

Writing the Body: Tracing *Écriture Féminine* in *Mattathi* by Sarah Joseph

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Abstract

Écriture féminine, a critical concept that emerged from French feminist theoretical discourse in the 1970s, designates a mode of writing that challenges the phallogocentric structures embedded within language and literary representation. Developed through the works of theorists such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, the framework foregrounds the inscription of female subjectivity, corporeality, and desire within textual practice. This paper examines the manifestation of *écriture féminine* in *Mattathi* by Sarah Joseph, situating the novel within the broader trajectory of feminist literary production in Malayalam literature.

Through a close textual analysis of the protagonist Luci's experiences, the study demonstrates how Joseph disrupts patriarchal linguistic conventions by employing metaphor, natural imagery, vernacular idiom, and non-linear narrative structures that privilege embodied female consciousness. The novel reconfigures menstruation, sexuality, romantic desire, and maternal longing not as sites of shame but as sources of creative and existential affirmation. Joseph's strategic deployment of feminine language resists masculine modes of representation by articulating women's lived realities from within rather than through external objectification.

Furthermore, the paper explores how Joseph's association of women with nature, use of regional dialect, and semantic ambiguity function as narrative techniques that destabilize dominant symbolic structures. By inscribing the female body and consciousness into language, *Mattathi* exemplifies an indigenous adaptation of *écriture féminine* that interrogates social, cultural, and psychological dimensions of women's oppression. Ultimately, the study argues that Joseph's writing constitutes a liberatory linguistic practice that reclaims female agency and redefines feminine identity within the socio-literary context of Kerala.

Keywords: *Écriture féminine*, Feminine Language, Female Subjectivity, Malayalam Literature, Patriarchy, Embodiment

1. INTRODUCTION

Écriture féminine, a term originating from the French feminist journal *Psychanalyses et Politique*, emerged in the 1970s through the theoretical work of French feminists such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray. This conceptual framework designates a mode of 'feminine writing' intended to challenge the hegemonic discourse of the symbolic order through a counter-language appropriate to feminine desire and difference. As Brooker elucidates, "In terms of its formal practice, *écriture féminine* would be experimental, subversive, spirited, playful, and excite something like the experience of *jouissance*" (85). Cixous contends that language inherently privileges masculinity, thereby contributing to the construction

of a patriarchal society in which women occupy subordinate positions and are frequently silenced.

Radical feminist discourse posits that if societal structures prove incapable of accommodating both sexes equitably, women must endeavour to construct alternative social formations and linguistic systems. French feminist theorists advance the more radical assertion that Western languages, in their entirety, are fundamentally male-engendered, male-constituted, and male-dominated (Abrams 104). Consequently, *écriture féminine* seeks to undermine the linguistic, syntactical, and metaphysical conventions of Western writing through its characterization by absences, ruptures, irrationality, chaos, and *jouissance*.

The inscription of female difference in language and text has been the primary concern of theorists including Hélène Cixous, Monique Wittig, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Bracha Ettinger. These scholars have demonstrated that language, as conventionally understood, constitutes a decidedly male realm that represents the world exclusively from a masculine perspective. Drawing upon Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, which posits that the structure of language is centered by the Phallus and that language within the symbolic order is representational—whereby a single signifier corresponds to a single signified—Cixous argues that the subject position of ‘woman’ or the ‘feminine’ occupies the margins of the symbolic and is thus less firmly anchored and controlled by the Phallus.

The concept of *écriture féminine* derives from Freudian psychoanalysis, which characterized women as incomprehensible, less moral, and less rational than men. Freud’s characterization of women as ‘the dark continent’ is appropriated by Cixous as a metaphor to celebrate the lack of control exercised over the position of woman within the phallogocentric symbolic order. Significantly, feminine writing is not exclusively the province of biological females; Cixous argues that any subject can occupy the marginalized position of ‘woman’ within the symbolic and write in *écriture féminine* from that subject position. While refusing to define or encode *écriture féminine*—recognizing that definition would constitute limitation and imprisonment within the logic of Western phallogocentric rationalism—Cixous paradoxically asserts that *écriture féminine* emanates from the female body, while simultaneously maintaining that men can write from that position. She contends that *écriture féminine* functions as a disruptive and deconstructive force, destabilizing the security and stability of the phallogocentric symbolic order, thereby enabling greater fluidity in gender, writing, and sexuality for all language-using subjects. As Kumar Das observes, “It is the body that creates a new language of its own not simply body language but the language in point. A woman gets her own voice and asserts her desire defying the patriarchal canon” (13).

American feminist critic Elaine Showalter defines the movement as “the inscription of the feminine body and female difference in language and text. *Écriture Féminine* places experience before language and privileges non-linear, cyclical writing that evades the discourse that regulates the ‘phallogocentric’ system” (179).

The concept of *écriture féminine* has significantly influenced numerous Indian writers, generating literature that fundamentally challenges existing patriarchal systems. Female writers have articulated their experiences through innovative linguistic practices, interpreting their lived realities through a new idiom. Sarah Joseph, a prominent figure in Malayalam literature, exemplifies this engagement with feminine language and feminine writing. Through her literary works, Joseph interrogates societal constructions of femininity and womanhood. Her writing impressively expresses the feelings, attitudes, imaginations, and inner conflicts of women, asserting that only women possess the experiential knowledge necessary to understand and articulate women’s consciousness authentically. Joseph’s works

are inherently liberatory and consistently powerful in conveying the conditions of oppressed groups. Her literary trajectory demonstrates increasing critical engagement, with her fiction attracting serious scholarly appraisal. She conceptualizes women and nature as interconnected entities, presenting them in dialogic relationship throughout her work.

2. Textual Analysis: Inscribing Female Subjectivity in Mattathi

Sarah Joseph's novel *Mattathi* occupies a significant position within Malayalam literature, grounding itself in the experiential reality of women within patriarchal society. Joseph guides readers toward an understanding of women's liberation from their enslavement within male-dominated social structures. She articulates women's suffering through distinctive stylistic choices, engaging with women's issues at social, cultural, and psychological levels.

Through the deployment of feminine language, Joseph successfully articulates women's experiences in *Mattathi*, presenting a distinctive voice of female subjectivity. The novel incorporates the experiences, dreams, emotions, feelings, and sentiments of women, refusing male language in favor of a linguistic practice differentiated from masculine discourse. Luci, the novel's central character, commands readers' attention from the narrative's inception. The term 'Mattathi' itself signifies her subordinate status within Brijitha's household. The narrative's treatment of Luci's menarche exemplifies the deployment of feminine language:

"Luci muringa marangalkidayilude nadannu pokunnu. Randu muringa marangalum ochayillathe ila peythu Luciye nanakkunnu. Mulamkadukal kilukkathode Luciyude kanamkal thodunnu. Kudapulimaram. Thenvatrikkaplavu, Luci valarthunna pasukkal, Adukal, Kozhikal, nattunanacha mulakuthaikal, cheerathottom, kovalukal, Adukkala purathe kakkakal, Mainakal, Muringa marathile kattu. Ella pullukalum vellaram kallukalum, Lucikkundu kaivechu. Luci prayam thikanju" (Joseph 12).

[Translation: Luci walked through the drumstick trees. Two drumstick trees shed their leaves silently, moistening Luci. The shrubs touched Luci's feet with their trembling. Tamarind tree, jackfruit tree, the cows Luci tends, goats, hens, the chilly plants Luci planted, the amaranthus garden, koval creepers, the crows outside the kitchen, small birds, and the wind in the drumstick tree—all participated in Luci's joy. All grasses and sandstones extended their hands to Luci. Luci attained maturity.]

Upon experiencing menarche, Luci summons Brijitha to articulate her joy: "njan vayasariyichu Elemme" [I have come of age, Elemme] (18). This expression demonstrates Luci's desire to communicate her feelings and pleasure to society without shame or disgust. The narrative continues:

"Ennal, Brijithaudeum, Saleenyaudeum sahayamillathe ippol Luci athariyunnu. Aval sneham niranja rakthathil kai mukki. Athu sooryante nere pidichu. Jeevante thilakkam! Luciyake ilakimarinju" (18).

[Translation: But now, without the assistance of Brijitha and Saleena, Luci came to know it herself. She dipped her hand in the blood of love. She held it toward the sun. The radiance of life! Luci's body trembled with joy.]

The phrase "Jeevante thilakkam" [the radiance of life] designates menstruation as the origin of being, a sensation experienced exclusively by women themselves. In *Mattathi*, Joseph articulates how women experience love, a phenomenology distinct from masculine experience.

The narrative employs natural imagery to convey Luci's romantic feelings:

"Luci veliyil randu koval vallikal padarthi vittu. Ilakal moodi valarnnu padarnnu oru pachapadarpundayi. Aganeyirikke kovalukal pranayikkunna kaalam vannu. Pachilakalkidayil vellappookkal nirannu. Thiripole kovakkagal thoongan thudangi. Nanunane oru cherukattu koval

vallikale thazhukikondu kadannupoyappol adukkalayil ninna Luciku vazhiyilude pokunna sethuvinte manamkitti. Aval odi muttathethi” (21).

[Translation: Luci spread two koval creepers along the fence. The leaves covered, grew, and spread to form a green canopy. Then came the season when the koval creepers made love to each other. White flowers filled the spaces between green leaves. Koval fruits began to hang like lamp wicks. When the breeze passed through the koval creepers, Luci, standing in the kitchen, caught Sethu’s scent. She ran to the courtyard.]

Joseph employs the fragrance of koval flowers as a metaphor for the arousal of romantic desire in Luci, expressing her yearning for union with Sethu. This indirect methodology—utilizing natural olfactory imagery to convey emotion—constitutes a distinctive feature of Joseph’s feminine language. The association of women with nature, manifest through imagery drawn from the natural world, represents a recurring motif in her work.

Joseph explicitly challenges Lacanian phallogocentrism through her portrayal of women’s objectification by male characters. The novel depicts this objectification through characters such as the butcher Kochappu, a college professor, and Wilson, all of whom regard women as property and sexual objects. Joseph deploys language as a strategic instrument to contest masculine discourse:

“...oarkappuratharunnu ...Aa...Saru randu kaikondum luciyude mukham valichaduppichu. Thulachukerunna pole kannilekku nokki. Chuvarilekkamarthi muzhuvanum kaikondu Luciyude mulakale anweshichu. Aakarathode chundilekkeduthu” (105).

[Translation: It was an unexpected moment...The professor grasped Luci’s face with both hands and pulled her close. His eyes penetrated deeply into hers. He pressed her entire body against the wall. With heated hands, he searched for her breasts. With excessive desire, he kissed her.]

Writers such as Joseph inscribe both body and consciousness within language, articulating women’s phenomenological experience. They advocate for a linguistic practice distinct from that of male writers, who represent the female body from an external, objectifying perspective. Feminist writing transforms this condition by articulating embodied experience, consciousness, feelings, and sentiments from a feminine subject position.

Women writers openly address sexuality, asserting that feelings and desires are not exclusively masculine prerogatives but belong equally to women. Joseph exemplifies this approach, presenting feelings and desires while conceptualizing the female body itself as a form of language for women writers:

“Kalvannayiletho arikkunnu enna thonnalodeyanu Luci njettiunarunnathu. Veetake puliurumbinte manam. Luci swasam pidichu kidannu. Kaal vannayil arichu nadakkunnathu oru puli urumbano? Aval anangiyilla. Anagiyal irukkum. Verpeduthan vizhamikkum aswasthatha, pedi, ikkili. Muttinu meethe thudakalileku arichu kayarunnu. Luci virangalichupoyi. Thante deham ethrartholam bangiullathum, mrudulavumanennu Luci arinjathanganeyanu” (103).

[Translation: Luci woke with a start, feeling something crawling at her feet. The entire house was filled with the scent of ants. She held her breath and remained still. Is that an ant walking across my feet? She did not move, knowing that movement would provoke biting. She experienced irritation, fear, and tickling sensations. It crawled from her knee up her thighs. Luci began to tremble. In that moment, she became aware of the softness and beauty of her own body.]

The character Brijitha performs a crucial function within the novel, interrogating patriarchal norms. Joseph’s female characters demonstrate awareness of their rights and responsibilities. Brijitha possesses

autonomous identity and expresses her opinions assertively:

“Brijitha sigarattu thattiparichu chundathu vechu. Oappen sigarattu lighter kathichu koluthi koduthu. Lighter enna athbuthathinmmel Brijithayude kannu koluthi. Engilum Oappane manapoorvam idichuthazhthan vendi sigarattu lighter kandillennu nadichu. kannilninum mookilninum pukakeri Brijitha chumachu. Kanilninum mookilninum vellam chadi. Luci oru pathram vellam kondu vannu Brijithakku koduthu. Vellam kudichu swasam nere ayappol Brijitha veendum sigarattu chundathu vechu” (52).

[Translation: Brijitha snatched the cigarette and placed it in her mouth. Oappen lit the cigarette with his lighter. Brijitha’s eyes were drawn to the lighter, a novelty to her. Nevertheless, she feigned indifference, determined not to give Oappen the satisfaction of her astonishment. The smoke caused her to cough violently. Tears streamed from her eyes and nose. Oappen and his companions laughed derisively. Luci quickly brought her water, and after drinking and recovering her breath, Brijitha resumed smoking.]

This passage illustrates Brijitha’s resistance to masculine authority and her determination to maintain her dignity despite physical discomfort.

Luci’s fantasy regarding romantic love further exemplifies feminine subjectivity:

“...Thanikkoru kamukanundayirunnengil than orikkalum avante apekshakale nirasikillennu Luci manasil urapichu. Avan nokiyal Luciyum nokum avan chirichal Luciyum chirikkum avan aduthekku vannal Luciyum adutheku chellum. Ottakkirunnu chirichu chirichu Luci Sethuvine thante kamukanayi sangalpichu” (21).

[Translation: Luci resolved in her heart that if she had a lover, she would never reject his overtures. If he looked at her, Luci would return his gaze; if he laughed, Luci would laugh with him; if he approached her, she would approach him. Sitting alone, laughing to herself, Luci imagined Sethu as her lover.]

Joseph foregrounds the significance of motherhood in Mattathi, recognizing childbearing as an exclusively feminine capacity. Luci’s inability to give birth constitutes a profound source of sorrow:

“...Valiyoru idivetti, luciyude kayyilirunna kunju nadungi. ariyathe lucy avane nanjodamarthi. Unarnnu karayum munpu avan vaaya pilarthi, luciyude mulayil urummi. Mulakannu anweshichu. Anjaaru nimishangal! Luci alinju mazhayayi. Aa cheruchhodine aakavunnathra shakthiyode aval jeevanilekku cherthu pidichu. Mazha pole peythu. Kaattupole veesi, manam marannu Luci ninnu” (197).

[Translation: Thunder crashed. The child in Luci’s arms trembled with fright. Instinctively, Luci pressed him close. Before he could cry, he opened his mouth and latched onto Luci’s breast. He searched for the nipple. Five or six moments passed! Luci dissolved like rain. She held the small questioner to life with all her strength. Showering like rain, blowing like wind, Luci stood, self-forgotten.]

The phrase “Luci alinju mazhayayi” [Luci dissolved like rain] evocatively conveys Luci’s maternal yearning. Joseph presents such matters through complex, metaphorical language. The novel employs numerous instances of semantic ambiguity and double meanings. Circumlocution constitutes a prominent feature of feminine language, creating a space for subjective interiority and thought.

3. Conclusion

The novel’s title itself embodies semantic duality. “Mattathi” denotes both washerwoman and midwife, while simultaneously signifying a girl occupying the position of daughter within a household. Throughout the narrative, Joseph employs the Thrissur Christian Malayalam dialect. Another distinctive feature of her language is the use of vernacular rural idiom. A representative example is “Kidavu,” meaning children—a colloquial term characteristic of regional speech.

When women write, their writing becomes a metaphor for feminine identity. Sarah Joseph deploys language as metaphor throughout *Mattathi*, representing the female consciousness, embodiment, feelings, and sentiments. Joseph interrogates fundamental questions of feminine being and desire, presenting these to society through the distinctive linguistic practice of *écriture féminine*—the language of feminine difference.

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