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## Writing as Resistance: An Analysis of Sister Jesme's Amen

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*Among the literary genres, autobiography is a unique mode of self-narration and self-reflexivity which foregrounds so-called truth statements; however, it has an added advantage of authenticity and truth. Perhaps, unlike other modes of writing, it acquires significance and value, notwithstanding its aesthetic value, when it is 'used' as a tool of protest/ resistance by the autobiographer giving vent to his inner thoughts and turmoil. In fact, the powerful, lasting literature of resistance has a personal and existential urgency. It may be observed that the life writer acts as a self-appointed spokesman who publicly unravels his/ her sentiments while standing from a particular vantage point. Women's autobiography has thus to be read as a "strategic necessity in a particular time, rather than an end in itself." (Rooney Ellen: 120). Apart from the aesthetic dimension, we may also investigate the political / ideological angle of autobiography when we study the autobiographies of Dalits and other subaltern sections of our society.*

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### Introduction

Here, one may add the recent one, Sister Jesme's gripping autobiography, *Amen: The Autobiography of a nun* (2009), is a scathing attack against the religious institution, Church. In fact, this taboo-breaking treatise is searing in its treatment and riveting in its honesty and directness, revealing "the hitherto hidden life inside the enclosures of the convents" (vii).

The name 'Jesme' was adopted instead of Memy Raphael by adding 'me' (herself) to the first three letters (Jes) from Jesus's name. The title appears to be apt and as a matter of fact, 'Amen' is primarily used to conclude prayer or a statement to express assent or approval in Christianity and means so be it.

Sr. Jesme, after much consideration, selected this title as in a way it was the conclusion of her eventful celestial life inside the four strong walls of the congregation. Confessing inspiration behind the book, Sr Jesme bluntly admits, ". . . I escaped from a Formidable Fortress to His Safe Anchorage" (xi). In fact, she clearly states her agenda in the following manner: ...In my own humble way, but empowered by Lord Jesus Himself, my aim is solely the reformation of the Church; to enable society to have a peep into the panoramic but veiled ocean, like the seashell that holds a few drops of sea water.

So that the book should in no way hurt those inside the *iron curtain*, unlike in an autobiography, *I have purposely used fictitious names*. Let the fresh breeze enter the walls and purify its stinking corners. May the Holy Spirit liberate the chained souls in the dungeon-like interior of the Holy Abode. (vii: Italics added)

Fictional names are attributed to various characters in *Amen*, probably to avoid embarrassment for the persons concerned. Beginning with Paul John Eakins' now standard *Fictions in Autobiography*, which argued that "the self that is the center of all autobiographical narrative is necessarily a fictive structure" (3) and that "fictions and the fiction - making process are a central constituent of the truth of any life as it is lived and of any art devoted to the presentation of that life" (5), most scholars have come to agree that the presence of fiction within autobiography is no more problematic than the presence of nonfiction within the novel.

He adds that, "autobiography is not about the truth of the lived experience; it is about the retrospection and interpretation of the experience as the writer is situated in her present moment in history and geo political location" (188).

Despite the autobiographer's moral indignation and frank, straightforward self-revelation, her stand towards the culmination of the text puts the reader in a dilemmatic situation when the writer vacillates and wavers to break free from all religious paraphernalia. She reveals: "...I am for the Church - my Amen is to Jesus, to the Bible and to the Church . . . I have only quit the Congregation of Mother of Carmel but am still the loyal daughter of the Church" (*Amen* :178).

On the one hand, she wants total reformation in the present church but on the other hand she wants to continue her position as a responsible servant of the congregation; she goes to the extent of apologizing to the Respectable Authorities of the Church for sullyng the sacred reputation of the church.

The reader becomes totally confused as the life writer seems to be both an 'insider' and 'outsider.' But, the text is worth studying because it becomes an eye opener which throws light on the plight of a unique, hitherto untouched segment of female community in India, nuns; it also deserves special attention for such burning social issues it addresses rather than the literary or aesthetic merits - Church and religion, gender and sexuality, caste, corruption etc. It is pertinent and crucial to critically analyze them one by one.

## Religion and Church

As per Census India 2001, Christianity is the third most practiced religion in Kerala, with 19% of the population. Although a minority in Kerala, Christianity has contributed significantly in the fields like education, healthcare, social uplift etc. Among the various church denominations in Kerala, the Indian Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholics of the Latin Rite, Syro- Malabar Catholic Church, the Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church and the Malankara Jacobite Syrian Orthodox Church are prominent (Web).

*Amen that* addresses "the present scenario of Church in Kerala" (viii), may be read from many dimensions given chastity, sacredness and numerous other moralistic ideals we associate with

religious life. In fact, Jesme's work is a stunning exposition and pillorying of the Church, which according to her is never democratic but hierarchical. She is vocal that, "the Church should be transparent in its dealings" (xii). In its hierarchical system, Pope is the head of the Church and the nuns and priests are expected to report to the Bishop.

However, the Church believes that the hierarchical set up makes it a very powerful system in the world. To Jesme, it sadly proved to be a hegemonic institution with the religious ideology crippling and stultifying the identity of an individual. Here, we are reminded of Althusser, the French Marxist's theory of ideology; he argues that escape from ideology is totally unwarranted and it is percolated down to the masses through the instrument of state apparatuses (SAs). In his highly influential essay, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," he dwells on his notion of ISA.

In fact, he was confounded with the question of how the exploited allow themselves to be exploited and as an answer to this, he introduced the multidimensional concept of the Ideological State Apparatus: the religious I S A (the system of different churches), the educational I S A (the system of the different public and private schools), the family I S A, the legal I S A, the political I S A, the trade union ISA, the communications I S A (press, radio and television etc.), and the cultural I S A (literature, the arts, sports etc.) (*Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*: 162) Jesme frankly reveals her plight: "I was able to see my father barely 15 minutes before the funeral. The alibi of the superiors was that the then senior sisters were not even lucky enough to see the bodies of their parents" (65).

In her latest work, a collection of essays titled *Njanum Oru Stree* (2011), the nun speaks out against the church: "I can see the replacement of spirituality with religiosity; Christianity has become an impoverished religion. The self-proclaimed apostles have failed to notice that real God has stepped out of the Church and it has become a place of power mongering and corruption..." (46-47). *Amen* exhorts the reader to shed the excessive secrecy surrounding the Church and generally all religious institutions, underlining the public's right to know what is happening around within such prison-like enclosures. Jesme narrates the irregularities in the admission procedure in the college where she worked. She also criticizes the petty politics which pervades the college where some students are unnecessarily discriminated against.

Corruption was rampant in Church by way of donations for college seats, sexual relations between some priests and nuns, and between nuns; class distinctions whereby the *cheduthies*, or poorer and less-educated sisters, did menial jobs and a wide gap between comforts and facilities enjoyed by the priests and nuns. She alleges that professional sisters, who have taken the Vow of Poverty like the other sisters, secretly take money and other valuables to their own families and relatives.

### Gender and Sexuality

Gender and sexuality are the two issues which are addressed and highlighted at length by Jesme in her polemical text, but unfortunately her stand towards them is far from convincing. Ann Oakley, the feminist scholar argues, "gender is a matter of culture, it refers to the social classification of men and women into 'masculine' and 'feminine' (16). Church, a biased institution, in its collaboration with patriarchy, turns out to be a hegemonic and crushing

machine, particularly to nuns. As a matter of fact, patriarchy is.. both a social structure and an ideology or a belief system according to which men are superior. Religions have played an important role in creating and perpetuating patriarchal ideology. They have spread notions of male superiority through stories like, Eve was created from Adam's rib; or man is created in the image of God, etc.

Today, media and even educational institutions spread patriarchal ideology by showing men to be stronger in decision-making positions, and women as voracious consumers, dependent and jealous. Ideology plays an important role in perpetuating social systems and controlling people's minds. For example, by reducing women to bodies and objectifying them, media encourage violence against women. Ideology provides the justification for social behaviour and socio-economic structures. (Bhasin: 21)

Now nuns are the new victimized group, made more voiceless by male and higher female authorities to be backboneless puppets of religious authorities. Criticizing this inhuman tendency which is ingrained in scriptures, Jesme gushes out and decries the patriarchal postulation of St. Paul: "I desire that . . . women should adorn themselves modestly and sensibly in seemly apparel, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly attire... Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent . . ." (1 Timothy 2: 8 -15) (111)

Gender discrimination is noticeable in the difference of treatment meted out to nuns and priests. The priests are permitted to travel and go for movies in lay dress, officiate or attend wedding, and even consume liquor. The ceremony of anointing a priest is one of the sacraments of the Church, whereas the ceremony of the woman taking vows and entering the convent is not accepted as a sacrament. Even their financial status is quite sound. Jesme finds the rot too deep as many priests and nuns who have renounced worldly possessions while entering the order are after money and power.

Jealousy, intrigue and backbiting are quite common. To a great extent the nuns are not emancipated women; they are often kept under submission by the fear of revenge by priests. The diocesan priests treat them like servants; making them wash their clothes, prepare their food, wash the church, etc. and that too without getting paid. These are all unjust ways of treating the religious women, according to the autobiographer (176).

Christianity considers celibacy as a prerequisite for a true Christian and sexual relations outside marriage is treated as abominable, sinful and immoral. Originally, sex is treated as sinful in Christianity and it is placed at the center of Christian morality, as something shameful and obnoxious. The public narration of sexual truths through confession was an offshoot of this frame of thinking.

As Veronique Mottier observes "...in modern times, such confessional models spread to other areas of social life such as family, relationships, medicine, therapy, criminal justice, education, and the media, all settings where we are encouraged to communicate our deepest thoughts and desires "(26). Michel Foucault comments in his *History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction*. "we have since become a singularly confessional society" (59). St. Augustine 9354-430 AD), one of the fountain fathers of Western Christianity was responsible for the influential doctrine of

'original sin'; sex as the cause of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden narrated in Genesis (Mottier :19). In Christianity, "...sexual renunciation was valued as part of a male ethics of self- mastery' (18); virginity and sexual abstinence for men and women (18), 'celibacy and purity came to be valorized, whereas sex and desire became policed (18).

Christianity raucously advocates that God created man first and women next (from man's rib) and therefore man is the exemplary human, whereas woman is secondary and a dependent being. Ancient Hebrew texts suggest that as agriculture became a settled way of life, men began to assert that their 'seed' or semen was the source of the child's soul and that woman was merely the substance or field in which it was sown. Like Hinduism, Islam also associates women's bodies with impurities. In this way they were able to deny much of women's power over birth. The philosopher Aristotle holds that women are naturally lacking in intelligence and rationality. Being natural fools, women do not deserve to be citizens who could participate in public affairs. They came up with an ingenious explanation: women are inferior because their bodies are unclean.

They menstruate and give birth, acts which have to do with blood and flesh. Most world religions enable men to attain positions of authority in religious matters. Such men alone are deemed capable of interpreting scriptural texts and laying down rules with other men and all women are to follow. When men turn religious zealots, they exhibit their zealotry by forcing women to follow religious strictures in the strictest, imaginable way. This may mean observing fasts, wearing a veil and so on. In fact, the *Manusmriti* lumps together animals, *shudras* and women and considers all of them equally unclean, polluting and fit to be subdued and controlled by the men of the upper castes (The Gita: 40).

Early Christians saw families fundamentally as obstacles to religious devotion; they were warned against the temptations of the flesh, which reflected the works of the devil. Later, Sexual consummation through marriage was given the green signal. "Given the emphasis on reproductive sex within marriage and the disapproval of other lustful sexual practices, same-sex relationships between women were consistently condemned and suppressed by Christian authorities.

(Mottier: 220) According to Foucault sexuality is "an especially dense transfer point for relations of power: between men and women, young people and old people, parents and offspring, teachers and students, priests and laity, an administration and a population". (103)

The author mentions that illicit relations exist among priests and nuns; though vowed to celibacy there are priests and nuns who indulge in sexual relations. She recalls:

At a retreat for novices, I noticed girls in my batch were unsettled about going to the confession chamber. I found that the priest there asked each girl if he could kiss them. I gathered courage and went in. He repeated the question. When I opposed, he quoted from the Bible which spoke of divine kisses. (38)

Poor nuns have to face so many rivalries and advances made by priests and she adds: The mental torture was unbearable. When I questioned the church's stand on self-financing colleges and certain other issues, they accused me of having mental problems. They have even sent me to a

psychiatrist. There are many nuns undergoing ill-treatment from the order, but they are afraid of challenging it. The church is a formidable fortress. (116)

Jesme narrates her sexual encounter with a priest during her visit to Bangalore: the priest opined, “Mole, I have asked permission from each one of them. And only those who agreed, did I kiss. It is in the spirit of the Bible and Jesus”(38).After a while he shows me a milky liquid oozing from there and lectures me on the “thousand lives” it has (88).Although I resist undressing myself, after repeated persuasion, I oblige, and show him `a female ‘on the condition that it will be for a twinkle of an eye` (88).

However, it may also be remembered that priests and nuns are also of flesh and blood with vulnerability of their own and the problem arises when we treat them as celestial beings dropped from heaven. Exceptions are there but generalizing the fathers and brothers as vultures preying on hapless girls is an exaggerated exercise. Talking about the Church’s draconian rules, Jesme writes in *Amen* that she was not allowed to go home when her father died, or to even pray some extra hours for his soul: “I was able to see my father barely 15 minutes before the funeral. The alibi of the superiors was that the then senior sisters were not even lucky enough to see the bodies of their parents” (65).

Apart from the hegemonic male heterosexual relations within the Church, Jesme shockingly reveals the practice of lesbianism and she frankly confesses her traumatic experience during her brief relationship with ‘SrVimy.’ Homosexuality seems to be a bane many young girls have to silently endure at the nunnery and sister Jesme suffered it too. She plucks out an episode from her life as an example: .....I can’t believe such things are happening, but as there is none to rescue me, am forced to succumb to her attentions for a while. When all are asleep at night, she creeps into my bed and does indecent things to me which I hate but cannot combat. Our ‘rooms’ are a large hall divided up, and are separated only by sheets, so there are no doors which can be shut, to protect ourselves. She tells me that she is cautious to have sex only with women, lest she becomes pregnant . . . (51)

Jesme further elaborates on the pervasiveness of ‘special love’ among sisters.

...The Rule of Touch, along with the Rule of Silence and the Rule of Sight, is very strict in the convent. No sister may touch another. But there are sisters, who sitting beside each other, play ‘footsie,’ as one sister entwines her foot with the other’s and rubs against it; or sometimes a sister’s hand lingers and caresses another’s shoulder, on the pretext of smoothing her dress. These are only a few – and hopefully, stray instances...” (29)

## Class

Class hierarchy is rife in nunneries and for instance, nuns from lower class and economically weak sections of society are shabbily treated by the power-wielding privileged grouping of nuns. It may be observed that sometimes converted Christians are also the poor sufferers of class segregation. In *Amen*, Jesme pithily divulges:

“...Before I entered the convent in the 1970s, there was a sort of class distinction even among the sisters. The less-educated and less-privileged among the professed nuns belonged to a lower class, undergoing a different manner of training under a separate Mistress. These sisters, though

also from the lower strata, were differentiated from the *cheduthies* as they, too, took the three Vows of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience, and wore the sister's habit. These nuns could not sit on chairs alongside other more privileged sisters but only on their 'trunks.' They were given jobs in the kitchen, parlour, fields or compounds...it persisted in the minds of the sisters. There is a 'Fair Ethelamma' and a 'Dark Ethelamma' in the province. The fair one belongs to the higher strata and the dark one to the lower, not only because of the difference in the complexion, but mainly because of the disparity in education and wealth. The two sections are treated differently..."(47)

Many of them are dissatisfied, grumbling about their predicament of neither belonging fully to the convent nor the family. Only those who remain virgin are allowed to continue in the convent. When they die, the *cheduthies* have the unique privilege of a religious funeral service and of being buried in the same place as the sisters (28). She refers to a clear class distinction prevalent as nuns who come from poor families and less educated ones are allowed to do only menial jobs in the convent. She also brings forth the authorities' display of duplicity in their judgments and manner of punishments. She wonders at the practice of 'justice' there:

A sister undergoes a hysterectomy operation and stays in the sick room for rest. I am puzzled at the remark of the Superior, that she is relieved that the sister's uterus has been removed, or else when she spends her nights elsewhere, they are all scared. (75)

### Reception and Readership

Whatever be the social implications of *Amen*, it does raise certain questions in the mind of the reader, yet to be answered convincingly. Throughout the text, the author wears the garb of a victimized, hapless soul. But, it may be observed that she had voluntarily joined the congregation much to the displeasure and discontentment of her parents and relatives and having spent 33 years in the Church, she enjoyed all the privileges and benefits. The protest came too late and the repeated appearances of "I" in the work together with the descriptions of her achievements may create an impression that it is a piece of self-promotion by raking up controversies, if not unnecessarily. However, the true victims are the so-called marginalized class within the community of nuns and the poorer *cheduthies* who suffer too much trauma and total neglect and their predicament far outweighs Jesme's. Unfortunately, she fails to project these 'othered' and subaltern sections within the Formidable Fortress. Having devoted herself to the case of the church, she hardly seems to have renounced the world, and is always seen to be keen on languishing in material comforts and eventually gaining the nickname "cine nun" (122).

Sister Jesme deliberately tries to equate her with the likes of Abhaya and Anupama in her autobiography and other writings. Having placed her in the league of these victimized souls, she wants to evoke sympathy. If it were a text with an ardent social cause, the question what she has done for her community of sisters does not arise.

The classification of Jesme's work *Amen* is a problematic issue; it is obviously titled as *An Autobiography of a Nun* but there is a reference in the text that it is a memoir. She concedes: "I don't claim this to be an autobiography; it is only a revelation of a part of my life ... I can affirm it represents the truth, to the best of my ability and perception" (xii). However, the generic

division may not be debated and discussed a lot as the intentionality of the author is beyond doubt.

Throughout the autobiography, Jesme is seen vacillating between patriarchal notions and the desire for liberation. The writing lacks flair and is often turgid, as the narrative lurches from one closet-drama to another. Yet she comes through as someone lively with intellectual doubt, yearning for moral certitude. Life histories of marginalized sections need to be judged at three levels: as a cathartic process for the sufferer, as a rebellion on the systems or institutions that victimize them and at the larger level as a desperate call for a renaissance. As such, the book remains the personal story of just one nun, who is unable to justify why her experience is in fact representative of many such experiences. She does not put forward so many reformative suggestions whatsoever for the betterment of the Church or her community. Instead, Jesme totally accepts the system when she says:

“...Once again, I would like to affirm that this is not an attempt to sully the sacred reputation of the Church or the Religious Congregations. I honour and respect the Church, the Head of which is Christ Himself. I bow before the present Respectable Authorities of the Church...” (xiii)

*Amen: An Autobiography of a Nun* has busted popularity charts by going into third edition barely three weeks after it was released in early February and is now being chased by many English publishers for translation rights. Through this text, Jesme targets not only the readers in India but also those outside the country. In the beginning itself, she states her agenda: “It has been made more comprehensible to those who are not familiar with the present scenario of the Church in Kerala” (viii). After quitting CMC, her secluded habitat, Sr Jesme has been working as a social activist voicing her views on various social issues, particularly of women. She still lives as a nun and frequently gives interviews in many magazines and periodicals.

Whatever may be the minor flaws in this work, Jesme may be appreciated for her audacity to share the drab, unravished truth about the cloistered life which virtually rocked Kerala society. Therefore, a study of *Amen* is a fruitful endeavour.

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