

## **Abstract**

### **Constructed Empowerment and Female Agency in Selected Works of Lajo Jose**

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This project critically analyses the portrayal of women in Lajo Jose's novels *Coffee House*, *Kanya Mariya* and *Ruthinte Lokam*. Although these novels foreground female agency and seem to offer a progressive representation of women in Malayalam crime fiction, this study questions whether such portrayal genuinely critiques patriarchal structures or simply hide them behind female-led narratives. Employing a theoretical framework informed by feminist critics including Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Bell Hooks and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak along with Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction, this study examines the construction of women's agency, voice, and power in Jose's narratives. It argues that these novels create a pattern of controlled empowerment, in which women occupy central narrative positions yet remain bound by pain, emotional labor, moral sacrifices and the validation by men. Though these characters resist, struggle and survive, their agency is symbolic and not structural. By revealing the tension between empowerment and restriction, this dissertation reveals that narrative centrality does not always contribute to feminist liberation.

CONSTRUCTED EMPOWERMENT AND FEMALE AGENCY IN SELECTED WORKS  
OF LAJO JOSE



*Project submitted to St. Teresa's College (Autonomous) in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of BACHELOR OF ARTS in English Language and Literature*

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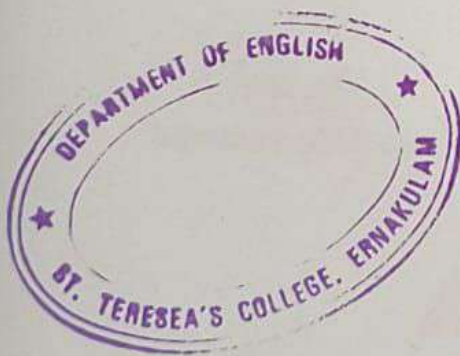
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## **DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that this project titled “Constructed Empowerment and Female Agency in Selected Works of Lajo Jose” is the record of bona fide work done by me under the guidance and supervision of Ms. Tessa Fani Jose, Assistant Professor, Department of English.

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## **CERTIFICATE**

I hereby declare that this project entitled “Constructed Empowerment and Female Agency in Selected Works of Lajo Jose” by Olivia T Xavier is a record of bona fide work carried out by her under my supervision and guidance.

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## Introduction

Crime fiction is a genre that has entertained readers with its complex riddles, twisty plots and psychological nuances. Popular conceptions about this genre have been conditioned through iconic figures like Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, and the writings of Agatha Christie. But crime fiction is not just about solving a crime. Its historical origins have to be traced in order to gain a perception of its cultural and ideological power. The modern detective story dates back to the nineteenth century. *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1841) by Edgar Allan Poe is considered a seminal work of this period. Crime fiction was popularized in the era of industrial revolution when there was a high urbanization and social changeover. With the migration of isolated rural groups to urban areas where people did not know each other, it was the beginning of fear, suspicion, and anxiety of crime. Crime fiction answered these social doubts with some assurance, that however shocking the crime is order would eventually be restored.

Although female characters were present in early crime fiction, they were depicted in vastly different ways as compared to that of male characters. This contrast is evident in Agatha Christie's portrayal of Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple. The logic, method, and authority of Poirot is celebrated. But the intelligence of Miss Marple is often portrayed as intuition, gossip, or as something which is characterized as womanly observation. Her interest in domestic activities such as knitting and gardening is highlighted, which is not the case with Poirot. His personality is characterized by a sense of reason and order. The problem, however, was not the lack of women in crime fiction but the narrowness of space that women characters could inhabit. Nevertheless, even the first female detectives like Mrs. Gladden in

*The Female Detective* (1864) broke the gender rules with their ingenuity and social skill and Nancy Drew, an independent and clever young woman introduced in 1930 was considered a bold outlier against the prevailing ideas of femininity.

Crime fiction was also able to establish a unique voice in Malayalam literature. The early Malayalam crime fiction was mainly based on linear problem solving. This genre began gaining popularity in 1970s and 1980s with authors like Kottayam Pushpanath. His novels were filled with mystery and included the elements of psychology, philosophy and science-fiction, which lead to the creation of iconic characters such as Detective Pushparaj. Nevertheless, similar to Western crime fiction Malayalam crime stories were still male dominated both in terms of authorship and protagonists. With the development of society, crime fiction started to change its focus from puzzles and began delving deeper into emotionality, trauma, guilt, power. Crime was no longer being introduced as a simple act but as an expression of internal and social conflict.

Over the last few decades, there has been an increased interest in female-oriented crime fiction within Malayalam crime fiction. This can be seen in the works of authors like Lajo Jose. Emotionally charged and psychologically complex in his narration of stories, Lajo Jose puts women at the centre of his works: as survivors, victims, detectives. His novels seem to defy traditional gender roles by letting women take up the narrative space, make choices, and lead the narrative forward. Instead of idealizing women as empowered characters, Jose introduces us to characters who are complex, suffering, and above all, surviving.

However a critical question arises after a closer reading of his Jose's works: Are these stories actually a critique of patriarchal structures or simply hiding them behind female led narratives?. This is not a question of skepticism but a question regarding the repeated

narrative pattern, especially in regard to agency, voice, and power. This project gives a deconstructive reading of three of Lajo Jose's novels – *Coffee House*, *Kanya Mariya* and *Ruthinte Lokam*, in an attempt to understand how the female agency can be constructed, constrained, or governed by the very structures that these novels seem to oppose.

This study is mainly based on feminist literary theory, especially the patriarchal discourse analysis, the theory of representation, and post-structural feminist ideas to explore the construction of the experiences, voices of women in these texts. This analysis is enlightened by feminist critics like Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler who emphasize womanhood as a social and discursive construction, critically examining claims of empowerment within patriarchal discourse. Furthermore, the ideas of silencing and internalized oppression and gendered power relations are applied to determine whether these female characters have real agency or operate according to patriarchal boundaries. The theory of deconstruction by Jacques Derrida is also used in this project and helps in revealing the contradictions, absences, and repressed meanings of these narratives. The process of deconstruction allows the reader to read between the lines, and to read what the text leaves out or does not express.

Feminist literary criticism and deconstruction enable this study to question not only who is speaking within these narratives, but also who controls the meaning, power and interpretation. The project is divided into two chapters. Chapter one presents the theoretical framework of this study by defining the major concepts of feminist literary criticism and deconstruction. It also discusses and covers the ideas of significant feminist critics like Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, bell hooks and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. This chapter also focuses on the feminist insights of

crime fiction and determines that there is a significant gap in the feminist theory of portrayal of women in Malayalam crime fictions, especially in the novels of Lajo Jose.

The last chapter provides a closer textual interpretation of the novels *Coffee House*, *Kanya Mariya* and *Ruthinte Lokam* by Jose and explores the construction of female characters as empowered and limited by the patriarchal narrative structures, using the theoretical knowledge present in the first chapter. The themes discussed in this chapter include emotional suffering, gendered spaces, narrative authority and controlled agency. This is done to suggest that the empowerment that women have gained in these novels is not transformative, but conditional.

This study is not aimed at disregarding the role of Lajo Jose in Malayalam crime fiction. Rather, it seeks to critically interact with his works by discovering not only what the story tells, but what it doesn't.

## Chapter 1: Feminist theory and Deconstruction

Centuries of patriarchal literature, which focused on male authorship and perspectives paved way to the advent of feminist literary criticism. Women were rarely or never portrayed as individual subjects but as objects of male desire and control. Thus, feminist literary criticism appeared in order to criticize and analyse the effects of patriarchy and gender on literature and to advance the inclusion of women voices and experiences. It also aimed at reconceptualising the traditional canons by focusing on gender as an important element in literary production and reception.

The first wave of feminism which emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century primarily focused on women's education and suffrage. In literature it focused on the recovery of women writers who had been long forgotten. The second wave of feminism had its genesis in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949). De Beauvoir in her work asserts that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (273). This statement underscores the idea that femininity is not natural but socially or rather patriarchal constructed. This idea of constructed femininity proposed by De Beauvoir is central to feminist analysis as it explores how texts imposes gender roles that appears to be natural. The second wave of feminism witnessed the rise of critics such as Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar. Gilbert and Gubar in their influential work *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), explored how woman who refused to submit to patriarchy are often portrayed as mad or hysterical. Madness becomes both a metaphor of resistance and a way of silencing. Elaine Showalter in her *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) makes a major development in feminist criticism through her concept of gynocriticism. It focuses own women as writers and subjects rather

than objects of male narration. She also brings the concept of a “double-voiced discourse”. She proposed this concept arguing that the writing of women is accommodative and defiant of the ideology of patriarchy. bell hooks in her *Understanding Patriarchy* (2004) states that human relations are structured using domination by patriarchy, reducing both men and women to rigid gender roles. Hooks writes, “Patriarchy has no gender” (2), so as to bring out the thought that individuals may internalize the same structures that oppresses them. After the first and second wave of feminist criticism the focus now shifts to postcolonial feminist criticism.

Postcolonial feminist criticism was led by critics such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. In her *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988), Spivak discusses how marginalized women or any women in general are often denied a voice. This highlights the problem of representation in literature. About who speaks for women and can their speech ever be authentic and free from the influence of the patriarchal and colonial discourses. She questions whether women characters are genuinely subjects or whether they are just objects of entertainment. *Gender Trouble* (1990) by Judith Butler destabilizes the category of woman. She does this by introducing gender performativity. For Butler gender is not a stable thing but something that is socially constructed. She argues that this construction is through the repeated performance of socially sanctioned behaviors. Butler’s theory questions whether the female strength as portrayed in literature is authentic or is it another performance of femininity constructed by patriarchal expectations. Her insights raise another important question: Whether the acts of rebellion in a work actually disrupts patriarchy or reinforces it?

When this broader idea is applied to crime and thriller fiction another pattern becomes visible. Women are frequently placed at the centre of the plot yet their power remains symbolic. Crime fiction research around the globe has indicated that even strong, smart female characters are molded to fit within patriarchal constraints. Their pain is used to build emotional depth. Their sufferings become the central mystery and their intelligence is only acknowledged when validated by male authority figures.

*Women Detectives* (1988) by Maureen Reddy reveals how women detectives who seem to be strong are still bound to gender roles and expectations that value male logic and rationality. In *Hardboiled and High Heeled* (2004), Linda Mizejewski contends that despite the bold heroines being presented in the thrillers, their power is something to be admired and not something that threatens to tear down the patriarchal structures. Priscilla Walton and Manina Jones in *Detective Agency* (1999) point out that many female detectives are central to the plot but peripheral to structural authority. This body of research indicates a recurring pattern, how female empowerment in thrillers is often symbolic rather than structural.

Gender in the Malayalam context has been examined by scholars of Malayalam literature such as Meena T Pillai, J. Devika, K M Sheriff and Nirmala Menon. Their writings emphasize how the Malayalam cultural writings tend to depict women as mere objects of pain or morally superior beings who can only attain power through sacrifice. Despite the growing popularity of Malayalam crime fiction, there has been neither major feminist study of Malayalam thrillers nor any extensive research on the representation of women in this genre. The portrayal of women in Malayalam thrillers in particular remains largely unexamined.

Lajo Jose, one of the most prominent contemporary writers in this genre consistently places women at the forefront of his stories. His novels portray them as bold and courageous. At first glance, this seems to be a progressive shift in Malayalam thriller writing. However a closer analysis reveals that the empowerment offered is not complete or unconditional. Crucially Lajo Jose's novels – *Coffee House*, *Kanya Mariya* and *Ruthinte Lokam* have not been examined through a feminist or deconstructive lens, having a major gap in this scholarship. Although his novels have been a commercial success and were commended on introducing potent female characters, there has never been an analysis as to whether this portrayal is actually challenging or supportive of patriarchal organization. It is in this gap that the current study comes in.

This study argues that Lajo Jose's novels create a pattern of what can be called "controlled empowerment". His female characters occupy central spaces but their strength is shaped by emotional sufferings, sacrifices, isolation and forms of rebellion that remains safe for the narrative. Ruth in *Ruthinte Lokham* appears strong and resilient, yet her pain and suffering becomes her primary identity. In *Coffee House*, Esther Immanuel is assertive and vocal but her power is diminished by the power of men. It is a sign that her resistance is still within the boundaries allowed by the story. Sister Mariya and Sister Agneeta in *Kanya Mariya* do resist the oppressive conditions, but these resistances are presented as personal and emotional, not structural. Across these three novels women's strength is acknowledged, yet it's contained. The tension between appearance and reality forms the core concern of this study.

To examine this tension Jacques Derrida's concept of deconstruction is used. Deconstruction argues that meaning is never stable. It holds that there are internal contradictions present in the texts that weaken the surface meaning of the texts. The idea of deconstruction aids in the display of the fact that a text can pretend to give women power, but in fact restrict them. It reveals instances when characters appear to be strong, but made to suffer individually, speak loudly but unheard.

Thus, this research argues that although Lajo Jose highlights strong women, their strength is not autonomous but negotiated within the limits of patriarchy. This study deconstructs the presentation of women in Lajo Jose thrillers by a mix of general knowledge of gender construction and a deconstructive reading that delivers women as empowered but subtly restricted in their promise of liberation. This project is an exploration of how pain is romanticized, how survival becomes solitude and how rebellion is allowed but limited, creating an intricate and sophisticated interpretation of the representation of women in Malayalam crime fiction

## Chapter 2: Constructed empowerment

Contemporary Malayalam crime fiction frequently places women at the centre of their narratives and often representing them as assertive, capable and resilient. They have begun to celebrate stronger and more visible female characters. Lajo Jose is often praised as one of the writers contributing to this shift. His novels are widely read and appreciated for their astonishing plots and female characters that appear central to the story and enjoy wide readership and commercial popularity. His book *Ruthinte Lokham* was adapted into a movie named *Bougainvillea* and won seven awards at the 55<sup>th</sup> Kerala State Film Awards including best screenplay.

Jose's female protagonists are not merely side characters but drive the narrative forward with their decisions, emotions and conflicts. At the surface level he seems to offer a fresh portrayal of women in his works, who appear stronger than the traditional female figures seen in older Malayalam thrillers. Because of this his works are often considered as progressive in their representation of women. Characters like Ruth, Esther Immanuel, Sister Agneeta and Sister Mariya are often read as signs of progress in this genre.

However this appreciation also makes a closer examination necessary. When a writer is widely appreciated for his portrayal of strong women it becomes important to ask what exactly this strength looks like, how it is constructed and whether it is truly challenging patriarchal norms or only appears to do so. Representations that seem empowering on the surface may still carry deeper contradictions; therefore there is a clear need to look beyond

the initial impression and examine how these women are written and whether empowerment in these novels is structural or merely symbolic. To understand how this surface level empowerment is produced it's necessary to examine the specific ways in which Jose constructs his female characters across his novels.

By looking closely at the three selected novels, *Coffee House*, *Kanya Mariya* and *Ruthinte Lokam*, it becomes possible to trace the patterns through which Lajo crafts his female protagonists and the kind of strength they are allowed to embody. This chapter therefore focuses on the representational strategies through which the three novels build, maintain and foreground female agency.

In *Ruthinte Lokam*, Ruth is shaped through a mix of vulnerability, emotional depth and a really slow self- realisation. The aspect of empowerment is mainly established based on the slow efforts made by Ruth in trying to understand her broken identity. This novel opens with Ruth's retrograde amnesia and this condition becomes the central narrative device. At the surface level she is presented as resilient because she continues to function despite the absence of her past. The depiction of Ruth works at two levels, empathetic level and narrative susceptibility. She is made out to be a woman that manages to survive, but a closer examination shows that her perceived power is moulded by the fact that the novel is trying to frame trauma and pain as her mark of identity. Ruth's amnesia becomes the lens through which the reader understands her. As she isn't aware of her past, she becomes entirely dependent on the story the world builds for her. And this vulnerability is presented as a gentle and admirable quality. This creates the appearance that she is rebuilding herself which seems empowering. However, this empowerment is defined by the suffering; her pain is the

main argument that makes her look strong. This matches what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar says- women are often shown as “strong” only because they have endured trauma. Suffering becomes a pathway to strength and the text doesn’t seem to question whether this suffering is necessary.

Her imaginary children and sensitivity are portrayed as components of her emotional richness, which provides her with a special inner world. This emotional richness is, however, a conventional feminine requirement that is sensitive to patriarchal discourses. Judith Butler’s idea of gender performativity can be seen here. Ruth’s emotional fragility presents strength in a way society traditionally accepts for women, soft, gentle, suffering, inward-looking. Even her investigation of her past is not based on rational, external inquiry but inward intuition which again aligns her strength with what patriarchy defines as “feminine.”

The theory of gender performativity as applied by Judith Butler can shed some light on the enactment of femininity by Ruth in terms of emotional labor, care, tenderness, self-introspection, suspicion. These characteristics produce the feeling of empowerment as they put pain in the context of virtue, not of oppression. Ruth’s attachment to the house intensifies this performance. Home turns to be her haven as well as her prison because any effort to go outside the home brings flashbacks, and the world outside the home becomes unknown and dangerous. Here one can see the concept of constructed femininity by Simone de Beauvoir, that the woman’s “natural” place is indoors, while the outside world is coded masculine, dangerous, and overwhelming. The fact that Ruth relies on the house that Ronald constructed on her behalf turns which out to be the source of both her trauma and her sufferings and, therefore, the approach of domesticity as the place of comfort and control is demonstrated as

well when she is healed within closed corners. Therefore, the notion of Ruth being empowered is strongly connected with the patriarchal concept of safety, silence, and emotional suffering.

Despite being surrounded by people, Ruth remains emotionally isolated. She carries her psychological load herself and this is the reason why bell hooks noted that the patriarchy tends to condition women to regard emotional pain as their own fault. Her strength seems impressive yet limited and framed into the patriarchal demands.

Esther Immanuel embodies empowerment *in Coffee House* in a more precise way. Contrary to Ruth, Esther traverses the social environment, raises her voice and questions authority, and is not afraid of opposing the evil. At first glance, she appears to be the embodiment of a modern feminist heroine. Esther is said to be the protagonist, yet the male police officer Chris holds equal narrative space as her. Gayatri Spivak's question, "Can the subaltern speak?" becomes relevant here. Thus, the novel allows her to speak but does not allow her to define meaning.

Esther's confidence is also framed by traits traditionally coded as masculine, such as aggression, bluntness, physical confrontation. Here, Butler's theory becomes relevant again as Esther's boldness is not presented as an expansion of femininity but as an imitation of masculine behavior. Such representations tend to strengthen patriarchal expectations, since feminist theory tends to caution that this kind of representation reinforces the idea that real power is a masculine prerogative, even in the instances when women are playing such roles.

The magazine for which Esther works; “Kuleena” is another major symbol. On the surface, it is a progressive space for female expression. But its elitist name suggests that only certain women, urban, educated, modern can participate or rebel. Esther’s representation reflects a narrative strategy comparable to what Showalter terms “double-voiced discourse”. Esther speaks as a modern woman but within boundaries that elevate a specific class, not women as a whole.

The personality of Esther is inadequately developed. Even though the novel states that she lives separately with her family, the author does not sufficiently elaborate her past life or the events that influenced her decisions. The reader is not able to learn more about Esther than that she prefers an expensive cafe in Kottayam and drinks alcohol occasionally and not allowing the reader to know of her deeper psychological and emotional depths. This is especially salient when compared to the elaborate description of trauma and suffering Lajo Jose gives to the protagonists of *Kanya Mariya* and *Ruthinte Lokam* wherein their pasts are meticulously unbundled to produce sympathy and a sense of narrative. The lack of such an interaction with Esther’s past leads to an intriguing question: does the text implicitly imply that the history of a woman is only worth telling when it can be characterized by a noticeable pain and emotional suffering? By doing this, the novel runs the risk of diminishing the subjectivity of Esther to lifestyle markers instead of giving her the narrative seriousness that other female protagonists receive.

*Kanya Mariya* presents empowerment within one of the most restrictive institutions, the convent. In this case, strength is manifested in perseverance, moral doubt and spiritual strength. Sister Agneeta comes out as a character that questions injustice in a silent yet stern

way. Her ethical decisiveness is similar to what Showalter defines as the inner authority of women, where power is realized not by structural authority but by moral authority.

Sister Mariya's journey is shaped by intense psychological suffering and her emotional endurance becomes her defining quality. The narrative repeatedly aligns her purity with her pain, a pattern familiar in Malayalam literature, where women gain moral authority through sacrifice. This reflects the observation by bell hooks that patriarchy rewarded women who silently endured and penalized those who openly protested.

Her final act of violence appears to be liberation, but it is also framed as a breakdown. This fits Gilbert and Gubar's idea of the "madwoman" — women who resist are often represented as unstable, emotional or spiritually overwhelmed. Resistance becomes an emotional explosion rather than an intellectual or political act. Even in the final scene, after everything she endured Sister Mariya finds comfort in her habit. This implies a sense of attachment to the institution which caused her trauma, a psychological dependence, as de Beauvoir explains where women internalize the same structures that bind them. Her loyalty to the convent softens the appearance of her rebellion.

Thus, on the surface, the women in *Kanya Mariya* appear strong because they endure, question and survive. But their empowerment is expressed in forms patriarchy finds safe like emotional strength, moral purity, quiet resistance and eventual breakdown.

When combined, the figures of Ruth, Esther, Sister Mariya and Sister Agneeta demonstrate a scene of narration where women are placed as one of the central figures in these stories, which are emotional in complexity and strong in visual testament. The fiction

of Lajo Jose is repeatedly anticipative in its presentation of women who are challenged by trauma, corruption, institutional silence and emotional fragmentation. At the surface, these depictions appear to point to a change in the Malayalam crime fiction, one that puts women as productive agents rather than passive spectators. The womanly passion of Ruth, the unashamed gumption of Esther, and the female rebellion of the nuns in *Kanya Mariya* all seem to be combined signals in a direction of acknowledging the female agency in a genre where male rationality and power has been traditionally the norm.

In all three novels, emotional work seems to be the key to the creation of feminine power. The silent emotional sufferings of Ruth, the hidden pain of Esther under her daring, and the spiritual pain of the nuns are the reflection of the idea of emotional labor introduced by Arlie Hochschild.

Patriarchy rewards women who bear emotional burdens without complaint. In Lajo Jose's fiction, emotional labor is celebrated as strength, masking the expectation that women must absorb emotional pain as part of their identity. All the three characters suffer, and the narrative seems to glorify this suffering.

The novels also regulate space in a gendered way. Ruth's world collapses outside the home, Esther faces backlash in public spaces and the nuns are restricted to the interior spaces of the convent. These portrayals align with Doreen Massey's theory that patriarchal societies divide space along gender lines. Women are permitted emotional or domestic spaces but denied stable authority in public or institutional spaces. Whenever women cross boundaries, step outside their home, challenges public authority, confront institutional corruption, they face punishment or psychological collapse.

Another recurring pattern is the trope of the “exceptional woman.” Ruth’s emotional depth, Esther’s boldness, and the nuns’ moral strength mark them as extraordinary individuals. But the “exceptional woman” does not challenge patriarchy. In *Kanya Mariya*, except for Sister Mariya and Sister Agneeta the rest of the nuns are portrayed as either corruptive or not daring to raise their voices against injustice. This reaffirms the notion that it is only the exceptional and extraordinary women who can withstand oppression and the system no matter what will remain unchanged. This stereotype makes it impossible to transform the system with feminist intentions, as it isolates empowerment on an individual basis.

Lastly, the narrative gaze is explicitly gendered. Laura Mulvey’s male gaze applies not only to cinema but also to narrative structure. Even when the women act decisively, the meaning of their actions is filtered through male-coded values. In *Ruthinte Lokam*, the villain, Ronald is given narrative authority and it is through his eyes we understand Ruth and what she is. His interpretations shape Ruth. Ecclesiastical authority frames Sister Mariya’s rebellion. Thus, the women act, but the narrative determines the significance of their actions. Their agency is visible but not autonomous.

Taken together, these strategies, emotional labor, spatial confinement, narrative gaze, exceptionalism, and symbolic rebellion show that the women in Lajo Jose’s fiction are given prominence without autonomy.

They move the story forward yet are not able to break the systems which make them who they are. They are incredibly resilient in the face of trauma, corruption and institutional silence, but their power is never exercised outside of limits. They shine, but only in ways that

do not threaten the system. They resist, but their resistance is contained. They appear empowered, but their empowerment remains constructed and controlled.

Thus, the overall picture that emerges is not just one of simple empowerment, but of empowerment produced through carefully balanced contradictions. The novels highlight women who fight, endure, question, and resist, yet who remain enclosed within emotional, social or institutional boundaries that limit the scope of their autonomy. These portrayals are neither wholly regressive nor fully liberatory. Instead, they are in an intermediate place in which centrality and constraint work simultaneously. This multi-layered narrative stance is what makes the female characters of Lajo Jose so powerful, however, at the same time indicates the hidden tensions, which their representation carries.

This complex relationship between the visible and the invisible, between spectacle and subdued expression makes the fiction of Lajo Jose so fascinating, his female characters so convincing, complex and emotionally satisfied, although not free. Their empowerment is not revolutionary but conditional that is given, glorified and is dealt with by the very same patriarchal system that purports to be honoring them. It is within this tension between appearance and limitation that the complexity and the contradiction of Lajo Jose's representation of women become unmistakably clear.

In spite of these tensions, popular readers tend to read these characters as in a doubtless empowered state. The rush of the thrillers, the emotional immediacy of the story, and the dramatic turns in the context of the women, promote a superficial reading that dwells on the visibility of the women and not the circumstances that define it. Screen time or narrative centrality has often been confused by readers with the notion of empowerment,

ignoring the implicit limitations, which are present within the text. Such a misunderstanding is not a random occurrence but an outcome of the way the novels place emotion and trauma as markers of power that makes it simple to audiences to glorify the women disregarding the systems by which they are governed. Through this commercial popularity strengthens an illusion of progress and glorifies empowerment and avoids contradictions which complicate it.

The commercial success of the novels by Lajo Jose also contributes to the perpetuation of such a celebratory misreading. Popular fiction is based on emotional intensity, mystery, and moral drama and these elements can cover over the subtler ideological tensions. The fragmented memories of Ruth, the confrontations of Esther, the pain that Sister Mariya endures, that the readers hardly take time to analyze how the story inhibits their freedom. The narrative distraction of the thrill-based momentum is that the unfolding of events is so fast that it gives the sense that the women are active participants, although such agency is strictly regulated. Consequently, the narratives commonly become accepted by commercial viewers as feminist-agenda-driven, not due to the absence of patriarchal framing, but because the excitement of the narrative obscures its ideological boundaries.

These patterns also reflect the expectations of the crime-fiction genre itself. Crime stories are often framed by trauma tales, suspense, and emotional tension as drivers of the plot, and women are often put at the center to receive this emotional discharge. Their pain gives depth, their defenseless makes it more suspenseful, and their resilience raises the stakes of the story. Since the genre is more concerned with the internal drama and psychological

crisis, the process of empowerment is developed under the preexisting conditions of emotional resilience, but not the structural autonomy. Women are transformed into instruments of storytelling, agents of secrets, agents of violence, and agents of guilt which create tension and restrict the extent of their authority. Even though surfaced with progressiveness, novels by Lajo Jose retain this genre-determined model of feminine power, in which empowerment is dramatic but not often transformative.

These narrative trends are also echoed in a larger pattern in the representation of the Malayalam culture. The figure of the suffering woman whose sacrifice is her subsequent moral strength has been long revered in Malayalam literature, cinema and television. Since the mother in movies is self-sacrificing and the wife in TV shows is virtuous, women are made to be strong by virtue of their being as they face and not because they fight. It is this cultural beauty, in which human pain is canonized and silent tolerance glorified, that defines the way female power is identified and praised by viewers. The characters in Lajo Jose are not an exception: the suffering of Ruth endears her, the emotional impact of Esther makes her appealing, and the sacrifice of Sister Mariya makes her memorable. Their empowerment is reflective of the Malayalam culture which tends to exalt resistance and evade conflicts with the system in terms of inequality. In this way, the novels are seen as more progressive in the context of culture, although they reproduce the norms that they are apparently opposed to.

Combined these reader reactions, expectations of the genre, and cultural patterns contribute to the major argument: the empowerment in the fiction of Lajo Jose is created, glorified, and eventually suppressed. The women become radiant, not because the world has been made to suit their independence, but because the story lines their pain, visibility and

emotional work into legitimized forms of strength. These characters may be appropriated by popular reception as signs of a process of gaining ground, yet a more thorough interpretation shows that their agency is subject to a complex set of restrictions; restrictions that are governed by both the conventions of the genre and by the requirements of the culture. It is in this complex play of narrative building and cultural interpretation that the real depth of empowerment in the thrillers of Lajo Jose can be seen.

## Conclusion

This project set out to examine whether the women in Lajo Jose's *Ruthinte Lokham*, *Coffee House*, and *Kanya Mariya* can be considered as truly feminist representations or whether they are indeed challenging patriarchal systems or merely quietly upholding them. The research revealed the numerous layers in which women are made visible but manipulated, central but restricted, powerful but disciplined in the fictional world created by Lajo Jose through the combination of feminist literary criticism and deconstruction.

Through the analysis, a general trend was established. The women in these novels are in the centre of the narration, but not of power. They propel the story, contain emotional depth, and have some agency, but this agency was never created with structures that come before it. Ruth is a survivor, Esther is outspoken, and Sister Mariya is not willing to conform to institutionalized femininity that is characterized with suffering, enduring emotions, sacrifice, moral purity, and being confined, yet she ends up in all these figures as the longstanding stories of femininity associated with patriarchy.

A feminist reading shows how their empowerment has to be based on the same conditions that are intended to suppress them. The power of Ruth is built with the pain of emotion, the courage of Esther can be viewed only with the support of men, and the opposition of Sister Mariya is explained in the words of spiritual instability. Their struggles are romanticized in the narratives but never completely questioned in regard to how the structures contribute to the existence of such struggles. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar postulate that female depth is associated with suffering again and again. The silence of the

pain, as bell hooks claims, is rewarded by patriarchy and gendered performances as Judith Butlers reminds us are not necessarily a free choice. These theoretical lessons help one to understand how even the most progressive images may strengthen ancient forms of containment.

The deconstruction also reveals the ways in which these texts destroy their superficial projections. At times, when the events are libratory, contradictory issues are concealed. A woman speaking is not listened. The woman who is disobedient is punished emotionally. This means that a traumatized woman is left to fight on her own. A woman who takes up the space should be careful. These cracks reveal that the fictions of Lajo Jose are based on authorized empowerment, which is authorized strength that is not only tolerated but also celebrated and appreciated but never enabled to make any significant changes to patriarchal order. The women perform, and the format exists.

The bigger picture of this project is that centrality does not entail liberation. Visibility is not autonomy. Emotional intensity is not empowerment. The female characters of Lajo Jose are incredibly complicated, intriguing and of a narrative importance but they occupy a space where femininity is not permitted to be expressed but rather done in the manner of way that is not offensive to the traditions of the patriarchy. They are recognized as strong, not emancipator. Their opposition is great, but turned about. It is not in doubt that they are prominent, albeit carefully regulated.

This paper then concludes that Lajo Jose is pointing towards feminism, but fails to make it. His description of women does become a change in the Malayalam crime fiction. One that introduces female characters to the limelight, but the transition is still not complete

and conditional. The narratives are repeating old conceptions of womanhood in the name of modernity and creating a female agency on the basis of emotional labor, suffering and exceptionalism instead of structural freedom or collective empowerment. The results of this study are part of the new scholarly debate on the subject of gender in Malayalam popular fiction, specifically in the genre of the thriller, where there has been less academic interest.

Finally, this project holds that the women in the thrillers that Lajo Jose writes are luminous, to a certain extent. They are powerful, but rarely free, central, but not autonomous, expressive, but not transformative. Their representation is the clash between empowerment and control and this clash is the heart of the fictional world of Lajo Jose and the main critical point of this paper.

Ultimately, this project argues that the women in Lajo Jose's thrillers shine brilliantly, but within limits. They are strong, but seldom free, central, but never autonomous, expressive, but not transformative. Their representation captures the tension between empowerment and control, and it is this tension that forms the core of Lajo Jose's fictional world and the central critical insight of this study.

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