

# **GENDERED AGGRESSION IN THE SELECT WOMEN LIFE WRITINGS OF KERALA**

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the  
Degree of  
**Doctor of Philosophy**

By

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## **CERTIFICATE**

This is to certify that this thesis entitled “Gendered Aggression in the Select Women Life Writings of Kerala” submitted by Arya S bearing registration number PHDENG1803 in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the award of Doctor of Philosophy in English is a bonafide work carried out by her under my supervision. No part of this thesis has been presented to any other institution or University for the award of any degree or diploma.

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## DECLARATION

I, Arya S., do hereby declare that this thesis entitled “Gendered Aggression in the Select Women Life Writings of Kerala” is a bonafide record of the research work carried out by me under the supervision of Prof. Basavaraj P. Donur, Dean, School of Humanities & Languages, and Registrar, Central University of Karnataka, Kalaburagi; and co-supervision of Dr. Sreebitha P.V., Associate Professor, Department of Studies in English, Kannur University, Kannur. I also declare that no part of this thesis has been presented to any other institution or University for the award of any degree or diploma.

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## Abstract

Life Writing implies a range of writing that ‘represents the lives of others or of one’s self’. There is quite a chunk of life writings available in Kerala written by both men and women. Women often employed life writing as a medium to express their thoughts, feelings, emotions, opinions, and even their resistance against the injustices meted out to them in the personal and public realm. It is significant that when some women writers in Kerala turned to write their life experiences which not only refrained from endorsing the patriarchal ideals but also critiqued the same, they were dealt quite harshly by the society. The critique to such life writings and its authors were mostly aggressive. Thus, the study strives to find the link between women scripting their lived experiences deviating from the conventional ways and the aggression encountered for the same by analysing few of the critical responses to the select life writings. The selected works include Jaishree Misra’s *Ancient Promises* (2000), Sister Jesme’s *Amen: The Autobiography of a Nun* (2009), Nalini Jameela’s *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker* (2007), and Vinaya’s *Ente Katha Adhava Oru Malayalai Yuvathiyude Jeevitha Yathra (My Story or The Life Journey of a Young Malayali Women)* (2003). Evoking, the Kerala paradox, feminist writers assert that amidst eulogizing the fertility rate, high female literacy, and health care, the deep-rooted patriarchy and the subsequent violence against women tend to remain as one of the areas that lack much needed attention, both of the academics and the activists. The study aims to identify aggression especially verbal aggression, physical aggression, sexual aggression, relational aggression, and infrastructural violence documented in the select life writings, analyse its context and motive, and further its nexus between caste and gender. It also attempts to outline the commonality and differences in the aggression documented in the select life writings, and scrutinize if the select women writers were fiercely articulate or silent about their experiences of aggression.

*Keywords:* gendered aggression, life writing, Kerala, verbal aggression, physical aggression

## Introduction

### Life Writing

Life Writing is defined as “a range of writings about lives or parts of lives, or which provide materials out of which lives or parts of lives are composed” (Leader 1). Apart from memoir, autobiography, biography, and diaries, Leader includes “letters, writs, wills, written anecdotes, depositions, court proceedings, . . . marginalia, nonce writings, lyric poems, scientific and historical writings, and digital forms” in the genre of life writing. Smith and Watson too refer to life writing as that which accommodates auto/bio of any form (Reading Autobiography, 3, 4). In line with Smith and Watson, Howes observes life writing as “an umbrella term that represents lives of others or one’s self” (3,4). Jolly further widened life writings “beyond the literary by including entries grounded in anthropology, sociology, psychology, history, theology, cultural studies, and even the biological sciences, and in forms of life narrative outside of the written form, including testimony, artifacts, reminiscence, personal narrative, visual arts, photography, film, oral history, and so forth” (qtd in. Howes 4).

Citing the limitations encountered by life writings, Howes notes that “until the 1970s, life writings were referred to a particular branch of textual criticism that subjected some biographies and autobiographies, and a scattering of letters and diaries, to the same literary-critical scrutiny commonly focused upon poetry, drama, or fiction” (1). Thus, after much deliberation, Howes posits life writing as that which “refers to the study of life representation beyond the traditional literary and historical focus on verbal texts, encompassing not only other media- film, graphic narratives, online technologies, performance but also research in other disciplines- psychology, anthropology, ethnic and Indigenous studies, political science, sociology, education, medicine, and any other field that records, observes, or evaluates lives” (1).

According to Howes, in England, “though the life writing could be traced back to late 17<sup>th</sup> or early 18<sup>th</sup> century”, it reached the academic space only in the 1980s (3). Among the extensive list of life writings, one of the most widely read and recognised is the genre of autobiography. The term autobiography is derived from the Greek terms- ‘autos’ meaning self, ‘bios’ meaning life and ‘graphein’ meaning to write. Hence, it can be defined as the life account of a person written by oneself. James Cox defines it as “a narrative of a person’s life written by himself” (145). The term autobiography in its present sense was considered to be used for the first time in 1809 by Robert Southey. In the words of Felicity Nussbaum, “whatever the definitions may vary, by the 1830, the word autobiography had become a matter of established usage as more and more people began to use the word” (Anderson *Women* 7). The subsequent upsurge in the interest of the masses to read autobiographies resulted in its large-scale publication and circulation.

The first full scale autobiography is considered to be *Confessions*, written by St. Augustine, with spiritual overtones, in the Fourth century. Saint Teresa of Avila who lived in the sixteenth century has also written a spiritual autobiography titled *The Life of Teresa of Jesus*. Another notable spiritual autobiography was *Grace Abounding to the Chief Sinners* written by John Bunyan in 1666. Rousseau’s *Confessions (1764-70)* was a secular autobiography through which he explored his own personal experiences, feelings and works. This style gained ground as more writers like Goethe, Wordsworth, Gertrude, and Stein, Stendhal started writing secular autobiographies. Secular autobiographies flourished during the Romantic period. According to Mazlish, modern autobiography is, “a literary genre produced by romanticism, which offers us a picture from a specific present viewpoint of a coherent shaping of an individual’s past, reached by means of introspection and memory of a special sort, wherein the self is seen as a developing entity, changing by definable stages, and where knowledge of the self links with knowledge of the external world, and both together

provide us with a deep and true grasp of reality” (59). This was followed by the rise of several popular and sensational autobiographies across the world.

Humans long for self-expression and life writing serves as a generous platform for it. Hence both writing and reading of autobiographical works gained momentum across the world. As John Sturrock puts it, “we are entitled to suppose that there is something like an urge to write autobiography within any individual, seeking expression at every level from loosely and ephemerally conversational to the enduringly artistic” (286). Hence, analyzing life writings will provide insight about how self-expressions reflect the real societal conditions and cultural contributions on communal bases.

### **Life Writings in India: An Overview**

In India, the presence of life writings could be traced back to the medieval period. King Babar is found to have maintained a personal journal, *Babarnamah*. It resembled a memoir and was written in 1530 in Chagatai Turkish. Similarly, Banarsi Das was a Jain merchant and poet who wrote his memoir *Ardhakadhanak* (Half a Story, 1641) in Hindi verse. It was written during the prime time of Mughal rule. Guru Gobind Singh, a renowned poet, warrior, the tenth Sikh Guru and philosopher, is considered to have written his memoir in Braj Bhasha. His *Bichithra Natak* (Resplendent Drama, 1730-32), is written in verse form. Mirza Ghalib, a famous poet, wrote *Dastanbuy* (Diary, 1857) in Persian.

The genre of autobiography started to flourish once India’s contact with the British began. M P Sinha states, “the literary renaissance that began with India’s contact with England made a remarkable contribution as it excited and stimulated the autobiographical impulse in Indians” (97). Jawahar Lal Nehru’s *An Autobiography* (1936), Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi’s *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (1927), Nirad C Chaudhari’s *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (1951) are to name a few famous autobiographies which are widely read around the world.

Autobiographies attained a new dimension when the oppressed deployed it as a powerful tool to articulate their self. As Julia Swindells states, “autobiography now has the potential to be the text of the oppressed and the culturally displaced, forging a right to speak both for and beyond the individual people in a position of powerlessness-women, black people, working class people- have more than begun to insert themselves into the culture via autobiography, via the assertion of a ‘personal’ voice, which speaks beyond itself” (7). Hence, the genre of autobiography began to be used by the oppressed, as it gave them an opportunity to express their self.

In India, a new trend in life writing was brought forth with the emergence of subaltern autobiographies. For Dalits, autobiography became a platform to express their suppressed self. Dalit men and women deployed this powerful medium and vociferously brought their private lives into the public sphere. Undoubtedly, it gave them ample arena to give voice to the innumerable reasons which had marginalised them. As Udaya Kumar states, “by recounting experiences of humiliation, Dalit autobiographies make a public claim regarding the norms that govern the treatment of each other in the society” (17). Thus, it is important to read Dalit autobiographies, as it places a mirror on the society, bringing to the forefront the teeming reasons which marginalises them and urges for the edification of the same.

The movement of Dalit literature made headway in Maharashtra in 1960s. The spread of western education and Ambedkarite ideology worked wonders to boost confidence in Dalits and uplift them in multi-dimensional ways. Most of the writers in Maharashtra were the followers of Dr. B R Ambedkar, who revolted against the caste system, which stratified the society as well as the human mind. The first generation of educated writers held close to their heart the ideals propounded by Ambedkar, and together they brought into vogue the movement known as Dalit literature.

Dalit poetry and fiction were autobiographical in tone, hence could be considered as life writings. Dalit writers used it as a medium for self-expression. Namdeo Dhasal employed poetry as a weapon critiquing the paradigms that validated the social oppression, Suresh Bhat wrote poems on Dr. Ambedkar. Dalit autobiography stands aloof from the rest bringing to the forefront their struggles and experiences and has contributed in a great deal to the growth and development of Dalit literature. Until then, the world had known Dalits through the narratives of the non-Dalits. Hence, Dalit writers had the urgency to narrate their tale. They did not consider life and literature as different; instead, they employed literature to express the stark realities of life. *Baluta*, written by Daya Pawar in Marathi, in 1978, is considered as the first Dalit autobiography to be published. It was an account of the violence and inequality that the author and his fellow beings had to endure being Dalits and their sheer courage to fight back these evils. The book earned him several awards but it also created a huge ripple in the society leading to the upsurge of various anti Dalit reactions. Nevertheless, it infused courage in other Dalit writers to explore the genre of autobiography.

P E Sonkamble's autobiography, *Atwaniche Pakshi* (Birds of Memories) published in the year 1979, narrates the heart wrenching tale of the untouchables. Other noted autobiographies include Madhav Kondvilkar's *Mukkam PostDevache Gothne* (At Post Devache Gothne, 1977), Shankarrao Kharat's *Taral Antral* (The Sky and Heights of the Soul, 1981), Rustam Achalkhamb's *Gawaki* (A Village Profession), Kumud Pawade's *Antasphot* (Inner Explosion, 1981), Nanasahab Zodge's *Phanjar* (A Thorny Bough, 1982), Mukta Sarvagod's *Mitleli Kawada* (Closed Doors, 1983), Shantabai Kamble's *Majya Jalmachi Chittarkatha* (The Illustrated Story of My Life, 1983), and Mallika Dhasal's *Udhwasta Vyayacha Mala* (I want to be Ruined). Similarly, the Dalits in different parts of India too began writing their lives. Women too employed life writing as a medium to script their experiences.

## Women's Life Writing

According to Howes, feminist studies enhance the life writing scholars' focus on the personal and political and further the intervention of cultural factors which in turn stresses the potential drawbacks attached to the generalised notions on women (5). Leigh Gilmore notes how women's life writings exhibit a stiff resistance on what they are permitted to disclose about life experiences, especially the deeds of powerful men (qtd in. Howes 7).

Women across the world used life writing as a medium to express their thoughts, feelings, emotions, opinions and even their resistance against the injustices meted out to them in their personal and public realm. Historically women were conferred with an inferior role in the literature field. Though there was an unparalleled contribution from men in the production of literary works, eventually women too succeeded in making their presence felt in the field of literature. Women writers started off by writing poems, short stories and novels, and gradually they ventured into the genre of life writing, especially autobiographies and fictionalized autobiographies/biographies. Fictionalised autobiographies/biographies present life as wrapped in fiction. A few of the celebrated life writings of women around the world include Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868), Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges are not the Only Fruit* (1985), Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963), Helen Keller's *The Story of My Life* (1903), Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), Ayaan Hirsi Ali's *Infidel* (2007), Malala Yousafzai's *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban* (2013), and Michelle Obama's *Becoming* (2018).

Women from different parts of India had already succeeded in scripting their lives magnificently. In some regional languages like Marathi and Bengali, it was women who had pioneered in introducing the genre of autobiography. For example, Kashibai Kanitkar's *Palakhicha Gonda* (The Silk Tassel in the Palanquin) (1928) was marked as the first autobiography in Marathi. Rassundari Debi's *Amar Jiban* (1876) is considered to be the first

full scale autobiography written in Bengali. Kripabai Sattianandhan is credited with the publication of first Indian autobiographical novel in English, *Saguna* (1887). It appeared for the first time in the serialised form in Madras Christian College Magazine.

### **Life Writings in Kerala**

There is quite a chunk of life writings available in Kerala written by both men and women. A recently published article in the *Economic Times* reveals that “Mahatma Gandhi’s autobiography has more readers in Kerala than in his home state Gujarat”

<sup>1</sup> These statistics in turn throws light on the high reception and interest in autobiographies by the people of Kerala.

Malayalam, the regional language of Kerala, is enriched with life writings, mainly autobiographies and memoirs of different types, including political and secular ones. Yakob Ramavarma and Vaikkath Pachumoothathu are considered to have begun the writing of autobiography in Malayalam.<sup>2</sup> Vaishakam Tirunal Maharaja is also regarded to have written a short autobiography in 1880. Some of the noted autobiographies in Malayalam include Swadeshabhimani Ramakrishna Pilla’s *EnteNaadukadathal* (My Exile, 1911), Sahithya Panchananan’s *Smaranamandalam* (Memory Lane, 1938), E V Krishna Pillai’s *Jeevitha Smaranakal* (Memories of Life, 1938-1949), Mannathu Padmanabhan’s *Ente Jeevitha Smaranakal* (My Memories of Life, 1957), P J Cherian’s *Ente kala Jeevitham* (My Artistic Life, 1964), E M S Namboothiripad’s *Athmakatha* (Autobiography, 1969), A K Gopalan’s *Ente Jeevitha Katha* (My Life Story, 1972), Cherukad’s *Jeevitha Paathi* (The Half Life, 1974), Kamala Das’ *Ente Kadha* ( My Story, 1973 ), P Kunju Raman Nair’s *Kaviyude Kaalpadukal* (The Footprints of a Poet, 1974), Vaikkam Chandrasekharan Nair’s *AnubhavangaleNanni* (Thanks to Experiences, 1985), E Moidu Moulavi’s *Athmakadha* (Autobiography, 1985), Thikkodiyar’s *Arangu Kaanatha Nadan* (The Actor who hasn’t Seen the Stage, 1991), E K Nayanar’s *Jayilile Ormakal* (Memories from Prison, 1996), Vinaya’s

Ente Katha Athava Oru Malayali Yuvathiyude Jeevitha Yaatra (My Story or The Life Journey of a Young Malayali Woman, 2003), Ratnamayi Devi's *From the Desk of Life: Autobiography of Ratnamayi Devi* (2004), *Akkamma Cherian's Jeevitham Oru Samaram: Atmakatha* (Life, a Strike: An Autobiography, 2011), and *V Abraham's From Dark Dungeons to Dazzling Dawn: A Lifelong Struggle with the Church Hierarchy* (2016).

### **Women's Life Writing in Kerala**

Deliberating the history of women's life writing, especially autobiographies in Kerala, Udayan argues that most of them derived great satisfaction by placing themselves as mere shadows of men (166). In the beginning, some women writers wrote autobiographies eulogizing men- husband, father or someone they adored. For instance, B Kalyani Amma's *Vyazhavatta Smaranakal* (Memories of Twelve Years, 1917) depicts her life with her husband, Swadeshbhimani Ramakrishna Pillai. Rather than scripting her own life, she ends up being the biographer of her husband. A few such works had titles which hinted the prominence given to men rather than the writer herself, like that of Rosi Thomas' *Evan Ente Priya C J* (He is my Dear C J, 1973), Leela Damodara Menon's *Chettante Nizhalail* (In the Shadow of My Husband, 1984). Hence, in such works, women's life gets overshadowed by that of men, reinforcing the already existing ideology of the patriarchal society that woman and her identity lies subservient to man. However, certain life writings like that of Saraswathi Amma, Rajalekshmi, Sreedevi Changampuzha, and Kamala Das stood aloof from the rest in explicitly narrating the author's thoughts, desires, feelings, and emotions which were mostly against the accepted and adored patriarchal ways. It surmounted all the hassles, paving way for similar such autobiographies.

In 1990, K Satchidanandan<sup>3</sup>, used the term *pennethuthu* to denote to all the women's writing in his introduction to the collection of short stories titled *Paapathara* by Sara Joseph<sup>4</sup>. However, Sara Joseph objects considering all that is written by any woman as

*pennezhuthu* but includes those writing that share “women’s experience” and that employed “feminine idiom”. For her “like any movement, any freedom struggle, women’s writing is a struggle for women’s liberation” (qtd in Arunima 176, 178). Thus, she regards *pennezhuthu* as that which contests all hegemonies (qtd in. Sreekumar *Scripting* 67).

Tracing the history of *pennezhuthu* in Kerala, it is evident that, traversing the male dominated literary terrains was never easy for the women writers. It is important that when some women writers had turned to writing their life experiences which not only refrained from endorsing the patriarchal ways but also criticised the same, they were treated quite harshly by the society. They had to endure various difficulties, and even encounter various forms of aggression. This following section attempts to analyse the aggression the women writers had confronted and their subsequent response to it.

Some of the prominent Kerala women writers include Lalithambika Andarjanam (1909-87) whose works exhibited a stiff protest against the Brahmanical patriarchy and laid bare the plight of women in her community that is the Namboothiri women. Andarjanam while writing about the controversial figure, Tatrikutty, in *Pratikaladevata* (Goddess of Revenge), scripts her own struggles as a writer:

Story-writing is not a pleasant task, especially for a woman like me who maintains idealism without giving up dignity and aristocracy. When I present living situations... whose and how many oppositions I have to bear! When the opposer's weapon is abuse, will I be able to defend it with the same arrows? I cannot even go near the religious restrictions. I have to make up my mind in advance as to whose derision I will bear from among the hundreds of institutionalists in literature.... Oh! Misery! ... I don't want anything! In a state of unidentifiable hatred, I threw the pen on the table and sat, with closed eyes, leaning my head against the chair. (qtd in. James 104)

Here, Andarjanam notes the verbal aggression she had endured and further is prone to encounter as a woman writer who exhibits strong protest through her writings. It is significant that she notes her opposer has employed the ‘weapon’ of ‘abuse’ and further reveals having faced it for presenting life experiences. Using the terms ‘abuse’, ‘arrows’, ‘derisions’, she draws attention to the severity of verbal aggression she had confronted. Further, Andarjanam doubts whether she will be able to defend herself, paying back in the same coin. She prepares herself for receiving more derision. Finally, she throws away the pen which could possibly imply that she restrains herself from writing, though for a brief period of time. Andarjanam mentions that it was in a “state of unidentifiable hatred”, she throws the pen. This could either refer to the hatred she had been receiving from the society or the hatred for her passion in writing that had fetched her abuses and derisive comments. Though, Andarjanam had continued to write, it is quite questionable if other women writers, having shaped their works from the real-life experiences, critiquing the existing system could be resilient after encountering such aggression from the society. It is also noteworthy that though Andarjanam hadn’t resisted critiquing the entrenched patriarchy and the subsequent plight of Namboothiri women, she had much reluctance to script an autobiography. Even when she decided to narrate her own life, rather than calling it as her autobiography, she termed the work only as *Aathmakadak oru Aamugham* (A Preface to Autobiography).

Arunima points out that writers like Saraswathi Amma and Rajalekshmy who later were eulogised as good writers had to face various difficulties during their time. They were not only being ignored but attacked and persecuted by the literary field that was highly patriarchal (176-177).

K Saraswathi Amma (1919- 1975), a novelist, essayist and short story writer, deployed her work as a staunch protest against the patriarchy and the irrational beliefs upheld by the society that denigrated women as the weaker sex which in turn lead to her marginal

existence in the Malayalee literary circle (Devika, 'Beyond Kulina' 205). When she criticised the male domination, and raised voice advocating the rights of women, she was immediately categorised as the 'man hater'. Though, regarded as a 'man hater', it is interesting to note that she had raised and shared a close bond with her nephew, which in turn pauses the question whether it was the men or their rigid and demeaning ways towards women that she had detested. Further, Suneeetha in her analysis of Amma's works point out that it was not only men she had condemned but also women who had endorsed the patriarchal ways in their lives (528). Arunima points out that Saraswathi Amma believed that her writing could alter the attitude harboured by the Malayalee society towards women ("Pennezhuthu" 182). Devika, who had translated some of Saraswathi Amma's works to English, points out her as the one with "*streevashi* -a persistence that outlives repeated and violent attempts to suppress, expressed in her works and life alike, leading to be considered as the tragic of heroine of feminist fiction in Malayalam". She further observes her writing as an amalgam of "humour, rational arguments, and scholarship that transcended the region, and empirical observations" ("The Obduracy"). In addition, her bold, and dauntless temperament, especially while dealing with men including her peers intimidated them. She notes how one of the critics, Guptan Nair, recounts Amma entering a meeting in the Malayalam Literary Club declaring, "I too have written some short stories; I too want to speak". All these daunting ways both in her life and further expressed through writing, made her to be casted down as "*Vattu Saraswathy*" (Mad Saraswathy) and a 'man hater' ("The Obduracy").

Thakkathu Amayankottu Rajalekshmi (1930-1965) an academic, short story writer, novelist and poet, earned *Kerala Sahithya Academy Award* for her first novel *Oru Vazhiyum Kure Nizhalukalum* (A Path and Many Shadows ). In her works, she dealt mainly with the themes of women's struggle in the domestic realm. Rajalekshmi, even after receiving acclaims, thought of writing under the pen name 'Rajasree' for anonymity. Later, invigorated

by the editor, she started writing as Rajalekshmi, removing her initials, in order to attain obscurity (Jayasree “Rajalakshmi Remembered”). Here, despite the accolades she had started receiving, the writer longs to remain anonymous, just to sustain her writing.

In the article “Rajalekshmi, the Reclusive Author”, Jayasree positions her works as a “life text”. However, the similarity of her novels that bore close resemblance to real life experiences, making it fall in the category of life writings, adversely affected Rajalekshmi’s life, both as a writer and an ordinary woman. The publication of one of her novels as serialised version, *Uchaveyilum Ilam Nilavum* (The Noon Sun and the Light Moon) abruptly ended when she was harshly criticized as it bore close resemblance with real life which prompted her to burn the manuscript (Aparna 166). This instance forced her to abstain from writing for some time. Her next novel, *Njanenna Bhavan* (Self Conceit) was also criticised for its similarity to real life which coerced her to rewrite it. Prof. Indira, her friend, recollects that there was immense pressure to discontinue publishing her work the second time as well (Jayasree “Rajalekshmi Remembered”). However, soon she ended her life bidding farewell to her hardly ten years of literary career, leaving a note revealing “I tried two years without writing novels. I cannot continue without writing. If I live certainly, I will write novels. That may harm others. So, I leave” (qtd. in Aparna 167).

Both Saraswathi Amma and Rajalekshmi were educated, employed and independent women. When the former was considered as bold and outspoken the latter was regarded as reclusive and timid. However, both of them had to face numerous challenges to create their space in the literary circle. Finally, both of them had abruptly ended their literary career in different ways. Saraswathi Amma had resorted to remain silent, and Rajalekshmi embraced death.

Hemalatha Devi further mentions that when Sreedevi wrote about her difficult life with renowned poet Changampuzha Krishna Pilla, she was also treated quite harshly by the

society. Devika notes that when Sreedevi gave the picture of her husband as an “inept householder”, she was accused of being “jealous, narrow- minded kitchen corner ignoramus” (House wife 1682).

Kamala Das regarded “at once as the bold new feminist voice to be toasted and the embarrassingly brassy slut to be castigated” (Sreekumar “I Too Call” 73) too had experienced various resistances from the society especially during and after the publication of her widely acclaimed work *My Story*. Prior to the publication of her autobiography, when it was released in serialised version in the literary magazine, *Malayalanadu* in 1972, the editor, V B C Nair revealed that there was immense pressure from her relatives to retract it, to which neither the writer nor he himself had relented. It is noteworthy that unlike Rajalekshmi, Das was not ready to withdraw her work from publication. Even Kamala Das’s clash with the editor, Nair had resulted in him refer to her as a ‘street woman’ for having dashed into his room accusing him to have altered her work for his cause (qtd in. Pillai 111). Pillai in her discreet analysis limits Nair’s usage of the term ‘street woman’ as having emerged from the patriarchal notion that women’s body, limited to the domestic setting tends to be regarded as chaste rather than in the streets where it receives a negative implication, signifying its availability (111). However, it is quite relevant to question what had provoked Nair to make such a reference about a celebrated author like Kamala Das- was it her life writing that had already fetched her the image of an ‘immoral woman’ for having explicitly narrated about her sexual escapades or was it her daunting way to question an upper caste man like him about his authority to edit her work to suit his purpose, disregarding her agency. Furthermore, this shows the difficulties a woman writer is prone to endure in publishing her life writing as she intends, devoid of the intervention of external agencies whether personal or professional, which even a renowned writer like Kamala Das was not immune to. However, after its publication as well, both Das and her work were not spared from receiving severe criticisms which includes the

autobiography being referred as a mere “sex story” (Raphael 131). In an interview, Das mentions that the response to *My Story* was “bit too harsh” and people gathered around her place shouted “slut”, “prostitute”, “Madhavikutty go back” (Nair “Kamala Das - Excerpts”).

Das as a response to the frequent unfair criticism targeted on her points out:

I am not free in my home state. They are highly critical and find fault with whatever I write. It is difficult especially as I love writing...I am often demeaned, spreading false allegation that there is an overindulgence of sexual elements in my work though I have written about various topics, making my canvas wide. This belittling is done to restrict me as a writer which is why I escape to foreign countries whenever I get an opportunity”. (Das “Interview” 1.00- 12.07)”

Undoubtedly, it was the never-ending scathing remarks aimed at controlling the writers that had prompted Rajalaxshmi to end her life and Kamala Das to leave to another country, seizing such opportunities. Due to several backlashes, Kamala Das had disowned her life writing as just a story (Devika “Housewife” 1682). Beena notes that the conservative Malayalees found some solace when Das stated that the work was a fiction (60). However, she had later claimed it to be her life writing and not just fictitious (Das “The Rediff”, Pillai 113). Despite the controversies, and searing criticism, in the sterling edition of *My Story* published in 1976, Kamala Das notes that “This book has cost me many things I hold dear, but I do not for a moment regret having written it” (qtd in. Pillai 106).

Arunima’s arguments brings to light how, in Kerala, even the literary production tends to be gendered. Compared to men, less women ventures into writing and mostly the latter’s work remains under valued by relegating it as “un-aesthetic or closer to reality than art” (“Pennezhuthu” 172). When some of the women employed writing as a weapon, resonating their response, resistance, and protest, it further thwarted the elite aesthetics regarded to be indispensable in literature (Udayan 169).

Padmanabhan, a renowned Malayalam short story writer, in his observations on women's writing in Kerala notes:

... We have women's writing (*pennezhuthu*) and dalit writing (*dalitezhuthu*) and so on. That men cannot authentically and forcefully express the problems of women, is what these women writers claim. That women have problems is true. Our literature, especially within the fictional tradition, has had so many well-known women writers like Saraswathi Amma, Rajalakshmi, Madhavi Kutty, and Vatasala. There are newcomers like Chandramati too. None of them have come from the 'reserved constituency' of women's writing (*samvarana mandalam*). They all have a very high status here as writers. Let me say this with some sorrow, that it is those who have faced disappointments in different walks of life... especially within the sphere of the family that make such a noise about women's writing. Their numbers are very small today. No affliction can last that long. Can it? (qtd in. Arunima 173)

Arunima observes that such arguments put forward by Padmanabhan further "normalizes the patriarchal attitudes and undermines the challenges posed by women's writings" (173). Padmanabhan, in his attempt to deride women's writing partially acknowledges and further trivialises the issues women face. According to him, those women who had faced setbacks, especially in the private realm, makes a fuss over women's writing. Moreover, when he gives the idea that such 'affliction' will not last long, he indirectly implies that women writings too will not prevail for long. Citing Saraswathi Amma, Rajalakshmi, Madhavi Kutty etc., he states that they were bestowed with "high status" as they did not have the support of belonging to the reserved category of women's writing. However, he deliberately overlooks the struggle these writers had endured when they had boldly discussed issues related to gender and women's sexuality in their works. Here, he prefers to remain oblivious of three facts: first, how some of these women writers he had

mentioned were hounded by the male dominated literary sphere to the extent of invisibilising their presence; second, what adversaries women had faced which had made them endure such “afflictions”; and third, when he himself had devalued the issues women faces claiming it to be short lived, how can he contest the argument put forward by some women writers that men cannot “authentically and forcefully” articulate their issues. Thus, it is quite visible how the genre of life writing when employed by a woman writer to critique the entrenched feminine ideals or to articulate their experiences of aggression perpetuated by the patriarchal society tends to be opposed, censured, and further condemned by the society. Furthermore, it reverberates the question posed by Sharmila Sreekumar pondering the means to evade the “witch hunt” that would indubitably follow those women who desire to venture into autobiographical writing (*Scripting* 70).

The current study focuses on four life writings written by women and further attempts a critique of aggression represented in them. The selected works include Jaishree Misra’s *Ancient Promises* (2000), Sister Jesme’s *Amen: The Autobiography of a Nun* (2009), Nalini Jameela’s *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker* (2007), and Vinaya’s *Ente Kadtha Adhava Oru Malayalai Yuvathiyude Jeevitha Yathra (My Story or The Life Journey of a Young Malayali Women)* (2003). Also, the study benefits from the unstructured interview conducted with Jaishree Misra, Nalini Jameela and Vinaya.

### **Aggression**

Galtung elucidates cultural violence as “those aspects of culture which justify or legitimises the violence” which tends to be covert in nature (“Cultural” 291). Mentioning that violence could be physical or psychological, he states the former as the harm caused to the “body” and the latter to the “soul”, adversely affecting “mental potentialities”. Roughly denoting to “lies, brain washing, indoctrination of various kinds, threats etc.” he categorises it as psychological violence (Violence 169). However, it is significant that the psychological

theorisations of aggression trace the nuances of both physical and psychological forms of violence. Confortini argues that a gender conscious approach to Galtung's theory of violence would provide great insights and his framework could be deployed to gain a better understanding about the violence that takes place against women in the larger societal context (339, 356). However, the current study does not dwell further on Galtung's theory of violence but leverage the psychological theorisations of aggression.

Aggression is defined as "a behaviour directed towards the aim of causing harm or injury to another individual, who does not desire to be harmed" (Baron 7; Anderson and Bushman 28; Krahe 9). According to Ames and Fiske, intentional harm is worse compared to the unintentional one, even when the harms done are identical. Social psychologists consider violence as a subset of aggression while the public generally consider it as two different things (1756).

Based on the response mode that is the type of aggressive behaviour employed, Coyne et al. have made a classification of three types, which are physical, verbal and relational aggression (1). Physical aggression includes kicking, punching, beating etc. whereas, calling names, yelling, screaming and so on is considered as verbal aggression. Relational aggression on the other hand refers to the intention of destroying the social relationship of a person. It is to be noted that some researchers have classified the aggressive motive of destruction of the relationship of a person into two, which are relational (Crick and Grotpeter 711) and social aggression (Cairns et al. 320). They have subtle differences between them. Relational aggression and social aggression can be detected analysing the intended result. For instance, if the target of a person is to shatter the social relation or status of another, it falls under social aggression whereas if the focus is to disrupt the friendship between two, it is relational aggression. Later, Krahe, added that the response mode of aggression can be postural in nature too (10). Postural aggression denotes the threatening of

someone using various gestures. Further, Parrot and Giancola considers damage to property and theft, if intended to harm or hurt others, as another form of aggression (288).

Based on the type of intend, aggression is categorised as hostile and instrumental (Allen and Anderson 4; Krahe 10). Hostile aggression is defined as an “impulsive” or “reactive” aggression. For instance, shouting at someone who made you angry belongs to the realm of hostile aggression. Instrumental aggression on the other hand is “premeditated” and “proactive”. It is defined as a clearly planned or calculated aggression aimed to attain a specific goal. Impulsive and cognitive aggression are quite similar to hostile and instrumental aggression.

Rogers and O’Neill’s defines ‘infrastructure violence’ as a continuous “processes of marginalisation, discrimination and exclusion” (401) that tends to be sustained by infrastructure, either passively or intentionally (qtd in Datta and Nabeela 68). Datta and Nabeela further argues “lack of access to infrastructure violence as a form of intimate violence” (67).

Allen and Anderson however affirm the need to adopt a dimensional approach while analysing aggression, rather than adhering to a traditional dichotomous division. “The dimensional approach allows for a more nuanced classification of aggressive behaviour that accommodates mixed motives and relatively automatic but consequence sensitive forms of aggression” (6).

Rodelli et al. talk about how gender-based violence as being normalized, after a series of elaborate studies, including interviews with the survivors of gender-based violence (26, 27). Their studies corroborate the argument of World Health Organization (WHO) that when compared to men, women suffer more from gender-based violence across globe. WHO also reports that one third of women population in the world are victims of gender-based violence, but unfortunately it gets normalized and more often goes unreported. There are

multiple socio-cultural factors contributing to the normalization of gender-based violence prevalent in most of the cultural contexts, leading to “iceberg”<sup>5</sup> of domestic abuse or the normalization and ignorance of most of the domestic abuse incidents (Gracia 536).

Normalization of gender-based violence also adds to the inability of women to recognize or report the incidents of abuse that further promote continuation of aggression (Sinko et al. 4,5). McLeod et al. also specify that many women tend to consider intimate partner violence as normal unless it is severe physical aggression with visible bruises (qtd. in Rodelli 28). Rodelli et al. further state that normalization of aggression against women is highly significant as it is a base for continuing and intensifying various forms of aggression (26). In the special rapporteur on violence against women in India, it is regarded as a continuum from “womb to tomb”, caused due to several factors including caste, class, tradition etc. Further, evoking the Kerala paradox, feminist writers assert that amidst eulogizing the fertility rate, high female literacy, and health care, the deep-rooted patriarchy and the subsequent violence against women tend to remain as one of the areas that lack much needed attention, both of the academics and the activists (Arunima, “Pennezhuthu” 174, Devika, “Negotiating” 44, Mokkal, *Unruly Figures* 49, Datta 71). Thus, the current study attempts to identify the aggression especially verbal aggression, physical aggression, sexual aggression, relational aggression, and infrastructural violence documented in the select life writings written by the women writers, analyse its context, motive and further its nexus with caste and gender.

Aggression, especially its subtle forms, unlike physical aggression, is seldom analysed and studied in literature. Physical aggression, which is a subtype of aggression, many a times receives the limelight, as the hurt or injury caused will be clearly visible to others, unlike in other types of aggression. This often results in the marginalization of many other forms of aggression as trivial or insignificant, which in turn leads to the normalization of such aggressive acts. Additionally, factors like gender, caste, religious discourse etc. could

be seen working in multifold ways to obscure aggression propagated, relegating it as acceptable or normal to a particular group or whole of the society. In “Human Aggression”, Anderson and Bushman note that, “positive attitudes towards violence against specific group of people (like women) will increase aggression against them” (36). Women’s life writings often narrate instances of various forms of aggression. Hence, such works could be considered as important documents to be utilised in the study of various types of aggression persisting in the society. Thus, the study attempts to identify the aggression – specifically verbal aggression, physical aggression, sexual aggression, relational aggression and violent ideation – documented in the select life writings written by women writers, analyse its context and motive as well as its association with caste and gender. The current study intends to employ the psychological theorisations of aggression in order to identify and analyse the aggression pervasive in the life writings of women writers belonging to the dominant and marginalised communities in Kerala. The study thus would aid in gaining an understanding about aggression perpetuated in the specified culture against women.

### **Literature Review**

In *Scripting Lives: Narratives of Dominant Women in Kerala*, Sharmila Sreekumar analyses select dominant women’s life writings which include letters, diaries and other personal narratives. At the background, she observes those factors like high literacy rate, economic growth, sexual crimes and so on, which make Kerala, a utopian and dystopian society at the same time. She notes that the women writing, especially autobiographies as a genre, tends to be highly criticised, which in turn make women writers explore the genre of short stories. However, the tag of being ‘autobiographical’ latches to women’s writing even when they proclaim that the work is purely fictional. Sreekumar extends her inquiry on how the ‘dystopian’ and ‘utopian’ realities are shaped in the public and the domestic realm. In the proposed study, the researcher attempts to analyse how for a woman in Kerala, exploring the

genre of life writing tends to be problematic and further studies the aggression permeated in the text, especially those targeted on women.

Udaya Kumar traces the development of self-articulation in the Kerala context through his work *Writing the First Person: Literature, History, and Autobiography in Modern Kerala* (2017). He analyses in detail the works of male writers belonging to Hindu upper caste or from the lower caste- Ezhava. Udaya Kumar begins by analysing the works of Sree Narayana Guru, in which he tries to lay bare various caste demarcations in order to nullify the difference between human beings. However, in Sree Narayana's disciple, Kumaran Asan's work, gender discrimination occupies the major space. Udaya Kumar observes that these writings explicitly revealed the working frame of the society of those times. He mentions the close link which autobiographies and fiction maintained with the history of that period. He justifies his statement by quoting Marcel Mauss' concept of habitus. He further explores the rise of fiction and autobiography in Kerala. Some of the authors of autobiography he has closely analysed include Vaikathu Paachu Moothathu (1815-83), Yakob Ramavarman(1814-58), Kanippayyur Sankaran Namboothiripad(1891-1981), V T Bhattatirippad(1896-1982), and C Kesavan (1891-1969). He concludes with a minor discussion on the autobiography of Lalithambika Andarjanam(1909-87). Uday Kumar succeeds in unveiling the history of Kerala through his close reading of various autobiographies and fiction. However, by delimiting his study to a few prominent male writers in the Nineteenth Century, and a short description on Lalithambika Andarjanam's autobiography, he indirectly points out the enormous scope of studying female autobiographies and fiction in the Kerala context. The current study focuses on the life writings written by women in Kerala and analyses the underlying context of aggression which in turn lays bare various socio-cultural factors including gender, religion, class, and caste.

Priyanka Srivastava in her article titled, “Dalit Autobiographies: The Artists' Representations of Self and Community” analyses five Dalit autobiographies which are Sharan Kumar Limbale’s *Outcaste* (2003), Bama’s *Karukku* (1992), Kaushalya Baisantray’s *Dohra Abhishap* (1999), Vasanth Moon’s *Growing Up Untouchable in India* (2002) and Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan: A Dalit’s Life* (2003). She sheds light on the narrative strategy of the selected writers and the poverty represented in each work. She talks about the differences in articulation of oppression in both male and female autobiographies. The writer also talks about the common pattern of oppression in the chosen works. However, Srivastava, having selected writers from different states, fails to write about the regional and cultural variation represented in the autobiographies. The researcher has narrowed down the research by selecting women writers from Kerala, thereby making it convenient to analyse in detail the link between factors including caste, class, religion etc. and the aggression endured.

In the *Words to Win: The Making of a Modern Autobiography* (2013), Tanika Sarkar studies *AmarJiban* (My Life), the first full-scale autobiography in Bengali language, which was written by a woman, Rashundari Debi. Sarkar has devoted the major portion of her work tracing the socio-cultural milieu that had contributed in the making of *Amar Jiban*. She has analyzed various historical components including religion, place, time, and education of women that had played a significant role in the scripting of the modern autobiography, *Amar Jiban* and the reasons that had promoted Rashundari Debi, an upper caste, rural housewife to document her life. The first part of Rashundari Debi’s autobiography was published in 1868, and the second in 1906, when she was 88 years old. The book brought to light a number of instances depicting the extremely severe patriarchal norms that suppressed women’s right to read, write and gain knowledge. Although Sarkar mentions that Debi’s *Amar Jiban* stands aloof from the rest of the autobiographies that had emerged in the Nineteenth century such as the autobiographies of prominent figures like

Debendranath Tagore and Saradasundari Debi, she does not go for an in-depth analysis with the mentioned or any other work. Thus, the author gets bogged down giving only the historical details of *Amar Jiban*. The researcher, however, tries to analyse the life writings of four women writers hailing from dominant and marginalized communities, focusing on their caste and class, and attempts to give an understanding of the same in terms of aggression experienced.

Sharmila Rege's *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios* (2006) analyses Dalit literature in India from the perspectives of gender and caste. The book magnifies the gulf between academic ideologies and social practices in case of caste and gender. Rege explains that testimonio is the voice of a person representing a community with similar social status, who are unable to express their experiences of oppression and marginalization like the narrator could. Hence, these testimonies articulate collective suffering and pain, inviting the response of the readers. She then infers the relevance of Dalit women's testimonios and further analyses the representation of caste in them. Caste and gender are the pivot on which her work revolves. Locating Dalit woman at the centre, Rege could tap their innumerable sufferings. Thus, it has been reiterated through her work that caste and gender oppress women. The researcher has, however, included life writings of women belonging to both the dominant and marginalized communities. Thus, rather than delimiting the study with one standpoint, it gives the researcher a vantage point to critique the articulation of aggression by the select women writers belonging to diverse communities. In this context, Rege herself quotes Collins "Black feminist thought represent only a partial perspective...by understanding the perspectives of many groups, knowledge of social reality can become more complete" (234).

In "Dalit Women Talk Differently" Gopal Guru notes the two major factors that had prompted dalit women to articulate their struggles differently which included the external

factor, that was the other groups' attempt to homogenise their issues, rendering them silent and the internal factor which was the patriarchy existing within the dalit community. He recalls the argument put forward by the Dalit women activists that the intervention of caste needs to be looked at while addressing or analysing an instance of sexual violence on a Dalit woman, which the non-dalit activists often overlook. He mentions how Dalit women's voice was often subordinated to others because mostly others had spoken for them in the past. In the political front also they have a marginal existence. The patriarchal factors too oppress dalit women, just like how other communities had marginalised the Dalit community. Citing that the same mechanism as employed by the patriarchy existing within their community to suppress and subjugate Dalit women, they problematise the intervention of gender. Guru, thus, outlines that the Dalit women's life experiences give an altogether different standpoint of the social reality. In this study, the researcher adopts an intersectional approach in order to analyse the aggression articulated in the select life writings written by women, hailing from Kerala.

In "The City and the Sex Worker: Reading Caste and Gender in Life Writings" Carmel Christy analyses Nalini Jameela's *The Autobiography as a Sex worker*, places it in the genre of life writing rather than an autobiography. She writes how the city tends to be the space of work and rest for Nalini Jameela. Further, she points out the city as structured in relation to the gender and caste hierarchy which in turn pushes the sex workers off to the slums. The current study also positions *The Autobiography as a Sex worker* as a life writing. Furthermore, it adopts an intersectional approach and strives to explore various forms of aggression endured by Nalini Jameela and the sex worker's community in the public and domestic spheres.

In "Housewife, Sex Worker and Reformer Controversies over Women Writing Their Lives in Kerala", Devika analyses and traces the reception of two autobiographies, *Ente*

*Katha* by Kamala Das and *Njan, Laingikattozhilali* (I, A Sex Worker) by Nalini Jameela. The analysis sheds light on how problematic it is for the women in Kerala to venture into scripting their lives. However, in the current study, the researcher analyses the life writings of Kerala women who are contemporaries, and belonging to both dominant and marginalised communities. Further, attempts are made to analyse the challenges encountered in their effort to employ life writing as a medium to narrate the aggression they were susceptible to and also their articulation and resistance of the same.

J Miller, in her work *Getting Played: African American Girls, Urban Inequality and Gendered Violence* analyses the violence perpetuated on the African American girls. She adopts an intersectional approach, focusing on race and class of women and undertakes the study employing criminological studies and researches pertaining to gendered violence. Melloy et. al in “Words that Wound: Print Media Presentation of Gendered Violence” focus both on the violence perpetuated on women and the violence that women had committed, analysing the print media reports. Here, referring to gendered violence they had limited the study only to women. The study titled “Gendered Violence: An Analysis of the Maquiladora Murders” also focuses only on the female homicides analysing how they are structured in the print media, human right organisations, and researches. *Contesting Nation: Gendered Violence in South Asia: Notes on the Postcolonial Present* is a collection of essays where the authors attempt to problematise violence perpetrated on women by their own community or by the rival community. Focusing mainly on Sikh women, in *Gendered Citizenship: Understanding Gendered Violence*, Behl employs feminist theory and adopts an intersectional approach in understanding gendered violence and gendered citizenship. Also, the study makes use of the lived experiences of the women. In line with the above-mentioned studies, in the current study “gendered aggression” implies the aggression observed, experienced, and even perpetuated by the select women writers.

## **Research Questions**

1. How did the select women writers employ life writing as a medium to record their experiences? How was it critiqued?
2. What are the different forms of aggression pervasive in the select works and its context?
3. How do the life writings of women writers belonging to different communities in the Kerala context differ on the basis of aggression documented? Are they fiercely articulate or silent?

## **Objectives**

- To understand how the select women writers had employed life writings to document their experiences of aggression.
- To understand the nature of aggression as portrayed in the select life writings.
- To analyse how being belonging to the dominant and marginalized communities influence the women writers of Kerala in their articulation of aggression.
- To understand the ways in which the select women writers have addressed the question of aggression in their work.

## **Methodology**

The proposed study attempts an analysis of aggression in the select life writings of women belonging to both dominant and marginalised communities in Kerala. It employs the psychological theorisations of aggression. Further, it encompasses an intersectional analysis of the text appropriate to the socio-cultural context of Kerala. The thesis follows MLA Ninth edition.

## **Scope of the Study**

There are several studies that specifically focus on the life writings of dominant women writers (Sharmila Sreekumar 2009, Smriti Singh 2017, Meena T Pillai 2005, Tanika

Sarkar 2013, Uday Kumar 2017) and Dalit and marginalised writers (Sharmila Rege 1998, J Devika 2006, Gopal Guru 1995, M S Pandian, 2002). However, there is a dearth when one turns to the study of life writings of the women writers belonging to different communities, which include both dominant and marginalised, in the Kerala context. Hence, the study will contribute in providing insights about the differences in verbal expression of women writers about their experiences on aggression, and the potential reasons for the same. This may further motivate more women writers to venture into life writings and explicitly reveal their various experiences, despite the communal differences, paving the way for empowerment. Also, such a comparative and balanced approach will be beneficial while dealing with life writings written by authors belonging to dominant and marginalised communities, as it brings various perspectives together and helps in gaining a better understanding of the differences in the articulation of various experiences. As Collins argues in *Black Feminist Thought : Knowledge Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* “by understanding the perspectives of many groups, knowledge of social reality can become more complete” (234).

### **Chapterisation**

The thesis comprises of four chapters and conclusion. Chapter one is titled “From Domestic Abuse to Walking out of Wedlock: Aggression in *Ancient Promises*”. Jaishree Misra is a renowned Indian writer in English. She entered the literary sphere with the publication of *Ancient Promises* which traces the life of Janaki, who is brought up in Delhi yet hails from an orthodox Nair family in Kerala. Misra’s debut work explicitly narrates how women are coerced to follow the rules of their community through various aggressive strategies and stands as a protest against certain entrenched patriarchal ideals upheld by the society. *Ancient Promises*, though published as a fiction, is later revealed to be semi-autobiographical. The current study thus positions the work as a life writing. Scrutinising the intervention of gender and caste, this chapter analyses the aggression Janaki had confronted

both at her home and her husband's home. Also, it problematizes the normalisation of different forms of aggression against women (like verbal aggression) and the subsequent tendency to prioritize physical aggression.

Chapter II, "Embracing Ascetic Life and Moving out of Nunnery: Aggression in *Amen: The Autobiography of a Nun*", analyses Sister Jesme's life writing. Sister Jesme became quite prominent in the literary circle with the publication of *Amen: The Autobiography of a Nun*. Enduring various forms of aggression that had forced her to leave the Church convent where she had lived as a Catholic nun for thirty three years, Sister Jesme turns to script her life experiences in her dual attempts to attain cathartic relief and also to reveal the truth to the public. The chapter attempts to study different forms of aggression Sister Jesme had encountered and experienced residing in the Church convent and while working in the institution run by the Church. It analyses the critical reception of the life writing, Sister Jesme's life at home and critiques the aggression she had observed and encountered in the nunnery. The chapter also strives to look at the context and motive of aggression.

Chapter III entitled, "From Housewife to a Sex Worker: Aggression in Nalini Jameela's *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker*" critiques the aggression pervasive in Nalini Jameel's life writing. Nalini Jameela, a sex worker and activist, gained wide acclaim with the publication of her debut work, *Oru Laigikathozhilaliyude Atmakatha* (Autobiography of a Sex Worker) in 2005. Dissatisfied with the initial version that was transcribed by I Gopinath, she published the second version *Njan Laigikathozhilali: Nalini Jameelayude Atmakatha* (Me, Sex Worker: Nalini Jameela's Autobiography) with the help of a few friends in the same year. It was later translated to English by J Devika, a noted historian, feminist and academician. The English version titled *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker* is analysed in this chapter. The initial section positions the select work as a life writing and examines its

critical responses. Also, it pauses the question whether Jameela could exercise her agency completely while scripting her life writing like she could in other mediums like documentary and public speaking. The narrative also lays bare the experiences of a sex worker, who despite all hassles, works to claim dignity for her profession, and identity for herself and fellow sex workers. The chapter scrutinises the aggression she had observed and experienced in the domestic and public realm. Furthermore, it explores the aggression she had encountered as a sex worker from the public, as well as the state.

Chapter IV, titled “Humour to Despair: Aggression in Vinaya's *My Story: Or the Life Journey of a Young Malayali Woman*”, analyses the life writing written by Vinaya who is well-known to the people of Kerala for her ceaseless battle against gender discrimination. She exhibits a stiff protest against the entrenched patriarchal ideals upheld by the society. It is noteworthy that Vinaya employs her life writing as a tool to enlighten the public by visibilising gender discrimination and further divulge her efforts to resist and appropriate it. Interestingly, she does not limit the narrative to herself but at various junctures talks about what women faces at home, the workspace and the society. Vinaya in her roles as a daughter, wife, policewoman, and a member of the community, writes about the aggression she had encountered in each of these roles. The narrative thus outlines the predominance of aggression at home, workspace and the community. The study attempts to scrutinize the different forms of aggression permeated in the text which tends to be shrouded as normal or acceptable in the society. It also aims to analyse the context of aggression, its motive and further, its nexus between gender and caste.

The Conclusion entitled “Aggression Endured and Articulated: Differences and Similarities” provides the crux of each chapter and also outlines the commonality and differences in the aggression documented in the life writings. It also addresses which of the select writers had fiercely articulated their experiences of aggression.

## Chapter I

### From Domestic Abuse to Walking out of Wedlock: Aggression in *Ancient Promises*

In this chapter, attempts are made to identify and analyse the instances of aggression in Jaishree Misra's *Ancient Promises*, problematising the normalisation of different forms of aggression against women and the subsequent tendency to prioritize violence (physical aggression). It also strives to gain an understanding on the intersectionality of caste and gender in the perpetuation of various modes of aggression. The present chapter attempts to trace aggression, especially verbal aggression, physical aggression, relational aggression, and violent ideation, pervasive in Jaishree Misra's *Ancient Promises*. Moreover, it aims to unravel the instances of both overt and covert aggression, including but not limited to physical aggression, at the backdrop of caste and gender.

#### ***Ancient Promises* as a Life Writing**

Jaishree Misra, niece of renowned writer Thakazhi Shivashankara Pillai<sup>6</sup>, entered the literary sphere with the publication of the work *Ancient Promises* that garnered her wide attention and acclaim. Though published as a fiction, in the author's note, Misra mentions it as "semi-autobiographical". When Kamala Das had published *My Story* disclosing it to be her life writing and later disowned it as a mere fiction after receiving backlashes, Misra goes the other way round. She publishes it as a fiction and later reveals it to be a life writing. Misra notes, "early on I took refuge in the non-committal reply that it was semi-autobiographical, which usually put an end to more questions, except from the very determined and the very curious" (307). Further, in an interview, narrating the process of writing *Ancient Promises*, she notes to have scripted a memoir which could serve as an "explanatory note" for her husband. However, when she received the approval for publication, she mentions to have "panicked at the thought of having something so personal in the public realm" which

eventually resulted in her efforts to fictionalise the same (Chandrasekharan). Despite stating it to be a “semi-autobiographical” or a “fictionalised memoir”, Misra’s acts at once bring to light her reluctance to publish her work as a life writing. Akin to Misra, in *Atmakadhak Oru Aamukham* (A Preface to an Autobiography) Lalithambika Andarjanam too notes her hesitation to have written an autobiography, “I was reluctant...I felt the weakness of an *Antharjanam* who just abandoned her veil and was stepping out into the outside world for the first time” (qtd in. Christy 13). Thus, it shows the reluctance of the two women writers, Misra from the upper caste-upper class and Andarjanam from the upper caste-middle class background to place themselves in the public space. Comparing Nalini Jameela’s life writing and Andarjanam’s reluctance to have written an autobiography earlier in her life, Christy underlies the division of the space into public and private, where the former stands for the lower caste and latter for the upper caste, which tends to be visibly endorsed by them (“The City” 13). Similarly, Misra’s anxiety to place the ‘very personal’ in the public domain and her fear of its reception, signifies an upper caste-upper class woman’s reluctance to boldly claim the public space. However, despite this debate revolving around the caste and the subsequent division of spaces, it is interesting to note that Vinaya, hailing from an upper caste and lower-middle class background, does not hesitate even for a moment to claim the public realm, whether with her life writings or physical presence. It could be attributed firstly to her necessity for a job to earn a living which in turn had placed her in the public sphere and secondly, to her deliberate efforts to mar the ‘gendering of spaces’ that had resulted in her being quite audacious about claiming it. Thus, these instances reflect the caste, class, and gender intersecting and further influencing women in claiming the public space.

### **Janaki’s Home: Transition from a Peaceful Space to a Coercive One**

*Ancient Promises* extensively narrates the life of Janaki, hailing from an orthodox Nair family in Kerala, who is born and brought up in Delhi. It depicts various events in Janaki’s

life before and after marriage, describing in detail, her relationship with her family and friends in Delhi and with her husband and in-laws in Kerala. Contrasting the life in Delhi to that of Kerala, Misra initially outlines the conflicts that had arisen due to the cultural differences between the protagonist, Janaki and her parents. At the latter part, she traces how being born and brought up in Delhi had resulted in relegating Janaki as an intruder in her husband's home. This chapter, for the convenience of analysis, is divided into two sections: the first part identifies and further critiques the various types of aggression Janaki endures at her own home and the second part includes that which she endures at the *Maraar*<sup>7</sup> household.

Daughter of a highly placed official and school teacher, residing in Delhi, Janaki lead a care free life until her growing affection with a Punjabi boy gets revealed. Janaki's problematic understanding and coerced acceptance of the Nair customs and rituals, described as the Kerala tradition, unravels soon after her parents' decision to relocate her from Delhi to Kerala and get her married to Suresh Maraar. Misra, while narrating the protagonist's struggle in grappling the practices of the Nair community, often evades from making direct references to caste and generalizes it as the Kerala tradition.

The concept of arranged marriages in Kerala sounded quite problematic to Janaki whereas, it was the practice of dating, engaging in romantic relations or love marriages that were outrightly denounced by her parents. Janaki's father detested the idea of romance and was against his daughter even watching romantic songs or scenes in movies, as he thought it would give "silly ideas" to his daughter. According to him, it was meant only for "film stars" and "fools" (23, 24). Similarly, Kamala Das, another writer who hails from an elite Nair family in Kerala, notes in her memoir, *A Childhood in Malabar*, "the women of *Nalapat*"<sup>8</sup> believed that women from good *taravads* should be scornful of love... They (grandmothers) pretended it was their part of nature to dislike love stories" (66). It is quite visible that, both the young Nair women, watching, reading or listening to love stories were criticized and

disliked by their family. This approach, promoting the upper caste women to shun away from being exposed to or expressing the sensual side, intricately linked with the reputation of their family, tends to be targeted in controlling their sexuality. Kamala Das was frequently torn between denying and acknowledging *My Story* as her autobiography. Kaur, after interviewing Das, analyses this persistent effort to deny *My Story* as her autobiography, observes that she was obsessed with the concept of purity imbibed from the *Nalapat* women rather than lust, denoting her imperative need to dismiss the work loaded with sensual narratives as fictitious (qtd. in Tiwari 164). It also alludes to Misra's reluctance to claim *Ancient Promises*, which includes accounts of teenage romance, forced and unhappy marriage, extra marital relation, divorce, and reunion with her lover, as her life writing, that would also have resulted in publishing it as a mere fiction, only to acknowledge it later as semi-autobiographical<sup>9</sup>.

Like the *Nalapat* women, Janaki's mother too was not anyway different. She was against her daughter maintaining friendship with boys. She warns her to refrain from any contact with boys reminding that they "do not belong to the kind of family that would encourage its girls to have boyfriends" (26). She also gives her own example of not having boyfriends like Janaki while she grew up (25). Evidently, Janaki is raised in such a way as to gradually imbibe the unwritten yet imperative codes of the family and thereby refrain from engaging either in friendship or romantic affair which are unapproved by the senior members of the household. Uma Chakravarti observes the potential means to control women as ideological structuring, and the rights bestowed on the relatives to enforce discipline, promoting submission to their respective community norms (ch. 4). Thus, though residing in Delhi, Janaki's parents raise her inculcating the codes of the Nair community, giving only selective information about their family and caste community, and further by establishing certain rules and regulations. Thus, at this stage it is evident that Janaki, though aware of the

norms set forth by her parents, does not identify it as a potential means directed at controlling her.

It is quite evident Janaki's father feared that watching romantic scenes would let his daughter gain "silly ideas". Moreover, he could sense the potential danger such experiences could bring on the rigid system of endogamy, which he himself and his family has professed to have strictly adhered to. Ironically, Misra is quite keen on narrating to the readers, using only a bare minimum of words, the short episode which had led to Janaki's parents' marriage. "Love, for him, had been the stirring in his heart when his mother had shown him the picture of a fresh-faced girl, she had chosen for him to marry eighteen years ago" (24). This is included in the narrative to emphasize how Janaki's parents had carefully selected and further presented an instance of their life in order to serve as a model for their daughter especially regarding how willingly they had entered into the system of endogamy, that too arranged by their parents, evolved to be its proud products and flag bearers of the same system. It is significant that though Janaki is not allowed to watch romantic scenes in movies, she is given a clear structure in front of her about how a marriage in her family/community ought to be. However, Misra reveals that Janaki felt ashamed and angry when her in-laws, the *Maraars*, made it a point to "question her ancestry" by taunting her for having great-grandparents who were not married (97). Though Janaki was enlightened about how marriages take place in Kerala through her parents' example, she was unaware of such a past especially when it was known even to the youngest member of the *Maraar* family. She was also kept away from knowing her aunt's celebrated romantic affair. Thus, it is obvious that her parents had strived to impart to their daughter only limited information about the family's history as an attempt to influence her way of thinking aligning with theirs. Also, Misra vividly presents the relationship between Janaki's parents and her grandparents. Brimming with respect Janaki notes that her parents "neither of them would have dreamt of doing anything without seeking

their own parents' blessing" (25). Hence, all these vehemently influence Janaki in shaping her own life. Even when she detests the life her parents had chosen for her, especially after finding the romantic affair, rather than questioning them, she blindly obeys them.

Here, the initial control measures that refrained Janaki from exercising her agency included subtle suggestions and advices, imparting selective information about her own family as well the history of their caste community, sharing their own experiences magnifying the limits and rules Janaki's grandparents had laid forth for her parents which with willingness and discipline they had followed thereby safeguarding the reputation of the family, constant reminder about the reputation of the family being entrusted on the shoulders of the daughter, and relatives' timely intervention reiterating the norms existing in the family and presenting their own successful life as an outcome of having adhered to such regulations.

The happy and peaceful situation at home changes at once her parents realize that their daughter had tried to tread past the boundaries set forward by them, by being in a romantic relation with Arjun. As Niveditha Menon argues "...even heterosexual, potentially procreative desire is seen as threatening when it refuses to flow in legitimate directions, hence the violence is unleashed on those who fall in love with people of the wrong caste or religion" (*Seeing* 4). Janaki endures various forms of aggression that was intended to control her and further make her conform to the decisions taken by her family. They punish her and relentlessly coerce her to conform to the conventions of the caste community they were a part of. Janaki is coerced to end her relationship with him, discontinue studies and also enter into an arranged marriage with Suresh from the affluent *Maraar* family in Kerala. Here, the measures Janaki's parents had adopted to control her drastically shifts from subtle verbal suggestions to stringent and grievous ones that were overt in nature which adversely affected her course of life and well-being. Unlike in the former stage, despite having identified it,

Janaki refrains from resisting it, except by secretly maintaining her relationship with Arjun for a brief period of time.

G Arunima explains in the introductory section of her seminal work, *There Comes Papa: Colonialism and the Transformation of Matriliney in Kerala, C 1850-1940*, how the Nairs in Kerala denounced the sambandhams and opted for endogamous marriages that has also resulted in establishment of the Malabar Marriage Act, 1896. By the late Nineteenth century, the newly educated Nair men, in an attempt to redeem the status of their community, strived hard to save their women from the identity of concubines which they had incurred as a result of the matrilineal sambandha system. The Malabar Marriage Act supported registration of sambandha as a marriage. Thus, polyandry was replaced with monogamy with the legitimisation of marriages. The endogamous marriages further strengthened the Nair caste and their unity. Such marriages worked well to hide the immoral past which the *sambandhams* had conferred on the Nair women (22). Hence, it could be deemed as a conscious project from Nairs to retain their moral stature subscribing to the rigid endogamous marriages. Thus, when the “ideological structuring” which Janaki’s parents were attempting to make her endorse failed, they adopted the strategy to force her into a marriage fixed by them.

Arunima further notes that “those newly educated men who had advocated for marriage had taken advantage of it to control and guard the sexuality and fertility of their women” (ch. 5). Though the marriage commission was keen on collecting information and opinion from the educated and elite Nair men and a few Nambuthiris, the opinions of woman were not deemed important. She affirms that “the inquiry was thus considered complete without having analysed any information based on the experiences of women for the promulgation of a measure that would critically affect their lives” (ch. 5). Similarly, Janaki’s forced marriage to Suresh itself shows how the marriages still prolong to be something the

elder male members of the family decide, disregarding the agency of the young women. In Janaki's case it is her father who decided who she should marry and when.

Though being well educated and an Air Commodore by profession, her father fails to understand the rights, preferences, and priorities of his daughter, rather, he imposes on her the norms and dictums of the family he had born into. Even while residing in Delhi, Janaki's parents firmly adhered to the culture of Kerala and the norms of Nair community. Their daughter's world was quite confusing for them. Janaki affirms, that "by the time her parents moved to Delhi, they had dug for themselves strong deep foundations in the age-old tradition of their ancestral soil and suffered no mixed-up priorities, unlike her" (26). Instead of trying to understand her world, they coercively, imposed their ideologies and beliefs on her.

In a way, such attitudes curtail the freedom of another person, to be what they really want to be. It throws light on the unwritten norms in the family, controlling and regulating the upper caste women on even what to read or watch and what not to. Such acts of denying a woman from reading or watching romantic scenes may only look harmless peripherally. In order to control the young girls, various coercive acts are often deployed, as the elder members propose it to be done to safeguard the reputation of the family/community often in the guise of assuring better future for the woman.

Coercion is defined by Tedesechi and Felson (1994) as "any action taken with the intention of imposing harm on another person or forcing compliance" (168). According to Allen and Anderson, "coercion becomes a traditionally defined instrumental aggression when it intends to obtain other goals than the immediate ones of inflicting harm or imposing compliance" ("Human Aggression" 10). Such coercive act as mentioned in *Ancient Promises*, does possess a higher goal which is to control and safeguard the sexuality of the protagonist, Janaki, an upper caste woman. Hence, it indeed created an outburst when Janaki's father came to know about her budding romance with Arjun. One of the reasons Janaki suggests as

her parents' displeasure for Arjun was that he belonged to the "wrong community (non-Malayalee)". Here, Misra ceases to admit the caste difference that had played a pivotal role in inviting the displeasure of her parents, subsequently leading to Janaki's separation from Arjun and endure the pressure of a rushed marriage to Suresh. As Uma Chakravarti reiterates, "it is through endogamy<sup>10</sup>, men not only control the sexuality of women but also safeguards the caste system" (ch. 2). Rather than Janaki, it was her father who had decided Suresh Maraar as her prospective groom. Another reason, Janaki points out as a cause for their separation was that it happened at the "wrong time (I was too young)" (26). Misra implies that Janaki was too young to be in a relationship with Arjun. Interestingly, it was the same reason that Janaki being young that had prompted Suresh to select her as his bride. Further, even Misra justifies Janaki's 'age' as inappropriate enough to have resulted in preventing her from choosing a partner on her own but not from marrying someone her parents had chosen. Thus, Misra not only overlooks the interference of caste in Janaki's separation from Arjun and further the union with Suresh Maraar but also ends up justifying it.

As Allen and Anderson points out, coercion has three distinct levels – "punishments, physical force, and threats" (10). Janaki faces all these three, once her growing proximity with Arjun gets reported to her father by his friend. Initially she had to endure caning from her furious father. "Great red welts appeared on my legs, and on my heart, the next morning, testament to my shame and deception" (49). It is noteworthy that Misra notes the effect of physical punishment that Janaki has had not only on her body but also in her "heart". Janaki was both physically and psychologically hurt and considered it as a punishment received for her deception. The already acquired knowledge about the rules and restrictions laid by her family and community, covertly passed on to her by parents had resulted in Janaki consider her love for Arjun as an act of "shame and deception". At the receiving end of her father's anger, Janaki positions herself as a culprit who had deceived her family, exercising her

agency, turning to her sensual needs deemed to be inappropriate for an upper caste woman like her. Further, the “awful rift” with her father emotionally troubled her. However, Misra vaguely questions herself if it was “his guilt or hers” that had prompted him not to look at her (49). Despite all this, Janaki adds that quite “stubbornly and spitefully”, her relationship with Arjun proceeded though the “love” was replaced with “fear” (49).

Physical punishment was ensued by other punishments, including the curtailment to move freely out of the house. She was accompanied everywhere and was denied the permission to use telephone, attend drama practice or tuitions, with an intention to destroy their budding romance. Thus, her parents effortlessly restrain her movement, snip her communication ties, and further disengage her from other recreational activities. Furthermore, after schooling, they solely take the decision to get her married off, disregarding her aspirations to pursue higher studies. Quite indifferently, she was denied the right to pursue higher studies, even after she had exhibited the competence to secure a place in the Miranda House for B A in English, accusing that she would use the opportunity only to spend the time hanging around with boys (54). Here, Janaki’s entire morality and character is questioned by her own mother. Further, her mother’s reminder about how much she had disappointed them with her unacceptable behaviour constantly waivers her confidence (54). Janaki’s feeble attempts to defend her honor prove futile as her parents succeed in silencing her, making her feel remorseful for not having thought about their honor or the reputation of the family. Ammu Joseph notes that “closely tied up with mobility is the question of character and reputation, which clearly continues to dog women in the state” (90). Her parents’ thoughts were dominated by the fear of their daughter’s growing affection for a Delhi boy that could spoil the reputation of their Nair family. On one occasion, Janaki’s mother makes her understand that “the parents of boys are saved of her worst fear, pregnancies” (47). Niveditha Menon points out that “sexuality tends to be strictly policed to

ensure the purity and continuation of crucial identities, such as caste, race, and religion” (Seeing 4). Thus, rather than her well-being, all their attempts thereby are focused on averting the perils that would occur if they let their daughter live freely in Delhi. As a resolution, an alliance with the well-off *Maraar* family is quickly fixed. Soon a perplexed Janaki encounters the ‘*pennukaanal*’<sup>11</sup> ceremony, followed by the marriage as planned by her parents and relatives and gets effortlessly uprooted from Delhi to Kerala. After being punished, the whole dynamics of home turns for Janaki. Her own plight made her wonder if “people were really laughing and loving in their homes” (49). Here, the loving parents turn hostile, imposing too many restrictions on her and finally pressurizing her into an arranged marriage.

Neither *pennukaanal* nor marriage takes place with Janaki’s proper consent. The affluent *Maraars* consenting to the *pennukaanal* ceremony is presented to Janaki as an exceptional act citing that only very few young girls get such admirable opportunities. In order to save herself and her parents from further agony, Janaki decides to let the *pennukaanal* ceremony take place, so that she could disapprove the proposal claiming some reasons. She strongly believed that no one would “marry her off at gun-point” (54). However, contrary to her beliefs, her desire to decline the proposal and return to Delhi gets superseded by parents’ decision to get her married to a Nair resident in Kerala. No one bothers to ask Janaki for her consent. When others describe the girl seeing ceremony as the most awaited moment in Janaki’s life, she attributes to it as the day marking the “end of dreaming” (58). Her thought of rejecting the proposal is shattered soon after the *pennukaanal*. She understands that a ‘no’ from woman’s side or her family declining a marriage proposal, especially when the other party has agreed for the alliance, is considered as sheer “arrogance” (61). Hence marriage is narrated as the most important event in a woman’s life where she isn’t given the freedom to exercise her will or voice an opinion. Here, to turn down the proposal of the affluent *Maarar* family is deemed as ‘arrogant’ whereas a woman being

coercively denied the right to have an opinion or to take the decision regarding whom and when to marry is considered quite unaggressive and acceptable. Sunaina Arya, while critiquing marriages observes that in the deliberate attempt to sustain endogamy it became quite imperative to impose restrictions on women and further chastise them for the violation of the same (xi). Here, Janaki's agency to select a life partner is replaced through coercion. Through coercion she is pushed into marrying Suresh, that too on the day of her eighteenth birthday. Thus, she finds the day of her marriage as one of the saddest days, yet finds solace in watching the happiness of her family (93).

Helplessly, Janaki witnesses her life taking a drastic turn with a hasty marriage to Suresh Maraar. The episode unravels rapidly letting Janaki gain a better understanding about how the system of arranged marriages works in Kerala. Misra in the narrative reveals Janaki's intense desire to refuse the proposal at every stage and further resist the coercion to get married. She repeats that at every point, when the girl seeing ceremony took place, when the cards were printed, even after the marriage, she really desired not to proceed (9). Nevertheless, Janaki notes the marriage as a "compensation" for her parents who considered her ways as "dissolute and uncaring" (64). Her parents pretend to be disappointed by her actions and thereby make her feel guilty, break their daughter's confidence and even reduce the opportunity to express her opinion. Janaki's parents openly express their displeasure with her relationship with Arjun. They put undue pressure on her making her submit to their decisions. According to Coyne and Archer, "to lay undue pressure" on someone and "reducing someone's opportunity to express an opinion" falls under relational aggression (216). Janaki fears that all these would strain the relationship with her family members, especially with her father and mother, eventually leading her to be an unacceptable member, which prompts her to yield to their demands of marrying at a young age. Thus, Misra

considers Janaki's final punishment as the marriage implying the "end of her loving and safe childhood" (48).

### **The *Maraar* Household and Janaki 'the Other'**

The *Maraars* opted considering an alliance with Janaki's family mainly because they were conservative and traditional" despite staying in Delhi (53). Suresh on the other hand had laid forth specific demands about the girl he would marry contrary to Janaki who regarding her marriage reiterates that had "given a choice, this wasn't how I wanted it to be" (64).

Suresh's conditions included:

1. She had to be pretty.
2. She had to be young so that she would 'adjust'.
3. She had to be able to speak English well, so that he could take her to Bombay in the hope for expansion of his motel business.
4. Nothing else was too important" (96).

When Janaki fulfilled all those criteria in his list, he was pleased to marry her. Janaki soon realises that "it was the *Maraars* she had married, not Suresh" (87). Even being newly married, Suresh hardly spent time with her and most of the days she was left with the company of the mother-in-law and other women in the kitchen. She could never belong to the *Maraar* household, as its inhabitants rather than welcoming its new member turned hostile. A major difference between Janaki's family and the *Maraars* was that pertaining to the role played by women. Janaki's mother, though working and financially independent, preferred to blindly follow her husband's opinions and decisions with utmost devotion. On various occasions, she could be seen reminding her daughter, the prominence that her father has in their lives and family. However, it was evident right from the *pennukaanal* ceremony, which Janaki herself notes that, unlike them, the *Maraars* "gave off an impression of being following the matriarch" (79).

Hence, Padmaja Maraar, Janaki's mother-in-law, played a dominant role in the *Maraar* household. Further, Kandiyoti observes that the patriarchal system promotes girls being married away at a very young age where they are subordinated not only to the men but also to the elder women mainly the mother-in-law (273). Thus, Janaki's life turned miserable, when she was despised by her mother-in-law, mostly for her Delhi ways. Padmaja, adopting various aggressive strategies constantly reminded her to follow the *Maraar* ways whereas despite having strived hard, Janaki realized herself as "the one that could never ever measure up to others" (109).

Apart from criticising and ridiculing, making it worse for Janaki, who was struggling to settle in a new place and home, the Maraars made no efforts to support her. Further, deriding her inability to speak eloquently in Malayalam, being discontented with her appearance and jewellery, criticising her past life in the city unaware of the authentic traditional customs and values unlike them, inefficiency in performing various domestic duties, they succeeded in letting her feel inferior and thereby making her "hate herself" (96).

Janaki's initial conversation with her mother-in-law snatched off her confidence as it was a criticism against her Delhi upbringing and linguistic incompetence. For the Maraars, English sounded too stylish and the Malayalam she knew was made fun of. Though it was her grip over English language that had contributed to attract Suresh's attention, it was neither acknowledged by him nor other members of his family. On the contrary, it became a major weapon that was utilised to deride and thereby silence her.

"Look, you're not in Delhi anymore. Like it or not, you now live in Kerala, so I suggest you drop all these fashionable please and thankyou's. Here we don't believe in unnecessary style. She accompanied this with a short laugh, perhaps attempting to take the edge off it. But the edge was clearly there. It tore a tiny little scratch inside me somewhere, and suddenly the

many times that I'd been told off for forgetting a little kindness or gratitude seemed so falsely, so pretentiously Delhi" (80).

Here, Misra stresses that the way Padmaja had articulated her disapproval of Janaki's choice of words, labelling it as the 'stylish Delhi way' had caused the latter much distress. Devika while writing about caste notes "eating, dressing, talking, just about everything signified one's social position in the hierarchy, one's difference from others" (*Engendering* 2). Thus, Padmaja, keen on sustaining the *Maraar* ways of communication, dressing and various other attributes including performing domestic chores, that marked their difference from others not only became displeased with Janaki but employed various aggressive strategies to appropriate her and at times silence her. Janaki's inability to speak fluently in Malayalam was tactfully employed to silence her. Hence, Janaki from the beginning till a very long time regarded her language as inadequate to voice her opinions, dislikes, decisions, or protests. They humiliated her not only verbally but often by employing "sarcastic laughter" (86).

Thus, Janaki, having relocated from the metropolitan city of Delhi to Kerala, finds it difficult to survive amidst the hostile in-laws. Struggling with the stringent *Maraar* ways, she tries to imitate them so that she would receive their approval. "I needed to put down roots and attempt to survive, whatever it took. But I hadn't bargained for the fact that the soil I had been replanted in would be so hard and unyielding" (95). From mocking her inability to speak Malayalam fluently, and the ability to speak English, delivering incessant commands to replace the Delhi style with the self-proclaimed elite *Maraar* ways, to passing cruel jibes on her parents for not teaching her properly the rituals and customs of the community properly on a par with their expectations, Padmaja *Maraar*, Janaki's mother-in-law, never left an opportunity to remind Janaki's position as 'the other' in the *Maraar* household. "Now I suppose we'll have to explain all the rituals to little Miss Delhi. If it wasn't for family like

ours how quickly all our age-old traditions would be forgotten” (109). Taking great pride in following various customs and rituals with precision, Padmaja flaunts her family as much superior to that of her daughter-in-law. Her deleterious remarks often curb Janaki’s confidence and make her feel ashamed of her hybrid identity. Habib explains “hybridity as a state of ‘in-betweenness’ as in a person standing between two cultures” (750). Misra refers to Janaki and the like as “halfway children, who belonged to nowhere and everywhere, and were confused all the time” (169). Residing in Delhi with parents who were ardent followers of Kerala ways lead Janaki adopt a cross cultural outlook. “This, I suppose, had always been the chief paradox in my life. That these two places ran together in my blood, their different languages and different customs never quite mixing, never really coming together as one” (18). Yet Janaki considered Delhi as her home, and Kerala as a place to spend summer vacations. At Delhi, other children of her age considered her as a Keralite whereas while in Kerala, people regarded her as a Delhi girl. When it was the Delhi ways that had agitated Janaki’s in-laws, at the age of nineteen she felt “annihilated” unable to belong and follow their orthodox conventions and practices in Kerala (112).

Further, it is gradually revealed to Janaki that there was yet another reason other than her language and Delhi ways that had resulted in evoking the displeasure of her mother-in-law. She was not Padmaja’s choice to be the Maraar daughter-in-law. She had preferred a friend’s daughter to be the prospective bride for Suresh, which had subsequently aggravated her dislike for Janaki, making her life more miserable. Later, she discloses to Janaki that she had warned her friends to opt against choosing girls brought up in Delhi to “nice well-brought up, unspoilt girls in Kerala” (118). Misra mentions that though Janaki was hurt confronting such mean remarks, which she describes as ‘barbed shafts’, and ‘indignation’, her linguistic incompetence failed her to retort, which further led her to be at the receiving end of an ‘increased unkindnesses’ from the Maraars (118).

The *Maraars* desisting from demanding dowry was much appreciated by Janaki's family. However, soon after the marriage, she had to witness her jewels being gauged by Padmaja, only to be compared it with her elder daughter, Sathi's priced possessions, and denounce it as inadequate in both quantity and quality. Janaki's ornaments were either too small or too old for the *Maraars* (92). Kodoth, after her deliberations on gender, caste, and match making in Kerala, notes that, "dowry is practiced openly only by poor and socially vulnerable households, as the relatively affluent could mask dowry with hidden compensations" (263). Here, though the *Maraars* had chosen not to ask directly for dowry, they knew being the only daughter of a well-placed official in Delhi, Janaki would fetch them a decent measure of gold and other gifts, yet she is ridiculed in front of others regardless of what she had received as gift from her parents because of undue comparisons.

Gawri, and Sathi, her sister-in-laws, too played major roles in making her feel left out of the group. As Gowri being proximate to her in age than Suresh, Janaki desired to maintain a warm relationship with her. However, Gowri's sniggers, and hurtful remarks on various occasions about Janaki's father, his profession, and her ancestry, presented in the guise of innocent jokes, further worsened the situation. Suresh, whom Janaki expects to be her defense, finds fault not with his sister's skills in teasing but on Janaki's "sensitive nature" who problematized such acts, which was the consequence of being raised as a single child (97). Despite their callous attitude and pernicious remarks, Janaki was determined to make her marital alliance work as she did not have the courage to leave it risking the reputation of her family.

The *Maraar* women were mostly well educated, yet they were not expected to take part in the family business or choose a career. Janaki was poignantly reminded of this by Padmaja criticizing her mother's decision to work as a school teacher. They considered it inappropriate for women from reputed families like theirs to go outside and work rather than attending the

kitchen and domestic duties. Further, her association with the *Maraars* made her realise that a woman who chooses work would instantly be relegated as “unbecoming for the women of a good family”. Furthermore, Janaki mentions of having received “pointed remarks” and denigrating comments for her mother having chosen to work (99). Kandiyoti underlies that the class/caste interference remains visible in patriarchy especially when women refraining from engaging in non-domestic labour tends to be a marker of status (278). Thus, Janaki who desired to pursue higher studies, shifted her priority to learn to cook immediately after the marriage. This in turn made her declare to Suresh, “I am happy like this, learning to cook and things” (100). It is significant that the verbal aggression Janaki had encountered from her mother-in-law, citing her mother’s preference to work, had resulted in Janaki totally discard her ideas of pursuing her studies and instead learn to tend to domestic chores. Moreover, the *Maraar* women had plenty of time to spend idly. Their favourite pastime was to wear the best sarees and visit relatives, only to gossip about them later. Though Janaki preferred the company of books than merely waste her time around the gossip mongers, she took part in it. Hence, limiting her presence inside the kitchen spending time along with the *Maraar* women, and joining them in their visit to relatives’ home, shows her futile yet earnest attempt to belong to the *Maraar* group. Despite the efforts she had taken, her fervent attempts to please her in-laws failed, as every time she was reminded of being the ‘other’ in the *Maraar* household through various derisive acts. Misra notes, “it didn’t take long for me to start hating myself for the many different things that gave the *Maraars* reason to slap their knees and laugh until tears ran down their cheeks. For my mother having omitted to teach me how to cook; for not being able to speak Malayalam elegantly; for forgetting constantly not to mind my Ps and Qs; for having been brought up in Delhi; for having had an aunt who, in the nineteen-twenties, had an affair that everyone in Kerala (except me) had heard about. There was so much to be ashamed of..” (97)

### Janaki's Responses to the Aggression Experienced

Janaki's aspiration to gain the *Maraar's* recognition and love, made her reticent and yield to their demands by adopting their ways and style. From renouncing the Delhi ways, and imitating the *Maraar* style of life, Janaki endures much to secure a place in the *Maraar* household. As per Padmaja's commands, while clad in silk sarees and Sathi's ornaments, struggling to find apt Malayalam words to converse, she notes that she had succeeded in concealing her agony as well as the internalised 'Delhi ways' to resemble the *Maraars* (92). She feels accomplished when she could tolerate Padmaja's "verbal shafts", Gawri's exasperating jokes, and "Suresh's nightly embraces" (95). However, nothing seemed good enough to gain the *Maraar's* approval. Initially, despite receiving all the unfair treatments from the *Maraars*, Janaki fails to decipher what she was enduring as aggression and on the contrary feels that she would be just imagining things (111). Coyne and Archer (2005) categorise the acts of breaking one's confidence, deliberately leaving one out of the group, and verbal insults that hurt their self-esteem as aggressive. Janaki is constantly placed under the scrutiny of the *Maraar* clan. She is never included in their group even for casual talks. She feels quite invisible everywhere. Misra notes that Janaki remained silent mostly because of her linguistic incompetence. Her inability to converse fluently in Malayalam was often ridiculed and criticized by the *Maraars*. Deborah Cameron observes that the silence of women can result from "censoring oneself for fear of being ridiculed, attacked or ignored" (3). Mocking her difficulty in speaking Malayalam, and ignoring her when she attempted to communicate, had a detrimental effect on Janaki which forced her to remain silent. Misra observes that Janaki's inability to retort further encouraged the *Maraars* to be mean to her. Misra notes that "centuries of caste, language and religious barriers had validated our prejudices" (177). All these paved the way for enslaving her inside a forced and unhappy marriage, an act relegated as too normal by Janaki herself. Without realising that she was

enduring multiple forms of aggression, which was normalized often as a tradition or practice, Janaki wishes for an instance of violence, so that she could at least tell others about her unhappy marriage.

“There was, in truth, never anything terrible to suffer in the Maraar household, just a long and constant catalogue of very small things. Too small to complain about. Or write letters about. Now if I were being beaten up day in and day out, that would raise a few eyebrows. I thought. But tiny insults, so small and so subtle as to be almost invisible, could not do any grave damage, just rob me gradually of the knowledge of myself” (110). Here Misra, enduring different forms of aggression, apart from physical aggression, observes it to be too normal or trivial to be complained, even after the grievous effects it had on her. However, she acknowledges the potency of physical aggression, which may enable her to gain some attention. Aggression assumes different forms. However, physical aggression, a subtype of aggression, is often taken seriously, marginalising its other forms. At times, either the perpetrator or the victim does not realise certain acts as aggressive, as they tend to get normalised in certain culture. Here the protagonist thinks that an act of physical harm alone would let her complain about the unhappy marriage to her parents, as other reasons though hurtful would only be relegated as insignificant or as something that happens in every household.

As a last resort, she decides to choose motherhood over education or securing a job as she believed that a grandchild would fetch her “double promotion as a good mother and daughter-in-law” (113). Janaki’s decision hits hard when she becomes the mother of a girl child, Riya, which further invites the displeasure of her mother-in-law, who expects a boy. She continues to consider Riya as her “hope for future”, who would enable her to earn both Suresh’s as well as his mother’s love and acceptance. However, the famous pediatrician’s verdict of Riya as a “mentally handicapped” child, further degrades her position in the

*Maraar* household. Janaki notes that even during her most difficult times of realising Riya's disability, she failed to "raise the shutters that Suresh and all the *Maraars* had pulled down on her" (163). Janaki mentions, "Riya was never going to live up to *Maraar* expectations, in the same way that I had so spectacularly failed" (125). Here Janaki equates Riya's disability with that of her incapability to be an ideal *Maraar* daughter-in-law, leading them both to be isolated from the *Maraar* family.

*Maraars* or even Suresh was least bothered about Riya's condition and Misra notes that all they cared was "their privileged world of swaying plaits and silk sarees" (131). However, when it came to Riya, Janaki stood strong. It is interesting to note that the mean remarks about the child was shut by Janaki either with a laugh or a trip to the ancestral home at Alleppey. It is noteworthy that Janaki, in order to save the child and herself from being hurt by the rude remarks directed at Riya's disability, uses the same techniques employed against her by the mother-in-law and husband. The former strategy of laughing at her was usually employed by Padmaja whenever Janaki had failed to meet the parameters set by her, required for an ideal *Maraar* daughter-in-law and the latter by Suresh who used to arrange quick trips to different places as an attempt to escape from listening to his wife's complaints and struggles at home. Janaki notes that both her laughs and travels to home "annoyed Padmaja immensely" (125). Also, Padmaja's decision to ask Janaki to accompany them to the weddings and visits, keeping Riya at home was at once thwarted by Janaki. At the end, Riya and Janaki stayed at home as Padmaja was against people staring sympathetically at their flawed grandchild which could tarnish the prevailing admiration for the *Maraar* folk. Further, Padmaja's manipulation worked well as people started believing that it was Janaki's despair on seeing other abled children, unlike Riya, that prompts her from stepping out of the house. Janaki was amused by the *Maraar* tactics to turn her stubbornness to disobey them, by staying at home as their "generosity" and "heroism" in letting her take time to heal for

bearing a disabled child (147). Also, while at home, Padmaja showers special care and compliments on other grandchildren, neglecting Riya. Her attempts here are deliberately directed at isolating Riya from the family as well as the society. Thus, it is noteworthy that Padmaja's aggression extends from Janaki to Riya, who fails to reach up to her expectations as a grandchild. When Riya too continued to be singled out, and remained at the receiving end of *Maraar* displeasure, Janaki finally thinks of ways to escape the unhappy marriage. Quite thoughtfully, she refrains from taking any further attempts to gain the approval either of Padmaja or Suresh. She thus overcomes the pressure to have a second child knowing well that it would not change her inferior position (148).

It is significant that Janaki did not act when she was isolated and further endured various aggression perpetrated by the *Maraars*, yet for the sake of her daughter, she finds the act of opposing them and leaving the marriage as quite worthy and satisfying. Misra, here depicts Janaki's reluctance to do or claim something for herself. However, though at this stage, Janaki's decision to escape the unhappy life with the *Maraars* tends to be initiated after watching her daughter's plight, she later realises her own necessity for a happy and contented life. Other than Padmaja, Suresh's disregard also influences Janaki in arriving at such a decision.

### **Intimate Partner Aggression: Janaki, Suresh, and the Inevitable Wedlock**

Janaki's narrative divulges how the domestic sphere tends to be structured in the *Maraar* household where the women mostly position themselves in the kitchen, either cooking or giving orders to the servants whereas the men "congregating elsewhere, in some distant and privileged *verandah* or living room, to which large trays of tea were being regularly despatched" (81). Interestingly, Vinaya too, a Nair woman, mentions in her life writing how the similar structuring of domestic space existed in her parental home. However, after her marriage, she had vehemently tried to dismantle it and succeeded in her efforts from

gendering her domestic space. Here, though Misra recognises it, she remains helpless and attempts to conform to it. Suresh effectively utilises this right from the beginning of their marriage to maintain minimal interaction with his wife. According to her, he had his father to discuss about business, mother to enquire about household matters, and finally leisure time to spend with sisters (101). Even when Janaki attempted to discuss with him about the mistreatment, desperately seeking a solution to put an end to it or soliciting his support to subdue it, Suresh left the room and positioned himself in the *verandah* which thus forced her to discontinue communication and remain silent, fearing that others in the house would hear it and accuse her of hurting him. Here, Suresh prefers to remain inattentive to his wife's needs, neglects the aggression she endures from his family, leading her to suffer more humiliating experiences. Suresh in these stages does not turn to physical aggression but employs the method of neglecting his wife and being indifferent to her, causing her much distress. Furthermore, the environment persisting at the *Maraar* household remains conducive to his growing disdain for his wife.

Suresh continued to be callous towards Janaki which in turn made her describe their physical union as a "sudden invasion" that had adversely affected her "mentally as well as physically" that could only evoke the feeling of "revulsion". Misra notes, "I greeted it with a stoic sense of one of those things that had to be done. Like a visit to the dentist where things went on in intimate parts of you that you could neither see nor control" (87). Jancy Jose states that it is the patriarchal culture that relegates women as the "property" or "sex object" of her "owner, that is her husband" ("Issues of Domestic Violence" 71). Thus, Janaki considers the sexual contact with her husband as something that she was obliged to tolerate even at the lack of love or proper communication. Furthermore, Janaki claims that it was Padmaja who had taken her to Dr Gomathy's clinic to insert Copper T, making her ready for copulation (86). Kanchan Mathur observes that "women are denied rights over their own body and sexuality.

They do not have control and autonomy over their sexuality and cannot decide freely on matters related to their sexuality including sexual and reproductive health, free of coercion, discrimination, and violence” (59). It is significant that Janaki never mentions about her agency either in using or choosing the contraceptive. All the decisions related to her, even concerning her bodily integrity, appear to be taken by her mother-in-law. Also, Suresh’s presumed authority over Janaki, being his wife, leading to his callousness in observing her lack of consent, and further her pressure to engage in the sexual act despite feeling repugnant, when placed against her “compelling” and “natural” extramarital union with Arjun where “their bodies fused effortlessly” indicates Janaki’s reduced role and lack of agency in the marital life (190). Mathur posits that women are deliberately denied exercising sexual agency and thereby relegating their bodies to be controlled and treated as the “property” of either men or the community (59). This shows that though peripherally, the way the marriage gets consummated appears to be non-violent as physical force is not exerted, the aggressive elements that remain embedded and further legitimised in it cannot be overlooked.

Intimate Partner Violence manifest as acts of deprivation or neglect, emotional, physical, or sexual violence (Ler et. al. 3). Right from the beginning, Janaki anticipates her husband’s companionship. However, Suresh preferred to spend time drinking and escaped his responsibilities through frequent business trips (248). Even while Janaki struggled to grapple with Riya’s condition and needs as a disabled child, Suresh was unavailable to comfort either of them. Thus, Janaki is constantly denied of his attention, care or support. Further, her initial complaints about the meanness of his mother and sisters, which made Riya’s as well as her life at the *Maraar* household difficult, were mostly neglected by him.

#### Route to Escape

Janaki’s first thought to escape the difficult marriage was to let parents know about her plight, and seek her father’s help to save herself and Riya. She believes to be blameless, at

least in front of her parents, as she affirms to have attempted to save the marriage and thereby honour of the family even by “changing her entire personality to suit *Maraar’s* interest, needs and reputation” (121). However, her route to escape gets obstructed when her father dies of a sudden heart attack. After her father’s death, the *Maraars* did not show hospitality even to Janaki’s mother or grandmother.

Forced to live with Suresh, Janaki realises the significance of education and a job that can liberate herself and her daughter. She realizes higher studies as her route for the “great escape” (152). She completes her postgraduation in English Literature and secures fellowship to pursue a course abroad on special education. She resolves to settle abroad, as according to her it would provide Riya with better opportunities and education, keeping her away from sympathetic gazes. Moreover, she knew unlike in Kerala, the West would treat herself better than consider her as a “scarlet woman” or belonging to an “unfortunate breed” being someone who had left her husband (146). Misra, though briefly, lays bare the taboo attached to a divorced woman in Kerala and also gives a glimpse of how the verbal aggressive strategies are employed by the community, giving her various derogatory labels which adversely affects her and thereby serves as a warning to refrain from taking such decisions to leave the husband.

Nonetheless, the stigma attached to a divorced woman, desist Janaki from divorcing Suresh. Initially, Janaki’s decision was not to seek divorce as she would be the first in her family to do so, and she feared it would bring disgrace and humiliation to herself and family alike (153). However, after meeting Arjun in Delhi, for a brief period of time, Janaki realises her right to love and to be loved. At that point, she adds that “nothing mattered to her, neither the reputation of family, nor her parental love” (196). Though she decides to choose Arjun over Suresh, and engages in physical relationship with him with sheer courage, the next moment she could be seen frightened of the heavy price she will have to pay for her

transgression. These instances in the narrative resounds the question of chastity imbibed by an upper caste woman prompting her to anticipate severe punishments for her deeds. She compares the burning desire that had yielded her to Arjun despite being Suresh's legitimate wife as "succumbing to the dangerous calls of *kadalamma*<sup>12</sup>, regarded as the Goddess of Ocean, only to be punished later" (196). Misra, being the niece of Thakazhy, seems to be influenced by the chastity myth propounded in one of latter's seminal works, *Chemeen*<sup>13</sup>. Though Janaki musters the courage to be in an extramarital affair with Arjun, she is constantly haunted of the impending punishment, either in distant future or at least in the next birth, for being guilty of infidelity. Misra, however, does not present Janaki's illicit relation with Arjun as detrimental to her husband's life, but echoes the dangers that awaits the woman herself, hard enough to be extricated. Janaki's conflict of being guilty and not guilty persists at various stages of the narrative. At one point she relishes the pleasure of Arjun's company and searches for her guilty self and notes that she couldn't find any and then questions herself for the lack of it. Vehemently denying being guilty of her affair at one side, she solicits to be chastised for her deeds at the other. "But I wanted my one lifetime with Arjun now and thought I'd be able to get away with it if I offered to pay the price a hundred lifetimes over" (206). Misra is evidently torn between guilt and the denial of it. Realising the dangers of her actions and the demand to seek divorce, Janaki decides to return to Kerala fearing that people would penalise her mother and grandmother, if she runs away with Arjun. In order to save her mother and grandmother of the shame and to save herself and Riya from Suresh and his family, Janaki decides to face everything alone.

On her father's death anniversary, when entrusted to perform the pious rituals, Janaki finds herself ineligible to do it. She fears incurring the wrath of her ancestors and God alike, for her brief trespasses in Delhi. Janaki not only fails to complete the ceremony but also gets accused of defiling the temple as she starts menstruating, which her grandmother relegates as

highly inauspicious and an ill omen signifying the misfortunes that are about to befall her. Janaki is startled to listen to the “howls of *Kadalamma*” again at that unfavourable time probably reminding her of more severe punishments that awaits (213). Janaki’s fears result out of her decision to divorce Suresh and further for engaging in an illegitimate affair with Arjun.

Janaki’s account of her and Riya having led a troublesome life with the *Maraars* was not well received by her mother and grandmother. Even after recognizing that her daughter was enduring difficulties, Janaki’s mother urged her to forgive and adjust so that she could stay in the marriage. Moreover, she had the perfect model of a worse marriage to present before her daughter where Suma, the wife an IAS officer, continuously tolerates his physical aggression in order to sustain the marriage (144). Her grandmother further accuses Janaki of arrogance to have accused Suresh who unlike other men had not beaten her. Both her mother and grandmother trivialise the aggression Janaki had experienced at the *Maraar* home placing the example of Suma who saves the marriage even after enduring physical aggression. Her grandmother and mother while giving the example of Suma who tolerates the physical aggression from her husband, undermine the other forms of aggression which Janaki is prone to encounter at the *Maraar* household and its adverse effects. Her grandmother also points out Janaki’s act of complaining as arrogance because her husband had never beaten her. Thus, they overlook the aggression not only Suresh had perpetrated but also Padmaja. Further, they had quite tactfully placed Suma as a champion who saves the marriage despite being beaten up by her husband, which implies the significance of saving the marriage and thereby the reputation of the family even at the cost of enduring physical aggression. Vineetha Menon asserts one of the factors that prompts domestic violence as the “cultural systems that legitimises the violence” (3). Thus, Janaki’s initial plan to divorce Suresh was opposed by her mother and grandmother. When Janaki informs her mother about seeking

divorce, she gets emotional and gives her the silent treatment. Archer and Coyne categorise giving silent treatment as a form of indirect aggression (218). Here, Janaki's mother uses it to not only show her displeasure but also to force Janaki to continue her marital relation with Suresh. Denied the support, Janaki questions herself if she would be able to get away "defying centuries of tradition" (213). Interestingly, Janaki, at this juncture, also laments the "Malabar Marriage Act" that had uprooted the matrilineal system, which as per her, had conferred on women the agency to effortlessly discard their relationship with those men they detested or found unsuitable just by "leaving their umbrella and slippers outside the closed front door" (215). It is interesting to note that Misra makes very few references to her caste community in the narrative and whenever she does, she remains cautious in presenting its positive attributes. Initially, she posits the tradition they had been following for centuries as that which refrains her to leave Suresh and choose Arjun. Then she evokes the matrilineal system followed by the Nairs as having given better agency to women than the present in selecting and rejecting partners. Further, she notes how the matrilineal system had empowered women to snip their relationship with a partner unfavoured by them and restrains from mentioning how the same system had conferred on them the concubine image (Arunima *There Comes* 22). When Janaki remains guilty and is haunted by the fear of retribution for having sought divorce from Suresh, and for having engaged in an extra marital relation with Arjun, Misra remains inarticulate about how women in the past rather than being guilty had reaped the benefits of the matrilineal system with greater agency. Thus, her own "raging guilt", her mother's "terrifying silent grief", and her grandmother's anger forces Janaki to return to Suresh (215). It is relevant that Janaki's mother and grandmother pressurise her employing the aggressive strategies, making her return to the *Maraar* household. Her mother's silent treatment and further grandmother's angry outbursts in the form of verbal

expressions, adversely affect Janaki. However, despite all these she decides to communicate directly to Suresh regarding her decision.

Janaki chooses a public place to talk to Suresh about parting ways as she feared he might hurt her otherwise in the privacy of their bedroom or at the *Maraar* household. “I was glad I’d chosen a public place, he couldn’t flip his lid and hit me here...Or do a bunk with Riya” (216). Janaki does not overlook the possibility of Suresh hurting her physically or emotionally by parting Riya from her. It is noteworthy that Janaki’s assumption of Suresh taking Riya away from her materializes at a later stage. Diligent in not hurting Suresh, rather than asserting her needs, Janaki turns weak and requests him for a divorce to start afresh with Arjun and Riya. Janaki believes that he would support her. Here, instead of being assertive Janaki turns weak pleading Suresh for a legal separation. Further, Janaki presents herself to be strolling through the terrains previously traversed either by “very foolish or very bad women” (219). Though conscious about her right to leave a difficult marriage that has very little to offer to herself and Riya, Janaki at times doubts her motives and denounces herself as wrong or ignorant. Even after vividly narrating the grievous effects of aggression perpetuated on her by Suresh and Padmaja, resulting in her decision to dissolve the marriage and thus the alliance with the entire *Maraars*, Janaki considered herself as choosing the path of those “bad women”. Though Misra hardly defines what had prompted her to categorize Janaki’s way as akin to be chosen by a “bad woman”, it is quite obvious that the protagonist’s acts of seeking divorce and further expressing the desire to live with Arjun made her naturally fall into that category. Thus, the writer herself tends to justify the entrenched idea of a woman moving out of a difficult marriage and further selecting another partner as either “foolish” or “bad”.

Suresh, on the contrary, had ulterior motives behind his pretense of accepting her request and then seeking time to inform his parents just to avoid further disputes. Thinking Suresh would be informing the *Maraars* about their impending divorce, Janaki, ignored the

secret meetings and whispers taking place around her, even when Sathi's husband, a renowned Nephrologist had joined them. She recollects those days when beneath the normal behaviour, the *Maraars* were hiding the "lava of hate", struggling to erupt and destroy everything (222). Janaki notes that they were keen on exhibiting aggression differently by employing "nonverbal, roundabout, barbed-shaft system of communicating their feelings" rather than engage in arguments or addressing the issue directly (222). Unknowingly, being passive, Janaki was falling into the snare that Suresh had laid for her. Janaki, though initially amused by Sathi's growing interest in collecting whereabouts about her course, soon realises that she was only being ridiculed with side sniggers. Infuriated, for the first time, when she retorts, Suresh barges in and portrays her as a mentally disturbed person who fanaticise about overseas scholarships and taking away Riya. Though late, Janaki deciphers Suresh's plot to portray her as a mentally ill person by gaining sympathy from others and thereby save his male ego from the brunt of having a wife who wished to leave him (225). Janaki makes a brave yet futile attempt to prove her sanity. She discloses every detail of the scholarship she had received and urges them to verify the related documents. Padmaja, enjoying the scene, convinces others about the scholarship and higher studies as her daughter-in-law's mere imagination and further vouches to have not seen any such evidence. Suspicious of not knowing whether the entire *Maraar* family had conspired to label her as insane, or Suresh had manipulated them by hiding her documents, Janaki struggles to free herself. However, Dr. Sasi forcefully sedates her and in no time, Janaki ends up in the mental patients ward at the Medical College. Without further delay, Dr. Krishnan Menon, a friend of Dr. Sasi, diagnosed her with mania, delusion, and histrionic personality and prolonged her stay in the hospital. Janaki wished to talk to a doctor to brief him about what had happened to her, but the medicines administered to her were too strong that she could hardly move. Janaki asserts she could remember all about herself and how Suresh had betrayed her even in the dizziest

moment, yet she could not disclose it to others as her “tongue was too weary to lift itself and speak” (227). Janaki recounts the nurse’s delight watching Suresh and Padmaja engrossed in taking care of her. Initially, if it was Padmaja’s censure that made Janaki to be silent, later it was Suresh’s plans of ensnaring her in the hospital which when materialized had resulted in silencing her.

Suresh effectively employs instrumental aggression as it tends to be clearly planned and further is aimed to attain a specific goal. Initially Suresh hides all the official documents Janaki had received, in order to prove that she had imagined everything. Then he plots with the *Maraars* to admit Janaki to a mental asylum questioning her sanity, so that she would continue to be his wife in front of the society, which would not tarnish the reputation of his family or hurt his ego. Unlike various instances of aggression, this deliberate act of violence effectuated by Suresh was too difficult for Janaki’s family to be ignored.

She continued to be trapped in the hospital bed for quite some time until her mother, for the first time, garnered the courage to take charge and save her daughter. Janaki narrates contentedly that her mother had arrived to “be her voice” in order to save her (229). Unable to move, Janaki could listen to her mother’s fervent attempts to convince the *Maraars* to discharge her daughter from the hospital to be taken to the home in Alleppey. Though she succeeds in convincing Mr. Maraar, Janaki’s father-in-law, Suresh and Padmaja were inexorable. Suresh tries to persuade her in multifarious ways to prolong Janaki’s treatment. At first, he strives to manipulate her into believing how stressful it was for him, just like her, to see his wife struggle, then he presents his sacrificial self to have abandoned the busy business schedule just to serve his wife and finally, he displays Dr. Krishnan Menon’s expertise, fame and scholarship, projecting him as the only doctor who could save Janaki. Janaki notes Padmaja was least pleased with Janaki’s mother who had travelled alone to be there and talk to the *Maraar* men, suggesting what they need to do. Instantly agreeing to

Suresh's remarks, she molded her words to discourage Janaki's mother. Janaki feared that the *Maraars* would imprison her in the hospital forever, as Suresh seemed to have already made them realise that the reputation of the family would be secure having a daughter-in-law gone insane, in the grief of bearing a disabled child, rather than the one who had left the marriage for another man (229).

It was quite strenuous for Janaki's mother to convince the renowned yet haughty Psychiatrist, Dr. Krishnan Menon, to permit her daughter to be discharged and taken home. Her earnest supplication however displeases the doctor who pushes her aside. He further derides her declaring that Janaki requires medicines than a "mother's sympathy" (230). He proudly exhibits his scholarship describing how his understanding on Janaki's condition had prompted him to write papers on her illness, for which he was invited to Japan to deliver a lecture on delusions. Announcing that Janaki was not in a position to travel, he goes ahead injecting another dose of medicine on her. However, constantly pestered by Janaki's mother, he commands her to take her daughter away. Misra's depiction of the doctor as "an angry God in a dark, wet temple" further alludes to the punishment Janaki had feared and was sure of receiving for her fling with a man, whom she believed her ancestors or God would have instantly disapproved. Though Janaki is saved from the mental asylum, her mother continued to give the medicines administered by the doctor. Debilitated by the strong medication, Janaki helplessly watched herself being fed the medicines continuously, which deteriorated her physically as well as mentally. Suresh's visit and unreasonable angry outbursts make Janaki's mother discontinue the medicines for a week, which enabled Janaki to return to her normal self. As an offering, Janaki's grandmother desires to take her to Chottanikkara temple, which she instantly agrees and further seeks the goddess' forgiveness for the 'sin' committed in Delhi with Arjun. "I whispered a multitude of heartfelt apologies to Chottanikara Devi, folding my hands before her mysterious figure, genuinely sorry for my sin" (235). Initially,

Janaki's inner turmoil for having engaged in a brief romantic relation with Arjun compels her to listen to her parents and enter unwillingly into an arranged marriage with Suresh. Though, even after discerning it to be a terrible mistake her parents had committed, she finds it dishonorable both for herself as well as her family to leave an unhappy marriage. After having rekindled her relation with Arjun in Delhi, she discloses her vulnerable self, apologising for her "sins" with Arjun, fears to incur the wrath of the Gods and ancestors alike, and considers all the unfortunate incidents happening in the life as a retribution to her extramarital affair.

Even after tolerating everything, when her mother asks if the marriage was "too bad enough to leave", Janaki's response shows how strong her ideologies have been shaped by imbibing the patriarchal values. She responds, "...it wasn't unbearable. I could have put up with it for the rest of my life, people suffer much worse things, I know" (236). Rather than considering the hassles, and aggression encountered, or validating the pain endured, Janaki, blindly following her mother's and grandmother's standards of assessing a good marriage, compares hers with that of others regarded as worse and concludes she could have tolerated it.

Suresh was not ready to let Janaki walk out of the marriage easily. He kept devising plans to force Janaki return to his life. He tried to make his parents convince her to return to their home. Misra notes that it was the reputation of the *Maraar* household that made Padmaja plead Janaki to abstain thinking of divorce. However, Janaki was seeking divorce not just from Suresh, but from his entire family (241). Then he started openly threatening and thereby putting undue pressure on her. He warns her of his power and influence, potent enough to hurt or destroy her even in England. Though flustered, Janaki still moves ahead with her plans to leave him.

Apart from Suresh, she fears how the growing interest of other people about her failed marriage would intimidate her family. “I knew the cruelty Kerala was capable of..” (203). At this phase Janaki fears not only the *Maraars*, but the Kerala community, its ways, and the people. She writes about the gossip mongers, who could spread rumors like wildfire. Janaki worries how adversely it could affect her widowed mother and grandmother. About her divorce, she notes, “It would soon be said, in toddy shops and street corners and smart living rooms, that her granddaughter, married into such a good family, had slept with another man. Simply to be able to take her handicapped child abroad..” (237). It takes a great struggle, both internal and external, for Janaki to leave marriage and Kerala in order to start afresh a new chapter. When Kerala and its umpteen rules fetter Janaki, Delhi liberates her. She had chosen the man she wished to love from Delhi. Janaki’s attempts to settle in Kerala, and love Suresh, belonging to a materialistically rich *Maraar* household, as per her parents wish, miserably fails. Further Delhi, her “city of hope”, reunites her with her lost lover and bestows with a scholarship enabling her to leave Kerala.

Misra narrates in detail the stigma attached to a divorced woman. It was difficult for Janaki even to utter the word divorce in front of her mother or grandmother as they believed such “shameful” incidents would not happen in decent families (238). Further, it was disheartening for her mother to let the neighbours know that her daughter was going to be a divorcee. Her mother also feared the *Maraars* spreading false rumors and stories about her daughter that would make Janaki’s life more difficult in Kerala.

Soon rumours started spreading about Arjun’s interference, posing questions on Janaki’s morality. It was not difficult for Janaki or others to find the source as Suresh, as he alone knew about Arjun. Suresh, having realised Janaki’s decision to walk out of marriage had turned quite dangerous, devising plots to make her life more miserable. Janaki writes about the gossips about her as, “far more worse to deal with, the whispers were becoming

sibilant, with a sprinkling of razor sharp words, aimed to sting and stab.. adulteress.. shameless.. promiscuous.. materialistic hussy.. sleeping around.. ex lovers.. each word sent a new spear into my mother's heart" (251). Thus, Suresh employs relational aggression. He spreads rumours questioning her morality, tarnishing her reputation, and further straining her social relationships. All these adversely affected the well-being of both her mother and grandmother. Even before recovering from the harm the gossips had created on the three women, Suresh initiated his next plan by directly facing Janaki to remind her about her soiled image in public and give her a more severe hurt by snatching away Riya, claiming his displeasure on his daughter being raised by a prostitute (254). As Niveditha Menon notes, "prostitute becomes an easily available general insult" (132) which could be hurled at a woman anytime to crush her spirit. Panuzio and DiLillo categorise making derogatory remarks on someone's personality as an acute form of intimate partner aggression (IPA) that adversely affect marital satisfaction (697). Thus, with Suresh's every new strategy, Janaki drifts apart from her marital home. Finally, Suresh separates Riya from Janaki, uses her as a pawn forcing the latter to return to him. Janaki articulates the pain of having separated Riya from her as "someone having taken a carving knife to my chest and carved a great gaping hole there, the pain was almost physical (255). However, though nothing could deter Janaki from seeking divorce, it became quite onerous for her to convince the lawyer.

The lawyer, an acquaintance of Janaki's family, too was keen on advising her to avoid seeking divorce and to live harmoniously with husband, neglecting his 'minor' mistakes. Apart from physical abuse, and extra marital affair, the lawyer, in general, could not find apt reasons even to register for divorce. Rather than providing legal aid to his client, he assigns his faithful wife, Kamala to advise her to opt out of seeking divorce. Trivialising Janaki's problems, the lawyer further briefs about it to his wife as "little bit of neglect from husband, little bit of drinking, also little bit of mother-in-law problems... nothing majorly difficult"

(250). Misra points out the disgust obvious on Kamala's face, watching girls like Janaki, brought up in Delhi, destroying their pious Kerala ways of marriage with their demeaning ideas of divorce (250). With great pride, she asks all such girls to be sent to her to be taught the effective strategies to adjust which is by strictly devoting time to pursue domestic duties while serving and adoring their partners. It is significant that here Kamala also strives to inculcate in Janaki the domesticity appropriate enough to lead a happy marriage, completely devoted to her husband rather than choosing divorce.

Sarcastically entitling Kamala as the "expert marriageologist", Misra notes that the former had identified Janaki's "arrogance" as the sole cause that had created raucous in her married life. Misra, having written mostly about Janaki's instinct to self-blame in an attempt to justify others (for example her parents and the *Maraars*) or to consider all that had happened to her life as a result of '*karma*', had in limited instances, narrated the psychological harm that a forced and unhappy marriage had caused the protagonist. However, Janaki's introspection as a result of Kamala's hurtful remarks, discloses the real harm that had caused her because of the lack of necessary arrogance. Janaki notes "fear, wavering confidence, flagging self-esteem, gnawing, self-doubt...all those little demons with fancy double-barrelled names had raised their heads at some point or the other, clouding my belief in my own worth" (250). The given instance exposes the impact that Janaki had after enduring various forms of aggression. Moreover, Misra had depicted in detail the distress Janaki had encountered with the lawyer as well as the psychiatrist. Writing about domestic violence, Westlunt points out that a battered woman is destined to confront both pre-modern and modern forms of power structure, that is in the form of the controlling and powerful "sovereign" and the modern institutions like courts, medicine, police, psychiatry etc. Further, these modern institutions often revictimize these women, claiming them to be mentally unstable as they are incapable of making judgements and exert a rational control on their life

(1046). However, not just the battered women, a woman who strives to escape not only from physical aggression but also from other forms of aggression or defend the aggressor will also have to square up the same. Evidently, Janaki, apart from being scrutinized and controlled by the *Maraars* is further victimized by both the psychiatrist and the advocate. When Suresh with the help of his relative succeeds in labelling Janaki as insane, the lawyer makes her listen to his ideal wife, Kamala who attempts to inculcate in Janaki the domesticity suitable enough to lead a life devoted to husband.

### **Conclusion**

The happy and peaceful situation at home changes for Janaki when her relationship with Arjun gets revealed to her parents. Thus, Janaki's parents coerce her to follow the ways upheld by them and further enter into an arranged marriage with Suresh Maraar, leaving Arjun and the desire to pursue higher studies in Delhi. Here, aggression is targeted not only to control the sexuality of the protagonist, but further to make her conform to the system of arranged endogamous marriage, where she would have to marry someone from her own community, that is the Nair community, selected and approved by her family members. Though Janaki is pressurised to relent, her life at the *Maraar* household make her realise the marriage as an "an awful mistake made by her parents" (95).

Janaki, having relocated from Delhi to Kerala, finds it difficult to survive amidst the hostile in-laws who constantly accuse her incapability to be an ideal *Maraar* daughter-in-law. She reveals that the *Maraars*'s "strange, non-verbal, round-about, barbed- shaft, system of communication" having hurt her quite often (222). Further, Padmaja Maraar's verbal insults, denigrating comments, and sniggers were directed at Janaki mainly for her inability to converse eloquently in Malayalam, her "stylish" Delhi ways of communication, inability to cook, and follow various rituals and practices with precision, unlike them. Thus, her attempt tends to be focused on instilling in Janaki the domesticity ideally upheld by the *Maraar*

women. When the sisters-in-law, Gowri and Sathi too take part in further demeaning Janaki, she tends to remain isolated in the household. She reiterates that both Padmaja's "sharp tongue" and Gowri's "sharp tongue and blazing eyes" had at various times frightened her (134, 150). Through the words "barbed shaft", "needling game", "pointed remarks", "verbal shaft", "extra dose of meanness", "little digs", and "teasing", Misra notes the severity of verbal aggression which Janaki had experienced at the *Maraar* household (96, 97, 99, 112, 204). Also, Misra refers to Janaki as a "saddened soul" (102) and "an intruder, one that could never ever measure up to others" who was caught in a "loveless world" (106, 109). Here, the aggressive strategies employed by the *Maraars*, especially Padmaja, contains the intention of appropriating in Janaki the domesticity suitable to meet the standards of their upper caste *Maraar* household. Right from her appearance, language, and the ways of performing various rituals to domestic chores, they try to change her by employing various aggressive strategies including isolating her.

Suresh on the other hand in the beginning neglects Janaki and maintains minimal communication with her. It is significant that the atmosphere that had prevailed at the *Maraar* home further promoted the same. Misra equates the ten year long marriage of the protagonist Janaki to Suresh *Maraar* as "martyring of Janu" (200). Later when she decides to opt a legal separation from him and start a new life with Arjun, he threatens her, questions her morality, spreads rumours about her, and finally conspires in forcefully sedating and admitting her to the mental health wing of the hospital in his attempt to label her as insane. Janaki herself reveals Suresh's motive to do all this as "his overwhelming desire to avoid the awful stigma of divorce" which would tarnish the reputation of his family and hurt his ego (243).

It is noteworthy that when Janaki decides to divorce Suresh, initially her mother remains grief stricken and gives her the silent treatment whereas her grandmother through incessant angry outbursts expresses her displeasure. Further, the grandmother accuses Janaki

of her arrogance for having thought to leave Suresh who has not physically abused her. At this juncture, they trivialise various forms of aggression Janaki had experienced and endured at the *Maraar* household. Thus, the responses of her mother and grandmother and also the thoughts of being at the receiving end of the harsh criticism from the society awaiting a divorcee, forces Janaki to return to Suresh. However, when the mother and grandmother finally realise various aggressive strategies employed by Suresh including defaming her and labelling her as insane, they lend her support to end the relation. It is relevant that even at that point, Rama, her mother's brother asks her to negotiate for Riya, who was taken away by Suresh. Unmindful of how Suresh had trapped her in the hospital, he informs her that even people would forget all that had happened, if she goes back to him (260). Thus, Janaki experiences various forms of aggression perpetrated not only by her family members but also the community at various stages of her life, including her coerced marriage to Suresh Maraar to obstructing the materialisation of her decision to divorce Suresh.

## Chapter II

### Embracing Ascetic Life and Moving out of Nunnery:

#### *Aggression in Amen: The Autobiography of a Nun*

Renouncing worldly pleasures, the lives of nuns are known to be devoted to God. The high walls and rigid rules of the church convent often distanced them from the outer world. However, it created a huge furore in Kerala, when a few nuns like Sister Jesme and Sister Lucy Kalappura, rebelled against the Church management and scripted in their autobiographies, the unjust events taking place in the convents which for a long time had been kept hidden from the public. Sister Jesme's autobiography, *Amen: The Autobiography of a Nun*, is an unapologetic record of various forms of inequities and aggression which she had seen, experienced and endured while living as a nun, which nonetheless is least expected in a pious and holy place like church convent. *Amen*, in a way counters the beliefs ingrained in the public about the monasteries, especially Church<sup>14</sup> convents as a peaceful place where aggression seldom takes place. To much dismay, apart from several forms of aggression, she has also written about sexual aggression, presumed to be absent in the celibate life of a priest or nun. This chapter intends to unveil the instances of aggression pervasive in Sister Jesme's *Amen: The Autobiography of a Nun*<sup>15</sup>.

#### ***Amen: Life Writing or a Mere Fictional Account?***

Forced to leave the Congregation where she had lived as a catholic nun for thirty-three years, Sister Jesme had the urgency to narrate her experiences and thereby reveal to the world, the power politics within the Church and Congregation. Deriving inspiration from sensational life writings written by women writers in Kerala like Kamala Das and Nalini Jameela, she turns to script her own life writing not just to reach the public but also to gain 'cathartic relief' as she terms it (xi). In the beginning she notes, "If Madhavikutty can say that she left her religion, taking Lord Krishna with her, I, too can very well declare that I left the

CMC holding the hands of my spouse Jesus and Mother Mary” (xiii). Unlike Kamala Das who was reluctant to accept *My Story* as her autobiography, Sister Jesme asserts and further reiterates that everything she had written in the book has “actually happened and is not imagined or hearsay” (xiii). However, Sister Jesme herself refrains from claiming *Amen* as an autobiography per se, as it tends to be a “revelation” only of a “part of her life”. She adds that “it neither starts at the very beginning nor come up till the present- the curtain falls when I leave the convent”. Also, in her deliberate attempt to avoid hurting the people involved, she had refrained from using their real names or the institution they are associated with. Hence, all these make *Amen* fall into the realm of a life writing.

Sister Jesme asserts that *Amen* narrates her experiences at the CMC (Congregation of Mother of Carmel), which she thinks would enable the society to “reach closer to the truth” (xii). The life writing became quite sensational even before it was written. The Church tried to dissuade her from publishing the book in different ways. Mother Provincial informs Sister Jesme that the authorities wish her to desist from writing the book, later they offered her money, and on another instance a nun attempted to emotionally drain her by asserting that she would pray for all her books to be “burnt away” (175). However, nothing could deter her from writing the book. It was first published in Malayalam though Sister Jesme reveals to have initially written it in English (vii). After the publication of the English version in 2009, several copies were sold. Also, she mentions that it was later published in Hindi, Marathi, Tamil and the translation of the work progressed in Kannada, French, German, and Polish (*Amen Again* 182). The revelations evoked controversies as Sister Jesme’s narration of her life experiences exposed the corruption, and gender bias rooted in the Church. However, her single-handed mission against a monolithic organisation like Church did not go well. E V Ramakrishnan in his analysis of autobiographies observes that writers like Sister Jesme who through their work had critiqued powerful institutions like the church had in a way written it

“endangering” herself (19). Various attempts were made to obliterate the work claiming both the writer and the work she had created as unscrupulous. Hence it becomes quite challenging for Sister Jesme to stand the ground, proclaim it as her lived experience from time to time and thereby prove the authenticity of the work.

According to Jesme, some including a few nuns and priests came forward and supported her whereas a few denounced it as a mere fictional account, and the Church pretended to be nonchalant at the face of allegations made against them. For instance, Syro-Malabar Church spokesman, Father Paul Thelakatt posits that the “issues Jesme has raised are nothing new. Most of her arguments are trivial” (Sebastian). Here, it is significant that a man of reputation and influence immediately condemns the “most” of the issues experienced by the nun and further noted in the life writing as inconsequential. However, certain instances that had taken place in various nunneries akin to what Sister Jesme had revealed and even more gruesome ones reported in print media and mentioned in other life writings make it quite impossible to relegate her life writing as mere fictional or insignificant. Sunalini and Raja in their article titled “Crucifixion in Amen: The Autobiography of a Nun”, unearth several hideous instances that had happened in the nunneries in Kerala, including unnatural deaths of nuns, and illicit relations between nuns and priests. A few of the instances mentioned in the article include the allegation against a priest in the Changanacherry Archdiocese to have sexually abused and fathered the child of a fifteen year old girl; untimely deaths of Sister Anupama from the St. Mary’s convent in 2008, and Sister Josephine residing in the Daughters of Mary Convent in 2009, leaving a suicide note indicating harassment from the senior nuns; and Father Shibu Kalampambil’s narration in his autobiography, *Oru Vaidhikante Hridayamitha* (This is the Heart of a Priest), about having witnessed the heinous incident of a nun attempting to murder her new born baby (7-9). Further, following Sister Jesme’s path, Sister Lucy Kalappura too had come up with a life writing, *Karthavinte*

*Naamathil* (In the Name of God) where she attempted to depict the internal world of nunneries and points out various injustices that makes a nun's life miserable.

Sister Jesme further proclaims in the autobiography that since her 'case' has been mentioned along with that of Sister Anupama and Sister Abhaya, both having died long back, she is obligated to reveal the truth to the world (xii). However, apart from the attempts to declare the author as mad, the Church even while pretending to be unfazed by the allegations, gave quite aggressive responses to *Amen*. In *Sathyadeepam*, a weekly published by the Church, Sister Jesme is referred as 'Judas' (176). Judas, who was one of the twelve disciples of Christ is infamous as a traitor. Here, it is evident that the Church calling Sister Jesme as Judas, considers her to have betrayed them. On another Occasion, she is regarded as the 'Fallen angel' (Dev). Fallen Angel signifies Satan/ Devil, who is considered to lure humans to sin. In another bimonthly brought out by the Church, the main story was titled 'Sister Jesmiyude Aatmakadha *Amen*: Oru Vyabhichariyude Kumbasaram' (*Amen*: The Autobiography of Sister Jesme: The Confession of a Prostitute) and the cover page consisted of the 'photograph of her body with references to sexual debauchery taken out of context from the life writing' (177). In an interview, Sister Jesme opens up that 'it was the Church calling her a prostitute that had hurt her the most, apart from their intentions to declare her insane' (Pisharoty). Here the Church employs notorious figures from the holy scriptures to allude to Sister Jesme as 'Judas' and 'Fallen angel'. Furthermore, they had availed the use of magazines like *Sathyadeepam*, deemed to be a leading Christian weekly to call her a 'prostitute' and 'Judas', with dual intentions to humiliate her and isolate her from the believers. It is evident that spreading mendacious articles on her personal life, they had employed direct verbal aggression on the writer to hurt her and embarrass her in the public. Further, likening her to evil characters in the religious texts, they had attempted to win the faith of believers, and evoke in them an aversion towards her. The ulterior motive of such an

act would be to isolate her from the believers and other readers, who subscribe to such publications. The verbal aggression here tends to be potent enough to demean her social status, hence, could be regarded as relational aggression.

Significantly, it was not only from the Church Sister Jesme had to face the censure but also from the prominent literary figure like T Padmanabhan who reviled both the writer and her work. He opines, “if a woman includes obscene or vulgar elements in her work, it will sell like hot cakes. Also, if the writer happens to be a Christian nun who moves out of the nunnery and writes about the bad experiences, further better the sale would be...Even though they had left the nunnery and discarded the religious habit, they ought to add the term ‘Sister’ to their name so that the sale would again amplify. Moreover, he refrains from considering such narratives as “ideal literary works” (“If Women” 0.04- 1.57). Both Padmanabhan’s polemic against Sister Jesme and M Mukundan’s condemnation of Nalini Jameela<sup>16</sup> show their intolerance towards the wide reception of the latter’s work, enabling them in ceasing a considerable space in the literary circle. S Sarada Kutty<sup>17</sup> in her sharp riposte to Padmanabhan titled “The ‘Literary Patriarchs’ Who Fears Women Writings” underlies that “women reaching and further claiming the superior position in the literary space, reserved and ruled by men for a very long time, makes the literary patriarchs fearful. They fear the wide acceptance of women’s work, their language, and further the sheer courage to speak truth...Even when a woman’s work is widely sold, the success is sabotaged arguing it as the result either of her beauty or she having written about sex, unlike the male writers, deemed to be intellectuals and critical thinkers”. She asserts that its one’s own sexual thoughts that are imposed on women writers thereby labelling them as sluts and insulting them (0.00-9.27). Sister Jesme herself had often reiterated in interviews and other life writings that her intention was not to write about sex but to explain her bitter experiences. She vehemently questions the deliberate intention that necessitates the critics to separate only the sexual elements and

chastise her (*Amen Again* 184). Further she asks such critics “only half of what is experienced is written, was even that too much to handle?” (qtd in. Saradakutty 6.50- 7.22). Sister Jesme had clear explanations to Padmabhan who criticized her for having discarded the religious habit and proceeded to refer to herself as ‘Sister’. She mentions “being a nun is not just about wearing a habit. I can continue to live and work as a nun outside the convent”. Thus, rather than critiquing the literary work he went ahead making scathing remarks on the writer’s gender, her sartorial choice, and the salutation she had decided to use. Thus, all these instances vividly describe the struggles Sister Jesme had to endure before, during and after the publication of her life writing. Moreover, the writer being resolute in sustaining the salutation ‘Sister’ to her name despite having faced stiff protests itself is political. It affirms her argument that a woman can continue to be a nun through her acts of service to the humanity rather than merely being enslaved to the tyrannies of the Church. Thus, in the study giving due respect to the writer, she will be referred as Sister Jesme.

Sexual debauchery, corruption, favouritism, gender inequality, classism, and colourism, are few of the main issues that take up a major space in her life writing. Sister Jesme affirms that it was her own longing to lead a consecrated life which had prompted her to be a nun. However, forced to leave the convent after thirty-three years, she hasn’t shied away from writing the wrongs that had crept into the system. *Amen* discloses the predominant presence of aggression even in nunneries, a place where the renunciate inhabits.

### **Home as a Peaceful Space**

Sister Jesme, in her brief description about her life at home mentions it as a happy and peaceful one. Moreover, the narrative reflects the harmonious relationship that existed between her mother and father and also the significance the former had in the family. She notes, “at home, democracy rather than strict hierarchy prevails; mother respects the opinion of even the youngest child...It is a loving and lively atmosphere at home (9). Thus, each

member of the family including the children consisting of three boys and four girls were regarded with respect and equal importance. Though Sister Jesme mentions the financial trouble that had affected them for a brief period of time, she mostly reminisces her home as a space devoid of scarcity but rich in resources and their family as the one that enjoyed “worldly pleasures” (9). “Our *tharavad*<sup>18</sup> is well known for merry-making, revelry, feasting and so on” (17). She proudly writes about her father who ran an automobile workshop, had a car, and also owned the first motor bike in their area. Together they often went for night shows and then engaged in discussions on the movies watched (8, 9). Furthermore, the atmosphere at her home was conducive for her to excel in both studies and extra-curricular activities. Though she mostly recollects her father as a good-natured man, two instances in the narrative shows his other side. Sister Jesme recollects how her father who being drunk had referred to her as a “harlot” for defending her mother. She evades giving details about what had caused the incident yet clearly depicts how those words “remained in her” (96). Here, an act of supporting the mother had evoked the displeasure of her father who questions her morality by terming her as a ‘prostitute’. Further, when she notes that the scene prolongs to linger in her memory, it reflects the adverse effect of the verbal aggression that have had on her. Also, in another instance Sister Jesme discloses that she remembers her father with affection and regards him as a man of “many qualities” unlike the sisters for whom he was not a “good family man” (65). Nevertheless, she notes how her decision to lead a consecrated life by joining the Church convent was accepted by her parents, contrary to some of the relatives.

Sister Jesme’s decision to be a nun was not well received by her relatives who apart from responding with “sympathetic comments” also shot “accusing arrows” judging it to be “selfishness and escapism from the troubles of life” (19). Here, the criticism is directed at her escape from marriage and domesticity, regarded as “social imperatives” (Eapen and Kodoth

17), which evokes much displeasure in the relatives. However, the narrative doesn't mention her parents coercing her to change the decision and choose domesticity. On the contrary, her mother quite sensibly accepts her decision and her father turns emotional, shedding tears. Nevertheless, the narrative gives glimpses revealing how some of the nuns do not really escape domesticity. For instance, Sister Jesme referring to the pathetic plight of the nuns notes that they are not yet liberated and are kept under "submission by the fear of revenge by the priests" furthermore the "diocesan priests treat the nuns like servants, making them wash their clothes, prepare the food, wash the church and that too without getting paid" (176). Here, the nuns, fearing revenge are subordinated by the priests and thereby pressurized to engage in unpaid labour, including the preparation of food and cleaning. Thus, quite visibly gender intervenes even in their religious roles where priests dominate nuns and benefit from their labour by enforcing in them various domestic duties. The narrative further divulges other instances where nuns are exploited employing various disciplinary measures.

### **Plethora of Discrimination, Binding Vows and the Ascetic Lives**

"Despite our proclaiming the ideas of justice and equality before God, such class distinctions exist in the convents and seminaries (48)".

*Amen* throws light on the segregation that had existed and prolongs to exist in the Church convents. Sister Jesme notes that in the 1970s, before she had entered the convent, the discriminatory practices were based mainly on the educational and financial background of the nuns. Those who were less educated and those hailing from poor families were regarded as the "lower class". The stratification between the "privileged" and "less privileged" nuns were so wide that the latter were given separate trainings, tasks, and were even restrained to sit with the former ones on chairs but on their trunks. Also, the duties assigned to the "less privileged" nuns were those pertaining to the kitchen and the compound (47). However, though Sister Jesme notes that to an extent the unequal practices were considered to have

drawn out of the system, it lingered on in the minds of the nuns, which in turn is evident to have resulted in the emanation of the “Fair *Ethelamma*” and the “Dark *Ethelamma*”<sup>19</sup> in the province (47). This shows that the discriminatory criteria had only expanded further, comprising complexion along with education and wealth, where the fair ones secured better position unlike the dark ones. Philips in his study “Gendering Colour: Identity, Femininity and Marriage in Kerala”, observes women’s skin colour as a key factor that gives them advantage in marriage and in dowry negotiations (269). However, *Amen* shows how the same plays a significant role even in the life of nuns by securing them a better position among others in the nunnery. Sister Jesme argues that even though the nuns are supposed to endorse to the ideals of justice and equality, such demeaning practices existed among them (48). While Sister Jesme, belonging to the category of “Fair *Ethelamma*” could get away from such discriminatory practices, she was deterred from helping “Dark *Ethelamma*” indicating the differences. However, rather than mentioning how Sister Jesme was refrained from extending assistance to the “less privileged” nuns, the narrative hardly presents instances of her attempting to change the system being a part of it. Further, the narrative at times divulges her own reluctance not only to question these unjust practices but also to accept the prejudice harbored by the “privileged” senior nuns towards the ‘other’. She narrates an instance about how an old nun, Jainamma was well taken care of by the younger nuns. Justifying the nuns act she writes, “belonging to a prestigious family, she unconsciously prefers sisters of high-class families to those of the lower classes” (78). It is quite questionable how such biases ingrained in Jainamma and her subsequent acts motivated at demeaning the “less privileged” nuns, which vehemently persists in her even after she loses memory due to old age, could be regarded by the writer as an “unconscious act”. Though the writer refers to the nun as a “sweet granny” the incident does not seem to be that pleasant. The writer notes that being too old, the nun had lost her senses. However, it is conspicuous that her senses were strong

enough to detect and discriminate the “privileged” nuns from the “less privileged” ones as she used to order the latter to do several menial works, including cleaning her fecal matter. If Sister Jesme insisted on cleaning it, she would not let her do the menial job, as the elder nun knew, considering her “background and degrees”, that she belonged to the ‘Fair *Ethelamma*’. Thus, it shows that the senior nun, Jainamma, who belonged to the elite class deliberately treated nuns like her quite well, deigning the ‘other’. Furthermore, though sister Jesme has identified the discrimination and visibilised it through her life writing, she desists discussing the adverse effects that this ‘othering’ has caused on the nuns belonging to the “lower class” or “Dark *Ethelamma*”. Additionally, *Sathyadeepam*, a Catholic weekly, has proceeded further in referring to the stratification of nuns based on their economic, social and educational backgrounds as the cause for the insecurity among the nuns hailing from poor backgrounds (Devasia). Though Sister Jesme, being included in the group of “privileged” nuns could escape from a few such discriminatory practices yet she couldn’t elude from being a victim to other unjust acts of the superiors. Thus, Sister Jesme’s life writing discloses various forms of discrimination that prevail in the convents and institutions run by the Church.

In addition to the class discrimination, the practice of favouritism ascribed to senior nuns made the system furthermore unfair. On one occasion, when the superiors outrightly denied the request of Sister Jesme’s mother to celebrate her sixtieth birthday in the convent, they allowed another nun to observe her parents’ wedding anniversary there. Disheartened on facing such unequal treatments that even extends to their family members, she wonders about the authorities “double standards” and “duplicity” in judgements and punishments (75).

Furthermore, the writer brings out the importance of being “influential” while residing in the nunnery. A nun having accused of sexual liaison with a priest, despite being proved guilty by the public, was left unpunished by the seniors as she had great influence over them

whereas the “less influential” sisters are often punished for “silly acts of disobedience and doubts about their chastity” (76). In Sister Jesme’s case, the senior nuns took different measures to punish her including attempts to ostracise her, and plotting ways to label her as insane for questioning the unjust acts in the convent, as well as in the college run by the Church. Sipe notes that “according to the Church tradition, the only good woman is silent, sexless and subservient” (*A Secret* 30). Sister Jesme had thus trespassed the limits set for a ‘good woman’ initially by questioning the authorities and thereby shunning silence. Even the student sisters and others were restrained from helping her or interacting with her. However, Sister Jesme points out that she was not just the only person who had received such humiliations and punishments but also others, who had mustered the courage to speak against the injustices that prevailed around them.

Pulikunnel reasons the denial of freedom as the primary cause of conflict in the Church, which is rooted in the preaching of Christ, who is believed to have given free will to his people. He further points out tracing the history that initially the followers of Christ, formed a community where everyone was treated equal, and a few were chosen by the members to lead them in serving the society better. However, the community after receiving recognition from the Roman Empire, started imbibing the way they functioned. Thus, the unity and peace in the community were distorted when few of the leaders in the community, elected to serve, turned out to be the rulers (142-144). Catholic monasteries thus come directly under the rule of Church headed by the Pope, and several rules were enforced both on the nuns and priests, to be strictly followed. The Canon laws consists of codified rules and principles framed by the ecclesiastical authorities for the organisation and functioning of the Church. However, Sister Jesme points out the gender discrimination and anti-woman attitude that continue to exist in the Church which are often unquestionably followed and propagated from one generation to the other. Pulikunnel, argues the cause of various problems in the

nunnery as the compulsory vows taken by the nuns, which curbs them off the right to have freedom or exercise free will (Mary). Sister Jesme's life writing further shows how the vows adversely affect their lives.

In the Church convent, Sister Jesme had to endure different forms of punishments for her deliberations on the unjust acts happening in the college as well as in the convent, which included preventing her students and batch mates from both conversing with her and helping her. By doing so, Sister Jesme understood the superior's intention to ostracise her. Then they made her over work, in the college and in the nunnery. Both the Principal of the college and Local superior never ceased to put undue pressure on her, either to finish extra works or to follow the rules. Finally, when she demanded some "freedom and understanding" from the superiors in order to do all the duties entrusted on her, they stopped giving her any work. Archer and Coyne categorizes "ostracism/ exclusion", "to reduce or increase employee's duties to hamper his work" as adult forms of indirect modes of aggression that can take place in a group and work space (216). It is noteworthy that Sister Jesme lives in the Church convent and works in the college run by the Church. Hence, she shares the personal space with most of her colleagues who happen to be nuns. Thus, the work place aggression often extends to the convent, that is her personal space, and vice versa. Here, the aggression tends to take place indirectly, as a result of which the victim takes time to understand the real cause of such acts. Even when she realises it, the norms in the convent and the fear of expulsion prompts her to retreat. It could be estimated that the senior nuns were intentionally trying to keep her away from the peers, either to prevent her from revealing the truths to them, thereby creating supporters or to weaken her confidence so that she would not testify against the wrong doings of the superiors in public.

## Vow of Poverty and Gender Inequity

“Lay people ask, why do the priests have more freedom than the sisters? My only answer is that there still exists discrimination against women in the local church” (Jesme 111).

Sister Jesme lays bare a few of the disparities which the church had carefully inculcated in the ascetic life of priests for a better and comfortable living, unlike the nuns. Referring to the ‘Vow of Poverty’, which is the same for both nuns and priests, she posits that the priests had greater freedom in handling finances. “...I envy the Diocesan priests whose case is quite the opposite. These priests have the right to own private property whereas the priests belonging to the Congregation have the Vow of Poverty; but even they have more liberty in handling finances than the nuns” (78). The norm in the congregation was ‘from each according to their capacity and to each according to their need’ (76). However, the practice in the convent was quite different from what they preached. Sister Jesme narrates an incident when she had wept as she lacked enough money to buy slippers even when she was teaching in a college and the huge amount she received as salary went into the ‘central pooling to the Mother House’. Entirely eschewing the latter part of the norm, the former one stands rigid, well obeyed and followed. In case of Sister Jesme, she was exploited at various levels. She was made to work, at times overwork in the college run by the Church as well as in the convent, further the entire salary she received was controlled by the superiors, leaving her struggle to meet even the basic needs which compels her to seek the help of family members to buy an umbrella or a slipper. The ‘less privileged’ nuns are not exempted either, as they are allotted to do menial works, inside and outside the convent. Thus, the nuns are exploited economically by the Church. This often happens as nuns are chained by the ‘Vow of Poverty’, which prompts them to forgo the ownership of family property or even the income they receive as salary that makes them economically dependent on the convent to

survive. This mandatory vow thus weakens them financially and rips off their right to question the unjust practices of the Church, fearing an expulsion. The social stigma and discrimination of being an ex-nun and financial dependence further forces them to tolerate all inequities. The narrative further mentions the discrimination sustained between the priests and nuns, thus divulging the gender politics intersecting even in the religious space.

Sister Jesme writes with much contentment how the aged nuns are well taken care of by the younger nuns unlike the old priests. According to her, priests in their old age are taken care of by their male servants, who are often quite callous in their duties whereas the aged nuns get maximum attention and care from the younger nuns. Though Sister Jesme takes great pride in taking care of aged nuns, the question of why aged nuns is not provided succour unlike the priests, remain unaddressed in the life writing. Moreover, the narrative evades mentioning if the “less privileged” ones were also well tended like the “privileged” nuns in their old age. Also, when the priests are provided with male servants for assistance, it naturally becomes the obligation, in fact, an additional duty on other nuns to take care of the aged nuns. Hence, like in the domestic space, it remains to be an obligation for the nuns to engage in the unpaid care work. Such instances roughly mentioned in *Amen*, however had resurfaced in print media at various times. In 2017, the issue was brought to the notice of the public when a few aged catholic nuns, applied for government pension to meet at least the medical expenses. Referring to the issue, Reji Njallani, Chairman of Ex Priests and Nuns Association, reckons that the service of the nuns are best utilised by the convents when they are healthy only to be neglected at the later stage (“Devasia”). Airi Triisberg argues that the work of nuns in the convent tends to be socially unrecognized as they lead a life of prayer, satisfying basic needs and hence are positioned outside the “wage-labour” relation (15,19). However, though the disparity between priests and nuns are often laid out, this dimension of

unpaid labour which the nuns engage in, especially in the church convent tends to be unaddressed in the life writing.

Furthermore, when the priests could make use of casual dresses while travelling, watching movies or other private occasions, the nuns are compelled to wear the habit especially outside the convent. Sister Jesme points out that her interest in watching movies itself was not approved in the convent, further it infuriated the superiors and some of her friends when she used the nun's habit while watching movies. This unwavering rule to wear religious habit, and the subsequent accusations of wearing it while watching movies laid undue pressure on Sister Jesme, prodding her to confess about it to a priest. The priest, enlightens her, contrary to the understandings imposed on her by the superiors that “it has not been written anywhere that a nun should not watch movies or should always be clad in the religious habit” (112). Further he informs her about the norm that refrains a priest from consuming alcohol, which is seldom obeyed or confessed. Here, it is a priest who enlightens her and gives her the strength, revealing that it wasn't against their Constitution to watch movies wearing a habit. However, Sister Jesme notes that her act of watching movies wearing the habit was not well received by the superior nuns and such acts resulted in acquiring the displeasure of the religious authorities (113). Thus, it is quite questionable, how such irrational ideologies which find no basis anywhere in the scriptures or human logic advances into religion, and then results in the curtailment of freedom of a specific group, like the nuns.

Moreover, because of her interest in watching movies, initially, her access to the television placed in the convent is denied (68). Additionally, in order to dampen her spirits, she was questioned by the superior with the mere evidence of a letter from an anonymous person. The Provincial claims to have received an anonymous letter which averred that Sister Jesme was watching pornography and was engaged in homosexual relations with attenders. The letter states that “Sister Jesme, the Principal of St. Maria's college, is constantly viewing

“blue films” and forces the attender girls to view them. Besides, she indulges in sexual pervasions with them.” (132).

The allegations in the letter cast aspersions on the author to smear her. Further, the anonymous writer, posing to be a “loyalist”, threatens to publish the same in the newspaper if the authorities do not expel Sister Jesme from the Principal’s position. This is an instance of instrumental aggression, where as a carefully planned act a letter is written without revealing the identity of the writer and then sending it to the superior hurling multiple accusations on Sister Jesme. She is blamed to be continually watching porn, further pressurize the attender girls to do the same and then enters not only in sexual relation with them but also engages in perverse acts. Padte argues that “to label something as porn is to strip it of value, and to place it outside accepted value system” and further relegate those who watch it as “lacking values” (228). Thus, the accusation positions Sister Jesme as a person in power yet devoid of values who endorses sexual aggression towards her subordinates at the work space. Lapierre et al., observes “sexual coercion as an abuse of power” (156). Hence, connecting the accusations, the sender of the letter demands Sister Jesme to be expelled from her position as the Principal.

The motive of this deliberate act is not only to refrain Sister Jesme from watching movies but also to question her morality, brutally attack her reputation both as a nun and further as the Principal of the institution and finally pressurize the superior to remove her from the role as the principal. Thus, the aggression perpetrated here is targeted to adversely affect Sister Jesme’s personal as well as professional life.

A letter anonymously sent to the higher authorities about their subordinate, with the intention of casting doubt on her character and morality and thereby adversely affect her social life both as a nun as well as the Principal of a reputed college tends to be a form of indirect relational aggression. However, what hurt the writer more was the Provincial’s act of

questioning her based on the allegations raised in a mere anonymous letter. Facing accusations, Sister Jesme who is emotionally tormented, struggles to understand the callous attitude and intention of her superior, notes, “such piercing accusations she reads without flinching. Why doesn’t she think of the “wounded heart” sitting opposite her?” (132). She also divulges its adverse effects on her “I am broken hearted. Tears brim over...” (133). Apart from the writer of the letter who made false allegations against her, Sister Jesme finds it difficult to decipher the intentions of the superior who decided to interrogate her especially including past allegations that were carefully crafted against her.

#### The Vow of Chastity and Sexual Aggression

Sister Jesme quite explicitly narrates an episode of sexual aggression which she had to encounter from another inmate in the nunnery, Sr. Vimy. Chibnall et al., notes that in case of the nuns, “the combination of celibacy, intimate and communal living arrangements, and an historical lack of openness with regard to sexual identity and sexuality may create an environment that encourages invitations to sexual activity by some women” (160). However, it is noteworthy that in addition to these factors, the power of the perpetrator, that is Sister Vimy being a “senior”, also plays a crucial role in making the victim submissive. Sister Vimy remained quite persistent in employing multiple tactics even aggressive measures in order to gain sexual favours from Sister Jesme. Starting from totally ignoring her while favouring her batch mates, writing lengthy love letters, shouting at other inmates who came searching for her, throwing away things which are supposed to be handed over to her, Sister Vimy effectively succeeded in instilling fear in Sister Jesme. Here, Sister Vimy begins by excluding and further neglecting sister Jesme, then she adopts displaced aggression by throwing things which was meant for the latter, she also engages in indirect aggression by shouting at those who came in search for Sister Jesme. It reached the culmination when Sr. Jesme had to succumb to her sexual fantasies. It is depicted in the life writing clearly, the angst and stress

she had to go through while being a victim to nonconsensual sex. Sister Jesme was left totally helpless, when other nuns indirectly suggested her to cooperate with Sister Vimy's advancement. Eventually Sister Vimy discloses that she prefers to have sexual relation with women as it will save her from being getting pregnant. She also talks about another nun, and wonders how they escapes pregnancy while maintaining sexual relation with priests. Chibnall et al., notes that sexual abuse adversely affects both mental as well as the spiritual health of the victims (160). Sister Jesme concludes her homosexual encounter affirming that many nuns still "suffer in silence and fear" (54).

She also gives a glimpse into the lives of nuns harbouring relationship with other nuns (homosexuals), or priests (heterosexuals) and a few with both (bisexuals). She notes another instance when the superior was relieved when a nun in her convent had to undergo hysterectomy as the latter was exposed by the public while engaged in physical relationship with a priest. However, she discloses that when the trespasses of the influential sisters are neglected, the less influential ones are not spared easily. For maintaining friendship with another, they are often falsely accused as homosexuals, which is exactly what happened between Sister Jesme and Sister Maria. This made them consciously create a distance from each other and write letters to converse with each other (50).

Sister Jesme also notes her brief contact with a priest, renowned for his 'holiness and celibacy', which had exposed his true nature. She was suggested by others in the convent to take rest at the priest's place on her way to Dharwar University. The priest too promptly replied to her request assuring a 'royal welcome'. However, when she was at his place, he talked to her in length about the need for physical love and then without asking for the consent, embraced her. He persuades her and makes her respond to his advancements. He shows her his naked self and prompts Sister Jesme to do the same. "Although I resist undressing myself, after repeated persuasion, I oblige, and show him 'a female' on the

condition that it will be for the twinkle of an eye” (88). Being alone in an unfamiliar place, the writer needed the Priest’s help to continue her journey, which would have made her helpless to obey his commands. Later she gets remorseful, confesses this to another priest and does prayers and penance to be purged off the guilt. She further detains the former priest in his attempt to continue the relationship over telephone conversations.

Even though Sister Jesme claims that she had done whatever the priest had asked due to sheer persuasion, the instance brings to light the author’s as well as the priest’s urge to reclaim their repressed sexuality. Responding to the issue of sexual abuse prevalent in the nunneries and seminaries, Sister Lucy Kalappura reckons “forced chastity could result in deviant behaviour where the meek and weak become prey for the powerful” (qtd. in Aravamudan). Chibnall et al., mention that sexual aggression from a fellow religious person such as a priest or nun would have great psychological impact on the victim. This mainly happens as it breaches the vow of celibacy applicable to the Catholic priests and nuns. Also, it happens outside the marriage. In case of homosexual encounters between nuns, its adverse psychological impact was found to be less likely to decrease with time as apart from the given reasons, it further trespasses the prohibition of homosexual relations (160).

Sipe also observes that:

The victims and survivors of clerical sexual abuse have produced the most powerful witness to the inner workings of the celibate/sexual power system. Facts that were only whispered in confessionals are now spoken out loud and in public. Abuse victims who had reported offenses to church officials and been rejected and sometimes ridiculed and persecuted took their stories, often as a last resort to the courts and the media. (*Sex* 36)

The cases especially of priests sexually exploiting nuns have become quite rampant, and such instances finds place not only in Sister Jesme’s life writing but also in other life

writings and print media. However, the victim most of the time are silenced through various coercive measures and hence are denied justice.

Undoubtedly, the Vow of Chastity followed by the catholic priests and nuns tend to be one of the reasons which force them to detain themselves from natural sexual needs of the physical body. However, Suci Kinattungal, in her seminal article 'A Brief History of the TOCD Congregation' posits that the first nun in Kerala as Eliswa, a widow with a child. She wished to lead a consecrated life after her husband's death. Thus, with the help of a few priests, after seeking permission from the superiors, Third Order of the Discalced Carmelite Congregation for Women was founded and Mother Eliswa, her daughter, Anna, and Thresia were the only members in the beginning. It is evident that later, she received other women, including widows into the congregation. Nonetheless, in the current context, the circumstances remain unfavourable in accepting a widow as nun, as the Vow of Chastity stands prominent rather than the desire to lead a consecrated life. Thus, it demands an investigation of the historical background of this practice which has brought the Vow of Chastity as an imperative norm to be followed by nuns.

Looking into the history, Pulikkunnel traces the incidents that had lead to the inclusion of celibacy in the lives of nuns and priests in the Catholic Church. Celibacy denotes a state of abstinence from both marriage and sexual relations among nuns and priests. In *Kalahavum Viswasavum* (Disputes and Beliefs) he notes the reason for the inclusion of the concept of celibacy for priests and nuns. Greeks and Romans believed that an unmarried soldier would more efficiently discharge their duties than their married counterpart. Hence, the rule to refrain the soldiers from getting married was framed. However, Pulikkunnel stresses that the rule was imposed to stop the soldiers from getting into wedlock and not from sexual acts. The Church, impressed by this, gradually adopted the rule to be followed among nuns and priests. Pulikkunnel finds this as the rationale behind the introduction of the rule against

marriage among nuns and priests in the Catholic Church. Further, he points out that when Pope John XXIII and Pope Paul VI had given a choice for the priests and nuns to get married, many of them entered into married life. Later it was revoked and the priests and nuns are presumed to remain celibate. Pulikkunnel considers it as a clear instance of the violation of human rights and compares the Catholic Church's practice of imposing the vow of celibacy on priests and nuns with those women locked up behind iron bars in the red streets for forced prostitution and sexual slavery (139-140). Similarly, Margaret R Miles in her foreword to Sipe's seminal work *Sex, Priests and Power: Anatomy of a Crisis*, traces the inclusion of celibacy as a norm in the Catholic Church points out the spiritual strength intended through it. She also marks that celibacy/ sexual abstinence had resulted in making the clergy different from the public and thereby fetching them more power. However, she emphasizes that it was then considered as a "gift" rather than a "teeth-gritting sacrifice" and hence not to be regarded or developed as a strict rule (xi, xii). Taslima Nasrin in an article written in the context of a nun's allegation of rape against the Bishop in Kerala, opines of celibacy as an "irrational and absurd ritual which must be put to an end". She further adds that rather than thrusting the stringent rule to suppress the physical desires, revoking this practice of celibacy would at least give them a choice. Akin to Sipe's affirmation that "the celibate/sexual structure of the church must be discussed openly, freely, energetically and reevaluated" (*Sex* 46), Sister Jesme's revelations about the sexual liaison and sexual aggression in the lives of priests and nuns also hint at how the celibacy as a norm tends to be defied and stresses the need for its reappraisal.

#### Vow of Obedience or the Snare to Perpetual Enslavement

Sister Jesme reckons the vow of obedience as the "most terrible hammer used on nuns which is becoming the most important evil inside the convents," (Heanue). She underlines obedience as an imperative norm to be upheld by the nuns in CMC, deemed to be proposed

by the founder, Rev. Fr. Chavara, which had given undue importance to the decision of seniors. She further argues that the biased decisions and favouritism of the superior nuns had stymied her progress, as she was often left with no choice but to obey them. She quotes various instances when she was “subjected to the tyranny of obedience in the convent” (31). The narrative shows many occasions where the superior employing their authority, deliberately impede her aspiration for pursuing higher studies and further disparages her academic excellence. Even though she had secured second rank in the postgraduation exam, it was later changed to third rank. Without any qualms, when her superior, Sister Claudia informs her that “the second rank would be helpful to another girl” (31), she had to accept it without complaining as she feared it would be marked as an act of disobedience, which would then make her ineligible to be a nun. Hence, she reveals, “I know this is not fair, but I can hardly blame someone so senior of jealousy” (32). Further Sister Claudia, who turned to be the Provincial, again communicates her discontent when Sister Jesme secures first position for the MPhil course. While conveying the message and sharing her happiness with the Provincial, Mother Claudia, she turns angry and questions her how she had received it when there was a better scholar in the batch (66). Sister Jesme reasons that the superior’s displeasure had elicited not just such mean responses but also further troubles, including the attempt to mark her as insane. Furthermore, Sister Claudia again plays a key role to impede Sister Jesme from pursuing research. Again, the Provincial intervened adversely in Sister Jesme’s academic life, hindering her plans to pursue PhD, claiming that she has not received the permission from the council, which the latter recollects, others who had done research before her never needed (73). Moreover, the Provincial pressurise Sister Jesme to take leave for one and half years in order to perform the prayer services which the latter considers as a “big blow” (73). Besides, in Sister Jesme’s absence, the Provincial goes to the extent of attempting to create a negative impression about her on R.K, her prospective research

supervisor, which in turn makes him ask the former the reason for the superior being “always against” her. He adds, “whenever a reference comes up, she bears down heavily against you, despite my praise” (74). Hence, constantly the superior is seen displeased with Sister Jesme’s achievements and success. The intention behind Sister Claudia to persistently speak ill of Sister Jesme to R.K, could be to snip their professional relationship, especially as the superior herself desires to be her research supervisor (74). Hence, the superior here had employed verbal aggression, motivated at adversely affecting the relationship between Sister Jesme and her supervisor which could thus be considered as an instance of relational aggression as well. The superior thus employs both direct as well as indirect forms of aggression to depreciate Sister Jesme and her achievements. On one side by exerting the power that the ‘Vow of Obedience’ had vested on her as the provincial, the superior is able to thwart the writer’s attempts for academic progress whereas on the other, the same ‘Vow of Obedience’ enslaves Sister Jesme, making her defenseless to respond or question the unfair acts of the superior.

As referenced in the study conducted by Culotta & Goldstein, it is likewise conceivable that the victims of relational aggression, may have positive social or individual attributes that draw consideration from peers and may incite sentiments of envy (31). Further, this results in endeavours to cut down the peer's status (Pronk 18). Here, right from beginning, Sister Claudia, is evident to be ‘jealous’ of the academic excellence of her junior nun. Thus, it had resulted in her employing both indirect and direct means of aggression to pull down the victim’s social acceptance.

There are instances when sister Jesme attempts to speak against the age-old rigid norms and dictums to be strictly followed in the nunnery and urges the imperative need to rewrite it considering the need of the current context and the real teachings of Christ. When Sister Jesme was invited to release Nalini Jameela’s *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker*, she decided to go. However, when other priests and nuns opposed her, she tried to reason with

them employing biblical and academic references. She brings the reference of Mary Magdalene, deemed to be a prostitute who Christ himself had uplifted and treated with great regards. She quotes Christ who urges one to “hate the sin and love the sinners”. She then poses the question of who promotes a woman to remain as a sex worker in the society. She supports her argument claiming that a literary work is a contribution to the society and that if she can teach Mrs. Warren’s *Profession* in class, she can release the autobiography of a sex worker as well. However, she was not permitted to do so as the Provincial denied her the permission, and then made her follow the order reminding the ‘Vow of Obedience’. Pulikkunnel notes that most of the nuns take the ‘Vow of Obedience’<sup>20</sup> believing that the pledge is made to God, promising obedience to Him, however, the canon law emphasises submission and obedience to superiors as well.

On another occasion, when a nun preached about the significance of the ‘Vow of Obedience’ in an attempt to reinforce its relevance in the life of nuns, Sister Jesme stood for sensible amendments in the Vow of Obedience, by replacing the “blind obedience” with “responsible obedience”. According to the Nun, the founder had “demanded for unconditional obedience from the nuns in his congregation, CMC” (110). However, Sister Jesme spoke for ‘responsible obedience’ which she explains as “understanding the pulse from the context and then asking the sisters to obey” (110). She goes ahead and attempts to point out with an example how the religion has digressed from the real teachings of Jesus as it imbibed the flaws in the attitudes of people in power. She argues that when Christ had given great importance to the women and attempted to uplift them, the Church at present has moved away from his principles. Sister Jesme opines that the religion had greatly imbibed the ‘ideas, customs, and perspectives’ and even the follies of the West in due time. Respecting the system yet exposing the anti-woman attitude that prevails, she exclaims that the Church never ceases to ‘belittle’ women.

### **Mad Woman in the Nunnery**

During her stay in the Church convent, the superiors make few attempts to label Sister Jesme as a mad woman. The Provincial's intention to label Sister Jesme as a mentally disturbed woman gets revealed in an instance when she retorts, "If there is no physical illness, I will have to take you to a psychiatrist for treatment" (69). Though the writer silently endured other forms of punishments, this was too much for her to handle. "My frankness and straightforwardness may lead to many of their secrets being revealed, they feared. My questioning of many of their decisions and practices may have reaped for me the displeasure of the authorities. Perhaps this is why they want to curb me, to break me and silence me" (70). Sister Jesme narrowly escapes when the Provincial brings a doctor to the college parlour at night in order to check her mental stability. Further, they misinform her mother and urge her to be taken to a psychiatrist. On another occasion, she was forced to consult a doctor, who was also a nun. The doctor fabricates a medical report claiming Sister Jesme to be badly affected by thyroid and attempts to prescribe medicines. However, later Sister Jesme receives affirmation from another doctor that she is perfectly healthy. Later, after years the truth gets revealed that it was just an act premeditated by the Provincial to mislead her into taking medicines for mental illness. The ulterior motive of the superiors to label her as insane and trick her into taking medicines related to mental disorders evoke fear in her. Once again, after ten years, Sister Jesme had to undergo the same ordeal, this time devised by the Mother General, who seemed to be under due pressure to punish her. Making false allegations on her, and quoting Pope's opinion that "one out of every ten nuns is mentally disturbed and needs treatment", General discloses her intention to send her for treatment (145). Fearing that the superiors would trick her into taking medicines Sister Jesme even fears having food from the nunnery.

The suffering continued until she received the final blow which she describes as a “tragedy that had happened to her as a nun and a Principal” (142). The General hurls double accusations on her. She is alleged to be mentally unstable and to have employed obscene language, that is to “speak sex”, with the staff (144, 145). Thus, after ten years when again the superiors conspired to label her as mentally ill and remove her from the position as the Principal, Sister Jesme decides to leave the nunnery. Sister Jesme pointing out and then questioning the unjust ways of the superiors and the corruption in the system had brought the displeasure of the authorities. Thus, they attempt to label her as both immoral and insane. Sister Jesme, however, notes that she would have continued to stay in convent enduring everything only if they had detained themselves from calling her mad.

### **Conclusion**

Sister Jesme mentions her home as a peaceful space abundant in resources where all the members of the family shared a harmonious relationship. It is significant that her mother remained utmost cautious in treating each one of her children with equal importance. Also, her family refrained from following any hierarchy in relationships and hence, provided a conducive for their daughter to exercise her agency in choosing her course of life as a nun in the Congregation of Mother of Carmelite. Contrary to this, Sister Jesme’s life in the nunnery turned arduous especially as there existed strict hierarchy based on seniority as well as the background of the nuns. In the narrative, Sister Jesme mentions ostracising her, allotting over work or giving no work, making false accusations through anonymous letters and mendacious articles, questioning morality, attempts to label as insane had all been employed by the superiors to silence her. Additionally, she also endures sexual aggression from another nun. Sister Jesme affirms that it was her own longing to lead a consecrated life which had prompted her to be a nun. However, the thirty-three years of her lived experience in the nunnery, enduring difficulties leads her to refer to it as “enclosure”, “iron curtain”, “stinking

corner”, “dungeon”, “formidable fortress”, “prison”, and nuns as “chained souls”. The narrative however gives only a brief description about most of the instances she had experienced. This would have resulted from her deliberate attempts to limit the narrative to her experience and further refrain from hurting those nuns still residing in the convent. Further, she is less articulate about the problems faced by the nuns hailing from the “less privileged” background.

### Chapter III

#### From a Housewife to a Sex Worker: Aggression in Nalini Jameela's

##### *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker*

#### Reclaiming Agency and Voice: Life Writings and other Mediums

Nalini Jameela, a sex worker turned activist stormed into the public as well as the literary and academic spheres with the publication of her debut work, *Oru Laingikatozhilaliyute Atmakatha* (Autobiography of a Sex Worker). Soon she received a wider acclaim when her life writing was translated into different languages including English. Jameela's debut work, *Oru Laingikatozhilaliyute Atmakatha* (Autobiography of a Sex Worker) published in 2005 was orally narrated to I Gopinath, who had later transcribed it. He observes the work as the "first ever instance in India of a sex worker writing her life" (qtd in Das and Vinod 3). However, having lost her recorded interviews, his memories heavily influenced in shaping the narrative. Dissatisfied with the autobiography despite being an instant hit, Jameela exhibited the audacity to disclaim it and further revise it with the help of a few friends. In fact, she had to retract her first work sighting the unnecessary influence of Gopinath who had transcribed it. Jameela could hardly participate in the making of her autobiography with him as he was engrossed in conforming to the rules of structuring an autobiography, rather than incorporating her views and suggestions. Das and Vinod observe it as the "strongest ethical claim, reassuring readers that the autobiographic subject has vetted the revision" (4). Whereas, upon rejecting his version of autobiography, Gopinath, pronounced her as a "puppet in the hands of vested interest" (qtd.in Devika Housewife 1679). However, Jameela responded to his statement in the afterword of the English version, defining herself as a "puppet who dances to others' tune" in the disowned version of the autobiography (178).

Brimming with confidence she asserts, “I want to do everything to make my autobiography match my standards and style” (ix). Moreover, even after having encountered with the questions regarding the right to revise an autobiography, Jameela was least bothered in finding whether she had trespassed the literary canons as well. She states, “I don’t know if there are rules about these things that apply to everyone around the world. Even if there are, and I happen to be the first person to change those rules, let it be so! After all, when I started sex work, I didn’t go by the custom! (ix).

She opines of having received a better setting to exert her agency while framing the second version as she shared an equal relationship with the transcribers (179). Contesting the conventions of autobiography, Jameela, with the collaborative efforts of her friends soon published the second version titled *Njan Laigikathozhilali: Nalini Jameelayude Atmakatha*<sup>21</sup> (Me, Sex Worker: Nalini Jameela’s Autobiography). In 2007, it was translated to English entitled *The Autobiography of a Sex worker*<sup>22</sup> by J Devika, a noted academician, feminist and historian based in Kerala.

Further, the intervention of amanuenses in the production results in Jameela’s work to be considered as a collaborative autobiography<sup>23</sup>. Narrating the difficulty endured to publish her life writing, Jameela notes that, “the struggle to get this story written the way I wanted it written, and to get it into the public eye, has been as intense as any in my whole life” (179). Here, it is quite significant to raise the question whether Jameela could exercise her agency completely while scripting her experiences as she had done in the other forms of her life writings including documentaries, interviews, and public speaking. While framing the second version, Jameela finds working with her transcribers quite ‘good’ for her. She observes, “their many questions reactivated my memories and allowed me to tell a story” (179). Hence, it is evident that their questions had considerably influenced her narration. Furthermore, in the personal interview when asked if she is contented with the second version of her

autobiography, she claims “what I feel significant will not always seem the same for the ones sitting with me”. Thus, unlike in framing the autobiographies where the author solely decides what needs to be included and neglected, the transcribers here play a significant role in the same. Hence, one could not rule out the possibility of narration taking shape with the active intervention of the transcribers, based on the questions asked, and instances selected rather than Jameela’s own discretion. For instance, the aggression she had endured from her first husband, Subrahmanyam and his family or the instance where she encounters physical aggression from the police right after entering into sex work only make a passing reference in the narrative, unlike in her interviews.

Analysing Jameela’s life writing, Christy observes that “the very nature of the mediation of another agency makes this form a complex genre of analysis” (5). Deliberating the intervention of collaborators, Christy locates Jameela’s debut work as a life writing than an autobiography per se. Further, Jameela, does not limit her narrative to “inner-self” but goes beyond and speaks for the “social-self”, which is linked to the community of sex workers, visibilising them and further engages the public claiming the right to work and dignity. Thus, the narration shifts swiftly from ‘I’ to ‘We’ and vice versa. Distinguishing the thin line that demarks life writing and autobiography, Chanfrault Dutchet points out that, “the life story develops specific traits, the orality of the genre produces a system of formal and structural recurrences, and the interactional system, as well as the stress on the social self, produce reference to socio-symbolic discourse and the social imaginary through which a culture, by means of language, maps and deciphers the world, a dimension also present in autobiography, but heavily marked in the life story” (63). Thus, the work, where the transcribers play a considerably significant role and which constantly engages the readers regarding the politics of sex work and sex workers, could be better positioned as a life writing than an autobiography.

At this juncture, it becomes quite imperative to examine whether the translated version in English had undergone any mediation of the translator, especially as Jameela lacks grip over the English language.

In one section of the life writing, Jameela reiterates that her community needs acceptance and dignity rather than the sympathy of the public (*The Autobiography* 139, *Njan* 115). The narrative turns self-contradictory when the author condemns the public for their lack of sympathy especially when it was stated earlier that sex workers do not need their sympathy. When Maitreyan struggled to find a space for sex workers to assemble and work, it is written that “the rich and poor are equally unsympathetic to us, in this matter” (*The Autobiography* 154). Whereas in the Malayalam edition, it is expressed as “*Sampannarum daridraram orupole ee karyathil njangalkku puram thirinju nilkkare ullu*” (127). Here the terms ‘puram thirinju nilkuka’ roughly denote neglect. Neglect could indicate the lack of acceptance both by the rich or poor, which falls in line with Jaemela’s earlier remark, however, the term ‘unsympathetic’ infuses confusion, as it gets contradictory to her earlier argument demanding acceptance.

On another instance, Jameela mentions how at a young age she had failed to enjoy the nature while walking home from the work site as she feared the men who idled away their time playing cards. They used to sexually harass the girls who walked alone. In the translation, it is mentioned as, “that teenage girl fleeing from minor threats wasn’t able to appreciate the charms of nature” (*The Autobiography* 11). However, the fear of a young girl who had to run fast in order to escape the harassment is trivialized in the translation by instantly categorizing the threat as “minor”. Thus, in the very process of translation, the translator’s remark negates sexual aggression and the protagonist’s subsequent fear. Moreover, the translator dismisses the potential dangers of sexual aggression that a

girl/woman had to face in a public space, that too on a daily basis, and unacknowledged her sense of insecurity and fear.

In another section, Jameela discusses the reasons for her daughter leaving a difficult marriage. One of the reasons mentioned was that her husband preferred homosexual relations (*Njan* 99). However, in the translation this reason is excluded.

Similarly, Jameela narrates that she had declined the offer put forward by the Jamaat-e-Islam in Malapuram to arrange a marriage for her daughter. Had she accepted it, her daughter would have to live the rest of her life following the customs and practices of the Muslim community. At this juncture, she asserts that, “unlike me, Zeenu would not be able to come out of it even if she desires” (*Njan* 111). This instance gives an insight into the daughter’s as well as Jameela’s character. In the translated version, excluding Jameela’s standpoint, it is mentioned as “...she wasn’t the sort who’d come out of the faith if she wanted to” (133, 134). Here, the translation denies the reader an opportunity to look at Jameela’s stance towards religion as a matter of choice rather than a constraint. She emphasizes her courage to come out of religion if she wishes to.

On another instance, Jameela traces how men in the past and the present exploited women’s bodies. According to her they had “certain rights” to touch women’s bodies and it used to be limited to brushings and caresses (*Njan* 135). Here, Jameela herself legitimizes the sexual aggression which women had to endure in the past by terming the privilege a man had exerted as his ‘right’. However, the translation further minimizes the criticality when the same is represented including the outlook of the translator. It had been translated as, “that used to be nothing more than a bare brushing or a trivial caress” (164). The translator’s choice of the word “trivial” quite clearly negates sexual aggression further. Menon contends rape as just “one end of the spectrum of violence” and includes a variation of other male behaviours “endearingly” termed as “eve teasing” (*Seeing* 141). “It would not go beyond this

and suddenly reach the bedroom”; here, both Jameela and further Devika tends to underplay the effect of sexual aggression women are prone to face in the public space especially in the past yet ponders its grievous effects in the present.

In the Malayalam edition, Jameela mentions about “pappadam maker *Pandaran’s* house” (14). However, the translation excludes any reference to the term *Pandaran* and notes it as the “*pappadam* maker’s house” (3). *Pandaran* signifies a lower caste in Kerala.

Further, Jameela recollects how she used to play the games usually played by the boys as she used to be with her younger and elder brothers (*Njan* 17). In the translation it is narrated as, “once I grew as tall as my brothers, I played the games that boys played (7). She could play only with brothers as her father did not permit her to mingle with the girls staying nearby, citing that they belonged to a different caste. Here, Jameela is prevented from maintaining any association with the Dalit or Christian girls who resided close because of her father’s belief in caste and its hierarchization. In the Malayalam version the segregation based on caste is well visible and the two instances are effortlessly connected, whereas in the English version, the first incident does not seem to have any connection with the latter, which therefore tone down the intricacies of caste system.

Jameela refers to the house her father had built as a ‘*tharavad*’. However, the translator had refrained from using the term *tharavad*, and replaces it with other words. In one instance, Jameela points out how she received special attention when she went to work in the clay mine for belonging to one of the big houses of her times. It was only later she understood that by implying to the big house, others meant “big *tharavad*” (*Njan* 15). Here “big *tharavad*” could imply the high economic status. Though their house was big, Jameela and her family were encountering financial constraints, In the translation, disdaining the possibility of Jameela having mentioned an opulent household through the usage ‘big *tharavad*’, the translator instantly refers to it as a “well known and respected family” (4).

Similarly, Jameela observes that “in the *tharavad*, they were like dependents” (*Njan* 15). In the translation, Devika notes the same as “in the family, we were almost like dependents” (5). Here, Jameela states that though the house was built by her father, his elder brother exerted more authority over others. It is important to note that *valyachan*<sup>24</sup> and his family stayed near to Jameela’s father’s house. Thus, through the term *tharavad*, it is obvious that rather than mentioning the household, Jameela here refers to the kin group. Though the translation conveys the same meaning, it is interesting to note the translator’s decision to replace the term. Here, the translator seems to refrain from denoting an Ezhava<sup>25</sup> household as a *tharavad* and further attempts to appropriate it.

Robin Jeffery refers to *tharavad* as the “name applied to the house and family of Nairs” (230). However, Sreebitha observes that in the past the Ezhavas too used to call their matrilineal household as *tharavads* (44). Further, Abraham contests how the term *tharavad* got eventually limited to refer to the household of the Nairs and upper castes even when the lower caste like *thiyyas* had used the same term to refer to their house, despite its size. She posits that the word *tharavad* has gradually evolved to be referred to as “the house/ property and kin groups- not necessarily organized on the principle of *marumakkathyam* or matriliney” (8).

Hence, from the mentioned instances it could be inferred that certain additions, omissions and cultural nuances had crept its way in the very process of translation that has impacted the essence of the original work.

### **Documentaries and Public Speaking**

It is significant that Jameela had not only showed the courage to disclaim and further revised her written document but also remained obstinate in framing documentaries and public speeches the way she preferred. She had voiced her protest against the inappropriate notions about the sex workers and sex work deep-rooted especially in the people who tried to

represent them in front of the public. A theatre artist, who had portrayed the life of a sex worker in the light of sufferings, destitution and miserable death was vehemently criticized by Jameela. She was quite stubborn in her view that it not the “sympathy” of the public that a sex worker needs but “acceptance” (139). She firmly stood her ground and refused to apologise and further distanced herself from the organization when its members condemned her behaviour and apologized to the playwright on her behalf.

Later, Jameela learns to operate camera and translate her ideas and views into the screen. After learning to use camera, one could see Jameela being liberated who deploys her agency to shoot the concepts she favoured rather than blindly obeying or pleasing the organizers. She writes, “I didn’t like their suggestion that my third work should focus on police atrocities. I felt it was more important to highlight the negative attitude of the public...I stated openly that I didn’t need their camera or their money if I wasn’t allowed to work on the theme I preferred” (110). Later, in another documentary, “A Glimpse of the Silence”, she had laid bare the cruelties perpetuated by the police. She also utilizes her public speaking skills to address the public directly about the sex workers and the negative attitudes prevailing against them. She strives to show sex work as a profession, beyond sin and crime and sex workers beyond rehabilitation.

Jameela also employs public speaking as a means to reach to the people directly. When her talk that had addressed the various issues of sex workers succeeded in garnering public attention, others assumed that either Maitreyan or Paulson<sup>26</sup> would have taught her to talk (90). However, Jameela strenuously objects giving undue credit to them claiming that they were only members of the foundation and not sex workers. Here, she hints at having efficiently utilized her lived experiences as a sex worker and activist while conversing with the public that had invited recognition. Also, by reclaiming the credit she deserved, Jameela dismantles the wrong notion ingrained in the public in denouncing the oratory skills as not a

sex worker's forte. Also, rather than acknowledging her prowess and courage in publishing a life writing when she was relegated as an "intellectual among sex workers", Jameela appropriates the statement proclaiming that "she is a sex worker among the intellectuals" (167).

Thus, Jameel's life experiences tends to be leveraged in the books published, the documentaries made or even in the speeches delivered, gradually leading it all fall under the realm of life writing. Rowena observes that the "ideal Malayalee woman" tends to be regarded as the Nair women who had inculcated the "Hindu savarna morality, built around the chastity of upper caste women" which in turn lead to the obscuring of other lower caste women both from the "public" as well as in "cultural representations like cinema as 'desirable' sexual subjects" (qtd in. Christy *Sexuality* 61). Thus, when Jameela marked her presence in the public as well as the literary and academic spheres, she had flouted not only the "conventional definitions of autobiography" but also the concept of the "ideal femininity in the Malayali public sphere" (Sherin). It is thus noteworthy that employing various mediums of life writing including public speaking, publishing books on her life and making documentaries, Jameela fervently attempts to bring to the forefront the voice of the sex workers who are otherwise silenced or misrepresented. Her fervent attempts are devoted at visibilising not just the seamy side of sex work but its positive attributes as well. Nevertheless, the strength of her voice and the agency she had exercised tends to be high in the production of documentaries or oral presentations than in the written form.

#### Articulation of Caste

Jameela narrates in detail, the ubiquitousness of caste which she had experienced at the various junctures of her life. She reminisces how her father, despite being an ardent follower of Sree Narayana Guru<sup>27</sup> and the ideals of communism, could not deny the prevalence of caste and its hierarchization. He did not permit her or her siblings to have any

association with the Christians and Dalits who resided close to them. She notes how an old woman, who belonged to a lower caste, was served food neither in the house nor on the verandah but outside the house. She would dig a hole in the mud and place the leaf on which porridge would be served (124).

Jameela writes that unlike Nairs or Nambuthiris, those who worked in the clay mine were mainly Dalits, Christians or Ezhavas like herself (15). However, Kunhikkavu was the only Nair woman known to have worked there. Jameela reveals that when Kunhikkavu joined them, she was considered with great regard and respect as she belonged to an elite caste. Enjoying several favours from coworkers who belonged to other lower castes, she further received some relaxation in doing hard labour. Kunhikkavu had the privilege to carry the lighter basket and to serve herself food before others had touched it. These instances show how Kunhikkavu's caste identity had fetched her a superior position even in the work front, despite her financial setbacks. Further, through willingly accepting their inferior status and giving privileges to the Nair woman, the workers themselves pave way for reinforcing the caste structure existing in the society. Jameela herself acknowledges her admiration and jealousy for Kunhikkavu who received various benefits from her fellow workers.

Unlike Misra's father, Jameela's father outrightly rejects the marriage proposal of a man as he belonged to a different caste community. She writes that her father had punished her both physically as well as verbally for having loved a Christian boy (18). It is interesting that though her father had prevented Jameela from mingling with others belonging to Christian or Dalit communities, he had not voiced his reluctance or refrained her from working in the clay mine or tile factory along with them.

Jameela reveals how she considers faith and religion as complicated. She narrates of having lost faith in God in her childhood days especially when she saw her mother praying to

the Hindu deity Siva, while fearing her husband. This made her question whether Siva or her father was more powerful.

Later after being converted to Islam, even though she found refuge in mosques in dire poverty and comfort in performing rituals in sickness, the atrocities which occurred in the premises of mosque ingrained doubts in her about the existence of God. She argues, “In mosques, girls get kidnapped, raped, harassed, those who come to carry out vows are beaten if they don’t pay bribes- if there was a God, would such things happen?” (130). Further, she narrates about having met a practitioner of occult who was believed to have powers to cure illness. However, she realized that he didn’t have any sacred powers and was eliciting sexual favours from women in exchange for money. All these make her question the superiority of God over man.

Jameela writes how she was abandoned by the Hindus and not completely accepted by the Muslims. Opting the name Jameela, she turned to the Islamic faith, thereby becoming unaccepted by the Hindus and since she had not converted completely, she couldn’t gain the approval of Muslims as well (71). Though Jameela had adopted Islamic belief, she was not ready to coerce her daughter to accept the same despite the temptations of getting her married off, promising gold. She asserts that unlike her Zeenat would not be able to retreat, even if she intends. She thus remarks, “I decided I wouldn’t throw her into a place from which she’d never be able to return” (134). Jameela herself claims not to have fulfilled all the criteria of conversion, which in turn signifies her audacity to even flout the religious norms. Further, she considers religion as a matter of choice where one can exert their agency either to choose or to retract rather than to be perpetually entrapped. Her name ‘Nalini Jameela’ itself signifies how she has denoted the ‘in betweenness’ of not completely belonging to either Hindu or Muslim community. Just like she had transgressed the conventions of the cultural codes by

entering sex work, and further the rules of autobiography by revising it, she also exhibits the nerve to trespass the boundaries of religion as well.

### **From Home to the Streets: Journey of an Ordinary Woman to a Sex Worker**

Jameela recounts and documents her role as a daughter, a daughter-in-law and a wife in the domestic realm and as a domestic maid, clay mine/ construction worker and a sex worker in the public space. Hence, various instances of aggression she had faced both in the domestic as well as the public realm could be traced in the life writing.

#### Aggression in the Domestic space

Jameela hails from a lower middle class Ezhava family. Right from childhood, her thoughts remain dominated in finding means to sustain the family. She is constantly seen searching for jobs both before and after the marriages. In the beginning, Jameela writes about her patrifocal family, and the pathetic plight of her mother, having no agency neither on her own nor on her children's life. Her mother's position in the house deteriorated further once she lost her job. "After that, father, and later, my older brother, made all the decisions...Father used to beat her when he was in temper. When *Valyamma*<sup>28</sup> scolded her, father would never stand up for her" (125). It had an adverse effect on Jameela as well.

Though her mother had sent her to a school, Jameela was forced to stop her studies at the age of nine. Despite having the ardent desire to study further, *Valyamma* decided not to send her to school or let her study. She remained quite adamant in dismissing Jameela's desire to study further. Neither her mother nor Jameela could protest as *Valyamma* held a powerful position in their house and was supported by the male members of the family. Jameela observes, "none of mother's decisions held any weight at home" (2). The helplessness, economic dependence and further the endurance of physical abuse which in turn "made her mother choke in the house", and further her father's reluctance to provide for the family prompts Jameela to think about economic independence as a requisite to lead a better life. Sahni and

Shankar identify “poverty and limited education” as two key factors that results in women reach the labour market even from a young age (7). Furthermore, Jameela soon understood that both *Valyamma’s* and mother’s sisters’ monetary help came at the expense of their unnecessary intervention into her life, imposing restrictions on her attire and mobility. This prompted Jameela realize that “to be one’s own boss, one had to work”. Also, she adds that none could “bully” them when their mother was earning (5). Though the life writing hardly discusses what all measures were taken up by the relatives to bully them, it is visible that Jameela was not ready to submit to their demands that curtailed her agency in any way whether it be related to clothing or mobility.

Hence, the scarcity of various resources at home, including food, the desire to lead a life unhampered by the dominating intervention of others, and to evade both physical and verbal aggression from father and other relatives prompt Jameela apprehend the significance of work. Her urgency to be self-reliant makes her work right from a young age in the tile factory and clay mines. Jameela’s constant search for work in order to earn a living at various stages of her life is a depressingly recurring theme in the life narrative. However, though Jameela takes up various jobs, it is evident that despite working hard, she manages to earn the bare minimum and leads a hand to mouth existence.

Jameela’s rift with her father begins when he stopped working yet attempted to control her and the money she had earned. However, she immediately discerns that her father had been controlling her mother in the similar way. It escalates, changing the course of her life abruptly when he beats her and then pushes her out of the house for having helped her brother marry a woman elder than him. He then even removes her name from the ration card. When her father physically abuses and abandons her, at the age of eighteen, Jameela loses the security of a home. Having nowhere to go, the circumstances force her to be the wife of Subrahmanyam, a man much older to her in age who was involved in various shady business.

Jameela asserts, “I didn’t marry because I decided to do so. It happened by chance”(20). Mary Wollstonecraft argues “marriage for support” as a “legal prostitution” (ch. 9). Thus, when Jameela’s father refrained her from entering the house, she was left with no option than to accept the help offered by Subrahmanyam and stay with him in order to survive, which eventually lead the public to profess them as husband and wife.

While staying with Subrahmanyam, she had to tolerate severe physical as well as verbal aggression from her in laws. Jameela notes, “I suffered unimaginable levels of virulent squabbling in that house at the hands of his mother and sister...It was living hell. She even broke my head once, having clobbered me with a heavy coconut- scraper”(22). Jameela encounters intense forms of physical and verbal aggression from her in laws. However, it is crucial that she had refrained from narrating such instances in detail. She had more or less made a passing reference to the domestic violence encountered at Subhramanyam’s house and further desist from explicitly writing her response to it. Though she mentions “struggling to hold my ground, fighting inch by inch, I was convinced that life is a great struggle...” (22). However, in the life writing, it is quite ambiguous whether she had responded either verbally or physically to the aggression encountered.

Jameela continues to work even after her marriage by helping her husband in selling arrack. Moreover, she even takes up sex work to satisfy her mother-in-law, who demanded more money to support the family after her husband’s death. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that Jameela hardly elucidates the tough relationship she had with her in-laws and the wayward habits of her husband. Though Jameela remains quite silent about her three and half year’s marital life with Subrahmanyam she writes eloquently about her first client after she had begun sex work. According to her he was a policeman by profession, and his attire resembled Nairs, “he was the man of her dreams, and a lover who had met the expectations of her fantasies”. Even though the relationship was short and lasted only for a single night, after

which he got her arrested and beaten up, she considers “his memories warmer” than that of Subrahmanyam (26).

When her husband’s family stopped demanding and taking money from her as they became financially stable, Jameela thought of leaving sex work. She writes, “I had got into this trade to support my kids. . . I’d carried on only for their sake” (46). Jameela, thus leaves sex work and once again embraces the role of a wife. Here she shifts her position to a domestic woman again. It is significant that after making the decision to stay with Koya, she refrains from sex work and does the ‘wifely duties’ including bearing his child, as per his decision. However, her second marriage to Koya did not go well. Jameela, being his third wife was unfairly treated by his second wife and family. She notes, “I had a strong sense of self-respect; it wouldn’t allow me to accept a second-class status” (48). Further, her condition worsened when her husband’s family realized that she was a sex worker. Despite being pregnant, his sister’s husband started making unsolicited sexual advances on her. Further, making it worse, Koya forbade her decision to terminate the pregnancy. Though Jameela shifted to a different house, her struggles persisted when Koya refused to accept her and their daughter, Zeenat, citing the differences in their religion. According to her husband, “the kid born haraat (in faith) must be cared for, but not the kid born haram (outside the faith)” (48). Hurt by his remarks, Jameela decides to raise Zeenat as a Muslim. Further, she is forced to leave the marriage and start sex work as she knew he would soon abandon their daughter and divorce her. She asserts, “I was determined to divorce him before he divorced me” (49). Jameela strives to maintain her dignity even at the face of betrayal and hardships. In the second marriage, Jameela turns to be a submissive wife unlike in her role as a sex worker. Considering the situation getting worse, though she thinks of terminating the pregnancy, she turns compliant to her husband’s decision to raise the child, only to be disowned by him later. At home, she also experienced sexual aggression (in the verbal form) from a relative

especially after others learn about her past as a sex worker. The taboo attached to sex work, even after the decision to discontinue it, tends to adversely affect Jameela. Economically dependent on Koya, Jameela after walking out of the relation with a child struggles to survive. Thus, again she turns to sex work for a living yet soon discontinues it once she decided to marry Shahul Hameed.

Describing her third marriage, Jameela writes, “it was a relationship that we had jumped into because of a moment’s attraction” (77). Nalini opted the name Jameela once she started living with Shahul Hameed as he intended to convince his family of having chosen a Muslim woman as his wife. Even during the third marriage, Jameela abstains from sex work and could be seen undertaking various works along with her husband including plastic name board business, and cloth trade. At this stage, she refers to herself as a “proud housewife and trader” (60).

Her twelve years old marriage with him ended when she was bedridden, and he started maintaining relation with other women denouncing Jameela. During one of their fights, he manipulated others into believing that the fight was because “she desired to sleep with him every day”, indirectly hinting at her uncontrollable carnal desire. Jameela observes, “maybe it was the mean shrewdness of a person who wanted to win at any cost” (62).

Jameela however resists his intention to tarnish her reputation stating that thereafter she would not be sleeping with him. Again, her fear of him abandoning her prompts her to move out of the house. Jameela reiterates, I decided to leave him before he left me” (62). Weak and tired of illness, Jameela and Zeenat, seeks refuge in a mosque which was frequented by molesters and sex traffickers. Shahul, in his desperate attempt to justify his act declares that it was her madness that had incited him to leave her. Jameela quite shocked by the response asserts, “at that moment, I decided this man should never come to see me again. Imagine, claiming that I was mad, and then pretending to be my protector! How cruel!” (62). Despite

his sexual liaison with other woman, Jameela's husband makes fervent attempts to label her as a lecherous and insane woman, in order to justify his act of abandoning her. Here she confronts verbal aggression that directly questions her morality and sanity. Thus, in the three marriages, Jameela faces various forms of domestic violence that had an adverse effect on the relationship. Jayasree in her seminal work points out that "more than fifty percentage of sex workers in Kerala had been married and experienced domestic violence" (59). Tellis points out the discrepancy in Nalini Jameela's standpoint and actions on family. Though she considers sex workers as different and free than the married women, she had opted to marry thrice and had further got her daughter married off twice (qtd. in Christy *Sexuality* 88). Christy, however, argues that a lower caste, lower-middle class woman like Jameela who will have to confront oppression in relation to the religion, caste, class, and gender, access marriage differently unlike an upper-caste, middle-class women. Marriage often becomes the culmination of various difficult circumstances, thus, in a way "inevitable", rather than a "liberal choice". Hence, for a lower caste, lower-middle class, sex worker like Jameela, marriage should not only be dismissed as a site of "patriarchal oppression" but also read along with "other kinds of power structures they constantly fight" (Christy *Sexuality* 90-91). The following sections attempt to analyse few such instances in the narrative that enunciate the aggression Jameela had to encounter in her attempt to resist and survive especially in the work front.

Furthermore, for Jameela, home, controlled by her father, becomes a place of violence and insecurities. Her father beats and controls both Jameela and her mother. Her mother remains reticent to the aggression and resorts to suffer in silence. When the father doesn't care for the family, Jameela turns to work and starts earning at a young age. Finally, she loses the security of home when her father casts her aside. This sense of insecurity haunts her every time she embraces domesticity. In the second and third marriages she asserts that she had left

the relation (and the home) before they had abandoned her. Also, domestic violence marks its presence in three of her marriages. Every time a relationship ended, Jameela walks to the streets. Thus, the city space, all at once, turned out to be her “home”, “place of work”, and even “torment” (Christy “The City” 6). Even when she is unable to do sex work, she seeks refuge in public spaces.

#### Aggression at the Workspace

Through her life narrative, Jameela outlines how predominantly sexual aggression marks its presence at the workspace, whether it be centered around the domestic space or public space, especially for a lower class/caste woman like her. According to Devika, Jameela’s life writing “highlighted the ordinariness of sex work in the lives of poor women, its place alongside other strenuous, exploitative and demeaning work- situations quite invisible to Kerala's educated elite” (Housewife 1677). Furthermore, as her experiences get unfurled in the narrative, it is visible that sexual aggression in the workplace plays a key role forcing women to turn to sex work.

Jameela first encountered sexual aggression at the age of thirteen, while she was working as a maid at a lawyer’s house. It shook her, as the oppressor was her brother’s teacher whom she calls as ‘Ittamash’. Though she succeeded in saving herself from him, the episode was too traumatic that she began to be suspicious of other men around her. Jameela recollects, “after being pawed by Ittamash, a mere visitor to that house, I began to fear the others there- Balettan and the older boys...” (14). This prompts her to discontinue working as a domestic help, despite her dire need for an income. However, when she informs others about the incident, she began to be referred as “the girl Ittamash grabbed” and the others considered it as her fault. “I myself began to feel that I had done something wrong”(14-15). Ahrens in their study astutely observes that negative responses to sexual aggression evokes self-blame potent enough to silence the victim (263). Similarly, the responses she had

received from others resulted in self-blame and further planted the misinformation that she herself was accountable for the incident rather than the perpetrator.

Conspicuously, later while working in the clay mine, she endures similar circumstances without complaining or resisting. She notes that those who permitted “shoving and thrusting received better pay than others” (15). Jameela, writes about such instances in detail and reveals that she had dealt with such men diplomatically, neither yielding to their advances nor protesting, yet securing the work and wage. Here Jameela deals with the issue differently. The very reason that had once prompted her to leave working as a domestic help turned out to be regarded as more accommodating and less serious. It could be regarded as her determination to sustain her livelihood rather than leaving it which would have resulted from the realization that whether in the private or public domain of labour, women, especially from lower caste/ class, tends to be more vulnerable and hence, prone to confront sexual aggression.

She also brings to light that in Kerala, many construction workers soon venture into sex work as they will be forced to exchange sexual favours with the supervisor to sustain the job. However, they will gradually shift to sex work as the construction work at the expense of both physical labour as well as sexual labour would let them earn very little whereas sex work would fetch them better wages (146). In accord with Jameela’s experiences, Jayasree, in her study on sex workers in Kerala, observes that even though women from lower class families try different jobs including working in the construction sites, or perform agricultural or domestic work for meagre wages, they gradually turn to sex work when they are sexually exploited (59). Judith Heyer posits “poorly remunerated work further devalues the labour time without enhancing agency, thus, it can be oppressive and exploitative rather than empowering” (Qtd in Rao 81). Thus, apart from being engaged in laborious tasks like in the clay mines and construction sites, which would fetch them less money, the workspace turns

exploitative when the women labourers are pressurised to relent to unpaid sex work as well. The dire need for work in order to sustain themselves and the family impel them to comply.

Jameela's own life experiences make her position sex work in a slightly higher pedestal compared to construction work and scavenging work in the municipality. Sahni and Shankar argue that "for those coming to sex work from the other labour markets, they have often experienced equally harsh (or worse) conditions of highly labour-intensive work for very low incomes. It is from these background cases that the significance of sex work as a site of higher incomes or livelihoods emerges" (12). Jameela's narrative further shows that apart from the laborious work and low wages, the sexual aggression tends to be another major contributing factor which forces women to gradually turn to sex work. Also, compared to construction workers Jameela asserts that sex workers have the agency and liberty to work on the days they choose, earning more income and enough rest to remain healthy. Niveditha Menon argues, "there is no more or less agency exercised in 'choosing' to work as a domestic servant in multiple households for a pittance and with minimum dignity, or to be exploited by contractors in arduous construction work, than there is in 'choosing' to do sex work-whether as the sole occupation or alongside other work" (*Seeing* 182). Jameela regards sex work just like any other labour. She even compares sex work with other works, marks the differences, and outlines its advantages and disadvantages.

### **The Questions of Rescue, Rehabilitation, and the Right to Work**

Jameela problematizes the forced rehabilitation of sex workers. Her arguments clearly visibilise the fine line between coercion and volition in sex work. She argues that nobody thinks of rehabilitating the waste collectors though they work in hazardous environment as their service is imperative to keep the place clean or else the entire area would "stink". Her remark, "fellows who are out to pinch and prod women on the sly give out exactly the same

stink. This is not something that safeguards the health of the society” (140, 141). Jameela, here hints at and further condemns the sexual aggression perpetrated by men against women.

Jameela outrightly rejects ‘sex rackets’ and ‘sexual exploitation’ as having any association with sex work. She considers sex rackets to “naked display of force” where the victim will be tortured physically and emotionally (139). She elaborates that “in rackets, young girls are brutally used, without any discretion, without any considerations for their minds and bodies, without rest or health care” (140). Whereas she elucidates that sexual exploitation takes place when sexual favour is elicited from someone, usually without their consent, in the pretext of marriage or job. Here, clearly marking the lack of volition and the exploitative nature, Jameela denounces sex rackets as well as eliciting sexual favours through coercive acts. She further argues the need to decriminalize sex work, especially in the absence of brothels in Kerala. She argues that “if two people want to have sex with mutual consent, if this is no way a nuisance to others, then it should not be questioned” (138).

Jameela expresses her awe at those who considers receiving the benefits of being unemployed (dole) as better than sex work. According to her, the sex workers too would have the same plight as the beggars, who were resettled in long sheds with less facilities, where men, women and children including the sick, had to stay as if being “caged up in a dog’s house” (121). She expresses her disinterest in rehabilitating sex workers pointing out that it would further drain them economically as well as emotionally. She observes that rehabilitation would not contribute to redeem their status, either in public or personal lives. This in turn would make them “all the more isolated and helpless” (137). Akin to Jameela’s opinion, Sex Worker’s Forum in Kerala<sup>29</sup> underlies that until dignity is positioned alongside “chastity, monogamy and wifedom”, sex workers remain ineligible to be at the receiving end of the same, despite being rehabilitated (“Some Questions” 218). Often the sex workers and wives are pitted against each other which often adversely affect the former’s lives. Jameela

expresses her resentment of how the elite wives gains much by maintaining the “divide between the dignified them and undignified sex workers” and asserts that the latter knows clearly the “divide is thin” (*The Autobiography* 174). Rajeswari Sundar Rajan observes the gendered nature of sex work as problematic. According to her contrary to the sex work in the family setting where sex is performed for “free, out of love or instinct”, the same when commercialized tends to be immediately denounced as betrayal (140). It is noteworthy that, Jameela at times comprehends sex work drawing its similarity to marital relationship between a husband and wife. She reiterates comparing sex work to “using the woman the way husband does” (23). “The ‘things’ that my clients did to me were almost the same as the ‘things’ their husbands did to them” (172). Those days, clients used to be very much like husbands (40). When the aggression encountered by sex workers from their clients is often employed to confer victim status on them, Jameela lays bare and further problematises the aggression wives endure from their husbands. She states, “getting married is no safeguard against violence, even though the common consensus is that one can bear violence from a husband, but not from a client” (*The Autobiography* 175). When she expresses her displeasure at the unsolicited advances of a man while travelling, she was immediately labelled as a “bad woman” which prompts her to position “a good wife as one who suffers such groping and pinches in silence” (*Romantic* 8). Jameela’s critique of domestic women here offers a view of how it could also be an aggressive and exploitative space for women.

In a programme organized by the Kolkata Sex Worker’s Forum, Jameela put forward four points which makes them “free” from a housewife. She argues that “they are free in four aspects which includes they don’t have to cook and wait for a husband, they don’t have to wash his dirty clothes, they don’t have to ask for the husband’s permission to raise the kids they deem fit, and they don’t have to claim the husband’s property to raise the kids” (107). However, when Jameela positions sex workers against the domestic women, it shows how the

former, despite the claims at times fails to escape the domesticity. It is relevant here that she herself points out the role of a broker-cum-husband in the lives of many sex workers who exploit them both financially and sexually. Jameela mentions how some men like brokers and husbands reap benefit out of them. The situation further worsens when both (broker and husband) becomes the same person. Baldwin observes that the financial benefits of a souteneur, especially the men who mediates sex work, often goes unquestioned (76). The sex worker then will have to tend to their needs by providing money and liquor. Moreover, the sex worker would become obliged to raise their children as they would not be using birth control measures, unlike with clients. The man who plays the role of a husband will stick for some time and will eventually desert the woman and children. When another man takes the role of the husband, the sex worker will have to go through the same situation. She will have the “pressure” to bear his children (150). Thus, she will be left with more children to be taken care of. Furthermore, Jameela also indicates how despite her disinterest, she had to offer sexual service for free to thugs like Wilson (150). Thus, in certain ways even the sex workers fail to escape domesticity.

The public often considers sex workers as a menace to be purged off from the society. SWFK notes that many people think of themselves as social workers by beating the sex workers and consider they have thereby “saved the society or cleaned up the scourge that was affecting them”. This mainly arises as they consider themselves morally superior unlike the sex workers and attempt to exhibit it (“*Some Questions*” 211). Gangoli states that the “prostitute rights groups critique the ‘rehabilitating’ urge that drives feminists and policy makers alike” (14). This too often results out of the “good/ bad woman” dichotomy that prevails in the patriarchal society. SWFK underlies that the sex workers are often put behind both “iron bars” and “moral bars”. According to them, rehabilitation which tends to be “paternalistic”, emerges from the idea of morality (“*Some Questions*” 216, 217). Bareket et

al. observe that the “Madonna- Whore dichotomy” which implies that women would be either “good, chaste, and pure Madonnas” or as “bad, promiscuous, and seductive whores”, as that which reinforces patriarchy (519). Hence, women is regarded either as “good, pure, and worthy of respect” or “bad, dirty and deserving of abuse” (Wade). Thus, the imperative need emerges either to save the latter by rehabilitating them or discipline those who resist it through coercion. It is at this juncture Jameela raises the question of women’s agency to pursue sex work. Gangoli observes disregarding agency and viewing sex work only in the light of coercion that perpetually clad women the victim status as a means of infantilizing them (9). In the narrative it is quite visible that both the disciplinary as well as exploitative measures are often endorsed by the public, and the state alike against the sex workers who exercise their agency and continue to do sex work. This includes the conscious efforts to exclude and further reject their presence from public spaces through the perpetration of various forms of aggression.

### **Sex Workers, the State, and the Public**

Jameela’s further narration reveals sex work itself as not devoid of exploitation or aggression. Sex workers tend to face aggression of various forms on a daily basis, which at times turn lethal, claiming their lives. The sex workers are prone to abuse not only by criminals, but also from the public, the police and their own family members. Chapman argues that the “under-theorised forms of public violence include denied or limited access to emergency state-sponsored infrastructure and services such as clean water, dry food rations or shelter compared to higher caste neighbours; withholding and reduced services leading to increased stress and workload for women; the absence of legislation to protect women from abuse, discrimination and equality before the law; and the absence of a guarantee of equal opportunities for all women and men in the workplace” (53). Jameela’s narrative reveals that apart from her lower class/ caste status, her identity as a sex worker had also resulted in her

being at the receiving end of further discrimination from the State and also in accessing various infrastructures.

Jameela records severe physical aggression, apart from sexual aggression the sex workers are forced to confront. Providing a glance into the aggression their community is compelled to endure, from different spheres of the society, Jameela writes, “everyone (sex workers) would speak of their problems...the police beat me up...; the police punched me; the thug attacked me; I was thrown out of my house; the shop keeper insulted me” (84). The police and the local goons often resorted to violence while handling the sex workers. As Pushpesh Kumar observes, “the abjected sexual livings such as that of prostitutes and sex workers who embody an ‘excess’ of sexuality are construed as a threat to the moral order and hence, can easily and legitimately be denied a voice by the civil society, and may even be reduced to the ‘living dead’ through the necropolitical operatives of the state” (3).

One of the sections of the life writing titled, “Right in front of Death”, narrates the grave incidents which Jameela had encountered as a sex worker. Once while travelling in an auto rickshaw, some men in a motorcycle followed her. When her attempts to escape had failed, Jameela had to meet them as she knew, if they raise voice she would be arrested by the police and the driver would also be physically assaulted. Having realized that she would be either attacked by the rogues who persistently followed her or arrested by the police, she decided to go with the former. Jameela yields to their demands as she had ‘learnt from the experiences that it would be better to cooperate with the attackers at unavoidable circumstances’ (94). She was taken to Brahmakulam, where one had paid and used her service. However, in an attempt to provoke her, he constantly assaulted her verbally. Jameela writes about such men who would not stop having sex but also wishes to hurt them. They would ask provocative questions in an attempt to make the sex worker angry and thereby ‘beat’ them. The second one used her without paying and further attempted to provoke her.

Later she was taken to another building and was asked to wait there till dawn. However, though Jameela could save herself from such dire situations, soon another sex worker fell victim of the same gang and was ruthlessly raped and murdered in the same place. Despite hosting protests, the murderers were acquitted as the people were not concerned as the “victim was a sex worker” (95). SWFK observes that the sex worker is “caught in a trap, a moral vacuum where there is no one to help” (“Some Questions” 211). The narrative shows that neither the public nor the state pays attention even when a sex worker confronts life threatening situations.

On another instance too, Jameela narrowly escapes from being gang raped and murdered. She describes the experience as “seeing death face to face” (95). Chandran, an auto driver approached her and gained her trust paying an advance amount, ensuring sex work. Later when he took her to a deserted place, Jameela realized that she had been ensnared. Jameela saved herself from the seventeen other men who had joined Chandran by hiding herself in a pit till dawn. This time as a protest she lodged a formal complaint at the police station and as a result she was also arrested along with Chandran and some men from his gang.

Through the narrative Jameela explicitly writes about the humiliating and grievous experiences she herself as well as the community had to endure from the police. As the law enforcers stood against them, they suffered intolerable measures of abuse. Narrating the experience with her very first client who was a policeman, Jameela writes, “how could anyone be so cruel?” (27). After utilizing her service, he got her arrested the next day. Being detained and caned for no reason, Jameela also had to exchange sexual favours with the sub-inspector. Even though her first client needed the sex worker, he went ahead to seize and then physically punish her using his power as a policeman. Jameela, on the other hand lacked financial as well as other assistance to save herself. Finally, she had to exchange sexual

favour with another police official in order to be free. Here both the policemen could be seen misusing their power to exploit a sex worker.

Another time, the sub-inspector threw chilli powder on the sex workers who were in the lock up just to demonstrate to others their authority to punish. SWFK argues that the “moral right gives the policemen the right to abuse the sex worker...” (“Some Questions” 214). Jameela emphasizes the callous nature of the police and the media even when a sex worker is murdered. She narrates how Ammu, a sex worker was ensnared and murdered by the drug dealers. However, despite ample evidence and witnesses, the police had closed the case citing the reason as ‘poor evidence’ (99). She further points out how even without evidence, sex workers are often charged with crimes including murders as it would be easy for the police to dispose the case as the sex workers will not have the means to defend them.

She also discloses how in the past the sex workers were targeted, physically abused and even abducted by other men and the police desisted to intervene or help them. However, she adds that the situation had changed slightly as the police will intercede only to “establish their power rather than offer help” (164).

Another sex worker, Sabira, who had bravely voiced the plight of the sex workers and their rights was later arrested and tortured by the police. She had to endure severe physical assault as a result of which Sabira had to undergo treatment and was bed ridden for six months. Jameela writes that she died later. However, while narrating the gruesome incident, Jameela notes that “her breasts were infected and filled with puss so that she had to undergo surgery in the medical college to get cured” (101). Though it is mentioned that the protests hosted by the sex workers had resulted in the initiation of enquiry about the issue by the human rights commission, further details regarding its outcomes are not mentioned in the life writing.

These incidents throw light on how the state, through its law enforcers exploit, brutally punish and further disfigure the sex workers' bodies. It poses the questions whether women's body is violated, deriving sadistic pleasure from the pain inflicted in the guise of punishment or are the 'bad women's' body brutalized to be served as a model in front of the public, as an outrage against breaching the codes of morality set by the patriarchal society. SWFK observes that the policemen who consider themselves as "morally upright find it a pleasure to beat the sex workers" ("Some Questions" 211). Apart from the brutality inflicted, they employ the law, and misread it in order to detain or punish the sex workers. Jayasree in her article elaborates 'how the law enforcers often misinterpret and misuse the Immoral Traffic Prevention Act, which otherwise is meant to protect them and deploy it mostly to punish the sex workers rather than the real culprits including sex traffickers (62).

It is crucial that Jameela has not written much about the verbal aggression. The vicious attacks on their bodies either in the form of physical aggressions including beating, slapping, caning, murder, incarceration or sexual aggression including rape, gang rapes, coerced sex, would have made her overlook the verbal aggression they had to put up with. Further, her attempts are often directed towards presenting sex workers beyond the miseries. It is quite evident when she was invited to talk in the Sex Worker's Forum in Kolkata as when others discussed the difficulties and harassment in sex worker's life, Jameela preferred to talk about what makes them free from other women. Assert that the situation of the sex workers would have been better if they were not constantly arrested or punished ("Some Questions" 219). Thus, rather than presenting sex work as problematic, she chooses to render the unwanted intervention of the public, and the state, either engrossed in evoking the codes of the patriarchal society or manipulating the law to criminalize sex work and further penalise sex worker and their bodies as exasperating.

### **Problematic Public Places and Infrastructure Violence**

The narrative, apart from reflecting the police and goons turning hostile and exploiting sex workers in multifarious ways, also throws light on how the people belonging to different walks of the society, including activists, condemn their presence and turn quite apprehensive to share space with them. Thus, the public space turns to be quite problematic for the sex workers.

Jameela discloses how the public as well the activists including women ill-treat the sex workers. When Ammu and another sex worker, Usha, had participated in Medha Patkar's resistance against the Sardar Sarovar dam, a woman accused them of theft when she realized that her purse was missing. Though there were several other people, she was only suspicious of Ammu and Usha. Jameela argues, "I too have learnt from experience that the practice of a kind of untouchability which stems from certain prejudices is widely prevalent, and that in this, there is little difference between activists and ordinary people. It's women who strut around thinking of themselves as progressive who often behave the worst" (100). Similarly, when Jameela had to share the space with an activist working for the welfare of women, she realized that the latter did not sleep as she had to guard her money. Here too Jameela's identity being a sex worker instills suspicion in the activist that she might steal her money.

When Jameela met C. K. Janu, a tribal activist in Kerala, in order to lend her support in the protest organized against the atrocities of the Police in Muthanga, she was not allowed to speak. Some of the organizers vehemently protested against "treating Janu and a sex worker alike" (153). Despite offering solidarity, Jameela, because of her identity as a sex worker was not allowed to share the space with Janu.

However, Jameela writes about another event 'Festival of No Pleasure' that was organized in Trivandrum in 2003. She displays great satisfaction in being able to share the

same space with others. She states, “we were always cast out from the society. To have a space which we could share with others, this was the pleasure we enjoyed there” (157).

Jameela mentions another instance when a place near the Dalit colony was rented for the sex workers, they had to vacate it as the people there thought that the “dark-skinned” women who resided there too would eventually be considered as sex workers. However, when she argues that the poor would understand them better than the rich was shaken that day (154), she overlooks the plight of the Dalit women. This instance also shows the vulnerable social position bequeathed on the Dalit women. Niveditha Menon observes that the “discomfort” the Dalit women feel with sex work can not only be read in relation with the traditional moral principles but also with caste, as in the past they belonged to the castes that were forced into prostitution (Seeing Like 167). Devika further argues that there exists only a thin line between the “accepted marginals” like the Dalits and the “abjected marginals” like the prostitutes and the former constantly strives against being pushed to the latter realm (“Bodies Gone” 103). Hence, it could be considered as the former’s desperate attempt to evade the possible encounter of sexual aggression or the coercion to be a sex worker.

On another instance Jameela recounts how she was verbally abused by the people when she had to stay with a friend though she had reached there to carry out certain works related to Jwalamukhi. She did not flinch when the women and others gathered around the room showered abuses on her or when they claimed that woman like her would ruin the country or when the police approached to question her. She boldly asks the police to pay attention to the ones who are unhesitant to attack them as they doubt, they would not be alive to describe the details later (91). Jameela believes that rather than physical strength, being rational would save one from tough situations.

Jameela also points out how they are made to pay an extra amount whether for a ride in an autorickshaw, use comfort stations, have food from restaurants or stay in a hotel, the moment people recognize them as a sex worker.

Jameela recounts that the sex workers had to experience aggression from the police mostly for their mere presence in the public space. She explains that twenty-six sex workers were arrested by the police when one of the sex workers came in close proximity with a magistrate's wife in a public transport. Hence, the narrative lays ample instances of the sex worker encountering infrastructural violence on a daily basis.

#### Jwalamukhi

Jameela had attempted pursuing different jobs abstaining sex work, eventually she had to return to it in order to survive. She made the firm decision to continue being a sex worker only after being a member of the *Jwalamukhi*, the foundation which strived for the empowerment of sex workers (83). Her association with *Jwalamukhi* turned her into an activist. Being an activist, she learns to employ multiple platforms to bring to the forefront the various issues and demands of sex workers, who were previously invisibilised in the public. Jameela points out that based on the class, sex workers belong to high, middle and low class. It is the low-class sex workers she speaks for, who lead a miserable life as being constantly harassed by the police and public alike. Thus, *Jwalamukhi* provided the platform for them to discuss how they were forsaken by the family and society and also mistreated by the police, and gangsters alike.

Jameela advocates for the sex workers right to be treated in a dignified manner. She compares the social position of sex workers in the contemporary period with that of devadasis in the past. According to her the devadasis enjoyed better social status compared to them. She addresses the public and speaks directly to them, makes presentations in the symposium addressing the present plight of sex workers compared to the devadasis in the past, she urges

the need to refrain from using derogatory terms and replace it with sex work. Jameela's narration also throws light on how in the past, in Kerala, the upper class Nairs were also engaged in sex trade. It was then quite common for the sex workers to concentrate on company houses which were Nair *taravads* often run by Nair women. Jameels stayed in a *taravad* owned by Itturuvamma, a Nair woman who had sambandham with a Nambuthiri. Raman Nair was not just her husband but her manager and broker as well (33). In the pretext of running companies, sex work took place in such Nair *taravads*, which generated income for the workers as well as the owners and the public generally stayed out of it. While addressing the public, she demands to address sex workers in a dignified manner, rather than using the derogatory terms like 'petti', 'tatti', 'koothicchi' or 'tevidishi' (89). She urges for the linguistic appropriation to denote to their community, claiming dignity.

Further, she questions the system (both legal and the social) that is keen on finding fault with the women, sparing the men involved. In a public gathering she openly discloses, "there are lawyers who come to us; there are doctors and businessmen. It isn't fair that all of them are considered respectable and we alone are made into criminals" (87). She further questions the rationale behind punishing the women while the men get off scot free. Recounting the better social position enjoyed by the sex workers in the past, Jameela argues the need to see sex work as an occupation and not as a crime. Jameela argues that sex work should be considered in par with any other profession. She urges her fellow sex workers to refrain from considering sex work as a crime which makes them vulnerable to be punished.

*Jwalamukhi* provides a suitable platform for Jameela and other sex workers to reach to the public directly. Also, the organization paved the way for the sex workers to gather together and articulate how both the public and the state worked in multifarious ways to subdue them. Listening to Jameela speak quite vividly about various life experiences, her colleagues at *Jwalamukhi*, Maitreyan and Paulson, had instilled in her the idea to write an

autobiography. Thus, *Jwamukhi* plays a pivotal role in enabling Nalini Jameela visibilise herself and the sex worker's community in the public space and claim the right to live with dignity, unhampered by the aggressive intervention of either the public or the State.

### **Conclusion**

Home, just like the public realm remains to be an aggressive space for Jameela. Her narrative problematises the aggression she had faced in the domestic realm as a daughter, wife and daughter-in-law and also that which she had encountered in the public realm in her roles as a construction site worker and sex worker. Jameela outlines the severe aggression the sex workers are prone to face on a daily basis from their own family, public, police, and the local thugs. It is significant that their bodies, either brutally battered or disfigured, become the major sites of punishment. She is highly articulate about various forms of aggression endured, its nexus between caste and gender in her narrative, unlike other select writers. Quite poignantly, Jameela problematises the infrastructure violence as well, especially for lower class sex workers. The vicious physical aggression which includes beating, slapping, caning, murder, incarceration and sexual aggression involving rapes, gang rape makes the narrative at times overlook the instance of verbal aggression. However, Jameela argues for using appropriate terms to refer to sex workers in order to redeem their position in the society, denouncing those having negative connotations, which she identifies as paving way for marginalising them further. Quite vehemently Jameela claims dignity both for sex work and the sex workers.

## Chapter IV

### Humour to Despair: Aggression in Vinaya's

#### *My Story: Or the Life Journey of a Young Malayali Woman*

Vinaya's protests arise out of watching her mother's struggles at home. Additionally, when she observes the unequal treatment meted out to women in the society, Vinaya attempts to resist it in various ways. Vinaya turning to life writing to script her experiences and further dedicating it to her own mother and all the women in the world itself could be viewed as a means to express her resistance. The life writing deplores the inequalities that women face in their everyday life which Vinaya herself had observed and experienced at home, in the community, and at the workplace. The present chapter intends to scrutinize different forms of aggression permeated in the text which tends to be shrouded as normal and acceptable by the society. Further, it aims to analyse the context and motive of aggression and its nexus between gender and caste.

Vinaya hardly offers a linear narrative in her life writing. Her memory, inter-spread in the text, oscillates through various realms reflecting her life as a daughter, a wife, a daughter-in-law, a member of the society and a working woman. Since, the narrative presents the personal, professional and the social lives as entwined, for the convenience of analysis, the chapter is divided into three sections and looks at aggression pervasive at home, in the community, and at the workspace.

Aggression manifests in different ways and at different contexts forcing Vinaya and other women alike to comport themselves in the stipulated ways. It is evident in the narrative that the social control which imposes immense pressure on women to submit to certain practices and customs, deemed to be approved and accepted in the culture, regardless of their reluctance, percolates quite vividly in the three spaces- home, community, and workspace. Deliberating the ways through which social control works, Honkatukia and Keskinen

elucidate four types of social control, which include “formal institutional control that denotes legislation, formal directives, guidelines, or other strong normative accounts or dominant discourses in public discussions; informal institutional control which informs the individual about important customs and norms of the group, community, or institutional context in question (e.g. gossip, insulting, shaming, harassment, social rewards); normative control in close relationships implies explicit rules, norms, advice, or sanctions stated by those in an authority position in close relationships, such as family members; and internalised control referring to unconscious, routine, and voluntary adherence to rules based on values, beliefs, emotional ties, or commitment to family members, relatives, or friends” (6). This chapter also strives to explore the intricate link between social control and the subsequent aggression directed at conforming to it, in relation to the women subjects.

### **Writing Resistance: Home, Society, and Workplace**

#### **Domesticity: Gendered Labour and Leisure**

This section attempts to analyse how the unpaid labour of women which include the domestic chores, care work, and reproductive labour, linked to the patriarchal expectations, not only unrecognize their work but evidently control and further restrict their agency, space, and even leisure. Furthermore, the narrative shows ample instances revealing how women are coerced to conform to the gendered labour and role bestowed on them.

Vinaya begins her life writing recounting her childhood and her mother’s miserable life in the family. Like Jameela, home becomes a problematic space for Vinaya, where she learns the initial lessons of gender discrimination and subordination. Home, as Price argues, widely regarded as a safe space result in veiling the violence that takes place there and further devalues the women’s labour (40). Vinaya astutely argues that her mother and other women married and brought home, were reduced to the role of mere slaves, by the male members of the family (13). Meenakshi Thampan observes “housewifisation and domesticity” as an

incumbent conviction imposed on the women in Kerala (qtd in. Sreekumar *Scripting* 204).

Vinaya reiterates that these women, engaged in the never-ending domestic chores, and raising children, forsake even their dignity in order to satisfy their basic needs for food, clothes, and shelter. Narrating her life with parents, Vinaya notes that her father, a farmer and timber merchant, used to come only at nights. She further discloses that in case, if he came early, it would be develop into a difficult memory, as he used to verbally abuse her mother, finding silly reasons (14). Vinaya recounts how both the mother and her children, being frightened by her father's behaviour persistently remained silent.

It is imperative to look at how the domesticity is shaped in the narrative both in case of Vinaya and her mother. Vinaya, quite vividly portrays the dejected life of her mother, her lack of agency, submissive role, and passive existence despite working hard for the family. It is noteworthy that the narration evokes deliberations on the space, labour, and leisure which evidently tends to be gendered. Research shows that the domestic labour, considered as women's work, eventually leads to their exploitation and subordination. Besides, it adversely affects their mobility, and even leisure. Macfarlane et al. observe 'patriarchal dynamics' which relies on 'cultural and ideological assumptions' as one of the factors that determines the time invested in doing domestic duties (62). Furthermore, it is argued that the analysis of the patriarchal dynamics would essentially bring out how the 'domestic division of labour (unpaid work) tends to be a factor through which gender gets socially constructed' (Macfarlane et al 62; Gazo-Windle and McMullin 342). Hence, scrutinizing the differences in the space occupied, labour engaged, and leisure habits of Vinaya's father and mother would essentially emphasize the reasons for the dominance of the former and the submissiveness of the latter.

Vinaya narrates how her father not only unacknowledged her mother's efforts and contribution to the family but persistently remained unsatisfied with her labour. Considering

Vinaya's mother's life, it is visible that her role is limited to reproductive and domestic duties, which tends to be unrecognized by her husband. The family works in a way where the father, whose presence often centered outside home, does physical labour and at the same time finds time for recreation and maintains social relationships whereas her mother, confined within the four walls of her home, takes care of the house, her husband and raises the children. However, her domestic productivity is invisibilized and deprecatd by her husband.

Here, it is significant that Vinaya's mother's labour, including domestic work, care work, and reproductive work, tends to be devalued by her husband. It is observed that the family tends to be the space where men exercise patriarchal control over women's work (Hartmann 372). Moreover, Delphy and Leonard states that the 'men exploit the products of the womens' labour' (qtd in Duncombe 235). Confined to the private realm, she engages in various domestic duties. Her time is thoughtfully devoted in pursuing household chores, caring and raising daughters, and catering to the husband's demands. However, he trivializes her work by labelling it as the mere preparation of a few basic meals and then compares it to the physical labour he does in the farmland. Here, the domestic chores including care work, which is considered as a form of 'gendered labour', (qtd in. Varghese 355) tends to be invalidated and also taken for granted in the current context. Rao argues that when a man's work focused in the social space tends to be recognized, the woman's work in the private space not only become invisible but further leads to limiting their social mobility (79). Hence, "this careful segregation of the labour and the space paves way for the construction of gender, and further the systematic "non-valorisation of women's labour" contributes in their subordination" (Edholm et al, 123; Rao 79). Thus, the mother is not only subordinated but also controlled and belittled by her husband. In accord with Price's argument, these instances

clearly show that contrary to the romanticized notions latched on to a home how it could also be reduced to a space of absolute “terror” (42).

Additionally, the narrative throws light on how the gendered division of labour and space affects the leisure as well. The gendered constraints to leisure is a recurring theme in the narrative. The narrative throws light on the constraints in leisure based on the societal expectation of the gender roles which firmly grips not only Vinaya’s mother, but she herself and other women. Vinaya identifies her father as someone who had relished life. He had the privilege to enjoy leisure time with his friends- drinking, playing cards, and volleyball. However, she sarcastically notes that her mother, like a “good woman” was confined to the kitchen; “the indubitable women’s space” (Sreekumar 206) devoid of any recreation or ties either with friends or the society. She reiterates that her mother was reduced to the role of a servant not only in their house but also among her husband’s relatives. In Vinaya’s words, “none except her children spent time with her and often she used to cry silently” (22). Vinaya condemns such mothers, who couldn’t find their own happiness yet sacrificed their entire life tending to the comfort and satisfaction of others in the family. Shaw aptly observes how the gendered nature of leisure could be comprehended by looking into the cultural expectations and attitudes (Gender 273). Here, her mother’s duty is to pursue the domestic chores, which not only limits her mobility to the private space but consumes her time as well. Studies suggest that compared to married men, married women have lesser time for leisure (Shaw “Inequality” 279). Further, “being rushed” is regarded as another factor that adversely affect the leisure (Shaw “Boredom” 275, Gender 272). Fear of violence is also noted as one of the factors negatively affecting leisure practices (Bialeschki).

Vinaya divulges the fear in her and her siblings whenever her father bursts in anger, especially when her mother is late in tending to the former’s demands. One such instance in the autobiography records her father’s reaction when her mother was late in preparing food

for his workers. Here, his aggression gets manifested in multiple ways. Initially he openly shows his anger through his tone, further demeans her domestic work, and belittles her in front of the children. His anger evokes fear not only in his wife but also in the children. It is noteworthy to mention that the narrative shows how both father and children shivers, the former in anger and the latter in absolute fear (14). The mother lacking the courage to justify herself, remains completely silent and yet again presents herself at his service, providing him the water to wash his feet and requesting him to have lunch. However, he further shows his resentment by throwing away the food, claiming it to be tasteless. Here, it is significant that he controls not only her, but also how she spends her time, through aggressive strategies including, showering verbal abuses and further intimidating her by destroying the food she had prepared. Price states that at the homes dominated by men, the peace which he desires gets sustained at the expense of women's labour. He further opines that the labour often tends to be produced at the fear of incurring violence (40). The specific instance sheds light on how her mother had to rush, in order to finish specific works, and the consequences of inadvertent delays. Moreover, the instance gives a clear understanding on how the mother, her time, and space is constantly dominated and controlled by her husband. Thus, the leisure constraints in this specific instance results out of the gender role assigned to Vinaya's mother. In addition, she is coerced into confining herself to those roles especially in the fear of incurring her husband's aggression. Here, normative control in close relationship works through the father, who positions himself as the authority. When the mother fails to fulfill the domestic duties, he controls her by employing aggressive strategies including verbal abuses, humiliation, throwing and destroying things thereby intimidating and instilling fear in her so that she would not repeat it but discharge the stipulated duties appropriately.

For Vinaya, home is thus reduced to a space ruled by her father, where mother had an inferior role, as that of a mere slave. Though the mother remains extremely reticent, the

readers get a glimpse of her emotions when her father, being drunk and narrates to the children how he had narrowly escaped an accident to which she curses faintly “still he had not died” (15). Here, unlike Jameela’s mother who endures both physical and verbal aggression, Vinaya’s mother endures only verbal aggression, and the narrative clearly depicts the adverse effects it had on the victims - the mother and her daughters. Mother’s life, as viewed by Vinaya, marks how the experiences of verbal aggression had affected her. It is noteworthy that her mother passively accepts her situation, never retorts, and resorts to crying and suffering in silence. Rarely one could observe her response to her husband’s demeaning attitude towards her as murmurs, just like in the above-mentioned situation where she, for an instance, desires him to be dead.

Haddad proposes women's larger involvement in domestic labour as a fundamental component propagating sexual inequality (qtd in. Macfarlane et al 62). Observing her mother’s plight in the family, Vinaya realizes how the domestic labour subdues her and strives to appropriate her position right from the very beginning of the marriage, striving for equal partnership. It is evident that mother’s acquiescence had often intensified Vinaya’s distress. Thus, as the narrative unfolds, unlike her mother, one could see her vehemently resisting and articulating gendered inequalities not only in the domestic sphere but also in the public and the workspace.

In the narrative Vinaya also gives another account of how women’s leisure time gets marred not only in the private realm but in the public space as well, despite their right to mobility in the community. She recollects the time when the women used to go for bathing and swimming in a public space, a nearby stream. It served as a leisure time when the women used to come together, spend time chatting, bathing, and swimming. She recounts how certain men used to peek through the bushes and the women had responded by verbally insulting and thereby getting rid of them. Vinaya notes during those time, all that they felt

was a sense of anger and scorn towards the men who did such acts rather than shyness/ shame. She observes that in the recent times, only very few women go to the streams to bath, and they would cover the upper part of their body. She further argues that women gradually refrained from bathing in the streams or enjoying at the beach in their attempt to “avoid giving the pleasure/ happiness that men derive out of watching their body. Hence, the times when they considered bathing together in the public spaces like streams as a leisure has subsequently ended.” (33). Bannerji notes that the common bathing practices of Bengali women in the villages were considered as uncivilized and the women doing so were relegated as “bad”/ “whores”, as it placed their body in the public gaze. Further, it attaches to them the lack of the “virtue”, shame (lajja), the “moral mechanism” imperative to be endorsed by upper class/ caste women acting as a “tool for self-censorship” (241, 242, 245). However, here Vinaya humorously positions the ‘male gaze’ as deriving voyeuristic pleasure watching women’s bodies and further undermines the act to have any connection with woman’s shame or morality. She argues how the constant surveillance had eventually resulted in women getting withdrawn from enjoying their time together in a public space. Thus, their presence became relatively reduced in such places. Here, unlike men, through the sexualization of women’s body in the public space and thereby attaching moral codes to it paving way for defining the “good/ bad” women, they are pushed to the private space, denied of the leisure time. Thus, women, quite unable to overlook the chances of getting their morality questioned and being relegated as an unacceptable member of the society, naturally abstain from such activities. Here, the anticipated verbal aggression of being labelled as a “bad woman”/ “whore” and the ensuing relational aggression, urges the women to restrict themselves from engaging even from such leisurely activities. Nevertheless, Vinaya is quite inarticulate about her upper caste identity and does not mention if the group of women belonged to different castes. When she humorously posits and further generalizes that the women have stopped

bathing at the streams and beaches, she succeeds in showing the public space as gendered and further problematises bringing in the reference of “shameless”- the term deemed to represent those women who breaks the patriarchal rules (Menon *Seeing* 138). However, she trivialises the possibility of sexual aggression on a Dalit woman in such contexts. As Christy argues, unlike the idealised Nair women, a Dalit woman is more prone to sexual harassment marking them as “susceptible and promiscuous, even before they present themselves in the public space”. (74)

#### Home, Marriage, and the Husband’s Role

Narrating how her mother’s mobility and leisure were adversely affected by her labour centred around the domestic space, Vinaya observes how the dynamics of conjugal relationships had gradually shifted, with reference to domestic labour especially in the kitchen space, sighting her sister’s and her own marital life.

In her life writing, Vinaya problematises the position of the husband and wife in the domestic realm. She begins observing the position of husband in the family right from her father to her sisters’ husbands and traces how their roles had moved from a lofty position to that of an ordinary one. Her elder sister, Vasanthi was married to a man named Vasudevan Kidav. When they visited home, it created much distress to the younger siblings as they were not allowed to make noise. Apart from Vinaya’s father, everyone else used to talk to him in a low tone. He would sit at the front side of the house and never set foot in the kitchen. However, once he arrives, the women in the family will be busy in the kitchen, making food for him. If someone wanted to talk to him, they would have to go to him whereas, if he wanted to get information about anything else, he would call his wife. Vinaya opines that Vasanthi, who seems to be waiting in the expectation of that call, would present herself with utmost respect. Vinaya couldn’t resist but contemplate the plight of her sister who, being his wife, had to scrub clean even his ‘*langotti*’ (inner wear). Here, the domestic relationship gets

constructed in such a way that Vasanthi complacently adopts a subordinate role. Analysing the changes in the family dynamics, Sarkar states that the former forced subordination became gradually replaced with “willed surrender and ultimate self fulfilment” of the Hindu wife (1870). Unlike their father, Vasanthi’s husband is not depicted as verbally abusive or controlling yet willingly, like a ‘dutiful’ wife, Vasanthi spends her time serving her husband, doing the domestic chores, washing his clothes, and presenting herself at his command. It is noteworthy to observe how just like Suresh Maraar, Vasudevan too maintains his superiority even at the domestic space. He positions himself at the front side of the house, away from the kitchen- regarded as a “naturally feminine space” (Swenson 38). Further, he converses mostly with the male member of the family. Even when other women in the family communicate with him, who would be engaged in preparing elaborate meals for him, would have to go where he is seated and ensure that he would be talked to in a low tone. However, the narrative, by presenting Vasanthi as a full-fledged devoted wife, restrains the readers from receiving even a glimpse of her response to the relationship she shared with her husband.

By the time her second sister married, Vinaya opines that the ‘sacred’ position conferred on the husband changed to a ‘special’ one as he communicated with everyone in the family and came to the kitchen. It was only when her third sibling, Geeta, married, Vinaya, realised that husbands were just like the ordinary human. One of the major differences that Vinaya notes among her brothers-in-law is their entrance into the kitchen deemed as a women’s space. When Vasanthi’s husband had distanced himself from the kitchen, the other two sisters’ husband did not refrain their presence in the kitchen. Further, when it comes to Vinaya’s husband, she normalizes his presence in the kitchen at the very onset of their married life. Sara Joseph asserts that all endeavors for “gender equality to global equity” should begin right from the kitchen (qtd in Sreekumar 207). It is quite consequential when Vinaya problematises the generally upheld notion about kitchen as

essentially a woman's space and domestic chores as the compulsory duty vested on upper caste women.

While depicting the change in the role of the husbands, Vinaya notes that it had dissented from the sacred position to that of an ordinary one. It is relevant that the narrative had to trace the power dynamics that worked between the husband and wife from Vinaya's parents to that of her three siblings in order to finally view it as quite ordinary rather than a divine or lofty one. However, Vinaya's intense admiration for the Dalit workers in her family, gives the readers an altogether different dynamics of conjugality. Karan Singh astutely argues that the lack of "divine theorization" in the relationship between a Dalit man and woman, unlike in case of the upper caste, make them more egalitarian (145). Vinaya, is thus undoubtedly drawn to the relationship between the Dalit couple, based on equality, where none remained inferior or superior.

Vinaya narrates the life of a 'Paniyan'<sup>30</sup> and 'Panichi'<sup>31</sup> who stayed in the *kolay* behind their house. They used to call them 'Muravan' and 'Murathi'. Though she talks about her family's relationship with them, she does not write whether any type of untouchability was practiced against them. However, she mentions that Murathi used to fetch water and sweep courtyard for the family and Muravan used to clear weeds from the property. It is noteworthy that the life of Muravan and Murathi was different from Vinaya's parents, which in turn would have made her notice it and further write about it with great amusement. She observes that unlike her parents, after work they used to spend all the time together, to have tea from the shop, consume liquor, cook dinner, talk to each other and at times fight as well, both verbally and physically. Here, in contrast to Vinaya's parents, the shared leisure practices and domestic chores of Muravan and Murathi are well described in the narrative. Further, whenever Muravan abused her physically Murathi reacted in the same way. Vinaya recalls, "the moment Muravan hit her with hand, Murathi would hit him with a rod" (24).

She also recounts another instance when Muravan had kicked his wife and she reacted instantly by hitting him with a rolling stone because of which he spat blood for a couple of days. Interestingly, in another instance, Vinaya narrates how Murathi used to serve food for them and the guest. It is significant that she serves rice for herself first and then only for her husband, and finally the guest. Illaih posits that the Dalit men and women share a less oppressive relationship compared to the upper caste as they essentially operate on human terms, “power relations between man and woman are not sacred and therefore less manipulative. The divine stories do not structure them into an ideology that works on the human plane as male control the female” (27). Here, Murathi does not let Muravan exert any control on her and retaliates verbally as well physically. Moreover, she finds time for leisure even after the labour and demands to be treated in a dignified manner. It is quite visible that Vinaya was impressed with Murathi especially about how she had treated herself as an important member of the family, and further the marital life lead by Muravan and Murathi, where none remained either dominant or submissive. Discarding the aggressive elements in their domestic life, it is visible that Vinaya strives to bring the same in her marriage.

The narrative brings forth abundant instances that depict Vinaya’s affection for *Muravan* and *Murathi*. However, when she notes that *Murathi* and *Muravan* worked for the family, their presence remains strictly outside the home. While lamenting that her mother hardly had any connection with the external world, Vinaya desist mentioning why there was a lack of bond or even presence of *Murathi* in their private sphere. Vested in her never-ending domestic duties, her mother, hardly, has been narrated to have turned to *Murathi* to share her workload. Sreekumar observes how domesticity in case of the upper castes undergoes not only a gendered demarcation but other factors including caste (207). Additionally, she overlooks the presence of *Murathi* as a labouring body centered around the public space unlike her mother.

Thus, even when Vinaya is highly articulate and poignant about the vigorous presence of gender discrimination in the various spheres of the society, she is quite inarticulate in verbalizing her upper caste privileges/identity and overlooks the hassles and challenges meted out to women from lower caste.

Unlike her mother, Vinaya, right from the beginning of marriage, actively participated and worked together with her husband in the various events of their life, in both the private and public space. Also, she is highly articulate in questioning and further subverting certain religious rituals, customs and practices in her personal, social, and professional space which continued to persist through various modes of social control, serving as a catalyst that often place men in the high pedestal, and relegate women as inferior. Vinaya, through the close observation of such customs and practices argues how most of them serve as breeding grounds of gender inequality. Further, an analysis of her narrative points out the coercion she herself and other women encounters on a daily basis in order to conform to these practices.

### **Customs and Practices as the Sites of Gender Inequity**

Vinaya started garnering data, writing and learning about various instances where gender discrimination prevailed despite the prevalence of Article 15 of the Indian constitution that forbids discriminations of different kinds. This included newspaper articles, language uses, films, application forms, uniforms, stories, articles, advertisements, etc. Further, she also observed how rituals, customs, practices, hair, mode of dressing, ornaments and so on acted in ways to propagate inequality in the society. Vinaya often turns to legal help in order to fight the discrimination perpetuated against women in the society as well as at the workplace. However, in her life writing she writes a thorough criticism about some of these major issues and argues for an imperative need to quell the same.

Vinaya discloses the negative attitude of the society towards a woman who stays unmarried, especially after the marriage of the younger sister. She reveals of having

denigrated because of this. Eventually, this led her to start avoiding people. She denotes the verbal encounters received during the due course as ‘arrows of derision’ (40). In each of the select life writings the authors have attempted to bring about the stigma attached to those women who resist conforming to the compulsory domesticity. Misra discloses about the widows, Jameela about divorced women, Jesme about nuns. Sherin astutely points out the ideal women as the one “who stays within marriage and is under the male control” (Sherin). Thus, it denotes various strategies, including verbal aggression and isolation, endorsed by the public to make women conform to compulsory marriage and domesticity.

It was when one of her colleagues bought the marriage proposal of a policeman, Vinaya disclosed her interest in another policeman named Mohan Das. It is noteworthy that she exerts her agency to reject the proposal and further choose her partner. It is also important to note that Vinaya had initiated the proposal with Das, who later became her husband. When Kunjikannan, her superior, especially in age, advised her to wear some ornaments as no one would be interested to marry someone who does not do that, Vinaya retorted vehemently that it is simply not possible (62). Even to Das, she lays just one condition that she cannot adopt another personality just to marry him and proceeds when he accepts it immediately.

Vinaya’s narrative discusses and also problematizes some of the Hindu wedding rituals that obfuscate gender equality yet are widely accepted and practiced. Carter asserts “wedding as another site, another opportunity, for the production and reproduction of traditional gendered roles, leading to gender inequalities” (14). Vinaya through her life not only attempts to resist and further dismantle some of these customs but also writes extensively about it in her narrative enabling the readers to view it as a site of discrimination and hence to ponder over it.

Vinaya writes that ‘*pennukaanal*’ (the girl seeing ceremony) and the ‘*veedukaanal*’ happened just like the custom. She protests following certain customs and rituals that

propagated as well as maintained gender discrimination. For instance, in the beginning she shows her displeasure to the groom tying the *thaali*<sup>32</sup> and resists to bestow it with any ceremonial significance. She did not give in to the pressures of her colleagues and Das's request. Her colleagues preached them about the significance of *thaali*, and the outlook of the public towards not tying one. When Vinaya struggled to take a stand, Ramla, a policewoman supported her and urged her to stay strong and reject the marriage proposal if they are not accepting Vinaya's preference. It is significant that Ramla does not support her openly, in front of others, but she talks to her secretly. This could have resulted out of the fear of inviting others' displeasure. Gaining courage, Vinaya openly stated that she does not prefer to get married, where *thaali* tying remains obligatory. However, they continued to talk about the relevance of *thaali* and *thaali* tying ceremony. When one of the policemen claimed *thaali* as a marker to determine that Vinaya as Das's wife especially while booking a room for stay, Vinaya retorts by reducing the importance of *thaali* to the license for prostitution and that anyone can go with another if they possess a *thaali* (64). Thus, she succeeded in putting an end to the conversation and further not wearing or endorsing the *thaali* tying ritual during the marriage. Here *thaali* serves as a symbol of marital identity which women are supposed to continue wearing after the marriage whereas a similar such symbol remains absent in case of men. It is important that in order to refrain from following the *thaali* tying ritual, Vinaya had to engage in a lengthy discussion with her colleagues and Das in which she even had to declare that she would withdraw from such a marriage where she is pressurized to choose the *thaali*. It is interesting to note that in line with Vinaya's argument on reducing the significance of *thaali* as a permit to prostitution, Jameela, as a sex worker too recounts having used *thaali*, while being with some of her clients which had saved her from getting unwanted attention and further problems from the public and police alike.

Similarly, Vinaya opposed the *pudavamaattam*<sup>33</sup> which she considers as “disrobing” done by the groom’s family. Though considered as a prestigious custom, Vinaya argues that it questions the self-respect of the bride. She further deliberates the significance of changing the bride’s attire with that provided by the groom’s family while the ornaments remain unchanged. She observes that the custom would symbolize that the groom’s family requires a bride ripped off respect yet bestowed with material possessions (64). Though Vinaya received the *pudava* during the ceremony, she desisted wearing it. Exclusively to enforce coercion, even though the saree gifted was usually worn after having the food, Vinaya states that the groom’s party consciously changed it. They turned adamant to not to have food if she would not wear the saree. Vinaya quite tenaciously resisted Das’s family’s decision to make her comply and wear the saree. They even tried to persuade Das to make her obey. However, Vinaya notes how Das had supported her and declared in front of others that ‘she does not have to wear it if she dislikes it’ (65). Vinaya claims that it was those words that had contributed them to lead a strong and meaningful life. However, when the groom’s family decided to leave without having food, Vinaya had to relent when her mother cried and claimed that she would end her own life, if she does not oblige. Here, though Vinaya succeeds in resisting the ritual despite various tactics adopted by the groom’s family including choosing not to have food if she does not comply, she becomes totally helpless and pressurized when her own mother threatens her. Thus, Vinaya eventually become coerced to submit to the groom’s family’s demand to conform to the traditional practice.

Likewise, she could not resist the *kanyadaan* ritual, yet she tried to walk alongside her husband rather than the usual practice of walking behind him. However, when they reached a point where only one could walk at a time, unknowingly, Vinaya stopped walking letting her husband walk in the front. This instance is carefully incorporated in the narrative to show how she herself has internalized certain practices promoting men’s role despite her conscious

efforts to dismantle it. The internalized control which she had naturally ingrained through socialization had acted here making her voluntarily submit to the practice of groom walking in the front and the bride following him. Vinaya however recollects a similar instance which had evoked arguments between herself and her husband when she had walked in front of her husband in the public. She observes that though the wife walking behind the husband is a common sight, even during the marriage ritual, the former walking in front of him or alongside has become quite impossible to be accepted by the social consciousness. Here, rather than blindly eulogizing her husband, Vinaya opts to openly write about the patriarchal attitudes ingrained in him which she had persistently attempted to resist and rectify. Further, the internalized control had conversely worked in Das, who had learnt from the patriarchal society that men ought to walk in front and when this order gets disrupted, he resorts to engage in an argument as an attempt to reclaim it. Here, Vinaya does not specifically mention it as the Nair customs of marriage which thereby gives the impression of generalizing it as the Kerala practice. However, she does not resist to question the (Nair) marriage rituals and customs which worked in projecting women as inferiors and men superiors.

Vinaya writes that after marriage, the next morning when her sister-in-law handed over a cup of coffee to be given to her husband, she began drinking it despite her resistance. Later, she brought her husband to the kitchen and made him have tea served by the sister-in-law. Vinaya states that she was utmost cautious in not giving her husband even silly expectations (66). It is interesting to note that Vinaya, like *Murathi*, does not desist to treat herself as an important member just like her husband. She prefers to drink the tea first and only then invite her husband to the kitchen. Moreover, her narrative gives glimpses of Das engaged in domestic chores. It is significant that Vinaya is careful in mentioning it just like an ordinary event and desists eulogizing the same. Eslen et al. state that the public/ private distinction would get eventually effaced when men take part in domestic chores and does

those works deemed as “feminine” (3). Vinaya thus attempts to appropriate the labour that tends to be gendered by confronting and overcoming various aggressive strategies and then by ensuring her presence both in the private and public domains. Moreover, she also ensures her husband’s participation in the domestic chores.

It is relevant that Vinaya had consciously attempted in working with her husband not only in the private and public realm but also in the tasks that demanded physical labour. This had resulted from her experience at school. In the narrative, reminiscing her school life she subtly points out that it was the girls who swept the ground whereas boys were entrusted in arranging benches, which indicated that the tasks demanding physical labour was left for the latter. However, at a later stage one could see Vinaya being engaged in various works that include and test physical strength. For instance, she narrates in detail how laborious was the task of constructing her house. She reveals their struggle to manage money for the construction work and describes the physical labour they had offered. She remembers that it was their job which they consider as significant as their “life”, which had helped them to actualize a long-cherished dream of theirs. They started working for building a house in 1992 and completed the work in 1997. It shows the struggles a lower middle-class family will have to bear. Interestingly, Vinaya, even at those times too tried to appropriate certain unwritten norms. In the housewarming invitation, contrary to the usual way, her name was written first and above her husband’s name. Vinaya notes that this had evoked much discussion among the invitees. Moreover, the housewarming ceremony was led by her mother as Vinaya was aware of her unconditional support throughout the construction work. She further notes that whether at their own home or in someone else’s house, her mother was reduced to a secondary position. As a mother and mother-in-law, she received an unfair treatment as the priority was always given either to her husband or her daughters’ husbands’ family. Vinaya proves highly sensitive not only in discerning such sites that propagate inequality, paving

way for women's secondary role in the family as well as in the society but also makes tremendous efforts to redeem their position despite experiencing various aggressive strategies including belittling; and further narrates about the same in her life writing, spreading awareness among the public. She reveals of having encountered various discriminations meted out to women in her marital life, which she equates as a 'protest site' and opines that such disagreements and dissents directed to reclaim their rights are imperative to take place in every family.

Vinaya also notes how women are coerced to conform to the accepted practices of wearing ornaments, clothes and maintaining lengthy hair. Gowri Ramachandran asserts that "jewellery, clothing, and makeup all touch the body so closely that they also involve the right to bodily integrity, a concept with roots as deep as the common law protections against battery, which recognize that one must control not only the interior, but also the surface of one's own body against the actions of private entities" (34). Stressing that the clothing and hair operates in ways not only to culturally subordinate women but also to physically restrain them, Ramachandran disapproves the same (35). In the narrative, Vinaya mentions the coercion girls and women undergo to wear ornaments as it tends to be intricately linked to the reputation of the male members of the family. She ceased wearing gold ornaments at a young age. Since it was difficult for their family to afford gold necklaces, they had to lend it from their neighborhood while attending marriages or gatherings. Thus, the fear of losing someone else's gold would overpower her while travelling or being in the crowd. When she desisted asking them for the necklace once, her mother reminded her that it would affect the reputation of her father. This made her contemplate the exclusive link between women wearing gold and the reputations bestowed on the men in the family, especially father or husband. Vinaya opines that ornaments only lead women to lose self-confidence (36). Ornaments worn by women here serve as the markers of reputation and social status of the

male members of the family which thereby puts pressure on them to wear it regardless of their dislike. Vinaya attempts to dismantle it by not wearing ornaments. Moreover, she succeeds in challenging the norm of aesthetizing the body, adorning it with ornaments. Further, Vinaya points out that those men, who had cut the tuft of hair ('*kuduma*') which was considered as a marker of caste, were treated as social reformers and the common man had made necessary changes in their hair and attire to suit the needs of the time. However, Vinaya questions 'why does the norm that women need to maintain their hair lengthy, irrespective of caste, still prevails in the society unlike in the case of men, and why would not a group of women come forward to break these established norms?'. Vinaya writes about the inconveniences caused by long hair. Whether it be at home or in the hostel, women need to make sure that hair strands do not fall on the floor, bathroom, or remain on the comb. She also notes about how she was scolded by the matron of the hostel for entering the mess without tying the hair properly. She mentions how Das had sarcastically resisted her decision to cut the hair and further claimed hair as a marker of beauty for women (128). Though Das was fond of his wife's lengthy hair, he was particular about keeping the floor and comb clean from the hair strands. Vinaya however made him realise the inconveniences of maintaining long hair by instantly stopping to clean the floor and comb and further by questioning him how the same hair could while on the head becomes aesthetically appealing while on the comb gets reduced as disgusting (128). Thus, disregarding the accepted beauty standards and norms, she soon decided to cut her hair short to free herself from this bondage imposed on her by the society. When Vinaya cuts her hair short, unlike the previous time, Das responds quite approvingly. Vinaya also narrates the conveniences and relief of maintaining short hair. In this specific instance as well, Vinaya throws light on how the culture imposes restrictions on women's bodily integrity. However, while mentioning men cutting the tuft of hair which had religious significance, Vinaya refrains from divulging in any further discussion on caste.

It is significant that when Vinaya asserts that her father never addressed her mother by her name, as a resistance, right in the beginning of the life writing, she writes her mother's name (N A Lakshmikuttyamma) before the father's name (E K Raghavan Nair). Vinaya discarding her own surname could be deemed as a political act. She desists using either her husband's/ fathers's name as her surname, instead opts the place name 'Maadakkara'. Observing the Christian families in her neighbourhood, she recollects how her classmate Indira and siblings had the initials signifying their father's name and his ancestral house. She questions the position of their mother, who lacks the agency to add neither her name nor the house name to that of her children. She questions who had reduced Elamma, Indira's mother, to the mere role of a "reproductive machine" when she had moved out of her home to that of her husband's home. Vinaya sarcastically argues that "it would not have been done by God as He would not turn something meaningless as an absolute truth" (28). Vinaya finds it disturbing when the same gets reflected in the society, even in various modern institutions like the hospitals and educational institutions which demands only the father's name. Vinaya further notes her struggles to make the official forms gender neutral. She resists the system for not including mother's name in the official forms.

With hardly any help from her husband, when she had taken her daughter to consult a doctor, who was also a professor in Trivandrum medical college, he was adamant in entering only father's name in the consultation form. Despite Vinaya's persistent request to include her name in the documents as the child's father was in Wayanad and hence unavailable, the doctor did not pay any heed. This made Vinaya decide that the next time she would deal with such people by indicating that she does not know who her child's father was. Though Vinaya comments about the same quite humorously, here she problematizes how the significance of women tends to be invalidated at the private and public spheres, veiled either as a normal practice or custom. Later, with the materials collected Vinaya filed a writ in the high court.

Without much external help, investing considerable time, energy and even money, Vinaya was fighting the legal battle alone, just like in her workplace. Finally, she succeeded in gaining favourable verdict in that case for making application forms gender neutral. Here, it is noteworthy that when the usual practice of demanding the name of either the father or husband in the official forms became quite common and signified their importance, it became much difficult for Vinaya to change the practice. She had to resort to legal help in order to make the official forms gender neutral. Thus, all these tend to be the project consciously devised by the patriarchal society to denounce the importance of women which acts in various forms, for instance, as societal norms, practiced, endorsed, and recommended by religious and even modern institutions.

#### Society and Samajams<sup>34</sup>

Vinaya is quite vocal about the gender discrimination which she had observed and experienced in the community. In her attempts to rectify the practices which were anti women in nature, Vinaya gradually realizes the importance of assembling women and bringing them to the public sphere. Vinaya argues that women's mobility is often restrained, which in turn makes their participation less, in various activities that takes place in the community including clubs, libraries etc. When Vinaya pointed out the relevance of women's participation to the young men who were members of the club in their area, they directly revealed their reluctance in even considering women as "members of the community". Further, when she argued for giving a position for women, one of those men declared that "club will be ruled by men". Vinaya notes that the one who told this was raised by a single mother and if his mother had believed the same that men should rule, he would not have been alive to utter those words (144). It is the devalued work of women centered in the domestic space that further leads to the patriarchal society's reluctance in considering them as active members in the public realm as well. Also, belittling and humiliation are deliberately utilized

by the male members of the club in order to restrain the presence and further the participation of women in their various activities, thereby forcing them back to the domestic space.

Though Vinaya and her team miserably failed in the election, their spirit to depart after singing a song too was disrupted when the men hooted loudly. Being embarrassed, other girls decided not to take part in any programme along with Vinaya. It was only later Vinaya realises that a few members of the club had informed women who intended to participate in the election that it had been deferred. Thus, the club members had employed different tactics of giving misinformation, hooting to deride and discourage them to ensure women's continued absence in the functioning of the club, maintaining it as a male dominated section.

Vinaya had also started a group for women in her place Madakkara through which she could organise various cultural programmes and help them in the form of loans for poultry and livestock farming. According to Vinaya, "human beings are being enslaved by means of various societal customs and norms. Thus, in a male dominated society, it is quite obvious that the customs and practices followed tends to be anti-woman in nature. For a woman who desires to place herself as significant being in the society, they need to come to the forefront and seize the opportunities in front of her, for which she will have to break the established norms and dictums and liberate herself" (46). It was this thought which had prompted Vinaya in forming an organization for women.

Here Vinaya's deliberations on the cultural norms reflect how it tends to curtail women's participation and progress in the society, in which they are very much a part of. Vinaya's endeavors are often focused on bringing women to the public, who are otherwise praised and regarded for conforming to the domestic realm.

It is noteworthy that the women in Vinaya's own family, especially mother and sisters, stubbornly opposed her working in the *samajam* and considered her as living a revelrous life. Her younger sister's claim that Vinaya's acts would tarnish the reputation of

their father often used to hurt her. However, her father never accused her (49). It is significant that Vinaya had to face the resistance not only from the society but also from her family, especially the women members. The sisters criticize her way of life that is not centered around the domestic space but the public which in turn make them claim her as leading a wayward life. Niveditha Menon observes that women being “loose” that is not being “tightly controlled” would often invite harsh criticism from the patriarchal society (136). This in turn had resulted in her sisters accuse Vinaya that her activities would adversely affect their father’s reputation. It is evident that there was much pressure on Vinaya, both from the community as well as home to refrain from resisting gender disparity to which she had hardly succumbed. Here, informal institutional control acts especially in the aggressive forms of harsh criticism, insults, and derision to make Vinaya conform to the already existing practices of the community that was male centric.

#### Caste Narration and Women Characters

Though Vinaya tends to be inarticulate about her caste, the narrative shows her admiration for women from different castes, and further reveals how they have had a profound influence on her. Here, even when Vinaya points out to which caste community the women belonged, she often remains silent about the intricate link between caste and gender. Further, these women, in some ways, had trespassed the accepted norms of the community fighting off the ubiquitous social control, inviting her admiration.

Vinaya notes that though the *Muravan* and *Murathi* called her parents as *Thamburan* and *Pappathi*, yet they were not frightened to show their anger or displeasure in front of them. *Muravan*, after consuming alcohol, would verbally abuse her father, who would hit him and then send them out of the house. However, he would apologies and bring them back the very next day. *Murathi*, on the other hand need not necessarily be drunk to show her protest. Once, when mother had hit Vinaya for slightly deforming the aluminum pot, *Murathi* had the

audacity to snatch the pot from her hands and hit it twice on the hard ground (25). Though they are dependent on Vinaya's parents for the basic needs of food, accommodation, and work, both *Muravan* and *Murathi* are quite unhesitant in showing their protest in the form of verbal abuses or by destroying things. Similarly, Vinaya in the workspace resists and protests the unequal treatments hurled at the policewomen by the higher officials, even at the risk of losing her job.

Vinaya also gives another example of an acquaintance, Kadeesa. Of all the daughters of the Muslim women who worked in their property, she remembers Kadeesa, who according to her "craved for freedom" unlike others. She used to take a break from the work whether it be the domestic chores or other work. In the guise of going to the hospital, she used to go to the city and watch movies. It is quite obvious that Vinaya was influenced by her. She notes that though Kadeesa had to face a great deal of opposition from her family, she was well versed in tactfully defying her family even without engaging in verbal spats. According to Vinaya, she had the courage to express opinions and further act the way she preferred (27). She was keen on aestheticising her body, and even styled some of her hair outside the veil, making it visible. Claiming that Kadeesa was a feminist, Vinaya narrates how she was offended by Sathyan, who sang a song demeaning woman. Though other women remained silent, Kadeesa responded by singing a song mocking men. However, Vinaya points out that the women there considered her reaction as a misdeed and ridiculed her. Here, the women themselves attempt to curtail Kadeesa's act to retort by humiliating her. Kadeesa, giving significance to her interests of engaging in leisure activities, reacting to a man's demeaning comments, and by aestheticizing her body defy the norms pertaining to her home, and the community. Vinaya concludes the episode sarcastically stating that Kadeesa had turned to be a "good woman" living with her husband and child, leaving her earlier cherished habits including visiting town, watching films, and beautifying herself (28). Here Vinaya's

definition of a good woman aligns well with Mathur who notes a ‘good woman’ as someone who is obedient, sacrificing, safeguarding the reputation of family, and adopting silence, imperatively needed in the private realm (55). Misra too in her life writing mentions that Suresh had expressed his disapproval of Janaki for moving out of the “good wife realm” through the articulation of her troublesome life at his home (98). Vinaya mentions that the society regards “good woman” as the one restricted to the domestic space, silently engaged in domestic chores tending to the needs of husband, and raising children disregarding their own leisure, interests, or needs. However, Vinaya’s own spirit for freedom and her skill to deal with others discreetly rather than engaging in arguments seems to have resulted out of her interaction with few of these women she had admirably written about.

### **Infrastructure Violence**

Datta posits the lack of access to “infrastructure as a passive intimate form of violence” and further equates infrastructure as “a form of power” which is “differentiated along the intersectional lines of gender, caste, class, and other social markers and experienced in affective and emotional ways that are highly subjective” (68, 69). Vinaya throws light on how the patriarchal society adopts various means to limit women’s participation and movement in the public space, coercing them to be in the domestic realm. Here it is imperative to note that when the public space, along with its various infrastructures tend to be easily available and accessible for men, it becomes quite strenuous for women to utilize the same. Vinaya’s narrative constantly throws light on how the society deals with women who attempts to avail the public space.

Vinaya’s life writing locates various instances of gender inequity practiced and propagated in the society. Of these, certain instances may be deemed trivial, yet Vinaya shows the profound impact of such instances on women’s lives. One such situation includes her endeavours in learning to ride a bicycle, one of the easiest and economic means of

transportation. Vinaya mentions that during that time only men used to ride a bicycle thus, it was quite difficult for her to get one and learn riding it. Though, she managed to rent a bicycle with the help of a boy younger than her, he later desisted in helping her as other men mocked him for it. This made him declare that 'women should not ride a bicycle'. However, eventually, when Vinaya managed to learn to ride the bicycle, she was ridiculed by the men in her village. Incessantly, they hooted and followed her for some days. When Vinaya mustered the courage to continue using the bicycle, realising that none of their tactics could deter her, they eventually stopped doing it. She mentions that her riding the bicycle gradually became a normal sight to the public. Similarly, Roberts Riegel argues how in the Victorian period, bicycling served as a means to liberate women, enhancing their mobility both in using their limbs as well as in travelling effortlessly to considerable distance (568). Here, it is relevant that even for a boy younger than Vinaya the bicycle is easily available and accessible. Vinaya, on the other hand, endures multiple instances of verbal aggression, in order to rent the bicycle, learn, and finally ride it through the village. Her resistance not only eased her mobility but also resulted in finding the opportunity to get a job. Vinaya further adds that it was her habit to frequent the village office in her bicycle which in turn lead her know about the opportunity to work in the police force, that later became her profession and means to earn the livelihood. It is quite evident that the newly acquired mobility had liberated her in not only fetching her a job but also ensuring her presence in the public space. Roberts observes that the women of the Victorian period had to exert their agency and appropriate their heavy and lengthy skirts to ride the bicycle. In the narrative, Vinaya points out that, wearing the long skirt it was 'intolerable' for her to ride the bicycle (34). Though she voices the discomfort of riding the bicycle in her long skirt, it is understood that she has not attempted to change it yet strives and succeeds in riding the cycle through the public space.

Whether it is a policewoman or an ordinary woman, the narrative sheds light on the immense efforts required to lodge a complaint against the abuse experienced while availing public transportation service. Vinaya shares an instance that had happened while travelling in a bus. When a policeman who was on duty urged the men to move from those seats reserved for women, they did not listen, claiming that the women do not wish to sit. Though none of the women who stood there responded, Vinaya showed her displeasure with the men sitting on the seats reserved for women. Later, when the bus started, a sixty-year-old man started humiliating her and the travelers started laughing to his mean comments. Vinaya reveals that despite being frightened she decided to respond. When the old man alighted, some boys gave her his name and address and further informed her that he has contacts with higher officials. Thus, Vinaya decided to inform it to the Circle Inspector (CI) before the man made any moves to influence them. However, the CI spoke to her angrily and cut the call informing that if she has any complaint, she ought to report it in the station rather than make a call to the CI. The next day she gave a complaint letter to the Sub Inspector (SI). The CI, who came to the station called her to his room and talked to her in a raised voice that ‘she might be calling various police officers and that he should not be included among them’ (95). However, an FIR was filed, and the culprit was caught in the evening. The verdict too went in favour of Vinaya, though none in the station gave it much attention. Here in an instance of verbal aggression, Vinaya responds to it after realizing that none of the women present there would take the initiative. Just when Vinaya responded, it had an adverse effect on her. She was humiliated by the old man in public. Further, the passengers rather than helping her, burst into laughter. This episode shows how the man had tried to silence her adopting verbal aggressive strategy by belittling her. At this juncture, Vinaya notes her fear to respond yet musters courage later and further opts to register a complaint. Even the few boys who had extended help by giving the man’s whereabouts did it only after he had got down from the

bus, and further they warned her about his influence and power. Her initiative to inform the higher official about this also goes against her. Silencing through intimidation and raised voice, continues even with the CI.

Vinaya further discloses the hardships for accommodation which she had endured with her frequent transfers. When Vinaya could not find a space to stay in the hostel, she had to reside in the station, in the limited space. She discloses that she had stayed with the small rats, sleeping on top of the trunks, and got dressed, washed, dried clothes, and bathed before others reached the station. She also writes about the lack of infrastructure in the police station, especially for the women police officers. Moreover, Vinaya while articulating about the mandatory rule that was prominent in the police force for the then women police officers to wear saree points out the lack of cleanliness in the railway comfort stations to drape it, without getting it wet and soiled.

Vinaya also writes about the lack of amenities like chair or cot for the women police officers in the rest room. She stresses that the only cot available would be already occupied by the male police officers (99). She points out the pathetic condition of toilets in the station that were partially destroyed and also the unhygienic condition that prevailed mainly because of the inadequate water supply (89). She further reveals of having been humiliated in her attempt to bring this to the notice of the authorities by writing about this in her letter addressed to the Superintendent of Police (SP). The infrastructural violence Vinaya had to encounter from the community reflects her gender and middle-class background that forces her to rely on public transportation, comfort stations, and hostels despite various discomforts. Furthermore, she encounters the same in the police force especially because of her gender. Vinaya's narrative reveals that the male police officers had better access to various amenities compared to the policewomen. Moreover, her complaints to the superiors, attempting to improve the facilities get eventually subdued through humiliation.

### Aggression Visible and Invisible

Vinaya narrates an instance when she was studying in fourth standard. This specifically shows a child's understanding of aggression as that which needs visible evidence. She had narrowly escaped from falling when one of the senior girls, Shoshamma, pushed her. Vinaya reacted by striking the girl with an umbrella, leaving her head bruised. However, fearing whether the teachers or the girl's father would punish her, Vinaya started bending the ribs of her umbrella thinking that she would be able to point it out as the girl's misdeed. It is significant here, how a young girl realises that "she would not be able to convince that Shoshamma had pushed her as there were no proof for it" (19). Here, it is implied that the lack of a visible evidence had prompted her to fabricate one in order to save herself. Thus, she had to bend the rods of her umbrella to prove her point. This instance clearly shows how even a child believes visible evidence as imperative to denote that she has encountered aggression.

### Sexual Aggression

Vinaya has titled a section as 'The Disgusting Fingers of Harassment' where she argues how women are not spared from enduring sexual aggression at one or the other point in their lives. She discloses that such experiences that she had endured in her teenage had evoked 'disgust and fear' in her (30). She further states that the psychological trauma arising out of the 'barbaric acts of sexual assault' will be present in the lives of almost all the women. She reveals that though she had encountered various instances of sexual aggression, it was the two instances, which she had endured during the childhood days when she was unable to react, that continues to hurt her. The first instance happened when she was in second standard. The abuser was Govindan, who was a faithful attendant at their home. He lived in the 'Mupparu Colony'. She mentions that he used to make her sit in his lap and caress. It was only later that she had realized that his caresses were not really an expression of

love (30). Vinaya's abuser here had exploited his accessibility to her home. It is noteworthy that the narrative does not reveal if Vinaya had disclosed it to her parents or siblings once she understood that he was sexually abusing her.

The second instance took place when Vinaya was in the eighth standard. She was selected to participate in the district level sports meet. This time, it was a school teacher who tried to sexually abuse her. Vinaya writes, "he slid his hands inside my skirt and pinched me. Thereafter, his behaviours evoked disgust in me" (31). Vinaya adds that the way he had stared made her further uncomfortable (interview). Later, when he had taken her to a lodge, she had narrowly escaped with the help of another teacher who extended help. In both these instances, Vinaya hesitates to narrate the sexual aggression she had encountered in detail. It is relevant that Vinaya and Sister Jesme implicitly narrate the details of sexual aggression.

### **Aggression at the Workspace**

In 1991, Vinaya joined the Kerala Police Force. Quite unhesitatingly, Vinaya had written about the entrenched inequality that she had observed and experienced while working as a police constable. It is important that these unequal treatments meted out to Vinaya and other policewomen in the work front lay bare the close link between gender and the workspace and further the aggressive strategies employed by the force, especially superiors, to sustain the same. She recognizes, protests, as well as writes about various discriminations hurled at women police officers especially related to their sartorial choices, duties allotted, prospects of promotion, leaves sanctioned, and even the space shared. It is significant that rather than instilling career ambitions or furthering the skills of the women police officers, the force, including men and women, attempted to idealize the 'domestic women' and worked in multiple ways for it to be reinstated in them which Vinaya persistently attempted to resist and dismantle. She also notes of having endured several aggressive strategies as a result of articulating and protesting the gender discrimination that prevailed in the force, in

order to silence her. This included allotting extra duties, constant transfers, isolation, humiliations, cutting increments, delaying salary, and finally termination. In this section, some of these instances will be discussed in detail. Vinaya writes that though most of the women police officers required only transfers to favourable places and permissions to leave early, despite several setbacks she had persistently argued for the involvement of women in those areas of police force marked as a sight of male prominence including special branch, vigilance, crime detachment, narcotic cell, and the related dog squad, bomb squad, tear gas section, telecommunication etc. (102).

During the initial days itself Vinaya realised that her workplace tends to be male centric. According to Niveditha Menon “sexual division of labour extends even to the 'public' arena of paid work and, again, this has nothing to do with 'sex' (biology) and everything to do with 'gender' (culture)” (*Seeing* 11). Vinaya’s experiences point out that in professions considered to be male centric<sup>35</sup> like that of the police force, women’s labour is appropriated and further devalued. She narrates an episode that had occurred during the beginning of her training in the force. When the newly appointed women police officers were asked by the instructor that who all were truly interested and had joined the force, only Vinaya answered positively. However, he responded by prolonging her physical task, commanding to stop just before she was about to collapse. His derisive questions and the instruction to start drill without allowing her the time to rest made her realize that it was a hint to make her learn that one should not ‘love the profession’ (52). It is relevant that among the policewomen only Vinaya had responded positively. Thus, after openly answering that she loves the profession, the superior punished her in the guise of giving a physical task. He commanded her to engage in the physical task and also denied her the time to rest. Vinaya thus understands that it was a message to make her understand that she ought not love the profession. It is also understood that the other women police officers were not punished as they showed a lack of interest in

the profession. Many of the women police officers opted the profession only because they were in need of a stable job and further could not find any other options available (qtd in. Devika, "Mobility" 1153). Thus, the one who showed interest in the male dominated profession tends to be deliberately discouraged. Deans observes that the police training academies, the place where the newly appointed police officers gain the initial understandings about the profession, often endorse the covert agenda that women are unwelcome (48). Right from the beginning, the force employs various methods to deter Vinaya from being an active member and a successful policewoman. The narrative clearly depicts the systematic aggression perpetuated by the state on the women police officers, especially on the ones who articulated their protest in subordinating them in the workspace, in order to vanquish them.

Vinaya notes that she had taken an active part in reorganizing the police association especially because the election did not take place between 1991 and 1995. It is important that though she was the only policewoman who took part in the meetings for initiating election, she was not considered to compete for the single seat given to the women police officers. She notes that it was the leaders, that is the male police officers, who decided which policewomen must be selected. Vinaya states everything began to be controlled by those who won, and they enjoyed frightening and abusing her in various ways (97). Vinaya discloses that the leaders of the organisation started influencing the SI in allotting the duty. Those who supported the leaders of the organization were overtly given relaxation in doing duties. In 2001, when Vinaya and her group won the election, she managed to gain a place in the executive committee after several discussions. However, her achievement was denigrated by some of the male candidates declaring that it had resulted only out of the broad mindedness of the organisation. It is interesting that the organization was dominated and controlled by the male members of the force, hence, they were indirectly referring to their magnanimity for

Vinaya's achievement. Vinaya points out that though she could make it up till the executive committee, she could not find any space further as she failed to get the support of the male members. Being the member of the executive committee, her efforts to bring to light various discriminations faced by the women police officers fell on deaf ears. However, nothing could deter Vinaya. She went ahead and devoted considerable time to study the departmental circulars related to women police officers from the span of 1951 to 2000. She found that there were only two circulars pertaining to women police officers and that too were intended to deny their opportunities. Tracing the history of women police officers in Kerala, she pointed out how they had hardly attained any progress. When Vinaya placed the same for a discussion in the committee, it was neglected by the members. However, Vinaya further points out that her discussions with her superior women police officer, Sandhya, turned fruitful when most of her suggestions were implemented in a seminar held in Thiruvananthapuram, 2001. Vinaya states that she had experienced the arrogance of the policemen who regarded only their words and deeds as the association's activities. However, it is noteworthy that it was the superior woman police officer who had worked to materialize some of the suggestions put forwarded by Vinaya. Moreover, she utilised the opportunity when she was chosen as the editor of the police magazine '*Kaval*' by including articles and write ups about feminism and women police officers. Here Vinaya employs the magazine as a medium to reach to both the police force and public, the subject related to feminism and the role of women police officers. Also, she used to be an active member of the women's library '*Sakhi*', attending classes and discussions related to various issues faced by women. On request, she even wrote an article titled 'Suppression in Various Ways' which was published in their journal. Here, Vinaya adopts a distinct form of protest when the superior policemen desist considering her words or arguments as important. Vinaya remains resolute and

unswerving in investing time to do the research and disseminate the information she had garnered through discussions, presentations, and publishing articles.

Vinaya notes that after the election, the discrimination shown to her while allotting the duty was even visible in the documentation. While, in the register when only the duty was mentioned for others, for Vinaya, the SI did not forget to specify the duty time as well. This silent warning that she ought to be present in the station unlike other policewomen, further “suffocated” her (97). Vinaya narrates the instance that had led the SI to include the time of her duty in the register unlike others. Vinaya too utilised the one-hour lunch time used by the other women police officers. However, it is relevant that she had used the time to go home to have lunch and breastfeed her child. The leaders of the police unit had employed this against her. When some of them reported about this to the SI, he informed Vinaya of having received the complaints about her going out of the station during the duty and further punished her stating that no one else would thereafter attend the wireless duty for her. Furthermore, when he started entering her duty time in the book, it became difficult for her even to attend to the basic needs. Vinaya notes the fear of missing the wireless calls, that had forced her run from the washroom and even have food only after six. Thus she “lost her peace of mind, and she constantly feared of receiving suspension” (98). After three days, she decided to give complaint to the SP, in which she had mentioned the partiality of the SI in mentioning only her duty time in the register, and limiting the duty of the women police officers inside the station. Since Vinaya had brought the book as an evidence the SP verbally assured her she will not have to face any difficulties related to that. It is significant that despite the evidence, no action was taken against the SI. Further, the Sub Inspector humiliated her in front of others, talking about the complaint letter. The women police officers were then shifted to the women’s cell as a punishment. Vinaya writes that the ‘sharp words’ hurt her deeply when the women police officers cursed her, and accused her of making them lose the comforts and

further opined to have punished the one who had complained rather than everyone. Vinaya adds that within one month everyone got relocated to the station they preferred whereas she had once again received disciplinary measures for having made false accusations against the SI. Though Vinaya has written the complaint letter to better the conditions of the women police officers, they were quite displeased and further enraged. Often, the narrative shows instances where Vinaya receives the impudence of the female police officers especially for articulating the gender discrimination prevailing in the system. She hardly receives either the affirmation or support from the women police officers. The superior policemen who find faults with her even for silly reasons ignore the serious mistakes or discriminations perpetuated by others. The lunch time, which was also used to breastfeed her baby was instantly hampered by the superiors by restricting her mobility through their strict command to note down the time of her duty hours and further by providing no assistance to attend the wireless. Thus, they succeeded in not only making it inconvenient for her even to have food or use lavatory but also in instilling fear about the consequences of a minor fault. Later when others were transferred to the places of their choice, Vinaya had to struggle with another round of disciplinary actions taken against her.

In order to relieve herself from the 'severe stress' Vinaya, along with her family, went to watch a movie in the theatre. The theatre manager informed them that the SI had instructed to let him know when Vinaya and family come there. When the manager strongly agreed that he would testify it in front of the authorities, Vinaya wrote a complaint letter to the SP. She stated that the SI was intruding into her personal life and was not letting her live peacefully. However, as a result Vinaya received a notification from the department that the manager of the theatre had filed a complaint to the SP against her for creating a fuss demanding free pass for the movie for which another punishment roll was already open (100). Here, the aggressive strategies of the superiors extend to monitoring her moves and even encroaching into her

personal life to perturb her. They further framed false allegations against her only to humiliate and punish her.

When the frequent disciplinary actions and punishments made her quite disheartened, Das urged her to take a medical leave. The leave was sanctioned by the SI. However, when she had returned to the duty, she had to receive another punishment roll citing the reason as that she had gained the medical certificate unlawfully. Vinaya notes that she had received the punishment order that time “without any emotion” (100). Vinaya states that most of the police officers and she herself had taken such leaves at other times, yet she was the only one who got punished for it.

Vinaya explicitly narrates another instance of aggression against her where she was forced to over work. Vinaya extensively writes about the episode where she was made to over work for three consecutive days which had only resulted in garnering her first suspension, and encounter character assassination, all of which deteriorated both her physical and psychological health, leading to a miscarriage. While she was at service in the Manandavadi station, a strike was initiated by the public demanding closure of a toddy shop in that region. Since many women too participated in the strike, four women police officers too were on the duty there, taking turns. However, once the protestors declined to leave in the evening and turned violent, they started throwing stones at the toddy shop and threatened to demolish it, lest they be arrested and taken to the court. Vinaya, being on duty, started shifting the women protestors to the station in the police jeep. Since there were around seventy women protestors, Vinaya had to travel to and fro, from the protest site to the station, around five times. The station was six kilometers away and the rough road further made the journey arduous. Vinaya who was two months pregnant then endured the struggle and completed her duty. However, after reaching the station Vinaya had to further provide security to the women protestors. Though the khaki saree she wore was soiled in dirt and sweat, Vinaya had to wear the same

sari throughout the night as it was instructed to wear only uniform. She had to do the duty while being deprived of sleep and rest. Vinaya hoped to do the duty only till morning as there were three other policewomen in the station. However, she had to accompany the protestors the next day as well. When others were given bail, fourteen children were instructed to be taken to the Juvenile court. By the time they reached the Kalpatta court it was 7. 30 pm, further they had to travel back to the station with the children as the Chief Judicial Magistrate (CJM) was a woman and she was not ready to attend the case at that hour and further rebuked Das and the advocate. Vinaya writes that the CJM had specially instructed the SI not to send anyone after evening. This instance shows Vinaya's pathetic plight and her lack of power being a police constable in contrast to the CJM. When the latter is reluctant to attend any case after evening, the former, without ample food or rest, enduring physical discomforts is helpless to do duty continuously both day and night.

On the way back, the children turned violent and started shouting, calling names, and insulting the police. Vinaya became physically weak with prolonged working hours, constant travels, and lack of rest and food. However, her request to call another policewoman for the duty was at once rejected claiming that they all had little children. Though Vinaya too had a child of their age, it was not taken into consideration. She had to accompany them to the court the next day as well. All the while they had to take care of the needs of the children. While at the court, a rift erupted between the protestors' advocate and Vinaya. The former claimed that the documents the police had produced were not written clearly which had resulted in getting the bail delayed and proceeded to humiliate them in front of the children. However, when the superintendent informed the advocate that he had wrongly filled the papers for bail, and was instructed by the magistrate to rectify it, Vinaya retorted that "it would be his mistake that would have resulted in getting the bail delayed and further added if it was another advocate, they would have already received the bail in the morning" (91). Her

reaction further infuriated the advocate. Later Vinaya and Das had to endure the verbal spats of a group of advocates and the opposing party. Vinaya states that they “feared to respond because of the possible use of the weapon of discipline” that the authorities in the police force might use against them. The next day, in Wayanad, the advocates called for a court boycott in protest for insulting the advocate. Vinaya, on the other hand was chastised by the department and public for various other reasons. She notes that though initially the duty was handed over to two policemen and a policewoman, which included herself and her husband, the other policeman declined to do the duty and left them in between. For Vinaya and Das, even after the completion of the duty by working without rest for three consecutive days it had only resulted in earning a suspension. Moreover, she notes that being pregnant, the continuous travels adversely affected her by resulting in slight bleeding. A few days after the suspension, Vinaya had to endure a miscarriage as well. She asserts that the frequent travels accompanying the protestors, starvation, and psychological stress had resulted in bleeding and later the miscarriage. According to her “unknowingly, she became a murderer who had killed her own child” (92). However, it is quite evident that rather than Vinaya, the state had premeditated the hardship and the latter had become the hapless victim, engaging in self-blame. Vinaya concludes the painful incident disclosing that both Das and she herself had cried in each other’s company. Here, the aggression perpetuated by the state is well visible. Vinaya is denied the privilege given to other policewomen which clearly shows the hostile nature of the superiors towards her. It is noteworthy that the superiors who are unwilling to shift the duty to other policewomen citing that they have children deliberately remain obtuse to the reality that Vinaya, who is pregnant, also has another child to be taken care of. Despite having the authority and provisions to relieve her, they made a conscious decision to exploit her lack of power, and helplessness resulting out of her desperate need for a job. This specific instance shows how unlike her colleagues Vinaya is made to overwork. It could be

considered as a premeditated strategy deployed by the superiors to control her. Furthermore, it is interesting to note how the advocate who had come to take bail for the children humiliated Vinaya and other policemen. When she had reacted, the advocates came in groups and verbally abused them and later boycotted the court as a protest. Here, the advocate concerned was supported by others in his profession whereas in case of Vinaya and Das, they had to endure the verbal aggression and further remain silent fearing if disciplinary measures would be used against them in case they had retorted. The force continued to exploit and punish them rather than lending support.

The case became controversial, and an enquiry was initiated when it was reported in a local daily. When the DIG (Deputy Inspector General of Police) came to conduct the enquiry, Vinaya and Das were forced to speak as instructed by the CI. The CI, having hardly done any work regarding the case insisted on framing a false narrative to save himself. Vinaya, in the life writing, asserts that neither the SI nor others, in real, had given them any support or instructions. Further, in the enquiry, only two other policemen, Vinaya and Das, who had arrested the protestors were called, nobody was concerned about the policeman who had declined to do the duty. Though Vinaya had decided to reveal the truth, the CI, who stood behind the DIG, threatened her through his gestures and made her tell the false story which he had taught her. Thus, the higher officials were all saved and the four of them, who had worked hard were suspended. Here, Vinaya is intimidated by the superior police officers from speaking the truth. However, for Vinaya the punishment did not end there. She was further humiliated in the public, when a local daily published an article titled '*Ee Paykoothukal Aarkuvendi*' (For Whom is This Braggadocio For?) containing derogatory remarks about Vinaya and her husband. Vinaya mentions that the article 'stated that her past history was flawed' (92). She opines that by that time she had already attained the skill to endure insults from both the family and public alike with composure. It is significant that

Vinaya resisted it by seeking the legal help against the baseless news published against her. She filed a defamation case, and the court passed a verdict in her favour and further ordered the local daily to pay a fine of rupees twenty-five thousand.

Further, Vinaya states that the Human Rights Commission conducted an inquiry on keeping the children in the lockup and as a result, they were ordered to pay around seventy thousand rupees to the children as compensation. The money was to be deducted from four of the police officers, including Vinaya and her husband. However, even after Vinaya had found the discrepancy in the verdict of the commission in which the station mentioned was Thirunelli lock up, where none of the protestors had voiced any issue, the police department rather than clarifying the issue, ordered the four of them to pay the compensation. It is significant that, the fine ordered to be levied from the four police officers include Vinaya and her husband who were already struggling to handle the financial constraints. Signifying the intensity of the financial distress Vinaya writes that during the suspension, since they could not afford enough workers, they themselves were engaged in laborious tasks in order to complete the construction works of their house. Hence, it is apparent that such punishments endorsed by the state were intended to impose intense pressure on their already vulnerable financial situation. She concludes the section mentioning that the case went to court which implies that once again Vinaya had to turn to the court to get justice.

In the section titled 'Crucifixion at Bethery' Vinaya recollects various distressing instances that took place while she served at the Bethery station. It is significant that the title itself hints the austerity of the aggression she had experienced there. She had incurred the displeasure of the superior Circle Inspector, who was an ardent devotee of Amritanandamayi, when she declined to take membership for the journal 'Mathruvaani' (The voice of the mother) which dealt with the teachings of Amrithananthamayi. In addition, Vinaya discloses how she was labelled as a spy who extracts personal information of her colleagues, by a male

colleague with whom she had some rift, and later punished by the CI who already was offended with Vinaya. Once on the security duty, Vinaya had to attend a call meant for another colleague, Sreekumari. In her attempts to connect it to the CI's office in order to forward it to her, the policeman who heard this misunderstood and further stated that she was spying on others. The situation aggravated when he informed the same to Sreekumari who humiliated her in front of everyone, portraying her as a person who is eager to spy on others. Vinaya is thus initially chastised by a female colleague, who rather than enquiring the whereabouts, believes the words of the policeman and immediately labels her as a spy, pushing her to be at the receiving end of other punishment measures. This instance shook her emotionally and an argument erupted between her husband and the policeman who had made the accusation on Vinaya. The CI found this as a suitable "opportunity to trap" Vinaya and transferred her to another station as a disciplinary measure for tapping the phone (81). Later, citing the same incident her increment was also cut. Thus, the aggressive strategy here again targets aggravating her financial struggle. However, Vinaya writes that she was least hurt for denying the increment but was agonized realising how easily she was labelled as a culprit in the issue.

#### Sports and Women Police Officers: Reduced Opportunities, Protest and Termination

Vinaya's narrative explicitly shows how women police officers' skills were often undermined and their opportunities were curtailed by the superior policemen. She points out how during their times, none showed interest in raising a women's volleyball team in the police squad unlike the men's team, though the former were skilled and performed well. According to her, it is quite disheartening that using the weapon of 'discipline', the men who dominate the police force easily neglect or trivialise the potentials of women police officers in various fields (55).

Vinaya further reveals how the participation of women police officers in the sports meet were limited to wearing saree and holding placards. When, with sheer determination some of the policewomen took active part in the sports meet and contributed in raising the scores, their scores were soon removed. Though Vinaya and another policewoman complained to the SP who was in charge of the sports meet, he asked her to submit a written complaint. When Vinaya gave a written complaint pointing out the discrimination toward the women police officers, it was assured that they would consider it the next day. However, when Vinaya realized that there were no attempts made to resolve the issue, she met the SP once again and asked about the same. According to Vinaya, his response “women will be given some prize and they should take it and leave” reveals not only the neglect from a superior towards his subordinate but also the arrogance of a man towards woman (151). Martin refers to the “handicap rule” which the male officers impose on the female officers that not only poses discrimination in setting rules for male and female police officers but also potentially degrade the latter’s performance (47). Spradley and Mann further contend that “it is as if all the players in the game made a tacit agreement that women must play by different rules than men. Even a suggestion to make these rules the same arouses male anger” (37). Similarly, when Vinaya protested against the superiors by lying on the ground, she was tortured by immediate arresting and shifting to the town police station. Meanwhile, it reduced Vinaya into tears when the policewoman who had to guard her in the station cursed her, as she had to do the extra duty. Vinaya notes that her attempts demanding justice for the women police officers were not even acknowledged let alone appreciated by them. After she was arrested, Vinaya mentions that they ensured that she would not be allowed to talk to the media or meet her friends. Even though she had received bail, with the help of two of her colleagues Jaya and Elizabeth, she was not allowed to move out of the station. The SI, in the condonement station threatened her that he would “charge a nonailable offence and lock her

up in the station” (152). Further, when the CI asked to turn on the video, Vinaya feared that they would manhandle her and record when she gets provoked. He also shouted at her, treating her like an accused. Vinaya mentions that “she had endured the mental state of those accused who reach the station petrified” (153). Though two of the police officers who were leaders of the police association asked the CI to leave her along with them, he was adamant that Vinaya would be allowed to go only with her husband. Locked up in the women’s cell, Vinaya discloses that she was treated like one of the accused. Some of the women police officers gave wrong information against her in the enquiry that followed. Vinaya points out that though she was allowed to go when her husband had come, she could not even reveal everything to her husband and cry peacefully as she had to stay in the women’s quarters and he in the AR camp’s barracks. Though there was a room available in the women’s quarter, the existence of the ‘skewed morality’ did not allow her to stay there with her husband (154). Soon Vinaya received a suspension sighting her misdeeds during the sports meet. Vinaya, thus sought legal help to gain justice. The verdict related to the sports meet case which Vinaya had filed in the court was also in her favour. Thus, the superiors were forced to include the demands Vinaya had put forwarded. Later, in 2003, the women police officers could wear white shirt and pants and their scores were also considered to decide the overall championship. Vinaya points out that the media, keen on covering the news about her suspension did not show much interest in including the verdict or the changes that had taken place in the sports meet next year. Vinaya also throws light on how the media, at times had twisted her words, which in turn had resulted in gaining more disciplinary measures from the department.

In response to the suspension received, Vinaya filed a petition in the high court questioning it. The verdict was to give an appeal with the authority concerned in the force. When she had given an appeal to the DIG, he returned it claiming that it could be considered

only after the departmental enquiry. Even after six months when the enquiry was not complete, Vinaya decided to submit a letter requesting to reinstate her to the DIG. When she decided to take part in the DIG's meeting in Wayanad, she was asked to sit outside. Further, after the meeting when she met the DIG and attempted to give him the representation letter, he was reluctant to accept it. In a condescending tone, he remarked that they were finding ways to dismiss her from the service. Vinaya, however, with folded arms repeatedly requested him to accept the representation letter. She discloses that it was an awful moment where she was humiliated in front of other police officers including her husband. From there she went straight to meet a friend Maria, and burst out crying informing her that she would be terminated from the service. Here, from the usual practice of the force to punish Vinaya, targeting her vulnerable financial condition either by cutting the increment, delaying salary, or suspension, they further proceed to the extent of threatening her to be dismissed from the service. It is quite visible how both financially and psychologically it adversely affects Vinaya who strives to evade being terminated from the police force. When her friends, Rajasekharan Nair and Maria, urge her to file a case in the high court, Vinaya reveals that she would not be able to bear the expenses because of her financial setbacks. Through her friends, Vinaya could later seek the legal help and gain the order to be taken back to service. Vinaya notes that during her suspension, Sandhya IPS<sup>36</sup> had given special instructions to consider women police officers as a part of the station and to divide duties in the station without discrimination. Thus, at various times, Vinaya's efforts prove productive in changing the system, creating a conducive environment for the women police officers. Also, this instance at a time shows Vinaya's struggle to seek legal help because of the financial constraints and also the court as the only space from where she gets the justice to fight the system, paving way for amends.

### **Sartorial Choice: The Site of Protest**

When Menon begins her seminal work *Seeing Like a Feminist* citing an incident of battering and naked parading of Moni, a girl who chose to wear the attire deemed for boys that had happened in a remote village (3), Vinaya's narrative reveals how a modern institution like the police force would treat a woman police officer who refrains from appearing at the work front wearing saree but shirt and pants, regarded as the uniform of the male police officers. Vinaya is constantly restricted and scrutinized based on her sartorial choices especially in her workplace. When Vinaya had joined the police force, khaki shirt and pants was considered as the uniform for policemen whereas it was khaki saree for policewomen which she had persistently resisted. In her attempt to change the inequality related to clothing prevailed in the system, she becomes subjected to various forms of aggression. In the guise of disciplinary measures, she is constantly punished for not wearing saree and for further wearing the police uniform just like the male counterparts. Lahiri and Sarbani view the "institutionalizing of dress code as a means to tame women's bodies" (21). Throughout the narrative, the nexus between gender and the sartorial freedom in the workplace is well visible. Saraswathi Amma astutely argues that "the widespread acceptance of the sari as the 'decent dress' of the middle-class, cultured, educated working woman seemed to be a hurdle in that it restricted their physical mobility hugely; the debate on 'decent dress' for women has been a continuous and bustling one throughout the 1990s" (qtd in. Devika "Mobility" 1155). Vinaya's narrative reveals that women's clothing continues to be a site of great contestation. Her narrative does not limit highlighting the inconveniences of wearing saree while working and travelling but further brings out the skewed ideas of morality attached to it, snatching women of their essential need for a sartorial choice, the opportunities in the police force which they had missed for conforming to it, and also the fear of being disrobed, instilled through their own experience while discharging duties.

Nevertheless, the narrative provides deeper insights into various methods adopted by the force to make the women police officers comply to wearing khakhi saree rather than shirt and pants.

It is significant that the dress codes are imposed in the force orally as well as through circulars (23). Hence, various instances from the narrative proves that both formal and informal institutional control has been employed by the officials to make Vinaya conform to the rule of wearing khaki saree as prescribed by them. Thus, the sartorial discrimination, the subsequent protests and its various consequences mentioned in the narrative succinctly suggest the significance of looking into the issue, which poignantly tends to be gendered. Vinaya's account reveals how she had to encounter a strong resistance not only from the superior policemen but also from policewomen. Her narrative also points out how strenuous it was for her to exercise the agency to opt the uniform of shirt and pants, over khaki saree, with the shirt tucked in just like her male colleagues. Despite this, at various junctures, Vinaya had to cease wearing shirt and pants, being coerced to conform to saree and yet again turn back to the former, considering the inconveniences, reclaiming her agency.

Initially Vinaya and some of her colleagues wrote a letter to the then chief minister urging him to consider shirt and pants for policewomen as well. Their further discussions were hampered when a few of the senior policewomen succeeded in influencing others by talking about the greatness of saree, and disclosing how for them, a few marriage proposals got declined just because of having worn pants and shirt. Since the arguments for saree were strongly linked to the prospects of marriage, eventually most of the women police officers became unwilling to listen to the others' need for a uniform reform. Moreover, the seniors started giving special consideration including granting leave to the group who showed affinity to their demand in accepting saree as the uniform. It is significant that when the senior police officers started giving certain privileges to those policewomen who had

succumbed to their demand and chose saree, others who were reluctant became deliberately neglected. This, as an aggressive strategy and an informal institutional control would instill certain pressure in them to relent and obey rather than protest. In addition to this, some women police instructors started discussing how they had lost a few marriage proposals as they had opted to be in the police force, which shows how the cultural factors apart from the institutional factors coerce women to follow certain sartorial codes. This instance throws ample light on how even some professions hardly escape the demarcation of gender. When professions like teaching and nursing are regarded to be suitable for women, others like policing tend to be considered as “unfeminine” (qtd in. Devika, “Mobility” 1153). As in the above-mentioned situation, such notions had reflected in adversely affecting policewomen’s marriage prospectus. According to one of the senior policewomen, “men like those women who are meek and timid, and it is believed that policewomen do not have those qualities”. Other policewomen instantly approve it stating that they are often noted for their “temerity”. (53). It indicates that women police officers are more concerned about what men like rather than what they themselves need. The desire to accommodate culturally accepted gender traits supersedes even the requisite to adopt the comportment appropriate for their profession. In Misra’s *Ancient Promises*, when in the domestic realm Janaki had to shift from wearing jeans and shirt to saree in order to gain the acceptance of her in-laws, Vinaya is forced to do the same in the work front to save herself from inviting the wrath of her superiors, including men and women. As a compensation for choosing to work in the police force, some of the policewomen constantly try to adopt certain ways in order to reestablish in them the ‘feminine qualities’ which they think they have lost. It is relevant that these instances stand as an evidence to prove how cultural consensus related to women’s clothing and conduct are further reinforced even through modern institutions like the law enforcement.

Interestingly, another instance shows how apart from these women police officers, the state itself becomes conscious about sustaining their 'femininity'. The superior policeman prohibits Vinaya and other police women to use lathi even in protest sites pausing a risk to their life and safety. This indicates how women are subjected to be remarkably meek and forbearing rather than being aggressive even in the protest site. One section of the life writing titled "Various Faces of Discrimination" stresses the different instances of iniquity she had encountered in the work front, especially because of her gender, as a policewoman. Vinaya and few other policewomen were entrusted on the duty when a picketing took place in the collectorate. Only the policemen were given helmet unlike the policewomen. As the helmet provided protection, the privilege to protect themselves was given to the policemen when the women were denied the same. Vinaya sarcastically notes the assumption that women's head would be made of "metal" would have resulted in not providing them helmet (73). She explains that in every protest it was the women protesters who stood in the front side which in turn made the women police officers too to stand in front of the police force. When Vinaya kept a lathi with her, she was commanded by the SI, not to take it. Her request for the need of safety measures and the argument that all the policemen had equipped themselves with a lathi fell on deaf ears and she had to comply with his demand. The superior was more concerned about the issues that would arise in case Vinaya's lathi touches one of the protestors, rather than the other way. Further, above all he had the urgency to make her obey. Moreover, he made it a habit to remind her not to take the lathi whenever they went outside the station to do the duty. Thereafter, mostly Vinaya had to discharge her duty without even a lathi. However, Vinaya points out that in the absence of the SI, she used to take the lathi (73). Dean argues that "the masculine persona that is associated with policing is tarnished when the primary role of protector is not solely regarded as a "man's job" (45). Here, the SI, constantly refrains Vinaya from using the lathi unlike other male police officers. His reluctance in

approving her courage that is manifested in her willingness to use the lathi and protect herself and others, indirectly reflects his fear of her competence capable enough for erasing the division carefully created between male and female police officers. Denson et al. observe that patriarchal society often promotes aggression in men and proscribe the same in women (3). Akin to this, the given instance throws light on the state curtailing the woman constable from using *lathi* even when the situation demands it, thereby ruling out the scope of her being aggressive.

After the training when Vinaya and her colleagues had to report before the District Police Superintendent, others had decided that they will use saree right after that. Vinaya requested the superior to let her wear the uniform, pants and shirt, while discharging the duty to which he agreed. However, others accused her later citing that her request to wear shirt and pants had resulted in making them do the traffic duty (58). It is noteworthy that soon the policewomen were exempted from doing the traffic duty when a few of the unmarried women, met an MLA (Member of the Legislative Assembly) and argued that the traffic duty would make them expose to sun light that would adversely affect their complexion, which in turn would hamper their prospectus of getting married (60). In her article ‘Gendering Colour: Identity, Femininity and Marriage in Kerala’, Philips keenly observes the supremacy given to women’s fair skin in getting better alliances and further notes how the skin colour, as a “symbolic capital, turns out to be one of the factors considered in dowry negotiations” (269). Thus, all these conversations revolved around complexion and marriage made the debate on the uniform subside for a while, however, Vinaya’s efforts continued to problematize imposing saree as the uniform for policewomen. Sreekumar observes that many voices have merged at various times in the state (Kerala) that had questioned the “cultural consensus which favoured the peerless decency of the saree” (*Scripting* 197, 198). Vinaya exhibits a stiff protest against the discrimination in the police force projected towards women police

officers, disallowing them to wear shirt and pants just like the policemen. Moreover, the account shows how most of the policewomen subscribed conforming to the saree, considering the cultural significance attributed to it and its connection to depict them as the ideal women eligible for better marriage alliances.

Vinaya observes that “whether it be saree, salwar or pants, women’s attention is limited to their clothes and bodies” (54). Her deliberations show how an attire enslaves women and how tirelessly her attention is trapped into positioning, adjusting, and re-adjusting the clothes to cover the body appropriately whether in the private or the public. She explains how saree, the widely accepted and approved attire in the society physically restrains women. According to her, such attires often demand considerable attention to hide women’s body from the public gaze. Vinaya reiterates the example of how saree turns to be uncomfortable while travelling, as it requires some expertise and struggle to cover the body. However, through her own experience, she asserts having realized that salwar and pants provided immense freedom in mobility compared to saree that restrained it (40). Vinaya’s narration does not limit highlighting the inconveniences of wearing saree while working and travelling but further brings out the skewed ideas of morality attached to it, snatching women of their essential need for a sartorial choice, the opportunities they had missed for conforming to it, and also the fear of being disrobed instilled through their own experiences while discharging duties. Nevertheless, the narrative also provides an insight into various methods adopted by the force to make the women police officers comply to wearing khakhi saree than shirt and pants.

Vinaya discloses various instances of sartorial dictums in the police force which she herself and some of her colleagues had to submit to, not only while on duty, but the other times as well. Vinaya recollects that during the training, they were asked to attend the night roll calls in mufti. However, soon they were asked to present themselves only in saree as one

of the trainees wore a midi which evoked the displeasure of the superior, whom she mentions as 'SI sir'. It is interesting to note that a woman police officer's choice of wearing midi is scrutinized by the superior policeman and his immediate action resulted in appropriating the clothing of the policewomen even while in mufti. Vinaya further discloses that enduring the difficulty they had obeyed the command to wear the saree at night just to attend the roll call. Though they wore saree in the beginning, due to the inconveniences, gradually they started wearing it over the night wear (nighty)<sup>37</sup> using the uniform belt and covering completely so that nobody caught them.

Vinaya narrates another instance which happened while she stayed in the station. She wore a night wear (nighty) when she went out to have dinner and later had a chat with her colleague Udayan during his off-duty hours. The next day, SI called her and advised her not to wear nighty while going out as the news had spread that she was talking to a policeman and a few other "policemen lingered around her and started drooling" watching her inappropriate attire (111). Though Vinaya agreed that she would not wear a nighty, she later approached the SI in the condonement station and informed that it was instructed by the SI to refrain from wearing the night wear and opt saree, as her being clad in the former attire had sexually provoked some policemen. And since she is married and staying away from her husband, the presence of those policemen who wander around without wearing shirts tend to provoke her. This response from Vinaya made the SI send a notice to the policemen demanding them to wear shirts. It was a great blow to the policemen. She further tells directly to a policeman who had draped his *dhoti* to knee length that she feels provoked watching his bare legs as well, which at once makes him uncomfortable and cover his legs (112). Here, Vinaya refrains from engaging in arguments and further deals with the situation quite humorously yet succeeds in making a change. She makes the male colleagues uncomfortable claiming that their exposed body parts had provoked her just like her wearing the nighty had

excited them. Vinaya employs the same tactics which was used against her to clothe the policemen. It is significant that whether it be a short midi or a lengthy nighty, despite the time and context, the superiors do not desist in enforcing saree on women police officers.

Vinaya narrates a similar instance when she had incurred the wrath of a superior DYSP (Deputy Superintendent of Police). When they were called to meet them, the DYSP openly expressed his displeasure to see them in shirt and pants, and raised the question ‘why they were in the uniform?’ It is interesting to note that the superior here is concerned about the policewomen wearing the uniform rather than the other way. His further lecture focuses on enlightening them about the significance of saree in a woman’s life. He states “saree as better for women’ to which Vinaya humbly asks if uniform is not better for the policewoman?” Her question is meted with sarcasm and contempt. He further probes “how they would urinate wearing pants” and laughed cruelly to which all the other women police officers looked down in humiliation. Wallace defines humiliation as “an aggressive assertion of hierarchy” which is usually employed against those whom the perpetrator thinks would not respond (91). Vinaya reveals that she was deeply hurt. However, watching the plight of her colleagues, mustering courage, she asked how “he would relieve himself”. The superior felt quite embarrassed whereas this act made the other policewomen lift their head in pride and further smile. Vinaya however notes that after this instance, even those policewomen who occasionally wore the uniform stopped doing it and started using khaki saree and turned to be “good women” (74). Interestingly, at this juncture, Vinaya opines that rather than as a superior, in his role disapproving the attire of the policewomen, the SI resembled a *tharravattu karanavar* (74). Here Vinaya equates the role of the superior in the workplace to that of a *tharavattu karanavar* in the domestic space. *Karanavar*, the senior male member of the matrilineal household, had a stringent control over the various activities of the family (Sudha et al. 4). Similarly, she compares the DYSP and his attempts to appropriate the

policewomen's clothing from shirt and pants to that of a saree, just like how a *karanavar* grips his control over the women in the family. The DYSP exerts his authority and states saree as appropriate for women. Further, he denigrates the policewomen for their choice of uniform by asking them intimate questions and then laughs viciously when they become embarrassed to answer it. Here, though the incident appears to be a harmless teasing, the adverse effect of it on the women police officers have been clearly depicted. The superior effectively employs put down humour which thereby resulted in the women officers to return using the saree in order to avoid such humiliating instances. Marta Dynel defines putdown humour as an "aggressive verbalisation which may be veiled as, or mistaken for, teasing" (249). Susan Martin in "Sexual Politics in the Workplace: The Interactional World of Policewomen" notes that the male police officers employ put down humour against women police officers to show their subordinate position in the work front. The joke may even include comments about women's anatomy and the target would often be forced against retorting, fearing insubordination (51, 52). Vinaya, however, successfully resists such aggressive humour through witty answers and continues wearing shirt and pants. Nonetheless, it is visible that Vinaya's defiance does not go well with the superiors and results in her receiving frequent punishments and disciplinary actions.

Vinaya narrates another instance which occurred when she was working in the Manandavadi station. This time it was the sweeper, whom she mentions as a '*karanavar*'. He used to make tea for the staff. He was particular about serving the tea to the policemen first. The policemen were served tea in glass tumblers and the policewomen were served only in the remaining steel tumbler and a cup. Vinaya tried to stop this system and started taking a glass of tea before he served it to the men. However, displeased by this once he resisted her attempt to take the tea and ran to serve the men. When Vinaya raised the issue in front of others, his response that he intends to serve the tea in glass tumbler only to men further

infuriated her. In order to resolve the issue, the senior head constable instructed him only to make tea so that others will serve themselves tea as per their need. Vinaya notes that she had observed men, right from the sweeper to the officers above, attempting to rule the policewomen in both police stations and offices, which she had persistently attempted to rectify.

Vinaya was quite persistent in wearing the uniform even when others stopped doing it. However, since she was wearing the uniform, unlike other policewomen, she was asked to do the duties outside the police station. Vinaya remarks that though no one appreciated her wearing the uniform it resulted in making her do extra duties and further receive the insults and ridicules of both her colleagues and superiors. Vinaya discloses that when the belittling persisted, she finally stopped wearing the uniform (76). Correspondingly, her narrative echoes the vexation of the women in the Victorian period and their frequent attempts to appropriate their attire from long uncomfortable skirts to pants (bloomer). Riegal traces how the advocates of wearing bloomer though enjoyed greater freedom in mobility had to stop wearing it as they were constantly belittled in the public. “Miss Anthony came home many days in tears, and Mrs. Stanton advised her to let down her dress as the cup of ridicule is greater than you can bear” (qtd in Riegal 394). The specific experience drawn from a personal letter shows how they are humiliated and mocked at for choosing to wear the dress deemed to be comfortable rather than legitimized by the society as conforming to gender codes and aesthetics. Further, the given instance shows how the women had to eventually refrain from exercising the sartorial choice when they continued to be belittled by the public. The women police officers wearing saree had to face not only various inconveniences but also it resulted in them losing various opportunities within the force. They were not included in the ceremonial parade claiming their differences in the uniform. Though Vinaya wrote several letters complaining about the same, she is suspicious if it had reached the right hands

(76). Vinaya, further explains that due to her persistent efforts, which started in 1992, later in 2002 she was allowed to take part in the republic day parade. The reason mentioned to include her was that she had tucked in the shirt, and further has short hair, just like the policemen. Evidently, her short hair and inserted shirt which would not make her look different from the policemen, were cited as the reasons to include her. Thus, it is the reason that she resembles a male police officer in her demeanor and uniform had qualified her to take part in the parade rather than her organizational role as a police constable. According to Vinaya, it was quite ironical that the same superior who had mentioned the reasons for her eligibility to take part in parade had later cut her increments for wearing the uniform like the male police officers. She recollects the instance of sartorial discrimination quite vividly in her narrative. While discharging duties at the legislative assembly, policemen were instructed to wear white pants and shirt whereas their women colleagues were asked not to wear any uniform but prefer good sarees. Vinaya continues to question the logic that prompts the officials to fix saree as the dress code for women while attending to their duties in the legislative assembly. When it was Vinaya's turn for the duty, the SI laid forth a condition that the duty would be allowed to her only if she wears a saree, which she had declined instantly. Vinaya gained the permission to wear the uniform to do the duty after sending several letters to higher officials. However, later disciplinary action was taken against her for not obeying to the instructions of the SI and her three increments were cut.

Vinaya writes about how certain traditional attires and imaginations limit women in various ways. Specially referring to saree, she states that it causes inconvenience not only to law enforcers but common women as well. She opines that saree does not guarantee the needed privacy to a woman and hence in buses, trains, and work sites, they often struggle to save themselves from unwanted stares and inappropriate touches (pinches and prodding). Though deemed to be a decent and culturally approved attire, it clearly shows that saree does

not secure woman from sexual aggression. She further explains an incident where a woman police officer's saree was ripped off while attempting to capture a woman accused of creating agitation in the public. According to Vinaya, the policewoman rushed to the station in tears, wearing the underskirt with the yanked saree positioned on her shoulders (119). Vinaya argues that it was the plight of a law enforcer, who had to discontinue her duty and rush to the station in tears after the humiliating experience. She notes that such experiences were encountered by other women officers including herself in their attempts to arrest or control the miscreants. Once while Vinaya was trying to control a woman who created raucous and agitation in the general hospital, the latter threatened her that she would rip off her saree and humiliate her in front of the public. Thus, Vinaya reveals that the lack of a uniform assuring safety had made her unable to seize the woman and succumb to her demands (120). On a similar incident, when Vinaya went to arrest Shyamala, who created nuisance in the public, the latter intimidated her by grabbing the saree. Vinaya, however, with the help of the male colleagues managed to take her into custody. Shyamala, even after reaching the station continued to verbally abuse Vinaya, by ridiculing her short hair and questioning her morality. It is noteworthy, Vinaya mentions that none of her colleagues, including the male or female police officers had responded to Shyamala's mean remarks or had asked her to remain silent. On the contrary, they seemed to enjoy and snigger listening to the comments. This made Vinaya react by being verbally aggressive toward Shyamala and thereby stand up for herself. However, after this incident Vinaya refrained from wearing the uniform saree and chose to wear pants and shirt for three months ignoring the stiff displeasure of the authorities. It is significant that in the two instances mentioned above, the culprits were women who had intimidated the police officers either by threatening or attempting to disrobe them.

Even after gaining the permission to choose shirt and pants as uniform after constant struggles, the policewomen were not allowed to wear it like the policemen. Vinaya could not

resist but question the rationale behind the differences which the policewomen and men were asked to retain while wearing the uniform. While all the policemen, disregarding their rank, used to tuck in their shirt, only those women in IPS cadre were allowed to do it. Vinaya after discussing the same with Sandhya IPS decided to tuck in her shirt while doing the duty. This was questioned by the SI, to whom apart from men “only IPS officers have the right to tuck in the shirt” (123). However, Vinaya continued to wear the uniform just like her male colleagues, receiving the displeasure of her female colleagues. When earlier, she was intentionally given extra duty, this time they excluded her from assigning any duty unless it was necessary (123). Here, for opting to wear uniform like the male police officers, various strategies are employed by the authorities in order to deter Vinaya which included allotting extra duties and then excluding her from various duties.

Vinaya’s protests pertaining to the uniform reached the second phase after a circular signed by the DGP was issued granting women police officers the permission to wear shirt and pants. However, it was stipulated that they could wear cap, shoes and belt just like the policemen but the shirt should not be tucked in. Finding this as a discrimination against women and hence unconstitutional, Vinaya shows her resistance by disobeying the same. She was given a memo for not obeying the orders of the superiors. Before giving reply to the memo, she talked about this in the association’s executive committee meeting. However, though no one supported her she was given the warning that “in police, discipline implies obeying the superiors without analysing the just and the unjust”. It is noteworthy that like Vinaya, Jesme too in her narrative problematizes and further resists the coercion to endorse ‘blind obedience to the superiors’. Interestingly, both the writers depict it as the root cause for the emergence of various problems.

Later, Vinaya discloses that she had written a response to the memo pointing out that she did not obey the orders mentioned in the DGP’s circular as it was unconstitutional and

further argued that no law, including that of the police department was above the constitution. Additionally, she filed a writ in the high court to get it legally declared that the DGP's circular defied the constitution. She received a favorable reply from the court stating that an individual has the right to disobey the rules that goes against the constitution. Also, it was mentioned that she could further seek the court's help if the department imposes punishment for the same. When Vinaya was in suspension for other issues related to the sports meet, she received the order from the police department that her increments for the next three years were cut. It was a disciplinary action taken against her for the offense of wearing uniform like the male officers. Here, yet again the punishment is directed targeting Vinaya's vulnerable economic condition. Additionally, she also states of having undertaken a hunger strike when she was not paid salary for a couple of months. It is conspicuous that in order to break her spirit, often the state imposes punishments that adversely affect her financial situation. This aggressive strategy tends to be directed to make her obedient to the superiors, fearing retribution. Thus, Vinaya had to seek the legal help again and she mentions that since the case was under the consideration of the court, she was forced to report in front of the SP wearing the uniform without the shirt tucked in, as specified in the DGP's circular.

Vinaya also discusses in detail the parallel protest related to clothing that had taken place in her personal life. When Vinaya decided to turn to shirt and pants that offered her some comfort, it was not well received by her husband, who mocked her. This shows that whether in the work front or in the personal life, Vinaya had to exhibit protest in order to exercise the agency in making convenient sartorial choices. Here, one could observe that she neither resists nor begs for the permission of her husband to shift from wearing saree to shirt and jeans, but she makes him see the discomforts she is forced to endure while wearing saree. Once when she was travelling with her husband, he became restless as some part of her body remained exposed in her attempt to hold the handle on the top of the bus. When his constant

reminders that her body could be seen by others were met with resentment, he had to position himself behind her, hiding the view. Thus, it became quite difficult for Das to travel with his wife whenever she wore a saree. On another instance, when a few boys visited her for a discussion, her husband became concerned about the saree which partially slipped off her right shoulders, revealing the breasts. After the boys had left, Das showed his annoyance as she did not position her saree appropriately despite his gestures informing her to do so. He opined that though the boys would not have paid attention, such callousness would drag their attention. Vinaya, however points out that it's a part of her body and further, she had already covered her breasts wearing the blouse. Vinaya constantly verbalizes her displeasure to attract her attention constantly in positioning her attire so that it covers the body appropriately and further lays bare the discomforts attached to wearing the saree (126). Later, all these made Das affirm that shirt and jeans suit her. Though quite humorously Vinaya mentions the episode of tactfully convincing Das so that she could free herself from the constraints of saree to the comfort of shirt and pants, it reflects her considerable effort to gain his approval in order to exercise the sartorial choice.

### **Working Women: The Public and the Private Divide**

It is relevant that various instances in the narrative lays bare the deliberate efforts of the law enforcers to reinstitute a new domesticity in women police officers who had come to work in the public space along with men. Further, it is interesting to note that apart from various measures adopted by the force, women police officers themselves tend to be preoccupied with ways to enhance and elevate their socially approved 'feminine qualities'. This is evident in their attempts of endorsing saree, refraining from duties that would have an adverse effect on their complexion, restricting the conversations to preparing meals and family, leaving home early before the allotted duty hours to tend to domestic duties, and by limiting their presence mostly inside the station. Femininity and success in police duties

appeared to be inversely proportional (qtd in. Devika, "Women's Labour" 16). Thus, it appears to be a deliberate project taken up by some of the women police officers to secure and further represent themselves as the symbols of the culturally accepted modes of femininity rather than as successful professionals. Deans points out that women are coerced to choose between the two, that is either accept the "traditional form of policing, maintain femininity, and pursue gender appropriate role, in order to receive some acceptance from the male colleagues or to break away, abandon femininity, creating a subculture of authoritative women with opportunities, all these at the expense of enduring ridicule and harassment" (49,50). Thus, it is well visible that most of the other women police officers, rather than resisting the existing system that curtailed their opportunities and subordinated them, preferred to remain complacent and accepted the traditional roles bestowed on women by the society and reinforced at the workspace. This in a way helped them gain certain benefits from both the male and female superiors. However, in case of Vinaya, who deliberately attempted to resist and make amends in the existing system in order to create a niche for women police officers to excel in the profession, was constantly humiliated and harassed in different ways not only by the male police officers but women police officers as well. Vinaya observes that most of her colleagues did not approve her presence, yet they showed the courage to do several acts along with her, including watching movies at night, and dancing (57). However, her colleagues including women had openly showed their displeasure with her urge to question and resist each and every practice that reflected gender disparity. On one such instance someone destroyed her uniform shoes just before the duty in Senate Hall. When she had informed her female colleagues, they ignored it. However, this instance instilled fear in Vinaya thinking if her uniform kept in the station too would be destroyed. Thus, Vinaya decided to give a complaint to the CI (Circle Inspector), after which nobody dared to destroy her belongings (124). Vinaya identifies the main reason for the women police officers to

destroy her uniform shoe as a revenge taken against her for trying to amend the uniform from saree to shirt and pants (Vinaya). This is an instance of displaced aggression where the women police officers refrain from endorsing direct aggressive strategies yet respond aggressively by causing damage to her belonging.

Vinaya recalls that women's police station in Thiruvananthapuram was in real a small room in the condonement station. The room was divided using a curtain where one half was used as a kitchen and the other for staff. Around fifteen women police officers worked there. The furniture was limited to a cot and two chairs. The chairs were meant for the Writer and additional SI. Vinaya reveals that the norm there was to report in the station after completion of the duties outside and spends the rest of the time in the small room. It became quite tedious for Vinaya when the discussions in the women's police group were limited to cooking, saree, children, and the happiness of leading obsequious life with husband. When she moved to the front side to talk or to read books, discussions were directed claiming that sitting at the front side was wrong. Here, though Vinaya works as a policewoman in the public domain, efforts are made to conform her presence inside the station. Vinaya writes about how it had evoked displeasure in others when she preferred to sit at the front side of the condonement station. Though other policemen too sat there, a superior had asked only Vinaya to get up. He claims the reason for her ineligibility to sit there as that she was a woman (113). Vinaya, however, resisted that move and asked the superior to first make the policemen vacate the chairs. Later, it was notified that only visitors should sit on the chairs placed outside. Vinaya states that it was a move directed to stop her movement outside the women's police station (113). Further, when a new CI took charge, through others he instructed her not to stand in the entrance of the station mentioning that usually women do not stand outside or make their presence in the front side (115). Vinaya, however, continued to make her presence felt at the front side, disregarding the displeasure of the higher officials.

She adds that this later paved way for other policewomen too to stand at the front side and talk to others without fear. Here, just like in the domestic space where some men, for instance Vinaya's father and elder brother-in-law, positioned themselves at the front side of the home and women in the kitchen and interiors, in the police station there is a coercion for them to replicate the same by remaining inside, making minimal presence outside and at the entrance. Further, Vinaya notes how she and a few others were criticized for choosing to pay and have food from the AR camp just like the policemen. They were condemned for not cooking despite being women and walking in the public at night to have dinner. Vinaya also took the initiative to change the practice of making the women constables prepare tea in the absence of the sweeper. Thus, all constables, whether policemen or women, they would take turns to make tea (79). These instances show how the state, through informal institutional control, attempts to impose on women certain domestic roles, which includes the coercion to cook and limit their presence inside the station.

Vinaya points out that when they had joined their respective police stations, the senior police officers had briefed about concessions given to the women police officers. She observes that the major among them was the permission to go home at 5 in the evening, which later evoked much condemn from others. Around five in the evening, the male police officers used to ask the women officers whether they were not going home, which prompted some of them to leave, unlike a few like Vinaya. Instantly, the superiors would bestow them the title of "disciplined women" to those who went home early (59). However, Vinaya notes that despite being unenthusiastic about going home, many of them had to leave early because of this practice. During the evening traffic duty, many women police officers used to leave early. They had to seek the permission of the policemen who were in duty along with them, who would either put forward some conditions or mock them. Vinaya preferred to work till the allotted time rather than seek such concessions or await the generosity of fellow

policemen. However, she was accused by other policewomen claiming that such acts would bring difficulties for them. Soon the policewomen were exempted from doing the traffic duty. Vinaya states that their service thus mostly got limited to the four walls of the police station, when earlier they could enjoy the freedom to see and be in the outer world, while doing the traffic duty. In the station, unlike the male police officers, their role was limited only to wireless duties, take copies, and to get involved during protests and picketing, and to escort the convicts (59).

Vinaya was entrusted to do the duty during the festival in a temple. Though posted for the same she was refrained from doing the duty. For her request for a proper reason for not letting her do the duty, the response was that “she does not need to know and that she just needs to obey”. Deans states that “male officers feel threatened and reduced in status because the work of female officers is comparable to that of their male counterparts” (45). However, Vinaya argued vehemently that no one can restrain her from going out wearing the uniform to do the duty and further prompted him to report the same to the authorities. Resisting his command, Vinaya did the duty till morning like her male colleagues. Vinaya astutely argues that by declining the permission for the policewomen to pursue the duty in crowded places, the normal strategy to invisibilise women’s presence is promoted in the police force as well. It is distressing for the men in the police force to watch the policewomen efficiently guarding the law (79).

After the duty hours, Vinaya used to go to the city in mufti and returned to the station only after eight in the evening, which was not well received by her colleagues (108). Vinaya notes that everyday there will be a few officers on duty at night. Once after taking part in the activities of the women’s library, *Sakhi*, when she reached the station by 9 p.m., the door of the women’s station which usually used to be closed after ten was already shut. When she knocked, the policewoman in charge opened the door cursing her, and stood in the way

accusing her of leading rivalrous life. She did not let her stay in the room, after which Vinaya had to spend the night outside the station.

Once Vinaya was called by the CI in the condonement station and informed that there was a talk that she was in a close relationship with a policeman. She answers that she was in close relation with all the five policemen there. The CI further mentioned that he had received a complaint that she was talking to the male police officers at odd hours. The SI in the condonement station affirmed that he had seen her talking to a policeman to which Vinaya retorts that the next time he observes the same, a memo should be given or a case should be filed using KP ACT 47. Vinaya mentions that the act was employed to charge petty case against prostitutes (114). It is significant that all that the CI did was to instruct her not to repeat talking to the policemen. In both these instances, the superiors question her morality. Firstly, it is directed at her unrestrained mobility in the public space especially at night, and secondly for conversing with men.

Vinaya narrates an instance when they were asked to call their seniors as 'sir' but they used to address the policemen, who were their friends and happened to be younger than them, by their name. However, when one of the policemen complained about this, soon they were instructed both by the head constable and SI to address the policemen as 'sir' rather than their names. Years later, when the junior policemen addressed them by their names, some of the policewomen complained in vain. The head constable could not find any problem with that and further questioned "how they could be referred as 'sir' as they were policewomen" (61). Martin posits that the term used to address a person acts as a marker of status and that policemen in their attempt to keep policewomen "in their place" use their first names" (49). Thus, the policemen, with the support of the system, refrain from giving any respect to the policewomen despite the latter being their colleagues, either equal in position or senior to them. This is yet another instance where the gender intersects in the workspace resulting in

the depletion of the professional status of the women police officers. Vinaya states that during the training session both the policemen and women were trained to address each other as 'sir'. Though they did not get a solution for the complaint, they were mocked at for the same. Vinaya went ahead and wrote a letter regarding the issue to the SI, yet to no purpose. Vinaya argues that a head constable was enough to dispense the acceptance and respect due for the policemen but even an SI was not enough to do the same for a policewoman. She states that the notion that there is no need to respect women, but women need to respect, is still prevalent among men which is perpetuated in the guise of 'discipline' (61).

Vinaya notes that the discrimination which the policewomen had to face were not limited to the uniform or duties but in other areas as well. For instance, she writes that in the station history record the names of the policemen were written in the order of their seniority, however, the seniority was not considered if it was a policewoman. This discrimination changed only after Vinaya had complained about the same.

Vinaya points out that the women police officers were entrusted only to take copies and to attend wireless duties in the station which in turn made both their male colleagues and superiors mock them and at times claim that the women police officers as inefficient (75). Vinaya, however, stayed in the police station after five and attempted to learn to do various other duties performed by the male colleagues. She learnt to do the works performed by the writer in the station. However, Vinaya sitting in the writer's place and doing his work was not well received by some of the policemen in the office. Once while doing a cash transaction, the SI happened to see it and advised the writer not to entrust the cash transactions with the policewomen after which she was not allowed to continue learning or doing the same. Nevertheless, Vinaya mentions that though disciplinary action was taken against her for having complained about the discrimination that persisted in allotting duties to the policewomen, it had paved way for accepting that her demands were genuine and the

Wayanad SI sent a letter and later released a circular against the display of any discrimination towards the policewomen. All these instances bring to light how even at workspace, the women police officers are pressurised to take the position of a domestic woman which adversely affect their performance and thereby the prospectus for promotion. Hence, Vinaya, being in the system incessantly resists and further fights to dismantle various gendered practices sustained and enriched through aggressive strategies that relegated women as inferior and incompetent.

### **Navigation through the Workspace: Regular Transfers, Isolation, and Termination**

Vinaya, apart from being mocked at, belittled, and isolated, writes about various other punishment measures adopted by the force in their deliberate attempt to silence her. She recounts that she had been transferred to Trivandrum when her son was hardly one year old. After a month, when she met the DGP and applied for a transfer to Wayanad, she was granted the same. However, within a few days Vinaya again received a passport to Trivandrum. She asserts that she had already given a complaint to DGP that the continuous disciplinary actions against her were intentionally plotted and executed by the superiors (106). Later, while conversing with the DIG, Vinaya realises that it was the displeasure of the police association members which had resulted in getting her transferred to Thiruvananthapuram. Though she had travelled from Wayanad to Thiruvananthapuram and had reached the station before 10.30 am, she was made to wait for long hours to meet the superior. Further, DIG mentions that the association has no resentment towards her as otherwise she would not have passed the test. Vinaya replies that she had performed well in the parade, and hence, had passed the test. However, Vinaya goes further and reveals that the association used to pass and promote those who were its members often by curtailing the opportunities of the others. Vinaya notes that rather than following law, the superiors misused their authority and power to transfer her frequently (107).

One of the experiences mentioned in the narrative divulges how the superior turns physically aggressive toward Vinaya. When at once, the SI and the writer had given her the task to write the petty cases, she attended the work assigned by the writer first, as the cases mentioned there belonged to previous times and strived hard to finish it. Thus, she was able to finish writing only a few cases the SI had assigned. This infuriated the SI, who threw the book forcefully on her face. Though she turned her face, it hit right on the cheeks, hurting her. Vinaya mentions it as the reward she had received for having worked without rest. One can see an emotionally vulnerable Vinaya who writes, “I felt like crying” (97). Later rather than apologizing his misdeed all that the SI said was “not to feel bad”. The superior instead of evaluating her subordinate’s performance turns enraged and throws the book on her. He not only undermines her efforts and efficiency but also proves how a superior police officer can physically abuse the subordinate policewoman and get away with it even without a proper apology. Vinaya, unlike the select women writers, explicitly writes about the adverse psychological effects such instances have had on her.

Vinaya narrates how once she had requested and received a transfer (‘passport’) from the Mananadavadi station to the Bathery station when the then DYSP got transferred. After shifting all the belongings to the police quarter where her husband stayed, she had joined the duty at the Bathery station. However, within an hour, the CI, again transferred her to the Manandavadi station. Vinaya discloses that she ‘felt dizzy’ realising that she was being transferred again. It hurt her that she had to inform her husband who was on duty in another station, about the transfer through the phone call, and further even without changing the khaki sari or having food, with great humiliation, she had to start in order to join at the Manandavadi station. She burst out and informed about her immediate transfer to the CI in the Manandavadi station. She was then allotted to work in the C I’s office. Vinaya mentions that she was deeply hurt, when she heard that the CI had told others she was allowed to work

in the office “only because she had cried”. Further, in his conversation with other police officers he disrespectfully addressed her as *pembarannoru*<sup>38</sup>. His verbal aggressive strategy worked well in adversely affecting Vinaya. She states to be constantly “humiliated” (84). Martin argues that in the work front like the police force, the male officers deliberately frame the interaction projecting their “dominance” and thereby “sexualising” the work environment. Thus, rather than engaging in professional communication, it gets dragged down to the “assymetrical” male-female dimension, adversely affecting the women officers’ “self-image and behaviour” (47, 48). Similarly, without any proper reason, her husband, Das was also transferred from Ambalavayal station to Thirunelli station. Vinaya reveals that the transfers drained them not only psychologically and financially but also it had adversely affected the health of their six-month-old daughter as she had to stay away from her often as a result of constant transfers and overwork. Vinaya writes that she felt ostracized when she was given extra duties unlike her colleague who was also doing duty in the CI’s office. Thus, Vinaya had to do both the work in the office as well as the station (84).

On another instance, when Vinaya met the Wayanad SP to request for a transfer to the Bathery station, instantly he “humorously” asked the CI of the Bathery station who was present there “whether he needed her” to which he sarcastically responded “he does not”. Just because the CI had said that he does not need her, Vinaya was posted to another station. Vinaya’s plight here resembles Misra’s protagonist Janaki’s helplessness during the girl seeing ceremony where the course of the action solely depended on Suresh’s interest. Despite having expressed her interest, Vinaya had to beseech the superior male police officer to get her transferred to the preferred place. The SP engages in an unprofessional communication with the CI, right in front of her and understanding the latter’s reluctance, posts her to a different station denying her even a proper explanation. As Martini posits, here, once again rather than her status as “police officer” her identity as a “woman” gets activated. Vinaya

further throws light on how during those times, the women police officers used to be shifted to various police stations as the superiors pleased, without any order, as the women were not considered as part of the station. She reveals that rather than receiving a formal transfer notice, they were given 'passport' and unlike the men, transfer allowance, and joining leave were also denied" (93). Later, the situation changed, and the women police officers tend to be considered as part of the police station and required a formal order to be transferred to another station. For this significant change, Vinaya too had engaged in various conversations and arguments to include women police officers as part of the station (81). Thus, from within the system, she makes fervent efforts to challenge and further amend the system, making it an inclusive space for women police officers.

Vinaya mentions that women police officers were allotted only to six stations, among those she considered working in the Manandavady station as tough. Thus, she requested the SP to send her to any station except Manandavady. However, she was allotted to the Manandavady station itself much against her will. It evoked great fear in Vinaya, when some of her colleagues reminded Vinaya not to be excessively happy to be back in service and to be cautious until the DGP retire. Vinaya, on multiple occasions, had openly resisted his demeaning remarks on women. In 2002, when the new DGP was about to take charge, his statements in the press meet that "policemen need to be turned 'masculine' and that some police men should be made to wear bangles" was reported in the newspaper. Vinaya responded to his remarks by sending a legal notice claiming that his words were degrading both women and policewomen and was against the Article 15 of the constitution. Further, she added that he should withdraw his statements that deride 'femininity' or she would opt filing a defamation case' (160). Though the DIG gave a response to the notice, he did not withdraw his statements. Thus, during the suspension, Vinaya filed a case against him in the Bathery sessions court.

Soon Vinaya received a show cause notice, asking her to specify the reasons for not terminating her from the force. Vinaya, after receiving the notice, sat with her friend and broke down in tears. In the section titled, “Dismissal as the Death Penalty”, Vinaya vividly recollects the day she had to receive her dismissal letter. She writes about how each member of her family had responded. During her suspension period, her father had stopped going to the tea shop to avoid questions from the public. Once she had joined back, his health had improved, he became cheerful and started going to the tea shop again. When Vinaya informed him that she would be dismissed from the service, he stopped going out and started spending time at home, often lying in bed. When she received the dismissal letter, for some days her mother cried. Except Vanaja, her other siblings blamed her. Her husband’s elder sister’s son, who was in the police force too humiliated her asserting that her own misdeeds had resulted in the expulsion. Insulted by others, Das, her husband too blamed her. Vinaya notes that she felt isolated.

The concluding chapter titled “Depth of Desolation” narrates Vinaya’s responses. She notes that when the life experiences had further strengthened her ideals, her whole life became a battle (often tasting failures). This had often resulted in failures, rebuts, and countless days of psychological stress. In the eleven years of service, frequent disciplinary actions, transfers, suspensions, dismissal were too much for her to bear. Vinaya asserts that she could always stand strong despite the difficulties until her husband was threatened. When Das returned from the retirement party of the DYSP, he informed her that she was the topic of discussion there and that they have only two solutions in front of them. First one was to withdraw the case Vinaya had filed against the DGP and further apologize, requesting him not to dismiss her from the force. Das further mentions that others, including the DYSP, had hinted that if his wife desist doing the same, he himself would be at the receiving end of the DGP’s anger. Just like in Misra’s *Ancient Promises*, where Riya, the daughter is used as a

pawn to deter Janaki, here Das is used as a pawn to dissuade Vinaya from continuing her resistance against the superiors and the system.

His second solution was that she would not have to sacrifice her ideas and ideals but he would commit suicide. He burst out crying telling her that he could not find any other way. At this point, Vinaya relents to their needs of withdrawing the complaint against DGP. Soon the president of the police association informs her that her case against the show cause in the high court was rejected and she would be terminated from the service no matter what she did. Vinaya states that even at that juncture, though she struggled hard to find her mistakes, she could not find any. She asserts that her acts were always directed at finding the “right” which mostly brought in more troubles to her personal and professional life. Vinaya concludes the life writing in a state of despair. She reveals to be shattered watching the plight of her husband who had always supported her. Also, through the termination from the service, she was being pushed into a situation, making it quite hard even to sustain (Vinaya). However, quite vehemently she asserts that she would proceed to pursue the rights.

### **Conclusion**

These disquieting instances in Vinaya’s life writing brings to light the divide between the public and the domestic. Devika’s observation, that the social space which is ‘gendered’, attributes the domestic to women and public to men (*Engendering* 19), attunes to Vinaya’s experience in her role not only as an ordinary woman but also as a police officer. The divide is well visible when the young men are reluctant in considering women ‘as a part of the community’ or when men’s hesitance to see them engaged in certain activities, including riding a bicycle, which they only were privileged to do. Even while serving in the police force, several disciplinary measures were taken to appropriate her dressing and limit her presence inside the station. The division of labour, which were often limited within the four walls of the station, the concessions given to leave early to attend domestic duties, criticisms,

questioning her morality for interacting with male colleagues, restricting her mobility, all tend to be focussed on restricting her and making her role passive in the work front.

Eulogising those women officers who went home first, who had accepted saree as the uniform, even the police force ceases to be an exemption in reinstating the 'domesticity' in the workspace. Thus, the life writing reflects how for a woman police officer domesticity is carved even in the professional space. Further, it is noteworthy that Vinaya does not portray herself as impervious of the myriad aggression she had confronted, on the contrary she discloses its grievous effects it has had on her and the family.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Economic Times- 6,20,000 copies of Gandhi's autobiography were printed in Gujarati from 1927 to 2019 July. However, in Malayalam a total of 7,78,000 copies were printed from 1997 to July 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Udaya Kumar

<sup>3</sup> a noted poet and critic who writes in Malayalam and English

<sup>4</sup> an eminent writer in Malayalam. She is also noted as a feminist and social activist

<sup>5</sup> Gracia equates domestic violence endured by women across various societies to an "iceberg" as only a small fraction of it are reported whereas others lie "submerged" and hence invisible.

<sup>6</sup> Has extensively written, short stories, novels and novellas in Malayalam.

<sup>7</sup> Janaki's in law's ancestral home. Also, Maraars belong the Nair community, whose occupation was to beat drums in temple (see <http://www.nairs.in/classifications.htm>)

<sup>8</sup> Kamala Das's ancestral home

<sup>9</sup> In various interviews Misra refers to Ancient Promises as her memoir (Chandrasekhar) and as semi biographical (Misra).

<sup>10</sup> Marriages that take place within one social group, that is caste, tribe, etc.

<sup>11</sup> The pennukaanal ceremony is one of the traditional rituals when the parents and a few members of the groom's family visits the girl's family in order to see the girl before finalizing the alliance.

<sup>12</sup> means Mother Sea, regarded to have a sacred significance

<sup>13</sup> In Thakazhi's *Chemeen*, women's chastity is presented with great importance. Her chastity safeguards the life of her husband who goes for fishing in the sea. If a woman becomes guilty of infidelity, it is believed that the Sea Goddess would take her husband's life.

<sup>14</sup> the reference to the Church in the study refrains from any generalisations. It limits to the one sister Jesme had been associated with and the experiences she had shared.

<sup>15</sup> hereafter *Amen*

<sup>16</sup> Explained in Conclusion

<sup>17</sup> A noted writer in Malayalam

<sup>18</sup> A Malayalam word used to denote the ancestral home of aristocratic families. It usually served as the common house for the joint family system practised in Kerala. However, the current usage of the term is more generic to all social classes.

<sup>19</sup> referred in the narrative as the "less privileged", "lower class", "dark ones belonging to the lower strata" (46)

<sup>20</sup> As per the Canon law (601), Vow of Obedience is stated as "The evangelical counsel of obedience, undertaken in a spirit of faith and love in the following of Christ obedient unto death, requires the submission of the will to legitimate superiors, who stand in the place of God, when they command according to the proper constitutions".

<sup>21</sup> Hereafter *Njan*

<sup>22</sup> Hereafter *The Autobiography*

<sup>23</sup> In "Registering the Self and the Registers of Self: Toward an Ethics of Collaborative Autobiography" Parvathy Das & Vinod Balakrishnan and "Englising The Subaltern Woman\_ The Politics Of Translating Resistance In Mother Forest And The Autobiography Of A Sex Worker" by Dhanya Ravindran R K, Jameela's work is positioned as a collaborative autobiography

<sup>24</sup> father's elder brother

<sup>25</sup> a lower caste in Kerala

<sup>26</sup> activists who had actively supported sex workers

<sup>27</sup> a social reformer and spiritual leader in Kerala who led the movement against the caste discrimination that prevailed in the society in an attempt to promote equality

<sup>28</sup> Father's elder brother's wife

<sup>29</sup> Hereafter, SWFK

<sup>30</sup> A male member of the Paniya tribe

<sup>31</sup> A female member of the Paniya tribe

<sup>32</sup> Also referred as mangal sutra. It is a chain that the groom ties around the bride's neck during marriage. It serves as a visual marker for married woman.

<sup>33</sup> A marriage ritual where the bridegroom gives a *pudava*, or a traditional cloth of Kerala women, to the bride. Later, the bride will change into the *pudava* given by the groom.

<sup>34</sup> An association or group of people who have same aim/ interest.

<sup>35</sup> Certain professions like nursing and teaching are considered as feminine and police as unfeminine (Niveditha Menon Seeing 11, Devika, "Mobility" 1153)

<sup>36</sup> Indian Police Service

<sup>37</sup> a nightie or night gown for women Samajam

<sup>38</sup> an informal word used to refer to a woman. Here, it is used in the professional context by the superior to disrespect Vinaya.

## Appendices

### 1) Interview with Jaishree Misra

1. Question: It is quite visible that Janaki's life was not easy at the Maraar household. She had to endure "insults", "cruel jibes", "teasings", rude remarks etc and words are at times compared as "barbed shafts". Have you identified/ realized (a) at that point of time or (b) later while writing the book that the protagonist was enduring aggression (for example verbal aggression/ physical aggression/ relational aggression)?

Response: No, I certainly did not see it as aggression/cruelty at the time as much of it was encased in humour. Insults that are cloaked in jokes are always harder to address as not laughing along can come across as mean-spirited and humourless. Besides, I have (with hindsight) wondered if cruelty was even the intention or whether such 'humour' merely derives from situations where otherwise intelligent women are thrown together in constricted domestic scenarios and forced to rub along. It would have taken immense maturity to recognise exactly what was going on and even greater confidence and assertiveness to address the behaviour head-on thereby perhaps putting a stop to it. The kind of confidence that a bride in a new household is unlikely to pull off!

2. Question: Ancient Promises had garnered much recognition, love and positive feedback. It is widely studied and researched in many universities. I would like to know since it is "semi-autobiographical", have you encountered any negative experience after the book was well received?

Response: Not as much as I expected and feared. Perhaps I was lucky to have written this book at a time when social media did not exist so there were no platforms where people could easily & anonymously attack me without identifying themselves. I was fearful too of getting bad reviews, particularly in Kerala's literary scene, but it is to the immense credit of Kerala's

maturity and sophistication that what could have been perceived as criticism by an ‘outsider’ was received instead as a justifiable critique of some social norms.

Question: It is evident that Janaki is resilient. She succeeds in saving not just herself but Riya as well. What according to you were the major contributing factors that had enabled her to be resilient and regain control over the course of her life (apart from pursuing higher studies resulting in self reliance and a hopeful future with Arjun and Riya)?

Response: Janaki is an optimist, convinced by the universe’s essential beneficence! Some of her resilience came from that and the rest from sheer desperation to escape her adverse circumstances. A situation that she may well have coped with became untenable once her special needs child was born and it became evident that Riya was likely to suffer much worse discrimination than she had.

## **2) Interview with Nalini Jameela**

1. Question: You have mentioned about the torture/ aggression faced in the first marriage. However, only a brief description about the same is given in the narrative. Why?

Response: It was a marriage that had lasted for around three and half years. I had to face severe instances of physical and verbal aggression. I was constantly battered. He was strong and it was almost impossible to resist him. He knew I didn’t have another place to go and hence I would endure it. Now when I look back, I think his intention was to thrash me to death. He was even engaged in numerous extramarital affairs. Since I have a daughter in that marriage, I do not wish to create troubles for her by revealing much details about her father. Hence, many details about it weren’t disclosed in the autobiography.

2. Question: What did you find more severe, verbal or physical aggression (in the first marriage)?

Response: Physical aggression, it was almost unbearable. She described it as *idichinja parivam akkuka* (battered and deformed).

3. Question: Did you encounter physical aggression either in the second or third marriage?

Response: In the third marriage, once he slapped me and I had retaliated by breaking a jar. This act instilled fear in him after which he has not dared to attack me.

4. Question: You had to revise the first autobiography. Are you satisfied with the second one?

Response: Due to the time constraints I had to rush. Also, what I feel significant will not always seem the same for the ones sitting with me.

5. Question: You have reiterated in the narrative that ‘you have left them before they did’, implying the second and third marriages. What do you think gave you the courage to move out with a daughter despite the financial constraints?

Response: The main fear I have had was whether I would get a place to stay. In Kerala, without the presence of a man, in the role either as a husband or guardian, it is very difficult to rent a house. After being in Karnataka (Mangalapuram), I had realized it was easy for a woman to find a space to stay there, unlike in Kerala. This was the situation which prevailed there almost 25 years ago. Here, in Kerala, just three years back, I found it difficult to get a house rented as the owners kept asking if the husband/ relative who is a man, would at least visit occasionally. So, after I left the second and third marriages, I had the confidence that I would get a place to stay and also then I can work and earn a living.

### 3) Interview with Vinaya

1. Question: The narrative mentions an instance where your uniform shoes were destroyed.

Do you consider it as a deliberate act? If so, who do you think had done it?

Response: Yes, it was a deliberate act and it was done by the women police officers, especially seniors. Saree was the uniform then. I was at the receiving end of their displeasure for wearing shirt and pants. Hence, they resorted to destroying my uniform shoes.

2. Question : You have mentioned about encountering sexual aggression from a school teacher while in eighth standard. There you mention, “he slid his hands inside my skirt and pinched me. Thereafter, his behaviours evoked disgust in me” (31). How did he intimidate you further?

Response: The way he was staring at me made me feel very uncomfortable. He ogled that way as he understood I was escaping the scene with another teacher.

3. Question : The autobiography concludes in a tone of despair. You have exhibited a stiff protest against all forms of gender discrimination and often resort to humour as an attempt to resist it. So why did you choose to conclude it that way?

Response: I was around 35 years old while scripting my life writing. I was shattered watching the plight of my husband who had always extended unflinching support. Also, through the termination from the service, I was being pushed into a situation making it quite hard to sustain. So, at that juncture, I could conclude the life writing only in despair. The rest I knew, I will have to show the world through my life. Now, I have done it by being back in service.

4. Question : Have you faced any negative experience after the publication of your life writing?

Response: Yes, my father’s relatives were displeased with the way I had portrayed him in the life writing but I have convinced them.

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## Conclusion

### Aggression Endured and Articulated: Differences and Similarities

#### Writing Life: The Struggles and Acceptance

Meena T Pillai, in her discreet analyses of Kamala Suraiyya's controversial autobiography, *My Story*, argues that it was structured against the "dominant male autobiographical tradition" and points out that "such forms of subjectivity, which attempts to subvert dominant discourses are at all times dubbed neurotic and immoral and punished by the society" (111). It is quite evident that the select women writers too had to overcome various hassles and struggles in order to script and thereafter publish their life writings, each one in different ways.

Jaishree Misra, having published *Ancient Promises* as a fiction has later disclosed it as semi-autobiographical. She reveals not to have encountered negative experiences "as much she had expected or feared". She further opines that she being an "outsider" would have also led the Kerala society perceive it as a "justifiable critique of social norms" (Misra). However, it cannot be overlooked that Misra seems to have deliberately refrained from terming her work as either an 'autobiography' or 'her story' which unlike the other three select works, have at once made many readers identify it as a fiction and thereby evade further discussions or criticisms related to it.

Though Jesme had given the title of her life writing as *Amen: The Autobiography of a Nun*, mentioning a few reasons, she herself problematises considering the work as an autobiography. She discloses that it reveals only a part of her life, and further affirms that though it represents truth, her efforts directed in not hurting the people involved had resulted in hiding their real names and the institutions concerned. Hence, she claims it as "not a complete representation of reality" (xii, xiii). Societal response to Sister Jesme's life writing that had disclosed various forms of aggression she had endured while in the nunnery was

mostly aggressive. After the publication of the book, Jesme reveals to have faced adversities from the community as well as from her family. She also notes that her younger brother had abused her and in addition threatened the one who had helped her in translating the work. Moreover, the family members severed the communication ties as well (174). The church too attempted to dissuade her from publishing the autobiography. After the wide reception of *Amen*, certain denigrative articles against Sister Jesme were also published in the journals brought out by the Church referring to her as ‘Judas’ and ‘prostitute’. However, she states that a few nuns who had the fear to write about their lives, some priests and several Christian and non-Christian friends had lent support to her. Further, Sister Jesme had again seized the medium of life writing to script her experiences.

Jameela’s first attempt to write her life story had the adverse effects of losing one client and another one asking her to write about him without revealing his identity. Jameela stood aloof from her clients, when she narrated her life boldly revealing her identity and also claiming it as her autobiography. Devika rightly opines Jameela of having taken over the “crown of thorns from Madhavikkutty” (*The Autobiography xii*). However, Jameela never gave in to the pressure either by disowning her work claiming it as merely fictional. She states that “the struggle to get her story written the way she wanted and further bring it forth to the public has been as intense as any in her whole life” (179). Similarly, Jameela too received several backlashes after her life writing received attention. For instance, M Mukundan, an eminent writer in Malayalam at once denounced Jameela’s life writing as a ‘prurient money spinner’. According to Devika, his angst though appears to rest on the reading habits of the Malayali community, it masquerades his disapproval of a sex worker. Further she adds, “he laments that the future best seller will not be written by a great (male) author (*ezhuthukaaran*) of our language, but by a sex worker or (female) sex trafficker (*penvanibhakkari*)” (xviii). Interestingly, contrary to Mukundan who had denigrated both the

life writing and the writer who is a sex worker, Devika, considering her rational arguments and skills compares Jameela to the wise nun, Punna in *Therigatha* ( xx). Unlike Misra, one would not find even a moment of fear from Jameela regarding what had been written but what more ought to have been written. Jameela ends her life writing with a comparison between men in the past and the present. However, she explains that if there was no paucity of time, she would have concluded it urging the sex workers to shun reticence and be in the public space. Besides, with her experience she desires to enlighten young girls on how to save themselves from the possible victimisation of sex rackets (178). Furthermore, Jameela's warning that she would come up with "*My Autobiography, Part II*" and her assertion that she would "keep telling the story of her life" shows her surpassing courage not only to critique the social norms, its entrenched biases, and inequality, but also to seize the genre of life writing in order to serve the purpose.

Vinaya's *My Story* did not receive a wider acclaim compared to the other select life writings. However, Vinaya points out that the way she had portrayed her father in the narrative evoked displeasure among some of the family members. She further states that she had tried to reason with them and thereby convince them (Vinaya). It is noteworthy that rather than removing the instances that had garnered criticism, Vinaya exhibited the sheer courage to make the ones who had put forward the allegations understand her perspective. Further, like Jameela, Vinaya too states her debut work as not an end to writing her life experiences. The concluding section of her life writing titled *Thakarchayude Aazham* (The Depths of Destruction) depicts her termination from the service and the struggles related to it. Thus, though the narrative ends in despair, she argues that she wanted to show the world how she had overcome the hassles through her own life (Vinaya).

It is noteworthy that, after the publication of their debut works, all the four women writers- Misra, Jesme, Jameela, and Vinaya, despite all odds, had not hesitated to reclaim life

writing as a genre to narrate their life experiences. It is interesting to note that even their names mentioned in the life writings signify their protest. Jaishree adding the surname 'Misra' not only signifies her ultimate union with the lover who is a non-Malayalee, but also her deliberate effort to retain her tag as an 'outsider' which she thinks had helped her to critique the Kerala society, without inviting harsh criticisms, while maintaining her identity that had made her feel neglected at her husband's conventional Nair *tharavad* back in Alleppey. Meamy Raphael who became Sister Jesme after being a nun in the Congregation of the Mother of Carmelite, retains the name and the ascetic life even after moving out of the nunnery. Nalini chose the name Jameela when she married Shahul Hameed who belonged to the Muslim community. However, Nalini Jameela choosing and retaining the name could also be viewed as a resistance against her second husband Koya who had accused their daughter for being born "outside the faith" ( 48) and had further disowned them both. Here, unlike Jaishree Misra who denounces an upper caste identity (Nair) regains another upper caste tag (Misra), Nalini belonging to a lower caste (*Ezhava*), adds the name Jameela and thereby embraces the identities of both a lower caste and a minority community (Muslim). Vinaya, deliberately refraining from adding either her father's name or husband's name as her surname shows her protest against overstating the importance of men in the cultural context that she vehemently critiques in her life writing.

### **Differences in the Depiction of Home and Family**

Misra's protagonist Janaki, born and brought up in Delhi has her roots back in Kerala. Her father, a highly placed Air Force official and mother, a schoolteacher, hails from a conventional upper class Nair family in Kerala. Misra's narrative shows Janaki's home as a happy and peaceful one. Her parents share a warm and affectionate bond, unmarked by any trace of aggression. Janaki is raised cautiously instilling the codes of her community, constantly reminding her what tends to be approved and what is not. Though she understands

that the ways of her parents were quite distinctive compared to her friend Leena's or lover Arjun's parents, especially related to the hard and fast rules she ought to follow, Janaki refrains from questioning it and further dismisses it as "the different ways of showing love" (35). Until her growing affection with the Punjabi boy Arjun gets revealed to her parents, Janaki is portrayed as having a comfortable and peaceful life at home with her parents.

Similar to Janaki, Sister Jesme too shared a healthy relationship with her parents. She mentions her home as having a "loving and lively atmosphere" (9). Despite mentioning a brief episode of financial constraints, she narrates her *tharavad* as one noted for "merry making, revelry, feasting and so on" (17). Sister Jesme also mentions the dynamics of their family relationship stating that rather than "strict hierarchy, democracy" was favoured and established at home as her mother gave due respect to each one of their opinions (9). Also, the narrative does not show any sign of aggression between her parents. Thus, home is depicted as a peaceful and happy space with abundant resources.

Unlike Misra and Sister Jesme, Jameela depicts her home as a problematic space where her father dominated her mother and siblings. Her father was a soldier disbanded from the service and mother, a worker at a thread mill. Neither the atmosphere at home nor the relationship between her father and mother was peaceful. Jameela notes how her mother was verbally and physically abused by her father and how the former constantly resorted to suffer and weep in silence. Despite all the aggression endured, she continued to remain subservient to him. The narrative shows how the children too did not share a healthy relationship with their father as they remained jovial in his absence. Jameela notes that "they felt happy when father was not at home" and further quite directly mentions their relief when he had stayed away from home while being admitted in a hospital for a few days (6). Unlike Misra, Jameela quite directly articulates how her father was a casteist. Her father never allowed them to mingle with children from other castes who stayed close, especially, Dalits or Christians.

Contrary to Misra, who evades any reference to caste and claims that Janaki's father had caned her for being involved in a romantic relation with Arjun, a non-Malayalee, Jameela straightaway underlies the caste difference as that which had made her father shout and further beat her for receiving proposal from Kunhippavoo, a Christian boy (18).

Further Jameela portrays her home where there was scarcity of food and clothes. Though her father was domineering, he remained callous and irresponsible towards the needs of his children and wife. This prompted Jameela to desperately search for jobs to sustain herself and her family. Jameela's constant search for work is a recurring theme in the narrative, unlike the other three life writings. The rift between Jameela and father began when he attempted to control her and the money she had earned, just like he did with her mother. It is significant that when Jameela was hardly eighteen years old, her life changed abruptly when her father threw her out of the house.

For Vinaya too, home, a place dominated by her father was a difficult space. Problematising the relationship between her father and mother, Vinaya vividly depicts the instances of domestic violence. She questions the gendered division of labour, which positions women at home, engaged in unpaid labour and men in the public place, occupying themselves with paid labour. Her narrative throws insights on how her mother was made to conform to performing various domestic chores, which she describes as "never ending", through various aggressive strategies deployed by their father. Father unacknowledged her mother's unpaid labour at home which included preparation of food, sexual labour, and care work. Her domestic productivity is invisibilised and further deprecated by her husband deliberately by demeaning, belittling, neglecting, and intimidating her by throwing and destroying things. Her mother mostly remains reticent to father's acts, except on one instance where she reveals her exasperation for having him narrowly escaped an accident rather than being dead. On other occasions she is seen resorting to crying and suffering in silence. In

addition, Vinaya throws light on the fear as children she herself and her siblings have had when they saw their father abusing their mother.

Here, Jameela's mother endures both physical and verbal aggression and Vinaya's mother endures mostly verbal aggression. However, when the life writings show both the mothers as reticent, passive, and tolerating aggression, their daughters in the narrative exhibit a strong resistance to it and further articulate the episode quite distinctly in their narratives.

### **Choosing the Course of Life: Agency, Voice, and Aggression**

The happy and peaceful situation at home drastically changes for Janaki when her romantic relation with the Punjabi boy, Arjun gets revealed. Thus, her desire to continue studies in Delhi at once gets thwarted. Further, through coercion (physical force, threat and punishment) she enters into an arranged marriage with Suresh from the affluent *Maraar tharavad* in Kerala. Misra presents arranged marriages, strictly conforming to endogamy and monogamy as the norm followed by Janaki's family. Here the narrative deliberately evades the past where the Nairs had endorsed the matrilineal *sambandha* system. However, at a later stage when Janaki desires to seek divorce but becomes pressurised by her mother and grandmother to return to Suresh, she evokes the memories of "Kerala's proud old matrilineal Nair tradition" and further laments the loss of agency that women had exercised in choosing and further leaving their partners (215). In her reference to the matrilineal system, Misra cautiously eludes revealing any information that would question or tarnish the morality of the Nair women. Thus, it tends to be a conscious project endorsed in the narrative to only portray Nair women as moral and upright.

Janaki is obstructed from choosing the course of her life not only during marriage but at later stages as well. Even when Janaki decides to legally snip her relationship with Suresh, at multiple times she is forced to refrain from enacting her will. Even after knowing that Janaki was caught in a difficult marriage, her family continued pressurising her to return to

Suresh. Janaki's own "guilt" as well as her mother's silent treatment manifested as "terrifyingly silent grief" and grandmother's "anger" adversely affected her, forcing her to return. Further, Janaki, lacking the space to stay, or financial means to be independent, blames the end of matrilineal system also as a reason for her plight. Janaki states, "because the Nair act had taken a hammer to Kerala's matrilineal system all those years ago, I had to return that day with Suresh to Valapadu" (215).

It is significant that Janaki's final liberation from Suresh also took place with the permission and help from her mother and grandmother. "It was strange that I'd had to come back to her to be set free again. Almost as if it couldn't be done without that one final blessing" (4). Misra emphasizes how Janaki had to come back to her mother to end her marriage just like how she had begun it with her blessings. Here, it is noteworthy that despite considering her marriage as "an awful mistake made by her parents" she continues to depend on them and their approval in order to dissolve it. Undoubtedly, this had not only resulted in delaying her decision to divorce Suresh but further fall into his trap of being labelled as insane.

After enduring different forms of aggression, Janaki opts to file for divorce. However, there are several instances where Janaki is torn by guilt. She fears retribution and seeks forgiveness for the sins to the goddess. It is significant that upon asked by her mother whether her marriage was that bad enough to leave, Janaki responds' "it wasn't unbearable, I could have put up with it for the rest of my life, people suffer much worse things, I know." (236). Misra, through Janaki, not only trivialises the aggression she had encountered and endured in the Maraar household but also compares it to the worse situation meted out to others and further concludes that she could have tolerated it. Here, she could also be seen referring to the example given by her mother and grandmother, of her acquaintance Suma who despite being constantly battered by her husband continues to endure it and sustains the

marriage being “tired and defeated” (238). Janaki by comparing the physical aggression endured by Suma ends up trivialising her own experiences of verbal aggression.

Unlike Janaki who was coerced into an arranged marriage that had resulted in losing not only the one she had loved but also the aspirations to pursue higher studies, and the peaceful life in Delhi, Vinaya employs her agency to disapprove the groom others had selected for her and further chooses the one who caught her interest. Also, despite having endured verbal aggression from the public for remaining unmarried even after her younger sister’s marriage, Vinaya embraced married life only when she desired to do so. Furthermore, she employs her marriage with Das as an apt platform to appropriate certain rituals and practices which she argues as promoting gender discrimination. She equates her marital life as a protest site where the discussions and disagreements were all directed in claiming opportunities and rights on a par with that of her husband. It is important that the narrative shows various instances of how she becomes quite successful in her endeavours. Vinaya also mentions the support she had received from her husband both at home and at workspace, which she describes as one of the reasons that motivated her to continue fighting against gender discrimination and injustices at both these spaces. The narrative shows how Vinaya had refrained from letting anyone dictate how she ought to live and on the contrary, exercise her agency for the same. Even when Vinaya is terminated from the service, without a trace of guilt she states of not having found any mistake on her side.

Sister Jesme on the other hand opts to lead an ascetic life and thereby joins the Church convent. She overcomes the resistance of the relatives who accuses her of escaping the “troubles of life” which in turn reflects their criticism on her decision to decline domesticity; deemed as mandatory to be embraced by every woman (qtd in. Sreekumar *Scripting* 204). Her parents do not stand against her wish nor exert pressure on her to change the decision. Leaving the nunnery was also not easy for Sister Jesme as not everyone in the family

supported her decision. Despite her revelation that she would either run away or kill herself, they pressurised her to remain in the convent by isolating her, not extending help and further by preventing her friends from lending any support to her. She notes, “if none would help me, my sister falsely believed, I might continue to be a nun” (5). Thus, just like she had entered the nunnery, exercising her will Sister Jesme leaves the place with minimal help from others.

Jameela, unlike the others, having forced out of the house, eventually stays with Subrahmaniyan who offers help and the public later profess them as husband and wife. Thus, it was her circumstances and helplessness which made her start a family with Subrahmaniyan. Enduring both physical and verbal aggression from her husband and in-laws, she continues to remain there. Though she mentions to have fought back in order to survive, the narrative does not reveal how she had resisted them. Further, even though Jameela had not desisted giving a glimpse of domestic violence that had marked its presence throughout her marital relation with Subrahmaniyan, she refrains from giving detailed description about the same. However, in the interview she does not hesitate to mention that she had to endure extreme physical and verbal aggression from her husband and even doubts if his intention was to batter her to death. However, once she turns to sex work after her husband’s death in order to meet the demands of her mother-in-law and sustain the family, she desists remaining subservient to anyone. In the second and third marriages, Jameela vehemently asserts that she had left her partners before they left her. In her second marriage with Koya too, Jameela hardly describes her struggles. Apart from passively referring to the (verbal) sexual aggression she had to confront from her co brother, she refrains from describing the details of her struggles. Even when she mentions that when his first wife and her parents had returned making her situation “worse”, the narrative does not divulge what she has had to endure. Her third marriage that spanned for twelve years failed when she fell sick and her husband, Shahul started maintaining relation with other women. Here too, though the life writing

presents glimpses of verbal aggression, it abstains from pondering or documenting much on how aggressive the relationship was. However, in the interview, Jameela vividly recollects how she had responded when he physically abused (slapped) her for the first time. She had retaliated by breaking a glass jar which instilled fear in him after which he had not dared to attack her.

It is evident that in any of her other relations, she refrains from letting the other abandon or force her out of the house, just like her father did. With sheer courage, from the safety of home, she walks out to the streets with her daughter and does sex work to survive. Jameela remains quite stubborn in her decisions not only while parting ways with her spouses but also in choosing and continuing sex work as her profession. Even though, her mother labels sex work as sin and warns her that she would be denounced by her children, Jameela continues to do it and eventually becomes an activist and further a writer declaring to the world her identity and profession, demanding respect.

### **The Episode of Madness**

Janaki having been forced by her mother and grandmother to return to Suresh musters the courage and reveals to him her desire to seek divorce. It is significant that rather than being assertive, Janaki pleads him for the same. Further, she chooses a public place to communicate with Suresh fearing he would either attack her or take away Riya. It is noteworthy that, Janaki does not rule out his response for her request to dissolve the marriage to be aggressive. Though, Suresh succeeds in resisting to be aggressive then, his premeditated aggressive strategies work well to prove Janaki as an insane person in front of others, including her own mother.

Even after being forcefully sedated and admitted in the mental health wing of the hospital, Janaki evaluates the marriage as not bad enough, comparing it with marriages with more instances of physical aggression. It is noteworthy that Janaki, rather than feeling

enraged after Suresh's successful attempts to portray her as mentally unstable, goes straight to the temple and apologises for her sin. "I whispered a multitude of heartfelt apologies to Chottanikara Devi, folding my hands before her mysterious figure, genuinely sorry for my sin. But I knew, better than anyone else, that if Arjun appeared before me in some tender, wondrous dream, I would merely do it all again" (235). Here rather than rationally gauging the multiple aggressive strategies employed by Suresh to prove her as a mad woman which includes his secret discussions with his family, hiding her valuable documents and details of scholarship, Janaki considers it as a punishment received from God for rekindling her relation with Arjun. Here, Janaki not only trivialises the aggression endured from her husband but considers herself as a sinner or someone who had committed a greater mistake. Further, it is significant to note that not only Janaki, but her own uncle does not dismiss the possibilities for a negotiation with Suresh despite having known how dangerous he could be.

Despite the initial attempts of the superiors to label her as insane, Sister Jesme prolonged her stay in the nunnery for ten years. She reiterates of having lived in constant fear. Overpowered by fear she resists having food served to her, thinking they would trick her into consuming medicines. In their second attempt, she was forced to leave the nunnery claiming that she would have continued if the authorities have refrained from portraying her as an insane person. Here, both Misra and Jesme despite having laid bare the adverse effects of aggression that have had on them, strive to look past it. When Misra trivialises it yet dissolves the marriage, Sister Jesme refrains from considering it as inconsequential yet reveals her desire to continue in the system enduring the aggression (which she equates to "crucifixion") from superiors only if they had desisted trying to force "psychiatric treatment on her" (170).

Jameela on the other hand, exhibits strong resistance when her husband, Shahul Hameed, attempts to portray her as a mad woman in front of his family and friends in an attempt to hide his sexual liaison with other women and to justify his leaving an already sick

wife. “At that moment, I decided this man should never come to see me again. Imagine, claiming that I was mad, and then pretending to be my protector! How cruel!” (64). Here, Jameela rationally analyses her husband’s motive and at once decides to sever ties with him. Unlike Janaki or Sister Jesme, she remains stubborn in discontinuing the relation.

### **Slut Shaming**

Initially Suresh spreads rumours about Janaki and later directly abuses her by referring to her as a prostitute when she declines to stay with him or to refrain from seeking divorce. He thereby restrains her from raising their daughter questioning her morality. He states, “you, who can’t resist selling her body to strange men! Have you heard how people are talking about you? I can’t have a prostitute bring up my daughter (254).” Here, Suresh slut shames Janaki, and then to aggravate her misery asks if she had been aware about the discussions going on in the public about her. Finally, referring her as a prostitute, he deems her unfit to raise their only daughter. Here, when the rumours start spreading about Janaki, her family identifies it as a deliberate act done by Suresh. Later, he hurls the same accusations on her directly. Thus, both overtly and covertly Suresh employs verbal aggression to vanquish her. These two instances, though vividly narrated, fail to address how Janaki had confronted or responded to it. Janaki seems to be a silent sufferer in both the cases. She tends to be quite passive while encountering various aggressive strategies directed towards her by the Maraars.

Sister Jesme notes in her life writing that she was hurt when an article in a bimonthly brought out by the Church referred to her as a prostitute. Having pointed out how such remarks had deeply hurt her, she further pauses the question why the perpetrator who resides inside the nunnery tends to remain unaccused. Furthermore, she problematises taking excerpts out of context from any text and using it against the author. Here, Sister Jesme not

only articulates how she had been slut shamed, and its subsequent effects on her but also rationally places her arguments against it in the narrative.

In case of Jameela, when Shahul Hameed, her third husband indirectly hinted at her uncontrollable carnal desires, a false accusation he had deliberately framed as a reason for his constant fights with her, Jameela makes an open declaration that thereafter she would not be sleeping with him. Further, she analyses the context and points it out as the “lie” crafted by her husband which had resulted out of his mean “shrewdness to win at any cost” (62). Jameela, like Vinaya remains unflinching when such remarks are hurled at her.

Jameela also argues for using appropriate terms for referring to sex workers and openly expresses her displeasure with others, especially the public, for employing certain derogatory terms. Sufficing her statement with examples, she points out how it is “highly insulting and further pushes them to the margins” (152). Here, Jameela stands and voices for linguistic appropriation to refer to sex workers, commanding respect.

Vinaya when the superiors attempted to question her morality by problematising her friendship with a male police officer in the station, she asserts that she remains close with not only one policeman but with all the five policemen. Further, she prompts them to employ KP ACT 47 against her, which is used to charge petty case against prostitutes. It is significant that apart from addressing and resisting she further laughs it off right in front of the superiors. Also, Vinaya becomes quite persistent in interacting with the male police officers and further goes to public places at evenings and nights especially after a policewoman questioned her morality for the same.

### **Sartorial Dictums and Discriminations**

Janaki narrates how wearing a saree, and further washing and hanging to it to dry made her feel as an outsider in the Maraar house. She reiterates how she often failed to carry herself, matching up to the Maraar style and elegance. Unlike Vinaya, she hardly resists it but

expresses her lack of choice or agency to use another apparel. When Riya was identified as a disabled child, Misra reveals that except Janaki, the Maraars or even Suresh was least bothered about her condition and all they cared was “their privileged world of swaying plaits and silk sarees” (131). It is significant that Janaki’s liberation from the Maraars also indicated her freedom from silk sarees and false hip length hair, to jeans and tops (260, 261).

Vinaya exhibits a strong resistance in imposing saree as the uniform for policewomen and brings out its discomfort not only while doing the duty but also at other times. She further uses shirt and pants as the uniform just like the policemen, incurring several punishments and disciplinary action. Vinaya’s fervent protests and resistance thus paves the way for considering shirt and pants as the uniform for policewomen as well.

Sister Jesme also problematizes nuns being forced to wear the religious habit on all occasions, unlike the priests. She mentions how she was criticised for watching movie wearing the habit. Thus, it became quite evident to her that she was not supposed to watch movie as wearing habit at all times were deemed mandatory. However, though she garners the information from a priest that there were not any written rules prohibiting a nun from watching movies, it is not mentioned in the narrative whether she had continued watching movies either wearing casual attires or the habit.

### **Infrastructure Violence**

Both Vinaya and Jameela, hailing from lower middle-class family have articulated about infrastructural violence in their narrative. Jameela narrates how her identity as a sex worker had often hampered her from accessing the public transport, toilets, roads, restaurants, or while taking a house for rent. Vinaya’s narrative looks at infrastructural violence only from a gendered angle where women were discouraged from riding bicycle or use the public space including roads or streams like men. Also, she mentions how policewomen, unlike policemen, had limited infrastructure in the police station. Vinaya also notes the unhygienic

condition of the comfort stations that restrains women's accessibility to it. Sister Jesme though makes a passing reference that the nuns belonging to the 'less privileged' background (Dark *Ethelamma*) were not allowed to use the various infrastructure in the nunnery like the privileged ones, desists elaborating further details related to that as she was saved from those discriminations being belonging to the 'privileged group'. It is noteworthy that infrastructure violence is almost absent in the narratives of both Misra and Jesme where both belong to the upper middle-class family.

### **Conclusion**

The select four women writers, Vinaya, Nalini Jameela, Jaishree Misra, and Sister Jesme have articulated the aggression they had encountered in different ways. The former two writers have been fiercely articulate about the same compared to the latter two. It is significant that Vinaya and Jameela hail from the families where instances of domestic violence were quite common. This would have made them identify, point out, and further articulate the aggression they had encountered in their respective life writings, without flinching or fearing that it could either hurt the characters involved or themselves. Both Vinaya and Jameela had poignantly depicted the aggression women are prone to face at home, in the community, and the workspace. It is significant that Vinaya problematises the gender and dedicates her life writing to all the women around the world. However, she often overlooks the aspects of caste and remains quite inarticulate about her own upper caste identity and the privileges that come along with it. Vinaya had also tapped her emotions quite distinctly, including fear, desperation, and also the various moments she had burst into tears, which she had to go through while resisting the system that sustained gender discrimination employing various aggressive strategies. Nalini Jameela effortlessly critiques the questions of caste, class, gender, and sex work through her narrative. Her narrative not only talks about her life but further depicts the life of the sex worker's community. Additionally, one would

hardly find any trace of remorse or fear at any stage in these two narrators for what they had done or had written about. Jameela remains quite open and rational in framing her narrative and does not resist portraying herself as aggressive at times. Further, her words, “what I feel significant will not always seem the same for the ones sitting with me” (Jameela) shows how all the more powerful and articulate her life writing would have been, if she herself had written it.

For Misra and Jesme, unlike Vinaya or Jameela, home was a happy, safe and contended space. Misra and Jesme, often display a tendency to limit the narrative to themselves, articulating their own troubled past and liberation. Misra describes in details Janaki’s life with her parents, forced marriage, difficulties endured at the Maraar household, her life in Delhi and Kerala. At times she seems to cautiously refrain herself from giving vivid descriptions about other characters or her views on the various customs and rituals prevailing in Kerala which she had dared to trespass. Her decision to publish her life writing as a fiction, and the subsequent “fear” about its reception unearths her exigency to stay away from public censure into her life and further reprobation. However, Misra has mentioned the adverse effects of aggression on her quite vividly in her narrative. Sister Jesme’s narrative gives a brief account of the difficulties she had encountered in the nunnery. Though she remains quite strong in voicing her protest against the Church, its corruptive practices, prejudices and the vulnerable position of nuns in the convent, she often desists getting involved in or narrating the details of other characters that had not only perpetuated aggression but also the ones helplessly enduring the same. It is noteworthy that regardless the authors being a police officer, nun, housewife or sex worker, the four select life writings also stress the banality of domesticity enforced on women, be at home, or the workspace.