Chapter 1

Through Histories of Women-writing

In this chapter, I try to trace the development of “womanspace” through the presentation of select moments in histories of women-writing, projecting those as a counterpublic against the dominant public sphere in Keralam. The intention of the re-coup is to demonstrate the evolution of a womanspace that materializes in the writings of Sarah Joseph and I intend to demonstrate it in this thesis by analysing her writings. This work is not a retrieval of submerged histories; it looks at the existing histories of women’s writing and women writers and the politics therein, to trace the evolution of a spatial construct. I look at how, at different junctures, the dominant public sphere tried to eclipse it in different ways and how at different junctures it spoke the language of negotiation in an attempt to appropriate this space. I draw instances mainly from women’s fiction and women fiction writers, although I refer to women who wrote poetry while discussing early women writers. The chapter primarily draws on the pennezhuthu controversy, which will be discussed in detail, to look at how it changed the historiography of women’s writing, how it changed the images of certain writers and writing trends, etc. I also discuss K. Saraswatiamma, Rajalekshmi, Lalithambika Antharjanam and Madhavikkutty (Kamala Das) as important writers who took part in narrativizing the making of “womanspace.” This study specifically locates Sarah Joseph’s conscious women-writing within this tradition of resistance and strives to show how her writings contribute to the women’s cause through a merging of the public and the private.
Women’s writing emerged in India as a new site of research and critical studies in the 1980s, as a result of the feminist movement and as a consequence of growing interest in feminist historiography. Feminist historiography, which consciously reflects upon the writing of history from a feminist standpoint, emphasized the importance of examining writings by women. Seemanthini Niranjana points out the significance of women’s writings as follows:

As a discursive practice, women’s writing is situated within the wider cultural context of patriarchy and its structural manifestations. Despite the varying specificity of content under different modes of production, patriarchy can be described in terms of the dominance of the male and a corresponding marginalization of women. In such a circumscribing milieu, women’s writing assumes importance as response to patriarchal relations within patriarchy itself. It may provide a unique record of the systems which shapes and contains the life stories of women.

She identifies women’s writing as a site of struggle “which involves both dominant perceptions of social reality and the resistances to it” (78). In this sense, women’s writings become significant documents in the analysis of women’s spaces, which demonstrate the making and remaking of these spaces while recording their resistances to the outside world. Feminist historiography, while deconstructing dominant ways of writing women’s history, considers women’s writing itself as history writing. It would be appropriate to state at this point that I use both the terms women-writing and women’s

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1 http://frank.mtsu.edu/~kmiddlet/history/women/femhist.txt
writing in my dissertation. By women’s writing, I mean writings by women. Women-writing is usually used to denote the phenomenon of women’s writing and its emergence as a new discipline within Women’s Studies. I also use women-writing as a literal translation for the Malayalam word *pennezhuthu*, which I will discuss later in this chapter.

I use the term “histories” to mean different streams of history-writing that approach women-writing based on ideological positions, the changing socio-cultural milieu, etc. For example, the history of Malayalam literature written by Ulloor S. Parameshwarayyer lists some of the women writers of the 19th and the 20th centuries. He identifies each of them as the wife, mother or daughter of some poet or scholar of the time. Although in today’s context, this might help us to understand the socio-cultural background of the writer, the attitude suggests that these women writers are important only because they are related to some of the male poets and scholars of the time. Until the late 1980s, women-writing in Keralam was perceived only as part of mainstream literature. The criteria used to evaluate them were also those of the dominant literary culture, which always had its own biases and preferences. Therefore, women writers who questioned dominant values or moved away from those were excluded from its narrative. Mary Ellmann refers to this critical practice of male academics and literary public as “phallic criticism,” where women’s writings were judged using the dominant literary criteria. “Women writers”

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3 This kind of an understanding about history, not just as a single authentic version, but as many versions with different ideological and political positions, was brought in by subaltern historiography.
itself is a category that came into existence recently. Earlier, there was no such category. Each woman writer was forcibly related with her male contemporaries or judged against/in comparison with them. Therefore, women writers of every generation did not feel a collective sense of identity as “women writers” since they were rarely viewed as a recognizable group which flourished alongside the dominant literary culture. What Elaine Showalter, in her work, *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), observes seems true of the women-writing scene in Malayalam. Showalter says:

…each generation of women writers had found themselves in a sense, without a history, forced to rediscover the past anew, forging again and again the consciousness of their sex. Given this perpetual disruption and also the self-hatred that has alienated women writers from a sense of collective identity, it does not seem possible to speak of a “movement.”6

Niranjana points out that projects that attempt to examine women’s writing should treat it not so much as an instance of literary representation, but as a “cultural form.”7 She says this kind of an approach suspends both literature, as an essential category, and the use of literature as a discursive field where cultural meanings are negotiated, reproduced or modified (74). Dominant versions of history either neglect even the minimal presence of women, or mention some women who have never disturbed the frames of the dominant social order. One of the main agendas of feminist historiography is to counter these dominant versions of women’s invisibility explained as women’s incapacity to be in the

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public sphere. However, Joan Scott points out that feminist historiography which strains to counter this kind of stereotyping of women by the dominant society tends to send a contradictory message while making an argument towards the equal treatment of women and men. She writes:

Typically, this approach has involved substituting positive examples of women’s capabilities in place of negative characterizations. Countering stereotypes has built a tension into the writing of women’s history. On the one hand, an essentialising tendency assumes (with feminism’s opponents) that there are fixed characteristics belonging to women. (The disagreement is over what they are.)

She contends that this kind of positive stereotyping and metaphors of visibility do not explain fissures in history when we are countering a history that showed only neglect to women’s enterprises. Nor does the recovery of ignored facts explain it. Scott recommends a historicising approach that stresses on differences among women and even within the concept of “women” as an alternative method (1). She continues:

When the questions of why these facts had been ignored and how they were now to be understood as were raised, history becomes more than a search for facts. Since new visions of history depended on the perspectives and questions of the historian, making women visible was not simply a matter of unearthing new facts; it was a matter of advancing new interpretations which not only offered new readings of politics, but of the changing significance of families and sexuality. (3)

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Histories of women-writing point to the fact that “writing” itself was an act in the “public sphere”, that happened most of the time as a result of some kind of access to the public. At the same time, it became a reasonable hobby for some privileged women, as it did not require the writer to go into the public. The history of women-writing in Keralam has direct links to education, print culture and colonial modernity that received currency by the second half of the 19th century. Literary works in Sanskrit by women from royal families are available, which date back to the 18th century. Ulloor S. Parameswara Iyer describes Kuttikunju Thankachi (1820–1904), daughter of Irayimman Thampi9 as the first poetess of Keralam10. Most of the works of this period by women did not include any experiences of the writer herself as a woman. They were mainly imitations of writing styles that were set by male writers and scholars. A work that stands apart in this respect is Thottakkattu Ikkavamma’s (1844–1921) Subhadrarjunam, a verse drama. She asserts the power of women’s literary creativity in the beginning of her work as follows:

Didn’t Bhama, the darling of Krishna, wage battle?

Didn’t Subhadra hold the chariot reins once?

If women dare all these,

How can they not be fit

Just for the famed art of poetry? (100)

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9 This way of identifying a woman writer as some famous person’s daughter, wife, or mother by Ulloor has been criticized by many people, as mentioned earlier.

In his review, C.P. Achyuta Menon praised the work for its social importance and said that the writer deserves to be called “Tunchathezhuthacchan of womankind.”

He stated that women may aspire to become literary authors, not by availing any “special concession” but solely on the basis of “literary merit” (269). But what was this literary merit? This definitely referred to standards set by male scholars and writers, where women’s writing was viewed as substandard, narrow and personal with no social significance. K.M. Kunhulakshmi Kettilamma, writing in 1915, said that to be able to write, women need not only linguistic abilities but also “life experiences” which may be acquired only if women have “social freedom” (270). This remark signifies the identification of the public sphere by women as distinct from their space, as a space denied to them but one that they have every right to access.

Women from most of the dominant communities, who had access to education, started writing by the second half of the 19th century. They wrote in journals and magazines in the late 19th century and early 20th century. Susie Tharu and Lalitha identify the period as “a high point of women’s journalism and in almost every region, women edited journals for women and many hundreds of women wrote in them.”

There were several magazines like Keraliyasugunabodhini (1886), Sarada (1904), Lakshmibai (1905), Mahilaratnam (1916), Mahila (1921), Sahodari (1925), Mahilamandiram (1927), Malayalammanika (1931), and Stree (1933) during this period, and different journals for

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women from different communities. Most of the journals carried articles written by women on issues like health, education, child rearing, family, etc. All these writings, which basically took off from the writings of some male reformers reflected the attempt to create a model Malayali woman by mixing tradition and modernity in appropriate quantities. However, these attempts could be viewed as early attempts at bringing “private” issues into “public” notice. But the private that was being constructed across communities and identities, comprised largely of an ideal middle class woman who was educated, homely and suitable for a modern educated man.

Jancy James notes that the shift from verse to prose in women’s expression is related to women’s education. Women writers like Lalithambika Antharjanam (1909–1985) and K. Saraswatiamma (1919–1975) used prose efficiently and frequently, although there were writers like Mary John Thottam or Sister Mary Beninja (1901–1985), Koothattukulam Mary John (1905–?), Kadathanattu Madhaviyamma (1909–1999), and Balamaniamma (1909–2004) who wrote in verse. For most of these women writers, education functioned more as an indirect means of access to the public sphere than as a means to merely read and write. Unlike earlier women-writers who wrote in Sanskrit, women who had access to modern education expressed their own experiences in their writing, in their own languages.

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Women from different communities experienced the influence of reform movements and modernization differently, as many communities underwent reforms at different points of time alongside the nationalist movement. Community reform movements like *Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana* (S. N. D. P) Yogam founded by Sri Narayana Guru aimed at reforming the Ezhava community, *Sadhujana Paripalana Sangham* formed by Ayyankali for the support of Pulayas, *Catholica* Congress of Catholic Christians, *Keraliya Nair Samajam, Nambootiri Yogakshema Sabha*, etc., influenced the life and lifestyle of people in Keralam. These movements also influenced the literature of the time. Kumaran Asan,\(^{16}\) who was influenced by Sri Narayana Guru and was working for S.N.D.P., articulated reformist ideas which rejected discrimination on the basis of caste and gender. *Nambootiri Yogakshema Sabha* which had the project of “making Nambootiri human, and Nambootiri woman free” also had its limitations. A by-product of the Nationalist movement, the *Sabha* condemned the plight of Nambootiri women, but also set the boundaries within which they had to confine themselves. The reform movement, as mentioned in the first chapter in relation to the Indian nationalist movement and to women, also placed several new responsibilities on women. V. T. Bhattatirippad, one of the main proponents of the *Nambootiri Yogakshema Sabha*, wrote in his famous play *Adukkalayil Ninnu Arangathekkku (From Kitchen to Stage)*, as follows:

> For the well-being of man, let the woman remain weak. But, it is in her shoulders that the weight of the great establishment called family rests; being a mother she

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should have kindness in her heart, essential for the growth of the community; pieces of her silk cloth may have to be taken, to tie the wound of the nation ...."17

As it is obvious in the above comment, reform movements to improve women’s condition were merely extensions of the nationalist ideology and were meant to selectively modernize women to suit the new educated man. This was specifically the case of upper caste communities which were part of the nationalist movement. Women’s roles as homemakers were emphasised with the break of the joint family system and the introduction of the nuclear family. At the same time, these reforms gave women access to the public sphere. However, this access was for a short period or was a temporary state, as woman was placed as an integral part of the “home”. This suggestion is very much implicit in the title of V.T. Bhattathirippad’s revolutionary play Adukkalayil Ninnu Arangathekku (From Kitchen to Stage). This signifies a spatial shift from the kitchen to the stage. At the same time, the word “Arangu” (stage) suggests that it is not a permanent shift. It is temporary and one has to come back to where she belongs. The adukkala or kitchen too did not remain the same. The kitchen became an important site in the making of a homely, educated, middle class woman. Male and female reformers insisted on the importance of kitchen in the making of a new woman and nation. One of the main women reformers of the Namboothiri Yogakshema Sabha, Narikkattiri Devaki Antharjanam wrote about the importance of the kitchen in her article titled “Sthreekal Adukkala Upekshikkaruthu,” (Women should not give up the kitchen).18 She argues that women should have the right over the kitchen and see it as a means to empower and free

17 All translations are mine unless otherwise mentioned. V.T. Bhattathirippad, Adukkalayil Ninnu Arangathekku (Kottayam: DC Books, 1994) 78.
themselves. She adds that the space should be considered a way to render service to the world (24). Most of the articles promoted women’s education, although they stressed the benefit of either becoming successful housewives or social workers. The ideal woman imagined by most of the reform movements, continued to be a middle class, homely, educated woman. This trend persists even now in most of the women’s magazines and periodicals.¹⁹

Women Writing in India: 600 B.C to the Present, Volume I & II (1991), an anthology edited by Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha, is a groundbreaking work that offers critical insights as well as instances of women’s literary ventures, spanning 2600 years. The collection is also significant because it includes about 200 texts by women from 11 Indian languages, translated into English. The book introduces new sensibilities in its view and treatment of writings by women. Tharu and Lalitha, in their “Introduction” to Women Writing in India, state the aim of a project of surveying the histories of women writing as an attempt to create a context in which women’s writing can be read, not as new monuments to existing institutions or cultures, but as documents that display what is at stake in the embattled practices of self and agency, and in the making of a habitable world at the margins of patriarchies reconstituted by the emerging bourgeoisies of empire and nation…We are interested in how the efforts of these women shaped the worlds we inherited, and what, therefore, is the history, not of authority, but of

¹⁹ Vanitha, Grihalakshmi, Mahilaratnam, etc. continue to be in the making of a modern middle class woman, who is the perfect blend of tradition and modernity.
contest and engagement we can claim today. But we also ask, what was the price they paid in these transactions, what did they concede, and how do those costs and those concessions affect our inheritance.\(^{20}\)

This kind of an engagement with women-writing expands the possibilities of women-writing by opening up an array of critical questions that frame women’s writing:

these include questions about the contexts, structured and restructured by changing ideologies of class, gender, empire, in which women wrote, and the conditions in which they were read; questions about the politics, sexual and critical that determined the reception and impact of their work; questions about their resistances, the subversions, the strategic appropriations that characterized the subtlest and most radical women’s writing. (15)

Thus, women’s history can provide a critique of dominant historiography. For such a historiography, even instances of so-called phallic criticism function as materials to map women’s spaces. The comment on Kochattil Kalyanikutty Amma’s travelogue, Njan Kanda Europe (The Europe I Saw), by the renowned writer Sanjayan in 1930s can be cited as a very good example of this. He suggested that the book only needs a correction in its title, as Europe Kanda Kalyanikutty Amma (Europe that saw Kalyanikutty Amma).\(^{21}\)

J. Devika says that Sanjayan’s comment reflects “his fear of female individuation and public presence.”\(^ {22}\) Devika translates Sanjayan’s suggestion for change of title “Europe Kanda Kalyanikutty Amma” as “Kalyanikutty Amma, who saw Europe.” However, the


title can also be translated as “Kalyanikutty Amma, who Europe saw.” This meaning of the title takes us further to questions of self, agency, travel and access to the public sphere in relation to female identity. This also gives us the assumption that Kalyanikutty Amma, who travelled to a different place and culture, “indulged” in describing herself, contrary to the travel writing norms which narrate the new place and travel experiences.  

Therefore, her work stands as a document attesting newly achieved access to public place for some women – a privilege which was also rare in the case of a dominant male. The travelogue also stands as an example of women’s writing that subvert a male/dominant genre as a space to inscribe her self. Only a renewed and sensitized feminist historiography sees this as an expansion of womanspace. This should be read not only as a history of women’s writing or women’s spaces, but also as a document in relation to colonial education, modernity, and women’s social mobility.

Perhaps in this context, one needs to discuss the penezhuthu controversy, and how it changed the historiography of women’s writing. I am suggesting that it is possible to identify this as one of the important moments which highlighted the importance of such histories. Although the literal meaning of the term penezhuthu is women-writing, it has somehow carried a negative connotation in Kerala society and in the academic circles of Keralam, unlike the term “women-writing”. The term was introduced in 1990 by K. Satchitanandand, a well-known poet and critic in Kerala, as a critical category in his

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23 It was not possible to find a copy of Kalyanikutty Amma’s book.
24 The use of the term “pennu” which clearly has connotations of informality (in contrast to more formal and sanskritised words like “stree,” “mahila,” etc.) could even be seen as disrespectful when used in the public sphere. Yet, it was also a self-conscious usage, which tried to break the brahminical, sanskritised images of “good womanhood” and at the same time, call oneself by the derogatory terms which could be possibly used against oneself.
“Foreword” to a collection of short stories written by Sarah Joseph, *Papathara (The Floor of Sin)* which floated feminist ideologies. This gave rise to a controversy over the term. The term was introduced as a critical or theoretical category, although it failed to function as such. What Satchitanandan meant by *pennezhuthu* is still unclear because, in his analysis of the story “Muditheyyamayayunu” (“The Dance of the Possessed Hair”), he uses “écriture feminine” and “feminine writing” in brackets to convey the sense of the term, *pennezhuthu*. The concept “écriture feminine,” proposed by feminist scholars like Helene Cixous, suggests that texts written by women attempt to undermine the dominant phallogocentric logic by focusing on differences rather than similarities present in the female world, deal with open-ended textuality and break open the closure of the realm of binary opposition. *Écriture feminine* gives more importance to the effect and interpretations produced by the text. “Feminine writing” is the term used by Elaine Showalter in her essay, “Towards a Feminist Poetics” to refer to the first among three phases of women writing in English Literature. In this phase, women imitated male literary culture. The second phase “feminist,” denotes a period where women protested against patriarchal values through their writings, and the third is the “female phase” which emphasizes self-realization. Satchitanandan’s way of equating the term *pennezhuthu* with *écriture feminine* and feminine writing is contradictory in nature. As a literary critic, then, he fails to give *pennezhuthu* a specific theoretical locale and uses it as an umbrella term which may variously designate “écriture feminine,” “women-writing,” “feminine writing” and “feminist writing.”25

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In Malayalam literary circles, the term failed to be viewed as a critical category, may be because of these initial ambiguities. The controversy over pennezhuthu was focused mainly on the derogatory and abusive meanings of feminism and women-writing. The use of the term as an umbrella-term to denote writings of all sorts by all women was barely considered or problematised. This persistence in viewing pennezhuthu as substandard or derogatory, shifted attention from the real problems, and relocated it to comparatively shallow issues with the use of the term. Many contemporary women writers disowned the term maintaining that their writings did not come within the purview of this term. Except for Sarah Joseph and C.S. Chandrika, none of the women writers agree with the term, although some, like Geetha Hiranyan, refrain from rejecting it altogether. Here, we could dwell on the details of the responses of contemporary Malayalam women writers and juxtapose their stories to bring out the contradictions in their statements regarding pennezhuthu. While articulating very relevant concerns of feminism and feminist writings, most of these women writers refuse to associate themselves with these ideological positions. Chandramati says about pennezhuthu:

It is a very bad word. I do not agree with it. First of all, it is a word created by a man. Satchidanandan is the one who introduced the word. It was launched by him in the Foreword to Sarah Joseph’s collection, Papathara, where the Foreword was longer than the collection itself. If it was Sarah Joseph who introduced this word, I would not have been so much against the term…This kind of categorization will discriminate women from the mainstream. It gives protection to those women writers who are part of sectarian politics…Even if I get a position a little below in
the common list of writers, I will not complain. It is better than being the first one
in the list of women writers.26

This shows that the writer is concerned with being excluded from the mainstream if she
associates herself with pennezhuthu. At the same time, it is also obvious that she
understands women as victims of exclusionary politics, a ploy implemented by the
mainstream. Let us see how she articulates in her story, “Kavithayude Katha” (The Story
of a Poem), the problems of a woman who aspires to write. The story begins:

Sushama is writing a poem. The first lines of it take birth on paper as follows:
“I remember you in my eyes, always moist with a tear.” These lines could be
written by anyone from Edappalli poets to post-modern poets. If at all these lines
have some speciality, it is due to the fact that it is written by a woman. The
common problem of the reading public that includes Sushama’s husband
Raghuraman is their attempt to find autobiographical elements in writings by
women. For example, if Raghuraman sees these lines, he will not find Sushama
that innocent…Now it must be clear that each of Sushama’s poems takes birth
surpassing adverse conditions. One thing we need to notice is the fact that
Sushama is standing and writing the poem. On the table where a white paper and
a stubby pencil rest, there are also a wooden board, half-chopped ladies’ fingers
and a knife. (59)

The story progresses as Sushama fills the paper with many more lines, while finishing
household chores. But when she hears the sound of the auto rickshaw in which her

husband and children come back home in the evening, she tears her poem into small pieces. The story ends thus: “Those who want to read Sushama’s poem completely can pick up pieces of it from between the lines of this story, keep it together, and read.” (64)

We could read this story as the story of women writing. The history of women writing, I suggest could also be retrieved by reading between the lines of available writing. This story states that Chandramati is aware of the fact that women’s writing is different because of the contexts and situations in which it is produced. However, she is cautious about being branded as a votary of pennezhuthu, as it might exclude her from the larger reading public. Thus the story functions against her claims about creativity. Ashita’s opinion about pennezhuthu is also not different from Chandramati’s:

In my case writing is a communication that happens between souls. Through writing a writer is touching the reader’s (vayanakkaran) heart/mind. One writes with one’s hand. There is no difference between a man’s hand and a woman’s hand. There is no need to explain the matters of heart/mind in relation to the body. (34)

But Ashita’s writings are also about women’s experiences, and a writer touches the mind of the reader only through writing about these experiences. For a woman writer, it is the experience of her identity and body. Given this, how can it be possible to distinguish between body and experience? One of the most controversial woman writers, Madhavikkutty (Kamala Das) also does not approve of the term pennezhuthu, using the same argument. She says:

I just can’t tolerate the word. The use of that word insults all women. What kind of gender difference is there for women? There are organs which make woman a
woman. But nobody writes using those organs. Then why is it called 

*pennezhuthu*? (132–133)

Madhavikutty’s comment articulates the general notions about women, gender and writing. This was the main criticism of *pennezhuthu*, a criticism of the fact that it distinguishes writings on the basis of the sex of the author. Showalter’s argument embellishes this point, by asking whether there is any value in considering the sex of an author.

…although genius may be sexless, an artist’s potential cannot be realised without the freedom to explore individual perceptions of truth. All women have been forced to interpret their experience in men’s terms and have been intimidated into describing sensations that do not exist. How much they and we have lost as a result cannot yet be determined, but a new feminist criticism assumes that a woman writer’s point of view will reflect authentic feminine experience to the degree that her society has allowed her to define it.  

B.M. Suhara also does not agree with the use of the terms *pennezhuthu*, feminism, feminist writing, etc. However, her story, “Bhranthu” (Madness) is another example of this contradiction, where she demonstrates how a housewife who takes a day off from her daily chores is labelled as a mad woman by her own husband.  

This reverts us to Showalter’s formulation:

…the relationship between women writers and the feminist movement has generally been strained. Women writers have had enough to contend with fighting

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for their own artistic autonomy without taking a public stand on behalf of feminism. Often they have sought to defend themselves against imputations of unwomanliness by repudiating their more radical and demanding sisters. ²⁹

Young writers like Priya A.S. and Sitara do not talk against the use of the term pennezhuthu although they do not say that what they write is pennezhuthu. Sitara says: “It is a term which is misunderstood the most, these days. Many people have distorted notions about pennezhuthu. According to me, pennezhuthu is writing that takes the side of women and women’s issues.”³⁰ This suggests that she understands the term as a critical category. Like modernism or post-modernism, it is also a category where it is the critics’ discretion to call a work modern, post-modern, women-writing or feminist writing. We do not have any writers who claim that their work does not come under post-modern literature.

What we have here, is four groups among women who write about the pennezhuthu controversy: women writers who are against pennezhuthu because they do not want to be excluded from the mainstream (Ashita, Chandramathi, Gracy, Madhavikkutty, B.M. Suhara), writers who do not claim or disclaim it but regard it as a legitimate critical category (Sitara, Priya A.S., Geetha Hiranyan), women writers who think that it is a powerful term that articulates the strength of such writing and attribute an all-encompassing character to it (Sarah Joseph, C.S. Chandrika), marginalized women whose

writings shook the foundations of middle class women writers and flattened the all-encompassing nature of pennezhuthu by bringing out its exclusionary politics (C.K. Janu, Nalini Jameela).

In spite of the term’s inadequacy as a critical category, and alleged exclusionary politics, pennezhuthu has contributed towards deconstructing the gender-neutral concept of the literary writer and influenced the historiography of women writing. Writing women’s literary history that happened as part of the pennezhuthu controversy stressed the need to apply different criteria while studying or writing women’s literary history. This was recommended not as a special allowance, but as a methodology to explore the possibilities of women’s writing. This was to fill the gaping fissures which the dominant literary culture left within women-writing and its history. There was an upsurge in the re-publications of works by women-writers of the early 20th century after this controversy, and many major publishing houses in Malayalam undertook such projects. The works of K. Saraswatiamma (1919–1975), which had been long forgotten, were republished in the 1990s with a critical introduction highlighting the feminist aspect of her work. Similarly, the works of Rajalekshmi (1930–1965) also got republished during this time. Periodicals carried articles on these writers.31 The refiguring of these two women writers and their works in the late 20th century is important as both were victims of the selective amnesia of the Malayalam literary patriarchy. Studies like Keralathile Stree Munnettangalude

31 It is also interesting to note that unlike their contemporaries, Balamaniamma or Lalithambika Antharjanam, these women did not restrict their discussion to motherhood or domesticity. By writing about education, the workplace, academics and politics, they opened up spaces that were closed for women generally.
Charitram 32 (History of Women’s Movement in Keralam, 1998) by C.S. Chandrika, funded by the Kerala Sahitya Academy, were also undertaken around this time. Another development was the reservation of many major contemporary women-writers to have their works included in the category of *pennezhuthu*. Collections of stories by male writers focusing on women-characters also came out during this time. The collection *Zachariayude Penkathakal* 33 (Women Stories by Zacharia, 2001) is an apt example. Though the term *pennezhuthu* was not seriously viewed as a critical category in Keralam, it was from this point that a quest for versions of the history of women-writing emerged. Titles like K.P. Ramanunni’s short story collection, *Purushavilapam* 34 (He-Laments) also attracted attention in this context for its clearly visible maleness and chauvinism.

Lalithambika Antharjanam, patronised and appreciated by the dominant literary history also become important in relation to this new historiography that followed the *pennezhuthu* controversy, which tried to view her writings in a different light. Although Antharjanam had limited her activities within the confines of the society and community, feminist historiography does not dismiss her as a conventional writer. This methodology renewed the interest in Antharjanam with new interpretations by looking at how even within these constraints, Antharjanam articulated subversions in subtle ways. For example, Antharjanam’s criticism of the controversial character Tatrikkutti in “Pratikara Devatha” (“Goddess of Revenge”) is always referred to as an instance of her anti-

33 Zachariah, Zachariahyude Penkathakal (Kottayam: DC Books, 2001).
34 “Purushavilapam” is a story where two men nostalgically remember their “loving” grandmothers and sweet lovers in their village against their modernised wives. They remember how those women considered them great and were at their service. K.P. Ramanunni, Purushavilapam (Trissur: Green Books, 2005).

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feminist stand. She states: “Although it raised a furore, it did not show a right path. Dear sister, aim will not justify the path. While acknowledging your courage and self-respect, I reject you.” This need not necessarily suggest the writer’s belief in male moral values. While writing or re-tracing the history of women-writing, what emerges importantly is not Antharjanam’s willingness to accept extant social prejudices, but her choice of the theme itself. By writing a story on a very controversial and historically important issue (especially for the women’s movement), the writer made sure that it was recorded, and not lost forever. Her own view is only of secondary importance to the historiographer. Reading these subtle subversions can bring out the mysteries within such writings and writers, which are otherwise cleverly camouflaged by dominant trends in literary history writing.

In the context of feminist historiography, *Women Writing in India* is a landmark work, which includes writings from popular as well as long-forgotten women writers, and provides a concrete theoretical foundation for feminist historiography. However, even at their best, these enterprises can only be representational with reference to regional literatures. In this sense, the new historiography that surfaced in the context of the *pennezhuthu* controversy can be considered as regional efforts at recasting women’s writing. The revival and republication of K. Saraswatiamma’s and Rajalekshmi’s works not only added to the richness of women’s writing, but also brought out the exclusionary politics played by the dominant literary culture and the reasons behind it. Therefore, the

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revival was a leap made towards the excluded and neglected writers and their writings. Sarah Joseph, all through these years, maintained her pennezhuthu stand. She says that she has appropriated pennezhuthu as a crusade. Sarah Joseph places herself in the lineage of women writers who were excluded and abused by the dominant culture. In the introduction to Papathara (1990), she proclaims:

Malayalam women writers were challenged and insulted when they questioned values of the dominant culture. Nobody said anything against them when they were occupied with bhajana, kummi, thiruvathira, romantic love, etc. But, Saraswatiamma, Rajalekshmi and Madhavikutty were stoned when they rebelled against their sexuality being decided and defined by the dominant culture. I am also choosing their path.

Apart from Saraswatiamma and Rajalekshmi, Sarah Joseph considers Madhavikutty (Kamala Das) also as her predecessor, although Madhavikutty was not a victim to the selective amnesia of the dominant literary culture. However, she and her writings were abused and insulted by the dominant literary culture for another reason: for writing openly about women’s desires and sexuality.

As Jancy James points out, “In the entire history of women’s writing in Kerala, Saraswatiamma’s is the most tragic case of the deliberate neglect of female genius.”

Saraswatiamma, who was born to an upper-caste and reasonably wealthy family, did not lead a “normal” life. She was an educated, single, working woman, who lived alone and

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36 Researcher’s Interview with Sarah Joseph in May 2005.
questioned the patriarchal values of society through her writings. She was not part of any movement. However, even after being the author of a novel, a play, several articles and about ninety short stories, her death was reported in newspapers as follows: “Palkulangara K. Saraswatiamma (Retired Local Fund Inspector) died at 7:45 pm on 26.12.75 in the General Hospital.” There was no mention of her being a writer. This could also be because she had stopped writing about fifteen years before her death i.e., in 1960. However, her male contemporaries were never meted out such negligent treatment. Saraswatiamma had severely criticised existing patriarchal values. As a result, she was alienated in literary circles and was disregarded by the critics. She was rated by many as a purushavidveshi (man-hater). The reason for this response can be read in her own words as:

The social condition of the time was such that one had to accept the authority of man. A woman should always position herself below the man. I was not ready to accept this. I was ready not only to defend myself, but also to fight back. That’s why they call me a man hater. (1014)

Saraswatiamma consciously tried to change all notions that were traditionally ascribed to women–femininity, subservience, etc. She used sharp wit and sarcasm to criticize patriarchal values. While making fun of patriarchy, she also made fun of women characters who acted like puppets in the system. By adopting a style which underscores sarcasm, she surpassed the moulds of writings by women and women-writers. In her

article, “Purushanmarillatha Lokam” (A World in Which There are No Men), Saraswatiamma writes about a situation when there is no man:

The ultimate truth is that a greater damage will be done to literature and language. There will not be any scope for romance if women remain without men. Think about the plight of literature without romance. Forget those who enter the fray of literature keeping their hatred towards men as an asset. (976)

Saraswatiamma was the first Malayalam woman writer who identified woman as a victim of male exploitation and called for open warfare against patriarchy. Her extrovert nature, bold opinions, free interactions, and lifestyle as a single working woman were not acceptable to society.

Another victim of exclusion and neglect, Rajalekshmi, was born in 1930 in Palakkad. She completed her Masters in Banaras Hindu University. Rajalekshmi’s life and work demonstrates the other side of the proposition that writing itself is an act that gives women access to the public sphere. Through her experience, it became clear that the act of writing, which could be viewed as an attempt by a woman writer to access the public sphere, is viewed by the public as the personal experience of the woman-writer. Unlike Saraswatiamma, Rajalekshmi wrote about lost love, relationships, extra-marital affairs/attractions, all of which were interpreted and consumed as her own experiences. Her novel, Oru Vazhiyum Kure Nizhalukalum,40 (A Path, Many Shadows) won the Kerala Sahitya Academy award in 1960. Rajalekshmi committed suicide in 1965. In 1960, she requested to stop the publication of her novel Uchaveyilum Ilam Nilavum (Afternoon Sun

40 Rajalekshmi, Oru Vazhiyum Kure Nizhalukalum (Trissur: Current Books, 2002).
and Moonlight) while it was being serialised in Mathrubhumi Weekly. She burnt the manuscript of this novel before her death. Before committing suicide she wrote in a note: “I cannot help writing. I will continue writing if I am alive. When I write, there may be similarities and likenesses of incidents and lives which others may know.”

C.S. Chandrika notes that it is a significant lesson that no male writer was compelled to commit suicide in this society because he wrote about people around them (57). However, she was pushed into the folds of forgetfulness after some time. M.T. Vasudevan Nair, a famous Malayalam novelist, screen-play writer, and a Jnanapeeth awardee, in his introduction to her short stories, writes about Rajalekshmi’s death, that “the one who died is not a human being, but an artist.”

Although this underlines her acceptance as an artist or writer, it consciously underplays her identity as a woman. One can see that Rajalekshmi, who never proclaimed open warfare against patriarchy, is more liked and accepted than Saraswatiamma. By representing her as a loner who was depressed for unknown reasons (a characteristic feature of an artist), dominant literary history negates her importance as a woman writer.

Both Saraswatiamma and Rajalekshmi wrote about unconventional womanspaces like educational institutions, workplaces, libraries, etc. Saraswatiamma wrote a story titled “Ramani,” as a reply to Changampuzha Krishnapilla’s most famous work Ramanan. She criticised the romantic notions and misogynistic attitude of the poet expressed in the

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41 C.S. Chandrika, Keralaathile Streemunnettangalude Charitram (Trissur: Kerala Sahitya Academy, 1998) 57.
43 Ramanan is a lament on the death of Edappalli Raghavan Nair, a contemporary and friend of Changampuzha. Ramanan was written when Changampuzha was only twenty. The poem is of the pastoral elegy type.
work. This shows that she considered herself equal to the male writer, of equal calibre. However, it was difficult for the dominant literary culture to accept both these women as equal to any male writer of the time. The exclusion of them and their works from the literary history serves as an index of the exclusionary politics, the status of women as well as women writers, etc. Referring to such instances of exclusion, Elaine Showalter points out:

Because the literary professions were the first to be opened to women, the status of the woman writer has long served as an index of a society’s views on female abilities and rights. Although writing has never been regarded as an unfeminine accomplishment, women writers have always encountered more critical resistance than men. This is so primarily because literary creativity has seemed to rival biological creativity in the most direct way. Normal female creativity, in other words, was expected to find its outlet in childbirth and maternity.44

The dominant literary public could not accept both Saraswatiamma and Rajalekshmi, as they showed more features of a writer than of a woman. The spaces that were opened up through their writings, distinct from the middle class domestic space, records the resistances of women while contesting for a space in the public. Therefore, these two women can be considered pioneers of opening up a space for women through the conflation of public and private spaces.

Madhavikkutty, one of the most controversial of all Malayalam women writers, is the first woman writer in Malayalam who articulated issues related to women’s sexuality in literature. She was also born in a family where many had chosen writing as a career. Her mother Balamaniamma was a famous Malayalam poet. Madhavikutty’s autobiographical work *Ente Katha (My Story)* shook the foundations of Malayali morality. She was a fierce critic of morality, and attacked it in her writings. For instance,

> There is a reason why I do not respect or consider the kind of morality that is circulated among us. The foundation of it is the transient body. The real morality should have human mind as its foundation. I view society and its morality as distorted things.45

She has also been attacked by the mainstream and excluded from it because of the nature of her writing. As Sarah Joseph puts it, in the new history which is written after reviewing the moments of women writing, Madhavikutty’s writing functions as a landmark. However, it is interesting to note that now, in the light of the *pennezhuthu* controversy; Madhavikutty is appropriated by dominant literary culture. An advertisement for a collection of short stories by Madhavikutty which appeared in *Mathrubhumi Weekly* in 2006 reads:

> Amidst those who attain contemporary status through asserting feminism through interviews and public statements, the feminine mind that reaffirms femininity through writing...Stories which fathom women’s public and private sorrows

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better than anyone else. Creations that reject male authority but do not travel to the poisonous poles of man-hating… 46

Here, pennezhuthu (which is blamed for all those ills mentioned in the advertisement) and Madhavikutty are juxtaposed. This juxtaposition, beyond its ability as an advertisement or comparison or judgement, functions as an attempt to appropriate the space created by the writer away from the dominant literary culture.

Unlike Saraswatiamma, Rajalekshmi, or Madhavikutty, who belonged to upper middle class families with access to education and literature, Sarah Joseph belonged to a middle class Christian family. She was born in 1945 in Trichur district. She got married when she was 14 years old. However, she continued her studies and started working as a teacher in a school. She completed her studies through correspondence courses, with Malayalam as her main subject. In 1978, she joined the collegiate service. She describes herself as “a college lecturer who has never attended college.” 47 She joined Govt. College Pattambi as a lecturer in Malayalam. By then, she had already started publishing stories in magazines. However, Pattambi became a turning point in her life as she involved herself in the activities of student groups and theatre groups. She became part of many progressive ideas and movements. She says that the Pattambi Government College had a major role in changing her life:

Pattambi, which was coloured in blood red with the strength of revolutionary movements and unified vigour of the leftist movement, is responsible for the deep changes that happened in my life. (20)

She became active in campus theatre along with her other colleagues. In 1985, a women’s organization named “Manushi” was formed in Pattambi College and Sarah Joseph was one of its founder members. Manushi, showed interests in women’s issues beyond the capacities of a campus organization. Manushi took up issues like the case of Balamani from Trissur, who was expelled from the region and stripped in public by upper caste men over a land issue. Manushi also looked into dowry deaths, the rape of a fifteen year old girl in Muthalamada, beauty contests, and organised protests and strikes. Sarah Joseph’s involvement as a feminist activist during this period marks a major shift in her writing career.

Sarah Joseph falls into this lineage of mistreated women writers like Saraswatiamma, Rajalekshmi and Madhavikutty who fought against patriarchal structures of society, because she has also experienced exclusion, insult and appropriation as a writer. As a writer who has written for the past four decades, her writings have undergone various changes. We can see many phases in her writing where her ideology changes in keeping with her involvement in the feminist movement and in social activism. One can identify three phases in Sarah Joseph’s writing career. These cannot be categorized as three clearly distinct phases as we can see that they overlap. However, her early short stories

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written in the ’70s and early ’80s, feminist stories written in the late ’80s and ’90s, and her novel phase which started in the late ’90s and continues till date, can be taken as three different phases. These phases also share similarities with Showalter’s proposition of the three phases of women-writing—feminine, feminist, and female phases—which I have discussed earlier in this chapter. Showalter’s proposition of three phases denotes different degrees of participation in the public sphere, with the first suggesting being within the confines of allotted spaces, the second phase denoting resistance and protest to access other spaces, and the third one signifying a blend of many spaces in search for a space of their (women’s) own. While Showalter’s formulation of the three phases refers to women writers in Britain, the three phases of Sarah Joseph’s work signify different phases in her writing career. The first phase of her writing career can be traced in her early short stories where the narrative is confined to the domestic sphere. The feminist short stories that appeared in Papathara and subsequent collections can be regarded as the second phase. The third phase of writings includes her later writings—mainly the novels. Sarah Joseph’s works will be analysed in the next three chapters to map the growth of these spaces and themes in search of a womanspace.