

OTHAPPU AS AN ICONOCLASTIC NOVEL

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Abstract: Sarah's novel 'Othappu' discloses the ubiquitous forces within catholic practices that make such proactive faltering a heretical imperative. The novel gives us rare glimpses of Malayali Christian society peppered and layered with Biblical quotations and allusions and carrying echoes and subtexts that parallel events in the New Testament. It dares to explore the role of spirituality, sexuality and the freedom of the self in a self-consciously religious society. 'Othappu' unfolds at many levels to critique notion of class, caste, antiquity and prestige that have, over time, eroded the powers of the church. The novel is not only limited to the Christian community but also to our entire cultural terrain.

Key Words: orthodox, temptation, renunciation, iconoclastic, vulnerability.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Othappu (English: Scandal or Temptation) is a Malayalam novel written by Sarah Joesph and published in 2005. The novel is the last in the trilogy which includes 'Alaahayude Penmakkal' and 'Mattathi'. While 'Mattathi' is a kind of sequel to 'Alaahayude Penmakkal' 'Othappu' follows the pattern by having a central female character and protagonist. The novel deals with the decision of a nun to step outside the convent and embrace a life free from the shackles of established religious norms and practices. In this, the character 'Marghalitha' comes in logger heads with the church and society which refuse to accept her personal views and individual freedom and expect her to conform to the framework in place regarding those joining the nunnery. The English translation of the book named 'Othappu: The Scent of the Other Side' won the Crossword Book Award for translation

Othappu is an iconoclastic novel only to the extent that it questions and exposes the hegemony of irrational and materialistic functionaries within the church that defeat and nullify its spiritual resources. Sarah had done this earlier in short stories and the novel *Nanmathinmakalude suvishesham*. But in 'Othappu' she challenges the reader to interrogate the anointed and the ordained custodians of the church and the rationale of their soulless conformity to a system to which they belong under the pretext of a vocation or a divine calling; to an extent that is unprecedented even by Sarah's canon.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

Othappu: The Scent of the Other Side is the English translation of the 'final testament' in Sarah's award-winning trilogy of novels, *Aalahayude Pennmakkal* (1999) *Maatathi* (2001) and *Othappu* (2005). This Novel has a special resonance for the crisis of faith in our turbid times.

On the face of it, *Othappu* tells the story of young Margalitha who sheds her nun's habit and steps beyond the lakshmanrekha of the convent — a premise fraught with sure-fire narrative dynamite. But *Othappu* is much more than a mere iconoclastic novel. It dares to explore the role of spirituality, sexuality and the freedom of the self in a self-consciously religious society. It is a telling commentary on how the institutions of caste and patriarchy collude in the Church with their many insidious elements that escape the attention of the outsider and insider alike. We see, for instance, how a converted Christian is allowed to take only a distorted form of the original Christian name (Ousep for Joseph, Theredya for Thresia), as also the grim reality of churches that balk at the notion of a Dalit priest even as they condescend to regard the Dalits themselves as objects of their charity.

There is much else in *Othappu* that cuts too close to the skin, what with its share of motiveless malignancy, ignorance and grinding poverty. However, without in any way sentimentalising any of these, Sarah Joseph makes us view faith, rebellion and devotion to a path outside of the Church positively, tempering her narrative with a palpable blend of humour, irony and wit even as she reveals the radiant power of one woman's so-called nonconformists.

The Malayalam word 'Othappu' which is the colloquial equivalent for 'Uthappu' a word from the Malayalam {catholic} Bible, means 'falter' or 'stumble', that is, cause someone to lose faith and turn to evil ways. The issue of setting a bad example, causing others to deviate from the righteous path, is localized and shifted to an experiential level in 'Othappu, as echoed in the colloquialized form of the word. The novel lays, out from a radical and ironic angle of vision through the lives of the common folk, the parochial and orthodox idea of 'faltering' in respect of faith and religion, becoming' as a result a bad example for others. It presents different kind of people who refuse to endorse the status quo or conform to religious and social codes and in doing so, cause others to falter as well.

The Lord's Prayer places plea centrally in it- 'Lead us not into temptation'. The gospel condemns those who cause others to stumble in their faith. If anyone should Cause one of these little ones to lose his faith in me it would be better for that person to have a large millstone tied round his neck and be thrown into sea' (Mark 9:42-3).

The Scent of the Other Side is the story of man's stumbling vis- a-vis conventional perceptions of religion and living out the costly social scandal it creates. The Christian religion, particularly the catholic faith, lays on its ordained ones severe demands. On the human capacity for renunciation and sacrifice Celibacy, poverty and humility are the triple vows that catholic priests and nuns take as they Join religions orders. It is a one- way tracks of total integration into an exclusive way of living, thinking and feeling. Those who turn back repeat the story of the angels driven out of heaven; or of the first couple cast out from Eden. What is, by and large, a saga of self – sacrifice, remains vulnerable to the temptation to fall, inviting extreme social ostracism in this world to come.

Sarah places 'Othappu' as a counter discourse to this harsh and unfeeling verdict on those who deviate from faith by non-conformity to conventional faith. She subverts the traditional nation of 'Othappu' into a movement that lays the foundation for a new liberating spirituality and a new human vision.

The novel discloses the ubiquitous forces within catholic practices that make such proactive faltering a heretical imperative. Roy Francis Karikkan, the popular and respected priest, and Margalitha the reverend nun, rebel fall foul of the structure of their vocation because there unhappy about their inability to fulfil the spirit of their calling and the teachings of the caller, as well as the logic of a life that impinges on their conformity to the cloister. 'Celibacy' is a way of life that is constantly at war with the body and nature. Inside the confines of the abbeys and convents, clad in sanctified robes, people fight and gasp, striking out against nature, striking out against their own bodies.

The fear of god and the fear of sin held them back from the temptations of teenage. They caught between two forces' called 'sexuality' and 'spirituality' without any opportunity to mix them. It is absurd to categorize this complicated experience of the body and mind into opposing abstract column's called 'sexuality' and 'spirituality'. Sarah's protagonists are enclosed within the interwoven strands of cerebration and sentiment. The author justifies the iconoclastic turns of her characters by positioning them with in binary forces and options.

The novel is about a nun who renounces her vacations. The decision to become a nun, the journey or the urge is called 'The call of god'. It is actually result of continuous indoctrination that Christian children are subjected to from children; the idea is sown early, that to be a nun or a priest is a goal worth having. Protagonist of the novel, Margalitha renounces life to join the convent. Through similar act of renunciation, she ceases to a nun. Margalitha does both. The writer uses an evocative simile to describe this:

She cannot become channere Margalitha again. Nor will her heart allow her to remain a nun like milk souring into curd. A similar transformation awaited her. The change that takes place, when the young nun returns, is that of milk that has turned into curd. The novel describes the process of being churned; the trials and persecutions that accompany it.

Karikkan and Margalitha chose religions vocations from entirely opposite family backgrounds. The young boy who grew up in poverty and social neglect, identify worldly life with shame and deprivation, and hence, chose to enter another world of other regarding love and service, He had found comfort in the practices of the church and felt a deep attachment to it. But Margalitha had sacrificed a rich conventional catholic family to join the religions orders. Because she wanted to shift from being served to serving others, her strong individualistic streak silently rebelled against being like others or working in herd. Unable to attain self-actualization through her calling she could not justify the prospect of remaining confined to the cloisters.

For father karikkan, Margalitha is the catalyst for breaking out of the religious order. He rationalizes his vulnerability to her charms as altruism, to alleviate her distress. He is an instance of a fallen priest. He is tossed about and divided in his thinking, unlike Margalitha who steps out fully convinced about her decision. He struggled to make his faith as firm as a rock. Roy Francis Karikkan was neither an unbeliever nor a rationalist. But his faith was like a dangerous mossy stone, slippery and unstable at all. But he musters up courage of some sorts for a brief while to help Margalitha in her distress. He could organize asylum for her in kassess's house and plead for her with her mother and brothers.

Father Karikkan manages to rush to Margalitha in the forest house, neglecting the decree appointing him as vicar. Love bloomed between them and they fulfil their bodily urges. The young cowardly priest, karikkan, who doubts everything including id own faith, lives with her but abandons her when she becomes pregnant. Even when this happens, Margalitha doesn't break Sarah has created several vibrant, dynamic characters around the central finger, Margalitha. Such are rebekka, who is the fanatical charismatic's preacher and Naastikan George who is the rationalist and Father Agus tine, who is a selfless server of people. Institutionalization and its successful materialistic expansion into structural fabric and values of society are shown to have robbed the Christian religion of spirituality and essential simplicity.

An escapist by instinct, karikkam flees to an incognito existence in nowhere land still pursuing and unseen 'God' fear grips him and guilt paralyses him. Margalitha towers above him by the strength of her character and power of will. The real renunciation of worldly possessions is reflected in the poignant moments of her final departure from home after placing title deed on the steps. Suffering and challenges empower her, broaden are vision, and fill her with true agape. While at the convent, she experienced meekness, humility and obedience only as mere words, nothing

more. The time had come for Margalitha to leave behind the trappings of the world, one after another. The fragrance of true meekness was filling her like that of a flower.

Margalitha accepts pattippunyalan's request to look after little naanu in her desolate state while carrying a baby in her womb. She as truly transcended the concerns of the world and reached that states when she can forgive all & accept all in a blend of selfless love and compassion- the orphan child of an unknown street woman and unborn child, whose father has fled from her on the wings of escapist piety. She can face the spite & contemptuous rejection of this world, because she has accepted a different calling – a calling that transcends 'dos' & 'don'ts' of institutional religion and incarnates the pure and true love that is God. As the novel ends, Margalitha has discovered her mission which will spread new gospel- the gospel of faith in the saviour of the poor and the wretched, of hope amidst misery and compassion for all.

Margalitha's final career of mothering her own baby and the orphan is the author's own faith in the power of selfless love & sacrifice. The church was founded on this twin philosophy of sacrificial love which attracts both karikkan and Margalitha into joining its institutional frame. Both of them come back to the ideals of the church in different ways at the end; but both have disengaged themselves from the hegemony of the establishment. Poverty, celibacy, and obedience continue to mark their sense of vocation after all the trying phases of falling into 'Othappu'.

Margalitha's crisis is a crisis of faith. In Christianity and Islam a crisis of belief can rock very base of an individual's life, because these are monotheistic Semitic communities, who believe in a single god or a single prophet. Every religion sees the body as a seat of sin and imposes the restriction on an individual's sexuality with moral codes of conduct. *The Scent of the Other Side* is bound to be controversial given its bold treatment of the church and the values of the establishment in contrast to the convictions of those who have them or live without them.

The novel portrays the act of non – conventional through iconoclastic moments of the protagonists' the very act of leaving religious orders is a scandal in contemporary society and the Co-habitation of an ex-priest and ex-nun is a provocative stick of narratorial dynamite. Neither the church nor society is likely to take kindly to Sarah Joseph's portrayal of the human vulnerabilities that stalk religious orders. There is an unspoken consensus between the church and society on the need for conformity, self- discipline and subservience. In this tacit agreement, the individual's personal disagreements & disillusionments are irrelevant.

3. CONCLUSION:

Othappu is not a crucial text chiefly because the socio-psychological implications of convent-life, and its contradictions and conflicts, have rarely been discussed in Indian fiction; nor has female subjectivity in the Malayali Christian culture scape been made available in English before. As Sara Joseph tunnels into the lives of her characters, the conclusion shows people up for who they really are, and what they are prepared to bear, in support of their actions.

The book is the evident to describe the tough journey of a woman who wants to do things in her life according to her wish but not according to the wish of the society. The made dominant society is clearly portrayed in this book where women can't raise their voice till men allows them to talk and treat women as equal to men. This book reveals such a point that woman can live alone even her husband leave her alone in the society, through the character Marghalitha, she lives alone with her children and without her husband at the end.

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