

Autobiographies as Resistance: Reading the Lives of Malayalee Nuns

OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 13

Special Issue: 1

Month: October

Year: 2025

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

Citation:

Bhagyalakshmi Mohan.

“Autobiographies as Resistance: Reading the Lives of Malayalee Nuns.” *Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities*, vol. 13, no. S1, 2025, pp. 37–41.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v13iS1-Oct.9852>

Dr. Bhagyalakshmi Mohan

Assistant Professor of English

Bharathidasan Government College for Women, Puducherry

Abstract

*This paper is a reading of the autobiographies *Amen: Oru Kanyasthreeyude Atmakadha (Amen: The Autobiography of a Nun)* by Sister Jesme and *Karthavinte Namathil (In the Name of Christ)* by Sister Lucy Kalappura. These texts conceptualise the authors' lived experiences as nuns and interrogate the structures of religious institutions that seek to subjugate women. The paper examines these works as acts of resistance and self-articulation, analysing how they challenge institutionalised notions of Catholicism. The paper, thus, explores the differences they portray in their texts in relation to how women religious are positioned within ecclesiastical power structures. This paper employs content and discourse analysis grounded in feminist criticism to analyse the texts as acts of resistance by nuns, which call for reform within institutional structures.*

Keywords: Catholic Nuns, Patriarchy, Religious Catholicism, Autobiography, Articulation, Resistance, Agency, Reformism.

Autobiographical writing by women occupies a pivotal place in the history of women's writing. “The processes of subject formation and agency” (Smith and Watson 5) are crucial in autobiographies. When societal ideology and institutionalised notions that attempt to sustain their interests have multiple ways to subjugate women, autobiographies become essential for women to highlight their differences, assert agency, and challenge hegemonic discourses. “Women ‘s personal narratives embody and reflect the reality of difference and complexity and stress the centrality of gender to human life ... (they) provide immediate, diverse and rich sources for feminist revisions of knowledge” (qtd. in Smith and Watson 11). Autobiographies become political and controversial when the questions posed challenge the institutional frameworks.

When Sister Jesme resigned from the Congregation of Mother of Carmel in 2008 and wrote *Amen: Oru Kanyasthreeyude Atmakadha (Amen: The Autobiography of a Nun)* in 2009, it sparked numerous controversies in the public sphere of Kerala. This is visible in the comments and opinions that appeared on social media, which try to humiliate the nun and those who support her. The case was no different when Sister Lucy Kalappura published her autobiography, *Karthavinte Namathil (In the Name of Christ)*, in 2019. The narratives of the nuns can be viewed as an act of resistance. This paper examines the autobiographies written by the Malayalee nuns Sister Jesme and Sister Lucy Kalappura, who have shocked the mainstream Malayalee society by articulating their experiences and differences regarding how nuns are treated in the ‘sacred space.’ The paper attempts to

analyse their articulation of dissent as institutional resistance by positioning their individual voices within the ecclesiastical power structures. Thus, by examining the autobiographies written by nuns at different time periods, the paper highlights the reformist impulses that challenge the patriarchal notions of religious Catholicism.

Sister Jesme, born Meamy Raphael into a middle-class Catholic family in Thrissur, Kerala, began her religious training in 1974 and served the congregation. She graduated with a rank from Calicut University, completed her M.Phil. and Doctorate in English Literature, and served as a college professor and principal in several reputed academic institutions in Kerala. She defies her identity as a secluded nun, stating that her interests encompass cinema and social activism. She juxtaposes quotations from the Bible and films, declaring herself an individual who enjoys the companionship of both men and women.

In her autobiography, which she writes after leaving the convent, when the authorities wanted to curtail her voice by labelling her as mentally unsound, she reflects on her life and experiences as a nun. She considers writing her autobiography as a “therapy” that can heal her wounds (Jesme 9). At the same time, her devotion to Jesus is prominent, and she clearly points out that her fight is against the institutions that underrate them as subservient beings.

Her bonding with her mother is immanent in the narrative. Her mother always offers a receptive ear to her and expresses her emotional support. She did not want Jesme to be alienated and sent to a lunatic asylum. Her mother says: Should anyone attempt to commit you to a mental hospital against your will, refuse to comply. Tell them clearly that your father is deceased but your mother is alive. I will file a case against them” (73). This mother-daughter relationship is instrumental in shaping Sister Jesme as an agential woman.

Jesme documents and critically reflects on her experiences of sexual abuse faced by nuns. She also talks about the “special love” or homosexuality that exists in the inner spaces of the convent. While she asserts herself as a heterosexual, she raises her severe dislike of homosexuality and recounts her personal experience of sexual victimisation within the convent by a fellow nun. She also raises objections to the class and gender differences prevalent in the nunneries. She contests the rich-poor dichotomy evident in the treatment of sisters and the gendered hierarchy that privileges priests over nuns in the ecclesiastical order. Her critique of the materialistic notions of the system includes the violation of the vow of poverty. She criticises the unwarranted secrecy maintained by the authorities and asserts that all matters should be transparent (10). She critiques the management for appropriating the admissions reserved for Dalit students, thus pointing out how caste-based exclusions are reproduced within religious Catholicism (54).

Here, it is evident that Sister Jesme constructs her discourses as a sustained act of resistance against the institutional and patriarchal mechanisms of Catholicism. Her autobiography not only delineates personal experiences of humiliation and gendered discrimination in the inner spaces of the convent. However, it also raises concerns regarding normalising such practices in public spaces. She transforms her private suffering into a public critique of religious institutions, which is visible through her narrative of sexual harassment, gender disparity, caste and class-based biases, and the silencing of dissenting voices. Jesme’s refusal to repudiate her identity, her accounts of taboo subjects like female sexuality, and her critique of the contrariness between the spirituality affirmed in the religious institutions and reality encountered by the nuns can be theorised as counter-narratives that recast dominant representations of nuns as passive and compliant subjects. Thus, Amen asserts female agency by challenging the ideological construction of women religious in religious institutions and argues for systemic reform. Jesme’s life narrative is crucial as it documents her resignation from her institutionalised position as a nun and her choice of an autonomous personal devotion to God by claiming that “so be it” (Amen).

Sister Lucy Kalappura’s autobiography also raises concerns similar to those exposed by Sister Jesme. Kalappura, born into an affluent family in the Kannur district of Kerala, joined the Franciscan Clarist Congregation in Mananthavady at the age of seventeen. Her elder sister was also a nun. Even though their family did not want them to choose this vocation, Lucy finds out she is interested in social service and joins

the congregation as a nun. She talks about how the Church presents the life of the ascetic sect during the vacation programmes, to attract the girls to choose this vocation. (Kalappura 142)

Sister Lucy idealises her vocation as initially grounded in a commitment to social service, and Mother Teresa was her inspiration. However, once inside the convent, she encounters internal oppressions and contradictions in religious life, as Sister Jesme has experienced. She critiques the Church's construction of spirituality as one that overshadows social engagement and recreates class hierarchy. Her narrative registers her own acts of dissent and the institutional retaliation she faced, including repeated transfers and being treated indifferently for the 'sins' she has committed. She also documents the congregation's mechanisms of disciplinary control, such as mental and physical coercion, systematic silencing, and the use of surveillance technologies, which reveals a Foucauldian regime of power that regulates the women religious.

Her autobiography emphasises a consciously articulated female subjectivity and an active exercise of agency. By narrating her desires and experiences in her own terms, she resists the erasure of individuality typically inscribed in institutional religious life. She constructs herself as a courageous, present-oriented subject who does not concern herself with either the past or the future, and her decision to retain her birth name upon entering the congregation functions as a symbolic act of self-definition and resistance to the normative practices of identity effacement. She excels in her studies and has become a Mathematics teacher. Alongside her professional life, she cultivates personal joys, such as laughing freely, sleeping soundly, arranging flowers, enjoying good food, and writing poetry. Significantly, she learns to drive and purchases a car by resisting the restrictions imposed by Church authorities. In her autobiography, she recounts writing love letters to a priest from a neighbouring monastery, a practice that continued until it reached the Provincial of her religious institute, precipitating institutional censure. (39) But she narrates this act as a natural human impulse rather than a transgression, and thereby, she contests the control mechanisms within the convent by transforming the personal into a critique of disciplinary institutions.

She critiques the prescribed attire for nuns, arguing that it is unsuitable for the local climate and advocates for clothing adapted to environmental conditions. She questions the institutional imposition of celibacy and contends for the option of marriage for those nuns and priests who desire it. Her narrative documents the prevalence of sexual abuse within convents and her own acts of resistance, and locates this as a part of the suffering experienced by cloistered women religious. She highlights their spatial confinement and exclusion from the public sphere by comparing their access to the public sphere with that of male monastics' mobility. Thus, she unveils the patriarchal ideology embedded in ecclesial structures, where nuns are subordinate to priests. She questions the disparity in freedoms and life choices between male and female religious.

In her narrative, she discusses the experience of her elder sister, whose attempt to renounce religious life was initially obstructed by her brother because of his fear of social disgrace, which she cites as an instance of patriarchal control of women's choices through familial honour. Here, it is evident that she questions the burden of culture engraved on women's identity. She discusses how women who leave the convent are attributed with a negative image, as morally weak and socially deviant, thereby probing into the position ascribed to women in society. The narrative also highlights the concept of maternal solidarity and the significance of female bonding, which is similar to the mother-daughter relationship depicted in Sister Jesme's *Amen*. The mother's support enables her sister to exit the convent and simultaneously helps the author tackle institutional and familial constraints. This mother-daughter bonding, which can be considered an intergenerational support, functions as a site of agency and resistance, and thus redefines the patriarchal structures of control that seek to confine women's religious and personal trajectories.

Looking at her autobiography, we can see that Sister Lucy Kalappura is arguing for reforming Catholicism in India. She uses the Biblical quotes to substantiate her arguments and argue for the cause of nuns. Here, it is relevant that she wanted to stay inside the structure of Catholicism as a nun and express her differences. She supported the protest against Jalandhar Bishop Franco Mulakkal, who was accused of raping a nun and stood for the nun. She openly voices her ideas on social media. However, she is expelled from the Church

for questioning the authoritative nature of the Church. As she states in her prologue, she posits her struggles as emblematic of the collective experiences of nuns, and her resistance is directed against the hierarchical systems of religious life, which are ingrained in patriarchy. She says:

“Everything I speak in the name of Christ is true. This life story is not mine alone; it reflects the experiences of all women drawn into convents as ‘slaves of God.’ This vocation was entrusted to me by God. The contents of this book embody a vision of freedom from ignorance and bondage. My purpose is not to accuse anyone personally but to open up my own life.” (7)

The autobiographical writings of nuns acquire particular significance in the Indian context as they articulate an urgent call for reform within Christianity. Their narratives share many similarities, and the female bonding they revive in their narratives for the cause of women is relatively positive. Their narratives can be placed within broader ecclesiastical debates, especially in light of Pope Francis’s public acknowledgement of the systemic abuse of nuns by clergy and his reference to the persistence of sexual servitude within religious institutions (Pope admits). These autobiographies thus function as critical interventions that reveal the problem of power politics in the religious institutions.

Indian Christianity is often criticised for its casteist structure. This is evident in Bama’s assertion, in her interview with Gita Hariharan, that Dalit women are “triple exploited.” She considers “class, caste and gender” as “triple monsters” that oppress the Dalit Christian women (Bama 5.45). Bama narrates the discrimination and poverty she endured in her autobiographical work *Karukku*. The murder of Sister Abhaya and the suicide of Sister Anupa Maria have created a furore in Kerala, and many other, less-noticed deaths have occurred (Mathew and Vishnuprasad).

The nuns’ autobiographies thus challenge the inequalities within the ecclesiastical order, and their self-representational narratives are valid as they articulate the voices of those who are often voiceless in society. They resist the image of the nun constituted by the patriarchal structural discourses of Catholicism. They focus on the reformism that should happen in the inner spaces of convents by critiquing the Church and society for treating them as invisible beings. Their texts and discourses assert their identity as women in the public sphere. Thus, the texts’ engagement with feminist politics is visible here.

References

1. Antony, Anu K., and Rowena Robinson. “Prayer as an Actant: Freedom and Sociality in the Subject Formation of a Catholic Nun in Kerala, South India.” *Social Compass*, vol. 70, no. 2, June 2023, pp. 169–186.
2. Bose, Brinda, editor. *Translating Desire: The Politics of Gender and Culture in India*. Katha, 2002.
3. Brock, Megan P. “Resisting the Catholic Church’s Notion of the Nun as Self-Sacrificing Woman.” *Feminism & Psychology*, vol. 20, no. 4, Nov. 2010, pp. 473–490.
4. Devika, J. “Housewife, Sex Worker and Reformer: Controversies over Women Writing Their Lives in Kerala.” *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 41, no. 17, 29 Apr.–5 May 2006, pp. 1675–1683.
5. Faustina, Bama. “Writing and Feminism: Bama in Conversation with Gita Hariharan.” YouTube, uploaded by Indian Cultural Forum, 29 Jan. 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pnqfyzZLsY>.
6. Jesme, Sister. *Amen: Oru Kanyasthreeyude Atmakadha*. DC Books, 2009.
7. Kalappura, Sister Lucy. *Karthavinte Namathil*. DC Books, 2019.
8. Khurana, Neeta. “A Gynocritical Reading of Nalini Jameela’s *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker and Amen: The Autobiography of a Nun* by Sister Jesme.” *International Journal of English Language, Literature in Humanities (IJELH)*, vol. 4, no. 12, pp. 140–147.
9. Kondapally, Sunalini, and Raja Ambedkar. “Nunnery, Thy Name Is Crucifixion: *Amen: The Autobiography of a Nun*.” *The Context*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2015, pp. 7–17.
10. Mathew, Madona, and P. Vishnuprasad. “Uncertainty in Deaths of Nuns in Kerala over 30 Years: An Overview.” *The International Journal of Indian Psychology*, vol. 8, no. 3, July–Sept. 2020, pp. 848–853.

11. Mason, Mary G. "Positioning the Female Autobiographical Subject: The Other Voice—Autobiographies of Women Writers." *Life/Lines: Theorising Women's Autobiography*, edited by Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck, Cornell University Press, 1989, pp. 19–44.
12. "Pope Admits Clerical Abuse of Nuns, Including Sexual Slavery." BBC News, 6 Feb. 2019, www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-47134033.
13. Shaju, Josiya, P., Soni Joseph, and Jyotsna Sinha. "Catholic Nuns and Embraced Motherhood: A Study on Virginal Maternal Dialectics in Selected Autobiographical Narratives from Kerala, India". *Religion and Gender* (published online ahead of print 2025). <https://doi.org/10.1163/18785417-bja10022> Web.
14. Shaju, Josiya, P., Soni Joseph, and Jyotsna Sinha. "From Silence to Speech: Autobiographies of Catholic Nuns from Kerala and the Creation of Subaltern Counterpublics." *The International Journal of Interdisciplinary Cultural Studies*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2025, pp. 237–260. <https://doi.org/10.18848/2327-008X/CGP/v21i01/237-260>.
15. Singh, Susmitha, and Neelaksh Pituaria. *Women and Resistance: Breaking the Shackles*. Peoples Literature Publication, 2022.
16. Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson, editors. *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*. University of Wisconsin Press, 1998.