Chapter 4
Rewriting Women’s Spaces: Domestic Spaces, Region, Community and Religious Institutions

This chapter inspects the third phase (reminiscent of Showalter’s female phase) of Sarah Joseph’s writings, mainly the corpus comprising her three novels that form a trilogy. Moving away from the first and second phases of her writing discussed in the previous chapters, the third phase signifies a merge of many spaces to form womanspace. These conflations enhance the scope of “womanspace.” Through the analysis of these novels, the chapter tries to explore different dimensions of public and private spheres, and how their conflation is effected while dealing with region, the domestic sphere, religion, community, etc. It considers how the writer makes an effort in these novels to articulate and address the problems in contemporary feminist practices by rewriting and redefining these spaces in terms of gender. The three novels—Alahayude Penmakkal¹ (1999), Mattathi² (2003), and Othappu³ (2005)—focus on women’s experiences and attempt to redefine spaces to accommodate and expand women’s spaces. This chapter will investigate the different manifestations of the public/private sphere portrayed in these novels in relation to its current theoretical implications. The novels are studied in comparison with literary writings by other writers, which explore similar themes. Finally, the chapter will discuss the inclusiveness of the space for women that is envisaged by Sarah Joseph.

Sarah Joseph, an iconic and widely celebrated writer of *pennezhuthu*, rewrites the set notions of region, community, family and religion in mainstream literature. She also pushes the boundaries of *pennezhuthu* which accommodated writings that focused mainly on gender identity. Her interventions through the trilogy put forward the idea that gender is not a homogenous category and that there are power structures within it. The chapter examines three novels, *Alahayude Penmakkal*, *Mattathi*, and *Othappu*, to demonstrate how the writer maps other identities like caste, community and region along with gender identity. Sarah Joseph also charts how these identity formations span the themes of region, its colonization, family and domestic space as also political affiliations of religious institutions. Sarah Joseph was finally accepted as a “proper” writer, not just a *pennezhuthu* writer with her first novel, *Alahayude Penmakkal*, which was published in 1999. It gained critical acclaim due to its narrative style, spontaneity, language etc. The novel also fetched her the Kerala Sahitya Academy award in 2003. Different from her *pennezhuthu* short stories where community/caste identity of a character is secondary to gender identity, *Alahayude Penmakkal* attempted to re-write the history of Christianity in Kerala by providing many histories of the community and the region. The three novels—*Alahayude Penmakkal* (Alaha’s Daughters), *Mattathi* (a word used in one particular region in Kerala to denote a woman who is made the ‘other’ in her in-laws’ family), and *Othappu* (again a colloquial expression that means a bad example) – which the writer describes as forming a trilogy, share a common region and therefore a common regional history, but are set in three different times. They attempt to redefine spaces with an aim to reclaim ‘male’ territories, and expand them as women’s spaces. The continuity exhibited
within these three novels, enables the tripartite narrative to create the effect of a meta-
narrative.

Contemporary theories for the last decade are peppered with many discussions that centre
on the problems of gender and feminist practices. Susie Tharu’s and Tejaswini
Niranjana’s “Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender”\(^4\), Sharmila Rege’s “A
Dalit Feminist Standpoint,”\(^5\) Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s “Under Western Eyes:
Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Scholarship,”\(^6\) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s
“Discussion: An Afterword on the New Subaltern”\(^7\) are some of the seminal works that
point at the problems of viewing feminism and women as a homogenous category. I
would like to use these theoretical discussions as a point of departure to discuss how
these problematic configurations, which are generated as a result of viewing feminism as
a homogenous category, are effectively handled in Sarah Joseph’s novels.

Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana discuss the new visibility of women in the political
as well as social spectrum starting in the early 1990s. They argue that this new visibility
accommodates humanist practices that legalize bourgeois and patriarchal interests,
resulting in contradictions within gender analysis. Through the metonyms of the anti-

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Mandal\textsuperscript{8} and Chunduru\textsuperscript{9} agitations, the rise of the Hindutva, the anti-arrack movement in Andhra Pradesh, and governmental initiatives to promote contraceptives for women, Tharu and Niranjana demonstrate how the feminist movement is disabled by hegemonic mobilizations and how this confounds the possibility of alliances between feminism and democratic political initiatives. They propose that only “the shaping of a feminism capable of a countering hegemonic politics”\textsuperscript{10} can do away with these contradictions. Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s article discusses the monolithic, universalizing and essentializing constructions of women in the third world by Western feminism. She suggests:

> An analysis of ‘sexual difference’ in the form of cross-culturally singular, monolithic notion of patriarchy or male dominance leads to the construction of a similarly reductive and homogenous notion of what I shall call the ‘third-world difference’—that stable, ahistorical something that apparently oppresses most, if not all the women in these countries.\textsuperscript{11}

While criticising the discursive production of the third world woman which erases geographical and historical specificity, Mohanty recommends a decolonising and reorienting of contemporary feminism. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her essay, “Discussion: An Afterword on the New Subaltern”, critically examines the ‘new

\textsuperscript{8} The agitations in which both upper caste men and women participated, following the announcement of the then Prime Minister V.P. Singh in August 1990 regarding the implementation of 27% reservations for Backward Castes, in government service and public sector, as per the recommendations of the Mandal Commission report.

\textsuperscript{9} The incident that took place on 6 August 1991, in the village of Chunduru in coastal Andhra Pradesh, where thirteen Dalits were murdered by upper caste Reddys.


subaltern’ which stems from the monolithic woman-as-victim notion and remarks on how women’s issues assume the position of an international dominant which is the product of nationalism and modernity.\textsuperscript{12} She describes the endeavours of organizations like the United Nations as “efforts to bring the world’s women under one rule of law, one civil society, administered by the women of internationally divided dominant.”\textsuperscript{13} She suggests that only a women’s history that patiently learns from below can deconstruct this new subaltern. Sharmila Rege’s “A Dalit Feminist Standpoint” portrays the problems of contemporary feminism in India more explicitly. She speaks of the tendency to universalize women’s experience and womanhood, paying the price of excluding Dalit/marginalised womanhood.\textsuperscript{14} Rege points at how mainstream feminist theory develops around three crucial categories—woman, experience and personal politics—which prove inadequate to explain the experience of all kinds of women. She writes:

Though powerful as political rhetoric, these categories posed theoretical problems. The category ‘woman’ was conceived as being based on the collective state of women being oppressed by the fact of their womanhood. As the three categories were deployed in combination, it often led to exclusions around race, class, caste and ethnicity. (90)

These academic interventions as well as women’s movements from marginalised sections have prompted feminism to reconfigure its frames and move away from its 90s stand.

\textsuperscript{12} Tejaswini Niranjana, “Nationalism Refigured: Contemporary South Indian Cinema and the Subject of Feminism,” Subaltern Studies IX, eds. Partha Chatterjee and Pradeep Jagannathan (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2000).


Sarah Joseph, also an academic, has reviewed and reworked her frames in the later stage of her writing career, as is apparent in her novels. An analysis of these frames will help us look at the possibilities and limitations of the efforts at reconfiguration. The shifts that can be seen in her writings from the first two phases to the third phase attests a constant reviewing of frames on the part of the writer to be more inclusive while dealing with women’s issues. The initial phases of writing assume a certain kind of universality of women’s experiences, while the other identities are at play only in the background. The writings of the third phase place women within the multiple folds of society such as region, family, community, caste, etc. Inequalities among women are portrayed to demonstrate the operations of patriarchy on women in terms of caste, community and ethnicity. Theoretical interventions from inside and outside the mainstream feminist movement, has enabled a theorization of necessary reviews and amendments the movement has to make to become more inclusive. Sarah Joseph says that *Alahayude Penmakkal* is an attempt to map the lives of those who occupy the margins of society. The spaces that are portrayed in the novels are mainly spaces inhabited by women, which bring out the resistances and subversions within it, along with a sense of belonging. However, the analysis of her novels helps gauge whether the writer’s attempts to render a more inclusive space have indeed materialised.

I would like to outline the stories briefly before I present my analysis of them. *Alahayude Penmakkal*, set in the 1950s and 60s is the story of a small region called Kakkanchira and its inhabitants. The novel unfolds through the eyes of an 8-year-old girl. The narrative focuses on Annie and her family. Annie’s family includes her mother, grandmother, three
aunts, her uncle who is a Tuberculosis patient, their neighbours who like Annie’s family come to live in Kokkanchira because they were cast out the city space, and histories of Kokkanchira. The history/histories of Kokkanchira are narrated in *Alahayude Penmakkal* after Annie is insulted in school because she belongs to Kokkanchira. In response to the humiliation, Annie decides to change the name of the place. Kokkanchira means ghost land, and Kodichi angadi, the street where Annie lives, means bitch’s market. She is often seen feeling ashamed of being a resident of places with such dirty surroundings and names. The writer narrates the history of Kokkanchira by employing oral narrative methods, which are very different from the form of mainstream, male-constructed history. Rewriting history is not a novel idea and has been recommended and practiced by many. However, in *Alahayude Penmakkal*, the histories of Kokkanchira are used to extend the space of women’s history, through the narratives of subaltern women. The first inhabitants of Kokkanchira, a barren place that was used to dump waste, rubbish and dead bodies of unidentified persons, were scavengers and they were followed by many others whom the city rejected. The various versions of Kokkanchira’s history include: the story that Annie’s mind told (what she imagines), Ammama’s (Annie’s grandmother) oral *kathacharitram*, the story told by the scavengers, and the story of a butcher’s shop.

There are more versions of it, recorded by many. Fisherfolks, brokers, small-scale thieves, arrack-makers, body-sellers–Kokkanchira was filled with those whom the city rejected. The city was also growing. Annie’s family also belongs to those who were rejected by the city.15

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This history of Kokkanchira that is narrated is maintained as a counter-history to the mainstream version that circulated. Instead of a monolithic history, several versions of the history or histories are presented. And these histories are told by those who have lived experience of it. After listening to these multiple versions of Kokkanchira’s history, Annie decides that it is not correct to change Kokkanchira’s name. In course of time, the city grows and engulfs Kokkanchira, pushing those whom it had rejected to the boundaries. Places get renamed. Streets like Kodichiyangadi, where women spoke and fought noisily, are replaced by neat and clean Martha Mariam Roads. *Alahayude Penmakkal* is about the colonisation of Kokkanchira and its marginalised lives, by the city. What is made explicit through the construction of such a counter-history is not just another side of the history, but also another portrayal of the region itself.

*Mattathi* is set in the 1970s and 80s in the same region. The place is no more Kokkanchira—it is Mariyapuram. Here, the protagonist is a young woman in her late teens, Lucy. She lives with an 80-year-old relative of hers, Brigita, who is rich and unmarried. Lucy serves the purpose of a servant for Brigita. School and college are depicted as resting places for Lucy, where she is free of housework. Lucy’s only friends are Cherona, the washerwoman, and Sundari, Lucy’s classmate, who is a Dalit. Lucy does not have the freedom of movement Annie had in *Alahayude Penmakkal*. Mariyapuram does not have the breadth that Kokkanchira had. Lucy’s world is restricted to the kitchen and backyard, whereas Brigita’s world consists of the front portion of the house. For Lucy, the house faces the backyard. She knows all the small details of the kitchen. We see how she explores the possibilities of this space since other spaces are not
Othappu is the story of a socially and economically privileged woman (Margalita), who leaves the nunnery after spending some years there as a highly respected nun. The “ideal” family of Margalita does not welcome her back. We see the very institutions of religion, family and society, which had accorded her a privileged position and a place of pride, abandon Margalita when she leaves the Order. The other characters of this novel are people like Augustine, a priest who refuses to stay confined to religion and serve the poor, Brother Manikyan who gives holy services outside the Church to protest against the upper caste Church, Rebecca, a relative of Margalita, who lives in the streets and speaks about god, and the family of Yohannan Kasheesha—a priest of another denomination who provides food and accommodation for Margalita. Another main character is Kareekkan, a Catholic priest and a friend of Margalita. Kareekkan falls in love with Margalita and marries her, but always fears society. Margalita, who is refused a job by her brothers in the school which was established by her father, takes up the job of sweeping the ration

Here, the kitchen begins to represent a region. Through characters like Brigita, Lucy, Cherona and Sundari, the power structures among women are made obvious. Along with recording the lives of these characters, the changes that are brought in Mariyapuram through economic and social changes are also underscored. The novel ends when Brigita’s relatives push Lucy out of the house after Brigita’s death. The novel also functions as a mirror of the social and political changes that took place in the 70s and 80s in Keralam.

shop for a livelihood. We see Margalita pregnant and at the same time taking care of an orphan child, living in a house with a single room, at the end of the story. She claims that she is happy with her life and the novel ends there.

The novel deals with a woman’s fight against religious and social institutions. It challenges the morality imposed by the church, its casteist attitudes and the hierarchies that structure these institutions. The story portrays a woman’s search for her freedom and space within male-centred institutions. Unlike the other two novels, the space explored in Othappu is a supposedly male space. It offers an expansion of spaces assigned to women-writers by treading on spaces that are clearly male, but focusing on the struggles of a woman caught within these patriarchal structures.

In these three novels, we see a juxtaposition of nation and region. The word Sarah Joseph uses for region is “desham.” Desham, although it indicates a cultural and geographical area within the nation, gives a more local sense and suggests having indefinite boundaries unlike the nation. It resists the hegemonic apparatuses of the modern nation. In Alahayude Penmakkal, Trissur (the city) is a distant place. The vastness of the region is the vastness of Kokkanchira. The boundaries of Kokkanchira are fuzzy. The nation comes into the narrative in the form of Gandhi, Gandhism, Nehru, the Congress party and Communism. In Mattathi, Mariyapuram (the new name for Kokkanchira) is closer to Trissur. Only some old connections of Kokkanchira separate it from Trissur. The people

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17 Desham in Malayalam means region. In languages like Hindi, the word desh is used to refer to nation as well.
of Mariyapuram celebrate Independence Day and feel the pangs of patriotism when they
salute the national flag. In Othappu, there is no Kokkanchira or Mariyapuram. There is
again no reference to the nation directly. However, the nation is all-pervasive. We see its
apparatus present ubiquitously. Margalita’s brother is the mayor of the Trissur
Corporation. The capillary nature of State power becomes obvious through these
developments, where the region present in Alahayude Penmakkal dissolves to become a
part of the nation and its activities. Thus, we can read the trilogy as the genealogy of a
region which is obliterated by the nation. And this genealogy is constructed from the
memories of women, mainly women from socially and economically deprived sections.

Alahayude Penmakkal attempts to rewrite the history of Christianity in Kerala by
providing a wide range of histories to the community and region. This novel, unlike the
other two novels in the trilogy, does not deal with Syrian Christian community. Ammama
recollects their lineage as follows: “Sixty-four Christian families were brought to
Puthanpetta to live there. We don’t belong to that group. We come below that.”

Unlike Mattathi and Othappu, which speak about the contradictions in upper caste Syrian
Christian society, Alahayude Penmakkal deconstructs the existing mainstream history of
the Christian community, including Syrian Christians, and reconstructs it through the
eyes of subaltern characters. Therefore, the narrative of the novel remains different from
other Syrian Christian narratives, which speak of their heritage, lineage, etc. and it
reveals the contradictions within mainstream Syrian Christian narratives which come
through in other novels. Caste hierarchies within Christianity are delineated explicitly in

Mattathi, mainly through the dialogues of Brigita. In her conversation with the Gulf-
returned newly rich Oppan who tells Brigita that he had visited her house in his
childhood, she states that she was averse to allowing recently converted people inside her
house. Othappu gives an account of a more institutionalised casteist attitude of the
Church in the distribution of power, positions etc. Brother Manikyan, whom the church
did not permit into priesthood because he belonged to a lower class, marks his protest by
serving poor people. Sarah Joseph calls it “Karutha Kurbana” (Blacks’ Mass). Karutha
Kurbana, a book written during the same time by a non-upper caste priest, reveals the
presence of caste hierarchies within the institution. Sarah Joseph has attempted to
accommodate and represent these lone voices as rising against repression in her novel.
These representations of caste discrimination surpass the level of mere depictions of
reality, as they take acknowledge the veiled histories and recent historiographies that
uncover them.

In addition to being a narrative that is different from the mainstream Syrian Christian
narratives, the novel demonstrates historical narration through women’s eyes. The point
of view the narration assumes strictly adheres to the world of women’s lives. For
example, the fourteen KDs in the region appear three times in Alahayude Penmakkal.
The first incident is when they follow Annie’s aunt Nonu, who was going to Trissur to

21 Fr. Aloysius D. Fernandes, Karutha Kurbana (Trissur: Bishop Dr. Paulose Mar Paulose Foundation for
Socio-Cultural Development, 2005).
22 KD is a local usage meaning “rowdy.”
sell homemade bread. She starts running when they follow her. When she reaches a bridge, she jumps down.

Shocked, the KDs stood on the bridge...help, help...All fourteen KDs cried loudly. None of them knew how to swim.23

Another instance is when Kokkanchira was affected by cholera. The KDs also suffered from Cholera.

They also got stomach ache. Without taking the knife, without tying their kerchief around the neck (which is the trademark of KDs) they ran to the hospital (79)

Towards the end, the KDs also disappear with Kokkanchira as the city limits grow and engulf the region. The plight of the KDs is described in the novel as follows:

After Kizhakkekotta Tomakkutty’s son demolished the butcher’s shop and put it for sale, the worst affected were the KDs. The KDs do not have an existence away from the verandah of the butcher’s shop. They tried to find verandahs of other shops. But nobody permitted them. ‘We do not have anything against you people. But the business will be affected. No woman would come to the shop,’ said the shop keepers. (126)

No youth came forward to join. Some became part of a martial arts school. One fell ill. One person converted to the Pentecostal mission and the rest were scattered and left for other places. Sarah Joseph reflects on this uncommon mode of story-telling.

In *Alahayude Penmakkal*, women are those who experience history. The writer, Annie, Ammama–these three are women. The three instances in the novel related to the KDs are the history experienced by women. Otherwise, while mentioning

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14 KDs, how many fights, murders, lootings they have indulged in, how many times they went to the jail—all these would become important. However, these details are not important for these three women.  

Women’s versions of histories are projected as counter narratives of the dominant version of history. Marking women’s lives and experiences as the basis of their version of history, women’s history historicises the so-called unimportant and not-noteworthy as its subject. Sarah Joseph writes about the politics of the dominant history as follows:

…History is always like that. It will not give space to some truths. ‘All that is really a headache’: said History. How many tiny small things are there in this world? How can you accommodate all that in history? Those things can be said only through films or stories. Why should it be through history? History needs serious subjects. War, murder, invasion, and things like that.  

*Alahayude Penmakkal*, by rewriting the conventional forms of historiography and concepts of nation formation, offers itself as a form of resistance against modernist provinciality. The novel is narrated from a subaltern perspective and brings in the issue of how marginalised populations are consciously excluded from the modern accounts of the nation. Tamil Dalit woman writer, Bama’s *Sangati,* shares a similar and probably more powerful narrative of subaltern spaces. In *Alahayude Penmakkal*, Annie knows the history of Kokkanchira from Ammama, her grandmother. In *Sangati* too, the young protagonist knows the world from the stories of her grandmother, Muthiyamma. The regions presented in both the novels have boundaries set by social stigma—in *Alahayude*
Penmakkal lines are drawn along categories of class and caste whereas in Sangati it is caste that decides the boundary of the region and where people live.

Sarah Joseph envisages Annie’s family in terms of ‘womanspace’. It is unique and unlike the stereotypical family image comprising father, mother and children. It is different from the male-dominated, confined family in the first phase of Sarah Joseph’s writings or the repressing and suffocating family in the second phase. Other than Kuttipappan, Annie’s paternal uncle, everyone else in the family is a woman. Annie’s father left her mother when Annie was only nine days old, and nobody knew where he went. The only information available about him is that he is a Communist. So, the family is completely dependent on women’s labour. Annie’s elder aunt, a widow, is a local midwife and hers is the only substantial income in the family. Her younger aunts work in a button company which makes buttons for the uniforms of soldiers. After the war, the button company is closed and they start making buttons and laces for tailors in the city. Before becoming a midwife, Annie’s elder aunt used to make ‘appam’ and sell it to people. After she loses her midwife’s job with new hospitals and doctors coming in, she and Annie’s mother start carrying lunch for office-goers. All these could be considered as extensions of domestic labour.

In Mattathi also, a stereotypical family is absent. Brigita and Lucy are the only inhabitants of the house. Brigita, an 80-year-old single woman, often makes fun of family and marriage and concludes that she could live her life the way she wanted because she did not opt for either of this. Lucy, however, dreams about a family with a lot of people
because she has no one. However, she is also subject to dysfunctional families as in the case of Cherona and Sundari, where the family is seen as not providing any support. A modern nuclear family is also introduced to Lucy through Celina, Brigita’s niece who is settled in Bombay, and comes to stay at Brigita’s house with husband and child. In *Othappu*, we see that Margalita loses her space in her family. The framed photograph of the family in the front room, which was taken before she left the nunnery, functions as an ironic image of the contradictions within. However, the family that Margalita dreams to have with Kareekan and her children (one her own and another adopted) has the structure of a stereotypical family, although it is never realized.

Since the space is envisaged as ‘womanspace,’ women’s experiences are embellished and are abundantly available through the novel. For instance, consider that Kunjila’s being a local midwife, allows the family access to details of delivery, labour pain, etc on a daily basis.

Kadinjul (first delivery), labour pain etc are words that Annie is exposed to everyday. She does not know what exactly these are. She tries to guess it. However, from whatever she hears, she understands this much – that delivering a baby is one of the most difficult and painful things in the world…delivery…whosoever it is, however far it is, Annie has noticed that everybody in her family gets tensed and prays–especially if it is the first.\(^{27}\)

These experiences and sorrows attain universality within specific contexts as women’s experiences. The space shared by Lucy with the washerwoman Cherona, Lucy’s

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classmate Sundari, Brigita’s niece Celina, in Mattathi are examples of this. In Othappu, Margalita shares this with a woman she finds in the hospital veranda, her cousin Rebecca who behaves like a prophet in the Old Testament, Sr. Abelamma, etc.

Mattathi also explores another level of women’s experiences and the spaces they inhabit by suggesting that domestic spaces can hold infinite possibilities or minutiae. The kitchen becomes the pivot of narration. Vessels, the well, the long door-less window through which Lucy can see the backyard of the house, the cattle shed, the fowl, the vegetable garden, the process of cooking, recipes of dishes—all these occupy the novel in vivid detail. In this respect, Mattathi is one of the rarest works in Malayalam—it heavily underscores the space of the kitchen. And by focusing on the kitchen and the activities therein, the narrative highlights women’s labour which is rarely recognized as labour. In this way, Mattathi deals with a completely different space. It engages entirely with a domestic space and the domesticity of the kitchen. There are not many literary works that focus on the kitchen as a space. There are works like M.T Vasudevan Nair’s Nalukettu which includes instances where he nostalgically remembers the taste of some dishes prepared by his mother when they were in poverty. However, the narrative never goes beyond the nostalgic feeling to explore more about the space or the person who made it. Madhavikkutty’s (Kamala Das/Surayya) works to a great extent reflect on the domestic space and the kitchen, although from a third person’s perspective. The young protagonist of the narrative spends most of her time with the servants of the house.

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28 M.T. Vasudevan Nair, Nalukettu (Trissur: Current Books, 2002).
29 I have taken the stories that are included in the collection titled Varshangalku Munpu to discuss the domestic sphere narrativised in Madhavikutty’s writings. Madhavikutty, Varshangalku Munpu (Trissur: Current Books, 1989).
Although these accounts do not consciously present the politics of the kitchen and the domestic space, they provide enough material for that. In Madhavikkutty’s narrative, we can find individual spaces allotted to each character. The movements of each character are decided by the unwritten rules of the family. We see the young girl’s grandmother who moves in and out of the kitchen to the front rooms. The way she functions in both these spaces is different. She is more authoritative in the kitchen whereas she becomes very docile and subdued in the front room where Madhavikkutty’s uncle sits. The kitchen and the backyard hold gossip\(^{30}\) and information that are not supposed to be heard by a child, which is what intrigues her enough to go there. The cook, who is a man, often laments about being there and doing a woman’s job. There are other women servants whose access to each space is determined by their caste. While women of the family, except for her grandmother, rarely come to the kitchen, they read literature or are busy following Gandhi, the kitchen space is replete with gossip, sex talk, and the like. The kitchen is also a space where people express their opinions about many things ranging from a neighbour’s life to politics. To an extent, Madhavikutty explores this space and the role plays that operate within a family; but the narrative itself does not engage the space of the activity other than acting as a listener or viewer. Udayakumar writes about the involvement on the part of protagonist in Kamala Das’ story “Soap Nirmanam” (Soap Making, 9–15) as follows:

In this story, we see the presence of the narrator or the subject ‘I’ very rarely. The narrator is silent or invisible in the narrative world of the story. She is just an

\(^{30}\) Seemanthini Niranjana makes a very interesting observation on the act “gossiping” as an invisibilized form of agency that helps to maintain and define boundaries. Seemanthini Niranjana, Gender and Space: Femininity, Sexualization and the Female Body (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001) 94.
observer who stands near Ammamma, her grandmother. The story just records the conversations of her grandmother, servants and guests. The subject ‘I’ of the autobiographical account merely functions as an eye or ear or a sense that is unaware of the self.31

Domestic space is often perceived by mainstream feminism as a place to which tradition binds women and therefore it is a space from which women should acquire freedom. This may be true in many cases; but works like Mattathi show a different side of the picture. The protagonist of Mattathi feels quite at home in this domestic space. She looks at it as her private space. Her experiences, pleasurable as well as painful, are bound to that space. She owns that space although she does not have any ownership over the house. Mainstream feminism views the kitchen and the domestic space as spaces owned by tradition and observes the interactions and activities that occur in this space with suspicion.

Udayakumar states that Madhavikkutty’s narratives complicate this relationship between tradition and domestic space. When Madhavikutty’s Ammamma participates in the activities of the kitchen, it is difficult to say that it is a womanly interaction that is occurring. But when men participate in the activities in the kitchen, by rejecting the usual, set cultural codes, it expands the possibilities of kitchen and domestic space. This is very true in the interventions of Kali Narayanan Nair and Shankaran, the two cooks of Madhavikutty’s Nalappattu household. In Mattathi, the activities open the possibilities of

the female self, not conscious of the feminist or feminine self.\textsuperscript{32} Women’s activities in the kitchen appear to be part of the traditional role-play. But the same space has the ability to make space for the self. It is not a third person’s account like Madhavikkutty’s narrative. The kitchen in the narrative functions like a vast region, with its minute details and it is Lucy’s private world. Even when she has access to the outside world, she yearns for the privacy of this space. Unlike the very few literary works that describe the kitchen and the domestic space, \textit{Mattathi} goes into minute details of activities that play out in the kitchen. It includes recipes, the activity of cooking, the structure of different vessels, cooking space and everything that relates to cooking.

This intervention on the part of Sarah Joseph to politicise the kitchen and domestic space is reflected in two articles by her—“Nammude Adukkala Thirichu Pidikkuka”\textsuperscript{33} (Recapture the Kitchen) and “Bhagavadgitayude Adukkalayil Ezhuthukar Vevikkunnathu”\textsuperscript{34} (What Writers Cook in Bhagavadgita’s Kitchen) written in the late 1990s. As the titles suggest, the kitchen is seen as a space of domination and resistance. In “Nammude Adukkala Thirichu Pidikkuka,” Sarah Joseph traces the history of the kitchen as a central space to early societies and clans. She says that the kitchen in the present society however is a site of multiple repressions. She writes:

\begin{quote}
Who owns the kitchen? The male dominating ideologies have claimed that the kitchen is the forte of woman. The scope of exercising her skills of management
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{32} Here again, I draw from Showalter’s proposition of the three phases—feminine, feminist and female.
\textsuperscript{33} I have used the English translation for citations as the bibliographical detail of the Malayalam article is incomplete. Sarah Joseph, Recapture the Kitchen, \textit{Recapture the Kitchen} Trans. from Malayalam by V.S. Anilkumar and Ann George (Chennai: Centre for Women’s studies, Madras Christian college, 1999).
\textsuperscript{34} Sarah Joseph, \textit{Bhagawadgitayude Adukkalayil Ezhuthukar Vevikkunnathu} (Kozhikode: Secular Books, 2000).
and maintaining power are limited to the four walls of the kitchen. In spite of limiting the world of women like this, the monopoly of power in the kitchen has never been transferred to women. Even in this domain of hers, the decision regarding what and how much she must cook is taken away from her hands by power centres and multinational companies. 

The kitchen in Mattathi is free from this kind of male-domination. Lucy feels that the kitchen is her own space, although Brigita divests her of these powers to an extent. According to Sarah Joseph, male-domination and its demands have never acknowledged cooking as a creative art for a woman where she could explore her creativity depending on her taste preferences. Vijayalakshmi, a character in one of the short stories, is in search of this creative talent of hers. When she leaves her job to devote more time to cooking, her husband wonders how backward his wife is when it comes to progressive thoughts in women. But she replies that it is laying the foundation after the struggle. Her husband is not able to comprehend this act of Vijayalakshmi’s because he does not view cooking as a creative art. However, the kitchen and the interiors in Mattathi provide Lucy a sense of security. Lucy leaves the house after Brigita’s death, “like a child which comes out of the womb to the world of noises and blinding light.” The article, “Bhagavadgitayude Adukkalayil Ezhuthukar Vevikkunnathu” talks about caste and other kind of power relations in the kitchen space through the narration of one of her childhood experiences. Sarah Joseph writes:

The most insulting knowledge I discovered when I was in the fifth standard was that I could not enter the kitchen of my friend Gita’s house. I got to know that it was because Gita is a Hindu and I am a Christian, and if Christians enter a Hindu kitchen, the Hindus become impure.  

She also realises that she does not experience the same problem in the houses of lower caste Hindus. The kitchen we see here is under the control of dominant ideologies; it becomes a space that reproduces the values of the dominant section of society. Sarah Joseph urges us to move towards a denial of these ideologies to recapture a kitchen that is democratic, as one similar to the early societies. She writes that, although we need to boycott a kitchen that is a site of multiple dominations, a kitchen which is a central and important space of men and women, like the one shared by tribal people, should be recaptured.

However, when we read narratives by C.K. Janu, or even Bama’s autobiographical accounts, one significant difference that we note is the absence of the kitchen or the minimal presence of the domestic space. This directs us to the fact that this is a space that is mainly upper caste/middleclass in nature. In Janu’s narrative, she mentions that the concept of family is not similar to the mainstream concept of a man, woman and their children. She speaks about how she and her friends carried out what was normally termed 

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men’s labour and stayed together in a house. Domestic space is not as vast as it is in middle class homes. In Bama’s narratives too, either their profession is as domestic labourers or it is similar to what is considered primarily male labour. Women do not sit at home like the “respectable middle class women.” They go out and work like men. Cooking elaborately is not possible due to poverty. However, even when it is within the frames of middle class lifestyle, Sarah Joseph’s accounts of the kitchen and the domestic space open up different possibilities left unexplored by other women writers. The difference in the genres that encase these accounts – Sarah Joseph’s being fictional and the other two texts being autobiographical–becomes unimportant for this study, which examines literature as a cultural code. However, Sarah Joseph in her memoir says that Alahayude Penmakkal is the story of her region and childhood memories, and it has autobiographical elements in it.42

Othappu deals with a woman’s fight against religious and social institutions. The character Margalita does not have a space of her own. Therefore, her journeys are through spaces that are usually allotted to men. The only space she has for herself is her own mind. The vastness of this space, i.e., her mind, makes her experience spaces of social as well as religious institutions as limiting. There is no access to the domestic space for Margalita, as she fails to limit herself to spaces that are allotted to women. Her explorations are out in the man’s world. However, in Alahayude Penmakkal where most of Annie’s family members are domestic labourers, there is no mention of their own

domestic space or kitchen. Here they experience this space in their life outside home and thus somebody else’s private/domestic space becomes their workplace.

Bama’s *Karukku* and Sarah Joseph’s *Othappu* share a major similarity on the grounds that both the novels deal with protagonists who are nuns and who left the Order. Both are unhappy with the Order as they had different expectations of it when they had joined it. Bama’s novel is an autobiographical account where the narrative flows spontaneously in and out of memory and experiences. *Othappu* is a novel consciously written by the writer to record the resistance on the part of a woman to religion and its institutional structures, and a woman’s search for her own space. *Othappu* also consciously tries to accommodate academic discussions on caste and patriarchal structures in Christianity; there is a consistent effort to deconstruct dominant ways of writing history. Within the confines of the Order, the women of both the novels grow dissatisfied with the way the church serves humanity. However, there are enough differences between the two texts to make Bama’s novel stand out as more realistic and Sarah Joseph’s as largely idealistic. The main difference is in the identity of the protagonists. Margalita, the protagonist of *Othappu*, is from a very privileged background whereas the character in *Karukku* belongs to the Dalit community. This difference is reflected in their attitude towards the concept of service. Margalita wants to escape from all kinds of selfish thoughts that were generated from the ‘family.’ She says to her father:
Family is a prison of emotions. Selfishness is its foundation. My mother, my father, my husband, my children, my property…I want to escape from this wretched selfishness.\(^{43}\)

But, in *Karukku*, the protagonist has a much more practical attitude towards service and why she wants to get into the Order. She has contradictory feelings about joining the Order.

More and more the thought grew in my mind that I should become a nun, and teach those who suffer that there is a Jesus who cares; to put heart into them and to urge them onwards. At the same time, I also was aware that even if I became a nun, I might never be allowed to act in this way. All the same, however hard I pushed it away, the idea grew stronger.\(^{44}\)

The people whom Margalita wants to serve do not have an identity. They are the nameless, faceless poor. She could not remember anyone she knew who needed her service. She feels insulted when her father, who was the only one who discouraged her from joining the Order, tells her that if she thought having a family was selfish, she could as well have served Ayyappan and his family, a poor and sick neighbour of theirs. Her family was very happy about her decision, and it was a matter of prestige for them. Bama on the other hand, was aware of the double standards of the Church even when she decided to join the Order. But she did not have to think twice about whom she was going to serve. Those she was to serve had always been before her very eyes – her community,

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her people. She leaves the Order when she realises the institution does not support her wish.

I made my first vows with many hopes and thoughts in my heart. I dreamt that I would share my life with the poor and the suffering, live and die for them. Instead, I was sent to a prestigious school, and asked to teach there...All the children there came from wealthy families. The convent too was a well-endowed one. And the Jesus they worshipped there was a wealthy Jesus. There seemed to be no connection between God and the suffering poor. (91-92)

Except for the fact that both of them were in the Order and left it, the reasons each of them has for joining and leaving the Order were completely different. Margalita develops her own ideas of family, service to humanity, religion etc. Kareekkan, the priest who leaves the Order to marry Margalita, is not able to cope with Margalita’s notion of a family. He runs away, unable to take society’s bitterness. Kareekkan in a way is presented as a coward who values society’s opinion highly, whereas Margalita comes off as one who does not. The narrative outlines the difference in their family backgrounds too. For Kareekkan, he and his family could attain some respect in the society only after he became a priest. Margalita is presented as a bold and beautiful woman and we see that the other characters cringe in her presence. She feels gloriously alienated from the world she lives in. Sarah Joseph’s novel Othappu criticises the Church and its institutional paraphernalia minutely. However, it fails to criticise Margalita—a product of the Church’s upper caste lineages, affiliations, and biases. There are situations where she fails to practise what she preaches about serving people. When Margalita goes to meet Brother Augustine, who lives like an ascetic and serves the poor, she cannot live up to the kind of
service he does for society. He takes care of people who live near the sewage, bathes them and gives them food when they are unwell. Margalita cannot handle anything ugly or dirty. When Augustine asks her to help him change the clothes of a poor dying woman, she thinks:

‘No…if it is some other kind of service…I will be able to do it patiently…’

Margalita wanted to puke. The dark and dirty sides of life scared Margalita.”

The main difference between *Alahayude Penmakkal* and *Sangati* is in the way both the texts talk about caste in Christianity. Annie’s grandmother Ammama is well aware of the lower social status they hold as they are not converted by St. Thomas like Syrian Christians. She also criticises the Church and priests for being biased towards socially and economically privileged members. There is no critique of conversion offered from the side of the converted. A more sophisticated critique is provided in *Othappu*, regarding conversion. But *Sangati* offers a stronger and more effective critique of conversion than *Othappu*, through Muthiyamma and her daughter, although they are not educated or modern. The critique is applicable at different levels. One is about the monogamous marital relationship that is mandatory for Christians. Muthiyamma’s daughter says:

If we think closely, it was nonsense to get converted to Christianity. If we were Hindus at least we women would have had the right to get rid of our marriage if the man proves bad.  

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This critique obviously does not sit well with pro-Hindu sentiments as it does not speak of the upper caste Hindu marriage concept, where the woman is supposed to remain monogamous and dutiful to her husband. What she suggests as a better option is their own community which offers that particular freedom to a woman. Another critique of conversion comes with the realization that even after getting converted to Christianity, which advertises itself as a religion where everyone is equal, the status of the people from the lower strata of society remains the same.

What happens in the Church? We are the ones who sweep and clean the whole Church. And when people from other castes come, we have to give way to them. We clean the place and they get to go and sit in the front. I was sick of seeing this and once I asked about this to a nun. Do you know what she told me? If we clean the Church, we will be blessed. We will have god’s grace. They have to trick us in the name of God. Don’t they need any blessings? (116)

Bama, in an interview says that Christianity also follows the same caste system as Hinduism.

Whatever Brahmins do in Hinduism, upper caste Christians do in the Church. They will be educated—priests, nuns. And power over everything rests in them… The only benefit of conversion was accessing education. That is why I was educated. Those Dalits who did not get converted did not get educated. Christian missionaries give a lot of importance to health and education. And people like us have benefited from that. (131)

Othappu puts forward a variety of arguments against the Church and its institutional functioning. It takes into account caste system in Christianity, as the power and control of
Church rests with the upper caste Christians. There are people like Brother Manikyan, a Dalit priest, who is not accepted by the Church. However these interventions by Sarah Joseph remain at the level of politically correct academic interventions that sympathise with the cause. But Bama’s interventions are from the side of the victim or subject, and thus transcend the level of a sympathetic approach.

All the three novels of Sarah Joseph reflect the socio-political changes of the time in which they are set. These narrations are envisaged by the writer as women’s versions of the socio-political changes of the novels temporal spaces. Annie’s family, we note, is so diverse. When it comes to politics, Annie’s father is a Communist and her uncle is a Gandhian. Ammama, although she is a believer, supports her elder son. Annie’s mother hates Communists, as she was abandoned by her husband, a Communist. Her hatred towards Communists is manifested during the Vimochanasamaram47 (The Liberation Struggle strikes organised by the Catholic Church against the first Communist party-led ministry in Kerala). Annie’s mother does not know what this agitation is for. She just knows that it is against Communists and she passionately joins the protest, considering herself to be victim of Communism. Nowhere in the novel is it mentioned as Vimochanasamaram. It is narrated through Annie’s mother’s involvement, the slogans that she shouts during the protests, the names of Communist leaders like Joseph Mundassery and EMS Namboothiripad discussed in relation to the protest, etc. There are other Communist sympathisers like Kurumba, a neighbour. Quarrels between different

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47 Vimochanasamaram in Kerala’s history is a political agitation started in 1958 against the first Communist government in Keralam, following the introduction of an education bill by the then education minister Joseph Mundassery. It was organized by the Catholic Church along with the Nair Service Society. E.M.S Namboothiripad was the chief minister.
denominations of the Church also surface in the domestic space. In the quarrels between Annie’s mother and Ammama, who belong to different denominations, many historical facts that are specific to Christianity in Keralam surface with relation to each of their denominations. They always fight about the Coonan Kurishu Sathyam\(^ {48} \) (Coonan Cross Oath) that happened in 1653 which made the Catholic Church split into two denominations, and hold each other responsible for the split. Each one makes fun of traditions specific to the other’s denomination, although they belong to the same family. The Emergency, the newly visible marked difference between rich and poor, modernity, problems in marriage and issues like dowry, the emergence of the Pentecostal mission, TB as an incurable disease—the novel gives us women’s versions of all these issues. Many of these issues that take place in the public sphere seep into the narration from time to time, but it is narrated in the way in which it relates to the lives of women on a day-to-day basis. Caste, community and religion are all discussed in relation to women’s lives and their involvement with these institutions. What Sarah Joseph narrates through this is a situation similar to what Paule Marshall describes in her article, “From the Poets in the Kitchen.”\(^ {49} \) Marshall, while describing the lives of women in her community who worked as domestic labourers, narrates how the then contemporary politics and social issues came into the conversation of the supposedly uneducated women. She writes:

> They raged against World War II when it broke out in Europe, blaming it on the politicians. “It’s these politicians. They’re the ones always starting up all this lot of war. But what they care? It is the poor people got to suffer and mothers with

\(^{48}\) Coonan Kurishu Sathyam was taken in 1653 by a group of St. Thomas Christians, reacting to the persecution of their Church by the Portuguese colonials and Jesuit missionaries. This resulted in the split of the Catholic church in Keralam in to different denominations.

their sons.” If it was their sons, they swore they would keep them out of the Army by giving them soap to eat each day to make their hearts sound defective. Hitler? He was for them “the devil incarnate.” (629)

Therefore, the kitchen is portrayed as a site of oppression as well as a site which explores the possibilities of women’s expression. It is portrayed as a world of women, which is formed as a result of the conflation of personal as well as public interests.

Alaha’s prayer—recited by Ammama to exorcise evil—features as a major image in the novel that juxtaposes subaltern involvement in a religion or faith, against an organised and autocratic faith demanded by the Church. The prayer is passed from one generation to the other through women, unlike in the Church where men have the agency to correspond with god. However, Annie’s mother who blindly believes in the Church, operates as an agent of the Roman Catholic Church. She considers this prayer to be satanic and against the church and God. Mattathi reflects changes like Gulf migration, nuclear family, the Naxal movement, Hippy culture—all of which were characteristic of that time and region—and offers several versions of those movements from different kinds of women. Othappu speaks about the market, globalization, power structures, and protests against the Church from lower caste Christians.

These novels surpass the narrative sensitivities of urban, middleclass, feminist perspectives regarding caste, gender and identity, when compared to other writings in Malayalam. The writer explores spaces that are treated by dominant narratives as unimportant and confined, and demonstrates their richness and plurality. However, a
comparison of these novels with Karukku and Sangati gives us an idea about the limitations of the frames used by Sarah Joseph. Sangati and Karukku, apart from their thematic similarities to Alahayude Penmakkal and Othappu, function as useful tools to analyse the configuration and limitation of the space created in Sarah Joseph’s novels, in their attempt to bring the margins to the centre, by focusing on the culture and life of Dalits in Tamil Nadu.

Published about a decade before Sarah Joseph’s novels, Bama’s novels reconstruct the history of people who were not allowed to have a space of their own. Alahayude Penmakkal and Sangati can be compared on the grounds that both texts attempt to narrate the history of marginalised people. Both the texts employ oral narrative methods—an old woman as the story teller and a young girl as listener—and the history of a community is reconstructed through this. However, while Sarah Joseph’s attempts are focused on exploring the vastness of the region, Bama attempts to portray how the lives of people from the Paraya community are limited and confined to areas allotted to them by upper caste people. The vastness of space is presented to the reader as a space that is not explored or experienced.

Othappu and Karukku have protagonists who leave the nunnery after spending some years there as nuns. Both come out as a result of their dissatisfaction and disillusionment with religion and its institutions. In Othappu, Margalita joins the order with some idealistic notions about service to humanity and God. She enjoys the privilege of being a nun from the privileged section and earns people’s respect mainly for this reason. She
notices the caste biases of the Church. But she leaves the convent as she doesn’t find a space for her spirituality, which is again idealistic. Bama’s character joins the order with a much more direct ambition. She wants to serve the poor—people from her own community. But she is not allowed to serve people the way she wishes. She finds the Order’s notions of service to be superficial and fake and leaves the order. Both the characters and their act point in completely different directions. This shows how women, both Christian nuns, have different concerns and viewpoints. Mattathi, which takes a closer look at the domestic sphere, does not share any commonalities with Bama’s works as her works show how the domestic sphere is a privileged middle class phenomenon.

The spaces that are discussed in relation to women’s lives in these three stories open up the possibilities of womanspace. In this world of women, hierarchies and differences between women have been effectively portrayed by the writer. This world is about the spaces that are occupied by women, spaces that are hard won through resistances and subversions. These explorations become landmarks in the context of mainstream women writing, and at the same time point towards the non-inclusiveness of the experience of the other women. These novels, when compared to other mainstream writings, expand the possibilities of multiple spaces by exploring local regions and domestic spaces and by rewriting the family and community in terms of women’s perspective. Therefore, these novels explore the current implication of these spaces in relation to women’s lives, thereby facilitating a womanspace.
They taught my first lessons in the narrative art. They trained my ear. They set a standard of excellence. This is why the best of my work must be attributed to them; it stands as a testimony to the rich legacy of language and culture they so freely passed on to me in the wordshop of the kitchen. - Paule Marshall

One of the challenges associated with working on the writings of a contemporary writer, is that one needs to review and rework the framework of the study to incorporate the ongoing shifts and changes in the writings and ideology of the writer in a constantly shifting socio-political scenario. Since Sarah Joseph attempts to reflect these socio-political changes in her writings, it raises more challenges. However, this study offers contemporary views on the changing scenario of Sarah Joseph’s ideology and works. It locates her writings within the framework of contemporary trends of critical analysis.

When I took up this study, Sarah Joseph had published only two novels. The third and fourth novels, and the Ramayana stories as a separate collection along with its translation into English came out after I undertook this study. The shifts in her writings and ideology, along with critical comments from others, have often changed the initial trajectories of this study. Writings from other women writers, especially those from outside the folds of the dominant culture, have helped me in reviewing and reframing my argument, enabling me to critically look at the construction of a space for women in Sarah Joseph’s writings. A separate chapter on the Ramayana stories and the

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1 Paule Marshall, an American writer of West Indian origin, in her essay “From Poets in the Kitchen” attributes her writings and language to her childhood experiences of listening to her mother and her friends who sat around the kitchen table talking about matters varying from personal issues to politics in their common, domestic vocabulary. Sarah Joseph too uses this kind of a language and vocabulary by writing in a dialect specific to the region and community. Paule Marshall, *Callaloo* 24 (Spring 2001) 633.
juxtaposition of her works with writings from other unconventional women writers came about as a result of this.

An important contribution that the study makes is to recognise Sarah Joseph’s writings as constructing a “womanspace” that places women’s lives within their historic and discursive contexts. I see her writings as undergoing complex shifts, revising their frames of reference, and assuming various political positions to make the womanspace she envisages a more inclusive one. Interventions from outside these spaces should be considered valid criticism to widen the concerns of women’s writings as well as women’s movements.

Theoretical frames of the public/private dichotomy and its current implications are reviewed in the introduction. I have provided the viewpoints of Western as well as postcolonial theorists on this frame. The notions of the evolution of the public and private spheres are mapped out in an attempt to trace the incorporation of women into the public sphere and the consequent politicization of the private sphere. The introduction discusses the works of Western feminists on the public/private dichotomy to enable the framework to analyse the shift of the private to the public sphere through women writers and their works. The works of postcolonial scholars have reviewed the formation of the public sphere in India with its current implications through the involvement of women in the freedom and reform movements. Sarah Joseph’s works are placed in the contexts of interactions between the Indian state and women, the implications of women’s visibility, and the resistances and negotiations between tradition and modernity. Within these
multiple contexts, the study views women’s writing as a counterpublic that brings private matters into the public sphere while seeking the right to safeguard individual choices and rights. These interventions from women’s writings as well as women’s movements have therefore upset the borders of the public and private spheres to offer a critique of dominant culture and society.

The first chapter, “Through Histories of Women-writing,” looks at the formation of this counterpublic through resistances and negotiations. Selected moments from the history of women’s writing in Malayalam are reviewed to map the formation of this space using the pennezhuthu controversy as a point of reference. The chapter examines how Sarah Joseph, the iconic woman writer in Malayalam, becomes an important episode in reviewing the much-neglected history of women’s writing in Malayalam, by making a conscious attempt to reflect on the exclusionary politics of the dominant public sphere and women writers who were victims of it. This chapter also brings in the reform movements and struggles which defined and redefined women’s spaces.

The second chapter, “Towards a Feminist Self,” analyses the first two phases of Sarah Joseph’s works and discusses how her activist self contributed towards writings that consciously articulate women’s issues. While the first phase of stories dealt with the situation of women confined to the private sphere, who lack visibility and the ability to offer resistance, the second phase of stories portrayed women trying to come out of established systems, marking a space of struggle and resistance. The second phase stories advocated a separate sphere of sisterhood, similar to the feminist phase of women’s
writing propounded by Elaine Showalter. This chapter also focuses on how Sarah Joseph rewrites the notions of ezhuthukari (woman writer) in Malayalam literature, dismantling the moulds of a woman writer envisaged and circulated by the dominant public sphere. By portraying a middle class unglamorous woman in creative labour, she makes a statement against standardised and established notions of the woman writer in the literary public.

The third chapter, “Recasting the Marginalised” analyses Sarah Joseph’s Ramayana stories which also constitute the second phase of her writing, as articulating another dimension of her feminist concerns. These stories also mark a shift in her ideology by moving to a more specific notion of womanhood which is constructed within the frames of caste, community, ethnic and racial identities, unlike the early stories within this phase which focused more on women’s roles. I have placed Sarah Joseph’s retelling of the Ramayana within the context of similar narrative attempts from South Asia, India and Keralam. The chapter also reads Sarah Joseph’s stories within the context of the Dravidian movement and its proponent Periyar E.V. Ramasami’s interpretations of the Ramayana. Sarah Joseph’s retellings, which are influenced by Periyar’s readings, are viewed as an instance of a woman’s retelling of the Ramayana. The chapter also discusses the different kinds of public addressed by the various retellings. In this sense, these stories can be viewed as an intermediary phase between the second and third, in her move to write about the self-discovery of women within their own space.
The fourth chapter, “Rewriting Women’s Spaces,” examines Sarah Joseph’s three novels that form a trilogy, rewriting the notions of region, domestic spaces, community, and caste in relation to women’s lives. The novels record women’s spaces in different temporalities and contexts, by narrativising women’s experiences and forwarding analyses of culture. This phase shares similarities with Showalter’s proposition of the third phase of women’s writing – the female phase of self-discovery. The novels reflect on the history of community, region, domestic spaces, and women’s lives in the scenario of changing socio-cultural backgrounds. These narratives also trace the negotiations between tradition and modernity. In this chapter, I have reviewed the writings of non-middle class/ non-upper caste women writers on similar themes, especially the writings of the Tamil Dalit woman writer, Bama, to critique the space envisaged and constructed by Sarah Joseph in her writings.

Most of the writings from upper caste/ middle class/ privileged women writers which project feminist concerns are criticised for their attempts to universalise women’s experience based on their perceptions. Sarah Joseph’s writings, especially her later work, acknowledge the differences between woman as a monolithic category, and woman as a heterogeneous category, impacted by caste, community, ethnicity and so on. Sarah Joseph attempts to assume the identities of “the other” to provide counter-dominant versions, to present “effective” and “truthful” accounts. We could read this moment in

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2 Stories like “Viyarpadayalangal” (Sweat Marks) record the caste-ridden nature of the education system and question the so-called progressive society of Keralam. Annie’s family and their neighbourhood in Kokkanchira (Alahayude Penmakkal), Cherona (a washerwoman), Kurumba (a working-class communist woman), Sundari and Chandru (classmates of the protagonist) in Mattathi, Kareekkan (the protagonist’s husband who belongs to a non-upper caste Christian family), Rebecca (who sleeps in the street and assumes herself to be a prophet), Brother Manikyan (a lower caste priest) in Othappu represent these other selves.
the same vein as the feminist critique of men assuming a woman’s guise in their writing. These accounts of “the other” in Sarah Joseph is very much part of the counterpublic space that she envisages. Given this situation, Bama’s narrative offers a critique of the space of “the other,” rendering the counterpublic envisaged by Sarah Joseph as strictly an imagined one.

More recently, two ground-breaking autobiographical accounts released into the public sphere can be regarded as pursuing but also extending from Bama’s narratives and therefore having implications for the imagined counter narrative produced by Sarah Joseph. Sarah Joseph’s own views on these books act as useful tools to test her ideological positions. The told-to autobiographical accounts of Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha leader C.K. Janu and sex-worker/activist Nalini Jameela, pose multiple challenges to prevalent patterns of women’s writings in terms of genre, theme, concerns, and spaces discussed. These texts are significant in many ways and contain multifarious dimensions of the present socio-political scenario. I use these two texts with a particular interest in mind; as narratives that offer a strong critique of middle class/upper caste/privileged women’s narratives and the spaces they occupy.

Sarah Joseph’s view regarding her writing and role as an activist stress the need to stand with the ‘powerless.’ Her own rewritings of the conventional image of a woman-writer through stories like “Oro Ezhuthukariyude Ullilum” state that all women can write. This echoes the ideology that constituted Second Wave feminism in the West which

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considered memoirs, letters, and diaries as women’s writing. Ironically, Sarah Joseph’s view that books like Nalini Jameela’s should not be viewed as literature, contradicts her own deconstruction of *ezhuthukari*. She says:

It should not be viewed as a literary text. Women are marginalised, and people like Nalini Jameela are marginalised within the category of women. It is commendable when they tell their story and write about their experiences. My only disagreement is with the argument that prostitution is an occupation.⁵

If the writings from marginalised sections cannot be called literature, women’s writing cannot be called “literature” either. Sarah Joseph’s views about literature lose their counter narrative nature here. By not accepting prostitution as an occupation, she refuses to acknowledge certain kinds of labour similar to mainstream society’s rejection of domestic labour as labour. Nalini Jameela, who is in her fifties and has not even had the privilege to finish her formal schooling, says that she is a laingika thozhilali (sex-worker). The term sex-worker or the Malayalam equivalent *laingika thozhilali* acknowledges prostitution as a profession, or occupation. By rejecting the use of the word “sex-worker,” Sarah Joseph, who considers sex-work as one of the most exploited sites, fails to acknowledge the notion of work, so also labour, as being inherently exploitative.

On the other hand, with relation to Janu’s location we see that Sarah Joseph has been an active sympathiser of Adivasi land issues. To record her protest in the Muthanga

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⁵ Researcher’s interview with the writer in May 2006.
incident\textsuperscript{6} in 2003, where the state unleashed violence against the Adivasis involved in land struggle using police force, she returned her award to the Kerala Sahitya Academy.\textsuperscript{7} Nevertheless, her support can be regarded as belonging to a space that is outside the spheres of struggle. While Sarah Joseph can only operate as a sympathiser,\textsuperscript{8} and therefore can be located outside the movement, Janu’s own work is inextricably tied to the movement.

The two texts together offer a significant framework to critique the ‘womanspace’ discussed in this study in relation to public/private spheres, as these texts come from locations that are outside the dominant culture as well as the counter-space envisaged in Women’s writings. These two texts challenge the very definition of middle class/upper caste woman as “the woman.” Both Janu and Nalini Jameela do not share middle class women’s experiences of the private sphere. Such writings could also be used to counter and collapse the middle class construction of a monolithic representation of “domestic” and can function as a counter space to this. Unlike Sarah Joseph’s or other privileged women’s narratives, which start their journeys from the private sphere, these narratives are envisaged as documents to be circulated in the public. The writings of Janu, Nalini Jameela and Bama are written in direct support of the movements they are associated with. Writings of dominant women may afford support to a movement in course of time,

\textsuperscript{6} In the context of land encroachments on the part of dominant society on the land and lives of Adivasis, Adivasi Gothra Maha Sabha conducted a land occupation under the leadership of C.K. Janu in Muthanga, in Wynad district, Keralam in 2003. The occupation ended in massive police violence in which an adivasi and a policeman were killed. This came to be known as Muthanga incident.\textsuperscript{7} \url{http://www.hinduonnet.com/2003/03/22/stories/2003032205030400.htm} \textsuperscript{8} For instance, Sarah Joseph’s reference to Janu in the story “Orezhuthukari Swayam Vimarshanam Nadathunnu,” as a person who raises important issues related to social and political spheres of Keralam, is different from Janu’s efforts in raising these issues.
just as Sarah Joseph’s writings later became identified with the feminist movement. This aspect opens up new avenues that might lead us further to reconfigure spaces that are fast becoming normative in women’s writing.

In the light of reading the told-to narratives of Janu and Jameela as representative of an emergent genre in women’s writing, it inaugurates a rethinking of historical moments like Marumarakkal Samaram\(^9\) (agitation for the right of lower-caste women to cover their breasts), Kallumala Samaram\(^{10}\) (agitation rejecting the tradition of lower-caste women wearing ornaments made of heavy stones and glass pieces, symbolic of their subordination), and certain peasant movements,\(^{11}\) which can be viewed as articulations and forms of political expressions peculiar to Channar women and Pulaya women. While these moments are recognised as constitutive of the women’s movement in Keralam, scant attention has been paid to this specific nature of their articulation. As Joan Scott suggests, differences among women is an analytical category of feminism, and these two

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\(^9\) One of the early instances of women protesting against patriarchy is Marumarakkal Samaram also known as Channar lahala (Mutiny of the Channar caste) on Channar women’s right to cover the upper part of the body. Women who belonged to lower castes including Ezhava women, pulaya women, etc were not allowed to cover breasts or cover below the knee. Towards the end of the 1820s some Channar women who were converted to Christianity started covering their breasts. These women were attacked by upper caste men in public. The struggle lasted for almost three decades. The official order, permitting Channar women to cover the upper part of the body, was delivered in 1859. It was one of the very first instances of protesting against casteism, and upper caste male domination. Channar lahala or Marumarakkal samaram is very important to the history of the women’s movement as it set a precedent for the demand of women’s rights and reform movements. This is also one of the early instances of dress reform in Keralam, which was later taken up by other communities. See N.K. Jose, *Channar Lahala* (Vaikom: Hobby Publishers, 1979) and Chandrika, C.S. *Keralathile Streemunnettagalude Charitram* (Trissur: Kerala Sahitya Academy, 1998) for more information on this.

\(^{10}\) Kallumala Samaram is another similar instance when Pulaya women refused to wear heavy necklaces made of stones and glass pieces, a marker of their caste imposed by upper caste patriarchy in 1904. Here too women were attacked by upper caste people for breaking away from the traditions.

\(^{11}\) Many peasant movements were made successful by lower caste women through their participation in the struggles. During 1907-08, Pulaya women collectively participated in peasant movements against landlords and suspended their work for a year, demanding pay-raise, job-security, to stop violence against women, and for their right to walk on roads.
particularly independent streams of feminism can be used to study “the conflictual processes that produce meanings.”  

On a concluding note, this study has helped me review my own notions of feminism and the impact of identities like caste, community, and ethnicity on gender. While Sarah Joseph’s narratives underscored the necessity of knowing and placing oneself in one’s own history, the narratives from less-privileged women emphasised the presence and importance of other histories. Understanding these conflictual histories and spaces, is therefore exploring my own past, while also deconstructing it.