

**Literariness Journal**

A Peer-Reviewed Quarterly  
Journal of Literature and Cultural  
Studies

P-ISSN: 3108-1614  
E-ISSN: 3108-172X

LiterarinessJournal.org

**Vol. 1, Issue 4, September  
2026**

© 2026 by the author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.



**A Literariness.org Project**

**DOI: 10.67147 literariness.v1i4.034**

**From Disappearance to Self-Discovery: Wanderlust, Mystery, and Feminist Resistance in Jissa Jose's *Mudritha***

**SANGEETHA G. NAIR**

Assistant Professor  
Research Scholar (Part-time)  
PG & Research Department of English  
Government College Malappuram  
Affiliated to the University of Calicut, Kerala. India  
ORCID ID: [0009-0006-9969-9502](https://orcid.org/0009-0006-9969-9502)

**DR. SAGEERA M.P**

Associate Professor  
PG & Research Department of English  
Government College Malappuram  
Affiliated to the University of Calicut, Kerala. India  
ORCID ID: [0009-0005-6035-8666](https://orcid.org/0009-0005-6035-8666)

**Abstract:** This paper offers a feminist reading of Jissa Jose's debut novel *Mudritha*, translated into English by Jayasree Kalathil, examining how the narrative stages its central movement — from disappearance to self-discovery — as a feminist trajectory. The novel unfolds through a polyphonic structure of diary entries, monologues, and emails, centring on the enigmatic disappearance of its titular character Mudritha, a woman whom neither the man who files the missing-person complaint nor the nine women she gathers for an all-women's journey to Odisha has ever met. Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's account of woman as Other, Virginia Woolf's demand for self-determined space, and the feminist spatial theory of Doreen Massey and Janet Wolff, the paper argues that Mudritha's absence functions not as lack but as sovereignty. The missing woman becomes the figure through which the novel interrogates the patriarchal construction of woman as the object of others' narratives, while the women's journey imagines an alternative female selfhood grounded in mobility, solidarity, and choice. The individual portraits of the nine travellers compose a collective study in gendered constraints on movement, against which the purposeless, women-only journey emerges as an act of healing and resistance. The paper contends that the novel's refusal to resolve Mudritha's fate is its most rigorous feminist gesture: by leaving her unfound, Jose refuses the reduction of woman to a case to be closed, transforming the missing woman from patriarchy's object of search into the self-authored subject of her own vanishing.

**Keywords:** *Mobility, Women's Travel, Self-Discovery, Feminist Resistance, Mystery, Missing Woman*

Jissa Jose's debut novel *Mudritha* opens with an epigraph by the Sufi poet Zeynep Hatun: "I am a traveler / You are my road / I go from You to You." This evocative invocation foregrounds the novel's central preoccupation with journeys, self-discovery, and the search for identity. Structured as a polyphonic narrative, *Mudritha* employs a self-reflective journal format that brings together the diverse perspectives of eleven women and one man. Through diary entries, monologues, and email correspondence, the text captures the complex emotional, social, and psychological realities of its characters. The narrative revolves around the enigmatic disappearance of the titular character, Mudritha. Intriguingly, neither Anirudhan, who files the missing-person complaint, nor the women who had planned to accompany her on an all-women's trip have ever met her in person. As these fragmented voices gradually converge, the novel moves beyond the conventions of detective fiction to explore questions of female subjectivity, agency, belonging, and the desire for self-fashioning within contemporary patriarchal society. This paper traces the movement from disappearance to self-discovery as a feminist trajectory. The missing woman becomes the figure through which the novel interrogates the patriarchal construction of woman as the object of others' narratives, while the women's journey imagines an alternative female selfhood grounded in mobility, solidarity, and choice.

The novel's plot is set in motion by an act of official inscription. The policewoman Vanitha registers a missing-person case under Section 57 of the Kerala Police Act, at the request of Anirudhan, a tour operator who runs Himadri Travels. The circumstances are, from the outset, unusual and dubious. Anirudhan has received a call from Mudritha, a middle-aged woman, requesting that he arrange a 10-day trip to Odisha for herself and nine other women. She communicates every detail through phone calls and emails and credits the full amount to his account before the journey begins. The travel companions — Sarvaranjini, Sancharini, Deeptha, Umanarayani, Baby, Vennila, Hannah, Shashwathi, Marianalini, and Madhumalathi — have been handpicked by Mudritha from a Facebook group named Lesbos. And then, on the day of the proposed journey, she disappears: her mobile switched off, no contact traceable, no person able to say they have ever seen her. What remains of Mudritha is just her emails, the plans she has made, and the impressions she has left upon a group of women who know her only as a voice and a name.

The novel's title itself announces the paradox that the narrative will explore. Mudritha's name derives from *mudra* — "a mark, an imprint.... Marks of affection, of joy, of love" (274), as Vanitha discovers in navigating the emails and Anirudhan's five notebooks. The woman who is bodily absent is everywhere present as an imprint, as an impactful force. She has marked the lives of the desperate but wanderlust women travellers she gathered, marked Anirudhan's notebooks, marked the official record itself. She is, in the most literal sense, a woman who exists as inscription in the form of diaries, emails, and police files by others and by herself, while remaining unseen. It is this positioning of the woman as

text, as mark, as the object and occasionally the subject of writing, that gives the novel its extraordinary feminist resonance.

The feminist stakes of Mudritha's absence are articulated within the novel itself, in the reflections of the policewoman through whose investigation the story unfolds. Writing her report, Vanitha pauses over the very category she is applying: "Who was missing her? What if she had gone away of her own accord?" (4). The questions are quietly radical. The official designation "missing woman" presumes a subject who *belongs somewhere* — to a family, a household, a set of relations from which her absence is a deviation requiring investigation and restoration. Vanitha's questions expose the assumption that a woman is "missing" only in relation to those who claim her. If no one misses her, is she missing at all? And if she has gone of her own accord, is her absence a disappearance or a departure? The distinction is the novel's pivotal point that has a long feminist genealogy: between the woman who is lost and the woman who leaves.

Simone de Beauvoir's foundational analysis in *The Second Sex* illuminates precisely what is at stake in this distinction. Woman, Beauvoir argues, has historically been constituted not as a subject in her own right but in relation to man and to the social structures that claim her: daughter, wife, mother, dependent. Her existence is relational, her identity conferred by her place within the patriarchal order rather than self-determined. Within such an order, a woman's unexplained absence can only be legible as a 'problem', a case to be filed, a body to be recovered, a relational position standing empty. What the order cannot easily conceive is the possibility that the woman has exercised what Beauvoir calls transcendence that patriarchy reserves for men while confining women to immanence, to the given, to the position assigned. Read through Beauvoir, Mudritha's vanishing act shimmers with double meaning: it is either the erasure of a woman by the world, or a woman's sovereign erasure of the world's claim upon her.

The novel makes its feminist genealogy explicit when the case reminds Vanitha to a literary predecessor, the British writer Virginia Woolf, a "woman who had, at the age of fifty-nine, walked into a river near home and killed herself" (11). The allusion is double-edged and deliberately so. Woolf is, on the one hand, the great theorist of women's need for self-determined space without which female selfhood cannot flourish; on the other, she is the woman whose final act was a walking away from the world, a self-erasure that has been read variously as defeat, escape, and terrible autonomy. By placing Woolf's shadow over Mudritha's disappearance, Jose poses the question that organises the entire novel: is Mudritha's vanishing a tragedy or a liberation? Is this the story of one woman's vanishing act, or a radical reclamation of the Self from the histories, official narratives, and spaces from which women have either receded or been made invisible? The question is not answered but held open, and in

holding it open, the novel urges its readers to examine the conditions that make disappearance, for women, an intelligible and even rational act.

This interrogation of female invisibility is deepened by the novel's dense intertextual weave. Alongside Woolf, the narrative draws on Sylvia Plath and Sappho, on Zeynep Hatun's Sufi mysticism, and on the *Mahabharata*, Greek mythology, and *the Bible* — a genealogy that reads as a deliberate assembly of women who wrote, wandered, vanished, or were written over. In binding its contemporary missing woman to Sappho's fragments, Woolf's river, Plath's silences, the overwritten women of epic and scripture, the novel insists that Mudritha's disappearance is not an isolated mystery but the latest instance of a long history in which women have gone missing from the record, and in which going missing may itself be read, against the grain, as a form of speech.

The five notebooks in which Anirudhan records Mudritha's phone calls and emails provide the reader with the fullest access to her motives and her method. With careful artistry, as the novel has it, she places the other women like multi coloured beads in a chain. The journey's conception is itself saturated with feminist intention. Mudritha's post in the closed group in Facebook announces a trip to Odisha, "a land with many women-centred festivals such as Yama Puja, Karthika Purnima, Pousha Pournami, Dhan Sankranti, Magha Saptami" (58). It is a destination chosen for its sacralisation of the feminine, a geography where women's rituals mark the calendar. She receives an overwhelming response of eighty-four affirmations within half an hour, from a group of three hundred and thirty women. The scale and speed of that response is itself a reference point to be considered, which reveals that, behind the ordinary surfaces of these women's lives lies a vast, pent-up longing for movement, waiting only for an invitation.

The group's name and iconography deepen the feminist genealogy already traced. Named Lesbos after the island of Sappho, the ancient Greek poet of women's love, the group uses Sappho's image and her lines as its profile picture: "You will remember / We, too, did these in our youth / Many and beautiful things" (57). The verse is an act of collective memory, a promise that women's shared joys, so rarely recorded, will be remembered. That three hundred and thirty contemporary Malayali women gathered digitally under this sign transforms the Facebook group into a virtual gynaeceum: a women's space in the ancient Greece, and the kind Virginia Woolf theorised as the precondition of female self-realisation, transposed into the digital age. Woolf's demand in *A Room of One's Own* was money and a room, the material and spatial conditions of autonomy denied to women. The novel updates the demand: for these women, the room of one's own is first a closed online group, a protected discursive space away from the surveillance of family and society, and from that room, Mudritha proposes the next, bolder step — the road of one's own.

It is in the individual portraits of the nine travellers that the novel builds its most systematic feminist argument, for each woman's story is a study in what feminist geography has taught us to see: that mobility is gendered, that freedom of movement has never been equally distributed, and that the constraint of women's movement is among patriarchy's most fundamental and least visible operations. Doreen Massey's insight in *Space, Place and Gender*, that spatial control, the confinement of women to particular places and the policing of their movement, is not incidental to but constitutive of their subordination. Janet Wolff's account of the "invisible flâneuse" which examines the historical impossibility of the woman who wanders freely without any accountability, names precisely the figure these women have been prevented from becoming.

Sarvaranjini's twenty years in Kuwait was like a "punishment for a crime she had not committed" (83) where her life has been spent between the flat and the school where she works – two rooms, neither her own – so that she feels "she was on parole" (85), on her journey to Kerala. The carceral metaphor of marriage and migration has functioned for her as an imprisonment, and mobility is experienced not as freedom but as temporary release. Deeptha's case is still more pointed, an irony so sharp it reads as allegory. A news writer for a travel magazine, she is assigned to write about places from photographs taken by the cameraman Sumanth and is required to produce the discourse of travel while being denied its experience, envying the man who is assigned all the journeys while she is reduced to a mere content writer. Her chosen penname, Sancharini – the Sanskrit for wanderer, sojourner – becomes in her own bitter reflection "Sancharikkatha Deeptha – Deeptha who never travels, the un-traveller" (96). Here is Wolff's invisible flâneuse given a name and a byline: the woman who writes travel without travelling, who knows from body language alone those who travel a lot, who walk "as though they were flowing, their eyes filled with the wonder of the sights they had beheld" (95). The un-traveller is the woman condemned to imagine the world through a man's lens, here, literally, through Sumanth's camera, while her own aching for the road is dismissed as irrelevant to her function.

The exchange between Deeptha and Mudritha crystallises the novel's spatial feminism into aphorism. Deeptha writes: "I have polished myself up, cobwebs removed and the debris washed off. I am determined not to allow dust and dirt to settle again" (101) – the imagery of housework turned inward, the woman as a neglected room finally cleaned. Mudritha's reply completes the figure: "women become dusty because they barely move," and they must "keep moving as though caught in a constant breeze" (101–02). The metaphor performs a quiet inversion of patriarchal domestic ideology that the woman kept at home does not remain pure but gathers dust, and that stillness is not virtue but slow burial. Against the cult of the stationary woman who are the 'angel' in the house, Mudritha proposes movement itself as the condition of female vitality. If Beauvoir diagnosed woman's

confinement to immanence, to the repetitive maintenance of life rather than its free projection, Mudritha's "constant breeze" is transcendence, figured as wind.

The remaining portraits extend the taxonomy of gendered constraint into childhood, violence, class, and age. Umanarayani's story roots the denial of space in the womb itself: born thirty minutes after her twin, undetected by family and doctors alike, she enters the world as a surplus entity, underprivileged, undernourished, undernurtured and underestimated by the family. Even her name "Umanarayani" was thrust upon her to match her sister's pre-selected "Umamaheswari." The woman who once dreamed of becoming an astronaut has never travelled in a train and her excitement at the prospect of seeing a mutilated sculpture of Umanarayani in the yogini temple of Odisha colours the structure of the novel with most poignant touches. In the damaged image of the goddess who shares her name, she recognises herself, as the female figure defaced by history yet still standing, still sacred. Baby, the tailor, carries the wounds of a rape suffered at thirteen and a forced marriage to a man twenty-five years her senior who shares her very name – a detail in which the erasure of female identity within marriage reaches a kind of grim perfection: even her name is not her own. For her, the journey's promise lies precisely in its purposelessness: "a journey without a clear reason, with nothing to accomplish, no one to visit" (140). This formulation defines the exact freedom women have been denied over centuries. Women's permitted journeys have always required justification – the pilgrimage, the family visit, the errand; travel for its own sake, unaccountable movement answering to no purpose beyond the traveller's own desire, has been the flâneur's male privilege. Baby's longing for the purposeless journey is a longing for wanderlust itself – for the right to move without explanation.

Vennila's story adds the dimensions of class and myth. A Tamil domestic worker, abandoned by a husband who leaves her for her own sister, she is offered the journey by her employer Philomena, who consoles her with the Greek myth of Tereus, who raped his wife's sister Philomela and cut out her tongue, and of the violated woman's transformation into a nightingale. "Everyone who experiences sorrow thinks that theirs is the worst," (157) Philomena tells her, passing on her own place in the trip. The myth is exquisitely chosen, as Philomela is the archetype of the silenced woman, her tongue cut out precisely so she cannot name her violation, who nonetheless finds a voice beyond speech, weaving her story into a tapestry, singing it as a bird. The novel's silenced women, gathering wordlessly in a digital group, planning a wordless escape into movement, are Philomela's daughters: denied the tongue, they weave; denied speech, they travel. Hannah Maria, who hides from life's turmoil in her phone and belongs to another group – Penlokam, Women's World – without ever making connections, answers Mudritha's call while musing on a line from the Song of Songs: "My vineyard, my very own, is for myself. I will never let anyone take it from me" (182). And Madhumalathi's response folds the generations into a single sentence of extraordinary compression: "Can I come too? There is a twenty-

four-year-old in my mind, the same age as my daughter, who needs new paths pointing outwards. I can no longer bear the weight of her inside me" (240). The younger self, arrested at the age her daughter has now reached, still waits inside her for the paths that were closed; the journey is undertaken on that inner woman's behalf. In *Madhumalathi* the novel acknowledges that constrained mobility is not one woman's misfortune but an inheritance passed between generations, and that the journey outward is simultaneously a journey backwards, a retrieval of the self that patriarchy interrupted.

Taken together, the portraits compose a collective protagonist: women differing in age, religion, class, and circumstance – the migrant wife, the un-travelling travel writer, the unwanted twin, the child survivor, the abandoned domestic worker, the digitally cloistered young woman, the mother carrying her arrested younger self – united by silencing and by an unextinguished zest for life and quest for identity, freedom, space, mobility, and emancipation. The journey *Mudritha* designs is the answer to all of them at once. It is a healing whose method is movement. As one of the group replies to Sarvaranjini's sad message from the taxi: "Why are you sad? Aren't we going to heal all hurt? Isn't that why we're going on this journey?" (89).

The novel's resolution refuses every convention of the missing-person plot. Vanitha, pursuing the whereabouts of the missing woman, finally closes the file, finding that no woman named *Mudritha* ever existed in the locality. The investigation into a disappearance concludes by discovering a prior, more radical absence: the missing woman was never officially present. And yet the trip takes place. The nine travellers, with Anirudhan, complete the ten-day journey to Odisha without the woman who conceived it – who remains, though unseen and untouched by anyone, in the hearts of all, spreading light and comfort.

This ending transfigures the novel's central figure from a person into a principle. *Mudritha*, whose name means the imprinted one, proves to be pure imprint: a *mudra* without a body, a mark without a marker, present only in the effects she has produced – the emails, the itinerary, the gathered women, the completed journey, the transformed lives. Read through Beauvoir, the ending performs a dazzling reversal. The woman as Other has always been a construction of others' discourse – defined, described, disposed of by the narratives of family, state, and men. *Mudritha* seizes this condition and radicalises it into freedom. If woman is doomed to exist as others' text, she will author the text herself and her non-existence in the official record is not her erasure but her escape as the state cannot declare a woman missing whom it never possessed. She is the woman who cannot be lost because she was never anyone's to lose. In her, the novel's founding distinction between the woman who is lost and the woman who leaves collapses into a third and more unsettling possibility – the woman who was never captured at all.

The novelist's refusal to resolve Mudritha's status is thus not an evasion but the novel's most rigorous feminist gesture. Mudritha is not a mystery to be solved but an echo to be listened to; she is neither heroine nor tragic figure, neither a winner nor a loser, and the narrative ends in deliberate ambiguity, uncertainty, and indefiniteness. To solve her would be to repeat the reduction of woman to an object of knowledge, a file to be closed. By leaving her unresolved, Jose leaves her free. The reader is placed in Vanitha's position, and also in Anirudhan's, and the nine women's, of having been touched, moved, and reorganised by a woman who cannot be summoned, explained, or possessed.

This paper has traced the feminist trajectory that *Mudritha* announces in its own structure: the movement from disappearance to self-discovery. That movement, the analysis has shown, operates simultaneously at three levels. At the level of the individual, each of the nine travellers undertakes the journey as an act of reclamation, a retrieval of the space, mobility, and selfhood that marriage, family, violence, and social convention have denied them. Their ten days on the road to Odisha, completed even in the absence of the woman who convened them, enact Mudritha's own aphorism that women gather dust because they barely move, and that healing begins in motion. At the level of the collective, the novel assembles from its disparate women, gathered under Sappho's sign, travelling toward a land of women's festivals, a sisterhood whose solidarity is itself a form of resistance. The closed group becomes the open road, Woolf's room of one's own becomes the journey of one's own. And at the level of the figure of Mudritha herself, the novel performs its most radical inversion: the missing woman, patriarchy's perennial object of search and seizure, becomes the self-authored woman who cannot be found because she was never possessed – whose absence is not lack but sovereignty, and whose only remains are the marks of affection, joy, and love she has imprinted on those she set in motion. The wanderlust of the title's promise, the mystery of its plot, and the feminist resistance of its politics prove, in the end, to be one and the same gesture. In a literary tradition and a social world that have made women disappear – from records, from histories, from public space – Jissa Jose imagines a woman who makes disappearance her own act, and who, in vanishing, sets other women free to appear: on the road, in the world, and in the pages of their own stories. As the epigraph's circle closes, the road, at last, belongs to the women who walk it.

### Works Cited

- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, Vintage Books, 2011.
- Jose, Jissa. *Mudritha: A Novel*. Translated by Jayasree Kalathil, Harper Perennial, 2025.
- Massey, Doreen. *Space, Place and Gender*. U of Minnesota P, 1994.

Wolff, Janet. "The Invisible Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity." *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 2, no. 3, 1985, pp. 37–46.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. Penguin Books, 2005.