

Humiliation and Trauma: The Lived Experiences of an Insider, in Selected Narratives of Kerala Women Writers

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Abstract:

The writings of three turn of the 21st century Kerala women novelists viz. *Othappu – The Scent on the Other Side* (2009) by Sarah Joseph, *A Video, A Fridge and a Bride* (1995) by Nirmala Aravind and *Ancient Promises* (2000) by Jaishree Misra reflect the gendered roles and emotional trauma of a specific region – Kerala wherein women over the years were assigned certain roles and expected to perform within the given parameters albeit the roles overlapped. Women moved from their traditional roles as homemakers/caretakers and contributed to the family income and yet were not given equal importance due to their gender difference. These novels bring out the concepts of humiliation that the women of Kerala experience because of this engendering and the resultant emotional trauma. The critical theories of Re-Orientalism, Trauma Studies especially in Diasporic Studies, Cultural Complex theory and Humiliation Studies are deployed to highlight these lived in experiences of the novels' protagonists as an insider's voice.

Keywords: Cultural Complex; Emotional Trauma; Gendered Roles; Humiliation; Re-Orientalism.

Women over the years in India and especially in the region of Kerala were convinced by the patriarchal society that it was in their interest to be ruled over by men. Religion also substantiated this – be it Hinduism, Islam, Christianity – all ruled under the larger umbrella of patriarchy. Women in Kerala accepted the subordinate role assigned to them over the years under the garb of societal and religious norms. Women have through the years been assigned certain role and are expected to perform within the given parameters and we find these roles cross over and over-lap. Wom-

en have moved from their traditional roles as homemakers/caretakers to contributing to the family income and yet are not given equal importance just because of their gender difference. Women rebelled and this has resulted in the marginalization of women through humiliating experiences. The women who rebelled were made to feel like aliens, creating anxiety in their psyche and ricocheting them in a swirl of otherness. This left them distraught and traumatized emotionally. It is considered socially appealing if a woman is meek, obedient, soft-spoken and timid. The bold and loud women are always frowned upon in the Malayalee society i.e., in the region of Kerala. Hence when these women raised their voice, they were misconstrued to be defiant and not in tangent with the patriarchal mode of operation. Hence, they were subjugated to humiliating experiences which were meant to silence them. They were made to feel out of place by being ignored or by deliberate non-recognition of their capabilities. They were treated as an outsider within the family and literally dumped into the peripheries of their circle of interactions. This resulted into the development of an unbalanced family and thereby society as it created a whole section of emotionally traumatized individuals.

This is even more significant because of the absence of a sustained women's movement in this region. The upper middle class and upper-class women were conditioned to dissociate themselves from such movements as it would degrade their status in society. But this has led to an imbalanced politics in the state. Swapna Mukhopadhyay states this in the chapter of the book she also edited, *Understanding the Enigma of Women's Status in Kerala* (2011) as having "lost a potential for their own growth and regeneration as well" (26).

The women of Kerala have reconciled themselves to conditioning themselves to the dictates of the patriarchal norms of their society fearing an even worse situation in the event of dissent. Mukhopadhyay states that women in Kerala tolerate such gender-related stress because they subscribe to the norms of their patriarchal society that places them in subordination to the men and along with all that it entails like gender violence, abuse etc. "they may have been internalized to a significant extent to the women's psyche" (15) Religious and societal dictums have played a significant role in silencing these women who, though highly educated, are told to use their education for the family and society and not for their individual use or rights. Hence the state of Kerala in India is a state of paradox as far as women's development is concerned. Hence being humiliated and ignored and thrust to the peripheries for being defiant and voicing opposition is the norm in this society.

This paper focuses on the concepts of humiliation and trauma which are drawn from the theoretical framework of Re-Orientalism, Trauma Studies especially in Diasporic Studies, Cultural Complex theory, and Humiliation Studies. These concepts are evidently seen in three texts chosen viz. *Othappu – The Scent of the Other Side (OTSOS)* by Sarah Joseph written in Malayalam and translated into English by Valson Thampu, *A Video, A Fridge and a Bride (AVFB)* by Nirmala Aravind and *Ancient Promises (AP)* by Jaishree Misra. These concepts of humiliation and trauma existing in the face gender bias and patriarchy in the Malayalee society in the region of Kerala are highlighted to showcase the lived-in experiences of the novels' protagonists as an insider's voice.

The word humiliation has its roots in the Latin word *humus*, earth. This literally means degradation in spatial orientation – a downward orientation. Analysis of the etymology of the word humiliation shows that at its core it is the sense of a 'downward push.' In her unpublished article, "*The Concept of Humiliation*" (2001), Evelin Gerda Lindner defines humiliation as "the enforced lowering of a person or group, a process of subjugation that damages or strips away their pride, honour or dignity...." (4).

The protagonist Sister Margalitha in the novel *Othappu: The Scent on The Other Side* by Sarah Joseph is humiliated again and again because of being impregnated by a priest, then faced with threat to her life and finally ostracized by her own parents and family members because she refuses to endorse the status quo or conform to religious and social codes. The protagonist Janu in *Ancient Promises* is a part of the pan Indian diaspora – a young Malayalee girl born and brought up in Delhi, whose sole transgression was to fall in love with a Delhiite boy. She was married, much against her personal wish, at eighteen to a very wealthy man, born and brought up in Kerala. The humiliation she faced for her alien urban upbringing and societal manners further alienated her from her marital home and relatives. "...I replied, 'Yes, please.' 'Look you are not in Delhi anymore. Like it or not, you now live in Kerala, so I suggest you drop all these fashionable Pleases and Thank Yous. Here we don't believe in unnecessary style.'" (AP:80) She faced alienation from her mother-in-law and her husband and finally their marriage came to an end with the birth of their mentally challenged daughter Rhea.

The novel *A Video, a Fridge and a Bride* by Nirmala Aravind shows the stages of humiliation that the protagonist Lissy goes through each time a suitor comes to seek her alliance and the rejection she faces because of her dark complexion and the family's financial constraints. Even though she

was bright enough to clear the bank entrance examinations and secure a good job, societal norms, and expectations in terms of physical appearance and financial health of the family, made her vulnerable to the charms of a union leader who enticed her only to spite the upper caste members in the Church where they would marry. Lissy breaks away from the shackles of expectations laid by others and concentrates on her bank career and makes peace with herself.

The concept of humiliation is related to tradition and culture. There is a deep link between dignity and human rights in so far as humiliation attacks a person's core dignity as a human being and inflicts very deep emotional wounds. In "*Humiliation – the Worst Form of Trauma*" (2000a), Evelin Gerda Lindner tries to describe how principles, procedures, and behavior that in hierarchical honour-based societies were 'normal', today, in a human rights context, are viewed basically harmful and traumatizing and that it is particularly the element of humiliation that inflicts the deepest wounds. Lindner further explains this through a new term she coined "Honour Humiliation". She says it entails roughly four variants viz. Conquest Humiliation, wherein one subjugates a former equal into an inferior and once this is established, Reinforcement Humiliation takes shape wherein the inferiors or underlings are reminded of their place. The third form is Relegation Humiliation wherein the underling is pushed further down and Exclusion Humiliation wherein the subordinate or underling is excluded from the hierarchy either by killing or exiling them (8).

Sister Margalitha, the protagonist of Sarah Joseph's *Othappu* is pushed by her brothers into the attic to die of starvation in pursuit of exclusion humiliation of the worst kind. She is looked down upon for seeking the pleasures of her body which violated the societal norms imposed on her calling as a nun. "..... She had no idea who among them had kicked her into the dark room. Not having eaten for three days, Margalitha was famished. Hunger, pain and weariness affected her legs first. Her muscles contracted, every spasm bringing on a flood of perspiration. It was intense enough to make her wonder if she was sweating blood....." (OTSOS: 3) The priest on the other hand Father Karrikan who impregnates her was free of such ostracism and in fact continues with his priestly duties. Here the author Sarah Joseph highlights the gender biased religious hierarchy that expects only the underlings in the hierarchy to suffer for the social and religious error committed by both the man and the woman. The author being a woman writer from the community feels the pain of the protagonist and flings a harsh irony on the religious norms and hypocrisy in dealing with what is considered as a grave transgression.

Janu, the protagonist of *Ancient Promises* also faces exclusion humiliation when she is unable to shake off her urban etiquettes in her rural marital home she is flung into. "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." (AP: 97)

To begin with, she faces with, to put in Lindner's words, conquest humiliation when she is overpowered by her physically powerful husband into meek submission in their first sexual encounter and then is faced with relegation humiliation where she is reminded of her low position in the family. Then with the birth of her mentally challenged daughter, she is pushed to the periphery of the household and is faced with exclusion humiliation. She talks of how her divorce ends thus: "My marriage ended today. Without the lighting of oil lamps and beating of temple drums, but in a cramped little divorce court, in the manner of these things." (AP: 3)

Lissy the protagonist of *A Video, a Fridge and a Bride* faces exclusion humiliation from all and sundry. Her parents especially her mother reminds her of her inadequate looks, dark complexion and is made to feel inferior. "She's dark, and no one would call her a beauty," replied her mother.... (AFVB: 4) But it hurt her to hear that it was her looks that decided them against the match, though she tried not to show it. (AFVB: 30) The number of prospective grooms and his relatives who subject her to objective scrutiny further humiliate her by enjoying all the delicacies set before them and finally rejecting her. "I have been looked up and down by two sets of horrid people in the past six months," declared Lissy. "Can't you leave me alone for a while?" "I'm not saying I don't want to get married. Can't you wait till I get this bank job at least?" It's easy for you. You never think about me or care for my feelings. Do you have any idea how humiliating it is to be gaped at and sized up and then dismissed?" (AFVB: 67) Each time a proposal came for Lissy she had to doll up and become an exhibit. The charade ended in further humiliation. Lissy was made to change into a sari each time a boy came to see her and when she was ready there was another humiliation awaiting.... (AFVB: 84) ... As Lissy walked back to her room she wondered coldly how many more times this ritual would have to be gone through before they got her married. She was certain this would not be the last: she was

not going to marry that moon-faced moron, not if her name was Elizabeth Cherian. (AFVB: 87-88) The persistent inflicting of pain on a day-to-day basis is what builds up into the psyche as a layering of wounds that result in the individual being emotionally traumatized. "... Do you know what it feels like to have strange men and women come look at you as if you were a cow up for sale, and bear with all their prying questions, only to be told you're not good enough for them? You don't know anything Renji. It's easy for you to talk." Lissy was sobbing..... "I know I'm not attractive, but I don't want to be told that over and over again. I have feelings, don't I? I want to be liked for what I am, just like anyone else," said Lissy, trying to control her sobs." (AFVB: 233)

According to Cathy Caruth, trauma is a greek word meaning a deep wound. Trauma was an expected adjustment made by the earlier women. It is now consciously being fore grounded as trauma. Lisa Henrichsen in her article entitled, "*Trauma Studies and the Literature of the U.S. South*" (2013) states that the origin of contemporary trauma theory can be dated to the 1980s and that trauma theory as field distinct in understanding the inferences of trauma whether in literature, culture or ethics began in the beginning of 1990s. Trauma theory became pervasive in providing stimulus to the evanescent humanitarian work with integrity and political authority. (606)

Trauma which was limited to what was seen "as something that has happened" but unspeakable earlier is now something that occurs even in a cultural context by inflicting pain daily - layer by layer on the psyche of the individual resulting into an emotionally traumatized individual. So Emotional Trauma is going beyond Cathy Caruth's definition of some ghastly incident that is embedded in one's memory or is thought of as something that is denied by the victim until it manifests in deviant behaviors by the victim. Emotional Trauma is the inflicting of pain on a day-to-day basis may be in small doses meant to humiliate and confine the victim to the peripheries of their social interaction. This is evidenced when Kutiamma's outburst to her daughter's inability to accept any proposals that come her way is expressed as, "Well, what do you want then? A Prince Charming? Don't forget you're not such a beauty," snapped Kuttiamma. (AFVB: 89). The intention may not have been to hurt Lissy but mother Kuttiamma is also expressing her frustration in not finding the right match for her daughter. This was mother Kuttiamma inflicting pain little by little working in the psyche of Lissy which is elicited as trauma.

Maurice Stevens in his article, *"From the Past Imperfect: Towards a Critical Trauma Theory"* (2009) also reiterates this by stating that trauma should be thought of as a cultural object rather than as something that can be a discerned or distinct event at a fixed time or place. Trauma, like cultural object navigates through various social factors giving it varied connotations and aids in producing varied social consequences (3). Hence the day-to-day infliction of humiliation builds upon an individual's psyche, and it effectually reveals itself in multiple social contexts giving rise to multiple social effects. This results in what is called *soul loss* in the traumatized individual. The various signs of *soul loss* are mainly inability to remember whole parts of your life, sudden onset of apathy or listlessness which cannot be shaken off, lack of enthusiasm, or ability to feel joy in life, personality missing or barely there, inability to receive or give love, chronic negativity, depression and addictive tendencies.

All these above characteristics are manifested in the lives of the three protagonists mentioned above. To be powerful is the motto for feminist movement. Alliance between capitalism and patriarchy brings the catastrophe for women. It designates sexism as the character of women's oppression. Simone de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* (1949) challenged male definitions of "woman" and called on women to define themselves outside the male/ female dyad. Women, she urged, must be the subject rather than the object (other) of analysis. Elisa Marder in her essay, *"Trauma and Literary Studies: Some Enabling Questions"*, opines that we need to find fresh skills to address the delayed effect that influence of events have and we need to heed to the indirect expression of strength of the happenings and literature is one of the ways to do so wherein various aspects of human involvement which cannot just be held within our common ways of utterance and may even surpass the extent of our human comprehension (2).

Furthermore, this fault line has caused the birth of a new identity within the traumatized individual which is an accumulation of changing factors right up until the time she describes it. That is why a spirited and urban Delhiite bred Janu in *Ancient Promises* turns into a docile and meek wife and daughter-in-law in the Maraar household up until the time when her daughter's illness challenges her to rise and fight for her. This new identity forces Lissykutty in *A Video, A Fridge and a Bride* to rebel against the social stigmas attached to her skin colour and lack of physical endowments and fight for her own place in the society. This is what enables Margalitha in *Othappu: The Scent of the Other Side* to carve an identity for herself despite the various humiliating experiences and ostracizing she

faced. This trauma is reiterated in Michelle Balaev's essay, "*Contemporary approaches in Literary Trauma Theory*" (2014) as causing "a disruption and reorientation of consciousness, but the values attached to this experience are influenced by a variety of individual and cultural factors that change over time" (4).

Literary trauma theory has moved from the early psychoanalytic method to a more theoretical position wherein a different set of issues, questions, and consequences have risen partly because of the inter-disciplinary approaches undertaken by psychoanalysis, cultural studies, and postcolonial theory. Statistics prove that women in Kerala face greater humiliation despite of their high rate of education and literacy and earning capacity in comparison to their male counterparts. This has created a gender imbalance and unequal society. The state which claims to be hundred per cent literate has not translated this into practical application as pointed out through these fictional narratives. The social practices enacted in the Kerala culture is translated into the private spheres of the individual and hence trauma becomes a lived experience. The culture and psyche of the individual in their social conditioning plays a huge role in the way a community adapts to their societal norms and expectations. "The Cultural Complex" theory explains how it is central to any conflict between many groups and is expressed in group life all the time. Thomas Singer in his essay, "*The cultural complex and archetypal defenses of the group spirit*" (2004) states that the word "Cultural complex was introduced by Samuel Kimbles by elaborating the notion of "cultural level" of the psyche. created by Joseph Henderson as "a much-needed theoretical space between the personal and archetypal level of the psyche" (13) These complexes though working as a median between these two levels of the psyche are also completely distinct; and are expressed in group lives all the time. When these complexes are activated, all the emotions of both the personal and archetypal domains flows through group life and its happenings. Hence Singer states these "'Cultural complexes" are lived out in group life, and they are internalized in the psyche of the individuals." (20)

Based on Cultural Complex theory, cultural complex is something between the individual psyche and the archetypal (here meaning the community) and is lived out in group life and is internalized in the psyche of the individual. We can deduce that the traditions and societal expectations are played in group life viz. in the community and hence is internalized by the individual of that community. So just as culture is imbibed by the individual, cultural complexes are also imbibed by individuals in a community. But the Jungian analysis gave greater focus to the individuation

process and tended to emphasize on the development of the individual out of his/her unique collective experience, it has not been helpful or clear in the differentiating of the individual from cultural complexes and so it has resulted in the overlooking of individual pain and suffering in the face of group trauma. Hence it is due to cultural compulsions certain areas of the Kerala women's lives are overlooked/camouflaged in the name of "the common/better good" of the society. Hence the individual trauma is camouflaged and that requires to be revealed – the differentiation of the individual, cultural and the archetypal (here the community) level of complexes requires careful attention as it is easy to ignore the trauma of personal/individual complex.

Sister Margalitha is expected to abort her child as it is in the interest of the religious institution she served and in the interest of the patriarchal society she lived in. Her brothers and mother meted out all four variants of Honour humiliation upon her viz. Conquest Humiliation, Reinforcement Humiliation, Relegation humiliation and exclusion humiliation without giving thought or consideration to her as being member of the same family. The society was more important than one's own blood relative. An example to illustrate this is an extract from the novel: ".....As they carried Margalitha out of the dark room, Paul was thoroughly embarrassed. She was in an obscene posture: left hand covering her breasts and the right, her privates. The wretched thing! Margalitha was still unconscious. On account of the putrid smell about her, it was difficult for anyone to approach her. Like a banana about to ripen, her body was not firm. Her lips had turned blue, her hands and legs were as cold as rainwater. While being carried out, she slipped through their hands and fell in a heap on the floor." (OTSOS: 43-44)

Lissy the protagonist in *A Video, a Fridge and a Bride*, is expected to doll up and go through the retinue of eyes assessing her as a material to be purchased from the market only to be humiliated by facing rejection. This cultural practice of assessing the bride (male gaze) is a societal and cultural expectation that has caused a great deal of stress and anxiety leading to trauma for the individual subjected to it. ".....There is always pressure on the girl's parents. When Cheriachen tells Joshua that the problem is not a small one and that it involves two lakh rupees, Joshua grins and says we must be willing to make concessions. You must have plenty of money in savings, you are an officer in the LIC, aren't you? Or we can sell a bit of property. You have five acres here, don't you? This is your only daughter, remember." (AFVB: 92)

Janu in *Ancient Promises* faces ridicule and is mocked at for her middle-class upbringing. Her father's occupation is ridiculed by her husband's younger sister. 'Do you know, I refer to your father as "Air Commode". Only air comes out on the lavatory. It always makes everyone laugh.' She giggled loudly and looked slyly at me to gauge my reaction." (AP: 88-89) Even the jewellery gifted by her parents become an object for ridicule. 'Oh look, Sathi, have you ever seen such tiny ear-rings? They're like your jumikis, only ten times smaller' (AP: 91). It is this extensive expectation of the society that causes imbalance in society producing members who are ostracized and therefore traumatized. This is cultural complex that is lived out in group life and internalized in the psyche of the individual. Thomas Singer, in fact, states further in his essay that the individual psyche is not adequate to bring about any change but that "the group itself will need to develop a consciousness of its cultural complexes the collective psyche will have to distinguish and that it is not the work of an individual alone..." (32). Hence an overarching change in the viewing lens of the community is necessitated to bring healing to the traumatized individuals. This cannot be done by one individual alone but by the collective efforts of the psyche of every individual to bring some sense of equity in the emotional well-being of the Kerala women.

Re Orientalism theory is exhibited here in the analysis of all the above-mentioned novels as they depict the way the native oriental writers/pan diasporic writers write about their own communities' flaws and raise concerns and questions that address gender issues and the resultant trauma that creates an imbalanced growth of their society. Ana Cristina Mendes and Lisa Lau who introduced Re Orientalism theory explain in the essay, "*Introducing Re-Orientalism. A New Manifestation of Orientalism*" (2011), that while Edward Said's *Orientalism* depicts "how the West designs the Orient, re-Orientalism shows how cultural producers with eastern association accepts an orientalized East." (1) Furthermore, Lisa Lau in her essay, "*Introducing Re-Orientalism Theory and Discourse in Indian Writing in English.*" (2014) elaborates that "Re-Orientalism discourses looks at how the contemporary Oriental authors comment on, challenge, change but occasionally also reinforce some of these Oriental practices, and with what/ which strategies" (4)

Only a native/pan-diasporic writer can understand and write with clarity the inner struggles of the protagonist and bring forth the dilemma faced by them. A western writer will never be able to gauge the fine cultural and societal nuances because it is not native to them. The struggles of a daughter-in-law with her mother-in-law is culturally relevant only when

described by a native writer. "..., a harassed mother of three children who also had to cope with a difficult mother-in-law and an endless stream of relatives who came to look up the old lady." (AFVB: 33) The indignation of Suma, Lissy's friend who is all for women's rights expresses her frustration at how the society functions. She is upset about the differential treatment meted out to the men and women. She questions why the decisive year of twenty-five is different for men and women. She says of the women "... No matter how brilliant they may be, their parents have only one ambition ---- to "dispose" of them as they say." "..... They start breeding, before their careers can take off. They can only start being serious about their jobs when the kids grow up. Which means a good ten years has been lost, and they are just at the bottom of the ladder when the men who started out with them have already established their reputation." (AFVB: 41).

The pan-diasporic writer Jaishree Misra in her semi-autobiographical novel *Ancient Promises* could reflect on the plight of the protagonist Janu because it was a lived-in experience of her life. Janu says, "..... 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. And when, as a Malayali girl growing up in Delhi, with Malayali parents but Delhi friends, and Malayali thoughts but Delhi ways...." (AP: 18) Sarah Joseph's *Othappu: The Scent on the Other Side* brings out the reality of the paradoxical Kerala society which praises a man/woman when they conform to the societal prescribed rules of behaviour and when they defy it are treated worse than animals. This depiction is possible only because the native writer has been exposed to such hypocrisy in her society. She writes of her protagonist Margalitha thus: "..... Margalitha had not imagined that the hurt of infamy could go so deep. Every word she heard said about herself shocked and startled her..... (OTSOS: 115).

The very society that venerates and glorifies priesthood strips Margalitha's lover, Father Karikkan of all of it and replaced it with searing mockery and disrespect. "..... Those who had till yesterday stood up on seeing him, praised him, feared him and loved him, were no longer to be seen. Today, people all around ridiculed him, said cutting things and mocked him..... The respect, worth and status he had once had in society were lost completely. He could not even say that he was a layman. No layman could be so ridiculed. At the mere sight of him, even the high and mighty in society used to rise respectfully, viewing him as a representative of God. Now even the man in the street hawked and spat at him. It was too

much for him to stomach. He could not step out and look people in the face or endure their voices. Their looks, laughter, signs, and signals all smacked of searing mockery." (OTSOS: 190)

All the writers mentioned in the chosen texts for this paper exhibit better understanding of the power dynamics at play in their own native culture and can, as native writers, better able to project these dynamics at play in their environment. Re-Orientalism theory though accommodates the viewpoints projected by the Western theories coated Indian writer in English, what pulsates through the veins of these texts is the heartbeat of the indigenous, native writer of the land. Hence a look at how they critically engage with the power dynamics at play is of utmost value. These writings depict stories of lives lived in an imbalanced society albeit with the façade of being the most literate and developed state in India. The issues highlighted here unless addressed stringently and effectively can severely hamper the balanced growth of society in Kerala.

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