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Conceptual Terrains: The Public, the Private and “Womanspace”

One of the major stereotypical images associated with Keralam is the image of an educated and emancipated woman. Along with this comes the assumption that women in Keralam are quite out-going and that the public sphere is accessible to them. This is the image that is deliberately constructed and circulated. However, many recent reports have inquired into this question and have found that the public sphere in Keralam is still hostile to women.\(^1\) The dominant public sphere, which had accommodated women (sometimes for brief periods) in its activities at different historical junctions, also suspended their involvement later.\(^2\) It carefully projects these historical junctures as highlights of its progressive aspect. Women’s movements had a major role in puncturing the exclusiveness of the public sphere, not just in Keralam but in most societies. Writings by women have been largely influential in this activity and these writings have greatly reflected the attempts on the part of women to access the public sphere. As a writer who has been writing for the past four decades and as an important proponent of the feminist movement in Keralam, Sarah Joseph’s writings map these developments in history as well as their influence on her.

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\(^1\) Many articles and reports carried by periodicals in the past two decades and many recent research studies point to the kind of hostility and exclusion women face in the various public spaces of Keralam.  
\(^2\) The nationalist movement and reform movements had women’s involvement to a large extent. However, women were treated as symbols of culture and tradition within these movements. These moments of involvement and activism from the part of women were projected later as a gender-inclusive nature of the movement. Partha Chatterjee speaks of how Indian nationalism resolved its women’s question after attaining independence. I will be discussing it later in the chapter in relation to women and the public sphere in India.
This study, “The Conflation of Public and Private Spheres into ‘Womanspace’ in Sarah Joseph’s Writings: Through Histories of Women-writing,” tries to examine the conflation of public and private spheres in the wake of the women’s writing in Keralam, especially in the works of Sarah Joseph. I see her work as reflecting the steady evolution of women’s writing as a counterpublic\(^3\) against the backdrop of the dominant public sphere over a period of time. I discuss the history and formation of this space with reference to important moments in the histories of women-writing in Keralam and use Sarah Joseph’s works to demonstrate the complex workings of this space, which I choose to designate as “womanspace” for critical purposes. The study focuses on how women-writing became a multilogue that voiced itself against the privileged male-dominated public sphere and the ways in which it has had impact on a contemporary woman writer in order to discuss the current implications of this space. Womanspace, formed as a critique to the dominant public sphere, is constituted mainly of privileged and middleclass women. Therefore, it has proved repressive in some contexts that involve caste and minority issues, and thereby giving rise to other counterpublics.

As a reader of Malayalam literature, I began to take note of Sarah Joseph’s writings during the 1990s. I remember that unlike the writings of other contemporary writers, these stories constantly reminded me of my identity as a woman. In addition, her writings

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\(^3\) I borrow this term from Nancy Fraser, who uses it to denote the public spaces shared by non-dominant groups and which functions as critiques of the dominant public spheres. She uses it as “subaltern counterpublics” to suggest such spaces shared by women, working class, etc. in 18\(^{th}\) and 19\(^{th}\) century Europe against the bourgeois public sphere. I avoid the use of “subaltern” here, considering the new dimensions of the term where the validity of socially privileged middle class women being included in “subaltern” is questioned. Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text* 25.26 (1990): 61.
also gave me a sense of the history of female characters and of writings by women who have been always there, almost neglected, and therefore form part of a discontinuous tradition. It was uncomfortable at least in the beginning to be reminded of my gender identity and the long-forgotten women characters as I was trained to look at literary texts as mere products of a certain aesthetic sense and imagination. Like many other women who “had to go out” and interact in public spaces, I started identifying with Sarah Joseph’s stories, that specifically dealt with women’s issues. Her writings marked spaces that were occupied by women and their current implications, thereby offering a critique of the dominant society and the spaces owned by it.

With the publication of her first novel, *Alahayude Penmakkal* (1999), as well as her other short story collections, Sarah Joseph became an iconic woman writer by 2000. Mainstream writers and critics who had dismissed her writings as banners of feminist ideology, accepted her as a writer of literary calibre. Even those who appear averse to the very notion of women-writing, accept Sarah Joseph as an accomplished writer as well as an icon of women-writing. Her later writings became more focussed on identities, going beyond gender to discussions of class, caste and religious identities within gender identities, making me think about the multiple identities that one has to carry. Yet, the possible questions of authenticity and the implications of the portrayals of “the other” made me feel uneasy about her writings, even while it gave insights about my own identity. She was criticised by new groups—socially less privileged groups—those for whom Sarah Joseph as an activist and writer claimed to work/write for. These critiques problematised the “authenticity” and “legitimacy” of an upper caste privileged writer
cum activist articulating complexities of caste, class and religious minorities. They helped me sort out my own unease with the writings of Sarah Joseph. They also enabled me to problematise the way in which I related to Sarah Joseph’s writings and the gendered identity presented in them.

In spite of these very important critiques, I believe that Sarah Joseph’s contribution to Malayalam Literature as a writer who fought for a space for women and their writings— as a mainstream writer who articulated issues of caste, gender and religious identity—ought to be recorded. Sarah Joseph’s interventions in literature underscore the importance of re-inventing a history of women-writing. Her writings, apart from other issues, deal with the complexities of the public/private dichotomy. It is very important to know the kinds of reconfigurations and conflations of spaces that occur in the writings of a woman writer who herself occupies different spaces and roles like a teacher, writer, academician, activist and, a woman who carries out her domestic roles. These are the reasons why I feel that Sarah Joseph’s work ought to be studied in its complexity and with its “problems.”

This chapter looks at the theoretical terrains of the public/private dichotomy and its development over the years, which offer a basis to the understanding of women writing and feminism as counterpublic spaces. Here, I discuss the liberal political notion of public/private spheres, the criticism on the Habermasian framework by Western feminist scholars, the public/private, spiritual/material, inner/outer dichotomy used by the postcolonial theorists in the context of the Indian nationalist movement, and the re-
ordering of social space in relation to gender. Both the feminist and postcolonial streams enable the study to come up with a framework, as the former gives a feminist perspective on the dichotomy and the latter gives the perspective of a postcolonial, gendered, and multi-ethnic subject. The womanspace I discuss here is the conceptual space that arises in women’s writing as a result of constant negotiations between the private and public spheres.

Women’s writing in Keralam, which emerged as a result of colonial modernity and women’s education, was a major breakthrough in accessing the male-dominated public sphere. One reason could be the fact that the act of writing does not require one to make any public appearances; in other words, it can be done even while physically confined to the private sphere. However, a certain amount of education and social agency is quite essential to become a writer. The public/private dichotomy generally evokes the notion that men belong to the public sphere and women to the private sphere. This leads to the assumption that women’s writing is all about the private sphere or personal life. I identify women’s writing as a counterpublic by looking at how at different junctures it negotiates with the private and public spheres, challenging the dominant public sphere. This negotiation happens as women’s writing tries to bring private matters into the public space and vice versa. The study, while focusing on the conflation of the public/private spheres in the writings of women from mostly middle-class backgrounds, also offers a critique of it in relation to subaltern perspectives.
The public/private dichotomy in socio-political theory evidently has its origin in Western political thought. Many a time, one would find objections from academic circles while using theoretical frames of Western origin to study a research problem. But I believe that it is important to study and contextualize Western political notions of democracy, politics and citizenship through the colonial experience of the Occident as this approach also explains the current implications of most of the theoretical frames in a postcolonial context. In its liberal political sense, the public/private dichotomy equates the public with the “masculine” and the private with the “feminine.” This spatial differentiation is also reflected in literature. It is conceded that women’s writing, especially early writings by women, deal with the private domain, as different from male writers who articulated their political/social concerns through literature. The basis of the concept of the public and the private could be traced back to Hobbes and Rousseau, where both attempt to explain the origin of the legitimacy of government and the State. The concept has been restructured and rearticulated over the years. However, Habermas’ theorization on this concept is the usual point of departure in contemporary discussions. Critiques of Habermas, framed by feminist scholars and postcolonial theorists, show us the exclusionary frames of the concept. The concept also maps the changes brought in by the gradual co-option of women into civil society. This could also be viewed as one of the more important theories that reflect the changes in the social contract and also one which problematises the gendered nature of political and civil rights.

4 Thomas Hobbes was a 17th century British philosopher. His work Leviathan is believed to have laid the foundation of Western political philosophy from the perspective of the social contract theory.
5 Rousseau was one of the most influential thinkers of 18th century European enlightenment. His major work on political philosophy is The Social Contract.
Almost all theorizations on the public/private are derived from the Habermasian concept of the public sphere, in which the public sphere denotes political and social activities under the overall jurisdiction of the government and the State, and the private sphere signifies the realm of the household, of home, and of personal or family relationships. Habermas’ work concerns the rise and fall of the 18th century bourgeois public sphere of Western Europe and relates readily to problematizing the public sphere. He defines the public sphere as “a sphere which mediates between society and State, in which the public organizes itself as a bearer of public opinion.” The bourgeois public sphere, according to Habermas, works as a forum to influence the decisions of the State authority and to regulate civil society. He refers to the private sphere only as the other half of the dichotomy. Another important 20th century political theorist who has worked on the public sphere is the German-Jewish, Hannah Arendt. Arendt’s view too lacks a feminist approach on the issue. Her approach elucidates the way in which men achieved a new form of political self through action, in the context of the French revolutionary public sphere. Arendt also does not speak about the way in which women were excluded from public activities and denied their rights. Landes, while examining Arendt’s contribution, contends that a democratic, feminist reconstruction of the public-sphere theory needs to take account of the gendered construction of embodied subjectivities within both public and private life. In her work *On Human Condition*, Arendt draws on

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9 Civil society, a composition of civic and social organizations, is believed to be the basis of a society as opposed to the structures of state and institutions of market. Recent researches reveal the exclusionary frames of civil society and public sphere.
the Aristotelian distinction of the *oikos* (the private realm of the household) from the *polis* (the public realm of the political community), and argues that matters of labour, economy and the like properly belong to the former, not the latter. The emergence of necessary labour, the private concerns of the *oikos*, into the public sphere—what Arendt calls “the rise of the social” has for her the effect of destroying the properly political, by subordinating the public realm of human freedom to the concerns of mere animal necessity.\textsuperscript{11}

One can notice that most of the political philosophers who wrote on the social contract theory were obsessed with idealising the public sphere and failed to crack the gendered nature of it. Even when the dichotomy is between the public and the private, most of these theorizations focus on the public sphere, leaving the private sphere unexplored. The private sphere was defined against the public sphere. However, not speaking about the private sphere also makes a statement about the gendered nature of society. Habermas’ emphasis on an ideal, democratic, accessible and non-state-dominated sphere of public life, and Arendt’s version of a political life that ensures equality, freedom and novelty, offer two perspectives that address the split between the two spheres. The split between public and private life in modern society, which has been addressed by both Habermas and Arendt in different ways, has become central to feminist analysis. Neither of them speaks of the exclusion of women from public life, or examines the functioning of gender difference.

\textsuperscript{11} \url{http://www.iep.utm.edu/a/arendt.htm}
One way of dealing with the idealised public sphere and the much neglected private sphere for feminist theorists is to deconstruct the idealist public sphere by identifying its exclusionary frames. Seyla Benhabib critiques the rigid, gendered boundary established by Arendt between the public and the private, as well as the masculinist and class implications of the public space. Habermas’ model of discursive politics operates to reinstate the public/private boundary that has led to the exclusion of women. Benhabib argues that a theory of the public sphere must take into account difference—especially the differences in the experiences of male and female subjects in all domains of life.\textsuperscript{12} Geoff Eley observes that exclusionary operations were essential to liberal public spheres in Western Europe as this public sphere was fostered by “civil society.”\textsuperscript{13} Gender exclusions became natural as women were never part of civil society during that time. Eley suggests that the public sphere was a masculinist ideological notion that functioned to legitimize an emergent form of class rule. This connection between civil society and the public sphere in Western societies explains the idealizations of the public sphere. Scholars like Joan B. Landes, Mary Ryan, Geoff Eley and Nancy Fraser contend that Habermas’ account idealizes the liberal public sphere. They argue that, although in theory the constituent institutions of the bourgeois public sphere were accessible to all, it was constituted by a number of significant exclusions.


Joan Landes contends gender as the key axis of exclusion by arguing that the bourgeois public sphere in France was constructed deliberately in opposition to a more woman-friendly salon culture that was stigmatized as “artificial,” “effeminate,” and “aristocratic.” Her essay, “The Public and the Private Sphere: A Feminist Reconsideration,” surveys many of the questions opened up by a critical feminist engagement with Habermas’ work from the standpoint of the gendered development of public and private life in eighteenth-century France. She argues:

Habermas overlooks the strong association of women’s discourse and their interests with ‘particularity,’ and conversely the alignment of masculine speech with truth, objectivity, and reason. Thus he misses the masquerade through which the (male) particular was able to posture behind the veil of the universal.  

Fraser suggests that Habermas failed to study “non-liberal”, “non-bourgeois” public spheres even in the context in which he studied it. Mary Ryan’s study shows that there were elite bourgeois women involved in constructing a counter civil society of alternative woman-only voluntary associations ingeniously using the names of domesticity and motherhood for public activity. Ryan also notes that, for some less privileged women, access to public life came through participation in supporting roles in male-dominated working class protest activities. Such revisionist historiographies show that there were a host of competing counterpublics including nationalist publics, popular

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14 Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text* 25.26 (1990): 59.
16 Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy” *Social Text* 25.26 (1990): 60.
peasant publics, elite women’s publics, and working class publics contemporaneous with the bourgeois public. The relations between bourgeois publics and these “other” publics were always “conflictual”. (61) Fraser intervenes:

I propose to call these subaltern counterpublics in order to signal that they are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs. The counterpublics emerge in response to exclusions within dominant publics, they help expand discursive space. (67)

It is interesting to note the conceptual difference of the public/private dichotomy in Liberal and Republican political argument. In Liberal political thinking, privacy is associated with freedom. Liberals defend the individual’s right to privacy against interference by other persons or the state. Contrary to this, Republicans consider the private to be hidden as they associate it with the body and its needs. At the same time, they associate the public with freedom or activities for a common good. 17 These two traditions are important as feminism has borrowed from both these traditions, without agreeing with any of the propositions completely. These contradictory propositions have helped feminism to unfold the complexities associated with the public and private to some extent. Feminism proposes to focus political attention on the private sphere and challenges the tradition of keeping the body and sexuality hidden from view. Feminism, by advocating contact between “private” and “public”, upsets the dichotomous nature of the two spheres.

As a further step to focusing on the exclusionary frames of the idealised public sphere, feminist scholars turned their attention towards the private sphere. Most of the theorizations on the private sphere have emerged as a result of this. Women’s being confined to the private sphere in most modern societies, makes feminist theory inevitably concern itself with the public/private dichotomy. However, the involvement of feminist theory and feminist movements with the liberal political notion of public/private becomes prominent in second wave feminism\(^\text{18}\) of the West, with its slogan “the personal is political”\(^\text{1}\). This idea challenged the conventional notions of the domestic sphere, family, and personal life. The interventions were essentially different from that of first wave feminism\(^\text{19}\) and its interventions to public/private spheres. First wave feminism recognized the significance “in bringing about a change from ‘private’ to ‘public’ patriarchy, via the struggle for the vote, for access to education and the professions, to have legal rights of property ownership, rights in marriage and divorce and so on.”\(^\text{20}\) Therefore, the struggle marks a shift from private confinement to the accessing of public spaces and rights. Second wave feminism marked the private sphere as a site of sexual inequality, unpaid work, and discontent. Betty Friedan in her landmark work, *The Feminine Mystique*, records the problem of ideal housewives of the post Second World War period in the United States and other advanced industrial societies as a “problem that

\(^{18}\) Second wave feminism refers to a period of feminist activity which emerged in the 1960s and lasted through the 1970s. \\
^{19}\) First wave feminism refers to a period dated to include pre-nineteenth century activities concerning the rights of women. \\
has no name.”

Feminist scholars who have addressed the public/private dichotomy regard feminism as having made an important contribution towards a more egalitarian private and public sphere, by giving public utterance to women’s private problems that do not have names. Joan B. Landes points out that although women and feminists are always assumed as “preoccupied with personal life,” it is feminism that has contributed to the theory and practice of a more robust and democratic public space. “As the slogan, ‘The Personal is Political’ attests, a feminist movement moves in two directions, placing the gendered organization of both public and private space at the centre stage.”

Second wave feminism’s focus on the “personal” brought special attention to the domestic sphere, issues like marital disharmonies, domestic labour, women’s sexuality, home as a space, etc. Men’s remunerated labour was juxtaposed with women’s unpaid domestic labour. Lynne Walker distinguishes domestic labour from men’s labour as follows:

The so-called ‘ideal divide’ which separated the legitimate spheres of men and women was deeply drawn between the public (masculine) world of remuneration,

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work and recognition and the private (domestic) realm of home and family responsibilities which were undertaken for love rather than money.²³

This called for more attention to the domestic sphere, which became synonymous with the private sphere. The focus on the domestic sphere placed the white/middle class woman at the centre of discussion, and to an extent failed to address other issues of identity like race and class that are involved. Davidoff speaks of the power relations within the domestic sphere—between husband and wife, husband and servants, wife and servants—to explore different dimensions of power.²⁴ However, the domestic sphere remained as a site of multiple oppressions. It also represented a site that is subordinate to men’s spaces in spite of the politicization. Davidoff suggests that the fact that women’s roles as nurturers and caretakers continue to be central to feminine identity although many middle class women could do away with much of such manual work with hiring domestic help, amounts to the subordination of domestic sphere.²⁵

The social contract theorist, Carole Pateman, criticizes the arguments of Habermas and other political theorists of the past for assuming the exclusion of women from politics, and regarding them and their confinement as “natural” subordinates to the domestic sphere. Pateman proposes that the social contract was a fraternal contract, from which women were completely excluded. According to her, “the meaning of the individual and

social contract depend upon women and the sexual contract.” 26  Such feminist interventions have helped later theorists to engage with the private sphere which include one’s domestic, personal, and sexual backgrounds. Pateman analyses women’s citizenship in modern welfare states from the perspective of the patriarchal division between public and private life. She finds faults with the leading theorists of democracy for ignoring the sexual division of labour, along with women’s dependent status. She says: “They treat the public world of paid employment and citizenship as if it can be divorced from the private sphere.” 27

Leonore Davidoff also addresses the construction of masculine and feminine identities with the institutional development of separate spheres. Focusing broadly on nineteenth-century England, she proposes that gendered notions of public and private also interact with the institutions of private property and the market, as well as with notions of rational individualism. Davidoff charts the gendered creation of various public domains that have the rational man at the centre and the embodied woman at the periphery. Observing that the masculine domination of the public was never unproblematic, she calls attention to nineteenth-century British women’s participation in the semi-public realm of “the social” as charity workers or volunteers, and their roles as feminist political activists. Here, we can see how women subverted their womanly roles to extend their space as charity workers and volunteers to access public spaces. At the same time, these interventions were not completely public or political in nature. The above theoretical interventions

suggest that the public/private dichotomy is no longer used strictly as a binary. Fraser argues there are several more senses of privacy and publicity in playing this binary:

“Publicity” for example, can mean 1) state-related; 2) accessible to everyone; 3) of concern to everyone; and 4) pertaining to a common good or shared interest. Each of these corresponds to a contrasting sense of privacy. In addition, there are two other senses of privacy just hovering below the surface here: pertaining to private property in a market economy; and pertaining to intimate domestic or personal life, including sexual life. (71)

All these interventions demystify the Habermasian notion of the public/private dichotomy and recommend the democratisation of public/private spheres. Sherry Ortner opines that the general notion of linking women’s associations with the domestic context amounts to their identification with the lower order of social and cultural organization.28 She states that until the symbolic structures of gender are dismantled, achieving equality in public and private spheres will not solve the problem. She suggests that democratizing these two spheres will not place the woman on par with the man, as even in the private sphere, the man assumes a superior position to the woman. Marilyn Lake points to an interesting contradiction between male and female views of citizenship, where male citizens expect the State to facilitate their engagement in public life while resisting interference with their assumed authority in the private domain.29

The historical and cultural contexts in each society reveal transformations in gendered contents of public and private life. Modern oppositional movements like feminism, postcolonialism, subaltern studies and other forms of identity politics have contributed to the complex historical, symbolic and practical effects of the organization of public and private life. None of these merge these two spheres but modify the dominant version by analysing the compositions of these two realms. While family as well as individuals tread on the public sphere, there are certain hazy contours to privacy issues that generate contradictory ideas. Landes points out that it becomes complex when those who argue for individual rights also advocate the use of state power to regulate the individual body and to restrict personal freedom. She adds that therefore it is the responsibility of feminists “to safeguard personal identity and the body, while re-valuing the private sphere.”

Seyla Benhabib observes that the most adamant defence of the private necessarily involves bringing “private matters to public light.”

A close examination of private life reveals the several layers within it. Moving away from using ‘private sphere’ and ‘domestic sphere’ interchangeable terms, words like domestic, personal, and sexual, qualify the private sphere further. A study on spaces allotted for women and occupied by women should map these layers within the private sphere, while also charting intermediary spheres like the social and economic, along with the political and public spheres. In a world of constant contestations of spaces, the meanings of public and private also shift, defining and redefining themselves, one against the other. It is at this point that along with the implications of gender identity, other

identities like race, ethnicity, nationality, religion and caste shift from the private sphere to enter public notice.

The present study is undertaken in the context of identity politics, and it is difficult to sideline the importance of identity politics while problematising the dichotomous nature of public/private spheres. Identity politics has served as a crucial critique of feminism when white, middle class, heterosexual and university-educated feminists attempted to bring all women under the banner of sisterhood. Wendy Brown examines the public/private dichotomy in the context of identity politics. She asks how a radical democratic politics performs when the very differences that are suppressed under the rubrics of liberal philosophy and universal humanism are embraced by marginal groups and individuals in late-modern democracies.31 As Landes infers from the arguments of Brown:

Identity politics becomes more significant as it has the potential to affirm publicly aspects of our private selves, to rescue identity from being ignored as a merely ‘private’ feature of our selves.32

Anne Phillips extends Brown’s discussion by looking at specific political challenges posed by identity politics to the actual workings of democratic institutions. While liberal democracies have traditionally followed the practice of tolerance to accommodate difference, this no longer seems adequate. Advocates of what Phillips calls the “new

politics of presence” demand equal public importance, “not just permission for private digression.”

Feminist interest in exploring the implications of historical, cultural and social foundations of the public/private dichotomy has theoretical as well as practical purposes. Initially, it was dissatisfaction with the way in which social reality was mapped as dichotomous. By deconstructing universalised assumptions and understanding non-state forms of cultural and political organization, feminism studies the patterns in this mapping and attempts to exceed the dualistic model. Feminist interventions also reveal the ways in which public and private divisions have been drawn in the past and continue to be drawn in the present by examining the questions of public and private life. Further, these interventions and feminist practices have revitalized democratic theory. Increasingly, questions of recognition and representation, culture and interest, equality and justice are discussed in terms of the gendered organization of public and private life.

We see that before the intervention of feminist scholars, the public sphere in Western societies remains as a utopian vision of philosophers and political theorists. Feminist inquiries of the public/private dichotomy not only demanded attention to the private sphere and its politics, but also demystified and deconstructed the utopian versions of the ideal public sphere. They spoke about the exclusionary frames and gender biases of the theory and pointed out the possible egalitarian and democratic distribution of roles.

against the strictly dichotomous notion. These studies also trace the gradual inclusion of women into the public sphere. The compositions of public and private spheres change with spatial and cultural factors, the dividing line becomes porous. However, the lines between these two spheres have been drawn and redrawn and this act involves power. As Nancy Fraser points out, “not everyone stands in the same relation to privacy and publicity; some have more power than others to draw and defend the line.”\textsuperscript{34} The play of power is very crucial in defining and accessing these spheres. This characteristic of public and private spheres prompts feminist theory to go beyond the universalised notions of freedom as accessible to everyone equally, even among women. The power vested in each individual, depending upon the social, cultural, racial, and gender privileges, decides the freedom to access these spheres, or more specifically the public sphere. This is where identity politics interventions become significant by suggesting a look at the divisions and power variations within women. The interventions of postcolonial as well as Black feminists have questioned the very notion of private/domestic sphere, from the point of view of a privileged white/first world woman. The public/private distinction provides a valuable lens through which to view issues of gender identity, and divisions within this identity. While feminist inquiries focus on spaces occupied by women, postcolonial theories on public/private dichotomy reflect the history of the colonial as well as postcolonial experience of a nation along with the gendered nature of that experience. As the study also includes a postcolonial context, it is very important to look at the equations

\textsuperscript{34} Nancy Fraser, “Sex, Lies, and the Public Sphere: Reflections on the Confirmations of Clarence Thomas,”\textit{ Critical Inquiry} 18 (Spring 1992): 611.
of this dichotomy explored by postcolonial critics, apart from the frames of feminism and identity politics.

An equivalent proposition to private/public dichotomy put forward by liberal political theory is the proposition of akam/puram distinction in Tolkappiyam, the oldest Tamil work on grammar and poetics that dates back to between 100 B.C and 250 A.D. A.K Ramanujan in his analysis of classical poets discusses the distinction between akam and puram (interiority and exteriority) in Tamil. 35 Akam, a gloss for house in Tamil also refers to the self and womanhood. This is logically contrasted with puram or the exterior or outer domain that includes spaces outside home like the street or the yard and also activities like war and governance. 36 Tolkappiyam does not talk about the akam and puram distinction as social contract directly; they are presented as terms of thematic distinctions in poetry. Yet it leaves a clear suggestion towards the existence of a gendered division of society in most of the civilizations, even in early centuries.

In the context of India, the discussion on the dichotomous relationship between the public and the private sphere is initiated mainly by the Subaltern Studies group. Many historians have found women’s involvement in the colonial public sphere as well as postcolonial Indian society interesting and have researched how women created a separate and “problematic space” for themselves. Two aspects have defined or/and problematised

36 Seemanthini Niranjana localises the private-public dichotomy in the context of her study of everyday life of women in two villages of Karnataka, as “olage-horage” which refers to the ‘inside-outside’ matrix, while inquiring into how gendered bodies and spaces are produced in their everyday practices. See, Seemanthini Niranjana, Gender and Space: Femininity, Sexualization and the Female Body (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001).
women’s involvement in nationalist movements—one is the reform movements and the other is Gandhi’s ideology and notion of womanhood in relation to the nation. However, Gandhi’s notions cannot be read separately as they were part of the nationalist movement. Nationalist movements in various parts of the country may have varying stories to tell with reference to the women’s question, and most of it is yet to be explored. As Tanika Sarkar points out:

Recently historians have started to explore how, within a subaltern domain of politics women created a separate and problematic space for themselves. We still need to fill out our notions about how these processes and departures were conceptualised on the basis of new, sacred principles that nationalists constructed to reorder terms of human relationships.37

Partha Chatterjee’s proposition that the nationalist project dichotomised the cultural domain into inside/outside, spiritual/material, home/world, with the woman representing the home; and the home (spiritual domain) becoming the catalyst of the nation’s distinctiveness that has to be protected from the politics and impurities of the outer world, is considered among the first of its kind in the context of India. Partha Chatterjee’s article “The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question” discusses the sudden disappearance of women’s issues from the public agenda towards the end of this century after India’s attainment of freedom.38 He suggests that this disappearance is due to the fact that nationalism resolved the women’s question as per its historical project.

Chatterjee applies the material/spiritual, public/private, inner/outer, world/home dichotomy to say that the Bengali *bhadralok* accept the superiority of western science and civilization in the material or outer domain, while holding the spiritual or inner domain superior to the West; hence un-dominated and sovereign. (238) This dichotomy clearly demarcates the public and private identifying social roles by gender. It is within this ideological frame that nationalism attempted to answer the women’s question. Chatterjee’s argument is useful in the analysis of the women’s question in relation to the Indian middle class. However, in his essay “Caste and Colonial Modernity: Reading *Saraswativijayam*”, Dilip M. Menon questions this framework by applying it to the experiences of lower castes in understanding colonial modernity. He says that the simple dichotomy of inner and outer, tradition and modernity that Chatterjee adopts fails, since lower castes are excluded from the inner space of tradition itself. 39 He writes:

Their access to colonial modernity is mediated through their entrapment in the domain of a tradition within which they can only be subordinates or outcastes. On the other hand, it is this very modernity that allows them access to the knowledge of that which subordinates them. (292)

M.S.S. Pandian advances a step further in his essay, “One Step Outside Modernity: Caste, Identity Politics and Public Sphere”. He says that although Chatterjee’s argument opens up new possibilities about nationalism in the colonial context by recovering a space of national imagination for the colonized, the very domain of sovereignty claimed by

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nationalism is used to subordinate subaltern social groups such as lower castes, women and individuals belonging to marginal linguistic regions.\textsuperscript{40} Pandian suggests that only by “unsettling the boundaries between the spiritual and material, inner and outer, could the lower castes (and women) contest the logic of exclusion inherent in the so-called national culture and talk caste in the colonial public sphere.”(1737) Such endeavours of unsettling the binaries give rise to a sphere of politics outside the modern civil society/public sphere.

Reform movements can be considered one of the main components of the nationalist movement that problematised the public and private dichotomy in colonial as well as postcolonial India. Reform movements added to the contradictions within the nationalist movement. While the nationalist movement always presented the glorious and golden traditions of the country, reform movements demanded a change in these traditions and this change came from within, as a result of the influence of modernity and education. These reforms redefined women’s spaces while keeping intact the boundaries between the woman’s world and the man’s world. The redefining not only defined woman’s space but also woman, who was placed as the preserver of national culture and as a resistance to the coloniser’s culture. The new woman had patriotism as an added quality. In other words, patriotism was termed a new womanly quality. C. Rajagopalachari wrote:

If our womanhood is made to lose direction, then the nation’s defeat would be complete. If, like the so-called enlightened, westernised Indian man, the Indian

woman also takes western education and changes her own nature and religion, then our subjection would be extended from outside to our innermost core.41

Women had the moral responsibility of preserving the purity of the spiritual domain, i.e. the home. The home envisaged by the nationalist as well as reform movements also was new.

The woman was to create a new kind of home which would be the nucleus of the new nation. Sarojini Devi, writing at the time of non-cooperation, summed up the scope of such work: ‘Whatever we can do from within our homes, we will do all of that.’(2014)

As in second wave feminism in the West, in the nationalist movement too, the home became an important site of discussion. Home and domesticity became synonymous with the private sphere. These sites were portrayed and presented as new sites of struggle with new missions attached in relation to the freedom struggle. The drawing of lines between public life and domestic life was also done with the representation of religious and traditional female characters. One such, Tanika Sarkar finds, is Kali in Bengal who used to be employed as a common imagery intending to represent the strength of womanhood. However, she finds that the Kali image represented certain contradictions within nationalism. The two modes of representing Kali indicate perhaps an inner tension within nationalism about the principle of female strength and about the violence and destructiveness latent in it. (2012)

Sarkar finds that Gandhi’s vision of women’s participation further problematises male/female realms. In Gandhian struggles, in which men’s participation was maximum and women’s presence was minimal, “the strategy remained persuasion effected by dramatic spectacle of suffering – a traditionally feminine strategy.” (2013) According to Madhu Kishwar, Gandhi viewed home as a political facilitator of the nationalist movement, making home and the family, sites of the nationalist struggle.42 However, this view again burdened women with more moral responsibilities:

Even if the woman is not given a direct role in the public domain, the moral initiative given to her must irrevocably alter notions about hegemony and authority within the family. The fact that the male patriarch regains his moral status through the intervention of woman must ultimately transform earlier models of patriarchal power by making it crucially dependent on the woman’s superior understanding.43

The formation of the public and private spheres is a differential process which takes place at several levels: the discursive, the linguistic; the political and the economic, and usually in relation to other classes. The process of the formation of the private sphere as an alternative to Western materialism surfaces at the beginning of the nineteenth century and gets reflected in the nationalist discourse which establishes a series of dichotomies like male/female, inner/outer, public/private, material/spiritual etc. The metaphor, “family” was used frequently to define women – the new community of patriots, suggesting that

they would have larger scope for activities within it. (2014) Therefore, the domestic sphere became an intermediary sphere where the preparations for the movement were taking place. However, this new woman was referred to as a metaphor for both the unviolated and chaste inner space; and the possible consequences of its surrender. We can also read this as an instance of blending tradition and modernity. As C.S. Lakshmi identifies:

…tradition is not static, its content keeps changing and it contains within it elements that oppose it. Its boundaries keep getting erased and re-formed. But the ‘notion’ of an unbroken tradition is constant. And attempts are made to write this notion of tradition on the body of the woman to dictate its movements, needs, attire, aspirations, and spheres of existence even while the body is moving along time, space and history. These attempts are born of a need to perceive women as those who authenticate a cultural or a national identity and as guarantors of the purity of this identity.44

As tradition and modernity can stand equivalent to spiritual/material, inner/outer, private/public, it is possible to argue that the division of public and private continues to exist and surface as a notion, whereas the re-ordering and conflation of these spaces happen simultaneously.

…but what is more interesting and immensely complex which we can glean from narratives and writings of/on women, is that the two worlds, in everyday life and

dealings, constantly run into each other blurring the boundaries. But the notion of separateness is maintained. (2954)

Nevertheless, one cannot deny the fact that the notion of separate spheres does affect the re-ordering/conflation of these spaces. C.S. Lakshmi further clarifies:

All the activities of women had to be rendered feminine for them to be accepted…

And women’s functioning in the outside world had somehow to be accommodated into a certain logic of what is termed feminine to make it seem like a continuation of her historical and cultural role. Such notion of separateness also created a mental image of women ‘coming out’ for a specific purpose and then ‘going back’ to where they really belonged. (2954)

Distinct from the notions of Western feminists who criticise the Habermasian notion of the public/private dichotomy and recommend an egalitarian and democratic re-ordering of public/private life, C.S. Lakshmi points out practical reasons for the existence of the private and public spheres separately, even in the present moment. She juxtaposes the notional upholding of private and public spheres with the everyday conflation of the public and the private. Feminism in India has imbibed its theoretical frames from both the Western feminist theory/movement as well as the socio-political movements in India. Like in Western societies, in India too women have been kept away from the public sphere. As Anuradha M. Chenoy points out, even at present, “Women’s reality, despite their presence and intervention in the public sphere, is confined largely to its margins.
They therefore continue to be regarded as symbols of the private.”45 It becomes more difficult and complex to combat this problem of limited or nil access to the public sphere by women with the onset of citizenship. Simone de Beauvoir expresses her disappointment with citizenship by talking about the “insufficiency” of political rights granted by “abstract rights.”46 Joan Scott explains the argument of Beauvoir further:

Citizenship had made women men’s equals as subjects before the law in a formal, procedural sense, but it had failed to win for them autonomy—social, economic, or subjective. The issue was not that of substantive equality (though de Beauvoir was concerned with securing that too). There was simply no carryover from women’s status as abstract individuals to their status as “sovereign subjects,” as autonomous beings fully in possession of themselves. In this sense, the vote was only partial victory.47

Even while accepting women as citizens, the State is unclear about the special consideration that is entitled to be given to its female citizens over male citizens. The same dilemma is faced when there is a demand for reservation for women. Joan Scott describes the situation as the “inescapable paradox” of a feminism which demands formal equality for women while emphasizing their difference precisely, as the grounds for

substantializing the equality, speaking in the name of “women.”(16) J. Devika, while commenting on women’s limited access to the public sphere notes:

Citizenship’s promise of equality may then be seen as premised on a masking of ascriptive, structural, and historically emergent inequalities and differences rather than dismantling them. Specific existential contexts of individuals are seen as irrelevant for the status of citizenship. 48

Partha Chatterjee discusses the “sudden disappearance”49 of women’s issues from the postcolonial public debate in India. However, it is interesting to note the transformation of the meaning of the term “women’s issue” in the postcolonial context. C. S. Lakshmi points out that many issues like the Devadasi issue, maternity and child welfare and social hygiene—were termed “women’s issues.” This transformation is not just a phenomenon that occurred in postcolonial India. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan writes:

The new international standards and indices of women’s welfare and status sponsored by the United Nations and its agencies, which reflect each nation-state’s priorities in the health, welfare, development, enforcement of legal rights, and protection of women and thereby indicate its unequivocal responsibilities in these areas, have become influential “universal” indicators of “human development” levels.50

This takes us back to the beginning of the chapter where I have explained the high visibility of women in Keralam’s much circulated stereotypical image and the paradoxical limited access to the public sphere by women. We see a deluge of such progressive images of women in different forms in the public debates of Keralam, especially in the mid-twentieth century. J. Devika notes how women figure as an important image in the discourse of development since the mid 20th century “as a way to represent Kerala as the utopia of social development.”

Rajeswari Sunder Rajan writes about the politics of statistics on women in the colonial context, as follows:

The “status of women” has served as a crucial signifier in different contexts. For the colonial state, for instance, it indicated the degree of a colonized people’s civilizational backwardness or progress. The British colonial government’s measures to improve the condition of Indian women were therefore pressed into service to legitimize its rule, while at the same time these interventions, carefully planned in relation to different sections of indigenous patriarchy, left large parts of it untouched as the domain of the “private.”

Anyway, this newfound interest in women’s issues signifies complex patterns, especially with reference to the social contract theory that got relocated from the West along with the idea of democracy and citizenship. But though this visibility seems to break the structure of the existing public sphere, it also uses women as symbols of the private sphere, overtly. Women-writing becomes significant here as it marks shifts in the social contract theory by showing the various possibilities of conflating different spheres of the

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life world. I look at those shifts that are reflected in writings by women in Keralam, especially Sarah Joseph, to understand the complexities that are woven around different social spheres.

Most of the works on Keralam’s modern society still largely work with the Habermasian notion of public/private spheres. Feminists have always questioned patriarchy’s attempts to confine women to the domestic sphere. Devika argues that in spite of the achievements in development, literacy and women’s education, the ideal modern society in Keralam comprises the public and domestic domains. She argues that this could be because “gender appeared as a ‘natural’ alternative to jati-based social order; gender was seen to be based on something concrete and even unambiguous, i.e., sexual difference.”

Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall explore how this new sexual division of labour underpinned the successes of the early nineteenth-century middle class, a class spurred on not simply by pursuit of profits but by a dream of domestic bliss. The same could be applicable to the emergence of the state-sponsored notion of an ideal family and domestic bliss, different from the notions of joint family, matriliny etc. This does not mean that in the society of Keralam, women do not have or did not have any access to the public sphere. The access to the public domain was largely restricted to institutions like schools, hospitals, charity organizations, etc. Upon surveying the writings of women, one can see the development of womanspace in women-writing and the extension of it through such institutions into the public domain.

One of the main propositions of feminist theory towards the social contract theory and the
dichotomous relationship between the public and the private spheres is the existence of
intermediary spheres like the domestic sphere, which is different from the private sphere.
However, experiences of women of different social locations differ in the case of this
sphere as well. Experiences of women from working classes and lower caste backgrounds
are different from the experiences of the middle-class woman’s life, which is largely
confined to the home. While examining the works of women from middle class families,
one might find that the discussions centre on the domestic sphere. Two books released in
the last decade—one, C.K. Janu’s autobiographical account and the other, Nalini
Jameela’s autobiography—stand out from the rest. While the former shows how gender
difference is an insignificant problem for a woman from a tribal community compared to
other threats like social discrimination, displacement, etc., the latter demonstrates how
the life of a sex worker can hardly claim any domesticity. The works of women from
marginalised sections published recently, demonstrates how the existence of the domestic
sphere is a middleclass phenomenon. Such writings also counter and collapse the middle
class construction of a monolithic representation of “domestic” and project a counter
space. However, the “womanspace” I discuss here largely deals with the domestic sphere
and negotiations of it with other spaces like religion,\textsuperscript{54} caste, community, region, etc.

\textsuperscript{54} This study discusses religion in relation to community rather than as a separate entity. The third phase of
Sarah Joseph’s writings (discussed in Chapter 4) which focuses on community identity mainly deals with
Christian identity, especially Syrian Christian identity. The study focuses more on community as it is
possible to argue that in the case of Christianity in Keralam, community identity comes foremost to the
religious identity. It is through community that one makes sense of religion.
Therefore, by womanspace I mean these continuously shifting and contested spaces occupied by women, formed by negotiations between different spheres. These spaces acquired and occupied by women do not function like dominant publics. These spaces carry a counter power that challenges the functioning of the public sphere, and therefore function as “counterpublic”. The counterpublic I examine here is mainly constituted by the writings of women from middleclass backgrounds. This counterpublic, using colonial modernity and modern education as ladders to access the public sphere, operates in creating an alternative critique of patriarchy–colonial as well as regional. While using the term “womanspace” to denote the reordering of the social contract theory and the spaces that it suggests, I would like to clarify that it is not used as an umbrella term to denote all other counterpublic spheres that have been created to challenge the public sphere. “Womanspace” could be of multiple interests and the attempt is not towards sabotaging other counterpublic spheres that are formed by men or women who would identify with their caste/class identities above their gender identity.

Thus far I have explained the conceptual framework of the womanspace that I would be examining in the works of Sarah Joseph; the next chapter will contextualise these concepts within the history of Malayalam women writing at different junctures. The first chapter identifies moments in the history of Malayalam women writing that are crucial to the evolving of a womanspace. The second chapter looks at the short stories of Sarah Joseph, the trajectory of her writings from those confined to the private sphere to those which take private matters to the public space of discussion, or the private scrutiny of the public sphere itself. The chapter looks at the blurring of the dividing lines between the
public and the private spheres in Sarah Joseph’s works. The third chapter looks at the stories and a novel written by Sarah Joseph based on the Ramayana, in her attempt to read the text as a tool of political domination. Here, she shares the point of view of the Dravidian movement and particularly that of Periyar E.V. Ramasami, the main proponent of the movement, to view the text as a political tool of Aryan domination. The chapter will also look at the kind of public sphere that the Self Respect movement offered for women. In the context of identity politics, it looks at different kinds of publics that come into play in these works. The fourth chapter looks at the three novels of Sarah Joseph which deal with women’s engagement with public spaces like region, religion and community, while also focusing on private spheres like personal matters, domestic space, the kitchen, sexuality, etc. The chapter also engages with the problem of the merging of public/private spheres through attempts by women to democratize both these spheres. The conclusion discusses the limitations and exclusionary frames of this womanspace envisaged by Sarah Joseph and other middle class women writers in Malayalam by looking at two sample texts by two women from non-middle class/ upper caste backgrounds. The study tries to argue that while mainstream feminism tends to draw more upon established female identities, narratives from non-privileged or non-middle class women deconstruct the established notions of femininity and free women from the constraints of pre-existing definitions.

Contrary to the ongoing assumption that Comparative Literature involves comparing two or more literatures that was part of a modernist project of universalization, I follow the line of Andre Lefevere and Douwe Fokkemma and perceive literature as a cultural code.
The comparative aspect of the work is not just limited to literature studied in relation to literatures or writers from other languages, but also concerns literature studied in connection to its socio-political aspects, where literature is viewed as a cultural signifier. With a “differential” concept added to it, Comparative Literature as a discipline promoted the study of regional literatures with different cultural backgrounds and subjects that are usually not accommodated within the rigid frameworks of other disciplines. Gurbhagat Singh, in his essay “Differential Multilogue: Comparative Literature and National Literatures,” 55 talks about this concept and records this development as follows:

> Comparative Literature has now to take a leap from the era of locating “universals” and “identity” to the era of recognizing and elaborating differences, the era in brief of, differential multilogue.

Therefore, Comparative Literature is envisaged as a discipline which does not have a defined and rigid framework any longer. On the other hand, it concentrates on the analysis of specificities, particulars, and multiplicity of contexts related to the production of literature. Gurbhagat Singh comments on this project of Comparative Literature as follows:

> Although it is the general character of the literary sign to self-assert and open to “appreciate” the structures of difference, it is in cross-cultural interliterary or interdisciplinary relationships, especially during the moments of crisis that the paradoxical/dialectical opening to others occurs maximally. The maximally opened sign becomes signifier through its play with inter- and cross-cultural

signifieds, is the object of comparative literature whose theory and practice we still have to develop, if there can be any paradigmatic term, it may be tentatively called *differential multilogue* that includes both the generative principle and the system of comparativity (11).

One can see obvious comparative aspects in the juxtaposition of the public sphere and the private sphere, the dominant public sphere and the counterpublics formed, and so on. Nevertheless, Sarah Joseph’s works also include a comparative aspect. The writer as well as her writings are read in relation to the works of other writers (old as well as contemporary), social milieus, political environment and available histories to map the similarities, differences, continuities, influences, etc.