Survivor Narratives and the Politics of Echmukutty’s Memoir

T. Amiya
Ph.D. Research Scholar
Institute of English
University of Kerala
Mail ID: amiyathajudeen1998@gmail.com

Abstract: Recognising the poignance of women’s autobiographical discourses in engendering discussions around domestic abuse and sexual violence, this study takes up the memoir *Ithente Rakthamanithente Mamsamanetuthukolluka* (This is My Blood, This is My Flesh, Take Them) by the Malayalam writer Echmukutty to examine the politics and possibilities of the narrative in not only exposing the microstructures of hegemonic patriarchy but also in fostering feminist dialogues on women’s rights and justice. To this end, the study reads the select memoir as a ‘claims narrative’ that forges affective ties with its readers, thereby claiming an ethical response from them. The study critically contextualises the memoir to tease out the ways in which Echmukutty narratively constructs her identity position as an agential subject who speaks and affectively prods others to speak. It further argues that Echmukutty’s memoir—an archive of trauma—potentially serves to problematize and, to an extent, alter the generic perceptions regarding the state’s development narratives.

Keywords: Trauma, Claims Narrative, Victim, Survivor, Affect

In 2018, an accusation of paedophilia against a renowned Malayalam poet shook the Kerala literary sphere, precipitating shockwaves across the state and instigating several women from the field to unite in solidarity with the survivor by sharing their own experiences of sexual abuse. Significantly, this happened against the backdrop of the rising prominence of #MeToo discourses in the public domain of Kerala following the abduction and sexual assault of a film actor. Echmukutty began publishing her autobiographical account on Facebook around the same time (2018-19), which soon garnered widespread attention for its candid discussion of violence as well as for its audaciousness in calling out some of the much-celebrated icons of Malayalam literature. These Facebook posts were initially titled
Mathakkurippukal (loosely translated as “Notes on Religion”), signifying Echmukutty’s reflections on her fraught encounter with the institution of religion. However, as the story further unfolded and began addressing the microaggressions of everyday life, it necessitated an alternate title that could adequately capture the complexity of the narrated experiences. Consequently, when these Facebook posts were published as a memoir, Echmukutty titled it Ithente Rakthamanithente Mamsamanetuthukolluka (“Ente Rakthavum” 0:43- 3:10).

By critically engaging with Echmukutty’s memoir Ithente Rakthamanithente Mamsamanetuthukolluka, notable for the vigorous discussion it engenders around the issue of domestic violence, this study seeks to demonstrate how the narrative forms a feasible and critical ground for the victimised gendered subject to perform her trauma, thereby fostering a new identity position. It submits that this newly configured autobiographical identity is of an agential subject who, by claiming her story, forges affective ties with her readers. At the very outset of this study, it is imperative to acknowledge that scholarly engagements with survivor narratives are often environed by two intertwined, yet apparently contradictory, strains of thought (Gilmore The Limits 6). On the one hand, there is the question of the fraught relationship between trauma and its representation through language, and on the other hand, there are the therapeutic possibilities of writing trauma.

This study, however, strategically shifts its attention beyond such theoretical ambivalences to focus exclusively on the politics and possibilities of publicly performing trauma. That is, though the study deploys trauma as a critical concept to analyse the select memoir, it does not extensively delve into trauma theories. Also, while the study acknowledges the plausibility of “scriptotherapy” (Henke xv), it moves beyond an analysis of the memoir’s cathartic and recuperative powers. The study, instead, contextualises the memoir to gain insights into the ways in which it serves as a tool—a claims narrative—for feminist praxis, especially when speaking publicly about abuse and rape risks one’s personhood.

Echmukutty’s childhood, as she recounts in the memoir, was plagued by the horrors of domestic violence. Though she soon moved out of her parent’s house with Joseph (the pseudonym she uses in the memoir to address her ex-partner), she faced caste-based prejudice
from his family and was even barred from entering his ancestral home. Echmukutty recalls how Joseph, a self-proclaimed feminist and an established Malayalam poet and academician, insisted that she should not garland the picture of Jesus Christ on their front wall (Echmukutty 95). Adjudged incapable of fulfilling domestic duties like a Christian wife, Echmukutty was dismissed as an unsuitable match for Joseph, even by their ‘feminist’ friends. Her struggle reached a crescendo when the mental torment escalated into physical abuse. The persisting sense of insecurity, helplessness, and shame were compounded by the sexual harassment she faced from Joseph’s friends. The absence of immediate family support, her legal status as an unmarried mother, and the ensuant lack of cultural capital further diminished her prospect of being recognised as a human subject deserving of justice.

Then, the question is, how does Echmukutty—a victimised and an othered subject—fashion herself as a speaking subject? The paper argues that Echmukutty’s autobiographical act of publicly owning her story has engendered the political possibility for her to constitute herself as an agential subject, claiming an ethical response from her readers. Her autobiographical act, similar to #MeToo testimonies, risks the uncertainties inherent in publicly speaking of sexual abuse yet takes up centre stage and functions as what Pramod K. Nair calls “claims narrative.” According to Nayar, such narratives “could be those within a court of justice or they could be life narratives that consciously or unconsciously set up ‘affective communities,’ making a claim upon us, readers, demanding an ethical response” (“Postcolonial” 75).

Typically, first-person trauma narratives are supplemented by paratextual elements like a forward, preface, introduction, and/or editor’s notes to prepare readers for the life story that unfolds (Nayar, “Trauma” 42). In addition to underscoring the sentimental nature inherent in such narratives, these elements validate them by providing contextual information. However, Echmukutty’s memoir notably lacks any form of paratextual intervention. Absent are the voices of academicians or other literary figures to authenticate the narrative—an absence attributed in part to the memoir’s initial mode of publication as Facebook posts that circumvented traditional intermediary filters. Additionally, given that Echmukutty’s narrative implicates some prominent literary figures, there is a conspicuous reluctance within the literary and academic spheres to engage with it. Echmukutty herself had
initially expressed disillusionment with the prospects of publishing her narrative, doubting the willingness of mainstream publishers and cultural stalwarts to support her cause (“360: Echmukutty” 9:03-10:00). Though DC Books later published her memoir, her dubiety proved partly correct as so far there are only a few feminist discussions on the narrative (“Jeevithathil” 14:04-14)—a critical gap that this study seeks to address.

Leigh Gilmore, in her book Tainted Witness: Why We Doubt What Women Say About Their Lives, observes that women speaking of sexual violence are subjected “to practices of shaming and discrediting” (5). So, when the veracity of the narrated experience is constantly questioned, and there is no critical intervention to set the stage for the unfolding of the survivor’s story, the narrator herself has to vouch for her own legitimacy. Echmukutty does this, particularly by expressing the embodied nature of trauma that permeated half of her life. She, for instance, poignantly titles her memoir as Ithente Rakthamanithente Mamsamanetuthukolluka, which translates to “This is my blood, this is my flesh, take them,” a concise form of biblical verses that Jesus recounts at the Last Supper.

It is the visceral dimension of her lived life, wounded by experiences of shame and pain, that Echmukutty lays bare in front of her readers and asks them to bear witness. In an interview, Echmukutty discloses the corporeal impact of writing the narrative: “While writing the autobiographical narratives, I was reliving those experiences. What happened as a result was, I lost almost 8 kilos in the three months of writing them. I suffered from severe fever three to four times. My body was responding to the writing” (“Jeevithathil” 20:40-21:04). Her body and the trauma etched into it here functions as a metaphor that structures the whole narrative. It is this “fuller representation” (Nayar, “Trauma” 42) of the somatic dimension of trauma that shapes her narrative. Or in other words, through the memoir, her trauma takes on textual flesh.

Drawing on De Man’s conceptualisation of the links between shame and confession, Linda Anderson, in “Autobiography and the Feminist Subject,” demonstrates how the confessional mode for women can be regressive, “coopting them back into a familiar dynamic where their acts of self-assertion can be allowed to exist socially or psychologically only if contained within a rhetoric of self-abasement and denial” (122-123). Echmukutty’s
memoir, however, carefully navigates this rhetoric of self-denial by welding the narrative of her life with a vehement critique of the enduring culture of misogyny. This, the paper posits, plays a discernible role in shaping Echmukutty’s identity position as an agential autobiographical subject.

Laura Marcus observes in *Auto/biographical Discourses* that “the ‘confessional’ text of autobiographical self-revelation was a dominant form in the 1970s, with major feminist theorists like Kate Millett redefining the autobiographical form in narratives which combined the close record of daily life with the thematics of feminist liberation and self-discovery” (279-280). Rita Felski has earlier pointed out how “through the discussion of, and abstraction from individual experience in relation to a general problematic of sexual politics, feminist confession…appropriates some of the functions of political discourse” (95). However, in *Contemporary Feminist Life Writing* Jennifer Cooke identifies that autobiographical disclosure of rape survivors are moving “beyond the prism of sexual politics,” to “shift the focus away from victimhood” and “add affective force and intensity to those arguments through drawing directly upon their experiences of rape” (38). Even though Echmukutty does not explicitly categorise her narrative endeavour as feminist, the syntax of her autobiographical disclosure, particularly how she attempts to unmask the mechanism of hegemonic structures in nullifying patriarchal violence, renders it feminist. For instance, Echmukutty emotively narrates a harrowing instance of sexual encroachment that attempted to push her beyond the disempowering status of victimhood thus:

That morning, around 11 o’clock, I overheard Joseph talking to someone in the front room. I was in the kitchen, grating coconut, with my saree slightly lifted. It was then that the poet came to drink water and saw me sitting with my head down, grating coconut. It was at that moment that Ayyappan intruded his disgusting nails under my saree and left three marks on my thighs, resembling those on the thighs of Cheeru in the movie *Paleri Manikyam*. Lust had made him a lunatic. The pain, humiliation, and tears from that moment will never leave me in this lifetime. In response, I swiftly hit Ayyappan with the coconut piece I had in my hand. Upon hearing the commotion, Joseph came inside, hit me with the glass plate on which I had
kept the grated coconut, and accused me of misbehaving towards the esteemed poet Ayyappan. (Echmukutty 106)

In the light of Cooke’s argument, this public act of autobiographical disclosure, of owning “the pain, humiliation, and tears,” is a potent political assertion through which the gendered subject refuses the socially bestowed position of silenced victimhood. The act simultaneously hints at the distinct ways in which gendered oppression gets manifested in everyday life and the range of resistance an oppressed subject puts forth against being silenced and labelled as a victim. By declaring, “This is my blood, this is my flesh, take them,” Echmukutty symbolically equates her violated and humiliated body with the tormented body of Jesus Christ, imbuing it with a sense of purity and sacredness, which in turn impart an aura of verity to the narrative. The act draws upon the very faith whose adherents, with their religious hypocrisy, have been instrumental in tormenting her. The juxtaposition stands in stark contrast to an incident where the priest denied her a blessing during Mass due to her non-official status as a Christian. Reflecting upon this, she writes, “The father announced my name through the microphone, declaring that I was unworthy to receive the consecrated bread as I was Hindu, living with a Christian without the sacrament of marriage, thus making him a sinner” (25). The memoir, in the process of detailing Echmukutty’s thwarted expectations and harsh realisedns, thus exposes not only the gendered dimension of abuse but also the role of caste in catalysing such oppressions.

Furthermore, rejecting the given name ‘Kala’ and renaming herself as ‘Echmukutty’ marks an evident shift in her self-perception and representation. She develops a deep aversion towards her name upon realising that Joseph, in her absence, addressed their daughter ‘Kala’ (“Jeevithathil” 12:53-13:11). Consequently, she renames herself as ‘Echmu,’ a name that has both personal and symbolic resonance. ‘Echmu’ is derived from ‘Lakshmi,’ the name of a servant who worked in her mother’s ancestral Brahmin household. Hesitant to address a servant as ‘Lakshmi,’ owing to the religious connotations associated with it—the name of a Hindu goddess—her family appropriated it to ‘Echmu’ and mitigated their discomfort (“360: Echmukutty” 30:10-30:36). While Echmukutty’s adoption of the name is, on the one hand, an act of altering her relation to the discourses that earlier shaped her, on the other hand, it is a conscious endeavour of forging solidarity with the marginalised. The autobiographical act of
the self-conscious and other-conscious subject thereby results in a sentimental presentation of traumatic events and an enactment of feminist argument.

From her childhood onwards, Echmukutty witnessed the tumultuous dynamics of a broken family. The harrowing scenes of her mother suffering mental and physical abuse at the hands of her father inevitably shaped her perceptions regarding family and marital life. Aware of the influence of hegemonic discourses in constituting women’s everyday lives, she productively contextualises her personal trauma within the broader framework of systemic misogyny. Echmukutty’s narrative strategy of conflating her experiences with those of other women in her life to reveal how the home serves as a patriarchal site where women face discrimination and violence highlights this. In one of her interviews, when asked about why she decided to write the memoir, she stresses that along with the need to mark her story and make it known to people, it is the realisation that numerous women and girls are going through extreme abuse that prompted her to write it (“Ente Rakthavum” 15:57-17:42).

Though one has to be cautious of the tensions inherent in discourses where the narrator ‘speaks for’ others and the othered, it is equally necessary to acknowledge relationality as an imperative for any autobiographical attempt, where ‘you’ is the requisite condition for ‘I.’ “My account of myself is never fully mine, and is never fully for me” (Butler 26). In this regard, while Echmukutty’s act of integrating her story with the pervasive societal issues affecting women’s everyday life is decidedly an attempt to make sense of herself, more significant is how, in the process, she emphasises the heterogeneity of women’s lived experiences that complicates and contends with modern orthodoxies that pigeonhole women’s issues.

As Cooke puts forth, “There is audacity in refusing to stop at one’s own story of rape, in travelling past it to the larger socio-economic and political conditions that make rape prevalent” (41). The gendered autobiographical subject, in her attempt to make sense of her trauma, exposes sexual abuse as a by-product of systemic injustice. “Beating can make anyone succumb. That is what beating, swearing, and rape do to women. Some people resort to these acts to vent their rage and assert their dominance. They target the weak and the poor, subjecting them to relentless abuse in any manner they please” (Echmukutty 36).
memoir, in this regard, stands as a testimonial to women’s collective suffering facilitated by the nuanced functioning of both macro and micro-structures of hegemonic patriarchy and that ironically goes overlooked in the state’s development surveys and much-lauded gender indices. Echmukutty writes about the insensitivity with which gendered oppressions are dealt with in the country thus:

I am not surprised when judges, lawyers, courts, and even some women and men question why I did not run, escape, make noise, or leave the place early. I am certain they are individuals who have not experienced violations or harassment. Regardless of who they are, those who doubt the victims inadvertently side with the abusers and are capable of becoming abusers themselves, given the opportunity. (44)

The discursive practices of systemic violence Echmukutty’s memoir exposes are distinct. She addresses gendered issues ranging from the failings of contemporary feminism in the state to the persisting ambiguity in recognising women as citizens. Observing how even prominent feminists in Kerala privately disparaged her for her dereliction to adhere to patriarchal norms, she recounts that “almost all feminist friends of Joseph advised me to be happy about the freedom I am getting” (Echmukutty 18). The memoir here transforms into a self-reflexive counter-hegemonic narrative that, by problematising the socio-cultural matrices that render abuse the norm, unveils patriarchy in its many subtle forms. Describing the indifference she met with at the Delhi local police station following the coerced separation from her daughter, Echmukutty writes,

As I exited the station, I came to the stark realization that as a woman devoid of privilege, I occupy a nebulous existence within the expansive confines of India. I felt insignificant, unrecognized. The laws of the nation seemed to offer me no refuge. From that moment on, anything bearing the label of national identity ceased to evoke any excitement within me. (128)

However, it is not these thematic concerns alone that render Echmukutty’s memoir affective. The use of language in engendering affect is also significant. As opposed to the impersonal register socially sanctioned as suitable for recording testimony, Echmukutty, a
creative writer, chooses literary language. She translates her trauma into an emotive narrative by augmenting the impact of her narrated experiences using literary ornamentations like metaphors. This aesthetic dimension of the memoir, or what Linda Brooks calls the “poetics” of testimonio (182), however, does not diminish its political effect but instead imparts an affective punch to the memoir, shifts the generic understanding of the world, and elevates the narrative of suffering into a narrative of survival.

The narrative, however, received a mixed response from its audience/readers. On the one hand, Echmukutty’s online autobiographical disclosures were subjected to harsh criticism. Some dismissed her accounts as frantic renditions, choosing to criticise Echmukutty “for recounting events from her life as they unfolded over three decades ago” (Binoy), while others, taken aback by the degree of outspokenness, levelled accusations of fictionalising her life. On the other hand, real-time responses like calls, private messages, and public comments significantly sharpened her politics and served as reminders of the growing public support for her cause. Such audience responses, in addition to enabling her narrative performance and affectively shaping her identity, aided in creating “moral webs” (Zarowsky 194) that facilitated the emergence of other marginalised voices articulating their indignation against the prevailing culture of sexism and misogyny. In other words, by embracing her wounded ‘flesh’ and keeping it open, many of her audience/readers experienced and communicated “it in the way that keeps it traumatic for others” (Berlant 44). Echmukutty says,

Many women contact me via phone; many send text messages. Among them are women who write about their lives. There is one lady who wrote about how the kick she got on her lower abdomen remains unexposed till now. Another woman wrote about the pain of a mother who lost her child and wandered in search of it” (27:53-28:18 360 Echmukutty- Part 1)

As a “spectral human,” wounded by systemic violence and whose narrative inhabitation reminds of the systemic issues of the modern world (Gordon 24-25), Echmukutty, the autobiographical subject, exposes the link between the gendered violence perpetrated by patriarchal institutions like family and the persistent failure of the state to
mitigate it. The very nature of her memoir draws attention to the complexities posed by the anxiety of writing, of exposing one’s traumatic past, and the visceral impacts of incidents that are socio-culturally deemed shameful. However, the narrative's political significance lies in the ways in which it serves as a critical ground for the gendered subject to autobiographically detangle and interrogate the socio-cultural power structures that discipline female bodies and subjectivities.

(*The author of the research paper has translated the quotations from the primary text and the interviews.)

References


**Bionote:** T. Amiya is a Junior Research Fellow at the Institute of English, University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram. Her doctoral research seeks to gain insights into the autobiographical self-fashioning of contemporary Indian women politicians, with a special focus on their life narratives. Her research interests include Life Writing Studies, Gender Studies, and Cultural Studies.