

**Iconoclasm and Freedom of the self : A Christian reading of Sarah Joseph's
novel 'Othappu'**

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ABSTRACT

Breaking the shackles imposed by a patriarchal society and an equally patriarchal religion is a colossal task for a woman. The novel 'Othappu' by Sarah Joseph eloquently portrays the travails of a woman in fighting against a society that looks askance at the doubters. Reading Sarah Joseph will help one to creep across the typical Malayali Christian convictions where we can find the private struggles of women and their veiled emotional insurgencies. Sarah Joseph, being born into a conservative Christian Catholic family, helps the reader to experience these struggles from a distinctly interior perspective.

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 novel tells the story of Margalitha who comes home after defrocking herself from a convent of nuns. She is in a zealous search of her spirituality and sexuality which she believes are not two different entities. She represents the radical nature and mobility against the existing threatened and subjugated system of the Christian Church. The protagonist navigates in her faith by her non conformity to conventional faith. This paper aims at analyzing the novel 'Othappu' as a counter discourse to the plea centrally placed in the Lord's prayer, 'Lead us not into temptation' as the literal Malayalam meaning of the word 'Othappu' itself is 'temptation or scandal'.

Keywords: *Othappu, iconoclasm, biblical patriarchy, temptation, christian feminism*

INTRODUCTION

‘Othappu’ is a Malayalam novel written by Sarah Joseph and published in 2005. It was translated into English by Valsan Thampu in the name ‘Othappu: The Scent of the Other Side’. The central character of the novel is Margalita, a youngster who chooses to quit her life as a nun in order to live her life to the fullest. She falls in love with Father Roy Francis Kareekan, a priest. Though, initially afraid of accepting his passion for Margalitha and leaving priesthood, finally he yields to his passion and goes to live with her. The conventional, merciless society around them retorts fiercely and Kareekan runs away to embrace the “path of the Cross”. Margalitha lives alone, takes care of her own child in the womb and an orphan boy, Naanu. She is helped by the outcasts of the society. Religion can give that kind of a guilt feeling for a person that can break him totally. But, Margalitha is daring enough to rise above the religion that taught her. She forges her own religion which is far too quixotic.

CHRISTIAN PATRIARCHY

God being male, the male in the family holds the position of the God and women has only a submissive role to play in Christianity. Christian Patriarchy states that women must be always under male dominance or ‘headship’. This includes obedience. This obedience is unconditional.

1 Peter 3:1 says: “Wives in the same way, be submissive to your husbands.”

Again, the Bible repeatedly states, “As in all the churches of God’s people, the woman should keep quiet. They are not allowed to speak, as the Jewish law says they must not be in charge” (1 Cor 14:33-34).

The novel discloses the universal forces within catholic practices that block the protagonist’s journey of self-realization. Margalitha questions and exposes the hegemony of irrational and materialistic spokespersons within the church that weakens its spirituality. She realizes that she is travelling in a revolutionary road and has to fight the existing social norms. Finally, she frees herself from the constraints of religion and society and sets her journey with her unborn child and Nanu, an orphan child. She is a spokeswoman of ‘Christian Feminism’ theory which advocates for anti-essentialism acknowledging that gender identities do not mandate a certain set of personality traits.

BIBLICAL REFERENCES

The purpose of the biblical references in the novel is to talk against the system of church and nunnery. The three nuns bringing gifts for Margalitha's unborn child, refers to the Magi bringing gifts to Christ. Another character Rebecca enacts the role of Mary when she comes to visit Marghalitha knowing that she is pregnant. These are instances that make the reader believe that Margalitha may be an outcast in the society, but she is cherished by God.

OTHAPPU AS AN ICONOCLASTIC NOVEL

The Church, as in Christ's times too, doesn't reflect the tranquility of Jesus Christ. It is in Yohannan Kasheesha's home and Father Augustine's bizarre forest that the reader finds the true 'Kingdom of Heaven'. Ms. Joseph gives the authors the full freedom to judge if Christianity has augmented life or the conformist beliefs have made it difficult. Institutions in religion often limit the freedom of expression of the individual and force him to move in a confined path. 'Othappu' portrays faith and devotion as a path outside the conformed frames of the Church and Christianity.

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. Margalitha, a Christian nun stumbles and falters throughout the novel to set a bad example for others. The novel experiments the issue of setting a bad example by faltering in religion and faith.

As we read through, we come across characters like Karikkan, the priest who questions the church's double standards in serving the poor and the rich and influential, Naasthikan George the atheist-evangelist, Rebekka the Pentecostal preacher, Pattipunyaalan (dog saint) who holds masses in the wilderness for starving tribal with tapioca for sanctified bread and water for wine, Yohannan Kasheesha, a priest of another denomination who provides food and accommodation for Margalita. It is in them that we find the real essence of Christianity, though they do not blend in the mold built by the Catholic Church. Margalitha craves for transcendence outside the four walls of the convent which is something forbidden. The punishment for disobedience is either 'fall from Heaven' (like the fallen angels) or cast out from Eden.

Christianity also imposes restrictions on an individual's sexuality with moral codes of conduct. Margalitha unfastens herself from the hegemony of the church which is a grave defiance. But, she mothers her own child and the orphan child at the end which is an illustration of selfless love and sacrifice, the philosophy on which Christianity is founded. Co-habitation with an ex-priest is furthermore provocative. The attempt to silence a woman who raises her voice can be seen throughout the course of the novel. The characters in the novel reveal that Christ is not within the precincts of the church and also female spirituality and sexuality are not two different entities.

The hypocritical attitude of the Church towards the poor even when they are supposed to be the ones who should receive their charity is revealed in this iconoclastic novel, 'Othappu' by Sarah Joseph. Converted Dalit Christians are never called by the so called 'elite' Christian names. Thresia is called Theredya!

The attempts to disrupt the male dominion by the self-assured feminine is exposed in the words of Sister Jereemia when, with her co-nuns offered the Mass secretly at night, and was commanded to confess her blasphemy before Mother Superior,

'You have no authority to offer the Eucharistic sacrifice to God.'

'God has accepted mine.'

'How do you know?'

'I know, exactly the same way as all priests know'. (Othappu 152)

Othappu says: "Margalitha felt a rare happiness at exalting the food of the poor, wrapped in smoked leaves, to the status of the immaculate host. Water and boiled tapioca too could become the body and blood of Christ" (151).

All these go against the conventions of orthodox Christianity and celebrate iconoclasm.

FREEDOM OF THE SELF IN 'OTHAPPU' : A FEMINIST READING

The protagonist of 'Othappu' identifies spirituality through the celebration of womanhood, body and sensuality rather than ignoring their desires. Father Augustine encourages Margalitha to search for her individual identity and she does. Womanhood is not an obstacle to search God.

Margalitha shows that she stays faithful to her soul and serves humanity even while carrying Karikkan's child in her womb. She accepts poverty, takes care of an orphan child. Nunship, truly, is a service to humanity and it is not simply living a luxurious life in the convent.

Rebecca who is a free believer works for the poor. Sister Jereemiya voices against gender stereotypes and limited status of women. They are strong female characters who embody the voices for reformation.

Conclusion

The novel harshly condemns the church activities which clearly scorns the preaching of Christ. Father Augustine established a black seminary in the midst of the forest for the Dalits. He performs noble clerical service to the poor. He is the true follower of Christ. Naasthikan George, stands against the social evils of society and advocates rejection of the conventional attitudes of religious institutions. The novel 'Othappu' cleverly uses the tools of iconoclasm to rectify the hypocrisy of the orthodox society.

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