

# Asserting the Right to Write: A Reading of Sara Joseph's Short Story "Oro Ezhuthukariyude Ullilum"

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## **Abstract:**

Sara Joseph is a prominent South Indian writer who was in the forefront of Feminist Movement in Kerala. She was the recipient of the Kerala Sahitya Academy award, Kendra Sahitya Academy Award and the Vayalar Award for her novel *Aalahayaude Penmakkal*. Her short story "Oro Ezhuthukariyude Ullilum" (trans. "Inside Each Woman Writer") discusses the struggles of a woman to write in a male dominated society. In order to write, she has to break patriarchal structures and liberate herself from the restrictions of her family. The story traces the woman's efforts to break free from patriarchal and familial constraints so that her creativity can flourish. Her husband, a powerful representative of patriarchy tries to fill her mind with the feelings of guilt in abandoning her children and family. However, in the end, she frees herself from things that hold her back and escapes into a world of creativity and fun.

**Key Words:** Gender, sexist, patriarchy, liberation, creativity.

"Women are not born but made," says Simone de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex*. Gender inequality is still a curse of the world and women continue to occupy an inferior or secondary position in society. She is still considered below men in status and dignity and her enfeebled position in society never permits her the right to express her thoughts through her writings. But education has brought slight changes in the life of women and she has started demanding her basic rights in society. This development has alarmed the patriarchal society which is deeply sexist in nature. It is in this context that the story "Oro Ezhuthukariyude Ullilum" is discussed here.

This paper tries to probe into the layers of patriarchal dominance and the consequent subjugation of woman and womanhood. The story explores the psyche of the woman writer who longed for a space that would liberate her emotionally and intellectually. The female character in the story is denied the freedom to write. However, she is not apparently denied her freedom to write but her position as a wife and mother and the responsibilities associated with these roles, leave her very little free time to think or write. In the story, she liberates herself forcefully from the space allotted to her by 'others' and thereby gains agency over her own life. Thus, the story serves as a powerful critique of the intolerant patriarchal norms prevalent in the society.

In her story, Sara Joseph reiterates the observation made by Virginia Woolf in her essay "A Room of One's Own." Woolf observes in her essay that women cannot become accomplished writers until they have a space of their own and also are economically independent. The heroine of Sara Joseph's story is not employed and therefore enjoys no financial freedom. The heroine laments about not having enough money for her travel: "The money for my journey is still a problem for me." Money was always a concern

for her and she even wishes if she had a good friend to help her with some money. She was not sure whether her confidante Mable aunty could help her with money. She does not even know whether her Mable aunty has enough money to meet her own expenses.

Though Woolf and Sara Joseph wrote in two different centuries and were situated in two different geographical contexts, the condition of women they described was strikingly similar. The narrator in Sara Joseph's story is a married woman with children. Her husband's name is Purushothaman (trans. "ideal man"). He is an "ideal man" in name but when it comes to real life, he lacks all idealism. In the typical South Indian household, usually the husband is the bread winner and the wife takes care of the home. The only difference in this story is that the wife is a talented writer who receives no support from her family. Her dreams of becoming an accomplished writer does not materialise as she hardly gets time to write after finishing her household chores. She actually wants to write a novel on a "serious theme" and the very thought of being unable to pen her dreams hurls her into the vortex of certain surreal visions that terrify her. She realises that she desperately needs to write. She either imagines or constructs the figure of an aunt who can accommodate her and her male companion Jayadevan with whom she can discuss her thoughts. It is when her husband fails to provide her the freedom and space to satisfy her urge to write she goes in search of a creative space in Mable aunty's house. Purushothaman is afraid of his wife's companionship with this aunt whom he has not met. He sees this aunt as a potential threat to the comforts of his marriage. He knows that this friendship will turn out to be a strong bond that will eventually liberate his wife. Now, it is his wife who manages his house and kids and washes his soiled clothes and cooks for him.

However, after deciding to leave the house, she makes a call to her husband to tell him about her decision. She wants to avoid a confrontation on this issue with her husband. She knows that this issue will not be resolved if she tries to reason it out with him. When the husband hears this, he tries to restrain her: "You should start only after I reach there. Where are you calling from?" She is not permitted to take her own decision in matters pertaining to her and is treated like a child who cannot take independent decisions. This is one way in which patriarchy confuses women. It is obvious that she has tried to put this idea across to her husband several times, but she never received an encouraging response from him. Now, she could hear him slam the phone down in anger at the other end of the line. She knows that this is his "trick" to stop her from going away from the house. She knows now that what she needs badly is "tranquility and time" to pursue her passion.

Most part of the story takes place in the memory of the writer. As she says: "Now-a days, I live only inside my work. Immersing myself in my work, I am doing and saying certain things mechanically and with a heavy mind." To her, writing is such a sacred act. She even dreams of giving birth to her words in the secrecy of her mother's womb. Mable aunty's place is almost like her mother's womb where she finds safety and security. Perhaps, Mable aunty's house would serve as the labour room for the birth of her writings.

Though the story never reveals the kids nor do we get any glimpse of Mable aunty or the narrator's male companion Jayadevan, they create an undeniable impact in the story. Purushothaman knows that the only concern that might make his wife reconsider her decision to leave the house is their kids. She knows very well that Purushothaman will use this vulnerability as a weapon and as a threat: "Purushothaman will definitely pose the question as to what I'll do with the kids. I must convince Purushothaman that I have already understood that this question conceals the nature of an attack more than a sense of helplessness." She knows that she will be deeply hurt by the memories of her children and will definitely miss them. Maternal instinct as Beauvoir says is a construct and the narrator is also not exempt from it. Motherhood is a huge responsibility and the rearing of children should be considered a joint task of the family. But the woman in the story tackles everything alone. She can do justice to herself only at the cost of compromising

things. She knows that the “stirrings of deep thoughts” will come to her mind only when her mind is absolutely free. But maternity strangles her neck like an iron chain. Now her children stand as a hurdle in front of her.

It is Purushothaman who decides what she should write. Purushothaman would allow her to write only litanies, eulogies and love songs about the deities Radha and Krishna. She is unhappy with these writings because other ‘serious writers’ discard these themes as trivial. This is the reason why she wants to escape to a place that will give her the freedom to write. She remembers: “Mable aunty’s house has no walls. It is built with light and exotic partitions. It has no grills and latches. [...] There, for me to read and write, I have a room of my own with three windows from where I can see the horizon.” The very thought about Mable aunty’s house makes her happy because Mable aunty never puts any restrictions or “millstone” around her thoughts. Mable aunty never spreads any soiled linen over her thoughts but at her home, she is often distracted with the thoughts of the soiled undergarments of her husband and other soiled dishes in the sink. Mable aunty’s house becomes an “ideal bower for the full flowering of love.” Mable aunty once suggested that she would be happy to see her fall in love with Jayadevan. But both the narrator and Jayadevan did not feel that all relationships should end in love. There grew up an unconditional love between them and they could laugh, fight and sing aloud and metaphorically bring back their childhood and make it sit in front of Mable aunty. Mable aunty gave unlimited freedom to the writer whereas Purushothaman choked her creativity. The bonding of the two women characters indirectly poses a threat to Purushothaman. Purushothaman can never understand the “peaceful and hearty friendship” between his wife and her male companion but Mable aunty could. In the typical South Indian patriarchal household, the ultimate ‘protector’ or ‘provider’ for an unemployed wife is her husband. She cannot have any happiness outside her family and when she mentions her male companion Jayadevan, her husband is enraged.

The narrator recollects how she used to long to be in the company of poet friends who used to come and sit on the railings of the bridge and indulge themselves in endless literary debates. She could see them growing “two golden wings” in the midst of their literary discussion. They always had a set of listeners for them. The wilting vegetables or the face of the baby beginning to cry would make her leave the literary discussion soon. Purushothaman would start looking at the watch even before it was six o’ clock - a cue that she should stop the conversation. Sometimes, these ‘winged’ writers when invited to her house would condescend to come to her house. Even when these writers came home, she would have to prepare tea and food for them and Purushothaman would do all the talking. By the time, she had finished cleaning the plates and tidying the room, and was ready with all that she wanted to talk to them, they would be sleepy and ready to go. She feels sad that they would never restart the conversation from where they stopped. They would thank her for the good food and leave the house. She cannot attend any literary discussions properly when Purushothaman is with her. She knows that Mable aunty would not put such restrictions of time on her and she would also happily enquire how she participated in the literary discussion. She thinks of the numerous literary gatherings she could attend from Mable aunty’s place. Without any distractions of the family, her mind would suck up everything from the literary discussion like the parched land.

The narrator talks of a symbolic anklet made of five metals embedded into the flesh of her leg. It was her mother who put it on her leg when she was born. When she grew up, the ring did not grow and it gave birth to many such rings inside her flesh. This anklet and rings are a reminder of her femininity. It is with all these discomforts she has to fight for the independence of the writer within her.

The final encounter with Purushothaman happens when the narrator is preparing to leave the house. Purushothaman takes out his last trick that he cannot live without her. She knows that this is just a lie meant to keep her there. She gets the ultimate freedom when she walks out of her house waving her hands.



What she carries with her for her journey is just a few clothes, books and writing materials. The final picture of her arms touching the horizon and her tresses breaking loose and flying up and touching the horizon and her skirt circling and enveloping the earth shows her truly emancipated self.

## CONCLUSION

The short story “Oro Ezhuthkariyude Ullilum” is a critique of the patriarchal ideology that indirectly suppresses the creative talents of women by forcing them do all the household chores, leaving them with little or no time to write. It was only when the heroine felt deprived of her creative impulses, she decided to move out of her house. For her, the house was a place of bondage. She ultimately gains the agency to free herself from the familial bonds that restrict her creativity. Perhaps she is not the first woman character in literary history to have abandoned her family in pursuit of her dreams. Nora, from Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* left her family long ago to educate herself. Maybe, more women will leave their households if the patriarchal structure denies them the basic rights to live and express themselves.

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