



Blue Ava Ford Publications

International Journal of Trends in English Language and Literature (IJTELL)

An International Peer-Reviewed English Journal; ISSN:2582-8487

Impact Factor: 8.02 (SJIF); www.ijtell.com Volume-6, Issue-2; April-June(2025)

Modern Malayalee Women Writing: A Study of J Devika's Woman Modals

Mahi. S

Article Received: 03/03/2025
Published Online: 04/04/2025

Article Accepted: 03/04/2025
DOI:10.53413/IJTELL.2025.6208

Abstract

The Malayalam literary works of early nineteenth century and prior to it portrayed woman as submissive to her male counterpart, a victim of physical violation and social indictment. With the advent of the Malayala Brahmin reformism and *pennethuthu*, a term coined by writer and critic, K Satchidanandan to indicate women writing in Malayalam, the standardised female representation in Malayalam literature began to be challenged. But how far it has been questioned? This paper provides a perspective into J Devika's addressal of this issue in her essay "Housewife, Sex Worker and Reformer: Controversies over Women Writing Their Lives in Kerala" and will focus on her arguments, postulations and the limitations of her study.

Keywords: women writing, autobiography, Malayalee society, politics of representation

J Devika enumerates the alternative public spaces of a woman in modern Kerala in her groundbreaking work, "Housewife, Sex Worker and Reformer: Controversies over Women Writing Their Lives in Kerala" (2006). For problematising the 'self' of the *Keraleeya naari*, Devika has chosen *Ente Katha* (1973) by Madhavikutty and *Njan Laingikattozhilali* (2005), by a sex worker and activist, Nalini Jameela, which were both controversial best-sellers. She critically inspects the mainstream reception of both the autobiographies, the politics of the genre with relevance to contemporary Malayalee society. Devika begins her essay by defining her task that is threefold-to posit and trace both the texts within the origin, history and the dynamic space of gender in Malayalee modernity, to investigate the distinct socio-cultural contexts of discussion that shaped reception of these texts, and finally to analyze socio-



Blue Ava Ford Publications

International Journal of Trends in English Language and Literature (IJTELL)

An International Peer-Reviewed English Journal; ISSN:2582-8487

Impact Factor: 8.02 (SJIF); www.ijtell.com Volume-6, Issue-2; April-June(2025)

political repercussions in life-writing for women writers of autobiographies who are from distinct socio-economic backgrounds.

Her work is strategically divided into four parts. In the first two parts she peruses *Ente Katha* and *Njan Laingikattozhilali* across various discourses of gender in the modern Malayalee society while looking for points of divergence and convergence. In the final section, Devika focuses on the broader political and intellectual contexts that significantly shaped the public reception of these texts. In the last section she broadens her perspectives on why and how autobiography is politically manipulated by external forces such as editors or even by the writers themselves to suit the interests of the critics.

This essay is perplexing for a reader who is not preoccupied with Devika's other works that enormously establishes various theoretical formulations on modern 'Malayalee woman'. Her conceptions on an 'ideal', a 'domestic' and an 'aesthetic' woman in a Malayalee society in her essay "The Aesthetic Woman: Re-forming Female Bodies and Minds in Early 20th Century Keralam" (2005) are immensely riveting. Though Devika exemplifies the typical Malayalee narrow-mindedness in negotiating a woman's identity here, her own characterization of women as aesthetic, ideal and domestic which is strongly based on their familial or educational background is equally problematic. I will analyze this in the latter part of my essay. This essay is often quoted and cited in many works but is hardly put into question for the above aspect.

The first section titled "The revolt of the aesthetic woman" critically dissects Madhavikutty's *Ente Katha* and places it within the cross section of contemporary modernist society of Kerala. Like most of her works Madhavikutty's *Ente Katha* too abhors the notions on 'aesthetic' and 'domestic' woman and blurs the demarcating line between the two. According to Devika, this then signals the revolt of the aesthetic woman who is no more bound to please her husband or the people surrounding her. She just has to please her 'self'. Madhavikutty deglorifies the role of a house wife as "drab" and "demeaning" which is contrasted with the role of motherhood that is defined by playfulness, story-telling and empathy (Devika 1676). She reforms womanly 'body' through the depiction of homoerotic events in her life and in her open admission of her love for "female frivolity" (Devika 1676). Here, according to Devika, the aesthetic woman is contrasted with the 'domestic' woman. She postulates that "The aesthetic female body, adorned, fostered tenderly under the non-



Blue Ava Ford Publications

International Journal of Trends in English Language and Literature (IJTELL)

An International Peer-Reviewed English Journal; ISSN:2582-8487

Impact Factor: 8.02 (SJIF); www.ijtell.com Volume-6, Issue-2; April-June(2025)

objectifying touch/gaze of the loving male beyond patriarchy is contrasted to the domestic female body, imprisoned in self-control, a mere instrument for procreation and domestic labour, objectified by the dominating husband's lust"(Devika 1676). But patriarchy has commodified the 'aesthetic' woman and Madhavikutty laments for her. Madhavikutty's "spiritual striptease" of an autobiography further opens discussions on the homoerotic content on her autobiography and also a queer reading of her life (Devika 1676). Madhavikutty strongly condemns patriarchal notions of a 'modest woman'. Devika finds that the teacher-student relationship in the text is replaced with the couple loving beyond patriarchy which in turn is exemplified in the Radha-Krishna ideal. Also, her sexual meanderings then become her search for the ideal masculine beyond patriarchy which results in the quest for her own self. She tries to assert that a housewife is not bound in chains and she has multiple terrains outside the 'domestic' where she can explore herself without any societally sanctioned limitations on her body's pleasure. Madhavikutty is an 'aesthetic' woman bound to the domestic and should save herself from the clutches of 'home': to reorder everything material that is fragmented (Devika 1676).

Devika also finds Madhavikutty's 'intellectual kinship' with Lalitambika Antaranjanam, who was one of the earliest feminist writers of Kerala, to be profound. Both deals with similar themes in their writings as they were brought up under similar circumstances in Namboodiri households. Namboodiri women were called 'antharjanams', which translates as 'those who live inside' and who were 'like caged birds in their fortress home'. The women in these illams had to observe elaborate seclusion, and if they moved out of their homes, they were shielded by a cloak(putappu)and a large *cadjan* umbrella(kuta). Women in the illams carried out a highly ritualized form of domestic labour. They were subjected to a strict and Spartan sartorial code, and as with almost everything else, even bedecking the body was subjugated to ritual purposes (Devika 1676). Madhavikutty was strongly influenced by Antharjanam's 'new woman' that she had represented in her *Agnisakshi* (1976) and this is evident in *Ente Katha*.

The mushroom growth of Malayalee woman writing was an outcome of the prolific 'Pennezhuthu' movement of which Antharjanam's contemporaries like Saraswathi Amma and Balamani Amma were eminent exponents. But it is essential to note that these women were from the upper-class society and wrote about the upper-class agonies. The 'unheard melodies' of the lower-class society somehow remained unapproached for a long time. Nalini



Blue Ava Ford Publications

International Journal of Trends in English Language and Literature (IJTELL)

An International Peer-Reviewed English Journal; ISSN:2582-8487

Impact Factor: 8.02 (SJIF); www.ijtell.com Volume-6, Issue-2; April-June(2025)

Jameela's writings can be rightly acknowledged as those which speaks from the 'lowest of the lowest sections of society'; from a sexual worker's perspective (Devika 1677). In the next session titled "Revolt of the Bhrtya", Devika analyses Nalini Jameela's autobiography *Njan Laingikattozhilali*. Devika states that "If *Ente Katha* "imploded" the dominant womanly ideal, Nalini Jameela's *Njan, Laingikattozhilali* "explodes" it, announcing an oppositional voice in the Malayalee public." (Devika 1677). The 'veshya' or a prostitute was not depicted or was only marginally present in early 20th century Malayalee reformist discussions on the shaping of 'modern' womanhood. In the 20th century sexual self-control was found characteristic of both the 'modern' woman and man, and central to the ideal monogamous conjugality. The 'veshya' woman in this text is neither 'aesthetic' nor 'domestic'. She is obviously not the 'ideal' woman. Thus, Jameela's autobiography problematizes Devika's concepts on Malayalee woman: both domestic as well as the aesthetic. Jameela is a woman, who is yet to be defined; yet to be categorized. Though Devika addresses the fact that a sex worker permeates all her categorizations of aesthetic, domestic and ideal, she does not make any attempt to clarify her positions-the sex worker is attributed a revolutionary position but her "womanhood" is still in question.

'Bhrtya' in Malayalam means a servant or a labourer. It can also mean a 'dasi'. Devika finds that similar to the 'bhrtya' or the female labourer of the classical sanskrit typology, the narrator of *Njan, Laingikattozhilali* performs different kinds of productive, reproductive and sexual labour. So, she generalizes a sex worker as 'bhrtya' a term with rather commoditizing meaning. Though Devika criticizes the term 'prostitute', she herself attributes a patriarchal, subverting term for identifying a sex worker, who seems to be nothing more than a 'bhrtya'.

In her work, Jameela challenges the preconceived notions on a sex worker or promiscuous women and highlights the persistence of prostitution among poor women as nothing extraordinary. Also, the various boundaries that demarcates the workplace, home and the place of sexual labour are overlapping in Jameela's life writing when she suggests that the threat of sexual violence was equally forbidding in all these spaces. Thus, her life complicates Devika's notion of the aesthetic, domestic and ideal woman. Though Devika states that Jameela does not belong to any of her three distinctions, I believe Jameela's social identity or a sex worker's identity is one such figure that transgresses all these distinctions and yet is a



Blue Ava Ford Publications

International Journal of Trends in English Language and Literature (IJTELL)

An International Peer-Reviewed English Journal; ISSN:2582-8487

Impact Factor: 8.02 (SJIF); www.ijtell.com Volume-6, Issue-2; April-June(2025)

composition of all the three. She is domestic, aesthetic and ideal owing to the fact that she herself has a household and a family. She found the courage to come out of the closet to write her own life to mobilize and instruct millions like her. She is an ‘ideal woman’ comprising the above qualities. Thus, she is merely not a ‘dasi’ or ‘bhrtya’.

Jameela’s autobiography reveals the exclusions in a house hold and challenges the term ‘prostitution’ itself. For her it is an occupation, a job that a poor woman has to undertake naturally unlike an educated elite woman. Though she is compelled into this profession, ultimately it is her own choice. She chooses to call herself a *laingikatohilali*, or a sex worker, claiming the dignity of ‘tozhil’, that can mean both “labour” and “profession” in Malayalam. When she chooses a description defined by labour this indicates, according to Devika, the distance between elite centred notions of “womanhood” and the female labouring poor in Kerala. The very act of writing by a prostitute, that too an autobiography slams the stereotypical ‘aesthetic’ woman and the notion on the art of writing. This raised eye brows among the so called ‘moral’ elite critics and this in turn resulted in its commercial success. The public space of a woman is critically questioned while contrasting it with both domestic and aesthetic spaces of a poor uneducated woman. Jameela’s life writing thus contradicts Devika’s own arguments regarding the aesthetic and public spaces given her terminologies were largely based on educated working class woman.

The societal notion that a promiscuous woman’s life is full of sexual adventures devoid of any domestic relationships is thrown into contempt in Jameela’s life writing. In *Ente Katha* Madhavikutty’s sexual adventures are concealed safely within a domestic and private space while Jameela’s ‘work’ is out in the open. Devika substantiates how Jameela’s narrative has no explicit descriptions of sex and moreover she employs ‘amusing analogies’ while referring to sex. Jameela gives us a whole series of stories about being a wife, mother and devoted member of her husband’s family, long accounts of her daughter’s marriage (Devika 1677). Thus, her life is not devoid of a domestic space or a public space unlike perceived by contemporary notions. She too has a family and she too has a home to call a ‘home’ and she too can perform a grand wedding for her daughter. Her public life is contrasted with her domestic space. Moreover, Jameela writes how her life is pleasurable and her fantasies regarding her ‘work’. She characterizes her work as “counseling”, “therapy” and she claims to possess “expertise” in her work (Devika 1677).



Blue Ava Ford Publications

International Journal of Trends in English Language and Literature (IJTELL)

An International Peer-Reviewed English Journal; ISSN:2582-8487

Impact Factor: 8.02 (SJIF); www.ijtell.com Volume-6, Issue-2; April-June(2025)

In the third session called “Reforming Life Writing”, Devika analyses the critical reception of these two works. Devika recollects that “as soon as the first chapter of *Ente Katha* appeared, a flood of letters in *Malayalanadu* congratulated Madhavikutty, often comparing her to the Bronte sisters, and exulting that she was superior to Simone de Beauvoir: for the first time, a Malayalee woman-writer seemed to have achieved ‘world-standards’” (Devika 1678). Her autobiography brought home the fact how domesticity was “elite and sexually repressive” (Devika 1678). The celebration of ‘kamam’ or lust instead of ‘premam’ or love was critically praised (Devika 1678). Coming to Jameela’s *Njan Langikathozhilali*, Jameela chastises the system that contempt the sex worker but let off her clients. She asks us how a woman in an unhappy married life is different from a sex worker, only that the former does not get paid for her work. She does not sound a victim and this is the message she wants to convey to her fellow sex workers. Moreover, the feminists were compelled to think between the narrow gap of wifely and commercial sex. Devika is skeptical about how the unflinching focus on Jameela’s sex work obscures her class position as a poor labour woman (Devika 1680).

In her last section titled “Repelling the Reformer” Devika adjusts her critical focal lens to the various “touching up” in these autobiographies across editions, in order to suit the taste of the audience of Kerala. The very fact that Jameela’s autobiography had two different versions (one published in 2005 and the second in 2006) is thought provoking. The first version was more a socio-political satire but the second version turned out to be liberal in every aspect. Further many passages in the first which spoke about her clients were edited or excluded in the second edition. Madhavikutty in an interview mentions that *Ente Kadha* was actually written first in English and later translated into Malayalam by an unknown person (Devika 1681). But unlike Madhavikutty, who had a strong background of the Nalapattu Tharavadu (The brahmanic Nalapattu house hold had many literary figures including Balamani Amma, Madhavikutty’s mother), Jameela had no strong pillars to support her public disapproval. She had to indulge in an act of “correcting” her mistake by rewriting the entire text for a second edition owing to the public lash she faced even though her writing lacked any titillating narrations or depiction of sexuality like *Enta Katha*. For her, a successful autobiography meant more than an any economic advantage: it was her attempt to establish herself in a public sphere and to speak out in support of a million voices. In fact, the ultimate



Blue Ava Ford Publications

International Journal of Trends in English Language and Literature (IJTELL)

An International Peer-Reviewed English Journal; ISSN:2582-8487

Impact Factor: 8.02 (SJIF); www.ijtell.com Volume-6, Issue-2; April-June(2025)

aim of her endeavour was to raise empathy for the sex workers, including herself. Devika scrutinizes this fact and problematizes the genre of autobiography as well as the act of self-assertion in contemporary Malayalee society which reflects the gender, caste and class power hierarchies. (Devika 1681)

Devika's engaging inquiry into the realm of Malayalam woman autobiographies and the external forces that play in the authenticity of such writings mirrors the universal approach towards women writing their own lives. The only peculiarity is that the Malayalee society seems to be more predatory given its too ardent conventional notions. As I have mentioned before that Devika's essay is difficult to comprehend unless the reader is preoccupied with her critical works on anthropology. She draws immensely from her own theoretical formulations on contemporary Malayalee 'modern' woman. The main argument and the main theoretical framework of this essay is based on her theory on aesthetic, domestic and ideal woman from her essay "The Aesthetic Woman: Re-Forming Female Bodies and Minds in Early Twentieth-Century Keralam"(2005). In this essay she historically analyses the concept of a traditional Malayalee woman and differentiate it with her own 'modern' concept of 'aesthetic', 'domestic' and 'ideal' woman.

As discussed elsewhere in this paper, the limitations in Devika's inquiry are when she complicates her own theory of woman. By using the term 'bhrtiya' for distinguishing Jameela's revolt, Devika's proposed demarcation can be rightly viewed under a patriarchal linchpin. This essay is game changing or path breaking when it comes to the texts she has used for her study. Comparing and contrasting the work of a world-renowned writer Madhavikutty with a lesser-known individual like Jameela in itself is praiseworthy. Moreover, Devika has tried to substantiate her argument with her own theoretical frameworks from her previous work, which makes this article devoid of any abstractions that are not substantiated. Being an anthropologist herself, she has taken a commendable effort not to summarize her texts or to indulge in any kind of over-historicization of the theme she deals with. Furthermore, Devika problematizes the question of 'authenticity of representation' and 'authenticity of truth' in her treatment of the genre that she has chosen for her study and have substantiated how it is often compromised to suit the mainstream reception. Devika, with a precise conviction, undermines the various external forces that determines the reception of self-expression of a woman, with reference to a Malayalee audience.



Blue Ava Ford Publications

International Journal of Trends in English Language and Literature (IJTELL)

An International Peer-Reviewed English Journal; ISSN:2582-8487

Impact Factor: 8.02 (SJIF); www.ijtell.com Volume-6, Issue-2; April-June(2025)

References:

- Devika, J. The Aesthetic Woman: Re-forming Female Bodies and Minds in Early 20th Century Keralam. Modern Asian Studies.2005.Print.
- Devika, J. Housewife, Sex Worker and Reformer: Controversies over Women Writing Their Lives in Kerala. Economic and Political Weekly. vol.41.no.17. 2006.
https://www.academia.edu/3070156/Houseworker_Sexworker_and_the_reformer_controversies_around_women_writing_their_autobiographies_in_Kerala
- Madhavikutty. 'Bahutantreeka', Malayalanadu. 1976.Print.
- Madhavikutty. Ente Katha. Current Books, Thrissur, first published. 1973. Print
- E.S., Guptan Nair. Changampuzha. Sahitya Academy, 2001.Print.
- Jameela, Nalini (2005): (retold by I Gopinath) Oru Laingikattozhilaliyude Atmakatha, D C Books, Kottayam.-(2006): Njan, Laingikattozhilali, D C Books, Kottayam.Print.
- Antharjanam, Lalithambika. Agnisakshi. Mathrubhumi Press. Cochin. 1980.Print.
- Devika, J. En-gendering Individuals. Orient Longman Private Limited. 2007.Print.