

**CHALLENGING THE INSTITUTIONALIZED RELIGION: A READING OF  
SARAH JOSEPH'S *OTHAPPU***

**Shemeena Fauzia**

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Govt. Polytechnic College,  
Punalur, Kerala, India

**Abstract:**

Sarah Joseph is a writer who always creates a region for women with her powerful magic pen. To her women deserve their own space and they must enter there forcefully to serve humanity or to unleash the power of creativity. Her novels especially the trilogy: *Alahayude Penmakkal*, *Mattathi* and *Othappu* portray this idea very well. The sheroes of Sarah Joseph are common women who realise what they are and what they should do.

The paper titled *Challenging the Institutionalised Religion: A Reading of Sarah Joseph's Othappu: The Scent of the Other side* analyses the prominent and unparalleled character in the novel *Othappu*- Margalitha, who had undergone through struggles to reach a level where she reaches heights by helping the needy in her own way by challenging the institutions-religion and marriage. It is about the author, Margalitha and women in general in their multiple roles,. about how the protagonist and other women overcome the difficult paths to define their roles in the society.

**Keywords:** feminist, marginalisation, multiple roles, institution

The Ordination of women as priests and Bishops in Christian Churches during the later twentieth century has given the scholarly historical study of women and religion, particularly during the period, when Rome was the exclusive center of the ecclesiastical authority for most of Europe. Rome still resist the idea of women's priesthood: the argument runs that women have always had other forms of ministry and that the religious orders have offered women since the early middle ages and alternative life into a subservient place in a patriarchal family structure a dignified support to the unmarried, unmarriageable or widow and for the most gifted a means of cultivating the religious arts, or writing or administering their own life, as well as serving God. The study of women's religious writing and of the lives of women Saints is a popular area in late 20<sup>th</sup> century women studies, in which typologies of women's spirituality

tend to clash with one another and with men's and the task of interpretation is an ongoing one likely to continue in future, as earlier ways of life grow harder to understand or to defend in any terms that make immediate sense to us.

By profession a College Professor, Sarah Joseph is now active as an organizer of the feminist movement in Kerala. She is a member of Sahithya Academy. Awards showered on her for her literary talents. Her creativity spans from articles to stories, novels and novelettes.

*"Othappu"*, the first Malayalam Novel of its kind – is about a women's yearning for a true understanding of spirituality and her own sexuality. The novel is powerful indictment of the hypocrisy that plagues Christianity in many parts of the sub continent. *'Othappu'* unfolds at many levels of critique notions of class, caste, antiquity and prestige that have, over time, eroded the power of the first church.

The transfiguring work 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 law. The scandal rocks Thrissur and the couple become outcasts to be saved by the Atheist George.

The third in a trilogy of novels – the other two being *'Alahayude Penmakal'* (1999) which won Kerala Sahithya Academy Award and *'Mattathi'* (2001) – *Othappu* is set in the Kerala Christian Community, which splits broadly into Roman Catholics, Syrian Christians and Charismatic, who emphasizes free worship and faith healing. *'Othappu'* (2003) the winner of two State-Level awards, raises important issues revolving around a self conscious religious society, the role of piety, spirituality, family and the freedom of the individual or lack of it. Peppered and Layered with Biblical quotations and allusions carrying echoes and subtexts that parallel events in the New Testament, the novel gives us rare glimpses of Malayali Christian Society.

Literally meaning Outrage or scandal, *'Othappu'* is 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 culturescape been made available in English before. As Sarah Joseph tunnels into the lives of her characters, the conclusion shows people up for who they really are and what they prepared to bear in support of their actions.

Margalitha, has chosen her path to the God Shepherd all by herself. She is in despair there, She is in the midst of doubts. She is anxious about others. She is trying to question the self and the system. Church is for men in its heights but in its lower levels it is for women. How people show disgust even in prayers can be seen in “I Thank God, I was not born a woman” – a daily prayer of Jewish men makes clear their knowledge that the role is a sub-human one, but they are not willing to face change that would shift the balance of the universe.

Margalitha decides to act according to her instinct she doesn't want to be in the presence of Jesus Christ with prayers full of lies and attire which is not 'hers'. Walking out from the dress of nun is quite easy. But what happens when it comes in the case of society?. To her it is only a dress. But when Roy Francis Karikkan decides to live with Margalitha, even the death of his father, is converted as a punishment from God. When She hears the opinion of people about them She is thinking if God is such a person to punish them with such scornful situation, She wants to shout at the people that She hates God. When the dead body of his father was taken away, Karikkan realizes that fact that they must not decide to live together. Margalitha tries hard to practice prayer through her works. Work is worship. She is entrusted with the burden of looking after a child along with the one in her womb. Like Mother Mary, She is represented along with the children.

Her half sister Rebeca and 'Holy spirit' She is against the system of Church and Religion in a sense. Her poverty made her to work in the kitchen of Atheist George once, but all the while she is a theist. Later she tries to reveal the Doctor, the preacher of gospels in his true colours. But what happens to her is the most unbelievable ...She tries to cut down here tongue. She doesn't want to preach about God anymore. Church and authorities prevent her from preaching and praying among people marginalizing her from doing so. Questioning the authority of church can be seen in the eyes of the sisters in the convent. They are trying to do the Holy Communion. But they were found and sealed as convicts. The discrimination related to the family ancestry of the nuns are really annoying Margalitha. As Christ said, Margalitha did, 'true' to her Conscience but She disturbed the conscience of her family and society.

Understanding of one's true self and selecting the paths irrespective of the on-viewers is a great and unpardonable sin done by the Priest and Nun. Though the downtrodden in the society compares it with other trivialities and simplifies it people of the higher strata think about it as one like the act of Adam and Eve, who missed the Paradise of God to be lost again and again to be suffered through ages of hardship and mental agony. But as far as Margalitha

is concerned She attains universal motherhood to become Nanu's mother and the child who is yet to be born. The Patriarchal society that includes her brothers, John and Paul, Yohannan Kaseesa, Karikkan, Augustin, Brother Manikyan all try to subside her – in her heart of hearts She is strong or she behaves so not to be marginalized for ever.

### Works Cited

Bagchi Jasodhara, *Literature and Gender*, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2002.

Datta Scouler Kitty, *Women Authority and More*, New Delhi: Oxford University.

Joseph Sarah, *Othappu, The Scent of the Otherside*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009

Joseph Sarah, *Othappu*, Thrissur, Current Books, 2005

Sreedevi, *Ten Stories, Ten Writers-Interview with Sarah Joseph*, Thrissur, Current Books, 2003