jouissance* is more multiple than men’s unitary, phallic pleasure because;

Woman has sex organs just about everywhere... feminine language is more diffusive than its ‘masculine counterpart’. That is undoubtedly the reason... her language... goes off in all directions and ...he is unable to discern the coherence. (*Ecriture féminine* en wikipedia. Org/wiki. As retrieved on 8 September 2012)

Irigaray and Cixous also go on to emphasize that women, historically limited to being sexual objects for men (Virgins or

prostitutes, wives or mothers) have been prevented from expressing their sexuality in itself or for they can speak about it in a new language it calls for, they will establish a point of view (a site of difference) from which phallogocentric concepts and controls can be seen through and taken apart, not only in theory, but also in practice.

The concept of *Ecriture Feminine* by Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva etc paved the way for many Indian writers. The literature emerged out of these concepts thoroughly over threw the existing system of patriarchy and the female writers expressed their own experiences and there by interpreted their experiences. One of the writers who took up the issue of female language and female writing is Sarah Joseph's in Malayalam Literature. In Malayalam the corresponding term is 'Pennezhuth' which was first used by Sachdanandan. Through her works Sarah Joseph questions the societal view regarding what a woman should be. Through her writing she expresses the feelings, attitudes, imaginations and inner conflict of a woman and thereby she asserts the fact that only a woman can understand and express the feelings of a woman.

*Othappu* (2003) the winner of two state-level awards such as the Kerala Sahitya Academy Award and the Kerala Sahitya Academy Award, raises important issues revolving around a self- consciously religious society: the role of piety, spirituality, family, sexuality and the freedom of the individual or the lack of it. *Othappu*, the first Malayalam novel of its kind, is about a woman's yearning for a trace understanding of spirituality and her own sexuality. The novel is a powerful indictment of the hypocrisy that plagues Christianity. A female writer can express the events meaningfully only when she is aware of the suppressed womanhood. In female writings body establishes a symbol of their identity. Women choose their body as their language against the sexual discrimination. So the

questions of what they write and how they write become most important for them. Sarah Joseph shows a different voice of female writing through her work *Othappu*.

*Othappu* opens with Sister Margalitha leaving the convent in search of God. When she decides to live with Karikkan, a priest who has abandoned his vocation, she offends her family, society, the church and the law. At dawn, when the chapel bell rang in the convent, Marglitha took off her veil and under-veil. It did not bring on storm, a pestilence on an earthquake she stood looking at the clothes of holiness strewn on the floor, but felt nothing. Margalitha stepped out of the cloth-scheme of things. With a deep sign, she managed to open the door and walk out in to the wider world.

Women writers compose the world in which they live and the surrounding. They can even provide a clear and full description of that world to their readers. It is one of the features of female language. Sarah Joseph includes narrations than conversations in this work. We can see in the beginning of the novel Margalitha who abandons her renunciation, is ready to face the reactions of her family. Sarah Joseph uses her language to explain the situation of the family to her readers.

A darkroom, stuffy and sultry, where neither the faintest ray of light nor the slightest breath of air could enter. A mighty knick in the middle of her back had hurled Margalitha into it. She fell on her face and lay prostrate. The door slammed shut and its thunderous crash tore through every womb on earth. (Joseph ,1)

It is usual that society regulates and restricts the desires and concepts of women. Hence female writers give prime importance to dreams in their writings. Dreams, imaginations and fantasy are dominated in female language. Margalitha's dreams are examples for this.

Margalitha's sins were her dreams. Day and night sins teemed in her dreams. One day Margalitha dreamt she had given birth. But the baby was missing from the dream. All the same she was in childhood. Reluctant to forego the joy of dreaming motherhood, she got up late that morning and attended the Mass in church half asleep. Such a dream filled her with both bliss and fear. (52)

Another peculiarity of female language is the presentation of complicated incidents. In the beginning of the novel she presented Margalitha's childhood, adolescences and her memories. Another significance of female language is the orderless narration of the events. She narrated Margalitha's abandoning of renunciation and later her infant memories and convent life. Incomplete sentences are another peculiarity of the female language. The readers could understand what the intention of the author is. The hatred of the convent life is elucidated from the talks of Margalitha & Abelamma while they walk outside. The reply of Abelamma starts with 'if so'. This word makes confusion in the readers. The word 'If so' has double meanings. The first one is about Margalitha's abandoning of renunciation and the second is her turning back to the convent life. While female writers presented their topics we can see this duality of meanings in the sentences.

Tentativeness in female language is expressed through features such as tag questions, edges and other expressions. Karikkan and Margalitha express their thoughts and doubts and share with the society. Sarah Joseph uses tag questions in her work in order to make a change in the use of the language itself. Karikkan's thoughts about his relationship with Margalitha are his questions to the society.

Why was he chosen for the mission? Karikkan wondered. Sister

Margalitha's letter was a secret that could not be shared with anyone else. Why was Karikkan singled out to bear its burden? Was he really privy to the secrets of Margalitha's heart? The question burned in his brain. He was, and he wasn't Karikkan remained perplexed. (20)

The most distinguished feature of female language is circumlocution. For instance, in the novel Abelamma couched her indignations in an idiom:

Put a millipede on a plush bed and rest assured it will creep out of it. The merited favors are sure to make people restless or turn their heads. There is only one difference: the millipede, unlike human beings, does not go in search of a cesspool. If it does, that will be its last outing, with a significant smile she said, 'The lure of the cesspool appeals deeply to our lower instincts. (5)

Margalitha is distressed to open her mind before the society. Her only sorrow is that she could not justify her mind. Holding Abelamma's slender hand Margalitha walked a long distance she said, "For days and nights, every moment, I considered and re-considered. I reasoned with Jesus. He tells me not to come to him in the garb and prayers of hypocrisy or to choke my soul" (6). She was not sincere to her holy dress. She claimed that this holy dress not only covers her body but also her mind also. Really, the opinions, doubts and expectations of Margalitha about nature, rational and love are the doubts of the author herself.

Language carries with it power. *Othappu* becomes a challenge to the male dominated language system. Earlier women were portrayed only in the object position of the male fantasy. But Sarah Joseph challenges this concept in the novel. For example Rebekka's attitude towards her



husband Varghese Vaidyar is portrayed in the novel as:

On the first night, placing his right hand gently on Rebekka's thigh, he asked fondly, "Rebekka, what will you call me?"

He had been dreaming of a host of honey dripping pet names for himself.

"Vaidyar!" Replied Rebekka unfeelingly. (29)

In the expression of female sexuality the 'he' languages were inadequate. In order to express the sexuality of women there needed a change in the language itself. In this context, there arose a need for woman centred language. When they speak about sexuality the female writers makes use of their own language. The harsh realities and life of a female is presented through a complex interplay of language. Margalitha and Karikkan in *Othappu* were the means of Sarah Joseph to express her attitude towards sex. Openly she brings all the matters to the readers.

Karikkan reassured himself that remembering Margalitha was no sin. But his distress went beyond were memories. He was becoming a body that throbbed for Margalitha. A body that would not be denied: a famished body that, every inch, craved irresistibly for her as a woman. Perhaps.... 'Karikkan reckoned, 'perhaps everyone is struggling with this clamour of the body. (59)

Sarah Joseph vividly shows woman's view on sex through the thoughts of Margalitha.

Every fiber in Margalitha's body craved to be one with him. She longed to melt into him, to know the zenith of bliss, to crush open and to yield, to be spent and serene, to attain peace and rest, and to rest her head, in the end, on the heart of silence. It was a need written into the very formation of her body. Margalitha

used to feel embarrassed about the sheer force of her sexual instinct. Its urge had neither eye to see nor nose to smell; It was a tension that crackled like wild fire through her. There was both himsa and ahimsa in one body penetrating another. (189)

Sarah Joseph questions the concept of Phallocentrism in the novel. For instance, when we read the passage of Sister Jeramiya, we can see Sarah Joseph questioning the concept of 'priest'. 'Priest' is the position only owned by men in the society. Women are not called by the name of 'priest'. So Sister Jeramiya declared herself as a 'priest'. The usages of 'Thevidichi', 'kanyaka' & 'vesya' are common in *Othappu*. Sarah Joseph questions why these kinds of words are not used to address men. These words have no masculine gender on male tradition. Sarah Joseph enters language through the many locations of feminine desire uninhibited by sexual, historical, or linguistic roles that reduce and efface her. Throughout the novel she encourages women to celebrate themselves, to write in their own language and live in a deconstructed world without restriction.

In this novel *Othappu*, we can see all the features of female language expressed through the discourse of the characters, their thoughts, recollections and the questions they bring forward to the society. In this novel Sarah Joseph is able to bring fantasy and imagination as the core features of female language.

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