

Religious Ethos and Re-Visioning Reality: Ethical Outbreak in the Autobiography of Sr. Jesme's *Amen* and Sarah Joseph's Fictional Analogue *Othappu: The Scent of the Other Side*

- S Visaka Devi

Abstract: The article attempts to study two sides of the coin namely religion based on Sr. Jesme's *Amen: The Autobiography of a Nun* and Sarah Joseph's fictional analogue- *Othappu- the Scent of the Other Side*. The study reflects on religion as made evident in the two books that throw newer insights on various aspects of religion and call for amendments. The study tries to highlight how the two books reflect on religion and the related plight of women in certain specific Indian contexts and reiterates a demand for reformations. The role of the reader is to be sensitized while reading and also respond to them appropriately.

Keywords: Exploitation Corruption Discrimination forgiveness, amendments

Religion has been a major philosophy of thought that has had a great impact and influence on our minds, lives, and writings. Religion originated as a philosophy and branched out as a practicable theory that found its place in Holy Books all over the world. Whether convictions came first or verses in Holy Books became convictions is debatable. But what is true is despite the diverse religiosity that is followed throughout the world it is found that they are all bound together by the commonness of their tenets. However, in the modern context religion and related practice of it have become quite noticeably dilute and less stringent. The dogmas preached and the practice of those has become contrasting extremes today. As a result, the two are at loggerheads leaving an absolutely perplexed society. As a result, rivalry between religions and rebellion against religion as a ritualistic exercise has become the order of the day. The paper attempts to study two sides of the coin namely religion. The study narrows down to the reflections of Sr. Jesme in *Amen: The Autobiography of a Nun*, and Sarah Joseph's fictional analogue- *Othappu- the Scent of the Other Side*. The study reflects on religion and women as made evident in the two books that throw newer insights on various aspects of the two and call for amendments. The paper also tries to highlight how the two books reflect on Christian life in certain specific Indian contexts and reiterates a demand for reformations. Since the time of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Donne's secular, erotic love poems down the ages to the latest Post Modernist trends - Literature has reflected many aspects that typify reality. This

obviously means that Literature traces the co-existence of the Good and Bad, Virtue and Evil, Belief and Disbelief, Conformity and Defiance. The psyche and the unpredictability of man's nature have been so analysed, criticized and dissected in literature that today literature can proudly claim that nothing about the reality of these has been spared by the clipping gill of the writer's pen. Books written are either revelations of some issue or are rendered as an awakening call meant to evoke the society to some change or transformation. It is to this question that the paper in its entirety is related to. And before proceeding to contemplate on this, one cannot but contrast Miltonic Puritanical tones and thoughts to the revolutionary, unconventional revelations made explicit in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. While books were written to glorify religion and related matters among them were a few that exposed the malpractices in specific societies. The *Scarlet Letter* exposed the limitations that fringed religion and religious practices.

The extreme conditions portrayed by two different writers from two different literary milieu and nations such as Bunyan or Milton on the one hand and Hawthorne on the other one could conclude that Literature was, still is and continues to be a multipurpose medium that offers to act as a cathartic agent, a medium of vent for writers and a medium of entertainment for readers; a resource of comfort, a physician to the afflicted, and an anodyne for the deranged and above all a singular voice out to evoke change. In this context, it becomes essential to point out that post modernist Literature served also to revolutionize literary culture itself, to interpret or rebel against some issue or the other, to evoke some transition or revolution that are Marxist or Russell an or idealistic in nature. And this is precisely where writings of religion as part of an institution got pruned and trimmed down the ages to give it the contemporary countenance. Religions and their related dogmas have themselves been under the surgical knife of Literature which itself perhaps has been the cause for the varied views about religion. The case has been vice versa too. In the 1850's a book as the *Scarlet Letter* should have been a hard blow to the orthodoxy of the church and its believers. The repression of a priest being vented in the form of the most atrocious act of leaving a progeny- of a priest's own flesh and blood must have been an obnoxious 'exhibition' of clandestine issues carried on behind the obscure walls of monasteries. The sentiments and betrayals of love have not been new to Literature. Yet, for the first time Literature was reflecting rather with least clemency the 'physical wailing of a Priest' in an explicit language reflecting the modern predicament. Since then, Literature marked transition that helped break down the myth and aura around theories and convictions that bound the general invincibility of major institutions as religion. The conservatism practiced by any such institution that refused or denied the access of challenges at last was felled through literature. However, how far this transition had served constructive purposes in other areas or religion related areas itself is debatable. Daring voices that were confessional and even the stark realities that were obnoxious were read and analyzed. Writers like

Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* raised voices against Islamic conventionalities; Arundati Roy touched the deep aesthetics of her audience by her activist writings. Afro-American, Japanese, the most orthodox women writers from the staunch Islamic world such as Leila Abouleia, Taslima Nasreen, Nawal-El-Saadwi and gay literature began to voice out issues that had gnawed them through the years. They unhesitatingly opened up their lives to the readers through the might of their pens. This would not have found itself in the repertoire of literary books if traditionalism was still the order. If Literature is life- scandalous issues too that was abhorred by the society were captured in the eternality of fiction. Such book as *My Story* by Madhavikutty shocked the reading public with its glaring facts about the plight of an Indian woman. The autobiography *Njan Laingikathozhilaali of Nalini Jameela*-a sex-worker in Kerala though is still read with diffidence yet the memoirs fictionalized in them scandalized the reading audience. The facts that were laid bare in the books exposed the other side of conservative India. However, a shift over to the peculiar and revolutionary are sometimes essential to mark the historical changes of the times. It is only through such drastic makeshifts that the grace of the past is revered and the glory of the present could be savoured. Literature instantly echoed these changes from time to time. Autobiographies and memoirs especially by women were daringly written though probed and criticized. Autobiographies by women are a matter of great interest to readers and critics alike. It involves deeper questions of morals, meant to be more profound for Indian women than Indian men. Pooja Arora remarks that women are required to adapt to various levels, and that 'adaptation' could in turn also imply a conflict between 'values of the self and of the others. In the process, upon her physical and mental health and in trying to meet all obligations with dignity and perfection what she neglects here is her 'self, loss of ease and missing the outright satisfaction in the process.

The following study goes beyond women, where some amendments in terms of religion are called for with an ungendered spirit. Cases of shocking misconduct among members of the religious congregations are an issue that has attracted international attention. The latest being that of Rev. Amy DeLong for conducting ceremony for the union of a lesbian couple and another for being a self-avowed practicing homosexual as she herself reported to the Wisconsin Annual Conference. (www.independent.co.uk Feb. 18 2011). The study takes up the case of Sr. Jesme's *Amen* and Sarah Joseph's *Othappu* for an analogous echo of reality and fictional reality through literature. A publication of Sr. Jesme's autobiography *Amen* and Sarah Joseph's *Othappu: The Scent of the other Side* mirrored one another- its themes, background, characters and the issues concerned all bordering on the same problem. The former, Sr. Jesme, experientially realizes the incredible reality that lay smothered within the Congregation of Mother Carmelite walls. Sr. Jesme took the drastic step of casting away the vocation of being a nun. In Sarah Joseph's *Othappu*, she re-visions the reality within there through the genre of fiction. The plight of both Sr. Jesme (in reality) and Sr. Margalitha (fictional character in Sarah

Joseph's book) reveal the prejudices, financial irregularities, corruption, nepotism, intrigue, patriarchy prevalent in the church. Secularism needs to be practiced not just 'between' religions but 'within' religions too. Material pleasures and carnal indulgences are on the increase that nuns and priests who are part of such a society cannot practice perfect celibacy without literally adapting strategic brazenness. However, both are complementary expressions of two women authors, the latter a writer-who assumes the role of a critic in her fiction. Sarah Joseph literally 'tries' the authenticity of the rules of the church with regard to its ascetics; the slipshod that occur in the orthodoxy of the convents and critiques the slackening practice of Christian dogmas in Kerala. The book is a comment on the play of irreligious attitudes prevalent among the community that exploits the Church as a 'front' for their factional rivalry which directly dispels the more unifying and staunch dogmas of Christian convictions. Committed to her reviews and objective observations, Sarah Joseph creates a variety of characters in her book through which she literally brings to trial- individuals as ascetics- their psychological, emotional, social and irreligious transgressions. At the same time the book attempts to elicit judgment from the reading audience and demands attention and reformation from the church authorities. On the other hand- Sr. Jesme's book is confessions of a woman who was directly put through the suffocations of a repressive and corrupt ascetic life. The books are not anti-Christian in stance but clearly call for fairness towards women in terms of religious ethics even if Sr. Jesme's book could be adjudged or condemned as imaginary fabrication. Sr. Jesme's narration is purely autobiographical rendered through multiple reflections from the past. It is the strong daring voice of a person who could be easily demeaned as a renegade. It is the voice of a woman who has surrendered herself to religion, the voice of a culture, of a section of a strong, powerful society in Kerala; it is the voice that questions an orthodox congregation and its higher authorities who have the responsibility of rectifying their errors. Instead, the members concerned, feign or practice indifference or turn callous to the truth and reality in defense- almost afraid to strike back and take responsibility for the problems. Sr. Jesme's is the voice of someone who knows that she would be ostracized; above all the voice of one who is breaking the shackles of a restrained, cloistered community. The two books are the raucous notes of both revolution and transition. In short, the voices strain a note suggestive of a demand for a more positive change. Sr. Jesme in her autobiographical *Amen* narrates her own real life experiences in the convent(s) related to the CMC order where she spent nearly three decades and more of her vocation period. Sr. Jesme goes through sexual abuse by her own fellow-female inmates in the convent and in specific by a perverse priest in Bangalore. She is treated severely by authoritative hands from her own order for the mere sake of exposing them as well as for questioning their malpractices. Materialism which is indeed a petty offence among a community of nuns who are meant to leave a depraved life is yet another issue for which Sr. Jesme is mentally harassed. She

points out to individual members of the congregation who fail to accept their misconduct and instead defend themselves as they need to retain their power-positions. Lesbianism among nuns makes the book an expose of monastic obscurities. On a similar note is the fictional reality of *Othappu*. Sr. Margalitha is born to a typical Keralite orthodox Christian family who fancies a life in the convent. The intricacy of the novel gradually reveals Sr. Margalitha's life after she joins the convent and her plight leaving the convent in search of the irresistible Father Roy Francis Karikkan. In the almost romantic search for each other the author intrigues the reader to the depths of a graver reality of the increasing frustrations of the nuns and priests in the modern context.

Sarah Joseph's observations are unexaggerated and sincere and sets even a Christian reader perceive that the undeniable statements are after all squeals for a change over for the better. It is at the point of Sr. Margalitha's leaving the convent that one seriously notices the rising inclination towards the more worldly life among them. "[Karikkan] realized that it was going to be quite unlike any meeting he had with her before. The setting and the ambience, even her clothes would be different. What would she look like out of her nun's habit? This very thought intensified his eagerness to see Margalitha a hundred fold." (SJ 64) Sr. Margalitha is much spoken of and discussed over the issue of transgression while a character like Karikkan who is tempted and transgresses equally in the novel is less discussed. Sr. Margalitha surrenders her physique to Roy Francis Karikkan and the duo renegades' marriage is consummated. Yet even among the two, Sr. Margalitha's love is more sincere and committed to the affair, while Karikkan, a typical male, writhes between temptation and the vocation uttering a Hamletan self-vested concern in his letter to Margalitha, "I do no justice to either God or man. No justice to friendships and love. I find myself unable to be just and fair to father, mother, and teachers. My tears bear witness; they are the sign." (SJ 125) The act may not be justifiable in the context of an orthodox religion yet one is inevitably forced to note the vulnerability and discrimination towards a nun as a woman who is "the promiscuous slut" (SJ 53) and the indifference to a male priest's immorality even in such abhorrent matters of love and revolution amidst a Holy Community. Religion serves as a convenient platform for atheists and politicians who sometimes tend to exploit situations, protect or expose the 'charged or the victims' in concern as made evident by the attitude in the character of Chandy Doctor. Yet, it is undeniably an issue that has a huge social and moral impact that perplexes the community that is involved in it. As a community the members are often forced to hold moral standards and are unable to take sides with what it even if they prefer to forgive such glaring issues as Sr. Margalitha's. This perhaps is why Sarah Joseph portrays rational characters like Yohannan Kasseessa, Nasthikan George, Rebekka and Augustine who depict the positive, universal attitude of the Syrian Christian church that is ripped apart by Bawa Methran and Methran factions. Yet another feature is the contrast between Rebekka as a woman and Chandy Doctor's attempts at being

Evangelists and the success of the male figure. In the course of the novel the author through the character of the earnest Daniel Achen who is a philanthropic activist, makes an implicit observation about how he secludes himself in order to be involved in sincere service away from the politics of the monastery. The author comments extravagantly on the anti-woman stance of a patriarchal society. The very title of the novel is thought-provoking to urge the readers and the members of this orthodox community to take a peer at what causes the Othappu- the scent of the other side in terms of issues related to women and religion. The book then has an added dimension of being a religious satire meant to set the society thinking more seriously on the unabashed incidents that are on the rise that need immediate amendments. In Sarah Joseph's interview to Githa Hiranyan: A Dialogue, she says, "I firmly believe that not all Muslims and all Christians are communal minded; nor are all Hindus. Only a few people are, and their interest is clearly power and not religion. (SJ 281)

Othappu reverberates parallel issues to that of Sr. Jesme's Amen leading to the dubiousness of religion and religiosity. Incidentally, in Sr. Jeme's autobiography the priest who sexually abuses her in Bangalore while she is on her way to Dharwar to attend a UGC Refresher course indulges in it unflinchingly and is spared without even a probe into it. Likewise, the fellow-mates in the congregation who indulge in lesbianism, in creating scandals and who hover after money and power are taciturnly ignored. In Sr. Jesme's case the issue is multiple oppressions. Yet Sr. Jesme is condemned as being insane. Memoirs, autobiographies or subtle biographies that involve a critique of something clandestine as that, are quite discriminately treated as less moralistic or beheld with a squint by both critics and readers alike. So to say the issue is fiery in the case of Sr. Jesme a Nun- whose open revelations mark the degeneration of ethics among the toughest order of nuns and priests. The book is a record of the disillusionment of a young woman who enters the nunnery with such religious fervor but deserts it absolutely disillusioned. A great deal of innate orthodoxy and conservatism go into the 'making', 'becoming' and 'being' of a nun- an almost existential predicament within Christian precincts. A lot of fragmentation has occurred in Catholicism and its dogmas, still, for a nun or a priest the rules in the actual practice of it remains almost universal (as for all religions). In the Indian context it seems to become an extraordinary- religious orthodoxy as the conviction is almost parallel to that of a Platonic marriage to God. Sr. Jesme's confessions unassumingly reveals that they surrender to God in every possible way- both physically and mentally. It is the dedication of a devotee who by practice and training unconditionally surrenders herself to God. However, sardonically, whatever a priest does within the monastic walls- defiant or irreligious, even, in terms of sexual abuse, rape or assault or being a renegade passes off or is slighted off as trivial with times. They are even treated as pardonable acts as the society is still discriminately patriarchal. While the same issue that involves a woman as the prime accused is slandered much longer.

Sr. Jesme's self-recovery from the convent takes her thirty-three untiring years of suffering and forbearance. The book opens on thrilling notes of her 'escape in disguise', from the convent in Delhi and resonates with a sense of liberation of a young teen with her lover or a victim from prison walls. However, the fictional tone of almost a crime thriller literally boils up to authentic, shocking revelations which could otherwise be camouflaged by the codes that the garb of being a nun ascertains. Sr. Jesme's "*Amen*" evokes one to consider revamping the vocation as a choice between choosing willingly and living compulsorily. A young woman's expectations are cast asunder by the power politics within the convent where her years are marked by prejudices and biases, by the atrocious sexual abuse within a community which had been a symbol of reverence for her in her childhood. The ethical scar casts Sr. Jesme to absolute physical and psychological annihilation. The hope of a young nun in terms of her religion is shattered by the unexpected, ostentatious sexual pettiness and accusations she faces merely for being righteous which could be shocking to anyone of Sr. Jesme's age. She had aspired life at the convent at a tender age when she did not "really know about a nun's life" (Sr. J 17). Her serious doubts whether nuns were allowed innocent pleasures or whether they were allowed to even laugh aloud are all stifled by the sniggering profligacy of ignominy. Born into a happy-go-lucky family which follows the simple Christian tenets with austerity Sr. Jesme's life is a routine of the habit of church going, prayers, Sunday school, Mass, and above all of being a bride herself of God becomes no slight anticipation in her mind. For three decades, her chosen vocation remains her own spiritual and personal choice. But the minute she takes the drastic step of leaving the convent premises it becomes a religious, cultural, ethical and socio-political issue. At that instance, it becomes neither an event of an entire parish nor just an individual's nor that of a family's. Ironically, when Sr. Jesme voices out the problems faced within the order, the same society ignores her and the problems once again are Sr. Jesme's alone. The obvious reason is that to conform is that of being a woman to rebel is not her realm. "In a free and frank interaction with Sai Prasan, a senior journalist, Sister Jesme spoke on issues ranging from the raped nun case in Kandhamal violence to the need for the Church to bring democracy and transparency within its own set up." (www.orissadiary.com)

Everything about a woman becomes a taboo and almost ritualistic after a certain period of time. For instance, Sr. Jesme's interest in the vocation though is initially received with a quality of dubiousness by her parents. Later, both the members of the church and family take the stance of considering her decision as an event of pride, popularity and recognition. It is customary to allow her to go ahead if that is precisely what she chooses to be. It is also a 'symbolic' manifestation of additional adornment to affluence. For, it is with such elaborate deliberateness of choice that one assumes the holy habit. It is meticulously performed and diligently received as though it were an anointment by the Lord Himself. Sr. Jesme describes her final ordainment into the convent in 1970 with

descriptive details that speak for her earnestness in her pursuit. "The auspicious day has dawned ...All of us prepare for the ceremony physically and spiritually. The event is in the same place where my brother's marriage took place... Fourteen of us... just like the bride dressed up for the wedding, ...The long awaited spiritual marriage has occurred according to the norms of the Congregation and the society (SR. J 44-45) Strong echoes vibrate in similarity in Sr. Margalitha's decision to take up the vocation. Later, at her deserting the convent- her brother John Chanere and her mother treat her with utmost contempt. At that instance, the resistance of Margalitha as a woman and her tussle with her physique pitted against her vocation become indeed touching to the reader. Sarah Joseph's thought-provoking lines comment:

...for years she had been wrapped tightly in multi-layered clothes. And the sudden freeing from them unnerved her. 'Once you are caught in a system, it is best to cooperate with its dictates. If you walk out, your rebellion will exact a crushing physical and spiritual cost.' (SJ 5)

Psychologically too, Sr. Jesme's conversations with God, her solace seeking attempts to cleanse herself of the unhappiness that life at the convent offers her reveal the bearing religion has on her mind though a little too incredible to agnostics. The overtones and undertones, the oneness in the cultural predicament, sequential and consequential adherence to one another and the religious oneness all of these draw both Sr. Jesme's Amen and Sarah Joseph's Othappu to a plane where one is almost very nearly a replica of the other. Except in the case of Sr. Jesme's choice of leading the life of a common woman while continuing to remain single and that of the fictional Sr. Margalitha consummating with Karikkan- both are suggestive of and demanding practical changes, considerations and reformations in the monastic set-up. Comments, criticisms, observations through the lives of Sr. Jesme in reality and Margalitha in fiction. The hurdles a woman traverses through, the meagre allowances made to shield her from social onslaughts is evident from the way the 'men' are spared in both the fictional and non-fictional sequences. This intrigues the question of gender, the true liberty of women, social injunction of women enjoying the legitimacy of decision-making, the sparing, unscathed liberty men enjoy even in such situations of extreme promiscuous profligacy are all indeed abashedly appalling. In both Sr. Jesme's honest confessions and Sr. Margalitha's fictional reality the oppression is not merely patriarchal. It is matriarchal as far as the narration is concerned and is done in the name of maintaining orthodox religious ethics. What becomes more disheartening is the fact that this happens in a religion among a community of nuns where its Holy Book propagates pardon to Mary Magdeleine by Christ Himself. While in truth the church excommunicates rather than investigating and rooting out the immoralities. The irony is that in case of two books in concern the decisions inflict more slander on their own individual misconduct rather than on the entire community. Shaju Philip in *Ex-Nun's Confessions* set to rock Kerala Church observes that "Dedicated to Jesus", Amen is

explicit in its details of the sexual repression and harassment behind the Church walls as well as the draconian rules and “greed” of the Order. Jesme claims that since the book was released, she has been getting calls pledging solidarity. “Nuns mingle with the whole spectrum of the community around them. They teach students, comfort the aged and nurse the sick; still the brides of the Church remain an enigma. My work would throw light on the misunderstood convent life, engulfed in darkness,” says Jesme. The book in fact means to awaken every reader to the degenerating values within the monastic walls of any religion. Though the observation cited above seems to have drawn solidarity in this regard- a woman and a nun who has rejected her chosen life, to be received to lead a simple, common, and ordinary life without being harassed by the sneering of the more religious is indeed only a remote possibility. On a similar tone is Sr. Maragalitha's case, who after her rejection of the life of an ascetic and her consummation with Karikkan, she lives in isolation and all alone secretly fed by the grace of the ration dealer's wife. The Kasseesa couple guide her and even in that Kasseesa's wife at a certain point spites her for her appealing looks and wishes her out of her household. Sr. Jesme's tender expectations and eagerness to join the Congregation of Mother Carmelite is described as “Each novice is accompanied by her parents at the time of the procession, as she moves forward singing the song of total surrender... The preparatory prayer is followed by the mass. Each one publicly proclaims the vows of obedience, chastity and poverty over the mike and submits the paper recording our promises...” (Sr. J 44-45) The experience is rendered in a solemn manner bordering on the palpitating manifestation of absolute surrender versus the enervating experience of bequeathal of all that is worldly, that too 'worldly' in terms of the contemporaneous of being worldly. Obviously, the books evoke readers to understand that the narrow world of Nuns and Priests are not faced any more with a mere Chaucerian set-up to battle with but a revolutionary surge of thinking, behavior and relationships of the present world. Such that, what is essential to add to such vocations is not stringent celibacy but proximity to carnality yet learning to develop the ability to negate this impulse. As a literary piece of work and as an autobiographical note the books are an open, vociferous appeal to the church authorities. The books reinforce the essentiality to seriously consider and contemplate to solve such matters through careful designs that would help retain the glory of a celibate vocation. Though to bring about such training and tenacity could be hard in the contemporary scenario still only the one who learns to balance himself on this 'tight-rope walk' could escape the temptation of the carnal instincts. Or else, to carry on in the garbs of a celibate in such an atmosphere with the existing system would only send the celibate crowd to more profound complexities and transgressions which should only further complicate things for them and for the society. One would perceive a simple openness in the confessions of Sr. Jesme when she says, “The first night with Jesus as our bridegroom!” (Sr. J 45) Later, as she resists the undue attention of Govind Sr. Jesme observes, “Jesus, who is

Govind when compared to you? You are the most handsome man I know- the wealthiest, the smartest, the wisest and the most sincere and caring.' Within a twinkle of an eye, a stream of love wells up within me from nowhere, and I experience the joy of being His bride once again.' (Sr. J 82) The pain Sr. Jesme undergoes has yet another view that has a bearing upon religion as a social system in our country. For instance, the following view says,

Critics see it as a 'shocking account of life within the enclosure' ... The sexual frustrations of nuns and priests, which is condemned in the book, is not very shocking because after all we are human beings and when celibacy is forced upon someone frustrations are the assured outcomes. The corruption and class distinction Sr. Jesme tries to bring out is not shocking either as ... organizations ... [are] a reflection of the society in which they operate and the Indian Social System is reeking with both. We are so used to these that it is not shocking any more. And ... [one cannot] see 'Amen' as a plea for the reformation of the church. **Friday, August 21, 2009**

In all profession women are in the lower domain where her position is edged to some kind of vulnerability or exploitation. At least in such chosen vocation women need to be given better protection. Paul Zacharia observes about *Othappu* that "People who follow more loosely structured religions like Hinduism, they might not perhaps realize its problematic nature. Hindus are not reined in by so many multiple constraints. There is greater freedom since there is no fixed religious hierarchy as in pope dominated Catholicism." (SJ.254) Apart from this Paul Zacharia says we hear the heartbeats of a woman who is the victim of such a system." (SJ 254) Sarah Joseph's intentions while writing such a story as *Othappu* undoubtedly had graver intentions while intriguing the emotions and fickleness of Sr. Margalitha and Karikkan. It is an open insight into the lives of those who have been hushed by the hypocrisies of an old time austerity which is a deliberate and calculated repression of choice which needs to be rectified in an appropriate manner. Sr. Jesme's voice demands attention and redress of all of those unexpected happenings smothered behind the walls of the nunnery. The lower grades given to nuns who are disliked by other superior nuns, at Amala college, of withholding promotions and other recognitions, of the plight of Sr. Jesme at the hands the sexually perverse lesbian nun who pursue her persistently. Even if there is scope for amendments could those issues be allowed to get politicized offensively or defensively. In that case, the question arises as to what the Counseling, Retreats, and Refresher courses actually offer the nuns. The books take an interdisciplinary stance of awakening both literary and anthropological sensitivity of the reader. The books demand attention of the church authorities to ascertain- whether the women / men absorbed into the order are trained psychologically and whether they are counseled adequately to face these issues and situations. Are, they reminded time and again that they are basically human. Therefore, should their holy retreats taken up intermittently serve the purpose of re-training them and strengthen

them emotionally / psychically and spiritually? Don't their higher-ups need to be trained more in aspects of combining management, nunnery and emotionality of situations? Above all, the books seems to call for a reconsideration of why when priests decide to give up on their service to God, the decision sparingly hits the headlines as it happens when nuns give up. Secondly, though after austere orthodox training it may be bashful for the congregation to come to terms with a renegade among them; still, is it acceptable to the dogmas of any religion to retain a member who suffers a sense of disillusion or suffocation?

Sister Jesme's confessions bring out the clandestine obnoxiousness of simple human beings (though trained) behind the ethic-strengthened monastic walls. "When the authorities display 'double standards' or duplicity in their judgments and manners of punishments, I wonder at the practice of 'justice' here. A sister undergoes a hysterectomy operation and stays in the sick room for rest. I am puzzled at the remark of the superior, that she is relieved that the sister's uterus has been removed, or else when she spends her nights elsewhere, they are all scared. And she speaks of the time her when this sister was caught by the public from the room of a priest at night." (Sr. J 75) She reveals the lingering materialistic attitude, petty-minded envy, the avarice that power-positions generate, the carnal instincts that pervade. These however, are issues that make the society responsible too. Therefore, the emphasis calls for a revamping of stringent culture within monastic walls. Either religious rules should permit frequent intermittent training that repels, 'the draw' towards a mundane life or it should alter rules and make them fluid. Such that rules of deprivation are substituted with rules that allow them greater freedom of mingling with the world outside that should nullify frustration of any kind. In her interview to Sai Prasan she accepts, "Yes, you are right - the sex has penetrated within the four walls in the 21st century. The nuns should be allowed to speak out and interact with the world. Let the nuns interact with the world and vice versa. Let Church enter into the world, and world enter into the Church. Then only there will be balanced view on the issues... Those who want to leave Church, they should be allowed to do so. And, let the committed one stay within the Church. The Church should concentrate on the quality and not on the quantity." (Sr. J www.orissadiary.com) Adopting such flexibility coupled with intermittent training should indeed solve the issue. Literature has a purpose. Words and interpretations are secondary. What is primary is Expression. Expression itself is liberation of thoughts, of unrealized dreams, desires and losses. The two books in question are the chinks through which we catch glimpses of several crucial issues related to religion, gender, amendments and social attitude. The reality would call for a study of life within any monastic wall for that matter. Issues of woman in a sensitive vocation of a structured organization as the monastery, for instance, that looks on helplessly unable to cope up with the profligacy of the times, and the necessity to hold on to the ethical traditions of the vocation, of a society and media that treat women's issue with deep rooted prejudices in the pretext of protecting them at times, of

the growing factions in all religions, of the affluence of members that fan further fragmentation and above all the insatiable avarice for material wealth. Sarah Joesph rightly comments, that her duty is to write fearlessly about the world of woman, who are denied self determining rights over their own bodies by the oppressive gender regime. The story behind the texts that evoke the curiosity of the reader is in actuality not meant to be so but to sensitize the world of readers what slips away from sight when such news touch the headlines. We are in a nation that is supposedly spiritual but has become unspiritual in many ways. The two books complement each other in content and plea. What is autobiographically outspoken in one text (Sr. Jesmes's *Amen*) figures as the 'biography of an entire society and culture' in Sarah Joseph's *Othappu*. We cannot always blame the west for its influence or impact. We have outlived colonial rule for over sixty years and more now. We have evolved our own semi-oriental-culture for which we alone are responsible. It is escapism to point an accusing finger to the white man who is long lost to us. Voices made audible in literature are meant to be heard, listened to with insight enough to heal. Books as these that touch upon controversial issues are not to be stacked in libraries, nor are to be condemned as Mary Magdalene nor to be read like another case of Hester Prynne preserved in fiction for posterity. They are to be heard out for the two books mean and expect a congenial change.

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