

The Scent of the 'Other' Side: The Discourse of Alterity in *Othappu*

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The paper attempts to study the othering confronted by Margalitha, the woman protagonist in *Othappu*, the fictional work of Sarah Joseph, the feminist-activist writer of Malayalam, which has been translated to English as *Othappu: The Scent of the Other Side* by Valson Thampu. As the English title tells, it spreads the fragrance of the 'other side', its covered presence, its unexpressed wishes, its complexity of emotions, its unpredicted springings, its soothing solace, its peaceful confrontation and so on, which often remain unmarked.

Margalitha renounces her life to join the convent of nuns and through a similar act of renunciation, ceases to be a nun. Leaving the life of an ordinary woman, she embraces the 'other' one, though elevated in hierarchy, of spirituality. Realizing the lie she live out there for years, decides to step out of the space of that institutionalized othering, she reaches back, not to her previous life, but to face yet another 'othering' of repulsion. Both the experiences take her through conflicts of self-alienation which ultimately problematizes and redefines her own self and identity, even making her constantly engaged in disputes on identity and alterity. Thus, the search for self and identity, both in the accepted and the deviant states of life, tangled in between passion and desire traverses the progress of the narrative resulting the subversion of standardized and binaries. The social discourse of plurality which has been challenged by the mounting intolerance, can be seen met with the sense of feminine subjectivity shown by Margalitha in her search for self, pursuing the multiplicity of existence.

The discourse of other is widely discussed in the fields of philosophy and literature in the early years of feminist movement. The androcentric world takes 'man' and 'manly' as standard criteria for acceptance and recognition. His craze for conquering and exploitation has psychological reason as well. It is to surpass the life-giving bliss of nature and woman that he aspires for developmental activities. The entire existence of humanity has been centred upon the being of male and it has been he, who defines woman in a relative term. She lacks any of

autonomous standards and acts upon what he decrees, as Simon de Beauvoir, the French feminist philosopher stated half a century back as, “She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the absolute- she is the other” (714). Later Sherry B. Ortner has examined the cultural alienation of woman on account of the biological, sociological and psychological constructs and has observed that in any culture where external nature has been treated as devalued, woman also is seen degraded (71). In *Othappu*, the reinventing of the values of feminine and the nature can be seen emphasized when the protagonist invents herself and reinforces her relation with nature, which is capable of elevating the status of the both.

The novel exposes the self- elected life of Margalitha, the reverend nun, along with Roy Francis Karikkan, the popular and respected priest, who step out of the religious orders as they found incapable to pursue the spirit of their calling gratifying the calling of their conscience. Though belonging to entirely different familial settings, both the characters get unified as they share the othered existence, one that of a woman and the other that of a Dalit. From the plenteous life of an enclosed domestic security, Margalitha puts on the habit of a nun to serve the suffering and downtrodden ones, accepting a self-conceived othering, away from the ordinary life of ebb and flow. Within the religious walls of awful respectability, it can be observed, that she meets with yet another kind of othering, though enjoying a rather high propriety conferred upon, still being marginalized from the hegemonic hierarchy of priesthood. The secondary identity she experienced in her previous life gets deepened when discriminated against priests in privileges like offering holy Mass. Her strong individualistic self realizes this pious world too contradicting her very concept of service and self-actualization.

Against the monolithic religious concept of spirituality as a state of awareness accessible only for men, the heroine pursues her spiritual life of self-actualization deviating from the smooth and easy way of established institutions. It is her revolutionary consciousness that enables her to listen the call of her spirit as well as the call of her body as two complementary aspects of worldly existence. And though they live together later, she never feels it essential to have his support or approval to follow her mission of self-actualization. While the institution of religion demands celibacy as the foremost of the vows for the priests and nuns, Sarah places *Othappu* as a counter discourse of green spirituality. As Mary Mellor, the renowned ecofeminist theorist emphasizes: “The first is the problem of an image and Language of God that is exclusively male. The second is the division between body and soul (representing also mind and intellect) ... The third aim is to reclaim women’s spiritual experience and history and the fourth is to create new theology and rituals” (52).

In the “Introduction” to the work Jancy James commends on the author as, “she proposes alternative models of keeping faith and subverts the traditional notion of ‘othappu’ into a

movement that lays the foundation for a new liberating spirituality and a new humane vision”(xxi). The term ‘othappu’ being the Christian dialectic form of Malayalam, meaning ‘to set a bad example’ that may cause people to deviate from true way of faith. The attempts to subvert the cultural binaries of male domination by the self-assertive feminine is strongly revealed through the words of Sister Jereemia when, with her co-nuns offered the Mass secretly at night, and was demanded 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)

It opens to be a revelation to Margalitha to meet Father Augustine, the priest of the woods and Brother Manikyan living among the workers assisting their basic needs for a livelihood. She gets surprised at the poor offer the Mass in the woods according to the black liturgy of the marginalized. *Othappu* tells: “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). She apprehends the meaning of true service and true humanism by caring Nanu, the little orphan in the small hut of the Father and realizes the supreme ecstasy of human life in the lap of nature nourishing both mind and body.

Val Plumwood, the Australian philosopher, traces back to classical theorist, Plato to see the root of dualism as form/ body where, the lower element represents the woman, proposing that nature too, lacking the element of form, as devalued and mean (69-103). Associating spirituality with the natural surroundings and with the working class people of degraded bodies tend to subvert the discourse of culture domination over nature. Going back to nature’s serenity by the Father and her joining him can be seen metaphoric of moving away from the teachings of huge monasteries of vested political interests.

It is only after leaving the cloister, fully convinced of her decision, it occurs to her the real renunciation of worldly pleasures and the real confrontation of worldly pain. The repulsion she faces at her home and in the society makes her travel as no one. Living amid harsh scandals and poverty, she remains with the same courage of determination that motivated her to step out of her home. While living with Karikkan, the predicament of the ‘othering’ of body from the soul challenges her and while mending her torn out clothes, she contemplates, “could soul be the attire of the body?” (216). If one’s being is solely defined by the soul, why should the codes of morality matter for its clothing, that are always insignificant for the soul, she gets confused to think soul and body as separate entities. “Rules are broken a thousand times in the realm of the

soul. But the body is shackled in canons and codes. The soul does not subject itself, unlike the body, to prescriptions of any kind. It is the body, not the soul that is hanged to death” (*Othappu* 216).

Feminist theories generally assume that what woman experiences, what woman sees as reality, what woman takes as her knowledge, what woman perceives as future vision are all fundamentally different from the hegemonic view of the androcentric society. There are interpretations pointing out the ‘othering’ of woman as caused by the physical peculiarities of as menstruating, gestating, lactating and birthing in contrast with the abilities of a man (Wilkinson, Sue. Celia Kitzinger 4). It is this misconception regarding her organic entity that made woman to deliberate her body as a thing to be ashamed of, countering which Starhawk “sees the spiritual as alive in us, where spirit and matter, mind and body are all part of the same living organism” (113). Only by the symmetric blending of mind and body can overthrow the conflicting question of alterity that makes the identity of the marginalized problematic.

One, who knows the holiness of life through the circularity of her bodily experiences cannot, but water the last seed of life for the sake of the entire humanity. The total negation of physicality is, for her, is tragically equal to the total denial of life itself. Margalitha’s personality too have the opposing urges, the calling of a nun confronting the calling of her womanhood, existing together. This togetherness of physicality and spirituality is asserted in the ‘Author’s Note’ to *Othappu*, “As a woman I came to know my spirituality through the experiences of my body. My spiritual seeking spread through my desires, sorrows, ailments, labour, weariness, anger and pleasure” (x). She declares, for a woman, her pregnancy, birthing, feeding and every month’s bloodshed are not purely biological and her spirituality lies in the pleasure of sexual intercourse and in the birth pain (x).

And even after giving up her habit, Margalitha never renounces the way of God, as shown by Christ, the lord. Living together with Karikkan she remains faithful to her soul, but he, though struggles hard to keep himself strong in his beliefs, and fails to his own self. Being spiritually tired of knowing her womb nourishing a new life, he flees to nowhere in search of an unseen God, to be saved from the harshness of conflicting soul. But she responds to the urges of her body, talks to the growing life within and at the same time involves in spiritual queries on serving the humanity, for the brimming up of the fullness of life. Sarah emphatically asserts, “for a woman, sexuality is not a matter of physical or mechanical indulgence. It is absurd to categorize these complicated experiences of the body and mind into opposing, abstract columns called sexuality and spirituality” and adds “the ‘Christ’ defined by man is not the ‘Christ’ defined by woman”(x).

The “othering” can be seen as comprised of binaries of which the latter part is treated to be lower, as one othered from the former, negating any possibility of complementary existence of interdependence. The conception of ‘othering’ works in terms of gender, caste, class, religious sector and ideology and totally establishes the spaces of power and powerlessness in the discourse. Sister Jereemia, Annamkutty, Yohannan Kasseesa, Rebekka, Naasthikan George, Father Augustine, Brother Manikyan and his Black seminary are all enjoying the rebellious and deviant status of ‘othering’. There is a web of binaries in terms of characters and contexts that makes the fiction iconoclastic and problematical. James observes in her ‘Introduction’ as, “The author justifies the iconoclastic turns of her characters by positioning them within binary forces and options. Sarah’s fictional world is founded on a web of crucial binaries in terms of situations, characters, their qualities and their behavior” (xxi).

It is this intertwining complexity of binaries of which the ‘other’ being illuminated that makes *Othappu*, enabled to propose an alternative life of truth against the hypocrisy of cultural institutions. Sarah’s characters are constructs to shatter away the binaries of dominance, the basic stone of conventional orthodoxy upon which hierarchy of power as well as the powerlessness of other are firmly built. They are seen constantly engaged in self-interrogation to find their identity and in a way innovates themselves to enjoy peace and happiness in a world of their ideology. The author, by vitalizing those who are othered rebelliously or forcibly, employs an added feminine meaning to the great service of humanity that culminates through recognizing the pleasures of body and of its faithful relation with external nature.

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