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Architecture, Ritual and Religion in Sarah Joseph's Othappu

Abstract

To be human is to be placed, to exist in relation to physical structures, both to shape them and to be shaped by them. The oral and textual expressions of human experiences of God interact with the spatial surroundings, which are not mere empty containers of physical space. Built space is a physical entity as well as a socially and historically constructed place, which constantly interacts with human behaviour, thinking and feeling. Architecture is generally both the process and the product of [planning](#), [designing](#), and [constructing](#) buildings and other physical structures. If architecture is considered an art form then it too can shape the ritual and symbolic action of the people who experience that space. Here spatial experience of architecture can be used as a tool to explore the anxieties that surround religious identities.

Keywords –Architecture, Black's Mass, Eucharistic, Roman, Syrian, transubstantiation

Juhani Pallasma writes: "As we settle in a space, we similarly allow the boundary between ourselves and the space to soften and become sensitized." ("Artistic Generosity Humility and Expression." 23-36) Architecture appears as a lived metaphor. The external and the internal space, the real and the imaginary constitute in such a view an indivisible

continuum. The present paper tries to analyse church space within Sara Joseph's *Othappu* as a social practice that emerges in the interplay of built and imagined space. This novel depicts the story of a woman unveiled; both literally and metaphorically. It is a revelation to the foray of institutionalized trade in the name of God, religion and spirituality. *Othappu* is the story of a nun, Margalitha, who is constrained within the institution of church and how she performs creative ways and establishes within the narrative a plurality. The relationship and conflict between religious buildings and the shaping of young peoples' tumult identities is one of the interesting areas to be examined.

The search for the sacred is fraught with incredible distractions and challenges. Some people are malnourished while others throw food away. Poverty and wealth live side by side, often in the same neighbourhoods. And terrorism lurks everywhere. Where do homeless, hungry, abused, and stressed out people find a sense of the sacred in their lives? In a world that is seemingly embarked on a never ending journey of war, poverty, and oppression these structures can be oases of peace, prosperity, and justice. Do they? - this is the question faced recurrently by both Margalitha and Karikkan in *Othappu*.

There are also opposing worlds within the novel: the affluent home of Margalitha and the poor house of Karikkan. Karikkan's father is a coolie, who makes his living carrying loads on his head. Margalitha's is a wealthy family, landed and aristocratic. To Karikkan's parents and siblings, having one of them among the priests is a matter of great pride. So when the priest-son returns home with a woman, there is deep shame, great shock. Karikkan's father's world lies shattered, and he commits suicide.

The family and society in which Marghalitha has been brought up is very civilized and god fearing. They expect her to assume the role of a traditional nun. Marghalitha does not want to be trapped in a decorative life where her identity and individuality are likely to be

effaced. She needs fresh air, the freedom to grow and develop her personality. But Margalitha's exit from the convent is trouble shooting for her brothers — will she now claim her share of the property?

The enclosed Church and its priestly inhabitants under Daniel Achen and Pattippunyalachan's hut opened to the woods present the polarities that pertain to the actualization of a calling. The novel is a gyno text that deals with the decision of a nun to step out the convent and embrace a life free from the shackles of established religious norms.

Does the search for sacred space have anything to do with belonging to an organized religion? It is important to note the significance of the Pentecostal religious movement in the narrative space of *Othappu*, especially in the lives of poor people, and how mainstream religions may be losing their appeal. Rebekka is a rebel against conventional practices of the religion. Naasthikan George is another deviant character who interrogates the church. There is Pattipunyaalan—Father Augustine—who surpasses all these rebels and chooses the path of extreme charity and social service. He draws subsistence from an impromptu, indigenous, and radical liturgy and practice. He renounces the external robes of priesthood, but remains a priest. He lives in the woods, and nurses the marginalized and the socially rejected. He celebrates Holy Mass every Sunday in the woods for the plantation labourers and other workers. Father Augustine subverts the accepted structure of celebrating the sacrament of Holy Mass, without rejecting the foundation of transubstantiation.

In the Christian tradition a church is frequently called "God's House" even though there is no mandate in Christian teachings to erect dwelling places for God. In the author's note of *Othappu*, Sarah Joseph says: "Today, Christian congregations in Kerala are being deformed into institutions of trade. They command enormous economic and political power. Christ did not define such an idea of His Church."(xi)

Institutionalization and its successful materialistic expansion into the structural framework and values of society are shown to have deprived the Christian religion of spirituality and essential simplicity. The clean, simple, frank, and peaceful home life of the Kasseessas and the turbulent, wealthy, and unhappy house of the Channeres reflect the clear polarities in the social and religious fabric of the Christian community. Even in the happy home of Kasseessa, there is Annamkutty, the mother of Yohannan Kasseessa who, though married into a Syrian Christian family for sixty-four years, does not give up her worship of the Holy Virgin Mary. Kasseessa's father himself had grown disgusted with all church authorities after the tragic demise of his parents, who died shocked and dejected by the violent rift between the two sections within the traditional Church.

In his work, *Gesture and Power: Religion, Nationalism, and Everyday Performance in Congo*, Yaolnda Covington shares his experience of how everyday cultural performances are affected by and have an impact on larger social transformations. Gestures and spirit-induced trembling are two of several important types of everyday cultural performances that are sites of struggles for power and authority in daily life. This messianic movement, inspired by prophecies of independence and a reversal of the world order can be seen in Rebecca.

Performance is a concept of plurality that has been used in the humanities and social sciences to describe and analyze a wide variety of human activity. Restored behaviour conveys the idea that what we do with our bodies is never for the first time, as these movements are "twice behaved behaviour" based on past actions and observations, learned both consciously and unconsciously in our social environments (Schechner, *Performance Studies* 35– 41). The trembling of the body that signified the presence of territorial or other spirits in the past was embodied in a similar manner yet redefined as an index of the Holy Spirit in Rebecca. Victor Turner, the most influential pioneer of studies of performance in

anthropology, described the possible power of cultural performance in the following way: “cultural performances are not simple reflectors or expressions of culture or even of changing culture but may themselves be active agencies of change” (*The Anthropology of Performance* 24). Margalitha first frees her body from the restrictions of nunnery and then comes out as a woman. It provides a theoretical framework for understanding how the micropolitics of the body in interpersonal encounters can affect macro- level social and political structures.

The Cross that represents Jesus persecution and death signifies the atonement of Christians from sin. In *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence*, Lloyd Steffen probes the multi-layered Christian imagination with regards to violence, from the traditions inception in political executions and apocalyptic dreams through the intertwining of Christianity with political empires, wars and crusades to its internal struggle over heresy, slavery, missionary zeal, and social justice. (100 - 125) *Othappu* opens like this: “A dark room. Stuffy. Sultry. Where neither the faintest ray of light nor the slightest breath of air could enter.” Here writer uses it as a metaphor for the blind religious views and rigid practices which make men trapped rather than saved. Margalitha was locked not in a room, but in a dungeon where raw fruits were stored to ripen. Was she a raw fruit to be stored to ripen and to be sacrificed? - is a crucial question that the writer asks. Here the patriarchy and the dominant culture results in the impingement of the individual souls.

In the introduction to *Othappu*, Jancy James has put: Sarah places *Othappu*, as a counter discourse to the harsh and unfeeling verdict on those who deviate from faith and become ‘bad examples’(xxi). Roy Francis Karikkan, the popular and respected priest, and Margalitha, the reverend nun, rebel, come into conflict with the structures of their vocation because they are unhappy about their inability to fulfil the spirit of their calling and the teachings of the Caller, as well as the logic of a life that encroaches on their conformity to the monastery.

Brother Manikyan, who could not become a priest because he was a convert from a low caste community. Because of that he was unwelcome to a seminary. He dreams of setting up a 'black seminary' where the children of Ayya would learn to search for God with 'a syllabus made of water, soil and fire'(148-149). Sarah Joseph calls it "Karutha Kurbana" (Blacks' Mass) (46). Fr. Aloysius D. Fernandez, a non upper caste priest, wrote a book titled *Karutha Kurbana* which reveals the presence of caste hierarchies within the institution.

In the convent, Sister Jereemia ran a Eucharistic Order of sisters who would stand by one another through any humiliation or suffering. She declared herself a priestess and 'celebrated Holy Mass, in the darkness of the night like a ghost' wearing a loose cloak liberating herself from the nun's habit. (152)

The fourth chapter is a kaleidoscope of the various crucial changes that have occurred in the social, political, and religious fields of Kerala in the last twenty-five years. Rebekka reappeared in the story after twelve years as an 'independent believer' and a thorn in the flesh of the Church. It denotes the emergence of Pentecostal faith as a counter force and populist cult against the Catholic Church. Rebekka claims to have been 'selected by God' to follow a path farther from Church but nearer to God. She cuts her tongue as a symbolic act of realizing the futility of public evangelism.

The novel raises some crucial issues relating to the practice of the Christian faith. The historical bifurcation of the Syrian Christians, who claimed the original Christians of Kerala who were converted by Christ's disciple, St Thomas, and the Malabar Christians who were the followers of the Roman/Papal supremacy through the influence of Portuguese settlers in Kerala, has figured in Sarah's earlier works too. In *Othappu*, Marthamariam Church is depicted as the capital illustration of the disgraced sectarian strife between the Romans and

the Syrians. And the result is the destruction of the statue of the 'Weeping Holy Mother'. In *Aalahayude Penmakal*, she places this sectarian conflict more centrally.

According to Valson Thampu, a theologian who translated "Othappu", the book is a case study about any individual in any religion who's seeking the truth of faith. And that's the universality of it. Thampu believes that organized Christianity is not ready for the powerful questions Sarah asks. The hope of the individual, according to him, lies with biblical Christianity, not church Christianity. (<https://timesofindia>)

This novel discloses the birth pangs of a feminist spirituality, counterpointing itself to the aberrations of a male-dominated society that is hypocritical, materialistic, vain, cruel, and cowardly, as also a devotion that steers clear of fixed places of worship, godmen, set prayers, and pujas. Religion, which is inherently social, must also exist and express itself in and through space. Moreover, it plays its part in the production and reproduction of social space. Churches and other places of worship, as symbolic places, are one means by which religious ideas about the divine, the human community, and the ritual process of producing sacred space are given a material presence. The performance of resistance and subversion also has spatial consequences. The relationship and conflict between religious buildings and the shaping of young peoples' tumult identities is the main focus of this paper.

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