THE MUSLIM FEMALE BODY: READING THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION AND RESISTANCE IN KERALA

Thesis submitted to the
University of Calicut

for the award of the Degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLISH

by

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under the supervision of

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Declaration

I, Reshma Majeed, hereby declare that the thesis titled "The Muslim Female Body: Reading the Politics of Representation and Resistance in Kerala" is a work of bonafide research carried out by me under the supervision and guidance of Dr. Najeeb P. M., and it has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma, associateship, fellowship, or any other similar title or recognition.

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Reshma Majeed

Contents

Abstract

Recent enterprises on Muslim women often place the critiques of Muslim women's clothing practices in Kerala in the larger contexts of global Islamophobia and the rise of militant Hindutva in India, or the "perceived oppressive structures" inherent in Islam that limits the visibility and mobility of Muslim women's bodies by overtly sexualising them. To challenge and unsettle the regnant modes of analysis of the Muslim female body as the "oppressed/protected" or resistive trope, this study attempts to forefront the constitutive role of the Islamic tradition of Kerala in forging the diverse motivations regulating the bodily conducts of Muslim women, their religiosities, and aspects of their gendered religious embodiment.

Using a methodological framework informed by two critical approaches, body studies and Islamic feminism, the study traces the emergence of the discourse on Muslim female body through an analysis of Islamic interpretative tradition in Kerala. It reads texts on ethical self-fashioning and intra-faith debates between the traditionalists and reformists in the complex and embedded social, religious, and political schema of twentieth century Kerala. In this attempt to historicise the debates on Muslim women and body, the study traces the pre-reformist, reformist, and Muslim women reformist enterprises on body through an analysis of select texts. Besides analysing the contemporary debates in Kerala and examining the role of interpretative texts on ethical self-fashioning and "religious bodyhood" in creating the dominant discourse on the gendered female body, the study locates female articulations on body from within faith and also attempts to examine the nature of Muslim women's resistances from within these sects.

Key Words: Body, Muslim Women, Religiosity, Reform, Islamic Feminism

സംഗ്രഹം

മുസ്ലിം സ്ത്രീകളുടെ വസ്ത്രധാരണ രീതിയെ കുറിച്ചുള്ള വിമർശനങ്ങളെ ആഗോള തലത്തിൽ തന്നെ സജീവമായിട്ടുള്ള ഇസ്ലാമോഫോബിയ യുടെയും ഇന്ത്യയിലെ തീവ്ര ഹിന്ദുത്വയുടെ വളർച്ചയുടെയും വലിയ ചട്ടക്കൂടിൽ കാണാൻ ശ്രമിക്കുന്നതിനൊപ്പം ഇസ്ലാമിൽ തന്നെ അന്തർലീനമായ അടിച്ചമർത്തൽ ഘടകങ്ങൾ മുസ്ലിം സ്ത്രീകളുടെ ശരീരത്തിന്റെ ദൃശ്യതയെയും ചലനാത്മകതയെയും പരിമിതപ്പെടുത്തുകയും ഒരു പരിധിവരെ ഉപഭോഗ വസ്തു മാത്രമായി ചുരുക്കി കാണാൻ ശ്രമിക്കുകയും ചെയ്യുന്നു എന്നാണ് മുസ്ലിം സ്ത്രീ ശരീരങ്ങളെക്കുറിച്ചുള്ള സമീപകാല അക്കാദമിക പഠനങ്ങൾ പലപ്പോഴും വാദിക്കുന്നത്.

ഈ കാഴ്ചപ്പാടിനെ അല്ലെങ്കിൽ മുസ്ലിം സ്ത്രീ ശരീരത്തെ അടിച്ചമർത്തപ്പെട്ട/ സംരക്ഷിക്കപ്പെട്ട ഒരു വസ്തുവായി വിശകലനം ചെയ്യുന്ന നിലവിലെ രീതികളെ ചോദ്യം ചെയ്യാനും മറ്റൊരു പരിപ്രേ ക്ഷ്യത്തിലൂടെ ഈ വിഷയത്തെ നോക്കി കാണുവാനും ആണ് ഈ പഠനം ശ്രമിക്കുന്നത്.

കേരളത്തിലെ ഇസ്ലാമിക പാരമ്പര്യത്തിന്റെ ക്രിയാത്മകവും ഘടനാപരവുമായ പങ്ക് ഈ വിഷയത്തിൽ എടുത്തു പറയേണ്ടതാണ്. കേരളത്തിൽ മുസ്ലിം സ്ത്രീകളുടെ ശാരീരിക ഇടങ്ങളെയും അവരുടെ ലിംഗ മത ഭൗതികതയുടെ വിവിധ വശങ്ങളെയും നിയന്ത്രിക്കുന്ന വൈവിധ്യങ്ങളായ ചോദനകൾക്കും അതിന്റെ നിർണായക പങ്കിനും ഈ പഠനം മുൻഗണന നൽകുന്നു.

'ശരീര പഠനങ്ങൾ' ' ഇസ്ലാമിക ഫെമിനിസം' എന്നീ രണ്ട് നിർണായക സമീപനങ്ങളുടെ രീതിശാസ്ത്രപരമായ ചട്ടക്കൂട് ഉപയോഗിച്ച് കേരളത്തിലെ ഇസ്ലാമിക വ്യാഖ്യാന പാരമ്പര്യത്തിന്റെ വിശകലനത്തിലൂടെ മുസ്ലിം സ്ത്രീ ശരീര ചർച്ചകളുടെ തുടക്കത്തെയും അതിന്റെ പരിണാമഗതികളെയും ഈ പഠനം ലക്ഷ്യം വയ്ക്കുന്നു.

ഇരുപതാം നൂറ്റാണ്ടിലെ കേരളത്തിന്റെ സങ്കീർണവും സവിശേഷവുമായ സാമൂഹിക-മത -രാഷ്ട്രീയ മേഖലകളിൽ പാരമ്പര്യവാദികളും പരിഷ്കർത്താക്കളും തമ്മിലുള്ള ആഭ്യന്തരവിശ്വാസ സംവാദങ്ങളും നൈതികതയെ കുറിച്ചുള്ള അവരുടെ സമീപനങ്ങളും ഇതിൽ പഠനവിധേയമാക്കുന്നു.

മുസ്ലിം സ്ത്രീകളെയും ശരീരത്തെയും കുറിച്ചുള്ള സമകാലിക ചർച്ചകളെ ചരിത്ര സന്ദർഭത്തിൽ നോക്കി കാണാനുള്ള ഈ ശ്രമത്തിൽ തിരഞ്ഞെടുത്ത ചില പാഠ /പഠനങ്ങളുടെ വിശകലനത്തിലൂടെ മുസ്ലിം സ്ത്രീകളുടെ പ്രതിരോധത്തെയും അതിന്റെ സ്വഭാവ സവിശേഷതയേയും കണ്ടെത്തുവാനുള്ള ഒരു എളിയ ശ്രമം കൂടിയാണ് ഈ പഠനം.

സൂചകപദങ്ങൾ: മതാത്മകത,ഇസ്ലാമിക ഫെമിനിസം,മുസ്ലിം സ്ത്രീ,ശരീരം, പരിഷ്കരണം.

Introduction

Pardah:

A cavern of imprisoned slaves,

of dreams confined in the mines,

of bodies severed of freedom,

of explosions buried in the veins. (Theekkuni, my trans; 9)

The poem "Pardah" was initially published by the poet Pavithran Theekkuni on his Facebook page. Following the controversies triggered by the fifteen-line poem that compared the parda-clad woman's body to Africa, he recalled the poem with an explanatory note stating that it seemed to have offended some of his friends. He later published a "corrected" version of the poem in the collection *Seethayum, Pardayum, Seershakamillatha Kavithakalum*[1] (*Seetha, Parda, and Other Untitled Poems*). Both the poem and its withdrawal created a huge uproar on social media, bringing questions of intolerance towards Muslim woman's clothing and intrusion into one's freedom of expression to the forefront.

The steady increase in the visibility of veiled (*hijabi*) Muslim women in the public sphere of Kerala has been inviting an increased focus on the hijab and other

[1] The poem, translated and quoted in this thesis, is the version from the collection titled *Seethayum, Pardayum, Seershakamillatha Kavithakalum* (*Seetha, Parda and Other Untitled Poems*) published by DC Books. For the initial version of the poem and a report on the controversy, see Ubaid.

forms of Islamic clothing. The change in Malayali Muslim women's clothing practices, since the last decades of the twentieth century, is often discussed as "a problem to be solved." The fear of the hijab, the (mis)representation of Muslim woman's clothing in the poem "Pardah" invited scathing responses from diverse corners. Recent academic enterprises on Muslim women often place the critiques of Muslim women's clothing practices in Kerala in the larger contexts of global Islamophobia and the rise of militant Hindutva in India (Arafath and Arunima 26). These analyses often extend to include the "perceived oppressive structures" inherent in Islam, which limit the visibility and mobility of Muslim women's body by overtly sexualising them. For want of a more inclusive approach, these studies fail to engage with aspects of religiosity and devotion while addressing the Muslim women's question. Notwithstanding the polemics on Muslim women from within and outside faith, there is a dearth of rigorous academic enterprises on the emergent discourse on Muslim women and her body.

In an attempt to challenge and unsettle the regnant modes of analysis of the Muslim female body as the "oppressed/protected" trope, this study forefronts the constitutive role of the Islamic tradition of Kerala in forging the religiosities of Muslim women and their gendered religious embodiment. The research traces the emergence of the discourse on Muslim female body through an analysis of Islamic interpretative tradition in Kerala, texts on ethical self-fashioning, intra-faith debates between the traditionalists and reformists[2] in the complex and embedded social, religious and

[2] A brief survey of the religious formations in Kerala reveals that there are two prominent sects among Muslim organisations–the traditionalist Sunni organisations and the reformist Salafi organisations. The other organisations which eventually evolved can be grouped with either of the two categories.The section on Kerala Muslims in the next chapter presents a comprehensive account of these major religious formations.

political schema of twentieth century Kerala and thereby attempts to historicise the contemporary debates on Muslim women. This analysis seeks to locate aspects of piety, devotion, and ethical self-fashioning as well as objectification and sexualisation in the discourses on Muslim woman's body and thus offer a corrective to the neglect of the role of religious Islamic interpretative texts within the academia. Given the pervasiveness of Muslim religious organisations in Kerala and the institutionalised nature of their activities that permeate the everyday life of its adherents, this relatively under-explored field plays a significant role in contouring the lives and bodily conducts of Muslim women in Kerala. Yet, caution is exercised to avoid certain pitfalls that can possibly emanate from an overarching influence of "the piety turn" [3] in Islamic studies, to situate plurality in Muslim women's bodily practices.

Considering this study as a project in what one may call "Islamic body studies," this research draws on concepts from both body studies and Islamic feminism. This is to state that the methodological framework of the study is significantly informed by these two critical approaches that can help address the entanglements in the study of religion, gender, and body. These approaches are, in turn, influenced by diverse disciplines such as history, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, gender studies, and religious studies. Islamic Feminism is a set of critical approaches that uses a broad range of theoretical assumptions, critical methodologies, and disciplinary orientations in the study of Islam and gender. A brief overview of the major fields of inquiry and

[3] The exclusive focus on aspects of piety, though it problematises the all-encompassing Western intellectual enterprises as in the works of Saba Mahmood, has been criticised by some anthropologists. They highlight the reductionism in such readings and the narrow emphasis on ethical self-fashioning in appreciating the contemporary dynamics of the Muslim world. For such readings, see Bangstad ; Schielke, "Being Good" and "Second Thoughts"; Soares & Osella.

approaches within this discipline can help us understand how Islamic feminism has given rise to some of the boldest discursive articulations on the relationship between gender and religion. This is followed by a brief examination of the fundamental ideas within the field of body studies, which are utilised in this exploration of how Muslim woman's body is gendered in Kerala.

The glaringly overlooked lives and representations of Muslim women have been inviting substantial critical attention globally in the recent decades. Islamic feminists have been offering a much-needed reparative to the stereotyping of Muslim women both in Western historiography and the "male" exegetical texts in Islam. Drawing significantly from diverse theoretical disciplines, this methodological discipline of Islamic feminism has burgeoned into a significant area of study. It has emerged as a major theoretical discipline within feminism that, at once, challenges patriarchy within Islam and Islamophobic tendencies within feminism.

Islamic feminism gained prominence as a critical approach and a mode of activism, becoming increasingly discernible as a powerful critical tool for analysis in the 1980s and 1990s.The beginning of this approach is marked by the critical exegesis of scholars like Amina Wadud, who challenged the male dominant readings of Islamic texts and biases in Islam's interpretative traditions. Wadud, a seminal scholar, in her *Qur'an and Woman*(1992), developed a feminist hermeneutics, using which she challenged the male-centric readings of the Islamic texts. She maintains that her feminist reading of the Quran is an attempt to understand the text from a non-traditional and non-patriarchal perspective. Wadud says:

> I propose to make a 'reading' of the Qur'an from within the female experience and without the stereotypes which have been the framework for many of the male interpretations. . . . I am analysing the text and not the interpretations of that text, my treatment of this issue differs from many of the existing works on this topic. (3)

Other Islamic feminists who engage with this question of "male" interpretations include Asma Barlas, Fathima Mernissi, and Riffat Hassan. Within the field, Kecia Ali, a noteworthy figure, argues that patriarchal overtones are ingrained in the text, emphasising that feminist interpretations should not simplify the issue as a problem of interpretations (131-132). The works of these Islamic feminists are characterised by a critical exegesis of the Quran and other scriptures. The emergent scholarship also investigates how interpretative traditions have been shaped by socio-economic and historical factors that formed part of patriarchal and androcentric frameworks.

These exegetical enterprises undertaken by the Islamic feminists inspired numerous studies in the field, which eventually led to new understandings of the Quranic notions of gender, as well as justice and equality, and created new ways of looking at ideas of divinity and religious authority. The impact of these modes of inquiry can be discerned from the emergence of associated debates and studies within the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, feminism, and religious studies, which has expanded Islamic Feminism's fields of inquiry.

Apart from analysing and questioning the gendered assumptions in scriptures and examining the patriarchal frameworks of texts, Islamic feminists also focus on

restoring Muslim women's histories and investigate how and why gendered norms and practices took shape. They revisit histories to unearth the long lost histories of Muslim women. Leila Ahmed is a pioneering figure in this area. In her ground-breaking *Women and Gender in Islam*(1992), she argues that the early Muslim community enacted more egalitarian gender norms and that patriarchal practices strengthened in the years following the death of the prophet (67). The works of these feminists, including that of Fatima Mernissi and Leila Ahmed, provide a substantial account of the contributions of Muslim women in Islamic traditions. These studies also reveal how the idea of a single Islamic tradition normalised and legitimised patriarchy and invalidated not only female religious and political power but also women's social and legal status. In doing this, these Islamic feminists invite immense critical attention to such acts of rereading histories for vignettes of Muslim women who played crucial roles in religious histories and Islamic societies. Most importantly, these histories thus reconstructed also demonstrate how patriarchy came to be later naturalised as the legitimate Islamic world order.

Islamic feminism's approach is further enriched by theories of sociology and its tools, using which everyday negotiations of gender norms and practices in Muslim contexts are analysed as significant categories of experience. Similar to other feminisms and gender studies, Islamic feminism and its practitioners have also adopted and incorporated anthropology and its analytical tools and theories. The key areas of inquiry in the sociological and anthropological study of gender and Islam include the role of religious agency and authority in determining the experiences of women. Saba Mahmood's landmark study, *The Politics of Piety* (2004), is a nuanced examination of

female engagement with the Islamic tradition, which shows how religious texts and ritual practices together contribute to their embodiment of religious norms. In her study of Muslim women's engagement with the revivalist mosque movement in Egypt, Mahmood argues that the methodological incompatibility of Western feminism and Islamic studies needs a thorough revamping in order to accommodate Muslim women's experiences. She states:

> Women do more than simply conform to, or challenge, prescriptive discourses. Rather, Muslim women possess complex goals and motivations for inhabiting conservative religious norms. Their religious practices and frameworks, often complicate liberal feminist concepts, such as autonomy and freedom. (25)

Building on Talal Asad's intellectual legacy, Mahmood invited significant scholarly attention to Muslim women's engagement with the Islamic discursive tradition, setting forth a paradigmatic shift that foregrounds various micro-social practices of religiosity and its role in the ethical self-fashioning of Muslim women. Similar to Mahmood's critical enterprise is a work by Sherine Hafez, *An Islam of Her Own: Reconsidering Religion and Secularism in Women's Islamic Movements* (2011). In this work, Hafez focuses on women's Islamic activism in Egypt to challenge the binary representations of religious versus secular subjectivities. She analyses the ways in which women, who participate in Islamic activism, narrate their selfhood, articulate their desires, and embody discourses in which the boundaries are blurred between the religious and the secular (125-126).

These developments in Islamic feminism have helped to situate both the theory and praxis in a larger socio-political landscape and have necessitated a new focus on Muslim women's lived experiences in the overlapping contexts of micro/macro politics that determine aspects of religiosity and Muslim identity. This kind of an approach underscores the role of social actors and practices who are often deemed to be insignificant agents in history and culture. This methodological turn, that foregrounds the lived and the local, is further expanded to encompass questions of colonialism, modernity, decoloniality, nationalism, and secularism. This shift in the approach to the study of Muslim societies and its women is concomitant with the emergence of a more inclusive and expansive approach within gender studies, which emphasises an intense analysis of gendered experiences and practices. Ethnographers are documenting both emerging trends in gendered religiosities in the modern world as well as forms of resistive spiritual practices of women in the past and present[4]. Muslim women's religious roles shifted significantly in the twentieth century with their increased engagement in the public sphere. Joseph Hill's work, *Wrapping Authority: Women Islamic Leaders in a Sufi Movement in Dakar, Senegal* (2018), is such an attempt to read the gendered sacred through an analysis of the ethnographic accounts of the Sufi women of the Tijannya order in Senegal, in which women emerge as *Muqaddamas* ("spiritual leaders"). The shift in Muslim women's religious roles since the late twentieth century, with their increased engagement in the public space and the multiple roles they play in diverse contexts, has further necessitated such inclusive approaches.

[4] Recent Ethnographic inquiries extend to various fields pertaining to Muslim women and their religiosities, including fashion and clothing practices. For a sample of such studies, see Lewis, *Modest Fashion*; Bucar.

These studies have helped challenge the dominant notions of Muslim women as a unified, unchanging subject. The modes of analyses enabled by these intersections within disciplines have proved crucial in exploring not just the experiences of Muslim women but the complexities of Muslim social worlds in general.

A brief overview of the major approaches within Islamic Feminism attempted here makes it clear that the Islamic feminists are simultaneously waging a struggle against the patriarchal manifestations of Islam and also the Islamophobic manifestations of feminism. Thus, they not only de-traditionalise Islam by rereading relations between genders but also appropriate feminism in ways that make it a more inclusive methodological approach. Islamic feminism combines, in its analysis, aspects of secularisation with that of Islamisation and thus brings out its political, social, and cultural complexity. This approach and its resultant analyses are further sanctioned by the conviction that using gender theory to read and understand Muslim lives and contexts can help us have broader insights not only about religion but also law, economics, politics, and culture. Besides, a reading of gender and religion problematises male-centered and androcentric perspectives that are simplistically considered to be both objective and universal. In the past few decades, this mode of critical inquiry that combines feminism with religious studies has created new ways of perceiving gender relations, and this has its impact on religious practices, the judiciary, and even policy making bodies in various parts of the world.

One of the most remarkable outcomes of the intersection of sexuality, gender, and Islamic studies is the focus on the complex religious and cultural mechanisms that privilege certain bodies over others, and the myriad ways in which religion determines

these frameworks of knowing and experiencing gender and sexuality. This heightened focus emanates from the understanding that religion plays a key role in determining these frameworks within which certain genders and their practices are often marginalised by the dominant. Their roles have hitherto remained unanalysed. Besides, by acknowledging the multifaceted nature of gendered experiences, these research enterprises help scholars understand not only the interplay between Islam and gender but also how it is constantly being modified by subversive gendered acts of social actors. These approaches open up new archives and new voices in the study of Islam, and they also help in developing expanded and nuanced theoretical and methodological terrains for analysing them. Reconsidering gendered categories and ideologies in Muslim contexts as a complex system of representation, these studies call for a new focus on contextualised readings of religiosities. The task of the researcher is to show how a culturally specific system of inequality is constructed, practiced, and maintained in different empirical locations, with its distinct dynamics that predicate upon relations of gender in those contexts.

Different kinds of gender inequalities often coexist within a given culture. Hence, the sociocultural milieu and the histories of particular societies need to be considered as significant variables in determining the gendered religiosities of Muslim women. The idea of a unified Islamic culture and tradition has been replaced by this new focus on contextualised readings of Muslim societies and their experiences. This shift has initiated the need to foreground the contexts in the study of gender in Muslim societies.

The focus on the representation of the Muslim female body in Kerala emerged from an understanding of this methodological turn in Islamic feminism that invites our attention to the discursive practices of gendering in diverse historical and socio-political contexts, in which different Muslim societies and their religious experiences are located. Drawing on some of the key concepts within the theoretical discipline of body studies, the study attempts to trace the genealogy of the Muslim female body in Kerala through a reading of intra-faith debates between the traditionalist and the reformist sects in the Islamic tradition of Kerala. It also aims to locate Muslim women's resistances to the male discourse on body. This approach can shed some light on the discursive construction of the gendered religious female body through certain acts, which are rooted in Islamic theology, yet modified and evolving in reaction to the changing socio-political scenario of Kerala. The methodological framework employed in the study combines in it a set of concepts and ideas drawn from body studies, briefly enumerated in the following analysis.

The exploration of human societies has been greatly benefiting from some recent critical approaches that transcend the traditional mind/body duality and recognise the significant role of body and embodiment in human experiences. Within the realm of the social sciences of religion, a transformative shift has occurred, which has revolutionised our approach to the understanding of diverse communities and individuals and their respective worlds. By genuinely acknowledging that humans are inherently embodied beings, the sociologists adopted a fresh perspective of the "mindful body" that has significantly influenced research endeavours in diverse disciplines, by making us consider that believers (as well as non-believers) do not exist

as disembodied spirits but engage with and interpret the material world through their physical bodies (Hughes and Lock 6). This heightened awareness of the social and political dimensions of human bodies, now serve as a guiding principle in determining research and theoretical frameworks for the study of varied aspects of individual and social worlds. An understanding of this "body turn" in social sciences and its influence in the study of gender and religion is crucial to this study of Muslim women and the discursive construction of their body in the context of Kerala. The following analysis puts together some of the major critical approaches that intersect in the study of body, gender, and religion. This provides an insight into the methodological framework of the research undertaken.

Meredith B. McGuire pioneered the call for a focus on body in religious studies when she passionately urged scholars to embrace a fresh approach that incorporates embodiment as a pivotal category. In her arguments, McGuire emphasised that religion has conventionally been confined to the realms of the mind and soul, sidelining the crucial role of the human body as a complex religious symbol. She posed a fundamental question: "What if the subjects of our research and theorizing, namely people, were recognized as having material bodies?" (283-84).This query challenged the traditional narratives of a hierarchical status of the mind over body, highlighting the significance of considering the human body as an integral aspect of religious expressions. Throughout history, the human body has been a canvas for the manifestation of religious beliefs, with religion leaving indelible imprints on bodies and reciprocally, bodies embodying religious principles. McGuire criticises social science enterprises for frequently neglecting the embodiment aspect in their analyses.

Often, scholarly investigations focusing on individual believers, religious organisations and ideologies tend to maintain a distant or entirely dismissive stance concerning the relationship humans have with their own bodies as well as the bodies of others. McGuire's insights underscore the critical need to reevaluate these scholarly approaches, acknowledging the intricate interplay between religion and the embodied human experience (284).

The critical enterprises on religions were affected by an epistemological tradition that rigidly separates the spiritual from the material and the mind from the body. This division extended to the way the researchers organised their subdisciplines, with "mind and spirit" falling under the purview of their inquiries, while the "body" aspect, often equated with the real or physical, is typically associated with biologists and medical scientists. Continuing to uncritically accept this mind/body dualism proved counterproductive, and there emerged a call to consider, instead, the human body as a product of both biology and culture–concurrently physical and symbolic. The body exists within specific social and environmental contexts, where it is an active agent shaped by each social moment and its historical background. To emphasise this unified quality of the mind and the body, Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret M. Lock refer to it as the "mindful body"(6).There emerged the need to reconceptualise the relationships among mind, body, and society not as mere connections but as deeply interwoven, operating as a near-unitary phenomenon.

Religion is only one among the many influencing factors that mould, oversee and govern our physical bodies. The burgeoning field of body studies offers methodological frameworks for critical exploration across a range of disciplines.

Employing methodological approaches derived from this field, researchers delve deeply into investigations related to gender, race, ethnicity, and various other aspects, like body modifications and the impact of beauty industry. Given its pervasive impact, religion has emerged as a noteworthy category of influence that shapes our bodies, and consequently, it is becoming increasingly significant as a subject of inquiry. The following are some of the major aspects of the intersection of religion and body subjected to academic inquiries: this includes ritualistic performances, bodily conducts and habits, clothing practices, bodily inscriptions, as well as segregation of bodies. These aspects largely overlap in forming the religious body and hence the analysis of it cannot be separated into distinct categories.

Research into how religious ideologies permeate the daily routines of their followers has led to a profound understanding of the ritualistic practices and bodily acts that mould the body. By interpreting embodiment as a series of conscious processes through which individuals and groups assign religious significance to physical gestures and behaviours, recent scholars have started acknowledging the impact of these communicative practices, which can either encapsulate or challenge religious beliefs. In both scenarios, the body, functioning as a cultural emblem, engages in a complex interplay with religious ideologies and norms, giving rise to varying degrees of religious expressions. Religious meaning is not confined to mere bodily actions; it is also negotiated, reinforced, contested, and subverted through these actions. Essentially, the body operates as a mnemonic tool, embodying religion through diverse acts, routines, rituals, and by representing abstract ideas specific to a particular faith.

The inquiries into the role of body in religion also probe into the unique ways in which religions "structure" the followers' bodies using external signs to express the inherent devotional codes. Seemingly innocuous details and inscriptions too can represent complex meanings and symbols. For instance, in Hindu culture, bodily inscriptions hold significant meanings, reflecting various religious, spiritual, and cultural beliefs. These inscriptions often referred to as body marks or body decorations are associated with rituals, rites of passage, and religious practices. They play a crucial role in expressing one's devotion, identity, and connection to the divine. The *tilaka* or *bindi* is one such prominent mark worn on the forehead by both Hindu men and women. It symbolises the third eye or spiritual sight and is believed to enhance concentration and protect against negative energy. The *bindi* is also associated with the concept of the *ajna chakra* ("the sixth chakra") and represents the seat of wisdom and intuition (Zelazko). These inscriptions enable an extended visibility of the scriptural and spiritual codes and discipline the body in such ways that the individual body becomes part of a larger group of followers. Reading these bodily inscriptions in diverse religions is another key area in the study of religion and body.

Besides specific habits, rituals, and bodily markings, religions prescribe certain codes of conduct for its adherents. These behavioural codes express wide range of meanings, including hierarchical distinctions, gender segregation, aspects of purity, and pollution. Such bodily conducts and deportments include various forms of dressing, veiling, and public performance of activities such as prostration, ablution, circumambulation, and fasting. The followers of each religion have to keenly follow some complex patterns of bodily movements while performing prayers. These

movements performed as a group or individually generate certain modes of conformity to the religious credo. Besides, these body performances evoke certain devotional attitudes rooted in the scriptural texts of these religions. The very physical nature of prayer in most religious traditions ritualises the body.

The body in prayer is considered akin to the divine or as having elements of divinity within it. Body is God's creation and hence the divinity and purity associated with it. Healing, revival and resurrection of the body also constitute some of the key tropes in religious rituals. Yet, this doesn't make the body a completely "pure" entity inhabited by the soul or spirit, as evidenced by the religious discourses on impurity and potential for pollution the body contains. Considering this, there is an inherent ambivalence in most of the religions when it comes to question of the body. The body is at once celebrated and controlled. On the other hand, there is quite a lot of moral panic about the body; physical desires can be corrupting. Yet, there is a theological celebration running alongside this moral panic. In most of the religious traditions, there is a thorough focus on controlling the body and bodily desires. Recent studies, which probe beyond the issues of mind-body dualism, are helping researchers engage with these systems of bodily conducts while dealing with body as a category of religious experience. The materiality of the body, its enactment of the abstract religious principles through rituals and other bodily conducts, and its impact on individual and collective religious lives are worth analysing.

The critical engagements with aspects of embodiment, bodily practices, rituals, and habits within religious contexts elucidate the diverse manifestations of religiosity inscribed on and performed by these bodies. These critical analyses also deal with

expressions of gendered religiosities, indicating that religiosity is inherently intertwined with gender dynamics. They also reveal that religious bodily markers function as dual signifiers, representing both faith and gender. Discernible gender distinctions are evident in the inscription of religion onto bodies– a process that extends beyond a mere conditioning of individual and collective bodies. In addition to shaping the physical form, religions impart gendered perspectives onto the body, and these perspectives are distinct and specific to each religious tradition. Though the study of how religion genders bodies remained a largely unexplored field till the late twentieth century, sociologists and feminists have, in the recent decades, started analysing religion as a significant force that shapes women's gender experiences. Besides exploring the possibilities of feminist re-readings and re-writings of religions and its practices, exegetical analyses and epistemological inquiries, these scholars are attempting to understand how religions construct gendered bodies and subjectivities.

Religious body as a category of analysis can help us understand the more complex mechanisms through which religion contours gendered bodies. Bodies perform both gender and religion ritualistically. "Our bodies," as Susan Bordo contends, "are trained, shaped and impressed with the prevailing historical forms of . . . masculinity and femininity" (91). These repetitive performances combine with other social, cultural, and religious orders to create enduring patterns of bodily conducts and expressions. Gendering of bodies under the influence of religion is a bourgeoning field of inquiry that throws light on the hierarchical structure of different genders within religions. The study of gender and religion has been significantly informed by theories of body studies. These theories examine how the human body becomes a site of

cultural, social, and religious significance, shedding light on how gendered identities are constructed and negotiated within religious contexts. The following section briefly outlines some key theories and conceptual tools within the field of body studies that have made substantial contribution to elucidate the complex interrelationships among gender, corporeality, and religion.

Michel Foucault's ideas on the complex mechanisms that lead to the disciplining of the body has significantly influenced the methodological approaches within body studies. He famously argued that "the body is directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it: they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs" (25). His concept of body and power can be employed to explore how institutions and societal norms regulate bodies leading to the formation of specific gendered behaviours and religious practices. Foucault's theory illuminates the intricate dynamics of power and discipline within individual and societal contexts. Bodies are subjected to varying degrees of disciplining, making them either disciplined, docile, or deviant bodies. In gender studies, Foucault's ideas underscore how gender norms are inscribed on bodies, leading to the enforcement of specific gendered behaviours and identities. In the context of religion, his theories help to understand how religious institutions exercise power over individuals' bodies, influencing the construction of gender roles and norms through surveillance and classification. His concepts also help analyse how bodies are disciplined and regulated, reinforcing societal norms and expectations related to masculinity and femininity.

Foucault's ideas on discursive practices and the construction of the gendered body are also central to understanding how societal norms and power relations influence the way gender is perceived, enacted, and regulated. He argues that societies have systems of knowledge and power, known as discourses, which shape how individuals understand and talk about various subjects, including gender and sexuality (Richardson and Locks 29). These discourses are not limited to the realm of certain texts in the form of words but encompass a broad range of practices, institutions, laws, scientific theories, and cultural norms. Used to categorise and label individuals, discourses define what is considered normal or deviant within society.

Foucault's framework also allows for the analysis of resistance strategies that these bodies embody. Niall Richardson and Adam Locks explicate how body can act as a site of resistance:

> Resistance is a complex term and one particularly embraced by Michel Foucault in his writings on power. Throughout history there have been many types of resistance. On an obvious level there is the active resistance which takes place between two warring factions with one side resisting the attack of the other. Similarly, workers may resist a pay cut through striking. However, there is also resistance which takes place at the level of cultural negotiation and can be demonstrated through iconography or discourse. As such, resistance may occur on many levels: it may be overtly political, and demonstrated through street marches and the affirmation of a quantifiable presence, or it may be a much more moderate display. For example, a school child may be resisting the powers of the school by dying his/her hair

> a lurid colour. It is interesting to note that whenever resistance first occurs it is often demonstrated through the body's iconography. (128)

Individuals and communities can resist normative gender expectations and challenge regulatory discourses. By understanding the constructedness of the gendered body, social actors can question and subvert societal norms, leading to social change and the redefinition of gender identities and roles.

Foucault's ideas on discursive practices and the body provide a theoretical foundation for understanding the discursive construction of the gendered body. His work emphasises the historical, contingent, and performative nature of gender, highlighting how societal norms and power relations shape and regulate individuals' understanding and embodiment of gender (Adams). Foucault's approach emphasises that gender roles and norms are not fixed or inherent but are historically contingent. Different historical periods and cultures construct and interpret gender differently. He argued that the understanding of femininity and masculinity has evolved over time, influenced by changing social, political, and economic contexts. Foucault asserts both the direct involvement of the body in a political field and the necessity of engaging with the contingency and "situatedness" of the body. The body acquires significance only within a particular culture or context, and it cannot be interpreted independently of the cultural regimes that both inscribe and confer specific meaning or reification upon it.

Judith Butler's theory of performativity, elaborated in *Gender Trouble* (1989), is also applied to the study of gender in religious contexts. According to Butler, gender identity is not an innate characteristic but is constructed through repeated performances

of gender roles. This theory is useful in examining how religious rituals and practices constitute a liturgy of bodily acts in which individuals perform and negotiate their gender identities within their faith communities. Foucault's ideas align with the concept of performativity and his work also explains how gender is performative, meaning that it is not an innate quality but something individuals do and perform in response to societal norms. These performatives constitute certain regulative discourses that dictate how individuals should perform based on their gender, internalise these norms, and embody them in their daily lives. Butler questions whether there exists a "physical" body preceding the perpetually perceived body, a question she deems impossible to conclusively answer. Essentially, Butler's query probes whether a body can hold any signification outside of a specific cultural context or regime, suggesting that the body derives its meaning through engagement with particular cultural frameworks, rendering it incomprehensible or uninterpretable beyond these specific contexts (3-4).

Apart from Foucault's ideas of discursive practices and genealogy of the religious body, this study is informed by Pierre Bourdieu's idea of habitus and bodily hexis. These theories are central to a decoding and understanding of ritualistic practices in human societies. In his work "The Logic of Practice"(1999), Bourdieu elucidates how the body embodies abstract principles. His concept of bodily hexis has contributed immensely to an understanding of how religions lay claim on the human body as a surface for religious expression and a form of embodied religiosity. According to Bourdieu, "bodily hexis represents political mythology actualized, *em-bodied*, and transformed into an enduring disposition, a lasting way of standing, speaking, walking,

and thereby of feeling and thinking" (69-70). The contrast between male and female is realised in posture, gestures, and body movements, embodying the distinction between upright, direct, and assertive (as a man facing forward, looking and acting directly towards an adversary) and reserved, restrained, and flexible behaviours. His theory of practice thus introduced a way of understanding the "dialectic of internalization of externality and the externalization of internality, or, more simply, of incorporation and objectification" (*Outline* 72).

Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of bodily hexis, scholars have been exploring how religious rituals inscribe gender norms on the body. Bodily hexis refers to the way in which individuals embody religious and gendered behaviours through posture, gestures, and movements. This idea is a key component of Bourdieu's theory of habitus, which emphasises the role of socialised behaviours and dispositions in shaping individuals' perceptions and interactions with the world. Kate Cregan elaborates on Bourdieu's idea of habitus:

> Through our bodies we make flesh the structures of a habitus, we embody the social and political effects of all the fields of practice in which we are involved. We embody our habitus through the way we walk; the way we conduct ourselves with others and in different spaces; our disposition to particular ways of dress; the places we do and don't go; the way we regulate our behaviour in certain areas of our homes and in different public spaces; the way we act depending on whether we are adults or children, male or female, young or old,

> etc. These are structures and behaviours we learn and reproduce from the moment we are born. (71)

Religious rituals and practices often prescribe specific bodily comportment, and this theory also helps elucidate how gendered roles are enacted and reinforced through religious practices.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological approach with its emphasis on lived body and how individuals experience the world through their bodies is used in various sociological studies of religion, body, and gender. This perspective is foundational to understanding religious embodiment, as it focuses on the ways in which religious experiences are embodied and how the body shapes perception through religious practices. Merleau-Ponty's "Phenomenology of Perception"(1945), forms the basis of embodiment theory, later advanced by scholars like Thomas Csordas and Birgit Meyer, which centres on the idea that the body is an essential aspect of religious experience. David Morgan, yet another sociologist, explores how religious beliefs and practices are expressed through the body. He examines various religious traditions and rituals, emphasising the importance of embodiment in religious experiences. Morgan's work sheds light on the performative aspects of religious rituals and how gendered bodies participate in these practices. These inquiries focus on body as a medium through which individuals express their religious beliefs, engage in rituals, and negotiate gendered roles. The theory of embodiment also emphasises the differences in religious practices and bodily actions, such as prayer, fasting, or prostration, prescribed by religions for women, which contribute to the construction of gendered religious identities.

The aspects analysed in the study of religious embodiment and the major concepts used for those analyses outlined, provide some significant insights into how a set of these critical concepts can be used in the study of the "making" of Muslim female bodies in diverse contexts. While the idea of the body as site, a text, a trope, and a palimpsestic space with a contingent history and spatiality help disentangle and read socio-historical tensions and changes, conceptual tools like habitus and embodiment foregrounds the role of the body in forming perceptions and determining the experiences of social actors. This study makes a nuanced use of an assemblage of these theoretical concepts within the discipline of body studies. The use of these concepts is further contoured by the premises laid down by Islamic feminism, which help meticulously disentangle the role of socio-political, cultural, and religious specificities of Kerala in creating the dominant discourse on Muslim women and body. Aspects of Muslim women's bodyhood, such as veiling and hijab, clothing practices and fashion, visibility, sexualisation, and segregation within the overlappings of micro-macro contexts, are scrupulously analysed as this study probes into the history and the present of Muslim women's bodily practices.

Using Foucault's notion of discursive practices, which is germane to this study of gendered religiosity of Muslim women in Kerala, the attempt is to trace the genealogy of the Muslim woman's body, its religiosity, and the complex negotiations Muslim women have been making with forces within and outside religion. This calls for a subtle approach that can unsettle the very idea of a unified tradition and foreground the ruptures and discontinuities in the Islamic tradition of Kerala. Talal Asad's notion of Islam as a discursive tradition provides great theoretical and

methodological insight into the contextualised study of Islam in diverse Muslim societies. Informed by Asad's approach, this study also aims to move beyond the totalising nature of the cultural turn and exclusive narratives of piety, choice, and agency, as in the works of Saba Mahmood and others who focus on the exclusivity of the aspects of ethical self fashioning, to reclaim the multiple positionings of Muslim women in inscribing their religiosities. Hence, placing the discourse on Muslim female body in the broader macro-politics, structural concerns, multiple discourses of pan-Islamism, and other global and trans-local Islamic traditions is as imperative to this study as acknowledging aspects of the micro-contexts in which these discourses are produced. This embeddedness of the schema that constitute the discourse on the body present before the researcher a complex set of relations hitherto uninvestigated. The discursive nature of the Muslim female body in the constitutive contexts and Islamic cultural formations of Kerala necessitates the use of an interpretive grid that comprises methodological premises drawn from body studies and Islamic feminism, along with a focus on the "temporal and spatial contextuality" of Malayali Muslimness.

The Malayali Muslim woman's history occupies only a liminal space in the historical and academic enterprises on Kerala Muslims. This marginality has been recently revoked by some academic inquiries into the dominant discourses on Muslim women's agency and subjectivity. Yet, there remains the need for recuperative endeavours to address the misrepresentations of Muslim women –their bodyhood, religiosity, self, and identity. The present research work attempts to historicise the discourse on Muslim female body, focusing on the primacy of religious texts in creating the discourse. This study of Muslim female body in Kerala will help shed

some light on the complexities of such aspects as veiling, visibility, and gender segregation, while examining the constitutive role of religion in regulating Muslim women's gendered performances.

Foucault contends that the body plays a direct role in the political realm (25). Power dynamics operate by influencing and shaping the body, prescribing "appropriate" behaviours and visual representations. Despite cultural expectations for adherence to specific discourses, the potential for resistance remains, often initiating through bodily expressions. This research seeks to examine the central discussions surrounding conformity and resistance in Muslim women's bodily conducts, focusing on the role of the body within these dynamic processes. Moreover, it is also an attempt to know whether and how Muslim women resist and subvert sexualised and objectified discourses on female body created by both the religious and liberal-secular sects. The attempt is also to forefront Muslim women's voices and to locate their resistances, both to "male religious orthodoxies" and liberal-secular critiques of women in Islam. The role of various Muslim community organisations and the convergences and divergences in the interpretative tradition, while dealing with the Muslim woman's question, which can help contextualise the debates on Muslim woman and her body in contemporary Kerala, is also a key question addressed in this study.

The focus on the religious construction of the gendered female body necessitates a reading of an assemblage of texts that includes articles, speeches, novellas, videos, and other tracts and tapes that fall into the category of Islamic advice literature aimed at fashioning the Muslim woman. These texts, which are part of the Islamic interpretative tradition, placed in the embedded contexts of socio-political and

historical specificities of the Muslim community, are put to a thorough analysis using a combination of research methods like textual analysis and discourse analysis. The complexity of the field under question can be forefronted only through a context-oriented approach that links the Islamic enterprises of the reformists and traditionalists in Kerala with other translocal and transnational Muslim societies.

The study tries to offer a counter text to the current historical and sociological accounts of the Muslim women of Kerala that focus either on Islam and its "mechanisms of oppression" or the "exclusivity of liberatory ethos" inherent in Islam. These reductionist readings overlook the myriad aspects of the Muslim woman's question and hence are insufficient to explain complex practices of gendering the body. The dominant religious discourse on Muslim woman in Kerala is created, invariably, by the traditionalist and reformist religious sects. This discursive nature of the discourse on gender that permeates every aspect of the Muslim *Ummah* in Kerala can be succinctly brought out through an analysis of the debates between the traditionalist Sunni sects and the reformist Salafi sects.

The idea of a unified Islamic tradition has been dislodged by the anthropological inquiries in the twentieth century, resulting in a new focus on diverse local Islamic traditions and its specificities. This analysis of the discursive construction of the Muslim female body, attempted here, foregrounds the socio-political specificities of the Muslim society in Kerala and their complex negotiations within a multicultural society. A brief history of the Muslims of Kerala, the emergence of various Islamic religious groups within the Islamic tradition of Kerala, and their role in constituting the religiosity of its followers, attempted in the next chapter, provide a backdrop to this

study. This helps to identify two broad categories within the Islamic tradition: the traditionalists and the reformists, whose organisational activities and interpretative texts play a crucial role in creating the discourse on Muslim religiosities.

Recent scholarship on the Muslims of Kerala shows substantial interest in the history of reformism and traditionalism as well as their role in constituting the "Muslimness" of the Malayali *Ummah.* Studies have been undertaken in diverse disciplines that probe into numerous sociological and historical aspects of the Muslim community of Kerala. Yet, a review of the available historical texts on the Muslims of Kerala reveals that no comprehensive study has been attempted on the histories of Muslim women in Kerala. Historical accounts like Roland E. Miller's work *Mappila Muslims of Kerala: A Study in Islamic Trends* (1976), is a notable work on the history of the Mappila community of Kerala. This work fulfils the need towards understanding the Muslims of Kerala, who are generally considered as "away from the Indian Islam" with a distinct identity that emanates from their close ties with the Arab world. *Kerala Muslims: A Historical Perspective* (1995) is another important work by the eminent scholar Asghar Ali Engineer, which traces the social and cultural history of Kerala Muslims. Despite the liminality of Muslim women in these historical enterprises, these accounts provide the researchers with a useful backdrop to the analysis of gender and construction of the discourse on Muslim female body in Kerala.

Some recent feminist interventions in Kerala have helped establish an interest in gender and aspects of its intersectionality with social, political, and cultural factors. This includes J.Devika's analysis of the mechanisms of constructing "the good woman and the bad woman" in Kerala. Her path-breaking initiative, *En-gendering Individuals:*

The Language of Re-forming in Early Twentieth Century Keralam (2007), explores the enmeshed nature of ideas of the new individual and the concept of gender in early modern Malayali society. Devika examines how the emerging idea of individuality, distinct from identity based on factors like *jati* ("caste") and region, was intricately linked to the vision of a society structured around gender differences. The process of individualisation, therefore, became synonymous with the process of "en-gendering." While social reform purported to liberate individuals by making them free, this very process of individualisation, she argues, created another set of hierarchies which are deeply embedded in the emergent gender specific discourse. Men and women eventually came to inhabit separate yet complementary spheres, perceived as suitable to their innate "natural" endowments. Education also paradoxically aimed to actualise these "naturally gendered" selves. The book thoroughly explores the convergence of social reform, the concept of the individual, and the creation of a "gendered" individual in early modern Kerala.

Feminist enterprises have opened new terrains for critical engagements with issues of gender in Kerala. By extending the ambit of their analyses to include the embedded questions of caste, class, community, and other socio-political specificities of contexts, some feminist researches are now challenging the biases in mainstream historiography and the mainstream feminist debates within academia and their preoccupation with the binary of the oppressed versus liberated women. The conspicuous silence about Muslim women in mainstream feminist enterprises–the reasons for which need to be probed into–has been recently revoked by some significant studies in the field.

Shamshad Hussain, in her exploration of the sociocultural history of Muslim women in Kerala, opens up an array of new questions about the problems inherent in seeing Muslim women simply as a part of the unified entity, Malayali women. Equally contentious is the dominant notion about Muslim women as victims of Muslim patriarchy. Her works, *Musleemum Sthreeyum Allaathaval* (*Neither a Muslim nor a Woman*), published in 2015, and *Neunapakshathinum Lingapadavikumidayil* (*Between Minority Status and Gender Discourse*), published in 2016, can be considered seminal enterprises in this field. In her *Gendering Minorities: Muslim Women and the Politics of Modernity* (2021), Sherin B.S. offers a remarkable counter-narrative to the problematic portrayals of Muslim women in mainstream cultural-historical texts. Addressing issues of exclusion and homogenisation of Muslim women in mainstream feminist projects, she makes an extremely nuanced analysis of their subjectivity and agency.

Apart from these, several socio-political readings of Muslim women's identity have emerged, locating the entity called "Muslim woman" as a perpetual site of resistance to global Islamophobia and Hindutva nationalism. Notwithstanding these developments, it can be argued that the subtle mechanisms at work in engendering the Muslim woman have not yet received the academic attention it deserves. This is to say that the current academic enterprises on Muslim women are either preoccupied with the impact of Islamophobia, the rise of militant Hindutva, or the problems in the secular-liberal feminist projects on "saving the Muslim woman." This has led to articulations on Muslim women that overlook both the specificities of the local context, the constitutive role of religious interpretative texts, the intra-faith debates, and the

question of negotiations Muslim women partake in within faith. The discursive role of religiosity in constructing the Muslim woman's body in Kerala, which has been blatantly under-acknowledged within the field, needs to be put in perspective.

The Islamic feminist engagements with the history of the veil, as well as Muslim women's clothing, that emanated from the cultural turn and the piety turn in the studies of Muslim societies, provide useful models for the study of women and gender in diverse locations and historical periods. The recent scholarship on Muslim women's fashion and modest clothing has added a new dimension to these inquiries, with its focus on the socio-political contexts and historicity of sartorial practices[5]."Muslim Styles in South India" by Caroline Osella and Filippo Osella is an ethnographic exploration of Muslim women's clothing practices in Kerala. A similar study has been undertaken by another sociologist, Julten Abdelhalim, on the sartorial markers of Malayali Muslim women. Despite the new academic interest in Malayali Muslim women, the question of Muslim female "bodyhood", the embeddedness of the schema, has largely remained unexplored. This study is an attempt to throw some light on these aspects of the discursive construction of Muslim female body in Kerala.

The brief history of Muslims in Kerala, local Islamic tradition, and the co-constitutive role of various organisations in determining the trajectory of Muslim community formations necessitate a specialised focus on the role of intra-faith debates in the forging of dominant discourses on Muslim woman and her body. This focus on the overlappings of the constitutive structures helps locate the discourses on aspects of

[5] For a sample of studies of fashion and clothing practices, see Lewis, *Modest Fashion*; Bucar; Tarlo.

bodily conformity, deviance, piety, oppression, and liberation of the Muslim woman's body. Locating Muslim women's resistances and subversions of these dominant patterns is crucial in marking the plurality in their articulations. This can arguably take this analysis on body beyond the redundancy of reductionist readings of choice and agency versus oppression of Muslim women.

The thesis is divided into five chapters. This introductory chapter situates this study of Muslim female body in context by briefly exploring the scope, relevance and objectives of the study, besides delineating the methodological framework and research methods employed in this research. This is followed by the second chapter titled "Context as Text: Some Key Issues in "Situating" Muslim Women," which provides an overview of the significance of the historical construction of the Muslim woman's body and the current global scenario. Besides elaborating on the major critiques of the methodological approaches of Western feminism used in the study of non-Western societies, the chapter problematises the reductionist tendencies in universalised readings of Muslim women's "bodyhood." By presenting some critical insights on the ban on veils in various parts of the world, and most recently in Karnataka, as well as the issues of forced hijab as in Iran, the chapter provides an analytical backdrop to the study of Muslim female body in Kerala. This is followed by a brief history of the Muslim community in Kerala, with a focus on the emergence and formation of the reformist and traditionalist organisations, their activities, and their negotiations with ideas of modernity and secularism. This chapter aims to provide a necessary understanding of the global, national, and local contexts and helps locate the

overlappings as well as convergences and divergences in the discourse on Muslim female body in Kerala.

The third chapter titled "(Re)forming the Body: Historicising Religious Gendering of Muslim Women," traces the emergence of the discourse on Muslim women in Kerala and historicises the discourse on Muslim female body, its veiling, seclusion, and visibility. The chapter reads the history of reform in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century Kerala, and locates the discourse on Muslim woman and her body in the works of the reformers and their debates with the traditional *Ulema*. This analysis is co-textualised with a reading of the pre-reformist tradition and the representation of Muslim women in early Mappila literature to provide a more holistic yet conflicting picture of the representation and discourses on Muslim female body. This helps give a historicity to the contemporary debates on Muslim women in Kerala and also foregrounds the differences in the history and context of Kerala, its social, political, economic, and cultural matrices that has determined and continue to determine the Muslim women's question.

Having laid down the history of the discourse on Muslim female body, the fourth chapter titled "Readings on Body/Contemporary Debates on Muslim Women in Kerala," analyses the contemporary discourses in Kerala and examines the role of interpretative texts by religious scholars and different organisations on ethical self-fashioning and "religious bodyhood" in creating the dominant discourse on gendered female body. By tracing female articulations on body from within faith, this chapter also attempts to locate the nature of Muslim women's resistances from within these sects. A brief survey of Muslim women's clothing practices in contemporary Kerala is

also undertaken in the fourth chapter. The goal is to gain insights into how and to what extent these women engage with and reinterpret concepts such as hijab and seclusion in their daily lives, challenging prevailing narratives that portray them as either protected or oppressed. The final chapter sums up the findings of the study.

The exploratory research undertaken navigates through a range of select texts from diverse genres to locate the historical and contemporary discourses on Muslim women. This study of select texts on religious ethical self-fashioning puts to analysis the contingency of these discourses on Muslim women's body. Exploring the historical evolution of religious bodyhood and its influence on present-day discussions about Muslim women's bodies unpacks a set of new questions and identifies numerous new analytical terrains concerning their identity, subjectivity, and representation. Dealing with one of the significant aspects of Muslim women's identity and religiosity in the context of Kerala, the study calls for more rigorous engagements with ideas of religiosity and gender.

Chapter 1

Context as Text: Some Key Issues in "Situating" Muslim Women

The analysis in this chapter focuses on navigating the complexities of constructing a methodological framework for examining religion, gender, and the body in non-Western societies. Key to this methodological entanglement is the idea of "infinitely varied social constructions" of the body (Coakley 3). By comparing religious rituals in diverse religions and contexts, Sarah Coakley foregrounds context as a key concern in the study of religion and body. She says that the body, much like other facets of human life and society, is subject to diverse mechanisms of social constructions (3). Consequently, any attempt to conceptualise the body as a uniform category is inherently flawed, as it cannot encapsulate the impact of diverse contexts that define these individual bodies. Based on this premise, the current chapter seeks to outline the major issues involved in reading the body from within the contexts of Muslim women's being.

The first part of this chapter puts together some major critical approaches that intersect in the study of body, gender, and religion. This is followed by a brief summary of the critiques of Western historiographic enterprises, which constructed the Muslim woman as the "other," and her body as the locus of "otherness". This provides a useful background to the brief survey of headscarf disputes in different parts of the world and lays bare the complexity and enmeshed nature of the discourses that engender the Muslim woman. By foregrounding the Muslim female

body as a site of contestations, the analysis in this chapter highlights the intricate web of perspectives surrounding this issue. This analysis is followed by a brief overview of the historical and sociopolitical context of this study, i.e., the Muslim community of Kerala, and traces the emergence of the traditionalist and reformist religious groups within its Islamic tradition.

The rather new focus on contextual specificities has prompted the academia for a more critical engagement with feminism itself. They foreground the complex question of difference and dismiss the notion that there can be a unified, homogenous account of the female body. Issues such as essentialism in the definition of woman and methodological universalisms in Western feminism have emerged as major grounds of contention in many academic enterprises. The critique of Western feminism by Chandra Talpade Mohanty, in her article titled "Under Western Eyes" (1988), can help address the question of complexity involved in simplistically drawing on Western theoretical approaches in the study of women in non-Western and Muslim societies. It also highlights the need to exercise caution in using the concepts drawn from such methodological approaches in studying Muslim women and their lived religiosities.

Mohanty's concern lies specifically in the extensive writings, both academic and historiographic, produced by the First World concerning women from the Third World. She emphasises that the portrayal of women, as constructed by dominant discourses, is not based on straightforward implications. Instead, it is an arbitrary relationship established by specific cultures. Mohanty, in her work, subsequently delves into a detailed analysis of those aspects of writings that "discursively

colonize the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world, thereby producing/representing a composite, singular 'third world woman' - an image which appears arbitrarily constructed, but nevertheless carries with it the authorizing signature of Western humanist discourse" (51). Mohanty adds: "[I]t is only insofar as "woman/women" and "the East" are defined as others, or as peripheral, that (Western) man/ humanism can represent him/itself as center. It is not the center that determines the periphery, but the periphery that, in its boundlessness determines the center"(69). Mohanty's concerns reveal the contentious issues in Western feminism, which include the use of universal methodologies in defining the category of women. The issue of the generic portrayal of the Third World woman raised by Mohanty, and its subsequent contestation, is addressed by several Indian scholars, including KumKum Sangari, Kalpana Ram, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, and Radha Kumar.

Catherine Hall probes into the history of Western enterprises on the Third world to show how constructing the other was central to the imperialist discourse. In her study of imperial masculinity, she describes how the colonised people were presented to the English and how it played a crucial role in defining and reinforcing the authority of the Western man. She says that the Empire was an integral part of the English people's everyday existence, deeply ingrained in their collective imagination, contributing to their identity, and shaping their perception of the world. For them, being English was synonymous with being of Caucasian descent, Anglo-Saxon heritage, and gave them a belief in their inherent supremacy, being able to govern a significant portion of the world's population. English individuals could

envision themselves as rulers over "natives" in India, amassing wealth in Australia's goldfields or South Africa's diamond mines, and undertaking missionary work among "heathen" populations in the Caribbean. Hall explains how the Empire offered English citizens opportunities and experiences beyond the confines of their homeland, granting them forms of authority that might have been unattainable domestically, and presenting alluring prospects involving "native" sensuality. She contends that, during the mid-nineteenth century, the Empire played a crucial role in shaping English masculinity by defining the non-Western world as the "other" (180).

These engagements, which deal with the complex mechanisms of constructing the Third World other, have also led to a new interest in the diverse histories of women and religion and have subsequently led to the emergence of contextualised analyses of women and gender discourses. Amongst these inquiries, there is a keen interest among researchers in the discourses on Muslim women and the gendering of their bodies. The stereotypical images of the East, perpetuated by the writers and travelers, contributed immensely in establishing several myths about the Muslim worlds and its women. In effect, the anecdotes of Eastern decadence, replete with stereotypical images of degeneracy, functioned as a self propagating propaganda that helped the West to assert their superior status. In these controverted histories produced by the West, they used the Muslim body as a symbol of cultural difference. Edward Said says, "So far as the West was concerned during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, an assumption had been made that the Orient and

everything in it was, if not patently inferior to, then in need of corrective study by the West" (40-41).

The history of the Muslim worlds and the dominant discourse on Islamic veil is also invariably constructed by the West. Leila Ahmed, in her landmark study on Muslim women, *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992), draws on the colonial narratives on Egypt to explicate how the colonial rhetoric about the East was used effectively to spread prejudices and misconceptions of the culture of the East. This, in turn, helped the West to empower themselves and to justify their domination. She states that the roots of the contemporary discourse on Muslim female body can be traced back to these narratives and the resultant polemics between the East and the West:

> The new prominence, indeed centrality, that the issue of women came to occupy in the Western and colonial narrative of Islam by the late nineteenth century appears to have been the result of a fusion between a number of strands of thought all developing within the Western world in the latter half of that century. Thus the reorganized narrative, with its new focus on women, appears to have been a compound created out of a coalescence between the old narrative of Islam just referred to (and which Edward Said's *Orientalism* details) and the broad, all-purpose narrative of colonial domination regarding the inferiority, in relation to the European culture, of all Other cultures and societies, a narrative that saw vigorous development over the course of the nineteenth century. (*Women and Gender* 150)

Several studies in this area reveal how the writings of travellers and missionaries helped the West to establish the differences between "them" and "Us". Their anecdotal accounts were interspersed with exaggerated and fictionalised accounts of the colonial natives that would satisfy the expectations of the Western readers. The construction of the East by the West was also the construction of the Eastern woman–veiled, suppressed, and invisible. These narratives were propagated in the Western world as authentic sources of female experiences. Foreign diplomats and missionaries both stressed the need to liberate the Muslim women from the hands of Muslim men and Islam. Leila Ahmed states that the Western colonialists considered the segregation of women and the practice of the hijab as indicative of Muslim backwardness, posing a barrier to their development. She examines how the missionaries, too, upheld these concepts and propagated Christian principles as the only means of liberation to the native women folk (*Women and Gender* 153).

Ahmed further probes into the history of colonial Egypt to show how Lord Cromer's writings on colonial Egypt and his attack on the Muslim women of Egypt established the difference between the women of the East and the West. Utilising a wealth of information detailing the challenges faced by women in the East, Cromer draws comparisons between them and their European counterparts. Cromer established that they both are at the two ends of the spectrum. He says:

> Look now to the consequences which result from the degradation of women in Mohammedan countries. In respect of two points, both of which are of vital importance, there is a radical difference between the position of the Moslem women and that of their European sisters. In the first place, the

> face of the Moslem is veiled when she appears in public. She lives a life of seclusion. The face of the European woman is exposed to view in public. The only restraints placed on her movements are those dictated by her own sense of propriety. In the second place, the East is polygamous, the West is monogamous. It cannot be doubted that the seclusion of women exercises a baneful effect on Eastern society. The arguments on this subject are indeed so commonplace that it is unnecessary to dwell on them. It will be sufficient to say that seclusion, by confining the sphere of woman's interest to a very limited horizon, cramps the intellect and withers the mental development of one-half of the population in Moslem countries. (155)

In the above passage, Cromer emphasises that veiling is key to the seclusion of Muslim women and hence the cause of the degraded status of women in Muslim societies. The perspectives of these individuals, among many others, contributed to the idea that the Islamic hijab was a factor contributing to the backwardness of the people. Such depictions of Eastern women left a lasting impact on public perception. They promoted the notion that the hijab, as a practice, was suppressing Muslim women, and argued that liberation could only be achieved through its removal. There was a subtle yet assertive proselytising effort by government social engineers and missionaries, who employed an indirect approach to critique Islam by linking its practices and customs to backwardness. They utilised the hijab as a visible marker and targeted women as part of their strategy. They used hijab as a sign to dislodge the Islamic tradition. The veil thus became a symbol of mystery, and the harem culture thus catered to the imagination of European minds of everything that

happened in enclosures. Tuula Sakaranaho elaborates on the constructedness of these discourses:

> In the Western orientalist discourse on Islam, the veiling of Muslim women has been seen as a visible sign of the oppression Islam inflicts on women. Behind their covers; Muslim women have been hidden from the foreign gaze. However, extravagant stories of 19th century Western male travellers have purported to reveal their secrets. In these travel accounts, Muslim women are approached either with horror and pity when seen as 'beasts of burden' or little more than with exotism and eroticism because, hidden away in the harem, they were imagined to possess excessive sensuality. Nevertheless, these Western male travellers did not, in actual fact, gain access to the private domain of Muslim women. The secrets these men revealed were little more than the fruits of their own daydreaming inspired by the mysterious East. Muslim women behind their veils remained mute and invisible. (331)

Leila Ahmed also discusses how Western historical accounts depicted the Islamic veil as a symbol of oppression. Veiling, which was readily apparent to Western observers, served as a prominent symbol representing the perceived distinctiveness and perceived inferiority of Islamic cultures. It came to symbolise not only the subjugation of women (or, as it was described at the time, Islam's suppression of women) but also the perceived backwardness of Islam. Ahmed argues that veiling became the focal point of colonial criticism and a primary target in the colonial efforts to undermine Muslim societies (152).

The same discourse of veiled, subjugated women was shared and reinforced by many Western educated native reformists in the colonies. Embracing this colonial ideology, native men and women further entrenched their own subordination within their culture, and their nation's submission to European dominance. In Egypt, for instance, Qassim Amin, in his book on the emancipation of woman published in 1899, echoes Lord Cromer when he expresses the colonial view that the degradation of Muslim women was due to the cultural beliefs that permitted its women to be veiled and segregated (Ahmed, *Women and Gender* 161-162).

The language of feminism was also effectively assimilated into the discourse of colonialism and utilised to target Islamic societies' treatment of women. Men employed by the colonial administration, like Cromer in Egypt, paradoxically opposed feminism in their home country but embraced feminist rhetoric in the colonial context. They criticised Egyptian men for endorsing practices they deemed harmful to women. These narratives about Muslim women were used by the West to highlight the differences between the women of the East and the West. Though conditions of European women were not utopian, as they lacked autonomy and had an inferior status in society, the colonial architects projected the image of the Western woman as worth emulating and modern. Islamic religiosity in these Muslim societies was perpetually pitted against modernity by the colonial masters. This strategy of subverting and appropriating the colonised culture can be seen as an attempt by the colonising power to justify its occupation policies and validate its dominance. The type of feminism that evolved from this colonial setting became a

substitute form of dominance that fostered a sense of superiority among both colonised men and women who adopted it.

The details discussed so far reveal that the key focus of attack in the colonial narratives is on the Islamic veil, which has been for long viewed as a symbol of oppression. The veil became the locus of debates around the question of adaptability of Islam to the Westernised framework of modernity– a complex trope both within and outside Islam. This raised varied responses of both resistance and conformity to the modernist ideals propagated by colonial sociology. The "veiling–unveiling–reveiling" projects in Iran's history are a major example of such complex negotiations the state made with issues of nationality, religiosity, and modernity. The resurgence of the hijab after the 1970s marked the beginning of a set of new debates on religion and Muslim women that is rooted in this history of the discourse on Muslim women and her veiled status. Resistance to the hijab globally is often seen as a new phase of the colonial discourse on Muslim women and Islam. These discourses bring to the fore some extremely complex questions of agency, identity, and gendering. The bans imposed on the headscarf and veil by various nations have triggered heated debates on numerous issues concerning Islam and Muslim women. All these polemics are rooted in the question of the Muslim female body and her autonomy and agency. An understanding of the meaning of the hijab, the question of Islam's insistence on it, and a brief analysis of the recent controversies on hijab/hijab bans and other headscarf disputes can help us further delineate the global contexts of the discourse on Muslim female body.

Researches show that scarves and various forms of veiling and head dresses predated Islam in the Arabian societies (Kilian). Even in contemporary times, head coverings remain a significant aspect of several religions, such as orthodox Judaism and Christianity. As Islam spread to various parts of the world from the Arabian Peninsula, it adopted and also adapted to various local veiling customs that existed in these societies. Islam's beginning is traced back to the emergence of a small faith community in the Arabian Peninsula under the leadership of Prophet Muhammed. From Medina Islam spread across West Asia to Saharan and Sub-Saharan Africa, reaching parts of Central Asia, and extending to various regions around the Arabian Sea. Once it got established in West Asia, it spread to Europe as well. Forms of veiling that exist in these Muslim societies have been multiple and contingent, based on the specificities of the sociopolitical and historical configurations of each contexts.

Numerous researches have probed deeper into the preoccupation of the West with Muslim women and the reasons for their hostility that forms the basis of their objection to hijab. These studies have thrown some light on the complexity of the term *hijab* itself, which is a rather nuanced term that encompasses more than just the physical act of veiling. It encapsulates notions of modesty, behavior, and social interaction. The concept of hijab is closely related to the concept of *awrah* in Islam. Both terms pertain to modesty and appropriate covering of the body, particularly for Muslim women, and they are interlinked in the context of Islamic dress and behavior. Before venturing forth into an analysis of the question of advocacy and opposition to veiling, and different forms of veiling in Islam, a brief note on the

concept of *awrah* and hijab, which is crucial to an understanding of the religious body of Muslim women, is attempted here.

Awrah (also spelled as *awra* or *aura*) is a significant concept in Islamic culture and jurisprudence. It refers to the parts of the body that should be covered or concealed, particularly in the presence of non-*mahram* (non-related by blood or marriage) individuals. The definition of what constitutes the *awrah* varies among different Islamic schools of thought and cultural traditions. However, the primary objective is to promote modesty and maintain the privacy and dignity of individuals, especially women. The exact interpretation of what constitutes the *awrah* can differ, but it typically includes, at least, the area from the navel to the knee for men, and the entire body except the face and hands for women. Some interpretations advocate a broader coverage, such as the entire body for women. It is essential to note that the understanding and application of *awrah* varies widely across different Muslim communities and cultures. Local customs, cultural norms, and personal interpretations can influence how individuals and communities adhere to these guidelines. Modesty and privacy are core principles in Islamic teachings, and the concept of *awrah* serves as a way to uphold these values in everyday life.

The term hijab has a twin meaning. It refers to both the practice of covering the head and body, often with a headscarf, by Muslim women, and as a means of fulfilling the requirement of modesty. In practice, hijab often serves as a means of implementing the broader concept of *awrah.* By wearing the hijab, Muslim women cover the parts of their body that are considered *awrah*. The hijab, therefore, is seen as a visible symbol and practice of modesty and privacy in accordance with Islamic

teachings. It is important to note that the interpretation and understanding of the concept of hijab can also vary among different Islamic traditions, cultures, and individual choices, but the overarching principle of modesty and covering the body is common to these concepts.

Islamic veil is a term used to refer to many forms of dress that is meant to symbolise religiosity and to cover women's body. While terms like *khimar, jilbab, abaya,* niqab, and *milhafa* describe the physical attire, the categories of *tabarruj* and *awrah* are employed to denote the context of behavioral constraints. Hijab has lately attained a more specific meaning as a form of veiling using a headscarf, and it is not frequently used to refer to the abstract idea of modesty and behavioral confines. Islamic dress and forms of veiling includes some major varieties like the *burqa, chador,* hijab, niqab, and various other forms of head coverings practiced by women in Muslim societies. However, most of these terms are often used interchangeably in the contextual analysis of the hijab. A brief description can help understand the different types of veils.

The hijab is the most popular form of Islamic veil worn around the world. It is a name used to refer to a variety of similar headscarves. This style of headscarf comprises one or two scarves that cover the head and neck. Worn by numerous Muslim women in the Arab world, the West, and various other parts of the world, this traditional veil is a widespread choice. The niqab, on the other hand, is an Islamic veil that covers the entire body, head, and face, with two main style variations. The first one, known as the half-niqab, consists of a headscarf and face veil that leaves the eyes and part of the forehead visible. The second style, the full-

niqab or Gulf-niqab, leaves only a narrow slit for the eyes. While these veils are most common in the Gulf region, they are gaining popularity across the Muslim world. Niqab has created much debate in most nations other than the Islamic nations, and many have banned the niqab, claiming that it interferes with communication or creates security concerns.

Another type of Islamic veil is the *chador*, a full-body-length shawl secured at the neck by hand or a pin. It covers the head and body but leaves the face partially visible. Typically black, *chadors* are prevalent in West Asia, particularly in Iran. The *burqa* is another common form of veil that conceals the wearer's entire face and body, allowing vision through a mesh screen over the eyes. Apart from these, there are numerous other styles of headscarves and ways of covering head to express religiosity. Some of these styles of head coverings emerge from acts of appropriating local dress styles to suit the needs of Muslim women. For instance, South Asian Muslim women use the free end of the Saree to loosely cover their head. Muslim women of North India and Pakistan use the *Duppatta/*shawl (which they use along with the *churidar/salwar kameez*) to cover their head. The South Indian Muslim women, who later adopted the *salwar kameez,* also started using the same style of veiling to mark their religious identity, until the last decades of the twentieth century, during which the Arab style of wearing hijab became more common in this part of the Indian subcontinent.

Veiling practices among Muslim women have evolved significantly over time, exhibiting considerable diversity across different regions of the world. These variations manifest in a multitude of forms and styles, highlighting the fact that not

all veils are identical. Local traditions and the ever-changing realm of fashion also exert their influence on the contemporary Islamic veil. As a result, Muslim women today showcase a broad spectrum of headscarf choices. Some even opt not to cover their heads but instead emphasise modesty through long sleeves and locally inspired fashion that identifies them as followers of Islam. Others might wear vividly colored headscarves, allowing their hair to be visible, while some prefer tightly-pinned veils that frame their faces. Women in various parts of the world don long-flowing Islamic attire, such as the pardah and *abaya*, paired with a hijab or a niqab that covers their entire face except for their eyes. Muslim women also blend Western clothing with different forms of veil secured around their faces to conceal their hair. Diverse approaches to veiling are observed in different parts of the world among Muslim women.

Considering that the Islamic veil comprises various styles and variations that have evolved over time in different parts of the world, the acceptability of these forms of veils and the religious permissibility of many of these varieties remain subjects of debate among religious scholars. Moreover, the question of Islam's insistence on veiling itself is problematised by many scholars and Islamic Feminists. The prolonged history of these debates on veiling within Islam reveals that Islamic scholars have different opinions on veiling and the nature and forms of veiling. There are numerous studies on the origin of veiling and on how obligatory it is in Islam to wear the veil. Different religious interpretations have constantly been changing and renewing existing notions of it. The emergence of Islamic feminism and feminist readings of the Quran has resulted in rigorous analyses of the subject.

For instance, the Islamic feminist Asma Barlas is of the view that there is no insistence on the veil in Islam. Barlas, in her book *Believing Women in Islam*, contends that "the obsession with the female body has spawned forms of veiling the Qur'an does not mandate" and that the conservative reading of certain *ayahs* ("verses") by male exponents of the Quran has led to the insistence on veil (158). "Women," she adds, "prayed unveiled in mosques until the ninth century and they perform the Haj, the holiest ritual in Islam, with faces uncovered" (55). Barlas adds:

> [W]e need to understand the Qur'an's provisions on ''veiling'' in the context of its view of human bodies as potentially desiring and desirable, and not as pudendal. In fact, the Qur'ān does not refer to pudendency, much less to female pudendency. Nor does it suggest that–in order to maintain an Islamic society–we need to hide women from view by confining them to their homes or by enshrouding them in face and body veils. What the Qur'an does mandate is that both women and men comport themselves modestly and not make public spectacles of themselves through a ''wanton display'' of their bodies. There is absolutely nothing in these values that supports the conservative Muslim position on the female body, male and female sexual natures, or the practice of veiling. (159- 160)

While Barlas's views are shared by many other Islamic feminists who, in their textual analysis of the Quran and related texts, foreground the problem of male interpretation, the contextual analysis of Islam and its practices by several Islamic feminists demonstrates a more inclusive approach. They focus more on the socio-political implications of the veil instead of focusing on the question of interpretation.

Leila Hessini, in her *Wearing the Hijab in Contemporary Morrocco: Choice and Identity*, makes a context-specific analysis of the question of the veil. She states that, contrary to the discourses of the West, the veil can be liberatory. Yet, the complexity of the question of "choice" in patriarchy cannot be overlooked (54). She says:

> When women wear the hijab, they obtain respect and freedom. In this sense, the hijab, which is often perceived by Westerners as a tool of male domination, may ultimately be a liberating force for some Morroccan women. However, this choice is made within a patriarchal framework. It is a conditioned reaction and can exist only within prescribed norms established by men for women. (54)

Leila Ahmed too voices her apprehension of the contemporary re-veiling movement. She calls it an "alarming trend" since this can give a wider currency to the ideas on restrictive roles of women in Islam (230). Katherine Bullock, in her introduction to the book *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil* (2010), takes this debate a step further by probing deeper into the relationship between ideas of oppression and Muslim women's agency in choosing the veil. She says:

> My contention is that if and where veiling is linked to oppressive practices against women such as under the Taliban regime in Afganistan of the 1990s, where women have been denied education, confined to the home, and barred from any role in public life, veiling may be seen as a symbol of oppression in that community. Nevertheless, suppression ought not to be generalized either to 'Islam' or to 'the' meaning of the veil. (25-26)

The above references make it evident that the questions of veiling– how to veil and how much to veil– and the very insistence on veiling in Islam too occupy a major position in these debates on Muslim women. On the one hand, both feminists and Islamic feminists question the Islamic veil, saying that it is an oppressive practice imposed upon women. Another sect of Islamic feminists defend the use of veil as an essential religious practice and exhorts the attackers to look at it as a more liberatory form of bodily conduct that Muslim women have willfully adopted as a performance of their piety. Their studies highlight the multivalent nature of the hijab and locate its meanings as complex and extremely nuanced in the varying contexts in which it is worn.

Headscarves are worn in diverse ways physically, and across various cultures and political contexts, these coverings convey distinct meanings. Its rich history reveals that Muslim women have veiled in varied ways in the past. Over time, the responses to these veiling practices have also changed. The origins of a concerted campaign against such distinctive Muslim clothing that can be traced back to the early Orientalist writers, who began to closely examine Muslim households and social interactions during the nineteenth century. This had a lasting influence on the discourse on it as an oppressive tool. According to Edward Said, Muslim women wearing the veil (encompassing both head and facial coverings) became a central focus in Orientalist literary discourses, with the veil coming to symbolise Muslim sexual fascination, Islam's enigmatic essence, and inflexibility (90).

Islamic feminist engagements have also undergone a major shift in its engagement with the hijab, from its focus on scriptural aspects of the hijab and the

question of interpretation to a more inclusive approach that locates the plurality of its meanings in diverse sociopolitical contexts as resistance, piety, identity marker, and a marker of Muslimness. Hijab's meaning is multiple, so are the reasons for donning the hijab. Several Muslim women scholars, such as Lila Abu Lughod, Amina Wadud, Fatima Mernissi, and Saba Mahmood, have elucidated the diverse motivations behind the adoption of the hijab by educated Muslim women from various ethno-cultural backgrounds since the latter half of the twentieth century.

Hijab became increasingly visible in different parts of Europe post-1970s. A corresponding increase in the use of the Islamic veil can be seen in various other parts of the world. This politicised symbol of Muslim womanhood is deemed necessary by some while some consider it optional. However, the history of the evolution of the hijab is also a history of bans and prohibitions imposed upon the hijab that eventually made it a strong political symbol of the Muslimness of Muslim women. One of the foremost instances of ban imposed on hijab was in Iran by Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1936. This ban was later revoked and the use of hijab was enforced by the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979. In the 1920s and 1930s Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in Turkey and King Amanullah of Afghanistan expressed their modernity by discouraging the use of hijab by Muslim women (Sedhghi). These bans on the hijab in the first half of the twentieth century were a result of the influence of colonial rhetoric on the native rulers and were also attempts to assert their "modernity" as opposed to the frequent accusations of Islamic fundamentalism levelled upon them by the West. While the native rulers were making radical expressions of their intense affinity for modernity through these bans, the veil and unveiling projects were being

utilised as tools of political control in regions of Central Asia. Faegheh Shirazi, in her study of the hijab, observes that "the Soviet propaganda machine politicized the veil as a symbol of women's oppression" in Uzbekistan (147). She makes a succinct analysis of how Stalin used the Soviet unveiling campaigh, *khundjum,* in the 1930s to advance the "Sovietization" mission. This mission, Shirazi argues, targeted the veil as a cultural symbol, "the most conspicuous sign of Islamic culture in Uzbekistan" (148). She further states:

> Moscow's strategy of unveiling Uzbeki women in order to gain greater control over Uzbekistan has many parallels with France's strategy of unveiling Algerian women in order to conquer Algeria. Both the French and the Soviets equated the veil with Islam and Islam with woman's oppression. Therefore, according to their view, women who discard the veil discard oppression. Once Uzbeki women were unveiled, all of Uzbeki society was thought to abandon the oppression believed to be inherent in Islam. (148)

The intense politicisation of the Islamic veil globally since the last decades of the twentieth century, and the bans imposed on it in the twenty-first century needs to be placed in the larger historical contexts that determined the meaning of the Islamic veil as a symbol of backwardness, a tool of oppression, and a political weapon. Researchers have undertaken in-depth analyses of the socio-political implications of the hijab bans, both in the past and the present. A brief account of the more recent hijab bans and headscarf disputes in the post-09/11 context can help delineate some of the key issues in this study of the Muslim female body, since the

context of the global discourse on hijab can significantly inform the study of Muslim female body in Kerala by providing a global design of the Muslim woman's question.

Tracing the trajectory of Islamophobia post-9/11 attacks on the twin towers in the United States of America, reveals a significant rise in hate crimes against Muslims. The rampancy of anti-Muslim sentiments was a natural corollary to the new mechanisms of othering that ensued subsequent to America's declaration of "global war on terror." Notably, Islamophobia is fluidly codified to encompass diverse issues pertaining to Muslimness and to legitimise the state's counterterrorism objectives. This also extended beyond the domestic front to justify the series of wars waged in Iraq and Afghanistan. Khaled A. Beydoun observes that the framework for defining Islamophobia was based on the assumption that Islam is inherently violent, foreign, and incapable of assimilation. Additionally, it includes the belief that expressions of Muslim identity are linked to a potential for terrorism (111). Islam here is perceived as something more than a religion: it is an ideology, civilisation, and an other that is inassimilable with American whiteness.

Lila Abu Lughod explores the gendered manifestations of Islamophobia and the projection of the hijab as a symbol of the oppressed other in the post-09/11 world. She states that Muslim women are portrayed either as threatening extensions of their male counterparts or as oppressed yet simultaneously eroticised victims of their culture and religion (783). The hijab-clad Muslim woman is thenceforth increasingly seen as the quintessential symbol of Islam and everything that Islam represents–one who must be subjected to state surveillance. Muslim women's bodies

are thus rampantly marked as sites of control and domination, extending the colonial discourse on hijab, and are used as a central tool in the anti-Muslim campaign, setting the ideological and political scene globally for the headscarf disputes and bans that followed.

In her book *The Politics of the Veil*, Joan Wallach Scott says that the initial discussions about hijab ban in France had started as early as the 1980s (7). With its ban in 2004, France became one of the first European nations to ban the hijab. This was followed by widespread resentment among the Muslim youth, accusing the French government of bias and prejudice towards Muslims. These protests gained support from Muslims all over the world. The series of events that followed brought to the fore serious questions on immigration, nationalism, and integration of minorities into the European communities, proving that these headscarf controversies are not debates on Muslim women per se but have wider social and political implications.

The dichotomies offered by France, like private versus public, church versus state, and fundamentalism versus secularism, to justify the ban on "conspicuous" religious signs are insufficient to explain the complexities of the issue. The French version of secularism insists on an absolute separation of the church and state. The wearing of Muslim headscarves was seen as a breach of French secularism, suggesting that anyone practicing Islam was inherently non-French, regardless of the specific form of practice. The notion was that religion should remain a private matter, not conspicuously displayed in public spaces, particularly in schools–the very institutions where republican ideals were instilled. The prohibition of

headscarves signaled lawmakers' commitment to maintaining France as a unified nation: secular, individualistic, and culturally homogeneous.

Following the legislation in France, several other European nations proposed and passed laws banning the Islamic veil. This includes Germany, Belgium, Holland, Austria, and Bulgaria. Several countries have banned the face veil or the niqab worn by Muslim women. In some places, regional bans are in effect: in the Francophone province of Quebec, government employees are forbidden from wearing religious symbols. Turkey, amongst these nations, has an entirely different status with a majority Muslim population and a secular government. In Turkey, the ban extends to elected officials, civil servants, as well as students in schools and universities. According to Joan Wallach Scott, these bans and the resultant polemics hide a complex reality, and the question here is not secularism or the fight between tradition and modernity. She contends:

> Banning the headscarf or veil is a symbolic gesture; for some European nations it is a way of taking a stand against Islam, declaring entire Muslim populations to be a threat to national integrity and harmony. The radical acts of a few politically inspired Islamists have become a declaration of the intent of the many; the religious practices of minorities have been taken to stand for the "culture" of the whole; and the notion of a fixed Muslim "culture" obscures the mixed sociological realities of adaptation and discrimination experienced by these immigrants to the West. (3)

Scott convincingly argues that the ban on hijab exposes deep-seated prejudices held by white Judeo-Christian Europeans against a segment of their own citizens. She

further adds that these policies will only exacerbate ethnic differences and will eventually defy the very "purpose" of the ban to establish equality (9).

The more recent events in Iran and Karnataka have added a new dimension to the debates on hijab and Muslim women. The protests in Iran that followed the arrest and death of the 22 year old Kurdish woman Mahsa Amini in Sepember 2022 raise numerous questions on hijab and the issue of Muslim women's choice. The complex power dynamics involved in this is predicated on the intersection of the political, social, and ethnic differences and re-Islamisation policies in Iran. Forced hijab and the backlash against it in Iran are forcing the academia to revisit and reexamine the discourse on hijab. The academia cannot afford to overlook the fact that these struggles by women against the forced wearing of the hijab are also part of the larger struggles for social justice, freedom, and equality. In short, the question of the Muslim woman's choice to wear the hijab is a complex question with so many intricately woven strands. Hamideh Sedghi observes:

> Significant metaphorically and literally, veiling, unveiling, and reveiling illuminate the contest for political power in the course of Iran's development. During and immediately after the Constitutional Revolution (1905– 11), concerns regarding veiling and women's subordinate social and political position fostered challenges to the established power structure and the religious establishment. Later, state-sponsored unveiling contributed to the Westernization posture of the Pahlavi dynasty (1925–79) and its apparent victory over the clergy. The state-mandated reveiling embodied the Islamic identity of the succeeding polity (1979), accompanied by the

> restoration of juridical and de facto gender segregation. From the early twentieth-century to the present, therefore, various forms of veiling draw attention to the continuing quest for political power between the state and religion especially over women's sexuality and their labor. Gender remains a core concern of politics. Gender analysis illuminates politics and power struggle: who gets, what, how, when, and why. (2)

Sedghi's views highlight the embeddedness of the hijab in the politics of Iran. The Iranian woman's veil, reading its history and contemporaneity, is central to an understanding of the cultural and socio-political dynamics of the nation. Following the September 2022 events, Iranian women are expressing their strong protest against acts of forced veiling by their government. They were once forced to unveil by their male reformers with the objective of rendering them modern. Earlier in the 1920s, Reza Shah's rule had insisted on de-hijabing the Iranian women, tearing off their sartorial markings. In the 1980s, the Islamic Republic of Iran under Ayatollah Khomeini mandated that Iranian women don the hijab. Moving between mandatory unveiling and veiling the Iranian women have produced a large body of literature that records their negotiations with the hijab as a cultural resource. Their history of unveiling, re-veiling, and recent protests against forced veiling reveals the turbulence inherent in their negotiation with the state and religion in claiming sovereignty over their bodies. They pose significant questions about the role of patriarchy within religion, that determines whether they are bad hijabis, good hijabis, or non-hijabis. Their struggle is also the struggle for the freedom to choose: to veil or not to veil, and how to veil.

The hijab row in Karnataka started in January 2022 when some hijab wearing Muslim students of a government-run pre-university college in the Udupi district of Karnataka, India, were denied permission to enter the college and attend classes, citing it as a violation of the college's dress code. This decision led to protests by students and various Muslim organisations. Debates and protests kick-started across the country, which were countered by right-wing students' organisations. They also demanded that they must be permitted to wear saffron shawls. In February 2022, the Karnataka government issued an order permitting the institutions in the state to strictly enforce their uniform policy and stated that no exception be given to Muslim girls. Following a series of protests against the government, the High Court of Karnataka issued an interim order on tenth February and the final judgment on fifteenth March 2022, in which the Honourable court observed that the hijab is not an essential religious practice in Islam, thus, rejecting the plea of Muslim girls and upheld the institution's right to enforce the ban ("Hijab Ban Judgement"). The court rejected the students' arguments, including claims of freedom of conscience and expression, stating that wearing hijab was "not an essential practice in Islam". The court deemed the dress code, enforced by the institution, a reasonable, religion-neutral, and a universally applicable restriction, promoting the principles of secularism. The students appealed to the apex court[1] against the High Court's decision, arguing that hijab is vital to their religious observance and doesn't harm others. This legal development has made the issue of

[1] On 13 October 2022, the two-judge Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court delivered the verdict in the widely known "hijab" case, resulting in a split decision. The case will now proceed to be heard by a larger Constitution Bench led by the Chief Justice of India. For more details, see Rajalakshmi.

Muslim girls' right to wear hijab in educational institutions a matter to be determined by law. It raises significant questions about the concept of secularism in this context, the rights of Muslim women regarding their bodies and beliefs, and diverse interpretations of the hijab itself.

Notwithstanding the similarities in motives with other "unveiling projects," the question of hijab in India has its own specificities. Tracing the history of contestations on Muslim women in India uncovers numerous questions embedded in the nation's political schema. The secular state's intervention in Muslim personal law following the Shah Bano case marked the beginning of a set of debates on Muslim women and their subordinate status within the community. The Muslim Women's (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act of 1986, introduced during Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's tenure, was widely perceived by progressive women's groups in India as an encroachment on the rights of Muslim women. This legislation prevented Muslim women, married under Muslim Personal Law and subsequently divorced, from utilising the Criminal Procedure Code—a privilege extended to women of other religions—to secure minimum maintenance from their husbands. Enacted in response to the contentious Shah Bano case, this law sparked debates on the injustice faced by Muslim women within various provisions of the Muslim Personal Law and the deeply patriarchal nature of Muslim *Ulema*, and the biases in the positions of the All India Muslim Personal Law Board.

The Rajiv Gandhi government's enactment of the Muslim Women's Act was perceived as an extreme measure of minority appeasement. Calls for the Uniform Civil Code as a comprehensive solution to the discriminatory practices surfaced

from various quarters, including both mainstream feminists and newly emerged Muslim feminist groups, sparking intricate debates on religion, secularism, the separation of the public and private domains, the role of religions and its institutions within Indian secularism, and the question of state intervention in religious matters. The situation became even more precarious, and communal tensions escalated after the demolition of Babri Masjid in 1992. This politically sensitive period also witnessed a consolidation of community ethos and a proliferation of identity markers.

The rise of militant Hindutva and the Bharatiya Janata Party's ascent to power, and a series of insidious projects initiated by the BJP government against the Muslim community–while professing to "save" Muslim women from their men and an oppressive religion–have eventually heightened concerns about the Muslim community's position in the Indian nation-state (N. Menon). Recent state interventions, such as the 2017 ban on Triple Talaq following the Public Interest Litigation filed by Shayara Bano and others, are perceived as steps toward the Uniform Civil Code (UCC), a move vehemently resisted by the community, seeing it as an infringement on its religious autonomy. Amidst these circumstances, the feminist initiatives and rights activism of Muslim women advocating for reform within the religion and amendments of Muslim personal Law are viewed as ill-timed, self-destructive, and wholly antagonistic to the current political predicament confronting the community.

The hijab ban in Karnataka, when read in this context of rising Hindutva nationalism in India and the sabotaging of the rights of Muslim minority, brings to

the fore the looming question of the inclusivity of Muslims in the contemporary Indian nation state as envisioned by the Hindutva hyper-nationalists. The preoccupation with the difference of Muslim women and the need to establish sameness is central to the obsession with Muslim woman's religious clothing. Tanweer Fazal observes:

> There are several objections to the hijab or the head scarf. The most vociferous and thereby the most visible is the one voiced by the Hindutva activists. The crux of the argument rests on uniformity–from sameness in dress and costumes to uniform civil code, the range is wide. Universality here is conflated with uniformity. The cultural artifacts of this uniformity are invariably drawn from purported norms, beliefs and practices of the dominant culture. (45)

The state sponsored "de-hijabing" project, as in Karnataka, continues to invite critical attention that places Muslim woman and her body in the embedded contexts of secularism, nationalism, and religious identity. P. K. Yasser Arafath delineates the complexity of the issue:

> The Karnataka hijab controversy exemplifies a vicious and protracted battle between male-centric religious nationalisms and Muslim women's bodies across regions. Re-hijabing and jilbabing defined the violent phase of Taliban rule in Afghanistan in the 1980s and the Islamic Republic of Iran under Ayatollah Khomeini, whereas de-hijabing–the tearing of women's sartorial markings–became a major political act in Iran under Reza Shah in the early 1920s. Even though thousands of Muslim women challenged

> Iran's imposition of hijab in 1979, all of them were put down by doctrine and punishment. In the late 1970s, Muslim women in Tehran were broadly divided into three categories: non-hijabi, "bad hijabi," and good hijabi, with only the latter being allowed to enter the theocratic state's moral template. When it comes to open threats against hijab-wearing women in Karnataka, only non-hijabi Muslim subjects are considered as the uncontested Muslim subjects under Hindutva rule in the state. All of these examples convey the same story: Muslim women's bodies are still a site of political and ideological contestation in the modern world. ("Hijabing" 69)

Both mandatory veiling as in Iran and ban on veils as in Karnataka target the female body. Both adherence to veiling practices and deviance from it can invite criticism and censuring from its supporters and critics respectively. The brief survey attempted here makes it clear that the meaning of the hijab is not uniform. Its meaning is multiple and layered owing to the embedded nature of Muslim women's existence in different contexts. The question of the "Muslim female body" hence calls for a rigorous analysis that takes into account contextual specificities: social, historical, political, and cultural.

Reading the discourse on veil and its history is key to understanding how practices of embodied religiosity become crucial in determining Muslim women's identity in different contexts. The analysis attempted here reveals how this vestimentary practice, carried out by Muslim women, has evolved from a mere symbol of Muslimness to attain a complex, multi- layered meaning, subject to the readings in different cultures and contexts. The context under study, Kerala, is also

impacted by diverse factors, both global and local. The following section briefly traces the history and contexts of Malayali Muslim community's negotiations with the various overlapping forces–global, national, and local–from within the secular fabric of Kerala, to help locate the uniqueness of its sociopolitical contexts. It is the uniqueness of the region, its history and culture, social and political milieu, that demands a close reading that can add to as well as challenge some of the dominant discourses on its Muslim women. This account of the history of Malayali Muslims, their theological and organisational activities, and political allegiances can further illuminate the centrality of the Muslim woman's question in Kerala.

The distinctive cultural identity of the Muslim community in Kerala is often attributed to the peaceful propagation of Islam in the region, which was facilitated by Sufi mystics and the *Ulema*. Arab traders had established contact with the Kerala coast as early as the seventh century, and by the ninth century AD, Muslim settlements were already present in the region (Dale; Miller). These trade connections with the Arabs were further strengthened through the support of local rulers, particularly the *Zamorins* of Calicut. Factors like linguistic and cultural affinity, with both the native communities and the Arabs, the practice of matriliny among Mappilas, and other syncretic religious traditions contributed to the development of a unique Islamic heritage within the Muslim community of Kerala.

Though the Muslim population of Kerala has considerable diversity, the majority are descendants of Mappilas. The Mappilas[2] of Kerala predominantly

[2] Mappila typically refers to a Muslim community in the state of Kerala, particularly among the Malayalam-speaking population. The Mappilas are known for their unique cultural and historical background, often associated with trade, commerce, and maritime activities. They have a distinct identity with a blend of Arab, Persian, and Indian influences. For more details on Mappilas, see Logan; Miller.

follow the *Shafi Madhab*[3], a branch of Islamic jurisprudence. Prominent Mappila settlements sprung along the coastal regions of Kerala, and Mosques built in various parts of the coastal region served as hubs of Islamic education, attracting substantial number of individuals from lower Hindu caste backgrounds to Islamic faith. At that time, the Indian Ocean was an intricate area characterised by extensive inter-regional economies and cultural interactions (Clark 385). It served as a focal point for the interaction of four major civilisations: the Perso-Arabic, the South East Asian, Indian, and Chinese. The Europeans entered this convergence of civilisations at a later stage (Chaudhari 21). Similarities can be observed between the Islamic traditions of Muslim societies scattered along the Indian Ocean region, highlighting the influence of trade routes in the spread of Islam across these areas (Ilias 436, 441).

The religious authority vested in Sufi mystics and the *Ulema,* who centered their activities around the mosques, played a pivotal role in the formation of a cohesive Islamic community in Kerala. The close ties between this emerging Muslim community and its *Ulema* with the Arab world, facilitated through the ports of Muziris and Quilon, significantly contributed to the evolutionary trajectory of Islam in Kerala. The erudite members of the *Ulema* relied on Islamic centers situated in Mecca, Medina, and Baghdad for their Islamic education (Dale 27).

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[3] *Madhab* (or *Madhhab*) refers to a school of thought or a legal school within Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*). These schools of thought represent different interpretations of Islamic law based on the Quran, the Sunnah, and the opinions of Islamic scholars. The four main Sunni schools of thought are *Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i*, and *Hanbali*, while the Shia school of thought is *Ja'fari*. Each school has its own unique methodology, principles, and legal rulings that may differ from one another in certain areas. Muslims follow one of these schools of thought in order to understand and apply Islamic law in their daily lives. It is important to note that while there are differences between the schools of thought, there is a general consensus on the basic principles of Islam.

This era witnessed a substantial influx of people, customs, and cultural elements from diverse regions, resulting in the enrichment of the Islamic tradition of Kerala. The syncretism and cosmopolitanism within this tradition played a vital role in the peaceful spread of the Islamic faith in the region. However, a tumultuous period of protracted struggle unfolded with the arrival of the Portuguese in the sixteenth century. The conflicts for control over pepper trade, involving merchants from Egypt, the Arabian Peninsula, and the Portuguese, disrupted the harmonious relationship between the Mappilas and the Zamorins (Osella and Osella, "I am Gulf" 326). This led to a series of intense confrontations with the Portuguese, ultimately relegating the Mappilas to the status of minor traders, landless laborers, and impoverished fishermen. Concurrently, the social, political, and economic privileges previously enjoyed by the Mappilas gradually eroded.

A new era of social, economic, and political change dawned with the Mysore incursions into Kerala led by Hyder Ali, followed by Tipu Sultan, in the latter half of the eighteenth century. This period infused the Mappilas with a much-needed morale boost and witnessed significant growth within the Mappila community. However, this phase of heightened consciousness and fervor was relatively short-lived, as the British triumphed over Tipu Sultan in the third Anglo-Mysore conflict of 1792, marking the beginning of the colonial era in Malabar.

The Malabar Rebellion of 1921 stands as one of the most pivotal historical events shaping public perceptions of the Mappila Muslim identity in modern Kerala (D. Menon 79). The discourse surrounding the Muslim community as the "other" within the emerging discourse of modernity was a major factor that led to complex

negotiations within the community itself. The emergence of Muslim reformism in Kerala needs to be read in the context of this checkered history of the Malayali Muslim community.

Starting from the late nineteenth century, the Muslim community engaged with the ideas of colonial modernity, which in turn led to novel forms of religious identification. This eventually resulting in the formation of two distinct theological strands: the traditionalists and the reformists. This period witnessed a significant shift in the religious lifeworlds of the Muslims of erstwhile Kerala. In this period of vigorous debates within the community, there emerged new ways of connecting with the faith, engaging with the question of modernity, and ways of democratisation of religious knowledge (N. R. Menon).

The Muslim community's encounter with colonial modernity thus resulted in new ways of experiencing faith and raised intricate issues, prompting the community to engage in a negotiation with modern ideas. Francis Robinson observes that the Islamic tradition has been greatly impacted by its encounter with modernity. He highlights that despite Muslim reformist movements aiming to resist Western cultural and political dominance, they simultaneously employed Western knowledge and technology to advance their objectives and, to some extent, were shaped by their interaction with it ("Islamic Reform and Modernities" 27). He goes on to enumerate five changes that the interaction with modernity induced in the Islamic subjecthood:

> (a) [T]he ending of a total authority of the past as Muslims sought new ways of making revelation and tradition relevant to the present; (b) the new emphasis on human will as Muslims realised that in a world without

> political power it is only through their will that they could create an Islamic society on earth; (c) the transformation of the self, achieved through willed activity, leading to self- reflectiveness, self-affirmation and growing individualism; (d) the rationalization of Islam from scripturalism through to its formation into an ideology; (e) and finally a process of secularisation involving a disenchantment of the world, which arguably has been followed by a re-enchantment. ("Islamic Reform and Modernities" 28)

The prolonged history of Malayali Muslim community's encounter with colonial forces eventually culminated in intense resistance and later, subtle responses to the question of modernity in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Researchers have been probing into the dynamic history of Muslim societies' engagements with colonial modernity and its impact on their understanding of Islam. Robert W. Hefner also foregrounds the need to engage with the role of European modernity, of such aspects like English education and print capitalism, in determining the trajectory of Islamic reform movements. Hefner observes that there ensued a steady process of democratisation of religious knowledge and that this process was not a reaction to the modern world but rather a response to it (98).

Reformists' engagements with colonial modernity as well as the existing Islamic tradition of the *Ulema* led to the emergence of a highly vibrant Muslim public sphere. This phase of Inter-faith debates between Islam and other religions, and intra-faith debates between the Muslim reformists and the traditionalists, significantly contributed to the identity formation of the new Malayali Muslim in Kerala. As part of their mission to shape the progressive Malayali Muslim, the

reformers exhorted the community to adopt modern education, the new Malayalam script, and also to appropriate their bodily conducts to suit the cultural precincts of "Malayaliness."

The reformist discourse on religion and modernity also marked a new era of public religiosity and garnered significant followers from the educated middle-class Muslims of Kerala. The reformists, represented by prominent figures like Sayyiid Sanaulla Makti Thangal (1847 - 1912), Vakkom Abdul Qader Moulavi (1873-1932), and K M Moulavi (1886-1964), engaged in organised efforts to reform the community. This culminated in the establishment of the *Muslim Aikya Sangam* (" The Muslim United Front"), in 1922, a reformist organisation in Kodungallur that later played a key role in advancing the reformist efforts among Malayali Muslims. Vakkom Moulavi's publications like the *Muslim*, *Deepika* (in Malayalam), *Al Islam* (in Arabic-Malayalam) and *Al Manar* (in Arabic) played a crucial role in Islamic reform. Through his extensive publications which dealt with wide range of issues, Vakkom Moulavi encouraged community members to embrace modern education, follow true Islam, and to abstain from corruptive practices. While Makti Thangal spearheaded Islamic reform in Kerala, it was Vakkom Moulavi's rigorous critique of existing practices that intensified the debates on delivering Friday *khutba* ("pulpit speech") in the vernacular language, translating the Quran into the vernacular language, providing modern education to Muslim women, and allowing women's entry in mosques.

In 1950, the current Salafi-Mujahid organisation known as Kerala Naduvathul Mujahideen (KNM) was founded with the goal of extending the

reformist efforts initiated by the early reformers under the banner of Aikya Sangham. The Salafi reformers, often referred to as Mujahids in Kerala, united under the KNM to propagate the teachings of Islamic scholars such as Ibn Taimiyah (1263-1368), Mohammed Ibn Abdul Wah'hab (1703- 1792), Mohammed Abduh (1849-1905), and Rashid Rida (1856-1935), among others, who emphasised the primacy of the Quran and *Sunnah* (Samad 26). The organisation continued the reformist resistance to " blind beliefs and corruptive practices" and sought solutions in a religious modernity. They established numerous schools and colleges for women and thus tried to ensure the social progress of Muslim women. In the same vein they raised the Muslim woman's question in the religious sphere and engaged with the scriptural aspects of diverse issues related to women, like polygamy, right to property, mosque entry, and access to education. In 1988, they founded the Muslim Girls and Women's Movement as a women's wing dedicated to mobilising women within the community.

The criticism of pre-reformist traditional cultural practices among Muslims in Kerala, voiced by the reformers, gave rise to a counter-religious formation of traditional *Ulema*. Anti-reformist Muslims rallied under the banner of Samastha Kerala Jamiat, established in 1926, as an organisation representing traditional Muslims. Notable Sunni scholars like Shihabuddin Ahmed Koya Shaliyathi (1885-1954), Varakkal Mullakoya Thangal (d. 1932), Pangil Ahmed Kutti Musaliyar (d. 1946), and Abdu Rahman Bafakhi Thangal (1906-1973) assumed leadership roles within Samastha during crucial years (Samad 132). The traditionalists, who unified under the banner of Samastha in 1926, assumed a defensive posture and actively

engaged with the reformers to counter their critique of the prevailing pre-reformist Islamic tradition, which the reformers claimed had been tainted by the misinterpretations of Islamic teachings by the *Ulema.* They vocally asserted their unwavering commitment to the Islamic tradition and openly criticised the reformists for their perceived affinity towards *Wahabism*. Additionally, they condemned the reformers for their overreliance on scriptural interpretations and their challenge to the spiritual-religious authority of the *Ulema* (Samad 131-132). The period after the consolidation of the reformists and the traditionalists witnessed several public conferences, marking the onset of intra-faith polemics commonly referred to as *samvadam* ("debate") or *vaathaprathivaadam* ("argument"). The polemics between the two sects unfolded through public conferences, theological debates, and print media, gaining wider publicity among Muslims and contributing significantly to the "new" Muslim identity formation (N. R. Menon 135, 136).

In the 1980s, along with the large-scale migration to Gulf countries, factors such as the rise of militant Hindutva, the influence of Gulf Salafism on reformist sects, and internal conflicts within both religious sects contributed to substantial changes in the religious orientations of the Malayali Muslims. The emergence of the AP Sunni faction in the 1980s, led by Kanthapuram A.P. Abubakkar Musliyar, stands as a pivotal moment in the history of Samastha. In 1989, the A.P. Sunni organisation was established, resulting in the coexistence of two equally prominent groups within Samastha: AP and EK Sunni. The latter was led by E.K. Abubakkar Musliyar, who served as the General Secretary of Samastha at the time and is currently led by Jifri Muthukoya Thangal.

The first division within the KNM was in 2001. Though the groups, led by Kunhi Muhammad Madani Parappur and the one led by Hussain Madavoor reunited under the KNM banner representing the Mujahids in the year 2016, the Madavoor group still retains the tag *Markazud'awa* and both the groups have separate platforms for their organisational activities. Another major splinter group, the Wisdom Global Islamic Mission, still keeps away from the KNM. Many other splinter groups, which have varying levels of scripturalist orientation, can be identified within the Mujahid sect, of which the Wisdom Global Islamic Mission can be seen partaking in the major debates on Muslim community in Kerala by organising conferences and campaigns.

In the 1980s, Jamath-e-Islami emerged as a key force in the Muslim community formations in Kerala. Despite their differences with the Mujahids, on account of the latter's apolitical stance, the JIH Kerala chapter can be grouped along with the reformist sect (Samad116). Jamath-e-Islami, established in 1948 in Kerala, has a strong women's wing, the members of which often engage with issues pertaining Muslim women. A keen understanding of the political scenario, globally and in India, is a characteristic feature of their critical engagements with the idea of a gendered Muslim identity.

Besides their allegiance to one or the other religious groups, the identity of Malayali Muslims is significantly influenced by their political inclinations and interactions with the state, which are closely intertwined with theological debates. Concomitant with the changes in the religious formations post-1980s is the emergence of Muslim League as the major contributor to the political

mainstreaming of Muslims in Kerala, and the emergence of numerous other political formations like PFI, its political organ SDPI and Welfare Party. However, the rise of militant Hindutva politics since the 1980s, coupled with the emergence of new Muslim political groups inspired by puritanical Salafism and political Islam, poses a significant challenge to this distinctive secular political engagement among Kerala's Muslims. In this context, the new traditionalist Sunni sects are using expressions of the secular identity, rooted in the discourse of communal harmony, to actively resist the ideologies of Salafi puritanism and political Islam. The rise of Muslim League as the single largest representative of Kerala Muslims, a joint platform for Sunnis and Mujahids, has pushed the traditionalists towards ideas of moderate reform for community development and progress (Osella & Osella, "Islamism and Social Reform" 335-336).

The political alliance of the Sunnis with Muslim League is characterised by breaks and ruptures. The IUML encounters challenges in its political journey, primarily due to the AP faction of Samastha, led by Kanthapuram A.P. Abubakkar Musliar. This faction consistently adopts a confrontational stance against the IUML in recent years, often forming and breaking alliances with them. Despite the historical hostility of the AP faction towards the Muslim League, the party still receives support from the Samastha EK faction, attracting significant votes from the community. However, recent developments indicate that the EK faction also has reservations about the Muslim League's alleged alignment with reformist groups within the community.

The details enumerated reveal that there has emerged a highly vibrant Islamic public sphere, in twentieth century Kerala, within the secular public sphere. As Rajeev Bhargava observes, Indian secularism, unlike that of other nations, does not relegate religion to the private sphere. The state instead maintains a "principled distance" with religions (83). The secular public sphere in Kerala thus contains the Islamic public sphere within it, which consolidates Muslim identities– reformist and traditionalist–as well as institutionalised organisational activities of both theological sects. Concomitant with these developments is the expansion and intensification of polemics on women in Islam, challenging the claims of a singular Islamic position on the women question in Kerala. The response of traditionalist and reformist sects to the theme of Muslim womanhood in this emergent public sphere of Kerala has been neither singular nor unitary. Diverse interpretative positions can be seen in the spectrum of religiosities sanctioned for women by these groups. The very act of reading religion from within the framework of modernity had necessitated rationalisation of religious tenets. Engagements with the concept of gender in Islam, whether from reformist or traditionalist perspectives, which open it up for discussions and public debates, bring forth diverse theological positions and opinions on the gender question from various theological vantage points. Addressing the woman's question, the reformists and counter –reformists vie with each other to prove the theological authenticity of their positions.

Notwithstanding their numerous positionings within the spectrum of theological interpretations, criticisms, and confrontations, one can discern many overlappings, convergences, and divergences in the traditionalist-reformist positions.

This is to say that the question of Muslim woman has been discursively constructed by these religious sects and their affiliated organisations. They vouch for the "correctness" of their respective interpretations. These multiple interpretative positions have eventually unsettled the idea of a unified entity called the Muslim woman within the sociopolitical and religious context of Kerala and have given rise to multiple, conflicting, and contingent discourses on women's Muslimness. These positions are also predicated by factors ranging from an extreme refusal to engage with the emancipatory framework of modernist discourses and a conditional engagement with the rights discourse, while dealing with Muslim women's issues such as gender segregation in public spaces, women's candidature in elections, education, property rights, and the (mis)use of hijab. These engagements invite our attention to the larger discourses on body and bodily conducts.

The debates on Muslim women in India are not located solely in the domains of Islamic theology. Instead it is embedded in the overlapping contexts of modernity, secularism and various other democratic political processes. Reactions and responses to state machineries as well as reformist endeavors in other communities have also significantly influenced Muslim reform movements in India. Reformism, Osella and Osella remarks, is simultaneously local and transnational ("Islamism and Social Reform" 333). Overarching framework of Kerala modernity has significantly shaped the Muslim reformist idiom, which is further expanded by economic mobility achieved through Gulf migration. Tremendous progress has been achieved by the community in the field of education, in which the traditionalists too have emerged as contributors by opening schools and colleges. Another significant

shift has been marked in the political engagement of Muslim women. Subsequent to the seventy third constitution amendment that mandated thirty three percentage reservation for women in the local bodies of governance, it became imperative for the IUML to ensure political participation of Muslim women. They established a women's wing, the Vanitha League, in 1992. Though the Muslim League is forced to field women for local body elections, their move has not gone without criticism. Tensions mount around the religious permissibility of having women leaders, women's presence in public spaces, and the question of their modesty. Religious enterprises on Muslim women in Kerala need to be read in these embedded contexts that put theological positions under constant scrutiny.

The Muslim Woman's Protection of Rights on Divorce Act of 1986 marks a crucial juncture in the history of debates on Muslim women in India. The Shah Bano case had triggered much discussion on the incompatibility of Islam with values of modernity and gender equality, viewing religion as an obscurantist force. Scholars like Sylvia Vatuk have traced the emergence of Islamic feminist initiatives in India and their engagements with the liberal, secular, and religious frameworks[4]. In Kerala, there is a dearth of independent feminist initiatives from amongst Muslim women, except for NISA, a "progressive Muslim women's collective" established during the late 1980s at Kozhikode by V.P. Suhara. While the traditionalist – reformist organisations are critical of the emancipatory discourses disseminated by Islamic feminists, Suhara locates her engagement with the question of Muslim

[4] For detailed analysis of Muslim women's feminist engagements in India and the emergence of organizations like Muslim Women's Rights Network, Bharathiya Muslim Mahila Andholan, STEPS, and Awaaz-e-Niswaan, see Schneider.

woman within the framework of Islamic feminism. Santhosh R. elaborates on the negotiations Suhara has been making in Kerala:

> For Suhara, the framework of Islamic feminism, especially Amina Wadud and Fatima Mernissi, provide a strategic standpoint to revolt against the conservatives from within the community. Suhara tells me that "it is almost impossible to fight these patriarchal Ulemas outside the community. The moment you discard your Islamic identity, your legitimacy is lost and the community members never take you seriously and a dialogue becomes impossible" (pers. comm. December 2016). She points out that all mainstream Muslim organizations have very little interest in addressing women's issues in India and unless women come forward, long-lasting changes will never occur. (100)

While Suhara emphatically asserts the usefulness of Islamic feminism in delineating the Muslim woman's question, women's wings within reformist organisations are still preoccupied with apprehensions about the possible corruption that may ensue from the "feminist" framework of Islamic feminism. Notwithstanding the hostility to Islamic feminism, MGM and GIO has emerged as significant platforms discussing pertinent issues related to Muslim women. In the increasingly hostile political environment, these women tread a careful path by upholding the cause of women from within the ideological space of their parent organisations. Traditionalist organisations, on the other hand, still restrict women from entering their organizational structure and remain male bastions.

Recent years have witnessed an expansion of a breed of religiosity which Osella and Osella refers to as "just a Muslim" in the public sphere of Kerala ("Islamism and Social Reform" 341, 342). Muslim Women of this view are a growing tribe who "believe but do not belong" to any institutionalised theological sects. They refuse to identify with Western feminists as well as liberal-secular feminists and espouse the theological aspects of their religiosity and the emancipatory ethos inherent in Islam, by engaging with Islam from within the Islamic feminist framework. These women partake in discussions in various platforms, including social media, faith groups, and numerous other virtual and real platforms. However, these believers, for not being consolidated under a banner and a theological position, are rendered invisible in the community's political and religious formations. The state machineries reckon the dominant groups, Samastha, KNM, and Jamat-e-Islami as sole representatives of Malayali Muslims and key stakeholders in religious, political and legal disputes on Muslim women. Shifting political allegiances of these organisations, the Left party's positions on "Muslim issues," and the possibilities of political bargaining and forming new coalitions have been surfacing in Kerala's contemporary political scene. Some of the recent developments in the state can help further delineate the complexity of this issue and lay bare the centrality of the Muslim woman's question in the political negotiations in the state.

CPI(M) had previously supported the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) in the 1980s. Its stance has changed or rather evolved, presumably emphasising the need for a holistic approach to the issue. This political positioning of the Left in recent

times has been facing criticism from both the Congress and the Muslim League in Kerala, accusing them of engaging in “vote bank politics.”They accuse that the Left in Kerala is seizing the opportunity to establish its own space among religious minorities, who have traditionally aligned with the UDF, led by the Congress party. Further prospects are offered to the Left by the recent disagreements between the two Samastha factions and the Muslim League. The drifts became public when they jointly criticised the IUML for allegedly appeasing Salafis and endorsing their ideology.

In response to the BJP government’s efforts to introduce the UCC, the state government, led by CPI(M) organised public campaigns and seminars against its implementation. They even passed a resolution in the Legislative Assembly opposing the UCC. These steps are interpreted by the opposition groups as attempts by the Left political front, represented by the CPI(M) in Kerala, to forge new political alliances. Notably, both reformist and traditionalist factions participated in a seminar at Kozhikode in July 2023, while Muslim women literary and social activists, with long-standing affiliations with the Left liberal front, declined to participate. Though Kerala’s Chief Minister emphasised the importance of reforming and amending discriminatory practices within personal laws through discussions involving all stakeholders, rather than imposing a UCC, which he perceives as part of the BJP’s electoral agenda, there are accusations that the Left led by him has overlooked the concerns of Muslim women while trying to appease the Muslim religious factions (“Kerala: CM Vijayan to Move”).

Dr. Khadeeja Mumtaz, a Left sympathiser and author, expressed her concern about the absence of Muslim women in the seminar on Uniform Civil Code. She argued that Muslim women should have had the opportunity to voice their perspectives, especially given Prime Minister Narendra Modi's emphasis on the UCC as vital for addressing the challenges faced by Muslim women. While the Muslim leaders openly opposed the call for reforming Muslim personal law at the seminar, Dr. Mumtaz urged political parties and women's organisations not to outright reject the UCC but to promote reforms in personal laws and to negotiate with religious leaders to bring about change. Hers was a lone voice asking for political intervention that can bring about moderate reform, while religious leaders like C. P. Umar Sullami, the general secretary of Kerala Nadvathul Mujahideen (KNM)-Markazuda'wa, who participated in the seminar representing his organisation, asserted that achieving equality for women is impractical and criticised political parties for their own lack of gender equality in leadership ("Hear Out"). Given the sheer absence of the Muslim women's voice in these deliberations, these acts backed by the Left government prove detrimental to the calls for reforming the Muslim personal Law by these women critical insiders.

Instead of advocating for reforms in personal law as an alternative and encouraging religious leaders to embrace change, these political parties are seen as bolstering the positions of Muslim organisations on issues related to Muslim women and gender equality. This stance is attributed to the complex political landscape in India, following the rise of militant Hindutva and the precarious situation of Muslims in the country, where external challenges often take

precedence over addressing internal issues. Consequently, the Muslim woman's question is further marginalised in this sensitive political context, with both traditionalists and reformists asserting the impossibility of amending Muslim personal laws. Besides, the opinions of Muslim women are often disregarded by the two major political parties, exacerbating the challenges they face. In this intricate web of political and religious discourse, the question of Muslim women's rights requires thoughtful consideration and discussion, especially given the overlapping interests and alliances at play in Kerala.

The debates and dynamics within the Kerala Muslim community are notably shaped by larger structural and cultural shifts within India. Elements like women's reservation in local political bodies, the rapid growth of higher education among Muslim girls, increased employment opportunities, and exposure to discussions on gender equality through social media platforms all contribute to a transformation in the discourse on Muslim women in India. In various Muslim-majority nations, Islamic feminism confronts influential Islamic clergy and Islamist states, but in India, the situation is particularly delicate. This is primarily attributed to the assertive stances taken by right-wing Hindutva parties and the government. The rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party to power in 2014 and the increasing dominance of Hindutva have marginalised the Muslim community even more. The expanding influence of Hindutva and the diminishing spaces for minority politics have led to a sense of siege, wherein any discussion of gender issues is perceived as ill-timed, harmful, and a threat to the fragile unity of the

community during challenging times. Santhosh R. succinctly puts down the complexity of Muslim woman's position in contemporary India:

> [T]he current political scenario, where Hindutva leaders are raising the bogey of "oppressed Muslim women" and the necessity to abolish "evil practices like triple talaq" while carrying out with their insidious agenda against the minorities, has made the entire discourse on reforming Muslim Personal Law problematic. Therefore, the legitimate demand for modifying the Muslim Personal Law is vehemently opposed on the grounds that such demands would only cater to the growing clamor for a UCC, one of the long-lasting demands of Hindu right-wing organizations in India. While identitarian and assertive exclusivist Muslim politics gain momentum in different parts of the country, any attempts by these women's organizations to be the internal critics are frowned upon, forcing them to tread a treacherous terrain. (106-107)

This context has brought the issue of Muslim women to the forefront, with various groups engaging in intense discussions on the "position of women in Islam" from diverse theological perspectives. In contemporary Kerala, it has become impossible for the major political parties and Muslim organisations to overlook or dismiss women's concerns. Reformist and traditionalist organisations strive to highlight women's issues within faith, as well as those arising from the specific socio-political situation in Kerala. Though such efforts face criticism from liberal-secular feminists who label them as superficial, these sects are compelled to respond to these challenges.

This chapter attempted to trace the history of dominant discourse on Muslim women and the veil as a product of the colonial narratives and its influences, the evolving discourse on the Islamic veil or hijab as a bodily practice and the contexts of hijab bans and forced hijab. Having delineated the contexts of discursive construction of the Muslim woman in Kerala, the next chapter traces the emergence of the debates on Muslim women with a focus on the history of the discourses on Muslim female body, aspects of its veiling, segregation and visibility. The chapter reads the history of reform in late nineteenth century and early twentieth century Kerala and locates the discourse on Muslim women and her body in the works of Muslim social reformers and different religious groups and organisations. This analysis is co-textualised with a reading of the representation of Muslim women in early Mappila literature, to provide a more holistic yet conflicting picture of the representation and discourses on Muslim female body. This helps give a historicity to the contemporary debates on Muslim women in Kerala and also foregrounds the differences in the history and context of Kerala, its social, political, economic, and cultural matrices that has determined and continue to determine the Muslim women's question.

Chapter 2

(Re)forming the Body:
Historicising Religious Gendering of Muslim Women

> Indian and Kerala public discourse, and private fears expressed among many Hindus and Christians, criticize Muslims' recent new veiling as: alien; Arabic; due to Gulf migration; and unnecessary. . . . Hindu women in Kerala also generally find sleeveless sari blouses and Western dress decadent and immoral. It is certainly not the case that only Muslim women are constrained in their choice of clothing or preoccupied by the issues of modesty and femininity. (Osella and Osella, "Muslim Style" 248-49)

In their ethnographic study of Muslim women's clothing practices in Kerala, Caroline Osella and Filippo Osella comment on the disproportionate attention drawn by Muslim woman's dress in contemporary Kerala. Most of the observations made by the researchers in their study, published in 2007, still stand true, since no other sartorial change invites such critical attention both from within and outside the Muslim community. Despite its ubiquity, these public discourses and academic engagements apparently fail to employ a nuanced approach that can take us beyond these "narratives of fear" to understand the reasons for the preoccupation with the "difference" of Muslim women in Kerala's political society. Viewing the issue from a different vantage point can help problematise both the discourses from within and outside the community and trace the discursive construction of Muslim female bodyhood. This requires reclaiming the history of Muslimness in Kerala through a

reading of the pre-reformist tradition, reformists' reaction to it, and the resultant polemics between the traditionalists and the reformists. This can help challenge the often dehistoricised analyses of Muslim women and their clothing practices, as emblematic of her oppressed or liberated status, to locate more complex and embedded discourses on Muslim female body itself.

Having traced the history of the dominant discourses on Muslim women and the veil as a product of the colonial narratives and its influences, the evolving global discourse on the Islamic veil or hijab as a bodily practice, and the contexts of hijab bans and forced hijab, this chapter traces the emergence of the discourse on Muslim women in Kerala. The chapter focuses on the history of the discourse on Muslim female body, its veiling, visibility, aspects of gendered spatiality, and gender segregation. Reading the discourse on Muslim women and her body in the reformists' texts, their defense of the Islamic views on women and gender, and their criticism of the traditionalist *Ulema* as well as critics from outside can provide us with great insights on the formation of the ethical female self and body in Kerala. This analysis of the traditionalist-reformist debates on women in this chapter is co-textualised with a reading of the representation of women in early Mappila literature to provide a more holistic yet conflicting picture of the representation and discourses on Muslim female body. This helps give a historicity to the contemporary debates on Muslim women in Kerala and also foregrounds the specificities in the history and context of Kerala–its social, political, economic, and cultural matrices that have determined and continue to determine the Muslim woman's question.

The emergence of a "new Muslimness" in the last decades of the twentieth century, with the sudden increase in the number of Muslim women appearing in Arab forms of hijab and *pardah*, has been triggering much public debate in contemporary Kerala. The image of the *pardah*-clad woman evokes nostalgic reminiscences of that unique Muslimness with its syncretic bodily markers, like the *kachi mundu, kuppayam, and thattam*,[1] which has been replaced by Arab modes of modest clothing as well as veiling. These liberal, secular readings of the new Muslim woman's dress as a foreign phenomenon overlook the long standing global ties of the Muslim community of Kerala, especially with the Arab world. The cosmopolitanism and pan-Islamic influences are not new to the Muslim *Ummah* of the land, as evidenced by the history of the community and its religious and social reform (Ilias 438,450).

The growing concern over the effects of adopting these "oppressive" forms of clothing fails to view it as a natural outcome of the socioeconomic, religious, and political changes during the period, as well as the translocal and transnational connections of the community with other Islamic societies. Given the pan-Islamic orientations of the Islamic tradition of Malayali Muslims during the pre-reformist, reformist, and contemporary periods and its influence on the identity formation of the Muslim individual, the idea of a unique Malayali Muslimness is at stake.

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[1] The *Kachi Mundu* is a simple garment, resembling a sarong, worn around the waist and extending to the ankles. It is typically paired with a *kuppayam*, a customised blouse that reaches the hip, and a *thattam*, a piece of cloth, often made of airy fabrics, worn as a headscarf. The *thattam* is usually loosely draped over the head, leaving the neck exposed. Until the latter half of the twentieth century, this attire was commonly worn by Malayali Muslim women. Over time, it was replaced, first by more Malayali styles like the saree, then salwar kameez, and later by Arab-influenced clothing like pardah and abaya, paired with Arab modes of wrapping the headscarf.

Probing deeper into the history of the traditionalist/reformist polemics on Muslim identity reveals intricate patterns of negotiations that the community engaged in during the twentieth century. The call for a pure-scriptural Islam inaugurated by Makti Thangal, as opposed to the one advocated by the traditional *Ulema*, later adopted a distinctive trajectory owing to the multiple demands they had to meet, viz., rescuing the image of the Muslim from the stereotype as the uncivilised, uneducated, and fanatic; defending Islam's compatibility with modernity; driving the community for social progress through modern education; defending the "pure" Islam against the pre-reformist version; making the new Muslim man and woman; countering the traditionalists' vehement criticism and opposition to the reformative moves; and responding to the call for a national political consciousness, secularism, and ideals of modernity. The reformers tried to redefine existing gender ideals to meet the growing demands of the period for modernity without compromising on the Islamic ethos that should contain it.

There was a heightened focus on a new form of religiosity as a central aspect of identity. Presumably, on account of these differences of the "Muslim gender project" with that of the other communities, the former has been pushed to a liminal status as mere religious movements in the mainstream historiography on gender in Kerala. These approaches have hitherto overlooked the significance of religiosity in Muslim social life and the community's engagement with the social and political discourses in the religious interpretative texts. Hence, rescuing the history of gender reforms in the Muslim community from its liminality is imperative in foregrounding

aspects of Muslimness and piety as central to the formation of gendered Muslim identities.

The surge in social and political movements in Kerala, amongst various communities, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, mirrored the movements happening in other parts of India. These reform movements aimed to challenge prevailing social and cultural norms, the *jati*-order ("caste structure") and establish a more just and equitable society. The emergence of a new gender discourse that challenged the existing gender roles and social structures to establish a new order was one of the significant outcomes of these movements in Kerala.

Informed by ideas of colonial modernity, the reformers emphasised the importance of modern education for women. Consequently, efforts were made to establish schools and colleges exclusively for women. These efforts are characterised by conflicts and constant negotiations that various communities had to make with ideas of tradition and modernity. Though the predetermined structure of European modernity acted as a fundamental framework for the reform of gender roles, different castes and communities, through their organisations and activities which aimed at reforming their members, engaged in careful negotiations with the "Westward looking" model of the new woman. One of the prime objectives of these organisations was the cultivation of an idealised notion of modern man and woman, with the latter being shaped in accordance with the concept of the new woman who is a hybrid–Indian and modern. Cultivating an interiority that is constituted by values of an appropriated modernity and inscribing its visible markers on body became two inseparable aspects of these processes. Efforts were made to instill

certain values that suit the idealised roles of wife, mother, and woman, and there were attempts to popularise bodily markers and behaviors that signify the new woman.

The period also marks the beginning of a radical departure from traditional notions of women's roles in the Kerala society. J. Devika, in her path-breaking study of gender and body in Kerala, challenges some of the dominant assumptions about the role of women in the reform movements and its processes of gendering. She contends that the gender project was a complex one, "full of moves and counter moves," and women too were active agents in the process of change ("The Aesthetic Woman" 463). She observes:

> Gender assumed unprecedented importance in such imaginings of modern communities to be attained through reforming. The entrenched *Jati*-order appeared to be grounded upon "external determinants" like birth or inherited social authority, and against this, a liberal vision of a society of equal individuals was set up: individuals who would be valued not for what they possessed by way of inheritance, but for their 'inherent, internal' qualities. Self-development, focused on fostering and extending 'internal, mental' qualities and dispositions, was accorded a prime position in all early twentieth-century Malayalee reformisms, like the Shree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam of the Ezhavas, the Nair Service Society, the Araya Sabha, the Yogakshema Sabha of the Malayala Brahmins etc., as well as in subaltern reformisms of the Pulayas and others, and in radical reappropriations of religious idiom like the Pratyaksha Raksha Daiva

> Sabha. While the mind and its endowments were attributed visible importance in the project of shaping the modern self capable of resistance to the Jati order, the body, especially its sexual endowments, was seen to be contributing the 'raw material' for reform. ("The Aesthetic Woman" 461-62)

The idea of the new woman is thus characterised by her ability to conform to the ideals of nationalism and modernity and bearing more neutral "external determinants" that can gloss over caste differences in the emergent cultural sphere of Kerala. This ideal of cultivating the desired interiority and expressing a new Malayaliness had a notable impact on the discourse surrounding the Muslim female body as well. Although initially met with hostility and skepticism, Muslim women also gradually became a part of this extended "body project," leading to the gradual remoulding of their bodies as sites upon which a combination of gendered modernity and social ideals are inscribed while retaining an Islamic demeanor. Despite its many similarities in aspirations with gender reforms in other communities, the history of Malayali Muslim community thus took a markedly different trajectory owing to its focus on inscribing a "gendered religious (Islamic) self" on Muslim women's bodies.

Reading the traditionalist-reformist debates of the period through an analysis of the texts on ethical self fashioning like the pamphlets, tracts, speeches and articles published in both Malayalam and Arabi-Malayalam magazines, major debates in the conferences and meetings held by both sects, and the intra-faith public debates organised, can help trace the history of gendered religiosity in Kerala. The reformers

used the print media effectively to disseminate their ideas on various issues related to the Muslim community. *Al Ithihad, Al Bayan, Al Islam, Mishkathul Huda, Nisa Ul Islam, Ansari,* and *New Ansari* are some of the magazines published in the first half of the twentieth century.

A closer examination of the literary and non-literary texts of the period reveals that language too was reformed or adapted to reflect the reformed discourse on body, gender, and women. In addition to the reformists' texts, Mappila literature, a repertoire of pre-reformist cultural expression, provides valuable insights into the representations of Muslim women, including their bodies' spatiality and segregation, visibility, and sexualisation. This rich oeuvre later underwent significant changes, during the early twentieth century, owing to the sociocultural shifts and the reformists' efforts. On account of the popularity of various genres in Mappila literature, the reformists also used it to bring about changes within the Muslim community, but with a marked amount of bowdlerising. Subsequently, in the hands of the reformers, the eroticised female bodies, hitherto depicted in Mappila literature, gradually gave way to representations of more docile, modest, and religious bodies.

Considering the interconnectedness of the ideas about women, their "bodyhood," visibility, and spatiality in both the reformist discourse and Mappila literature, it is difficult to separate the analysis of these tropes into distinct sections. Hence, the texts on Muslim reform and Mappila literature are analysed as co-texts to reveal the similarities, differences, contradictions, and conflicts between traditional literary-cultural narratives and the reformist discourse. Specifically, the study

examines select texts spanning from the late nineteenth century to the 1970s to contextualise the discourses on Muslim female body. Presented in a loose chronological order, the analytical narrative in this chapter incorporates various literary and non-literary texts to illustrate the evolution of the discourse on body and the centrality of religiosity in those discursive practices.

This analysis of the narratives and counternarratives on Muslim women's embodiment calls for an alternative approach that can help probe further into the complex negotiations Muslim women make with ideas of modernity and religiosity. This focus on women's texts is necessitated by an understanding that these women reformers' contributions to the Islamic tradition of Kerala remain hitherto unexplored, both within the history of religious organisations and mainstream feminist enterprises. For instance, Haleema Beevi (1918-2000), a Muslim woman reformer and publisher from Thiruvalla, wrote profusely on the rights of Muslim women, their role in the society, and the new Muslim woman's identity. She devoted her life and career to uplift Muslim women. Being a politically active woman, Haleema Beevi was elected as the secretary of Tiruvalla taluk Muslim League and later became the Muncipal Councillor (Noora and Noorjehan). Her contributions and legacy remained forgotten until she was recently rediscovered and presented through the biography *Pathradhipa* (*The Publisher*) in the year 2020, a narrative of her epoch-making life and activities. Browsing the pages of early magazines in Malayalam and Arabi-Malayalam, one comes across many such women of Haleema Beevi's creed. Pathavu Sahiba, P. K. Subaida Madaniyya, Habsha Beevi Marakkar, M.K. Aishakutty, N. Habsha Beevi, Thangamma Maalik, and K.A. Aisha Beevi are

some of them who wrote in various little magazines. A noteworthy aspect of these women's articulations on a range of subjects pertaining to the women of the community is a distinct "Muslimness", an Islamic ethos that marks their aspirations.

A corpus of Muslim feminist enterprises that includes literary and non-literary texts by Muslim women of the reform period, i.e., early twentieth century Kerala, is yet to be made. These women's major-minor contributions to the Islamic tradition, their articulations of religiosity, as well as their resistance and conformity cannot be read from within the binary categories of oppression versus liberation. This framework can be too limiting to address the question of gendered religiosity in their discourse on bodily practices. This highlights the need for a more inclusive framework of analysis as contended by Fadwa El Guindi:

> Instead of the polarity that characterizes Western constructions, Islamic principles insist on the integration of dualities. Hence we encounter a modality of polarity (Western) versus a modality of relational integration (Arabo-Islamic). It is within the latter model that we locate the second conception of gender, which is embedded within cultural tradition and Islamic activism and is contextualized in local, regional and cultural history. This conception is more relevant to an objective understanding of Muslim women's activism. Approaching Muslim women's rights through liberal feminist agendas cannot be effective because these agendas are based on the Western experience and derive from Western values; hence they are irrelevant to most issues of concern to Muslim women. Matters pertaining to women and the family are based on scripturalist-derived

> decrees and laws. To be effective, these issues must be dealt with within the same framework that created them. Feminism within the context of Islam can provide the only path to empowerment and liberation that avoids challenging the whole of the culture. (598)

Religion, (here Islam and its practices) pitted against modernity, proves to be an incompatible tool to explore the Muslim woman's question. El Guindi's view on this incompatibility of the liberal feminist framework for the study of Muslim societies forms a key methodological insight which informs the analysis in this chapter, since the study tries to locate the larger contexts of these discursive practices and Muslim women's participation in it and resistances from within it, by foregrounding religiosity as a significant category in their bodily experiences of being. Reading the pre-reformist tradition is crucial in contextualising the reformist discourse on Muslim women and her body. A brief survey of select texts in Mappila literature[2] is attempted here, since it can offer a glimpse into the "lifeworlds" of the Muslims of erstwhile Kerala. Besides, the representation of women in these texts, if put in context and rescued from the marginality imposed upon it by the overarching reformist preference for the "pure, ideal woman" in the later literary and religious

[2] Mappila literature is a rich repertoire of literary and performative genres written initially in Arabi-Malayalam script and later in Malayalam script. Arabi-Malayalam is considered a unique dialect of vernacular Malayalam heavily influenced by Arabic as well as elements of Sanskrit, Tamil, and Persian written using an appropriated Arabic script. The *Ulema* networks across the seas and the Indian Ocean cosmopolis have significantly influenced this language and literature which constituted an alternative knowledge construction paradigm for the Mappilas and incorporated in it diverse genres like *qissahpattu* ("story"), *malapattu* ("devotional songs"), *padapattu* ("war songs"), *kathupatu* ("letter songs"), and *kalyanapattu* ("marriage songs") among others. Despite their extensive use of this script in their literary and devotional engagements, the Mappila men and women came to be classified "illiterate" with the emergence of modern education in Malayalam and English.

texts, can inform us significantly on various aspects of female bodyhood and how it permeated the cultural lifescapes of Muslims in erstwhile Kerala.

A rich repository of both literary and performative traditions, Mappila literature, provides great insights into the shared social practices of the community. The purpose of this analysis of Mappila literature is not to evaluate its literary merit, but rather to explore how women's bodies are represented and shaped within the cultural and religious frameworks of Muslim community. In addition, this study seeks to contextualise these literary texts and examine how these texts dealt with aspects of ethical self fashioning and were later utilised as a tool of reform. To gain a better understanding of the broad patterns of experiencing and representing the Muslim female body in Mappila literature, a survey of select songs from various genres, such as *kalyanapattu, kathupattu, malapattu, padapattu*, love songs, and Arabi-Malayalam novels is attempted here. This analysis also aims to highlight the differences between the discourse on body in these narratives and the discourse on body created by the reformers.

In the introduction to his book, *Sthreepaksha Vaayanayude Mappilpadantharangal* (*Feminist Readings of Mappila Intertextual Texts*), BalakrishnanVallikunnu remarks that writers such as Moyin Kutty Vaidyar have adapted and appropriated female characters from other Islamic traditions to fit the Mappila imagination. He further notes that the eroticised portrayal of women characters and *hooris*[3] by Vaidyar does not conform to the Islamic perceptions of

[3] In Islam, the notion of *hooris* pertains to the belief in celestial beings, specifically female companions, destined for devout and virtuous men in Paradise as a reward for their righteousness and good deeds. Islamic scriptures depict these beings as possessing

womanhood. Instead, the poet appears to have been influenced by *Manipravalam* literature in creating such representations (84-85). He points out that the representation of women in Mappila literature, especially love songs and marriage songs, often deviates from the norms of womanhood in Islam as propagated even during the specific historical periods in which these texts were produced.

Problematising this premise, it is essential to consider the myriad factors that contributed to the formation of the literary imagination and the popularity of such works during that historical period. Dismissing these factors in any study of these works would be shortsighted. Furthermore, there are no historical evidences to support the claim that these songs were despised by the Mappilas due to their eroticism or explicit portrayals of love and erotic depictions of the female body. Erotic language is a common feature of premodern literature of many Muslim societies, which later came to be seen as "backward" and hence was subjected to correction and purification. Afsaneh Najmabadi, in her analysis of Iranian modernist discourses, discusses how Iranian women's language as well as the language of reference to their body was re-scripted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (487). She states that this change is concomitant with the emergence of the modernist discourse, the establishment of public schools, and the circulation of the pre-reformist texts in heterosocial public spaces as a result of the establishment of the new press. In the homosocial spaces of men and women, language could be

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extraordinary beauty and purity, characterised by wide eyes, fair complexions, and adorned with jewelry and exquisite garments. Allah is believed to have created them with the explicit purpose of offering pleasure and companionship to believers in the hereafter. The concept of *hooris* is predominantly present in Islamic eschatological literature, particularly within the descriptions of Paradise found in the Quran and Hadith.

overtly erotic (488). Najmabadi contends: “The process of de-eroticisation led to the emergence of a sexually de-marked language, of women’s body and bodily presentation in public, striving to produce a disciplined, chaste body, veiling its sexually marked messages, expressing sexuality otherwise” (488). She further states that a controverted modernist reading of the premodern phase marks its language as vulgar and rejects it as backward.

In the light of Najmabadi’s contentions, it can be argued that it is fallacious to view the portrayal of women's sexual desires in Mappila literature as amoral, as this involves imposing the moral and cultural codes of a different period to analyse a historical period and its cultural productions. It is important to recognise that literature is not completely free of the influences of a particular cultural milieu. Therefore, these texts have to be rescued from its folklorised liminality as sheer expressions of excessive eroticism to provide a counterpoint to mainstream narratives and historiography.

The origins of Mappila literature is traced back to the seventeenth century poem “Muhiyuddhin Maala” (1607) by Qadi Muhammed (Vallikkunnu and Tharamel 41). Primarily oral in nature, many other texts produced before and after this period may have been lost. Of the repertoire that is available for analysis, “Badarul Muneer Husn al Jamal” (1872), written by Moyinkutty Vaidyar, is the first poem to feature fully developed female characters (Vallikkunnu and Tharamel 123). Prior to this work, women characters were often less visible in Mappila literature, but Vaidyar’s poem marked a significant shift by providing detailed depictions of women.

In the nineteenth century Kerala, Vaidyar presented an enduring narrative on women in his poem "Badarul Muneer Husn al Jamal." This literary work revolves around the life and character of a woman known as Husn al Jamal, a figure of singular beauty, intellect, and moral integrity. The poem extols her as the embodiment of both elegance and sagacity, likening her physical allure to the celestial luminance of the moon and the sun.

> Husn al Jamal . . . was such a beauty that anyone who happened to see her would not want to take his eyes away from her. Her thick hair was as black as lustrous dark clouds. Her hair was so long that when unbraided it would touch her heel. The hair looked more beautiful when it was made into a chignon. Her forehead was curved bright like a crescent. The eyes looked darker even without blackening them with a collyrium. The teeth were like the juicy fleshed red seeds of pomegranate. And her smile was as quick and bright as lightning. (Kutty, "Husn al" 10)[4]

Notably, Vaidyar's composition transcends the reductionist tendency of confining Husn al Jamal's identity solely to her external appearance. Instead, it illuminates the multifaceted nature of her persona. She emerges as a woman of depth and substance, exercising her agency and mastery over the course of her own life. This portrayal positions her as an active agent rather than a passive victim of circumstances. When confronted with situations contrary to her will, she resolutely

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[4] The passage quoted here is taken from Ajir Kutty's translation of a version of the poem titled *Husn al Jamal Badr al Munir: Retold in Modern Malayalam for Young Readers* by M. N. Karassery. Due to the peculiar nature of Ajir Kutty's text, which is more akin to an adaptation, the translator is considered as the key contributor while citing the work.

refrains from acquiescing to external authority and, in turn, asserts her autonomy. Vaidyar's poetic work thus challenges traditional gender roles and associated stereotypes of Muslim women. The central protagonist defies conventional expectations of a passive, obedient woman. Instead, she emerges as a dynamic and purposeful participant in her own life as well as in the lives of those within her sphere. Her leadership qualities and exemplary conduct serve as a beacon for other women, ultimately interrogating and subverting patriarchal norms and practices through both her words and actions.

Within this poem, a celebration of the female form and its inherent beauty becomes evident. The verses offer explicit descriptions of both male and female physical allure. Remarkably, the poem fearlessly presents the unabashed sexual desires of women towards the captivating hero, while also portraying the male physique as an object of desire. The female characters in the poem openly articulate their erotic yearnings for the man who captivates their hearts (Kutty, "Husn al" 29).

In this context, both man and woman emerge as enchanting embodiments of eroticism, establishing both male and female beauty and form as coveted objects within the sensual fantasies of pre-reformist Mappila imagination. This cultural milieu was later transformed by the evolving perceptions regarding masculinity and femininity, which constricted the notion of beauty and desire primarily to female bodies, imbuing them with a feminised passivity that aligns with the contours of the modernist mindset. It should be noted that the presentation of beauty and desire in numerous Mappila literary compositions transcends these binary limitations and provides a richer and more nuanced portrayal of sensuality and attraction of both

men and women. Yet another instance of such explicit portrayals of female beauty can be seen in Vaidyar's "Badar Padappattu" composed in the year 1876 (Vallikunnu 74). Valikkunnu observes that a sublime depiction of feminine beauty can be found in *Ishal 68* ("section 68") of the poem, wherein the portrayals of celestial beings, known as *hooris,* who wait for the martyrs at the gates of Paradise, present a mesmerising picture. The poet presents *hooris* as extremely beautiful beings. Using elaborate descriptions, Vaidyar draws a vivid picture of their beauty:

> These ethereal entities [*hooris*] with dark coils of hair– darker than the wings of black beetles– intricately fastened into a conch-shaped chignon, outshine even the sun and the moon. Their features include foreheads and eyebrows arched like rainbows, pointed and sharp noses, and wide, dark eyes that illuminate their faces like the sun and the moon. Their faces are sculpted and round, their lips are soft and red like flower petals, and their teeth resemble pomegranate seeds. A slender-arched neck leads to a body redolent of musk, complemented by round, voluptuous breasts, plump and buoyant with taut nipples akin to rosary pea. Their bellies shine like fig leaves, legs are shapely as if carved from tree branches, and arms are beautifully rosy, resembling rubies. Fingers appear delicately carved from red coral stone. Even the rising sun shies away when they smile at the west, and not even seventy fleets of cloth can conceal their radiant, voluptuous bodies. They are described as being thirty-two years old. (Vallikkunnu; my trans; 74-75)

Such depictions of female charm and amorous love were not unique to Vaidyar's poetry. Numerous such instances can be found in the works of his predecessors and contemporaries (Elettil).The accusations that Vaidyar's portrayals of women often border on the erotic may be considered a modernist misreading and hence reductionist in nature. His poems enjoyed immense popularity and can be read as accounts of Muslim cultural ethos and literary sensibility during the pre-reform period. Vaidyar's women characters, though drawn from history and myth, are at once fantastic and real as hues of Mappila culture is added to those characters (Vallikkunnu 35). It should be noted that the explicit descriptions of amorous love in Vaidyar's poetry had no repulsive effects on the Mappila literary consciousness. Besides, these texts exemplify the unique status of conjugality in Mappila culture and its ethos around female beauty, body, and sensuality.

Similar instances of eroticisation of the female body, celebration of its beauty with extended comparisons that describe women's gait, clothing, and adornments can be seen in *kalyanapattukal* ("marriage songs"). The beauty of the bride is described and detailed descriptions of her body and gestures add charm to the verses (Vallikkunnu 95-97). Given the popularity of these songs, it is erroneous to infer that such descriptions of female beauty in these texts were incompatible with the Muslim consciousness of the period. It can also be noticed that these eroticised representations of women coexisted with the representations of women in *Malapattu* and *Padapattu* as spiritual and heroic beings respectively.

Before Moyin Kutty Vaidyar's time, there were only a few references to women in war songs such as "Sughum Padapattu[5]" (1836) written by Mappila Alim Umer Labba and "Cherur Padapattu" (1841) written by two native poets of Cherur, Mammed Kutty and Muhiyuddhin (Vallikkunnu and Tharamel 59,80). The latter is a narrative about the Cherur agitations that took place in the 1840s. The portrayal of Mappila women in this nineteenth century war song helps to challenge some of the stereotypical notions about them as women confined to their homes. In the song, the poet records those women's feelings of curiosity and admiration for the victorious soldiers. These women of Kozhikode come out of their homes to witness the procession of Mappila men. Though their presence is recorded in these songs, it may be noted that these women remain silent witnesses to the actions portrayed (Vallikkunnu 8-9).

Moyin Kutty Vaidyar, in his "Malappuram Padapttu" (1883), offers a nuanced portrayal of women characters who are active agents in shaping their physical and linguistic environment. Set in the 1720s, the poem is a historical account of the resistance movement by Mappilas against the ruling class. Drawing from collective memory, the poet reimagines the events in his Arabi-Malayalam song, skillfully delineating the role of women in the resistance movement. The portrayal of women in this *padapattu* subtly unsettles some of the dominant ideas about Mappila women by giving us insights into their agency and authority. When

[5] "Sughum Padapattu" by Mappila Alim Umer Labba, a native of Kaayalpattanam, is an Arabi-Malyalam adaptation of a poem titled "Sughun Padaiporu," originally written in 1686 by Varishai Muhiyuddhin Pulavar of Madhurai, based on a story in *Kithabul Magasi*. For more details, see Vallikkunnu and Tharamel 59.

the enemies, led by the *Paranambi* ("the local landlord"), attack the village, the enraged women move to the nearby mosque, carrying their children. The poet presents a vivid picture of these women as he captures their fierce determination in the face of adversity (Hikmattulla 80-81).

An important aspect of the representation of women in Mappila literature can be observed through an instance in this poem in which these women are entrusted with the responsibility of negotiating with the representatives of the king, without the assistance or accompaniment of men (Hikmathulla 81). In the eighteenth century setting of the poem, the poem portrays Muslim women as agentive users of language and space. This challenges some of the stereotypical notions about Muslim women as passive and docile. Moreover, the fact that such portrayals were deemed acceptable in the late nineteenth century highlights the need to re-examine dominant discourses about the history of Muslim women.

Vaidyar is widely regarded as the first Mappila poet to present fully drawn female characters in his works (Vallikkunnu 11). Both in his love songs and war songs, he individualises his female characters drawn from other sources. In his popular war song " Uhudu Padapattu" (1879), women are represented on both sides of the warring groups. These women actively participate in the war by singing and shouting to encourage the soldiers. Vaidyar presents characters such as Hind as the embodiment of revenge, dancing on the battlefield upon seeing her father's assassin being killed. Another woman, Susaiba Beevi, protects the Prophet by using her own body as a shield (Vallikkunnu 68). Here Susaiba Beevi's body is portrayed as a symbol of power and strength. The presence of these women on the warfront is not a

passive one, and hence the significance of these representations. The poet endows them with a visibility and individuality that is unprecedented in the genre of *padappattu*. Although Vaidyar's characters are drawn from Islamic history, his literary imagination imbues them with a distinct Mappila identity.

Likewise, in his "Saleeghathu Padapattu" written earlier in 1866, Vaidyar portrays Queen Saleeghath of Jamhuth as a paragon of chivalry. The Queen, an embodiment of bravery and valor, engages in combat with the Prophet's army and is subsequently apprehended by Ali, Amrabnu Aadhu, and Abdul Kareem. In a provocative manner, she ridicules their attempts to capture her, asserting that it is absurd for three men to subdue a woman. She then leaps a significant height of fifty feet to escape their clutches. Saleeghath is depicted as a formidable warrior who fights continuously for seven days and nights, resisting the Prophet's army's attempts to vanquish her. The Queen is celebrated as a noble heroine, distinct from the majority of female characters featured in Mappila literature, who embodies fearlessness and courage (Vallikkunnu 44).

The examination of these poems from the late nineteenth century reveals the entanglement of the literary with the historical, cultural, and the religious in the life of Mappilas. Women characters in these songs partake in the action and have access to space and language. Contrary to popular beliefs about Muslim women, these women are neither restricted to harem like spaces nor are they docile bodied and passive beings. These women characters' engagement with the spaces outside their homes is a testimony to the diverse roles they played. The portrayal of characters like Queen Saleeghath as an emblem of power and courage in *padapattu*, is part of a

cultural continuum of powerful, saintly women with both spiritual and magical powers portrayed in the *malapattu*[6] genre.

Malapattu, a significant component within the expansive corpus of Mappila literature, consists of devotional songs that venerate the spiritual accomplishments of saints. The genesis of these devotional compositions can be traced to the era marked by the influence of Sufism on the cultural landscape of Kerala (N. R. Menon, "Islamic Renaissance"). Though the idea of the feminine ideal is problematised by the reformists as incompatible with Islamic principles, these spaces continue to fluidly accommodate both worldly and sacred activities of certain sections of Muslims in Kerala who affiliate themselves with the traditionalist sect. An exhaustive study of the *malapattu* genre can unpack the plurality embedded in these "spatio-linguistic" enterprises both in historical and contemporary contexts of Kerala.

Within this body of work, certain compositions narrate the journeys and extraordinary feats of female saints. These *malappattu*, with its rhythmic cadence, aesthetic appeal, and spiritual profundity, found widespread resonance within Mappila households. The prevalence of eulogies dedicated to and tombs constructed in honor of female saints[7] across the geographical expanse of Kerala stands as a

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6 Musical narratives known as *Malas* serve to honor the extraordinary tales of Muslim saints and heroic episodes in the community's history. The inception of this musical tradition in Kerala can be traced back to "Muhiyudddin Mala". This revered devotional classic, thought to have been composed in 1607 by Qadi Mohammed of Calicut, recounts the history of the Sufi saint Sheikh Mohiyuddin Abdul Kader al-Jilani. For more details on the composition of the *mala*, see Vallikunnu and Tharamel 41.

7 These shrines are also called *dargas*. In Kerala they are referred to as *jarams*. Tombs dedicated to Beema Beevi (Beema Palli, Trivandrum), Ibrahima Beevi at Ponnani, and Sherifa Beevi near Edapally, Kochi are some of the examples of such *jarams* of female saints. For a note on these exemplary women, see Hussain, *Neunapakshathinum* 19.

compelling testament to the concurrent recognition of both male and female sainthood within this cultural context. Even in contemporary times, female saints continue to command reverence, albeit with fewer pilgrims frequenting their shrines. While the permissibility of saint veneration remains a topic of theological debate between the traditionalists and the reformists, the existence of these shrines dedicated to female saints and their commemoration through *malapattu* – an integral component of prayer and other devotional practices within Muslim households – offers poignant insights into the presence of women within the spiritual tapestry of Kerala's Muslim community.

A notable contribution to this discourse is Nalakath Kunhi Moideen Kutty's renowned work, "Nafeesath Mala" a poetic composition extolling the virtues of Sayyida Nafeesa, a Sufi saint of profound significance. Sayyida Nafeesa is depicted as a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, tracing her lineage back to the seventieth generation. Residing in Cairo, Egypt, she garnered acclaim for her mysticism and piety, and miraculous healings through her mystical powers. The poem eulogises her reservoir of knowledge and depicts how she influenced people and attracted a considerable following."Nafeesath Mala," enriched with its Arabic diction and phrasing, an ode to her spiritual eminence, attained great popularity among the Mappila Muslim community in Malabar.

Within the broader Muslim belief system of the traditionalists, it is held that the spiritual legacy of the Prophet endures also through female saints, with mystical women like Sayyida Nafeesa occupying such a revered status. "Nafeesath Mala" assumes particular significance in the Mappila cultural and spiritual mosaic, as it

acknowledges the spiritual leadership of women and act as a testimony to the capacity of female saints to inspire and guide others. The poem held special significance among Mappila women, who believed in its power to alleviate the travails of childbirth (Hussain, *Neunapakshathinum* 19). Thus, the poem serves as a testament to the recognition of women's spiritual authority within the Mappila Muslim community. Collectively, these narratives and historical accounts unequivocally underscore the pivotal roles occupied by female saints within the realm of Muslim devotional practices. A substantial segment of the community continues to pay homage to female saints through acts of veneration at their sepulchers calling attention to the profound association of these female saints with religious experiences and various other facets of Muslim devotional life.

The literary and spiritual manifestations of female sainthood in Kerala needs to be placed in the historical backdrop of religious rituals and practices among Muslims in Kerala. A comprehensive exploration of the ritualistic practices surrounding shrines, along with an examination of their manifestations within the spiritual consciousness of Kerala's Muslim populace, is imperative in understanding the nuanced aspects of gender fluidity within religious embodiment that existed in the pre-reformist Islamic tradition of Kerala. Merin Shobana Xavier's examination of the gender fluidity inherent in Sufism offers valuable insights into the understanding of female sainthood in this context.

> Male Sufis also subverted expected gender norms by wearing women's clothing and referring to themselves as the bride of God or in the feminine form in literary and oral traditions, as seen in this line of poetry from the

> Punjabi Sufi Bulleh Shah (d. 1758): 'I was a naïve little girl in my parents' home/When he stole my heart away' (quoted in Singh 2017: 186). These poems are still recited and sung today at Sufi shrines, especially in Pakistan, and have been popularized through Qawwali music globally, especially by Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan (d. 1997). The above examples signal us towards another critical way in which gender in Sufism was ambivalent. (168)

The exemplary female saints, who populate the spiritual landscape of the Malayali Muslims, simultaneously characterised as both chivalrous and saintly, also embody a harmonious synthesis of the masculine and the feminine within their persona. Though these practices has its parallels in other translocal Islamic traditions and can be placed in the larger context of female sainthood and Sufism in West Africa and South Asia, the reformists attacked it as a corruptive practice that emerged out of local Hindu influences. Numerous shrines of female saints found in Malaysia, Singapore, Srilanka, various other parts of India, and parts of Africa are indicative of the plurality within Islamic tradition and the translocal connections between Muslim societies in diverse locales. While segments of traditionalist Muslims continue to visit these shrines and engage in ritualistic prayers, reformist groups not only abstain from such practices but also vehemently criticise them as *shirk* ("associating partners with Allah"). According to the reformists, saint veneration contradicts the central tenet of Islamic belief, *tawhid* ("monotheism") as it involves intermediaries in prayer. These practices came under rigorous scrutiny and criticism from reformist quarters, often through the periodicals that championed

the reformist perspective. Eventually, the everyday practices of gender-fluid spirituality within the pre-reformist Islamic tradition of Kerala lost their perceived authenticity.

The changing sociopolitical scenario of early twentieth century Kerala, with its focus on values of modernity, a heightened sense of rationality[8] and individual agency for social change, had its impact on varied aspects of Muslim lifeworlds. A gradual shift in themes and literary styles of Mappila literature set in during the reform period in the first half of the twentieth century. Mappila literature itself became a tool of reform, and several concerns on the status of women and their deportment were reflected in the literary texts of the period, which gradually became part of the larger corpus of Mappila literature. This shift in themes can be seen as an inevitable outcome of the influence of various social reform movements happening in Kerala's public sphere and of Muslim reformers' efforts to engender a new Muslimness.

The social-religious engagement of the reformers, it may be argued, was instrumental in predicating the religiosity of Muslim women in the early twentieth century. One of the major concerns in the works of reformists was to define the "new" Muslim woman who performed a "reformed" religiosity. The analysis of reform texts, both literary and non- literary, that follows can reveal how attempts

[8] Rationality, being a central tenet of modernity was embraced by Muslim reformers, who persistently tried to test the compatibility of Islam with ideas of modernity. This is a general trend in Islamic reform. Francis Robinson, in his study "Islamic Reform and Modernities in South Asia"(2013), observes that the rationalisation of religious beliefs and practices was one of the fundamental traits of Islamic reform. The reformers critiqued local customs and practices and declared traditional values, perceived as incompatible with science and reason, to be "un-Islamic" (274–275).

were made to domesticate the Muslim female body, redefine her access to public sphere, and evolve the idea of an education that can contour her "self" and body within the precincts of religion.

Another major change noticeable in the literary production of the period is the gradual bowdlerizing of language in the texts produced by the reformists. The authors of these texts make use of carefully selected words–a sexually "de-marked" language– to refer to the female body– which is in stark contrast to the language used to celebrate the eroticised female body in the works of poets like Vaidyar and various other Mappila songs. The increasing rampancy of print media, which took the literary productions of the community to a wider reading public, the general literary trend of the period, and the influence of the reformist discourse on the body can be considered as some of the major reasons for this change. The brief discussion on some significant aspects of Muslim women's representation in select Arabi-Malayalam novels and reform texts attempted here can further elucidate this point.

Besides using diverse non-literary genres to disseminate their views, the Arabi-Malayalam writers who aligned themselves with the reformers explored the relatively new literary genre of the novel with an intention to reform the community, especially its women. By using the emergent genre of the novel and writing novels in Arabi-Malayalam[9], they targeted sections of Muslim women readers who were yet to get introduced to the new Malayalam script. One such text is the novel

[9] The prose writings in Arabi-Malayalam are notably diverse. This includes translations and commentaries on the Quran and Hadith, biographies of Islamic prophets, historical accounts of Islam, treatises on Islamic jurisprudence, Sufi literature, fictional works, medical manuals, magazines and newspapers, grammatical texts, and lexicons. Arabi-Malayalam novels emerged as a relatively recent addition to this diverse collection.

Khadeejakutty written by an anonymous author and serially published from September 1929 to November 1930 in the Arabi-Malayalam women's magazine *Nisa Ul Islam*. The unfinished novel has numerous episodes strewn together narrating the life and experiences of the eponymous heroine Khadeejakutty, a newly educated Muslim woman with a strong sense of individuality and freedom. Her conflicts as an educated Muslim woman who is struggling to synthesise ideas of modernity and religiosity are presented in a series of episodes. The narrative is interspersed with details of hostility Khadeejakutty has to face from within and outside her community as a Muslim woman. There is a conscious effort from the character Khalid to explain the principles of "true" Islam, and to reinforce Khadeejakutty's Muslimness. The text contains within it numerous hints at the negotiations these reformers were trying to make with hostile sects within and outside the community and also the newly educated Muslim women.

Arifa Beeviyude Kankettu Vivaham (*Arifa Beevi's Blindfolded Marriage*) by C. H. Ibrahim Kutty Master and *Khidr Nabiyekanda Nafeesa* (*Nafeesa Who Saw Khidr Nabi*) written by K. K. M. Jamaludheen Moulavi , a prominent religious scholar and reformer, are some of the other significant Arabi-Malayalam novels. Set in the 1930s, these novels also foreground issues of religious reform and places before the readers, ideas of reformed womanhood. It may be noted that these women characters significantly differ from the characters represented in the love songs and marriage songs. A look at the portrayal of women in these Arabi-Malayalam novels, one of the most important yet unexplored genres in Mappila literature, can help to further explain this point. In the novel *Khadeejakutty*, there are references to the

protagonist's internal conflicts, but the narrative contains sparse references to Khadeejakutty's body and her bodily conducts. Women characters in the other novels also remain shrouded in a sexually de-marked language; their bodies remain rather invisible, hidden away from gaze and de-eroticised.

Post-1920s several major social and religious concerns put forward by the reformers started reflecting in different genres of Mappila literature. Consequently, Mappila literature underwent a gradual transition from a fantasy-ridden world to a more realistic realm. Within this transformation, the theme of Muslim women's status and reformed religiosity emerged as significant tropes. The genre of *paattu* ("song") was the one of the common genres used by the reformers to disseminate their ideas on reform. For instance, the term *mala* itself acquired a more general meaning in the hands of later poets in the twentieth century and was used to refer to poems depicting social and historical incidents that affected ordinary people of their time. While retaining a few of the characteristics of earlier devotional songs, like focus on piety and devotion, they considerably deviated in style and purpose to accommodate socially significant themes and current events.

Edavalan Moidheen's "Mathamohini Kunjamimaala," first published in 1967, is a perfect example of this modified genre. The song falls under the "new" *malapattu* genre and tells the story of a woman's piety who converts to Islam and falls in love with a Muslim man, which leads to social problems and harassment by her own community. She seeks assistance from the *Qadi* at Nadapuram Mosque and marries the man she loves, changing her name from Cheeru to Kunjami. The poem is said to be based on a true event that took place in Nadapuram of Kozhikode

district. The female protagonist's agency, sense of freedom, and her religious and personal choices are succinctly portrayed in the poem, along with poet's commentary on how the society encroaches on her personal space. The centrality of the female protagonist in this poem is relevant because it explores not only the social obstacles that a woman from a marginalised group confronts but also the larger issues of a woman's choice of faith and her agency to do the same. The poem also uncovers the societal attitudes toward dalits and explicitly depicts the humiliation and torture that the woman suffers for marrying a man from a different community. The poem goes into great detail about the circumstances of the woman's conversion to Islam and her name change from Cheeru to Kunjami (Vallikunnu and Tharamel 175).

Appropriating the *malapattu* genre to reflect on and to criticise social evils is part of a general change in the literary trend that had begun in the early decades of twentieth century itself. Magazines in Malayalam and Arabi-Malayalam published literary works both by Muslim men and women with an intention to reform the Muslim individual. These works show a marked shift in focus and deal with real and socially relevant issues. Numerous songs written by Pulikkottil Hyder, Mehar, and several women Mappilapattu writers dealt with the lives of Muslim women as victims of a regressive, degenerate social order. Besides, they used songs as tools of reform by vehemently criticising social evils like dowry and many existing religious practices. "Kathukuthu Mala", "Durachara Mala", "Parishkara Mala", "Durachara Mardhanam", and numerous *kathupattukal* are examples of such literary expressions. Literary maestros like Pulikkottil Hyder and Nallalam Beeran took

sides with reformers and traditional *Ulema* respectively and acted as their mouthpieces (Karassery 26).

Mappilapattu written during the period dealt with various social issues. The song writers chastised the community both for its degenerate state and reluctance to embrace reform, and also what they perceived as the excessive indulgence of its members in some aspects of modernity, especially women's "misuse" of new clothing styles. The song "Kaliyugam" ("Kaliyuga") by Pulikkottil Hyder (1879-1975) is an example. The poet employs this medium to censure the new Muslim woman from using new modes of clothing in an "inappropriate" way. He says that women have stopped wearing their *makkana*. Instead, they wear shorter jackets, expose their bellies, wear ornaments, and freely move around in the markets among men, inviting unwanted male gaze. Hinting at the gravity of what he perceives as deviant bodily conducts and indiscriminate indulgence in the emergent ideas of modernity, which can prove perilous to Muslim women, Pulikkottil says that these actions amount to prostitution (165-67). The "reformist fervor" in Pulikkottil's songs echoes in numerous other popular songs of the 1950s and '60s, of which some exclusively dealt with the "wrong" ways of draping the sari[10].The inferences drawn from the analysis of pre-reformist Mappila literature can be read alongside the implications on Muslim women's bodyhood in these reformist texts for a more holistic understanding of the evolution of the discourse on body.

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[10] In a personal communication, Faizal Elettil, a scholar in Mappilapattu and related genres, discussed the extensive criticism directed towards the bodily conducts of "modern" Muslim women by Mappila songwriters in the mid-twentieth century. Gender representations in these popular songs, which fall within the genre of advice literature, still await a comprehensive study.

The co-textualized reading of reformist and pre-reformist literary texts has provided some new insights into the stark differences between the reformist representation of the Muslim female body and its representation in the pre-reformist tradition. Probing into the reasons that engendered these new de-eroticised imaginings reveals that the era of reinterpretation of Islamic principles and scripturalism, inaugurated by the reformers, significantly contributed to the development of the idea of a new Malayali Muslim woman who is markedly different from her pre-reformist counterpart. The reformists' extensive publications covered a broad range of issues, from the critical importance of educating Muslim women to debates on hijab, mosque entry, social roles of women, gender segregation, and aspects of an Islamic public sphere. The analysis attempted here identifies four focal points in the emergent discourse on Muslim female body: discourse on hijab and other sartorial practices, visibility of women, aspects of segregation and seclusion of female body, and the idea of a gendered Islamic public space, which often overlap due to the intricate nature of the discourse itself. The attempt is to analyse these tropes which lie embedded in the debates around the changing roles of women.

Pioneered by influential figures such as Makti Thangal (1847-1912), the Islamic reform movement in Kerala emerged amidst the complexities of colonial rule. The reformist engagement involved complex negotiations with issues of nationalism, secularism, and modernity, rendering its trajectory distinct in numerous aspects. Their endeavors to conceptualise Islamically sanctioned codes of conduct, safeguarding Muslimness and an identity firmly rooted in Islamic scriptures, aimed

at constructing a novel vision of a self-sustaining moral community for the Malayali *Ummah* (Niyas Ashraf, "Islamic Reformism and Malayali" 4).The rhetorical foundation for reform was provided by the socio-religious reform movements within the Islamic world during the nineteenth century, which exhorted the Muslim *Ummah* to return to what was perceived as a pristine form Islam. These movements helped the Malayali Muslim reformers by providing them a framework within which they could deal with the specificities of Muslim lives in Kerala.

Francis Robinson in his study of Islamic reform movements in South Asia observes that reformism in these Muslim societies was conceptualised as an "inward turn," signifying a need for restructuring individual behavior based on fundamental principles of Islam to ensure the survival of the Muslim community in the modern world (Robinson, *The Ulama of* 115). In erstwhile Kerala, it was Makti Thangal who pioneered these efforts to cultivate a "new Muslimness" among Malayali Muslims, a religious interiority and a distinctive identity, by exploring the compatibility of Islamic religiosity with ideas of modernity. Making extensive use of the print media, Makti published numerous polemical tracts, monographs, books, and articles in both Malayalam and Arabi-Malayalam. In his Arabi- Malayalam fortnightly, *Tuhfath-ul Akhyar Va Hidayth-ul Ashrar* (*A Gift and Guidance for Distinguished Individuals*), which he started publishing in 1894, he had a separate section for articles on self-development (Niyas Ashraf, "Islamic Reformism and Malayali" 7). Makti's writings, which articulated the need to purge the Islamic tradition of its un-Islamic practices and exhorted the community to progress towards a global collective

identity of the Muslim *Ummah*, played a significant role in forging the identity of the new Malayali Muslim.

Exhorting the community to return to true Islamic theological principles, Makti Thangal rejected many existing practices and customs as innovations and products of cultural syncretism. His attack on matrilineal customs and practices among Muslims, Muhammed Niyas Ashraf observes ,was instrumental in establishing the religious authenticity of the patrifocal family, and the reconceptualising of "women to be the symbol of Islamic tradition and Muslim identity, ultimately limiting women's autonomy and constructing them only as victims with little agency" ("Islamic Reformism and Malayali" 7). In his arguments against matriliny, which are firmly rooted in the scriptural binary of the *haram* and *halal,*[11] Makti attacked this custom as a strong remnant of hindu culture. He further asserted that the matrilineal system was intrinsically akin to certain reprehensible activities and cautioned that "matriliny is typically followed by licentious tribes who adhere to customs like prostitution and alcohol consumption without any remorse, and any Muslim who adheres to such a practice will not be deemed a true Muslim and will be classified among those tribal groups" (Thangal; my trans; 514). He contended that it was imperative for Muslims to discard such practices, given that even Hindus were beginning to reject them (Thangal 167).

[11] These concepts provide a framework for Muslims to lead a lifestyle aligned with Islamic principles, promoting ethical conduct and mindful choices in various aspects of their lives. The concepts of *halal* and *haram* refer to what is permissible and what is not permissible and applies to Islamic dietary laws and broader ethical principles governing various aspects of life.

Makti urged the community to shift from the matrilineal system, where women remained within their own kinship group and children belonged to the mother's clan, to a patriarchal system, where women became part of the husband's family after marriage, aligning with the norms central to Islam. He disparaged the matrilineal society where the sole beneficiaries were females; the inherited property was collectively passed to daughters or nieces from the female side without being subdivided among sons, reflecting a social structure in which women assumed centrality. Instead, Makti championed the male as the nucleus of the family system (Thangal 513-514).

Notwithstanding his presumed allegiance to scriptures, in his criticism of matriliny, Niyas Asraf observes that Makti selectively interpreted scriptures, disregarding Quranic sections that addressed women's property rights. "*An-nisa*" ("The Woman"), a *surah* ("chapter") in the Quran, states beyond question that women are entitled to inherit a portion of wealth from their father or husband. His selective interpretation of the Quran established moral and social boundaries for what he termed the "emancipation of women" and was employed to bolster patriarchal arguments regarding women's roles in society("Islamic Reformism and Malayali" 16). Although matriliny was prevalent only among specific segments of Muslims at the time, the critique of it carries broader significance as it inherently encompasses attempts to redefine gender roles. In his analysis of Makti's reformist engagements, Niyas Ashraf summarises this shift in family system and its impact on Muslim women:

> In the early twentieth century, a series of legislation instituted the basis of patrilocal families in Kerala. This process of redefining tradition through legal intervention underpinned by scriptural authorities had severe implications for the domestic sphere and for the redefinition of patriarchy itself. Women who had once enjoyed specific rights as holders of land and houses in the matrilineal household were further marginalized in the process of reform. The process of reform in patrilineal families predominantly set family structures that preferred men over women, . . . , establishing relations of protection and dependence between husband and wife, and father and children. This operated against the matrilineal family among matrilineal Muslim groups. . . . The concern and anxiety towards matriliny raised by reformers like Makti denounced the autonomy and empowerment of women to make decisions or choices and exercise female agency in the household. As a result, the colonial state implemented Islamic law in various legislations leading to the Mappila Marumakkatayam Act of 1933. This abolished the matrilineal system and legitimized and sustained the centrality of males to the continuity and well-being of Muslim families. ("Islamic Reformism and Malayali" 16)

Redefining the family by the reformers also meant redefining womanhood. The reformist conviction in the essential role of women as conveyors of accurate Islamic values and symbols of Muslim identity imposed a newfound sense of responsibility on women. This necessitated their adherence to religious strictures of proper conduct (Robinson,"Islamic Reform" 269). Concomitant with this shift is the

emergence and gradual consolidation of the ideas of the public and private sphere and the legitimacy of gender roles therein. The reformist tradition had long been placing an emphasis on the private domain as the legitimate space for women. Both Sayyid Ahmad Khan[12], a modernist reformer and Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi[13], a traditionalist, emphasised that the real roles of women lay in the private domain, rather than the public one which had been already surrendered to the British (Metcalf).

In his monograph titled "Naari Naraabhichaari" (“Women follow Men”) Makti redefined the roles and social conduct of women. This work, sought to delineate proper Muslim feminine etiquette as part of the larger spiritual reform of women. He reinforced the idea of chastity and modesty as essential qualities of women, through this monograph. By advocating both religious and secular education for women, with the goal of cultivating their piety and devotion, Makti introduced an ideal model of a new literate Muslim woman devoted to their families and husbands. To the Kerala Muslim community, Makti suggested that the primary duty of a woman is to focus on subjects related to homemaking and child-rearing – roles that align with new gender norms. He says:

> Women should acquire both religious and practical knowledge to enhance their personal development. They should pursue education that aligns with

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[12] Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) is widely acknowledged as the key driving force behind the resurgence of Indian Islam in the late nineteenth century. As a Muslim educator, jurist, and author, he established the Anglo-Mohammedan Oriental College in Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh, India.

[13] Ashraf Ali Thanawi (1863–1943) was a prominent Islamic scholar, theologian, and jurist in British India. He was a leading figure in the Islamic reform movement and a prolific author on various Islamic subjects.

> their natural inclinations and aptitudes. Although the early years of Islam saw female poets, intellectuals, philosophers, and doctors, contemporary women must be encouraged to focus on subjects related to homemaking and child-rearing for their educational pursuits." (Thangal; my trans; 662)

This shows that Makti's writings also reveal a familiar concern of the time: the tension between the necessity of educating women for the moral betterment of the community and the fear that they might transgress established moral and social boundaries. Barbara Metcalf observes that women's reform often served to create hierarchies within the domestic household. In her work she clearly demonstrates how women's reform, in most Islamic societies, essentially became a form of instruction designed to establish a hierarchy within the domestic sphere (Metcalf 2-12). Makti's assertion that "Islam orders women always to follow men" was nothing but an effort to establish such a hierarchy within the Muslim private sphere (Thangal; my trans; 640).

Citing physical differences between the sexes to justify distinct gender roles, Makti emphasised that Islam mandates women to follow men. He maintained that men are primarily responsible for tasks outside the home and must protect and provide for women, while women are intended for domestic chores. He cites and interprets scriptures to support his arguments about male and female roles by selectively ignoring Quranic verses that highlight women's equality and rights. In essence, Makti's modernisation program for women reflects contradictory and ultimately conservative notions of Muslim womanhood (Niyas Ashraf, "Modernity

and Reform" 20). On one hand, he stressed the importance of women's education, but on the other, he firmly asserted their essentially subordinate position.

Makti's concept of Islamic womanhood could be contended to have ultimately led to the subordination of women, restricting the emancipatory elements of modernisation initiatives. His engagement with ideas of a "proper" family, gender roles, nature of education for women, and his problematic, selective readings of scriptures to support his arguments while dealing with the Muslim woman's question can act as a point of departure, while reading the Muslim reformist enterprises on gender that followed in Kerala. Within the texts produced by both major and minor organisations and reformists, one can discern a continuum of aspirations that link them and shape their reformist agenda. Hence, the analysis that follows brings together diverse texts from within the reformist oeuvre to trace the evolution of the discourse on Muslim female body.

Following Makti Thangal's footsteps, Vakkom Moulavi (1873-1932) also campaigned against matrilineal customs amongst Muslims. In his publication, *Deepika*, numerous articles were published in which he extensively opposed the practice of *marumakkattayam* ("matriliny").When P. S. Muhammad, a member of Legislative Council, introduced a bill to abolish *marumakkattayam*, Vakkom Moulavi offered his wholehearted support (Abraham 40-41). Notwithstanding the many similarities in views, it may be noted that, Vakkom Moulavi's reformative enterprises on Women differ from that of Makti Thangal for its deep sense of egalitarianism and modernity rooted in Islamic tradition.

Vakkom Moulavi affirmed that “no man, without woman, or no woman, without man, is born in the world. It is difficult for man, without woman’s help or for woman, without man’s help, to live in the world”(*qtd.in* Abraham 78-79). He emphasised the indispensable mutual assistance between the genders, contending that men and women required each other’s support to navigate the complexities of life. Despite recognising biological, physical, and temperamental differences between men and women, Moulavi maintained that these disparities merely reflected different physical obligations and lifestyles rather than an inherent hierarchy. There is no difference in status, he asserted (Moulavi, “Oru Avatharika” 83). He argued for the intellectual parity between men and women, asserting that women possessed intelligence and are also equally bound by religious rules, capable of understanding concepts of virtue, vice, happiness, and sorrow akin to men. Thus, he advocated for women’s access to *ilm* (“religious knowledge”) and adherence to *adab* (“religious etiquette”), asserting the need to educate them in both religious and modern spheres (Moulavi, “Nammude Streekal” 33).

Moulavi’s progressive stance on women’s education clashed with the conservative beliefs prevalent in his time, particularly among certain dominant factions of Muslims. The traditionalists opposed modern education for women, citing a *hadith* that prohibited teaching women *kaiyezhuthu* (“writing”). Moulavi challenged this notion, arguing that the cited *hadith* was weak and contradicted another sound *hadith* that allowed teaching women handwriting. He urged a reevaluation of this stance and emphasised the importance of education in empowering women.

Moulavi's journal, *Muslim*, played a crucial role in promoting education of Muslim women. Articles within the journal showcased the biographies of noble Muslim women, aiming to inspire Malayali Muslim women to embrace modern education. In an article entitled "The Responsibility of Muslim Women," B. Kalyani Amma, wife of Ramakrishna Pillai, presented biographical accounts of esteemed Muslim women to encourage women in Kerala to adopt modern education (Abraham 80). In another article[14] Hamadani Sheikh says:

> Women were equally bound to discharge their religious duties like men. Without sound knowledge, they could not perform it well. Moreover, as long as our "kitchens" are full of darkness, our life would not be comfortable. Hence, our womenfolk must be provided with ample facilities of education. (*qtd. in* Samad 63)

This initiative countered the prevailing belief that Islam discouraged women's education. Moulavi's advocacy for women's rights paralleled the sentiments expressed by North Indian and Egyptian reformers like Rashid Rida.[15] Emphasising the equality of rights and responsibilities, despite conventional beliefs in men's superior strength and intelligence, Rida held that women's faith as well as religious and social duties are just the same as that of men. However, he maintained that

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[14] Both the articles were originally published in the magazine *Muslim*, vol. 5, no. 8–9, March–April, 1916.

[15] Rashid Rida is a prominent reformist scholar who developed an intellectual response to the challenges posed by the modern Western world to traditional Islamic values. Vakkom Moulavi's movement for reform was intricately connected to a global religious reform initiative led by Egyptian scholars, Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905) and Muhammad Rashid Rida (1865–1935), propagated widely through their publication, *Al-Manar*.

though there is an "equality of rights, . . . men are stronger, more intelligent, more apt for learning and most type of action. So they have predominance over women" (Hourani, 238–239).

Informed and influenced by these pan-Islamic reformisms, Moulavi defended the position of women in Islam, citing Quranic verses to underscore the equality of men and women, including women's inheritance rights. Moulavi vehemently argued that Islam, long before Western societies, recognised the independent rights of women, ensuring their equal rights. Jose Abraham says:"Following the footsteps of Makti Tangal, Vakkom Moulavi also responded to several allegations against Islam that were raised by Christian missionaries, European intellectuals, and non-Christians" (130-131). In his study of Vakkom Moulavi's contribution to social reform in Kerala, Abraham elaborates on how Moulavi established the centrality of Isalmic principles in the reformist discourse on gender:

> [I]n order to defend the prominence of Islam, he [Vakkom Moulavi] compared the status of women in western society during the modern period with that of women during the early Muslim community. In his understanding, thirteen hundred years ago, Muslim women had enjoyed the same rights and privileges that women held in modern western societies. Therefore, Islam elevated the moral and social status of women long before western societies even thought about it. Moreover, even in the modern period, western women do not enjoy certain rights that Islam granted them. According to Vakkom Moulavi, Islam never overlooked the womanhood of

> women and, therefore, proposed a lifestyle that suited them. In the Islamic understanding, chastity is the greatest wealth of a woman. Thus, Islam eschewed any customs and practices that could lead to the immoral behavior of women. As it did to men, it denied women the freedom to transgress the limits of moral behavior. (122)

The debates on the question of gender equality and education of women, initiated by the early reformers, eventually evolved under the aegis of *Aikya Sangham* and various other regional reformist organisations to address more pressing matters associated with Muslim women. It was the prerogative of the reformers to counter the infamous traditionalist dictum, "Muslim women *should not* be taught to write" (emphasis added). Drawing on Islamic scriptures, these reformers emphasised that Islam not only permits female education but mandates it. They challenged the traditional *Ulema* to defend their views on women. The traditional *Ulema* had previously issued a *fatwa*[16] preventing Muslim women from learning to write, but the reformers aimed to break this taboo.

Marmaduke, Pickthall[17], in his presidential address at the fourth annual conference of the Muslim Aikya Sangham held at Thalassery in the month of May

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[16] The infamous "Mannarkkad Prameyam" ("Mannarkkad Ordinance") was issued by Samastha in the fourth annual conference of the organisation held at Mannarkkad on 16 March, 1930. For a report on the *fatwa*, see the Arabi-Malayalam magazine *Al Bayan*, vol. 1, no. 4-5, Mar.1930, pp. 28; For a detailed analysis of the traditionalist position on women's education, see Pulisseeri.

[17] Marmaduke Pickthall (1875-1936) was a British Muslim scholar, translator, and novelist. He was born in London and raised in a devout Anglican family. However, he converted to Islam in 1917, after extensive study of Islamic theology and the Quran. Pickthall is best known for his translation of the Quran into English, which was published in 1930 and is still widely read today. His translation is known for its simple and clear language, making it accessible to a wide audience.

1926, demanded that separate schools be established for Muslim girls (*Aikya Sangham* 100). The organisation raised women's education as a pertinent issue affecting the progress of the community and demanded the colonial government's intervention to establish schools for Muslim girls. Later, in the eighth annual conference of 1930, they reiterated that education was necessary for the upliftment of the community and that both Muslim boys and girls should attend public schools for knowledge (*Aikya Sangham* 211, 218). The urgency of the issue also compelled the reformers to address numerous associated concerns regarding the education of Muslim women, including the question of their seclusion and mobility. The stringent religious rules on male female segregation were posited as one of the major reasons for the community's reluctance to send girl children to schools. The reformers set forth to address these issues of segregation and demanded favourable legislation from the colonial government to establish separate schools for girls so that the more reluctant sects can be brought within the new framework and Muslim girls can be educated within the precincts of Islamic principles.

The dilemma faced by a woman, caught in these conflicting notions about the permissibility of female education, is poignantly articulated by Haleema Beevi. She laments the traditionalists' reluctance to educate girls. She says:"Girls are kept in seclusion and those girls who defied the norm and ventured out of their homes to attend the schools had to endure the ordeal of malicious rumours and scandalous stories about them"("Muslim Sthreekal Saamskarika"; my trans;17). In an anecdotal

account, the author describes a speech by a traditionalist speaker, a *vayallu,*[18] she heard in her hometown as a child that disapprovingly linked attending schools with Islam, categorising such girls as *kafirs* ("non-believers") who will be consigned to hell and denied entry into heaven. "Islam doesn't permit girls to attend schools, nor are they supposed to learn to write, the speaker said" ("Shidhila"; my trans; 52-53). Haleema Beevi recounts the speaker's words and then succinctly narrates how she bore upon her the brunt of these regressive ideas and attended school with a deep sense of guilt.

The question of educating Muslim girls and their access to schools brought to the fore more pertinent issues regarding the religious permissibility of Muslim women's interactions in public spaces. Along with concerns about how educated women would utilise their knowledge, traditionalist sects were deeply apprehensive about the perceived dangers of women venturing out in the public. These debates spurred a more intense discourse on the public/private binary and the extent to which Muslim women could access the spaces outside their homes. Interestingly, while the traditional *Ulema* opposed the idea of Muslim girls attending schools, the reformists opposed women attending *nerchas*[19] and other traditionalist Islamic

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[18] *Vayallu* is a form of advice rhetoric, commonly used by the traditionalist Sunni sects, to explain religious strictures to common people. Often held in public, open to all spaces, mostly in the premises of a madrasa or a mosque, these series of speeches, conducted on consecutive days during specific seasons, deal with abstract theological concepts in a unique style that blends aspects of the performative and the rhythmical in it. The speakers often make use of diverse rhetorical techniques like using prose that resembles singing, erotic references, anecdotal accounts and vignettes from Islam's history to catch the audience's attention. *Vayallu* can be regarded as a precursor of the speeches and polemical debates between sects that later emerged and circulates in the digital media in contemporary Kerala.

[19] *Nercha* or *palli nercha* is often used to refer to religious offerings or contributions made in *jarams* ("shrines") of *Sheikhs* and *Beevis*. These *nerchas* were once celebrated

practices, where men and women mixed freely. One reformist pamphlet states: "When men are seated in the *ziyarat* ("tomb"), women enter the shrine shamelessly and participate in the rituals. This is violation of the principles of Islam" (*Aikya Sangham*; my trans; 73).These instances reveal that both the traditionalists and the reformists engaged with the idea of a gendered Islamic space and Muslim women's position in it, though from different vantage points of view.

The reformists expressed their strong criticism of several traditionalist religious practices considering them as *shirk*[20] and called upon adherents of true religion to refrain from partaking in such practices and from visiting shrines. They observed, "Even when they [the traditional *Ulema*] argue that men and women should not mingle freely, they support such practices like *chandanakkudam* and *kodikuthu* [ritualistic celebrations] in which men and women mingle without any restrictions"(*Aikya Sangham*; my trans;111). The reformers questioned the *Ulema's* moral stance since they allow women to attend these "primitive amusements." They asked, "How can we allow our female relatives, whom we have safeguarded from male lasciviousness, to attend such primitive amusements? How can we subject our women to be objectified for male pleasure?"(*Aikya Sangham* ; my trans;112) The reformist discourse on Muslim women thus posited gender segregation as a prime requisite for maintaining the safety and modesty of women. Besides, the problems of

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events but has now declined, with only fewer Muslims participating in it. Osella and Osella in their study of Islamic reformism in Kerala present a detailed ethnographic study of Muslims' response to such "less Islamic'' practices in Kerala. See Osella and Osella, "Islamism and Social Reform."

[20] A central tenet in reformist discourses used to test the authenticity of Islamic practices, *Shirk* refers to the act of associating partners with Allah or attributing divine qualities to someone or something other than Allah. It is considered a grave sin and the most significant violation in Islamic theology.

"being seen" is addressed so as to restrict the presence of women in such spaces like the *nerchas* which had relatively less gender segregation as it is evidenced in the above observations. Islam strictly prohibits men from gazing at women who are not related to them (*Aikya Sangham* 82).The presented viewpoint reveals the reformists' insistence on a gender-segregated society, strictly governed by Islamic principles of modesty, in which women's safety and chastity is prioritised.

While the reformers campaigned extensively against ritualistic practices like *nerchas* and individuals seeking help and fortunes from *Sheikhs* ("Sufi masters") and *Awliyas* ("friends of God"), they made rigorous attempts to defend Muslim women's rights to attend mosques (Kareem 23). Their impassioned plea to avoid corrupt practices and to follow *sunnah* and *tawhid* was a means to purify the religious practices among its followers. They conceived prayer as a crucial component of *tawhid* which must be performed by both men and women. This act of submission, of both body and mind, constitutes a "liturgy of communication" between the human and the divine (Gilsenan 185). An embodied expression of piety and devotion, prayer is a significant means of cultivating a religious interiority, a habitus. The reformists exhorted women to attend collective prayers at mosques, since Islam not only permits it but insists on it. Numerous pamphlets were published and circulated in support of this view. Muslim men were also entrusted with the responsibility of encouraging their female family members to attend the mosques for *Juma Jamaat* ("collective prayer") as well as *Eid Gahs* ("mass prayers on the occasion of Eid"). The traditional *Ulema* strongly disagreed to this reformist preposition. The debates that ensued between the traditional *Ulema* and the

reformists, with regard to Muslim women's mosque entry, are worth analysing here to understand how a new discourse on Muslim women's modesty, religiosity, and their access to public spaces emerged in Kerala.

In his notable work "Muslim Sthreekalkku Avakashamundo" ("Muslim Women: Do They Have Rights"), published in 1952, MCC Ahamed Moulavi boldly proclaims that the rights of women to attend mosques for *Juma Jamaat* is beyond dispute. He argues that congregational prayers hold twenty times more *punyam* ("merit") than those performed alone at home, and that women too are entitled to this spiritual reward (36). At the outset of the book, Moulavi makes clear his focus on the question of women's right to attend mosques for *Juma Jamamt* and *Eid Gahs*, and proceeds to draw on a range of *hadeeths* and books of *fiqh* to support his position. Delving deeper into the topic, Moulavi elucidates the concept of *awrah*, demonstrating that it applies equally to both genders. He argues that women can move freely and be present in venues where men are also present, with the onus on men not to stare at women. While acknowledging the value of modest dress, he emphasises that it is not compulsory. He says:

> There are both men and women, both in the past and the present, who cover their entire body except face and hands. If possible it is good to follow this practice. It is modesty. But that doesn't mean that it is compulsory. Women can expose their body except for their *awrah* when they are among their relatives, and their entire body before their spouse. For both men and women, *awrah* is confined to their private parts, and the lower body between the navel and knee must be covered. (my trans; 89)

Moulavi cites evidences from Islam's history to claim that women during the Prophet's time attended mosques alongside men and performed ablution from the same water source. He also affirms that women can attend prayers wearing their best attire, including various adornments and even their *pattuthattam* ("silk headscarf"). He quotes extensively from historical sources to substantiate his claim (91-92). MCC's contentions were way too radical for his times and his take on the matter proved to be problematic within the reformist cult itself for its call for a thorough overhaul of the existing framework. Notwithstanding the significance of this polemical text in the reformist campaign for Muslim women's mosque entry, his revolutionary re-conceptualisation of Islamic principles on women's *awrah*, gender roles, and rights in Islam in the text was widely disapproved by the reformist scholars. Although his work drew criticism from all quarters, including the reformist sect, Moulavi remained steadfast in his convictions[21]. In response to calls to edit the text, he refused to make changes, stating that his intention is to reform the community by guiding them towards the true path of Islam (132).

These debates foreground some questions about the ways in which Muslim women can legitimately occupy certain spaces. For decades, these debates have remained ongoing and have extended even to the contemporary times. One of the major issues discussed in the *Kuttichira Samvaadam* (*Kuttichira Sunni- Mujahid*

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[21] In the final note to his treatise, MCC submits that he was asked to edit the document in almost twenty parts by another prominent reformist scholar K. M. Moulavi to whom he had sent the text (he calls it a *fatwa*) for proof reading(132). MCC's views were later censured by another prominent Salafi scholar, Ummer Moulavi. These episodes bring out the conflicts inherent in the reformist discourse, and invite our attention to the complex issue of "interpretation of Islam." For details on Ummer Moulavi's response to MCC, see "M CC Sthree Palli Pravesham."

Debates) in 1976, was Muslim women's access to mosques. The question of women's seclusion and the potential challenges that can arise when women leave their homes to attend mosques for prayers and share space with men is raised by the *Ulema* (*Kuttichira* 100). Traditionalist *Ulema* argued that women's presence at mosques violated the rules of seclusion and could lead to moral corruption. Reformists, on the other hand, defended Muslim women's right to attend mosques, citing religious mandates that insisted on their participation in prayers. They defended women's right to attend mosques even for the evening and early morning prayers by stating that Islam insists on it (*Kuttichira* 98- 99). They accused the *Ulema* of promoting mingling between men and women through events like *nerchas* and shrine visits, which violated the norms of seclusion (*Kuttichira* 99).

It should also be noted that, though these reformist attempts opened up new vistas of religious experience to Muslim women, it also resulted in denying them access to the cultural spaces they hitherto occupied. In their institutionalised rejection of differences within the Islamic tradition of Kerala, the reformers replaced the diverse bodily practices within the pre-reformist cultural spaces with a unified idea of religiosity. The cultural spaces Muslim women occupied were dislodged of their status, and they instead gave a new emphasis to new forms of piety and women's roles as wives and mothers, which served to redefine and solidify the home as women's legitimate domain, which their bodies can unapologetically occupy. Domestic chores such as cooking, childcare, cleaning, and caregiving are now assigned exclusively to women, based on the supposed notion that it suits their natural endowments. The women are implored to invest their "selves" fully in the

process of "being the custodian of the home". This eventually led to the emergence of a well-defined public/private binary and the idea of docile, domesticated female bodies that seamlessly integrate into the home environment. By being domestic, women can be useful for men and aid them in their progress and social roles. The impact of this shift becomes clearly discernible when we take into account the diversity of women's roles in the pre-reformist period[22].

The reformers saw it as their prerogative to situate the new Muslim woman within the domestic sphere, placing her body and self as vital components of the family unit as a wife and mother. Numerous instances can be drawn from reformists' texts which substantiates this view. K.M. Maulavi, in his "Veedu Bharanathil Sthreekalude Murakal" ("Home: Duties and Responsibilities of Women"), emphasises:

> Women should receive comprehensive training in household duties, such as cooking, cleaning, and sewing. Even if a household has assistance from housemaids, it is essential that women acquire these skills themselves. It is better for homemakers to perform all household chores, even if they can afford to hire helpers. Mothers should pass on this knowledge to their daughters and train them in housekeeping. (my trans; 73)

Khadeejakutty Panmana, the author of "Muslim Sthreekalum Adukalayum"("Muslim Women and Kitchen") emphasises the importance of women taking on domestic responsibilities despite their wealth, education, or social

[22] For detailed explorations of cultural and spiritual engagements of Muslim women in the pre-reformist period, see Hussain, *Neunapakshathinum*, *Musleemum Sthreeyum*; Sajna.

status. She echoes K.M. Maulavi when she says, “Hey sisters, you must take up all the household chores. This is essential for the wellbeing of your family” (my trans; 91). Numerous articles were published in *Nisa Ul Islam* and several other periodicals, delineating various aspects of the domestic space and the changing roles of women within it. The reformist idea of the new Muslim woman, who inhabited this private space was invariably that of an “educated” Muslim woman, the nature of which is highly contentious.

Women’s education was viewed primarily as a means of producing better women who could adequately fulfill their duties of caring for their children, husbands, and managing household tasks. In his article "Muslim Sthree Vidyabhyasavum Pardah Sambradayavum" (“Muslim Women’s Education and the Pardah System”), published in *Nisa Ul Islam*, E. Ibrahim presents his views on the education of Muslim women with a clarification that he does not advocate Muslim women to pursue advanced degrees or enter the workforce, but rather, he is calling on the community to provide women with religious education and basic literacy skills in their mother tongue and English (178). In the subsequent issue of the same magazine the author addresses the same subject and a popular belief about Muslim women’s education. He says: “ There are people amongst us who believe that if women learn to read and write they will start writing love letters to men and thus stray from the path of religion”(my trans;199). In his retort to this notion, he says: “If an educated Muslim woman thus writes love letters to men, she will write it only to that man whom she loves and that will definitely end up in marriage since she is educated and capable of making informed choices”(my trans; 199). Here, both the

attack on female education and its defense is carefully situated within the premises of domesticity and family, when the author says education can help the woman choose a better partner and by not discussing any other prospect of education like getting an employment or any role outside their homes.

These authors' injunctions on the nature of education and the purpose of education, that must be imparted to the Muslim women, can be problematised by placing them in the context of diverse trends among various communities within the sociocultural landscape of Kerala. While the colonial model of education was viewed as a means of employment[23]and social mobility for women by several communities, the Muslim reformers carefully defined the limits of education and the nature of spaces they could occupy. These details reveal that Muslim reformers were by and large engaging in discursive practices that established the public/private binary for Muslim women. While doing this, these reformers were aligning themselves with the appropriated version of modernity endorsed by some reformers of other communities as well. For instance, J. Devika quotes a speech delivered by Thachattu Devaki Amma in 1913 on "The Purpose of Female Education[24]" in which

[23] Educational policies underwent significant transformations in the nineteenth century, greatly impacting women's education in Kerala. The issue of female education became the primary focus for Protestant Christian missionaries, especially in Travancore. In 1818, in Kottayam, Mrs. Baker and Mrs. Fenn, both missionary wives, established the state's first girls' school. The appointment of female teachers encouraged a considerable influx of girls into schools. Additionally, specialised vocational training programs in activities like lace making and embroidery enabled women to secure employment opportunities. For more details, see Joy 208.

[24] Tachattu Devaki Amma's speech made at the *Chitoor Balika Sahitya Samajam* "Streevidyabhyasattinte Uddesham" ("The Purpose of Female Education"), was originally published in the magazine *Lakshmibhayi*, vol. 20, no.1, 1913-14, pp.36-38.

she defines how a suitable education can help modify a woman's essential femininity as wife and mother.

> It seems that giving the same kind of education to men and women is inappropriate. That Nature has not ordained Man and Woman for the same tasks is amply revealed by the difference in their bodies, dispositions and mental ability. [. . .] . . . . Examining Woman's physique and disposition, one may be sure that she has been created for activity that requires greater endurance but less physical strength. Normally Woman's mental make-up is gentle, maturing faster, imaginative, easily stirred by emotions, attentive of detail and easily irritated. Man can never come close to Woman in such qualities as compassion, love and patience. . . . [E]ven if women do not enter public life, if they raise able children, is that not of itself adding to the prosperity of the world? Therefore the aim of their education is to increase such qualities [. . .] , and not to make them into second-rate men. Woman's duty lies in being Man's helpmate in the struggle of life, in easing his toil by her Womanliness. She must achieve victory through compassionate words and deeds. Not through competition. (Devika, *En-Gendering* 47)

K. M. Maulavi in "Sthree Vidhyabhyasam" ("Female Education") echoes Devaki Amma, except for his emphasis on religious education that must be imparted to Muslim women. He says:

> Allow me to draw your attention to several crucial aspects of this matter. Muslim women require specialised educational institutions, and it would be preferable for female teachers to instruct girls who are nearing puberty in

> these exclusive schools. The most vital quality that a woman possesses is the purity of her soul and body, and she must fulfill her responsibilities to her husband. When creating the curriculum for girls' schools, particular attention should be given to this aspect. The goal of women's education is to illuminate their souls, cultivate their characters, and make them proficient at managing their families and instilling good habits in their children, with the aim of preserving family property and prosperity. Additionally, we must focus on their ability to handle everything related to the economical and political endeavors of the community. However, for the purpose of enlightening the soul and developing wisdom, there is nothing more suitable than Islamic preaching. As a result, Muslim girls in our country must learn Arabic, Arabi-Malayalam, and pure Malayalam, and based on the Quran and the *Sunnah*, they must study *aqeedah, aqla, ibadath*, *haram*, and *halaal*[25]. (my trans; 10-12)

The excerpt from Devaki Amma's speech highlights the inherent feminine qualities of women's minds and bodies. These traits are showcased in her speech, illustrating how women's nature allows them to excel in household tasks. However, Devaki Amma points out that, if women were to compete with men in the public domain, their naturally feminine disposition might render them "second-rate men."

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[25] A knowledge of these theological concepts is central to the making of a religious self in Islam. *Aqeedah* denotes the Islamic notion of faith or belief. It stands as a fundamental element of the Islamic faith, encapsulating a set of deep rooted convictions held by Muslims. *Aqla* pertains to the cultivation of virtue, morality, and manners, as emphasised in Islamic teachings. *Ibadath* refers to worship, prayer, reverence, the feeling or expression of reverence and adoration for Allah. *Halal* and *Haram* refers to the permissible and the non-permissible.

In this argument, she emphasises that the fundamental feminine attributes of her body and mind serve as limitations in her active participation in the public sphere. K. M. Maulavi also says that the natural endowments of women must be fortified through an education rooted in Islamic principles, so that they play their domestic roles efficiently. This heightened focus on the domestic roles of women is echoed in many reformist texts, with the exception of some women from within the reformist sect who subtly opposed these notions. They resorted to the Islamic tradition and its principles to subvert the patriarchal implications in these discourses. These women's critical engagement with ideas of gender in Islam, aspects of education, seclusion, gender segregation, visibility, and hijab form a significant counter-text to the "male" Islamic discourse on gender and female body. Their negotiations with concepts of an Islamic womanhood propagated by the male reformists must be put in context. The following analysis of their engagement with the idea of hijab provides some crucial insights on the negotiations made by Muslim women with the dominant ideas of Islamic womanhood and helps trace its contingent history in Kerala.

Muslim women, who were part of the reformist cult, can be seen expressing their fierce criticism and resistance against both the obscurantist interpretations of Islam by the *Ulema* and the patriarchal implications in the reformist discourse. In her article titled "Muslim Sthreekal" ("Muslim Women"), though the author, T. K. Paathavu Saahiba, defends the traditional notions of women's duties as wives and mothers, she criticises the regressive attitude of the Muslim community that severely objectifies women. Quoting from *hadiths,* she justifies the responsibility of children and household duties, including cooking, childcare, and taking care of the husband,

on women. However, she emphatically states that the belief prevalent in the community, which regards women as machines for procreation and unpaid cooks, is painful and contrary to the percepts laid down in the Quran and *hadith* (40).

Haleema Beevi takes this argument a step further in her speech titled "Muslim Sthreeyum Vidyabhyasavum" ("Muslim Woman and Education"), by stating that confining women to their homes is a form of imprisonment. In this speech originally delivered at the inaugural meeting of Mujahid Women's Conference organised by KNM in 1961 and later published in the magazine *Al Manar*, she says: "One cannot forget the golden tradition of Islam in which women were scholars and warriors, and justify the prevalent regressive practice of secluding women in the pretense of protecting their chastity and denying them even the right to pure air and daylight" (my trans; 24). She emphasises that Islam permits women to participate in public activities for the good of their community, nation, and most importantly, their own livelihood ("Muslim Sthreekalum Samoohyasevanavum" 34). Though she also agrees with the dominant discourse that women must be educated and equipped with better knowledge to be better wives and mothers, she refutes the idea that women, their domain, must be limited to their homes. Women must be equipped through education to lead a better life as envisioned by Islam. In the article published in *Al Manar* in 1961 Haleema Beevi notes:

> Women must have knowledge of everything pertaining to their everyday life along with knowledge of religion. They need not vile away their entire lives within their homes. It is the responsibility of men to provide food and other requirements to women. Cooking is not women's responsibility per

> se. Men cannot insist that women must cook for them. (“Muslim Sthreekalum Samoohyasevanavum”; my trans; 41)

Haleema Beevi challenges the dominant notion about cooking as women’s duty by invoking the Quranic principles that entrust men to provide food for women. She repeatedly asserts that women too must participate in all social activities since women are capable of doing that just like men. She draws on the golden tradition of Islam, with its women warriors and scholars to justify women’s claims to a fuller Islamic femininity, which is markedly different from the one envisaged by the male reformers. It may be noted that this idea is clearly distinct from the ideas on women’s education and gender roles put forward by Makti Thangal.

Another remarkable aspect of Haleema Beevi’s engagement with the interpretative tradition of Islam is her view of the hijab as a means and symbol of Muslim women’s empowerment. She draws on the Islamic scriptures on hijab to challenge the popular notion that women should not occupy the public sphere or engage in social activities. She asks: “If Islam prohibits women from engaging in or participating in social activities, why has the religion set certain norms on their dressing? Are these laws applicable to those women who sit inside their homes with their family members or travel inside vehicles in a secluded way?” (“Muslim Sthreeyum Vidyabhyasavum”; my trans; 23).It may be noted that authors like K.C. Komukutty Moulavi, in his article “Quranum Pardayum” (“Quran and Pardah”),published in the magazine *Ansari* in 1955, exhorts women to “cover well” so that men don’t have to take the trouble to lower their gaze (8). Meanwhile Haleema Beevi resorts to Islamic principles to argue that women’s participation in

all spheres of life is permitted–the onus being on both men and women to lower their gaze. She says:

> There are rules in Islam that prohibit men and women from gazing at each other. Are these rules applicable to those women who sit veiled inside their homes? Never. These rules are there for those men and women who occupy the public space. This provides clear evidence that women are not restricted to their homes and are free to participate in public spaces. ("Muslim Sthreeyum Vidyabhyasavum"; my trans; 23)

By subtly criticising and subverting ideas on hijab and gender segregation, Haleema Beevi questions the very premise on which these restrictions are imposed. While she insists that women must practice modesty and discipline in their deportment, she also states that Islam and its principles on hijab equip women for a public life rather than restricting them to their homes and roles as mothers and wives. Haleema Beevi reinforces her views by drawing examples from the history of Islam, where women actively participated in wars and even took up arms against enemies, as in the case of the *Sahabi*[26] woman Umaibaan. She notes that the Prophet's wife Aisha was also an active woman and that the first martyr in Islam was a woman ("Muslim Sthreeyum Vidyabhyasavum" 24).

[26] *Sahabi* women, also known as a *Sahabiyah*, are female companions of Prophet Muhammad in Islam who met him, believed in his message, and died as Muslims. The term *Sahabi* is used to describe the companions of Prophet Muhammad, both men and women. The *Sahabiyat* played a significant role in early Islamic history and were known for their strong faith, piety, and contributions to the development of the Islamic community. These women, among others, played crucial roles in the early Islamic community, contributing to the spread of Islam and preserving the teachings of Prophet Muhammad. Their lives serve as examples for Muslims, and they are highly respected in Islamic tradition. For more details, see Muranyi.

Central to these negotiations of Muslim women is the emergent idea of a new Muslimness in the reformist texts that envisioned a modern individual with a distinct interiority and external markers. Re-making the body had a centrality in these reformist imaginings. Haleema Beevi in her writings rigorously engaged with the community's preoccupation with the religious externality of the female body. In an anecdotal account she recounts a man asking her husband whether his wife is a converted Muslim since she was wearing a sari ("Saamskarika Rangathu"14-15). She criticises this tendency of people to judge by outward appearances. She asks: "Is it enough that we are Muslim just by our dress? When you get to know that those who look Muslim by their dress and name have little understanding of Islam, its basic tenets and its culture, you will be disappointed" ("Saamskarika Rangathu"; my trans;15). Haleema Beevi affirms that irrespective of what they wear it is this knowledge of the Islamic tradition that constitutes their true Muslimness. She exhorts the religious leaders to impart such an education to women. She says: "The horizon of women's worlds should expand from sheer interest in silk garments and other adornments. The leadership must give them at least true religious education, rather than indulging in elaborate descriptions of *hooris* in religious speeches" ("Saamskarika Rangathu"; my trans; 15). For her, an understanding of true Islam alone can help Muslim women in their ethical self fashioning.

Haleema Beevi was quick to comment on the excesses in Muslim women's clothing practices. Forms of veiling practiced by some Muslim women, like the niqab, was as much a subject of criticism in her writings as their obsession with gaudy styles, silk garments and expensive ornaments. In her speech titled "Muslim

Sthreeyum Vidyabhyasavum" ("Muslim Women and Education") Haleema Beevi states that she cannot agree with the pardah system prevalent in some cities, especially those followed by rich women, with which they cover their face in a primitive fashion. "Islam doesn't permit this pardah system. It is modesty and discipline that women must have," she emphatically states (my trans; 23).

In an article published in the Arabi- Malayalam Women's magazine, *Nisa Ul Islam*, an unidentified speaker presents her views on hijab in the following manner:

> The hijab mandated by Islam does not require women to drape their entire bodies or confine themselves within their homes. It merely calls for covering parts of the body, excluding the hands used for work and the face that allows us to perceive the world. . . . Islam grants us the freedom to engage in all aspects of life while observing the hijab as prescribed by the Shariah [*sharai aaya hijab*]. . . . It is perilous to engage in immodest mingling with men while leaving one's head and bosom uncovered. . . . Such behavior jeopardises one's own honor. ("Muslim Sthree Samajathil"; my trans; 163)

The speaker asserts that women have the responsibility to act in the best interest of the community, a notion that is sanctioned by religion itself. She addresses the Muslim women among the audience, and urges them to follow the example set by the great women in Islamic tradition who fearlessly fought for their rights, emphasising the need for contemporary women to do the same ("Muslim Sthree Samajathil" 162). On a final note, this speaker urges women to break free from the shackles of antiquated traditions and embrace modern perspectives of the new order.

These women's engagement with ideas of religiosity and reform reveals the complexity in the negotiations they made within the community. As part of the reformist campaign, numerous texts were written and published by the reformers in defense of the hijab by explaining the Islamic principles that mandates it and the usefulness of the practice in the everyday life of Muslim women. The analyses attempted here reveal the reformers' preoccupation with ideas of gender and women's segregation, and Muslim women's subtle resistances and subversions of the dominant "male" interpretations. As already illustrated, the question of religious permissibility of Muslim women's interaction in public spaces is intricately related to the discourse on hijab. Efforts were also made by many male reformers to delineate the superiority of Islamic principles on hijab, for it is a symbol of women's honour and makes Islamic tradition significantly different from the Western and Indian traditions. These texts on hijab and pardah also called attention to the appropriateness of various sartorial practices that existed among Muslim women, and their religious implications, eventually leading to the emergence of a new scripturalist discourse on Muslim women's bodily acts.

In his "Hijab Adhava Ghosha Sambradayam" ("The Hijab or the Pardah System"), C. A. Muhammed Moulavi, besides refuting the accusation that hijab causes Muslim women's backwardness, asserts that hijab is part of the prophet's *sunnah,* and following the Quran and *sunnah* will not harm anyone. He cites examples of European women freely mingling with men in any attire they choose and Hindu women leaving their upper bodies uncovered while wearing only knee-length clothes (121). He emphasises that Islam values women and hence imposes certain restrictions accordingly. Hence hijab is not a symbol of oppression. Although

women in some parts of Asia live in harems, they are not the ignorant lot as it is usually considered and can fulfill their roles as housewives competently. "While, in Kerala", Ahmed Moulavi further remarks that, "looking at our Muslim women, I feel that they have difficulty in adhering to the proper practice of Islamic hijab. Those wearing ornaments often flaunt them while they are in public. Women should not to do that" (my trans; 125). He underscores the importance of women's vigilance in regulating their own bodily conducts. He concludes by stating that many elite Muslim families have adopted *anthapuravasam* ("the *harem* culture") and that covering the face is desirable, though not compulsory (125).

The article titled "Islam Mathavum Sthreekalum: Anthapuravasam[27]" (Islam and Women: The Harem Culture"), published in Vakkom Moulavi's *Al Islam* in 1918, also fervently defends the idea of segregation of women. Making a succinct effort to demonstrate Islam's superiority, the author states:

> To assert that Islam established polygamy is just as absurd as claiming that Islam established pardah. Even the so-called "civilised" men of ancient Greece and Rome separated their women from other men, despite Greece being considered the cradle of civilisation and the birthplace of Socrates and Plato. Women in ancient Greece were treated no better than animals.("Islam Mathavum" 52-53)

[27] The 1918 article featured in *Al Islam* is a translated excerpt from a piece originally published in the *Islamic Review*, an English magazine. The author of the original article is Quidvayi. For details, see *Vakkom Moulaviyude*. This article was later republished in *Nisa Ul Islam*, targeting the women readers in 1930, under the title "Islam Mathavum Sthreekalum: Al Islamil Ninnu" ("Islam and Women: From *Al Islam*").For the full article, see *Nisa Ul Islam* 218-220.

The article presents a persuasive case in support of the practice of pardah within Islamic societies, emphasising the advantages associated with Islamic ways of life. It states that the seclusion of men and women was a prevalent practice across all communities, and contemporary criticism of pardah is primarily influenced by the Western culture, which permits unrestricted interaction between genders–a practice that was only permissible in the nomadic lifestyle of humans in the past. Besides, the article provides an authoritative definition of pardah from Encyclopedia Britannica and contends that the practice predates Islam, as it is a customary tradition observed in various oriental communities. The author probes into the history of harems and cites examples from different parts of the world in support of his arguments. He states: "Islam is not the first religion to introduce harems. This can be found both in the East and the West" ("Islam Mathavum"; my trans;52-53).The author adds another dimension to the debate when he contends that cultures that keep women segregated have greater respect for women and their honour. He says:

> Seclusion of women is a symbol of the modernity of human culture and a community's way of life. Women are considered pure beings, and hence their purity must be preserved. Men cannot be permitted to mingle freely with women. Their honour must be safeguarded. The people who segregated women have been doing this to protect them just as we protect valuable things. ("Islam Mathavum"; my trans; 52-53)

He further states that

> the role of female beauty in sparking conflicts is well known, exemplified by historical figures such as Sita and Cleopatra. In ancient times, men would often fight fiercely over women. The hijab was introduced as a

> measure to prevent such occurrences and to protect women's *kulamahima* (“honour”), as well as to safeguard those who are *abalakal* (“naturally vulnerable”). The concern for morality and chastity led to the emphasis on the segregation of women in certain cultures. High-born Hindus and *Muhammadiyans* kept their women in harems, whereas women seen on the streets tended to be of lower social status. (“Islam Mathavum”; my trans; 55-56)

While the article primarily aims to defend Islam, it also seeks to challenge the West’s depiction of Islam as a primitive and inferior culture. During that historical period, numerous articles in various niche publications attempted to portray Muslim women as fundamentally distinct from, yet superior to, their European and Hindu counterparts.

These male interpreters’ view on seclusion of women as a necessary a priori to a healthy society finds a fitting counter text in Muslim women’s articulations of these segregatory practices. N. Habsha Beevi, in her “Muslim Sthreekalum Ghosha Sambradayavum” (“Muslim Women and the Harem Culture”), vehemently criticises practices of seclusion of women. She emphatically states that Islam doesn’t support harem culture and other practices of seclusion. Moreover, by denying women access to public spaces and the opportunity to participate in social activities, the community is preventing them from attaining intellectual progress by learning from their educated male counterparts. Habsha Beevi’s views signify a marked difference in the reformist motives of Muslim women with that of the male reformist ideals.

The idea of segregation of women as a symbol of superiority and upward mobility, as explicated in the texts by many male reformers, is not unique to the

Muslim societies. Inderpal Grewal's research on women in India during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reveals a connection between the colonial stereotype of the harem and the development of the concept of "home" in Indian nationalist discussions. Grewal, in her *Home and Harem: Nation, Gender, Empire and the Cultures of Travel*, suggests that pardah and *zenana*[28] were redefined as ethically superior tropes, overseen by the male elite and symbolised the new and important category of "Indian woman," which became emblematic of the emerging nationalist conversations on gender differences. This process of reimagining female identities and spaces reinforced local patriarchal structures as symbols of moral superiority, in contrast to the immorality attributed to the unsegregated *memsahib*[29] mingling publicly with men (54-55).

Notwithstanding the more general nature of the role of female segregation in defining Indian womanhood, we can see that the Muslim reform writers of Kerala attempted to locate the controversies on the Islamic veil in the context of its conflicts with Western epistemological structures of modernity, problematising the very premises of women's equality and empowerment in modernity. In his article "Al Hijabu" ("The Hijab") T.K. Muhammed argues in defense of the hijab, which he says "has become a controversial topic" (271). He defines hijab as the condition where women remain veiled or behind a veil to prevent men from seeing them. Muhammed provides a brief history of hijab and explains the circumstances that led to its compulsory practice in Islam. He also defends the hijab against Western influences, which often promote scantily-clad women as role models. Hijab is attacked by those who are influenced by Western culture. He says:

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[28] *Zenana* is part of the house used for the seclusion of women.

[29] A word used to address a white or non-white woman of high social status.

> Islam does not require women to be confined like caged birds. Instead, Islam seeks to protect and honor women while insisting on hijab for several reasons: First, women can easily attract men's attention. Second, mingling with men is not permissible in Islam. Third, it can cause harm to their chastity and honor. Fourth, Islam is not unjust in mandating hijab for women (it is for their good). Fifth, the great women of Islamic history achieved success even while adhering to hijab, participating in wars and various other activities. (my trans; 271)

For centuries, the practice of veiling to preserve the public modesty of women was observed by diverse populations in the Middle East, including the Christian, Jewish, and Druze communities, despite it being commonly associated with Muslims (Keddie). Typically associated with the wealthy and urban populations, veiling was not so common in rural areas where women worked outdoors, and social status was identified differently. Leslie Pierce observes that the veiling practice, along with spatial methods of seclusion like the harem and the high-caste Hindu institution of *zenana*, aimed at preserving one's social status. The division of the harem space was necessitated by the need to seclude and protect that which was holy or forbidden. He emphasises that mapping the European notion of public and private onto the harem would be a misinterpretation. Within the spatial relations of seclusion, proximity to the interior of the household indicated power and status, not distance from some outside public domain (6-7,149).

The defense of hijab in "Al Hijabu" can be read in the light of these observations. The author posits the idea that the Islamic hijab is unique in its dimensions for it empowers Muslim women for their interactions in the world

outside. He underscores the differences in the practices of seclusion in Islam as one that blends or erases the boundaries of the private and the public for its women. Though Muslimness is not fixed and an all encompassing aspect of the Muslim tradition in Kerala, these instances can be used to problematise and challenge the predominance of narratives that belittle the role of homosocial spaces in the lives of Muslim women. One needs to disrupt the binaries of modernist thinking to place the practices of veiling and segregation in its local religious structures.

Sarah Graham-Brown's analysis of female relationships both inside and outside the harem space can further illuminate this point. Her analysis reveals that the harem was not an imprisoning space but rather a social space for women and children. Structured by its own internal hierarchies, the harem was visited by workers and visitors, and its inhabitants also traveled outside the space (86, 106). This understanding of the harem as a household's social space contrasts with the Western perception of it as a brothel-like sexual prison, which has been reflected in much cultural production over the past two centuries (10, 71). Such perspectives on the *Ummah* often characterise the harem as a public space in contrast to the private home. The network of relations within and between harems constitutes another public space– a female public space– within which women could play crucial roles as cultural producers and consumers, which was invisible to most Western and male observers[30].

[30] In contrast to their counterparts in North India, Mappila Muslims of Kerala adhere to the *Shafi* school of Law. Unlike many other Muslim communities, Mappila women were not secluded in veils or confined to harems. Dale suggests that the Arab-influenced Islamic culture connects Mappila Muslims more closely with various Islamic communities in South-East Asia, which originated through trade relationships, rather than with their counterparts in North India (Dale,"Islamic Society" 8, 11). In contemporary Kerala, there exists varying practices of seclusion that ensure gender

This idea of a female public space of cultural production is particularly true of the Mappila women's cultural practices. But this female tradition was dislodged from its authentic status, by the dominant traditions both within and outside the community. The *tharavadu*, as it is evidenced in the studies on pre-reformist, reformist Islamic traditions, also functioned as women only spaces and served as vibrant areas of cultural production (Sajna). The homosociality within these female spaces, as well as the fluidity of boundaries in other practices of gender segregation, were overlooked by the modernists as sheer sites of oppressive practices[31]. The reformist texts failed to contain the cultural and spiritual implications of those spaces for women and attempted to carve out a new religiosity based on "uncorrupted" Islamic principles. While the reformists set out to define a new family order and gender roles therein, which constitute an Islamic modernity, Muslim women subtly subverted the "male" interpretations to replace the pre-reformist women's absence with their presence in the reformist rhetoric, by claiming their access to public sphere. Women's engagement with the reformist enterprises of the period reveals that their appropriation of the idea of the hijab, as a tool of female empowerment along religious lines, is seamlessly interwoven into their narratives.

These analyses make it evident that the interpretation of hijab by Muslim women reformers revolves around the principle of modesty. It is not merely a superficial sartorial practice. In their efforts to justify the practice of hijab, most of the (male) reformers associate it with women's safety and honour. Hijab is the best

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segregation, like separate spaces allocated for women in mosques and social gatherings like marriages.

[31] T.A. Sajna, in her analysis of the history of Muslim women, succinctly puts down how the reformist tradition overlooked and delegitimised the cultural and religious engagements of Muslim women in the pre-reformist tradition.

way to safeguard women from the "perils of being seen," they say. For them, principles of hijab and gender segregation constitutes the idea of an Islamic public space, while for women, the hijab symbolises their claim to the Islamic public space. The meaning of the hijab in the male reformist texts is thus multiple: it is the mark of one's modesty, high-born status and a bodily marker of a Muslim woman's determination to protect her chastity and purity, from the evil eyes of men. For the women reformers, the hijab signifies their modesty and religiosity, but above all, their religious empowerment to access spaces outside their homes. For them, hijab is the embodied practice that equips them to occupy "male-spaces."

The analysis undertaken in this chapter unveils the intricate nature of the discourse surrounding Muslim female body during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Kerala. The concept of religiosity and its interaction with ideas of colonial modernity within reformist texts gave rise to a range of discussions concerning the Muslim women and her bodyhood. Select texts from the extensive body of Mappila literature and reformist texts examined illustrate that there existed significant variations in the cultural imaginaries and reformist perspectives on Muslim female body during this period. Additionally, the survey of pre-reformist Mappila literature attempted, offers valuable insights into the discourse on gendered religious body within the pre-reformist Islamic tradition of Kerala. This serves as a significant counterpoint to the reformist discourse on the body, challenging their assertions regarding the making of a new Muslim woman.

Chapter 3

Readings on Body/Contemporary Debates on Muslim Women in Kerala

The 1980s is generally referred to as an era marking the re-emergence of religions globally. Various socio-political changes, global and local, intersect in the heightened visibility of religions in individual and social lives during this period. These changes, combined with the influence and growth of various Muslim religious groups within Kerala, and their attempts at negotiating with the liberal-secular feminist sects in defining the Muslim woman, have thenceforth added multifarious dimensions to the question of Muslim women.

The period also witnessed a marked shift in the ideological orientations of the reformist and traditionalist Muslim organisations. The influence of Gulf Salafism on the reformists and the new revivalism of the traditionalists became even more visible during this period (Osella and Osella, "Islamism and Social Reform" 331-332). As detailed in the second chapter of this thesis, there emerged numerous new splinter groups within the Mujahid sect. The AP Sunni faction emerged from among the traditionalists, creating two equally powerful groups–AP Sunni and EK Sunni. Each faction tried to monopolise the Islamic ideological scene, leading to a surge in organisational activities among Muslims. This eventually led to more visible expressions of community ethos and religious markers. An era of intense intra-faith polemics emerged, which made use of audio tapes and print media alike, besides using public debates and conferences to address their differences with the other sects.

Social critics have long been trying to identify the reasons for the proliferation of identity markers among Muslims. This phenomenon can be attributed to several factors; the significant ones are the rise of militant Hindutva and the resultant insecurity among Muslims, the consolidation of community identity post-demolition of Babri Masjid, influence of Gulf migration, and the intense organisational activities that resorted to highly structured multi-level programmes to reach its members. Additionally, the increase in the number of Muslim women migrating to the Middle East, the resultant influence of Arab culture, and the emergence of a pan-Islamic identity have also contributed to the significant rise in such identity markers. Out of these identifiers of a "new Muslimness", Muslim women's clothing practices have been inviting much attention from within and outside the community (Devika, "Hijabophobia" 134).

Probing further into the discourse around the new modes of clothing adopted by Muslim women reveals that the advocacy of the new mode of hijab by the "religious interpreters" itself has created a set of discourses around Muslim women's bodies. The religious rhetoric on female body, the do's and don'ts of bodily acts, and the question of spatiality and gender segregation permeates every aspect of Muslim women's lives. The twin concerns of an "Islamic public morality" as well as Muslim women's agency and freedom have, of late, invited much critical attention. The contemporary debates on these issues, when put together, help locate some surprising convergences in the discourses on Muslim female body constructed by the reformist and traditionalist sects within the community.

This chapter attempts to contextualise the discourses on Muslim women in contemporary Kerala by examining how the interplay between the traditionalist and reformist constructions of the Muslim female body has led to the emergence of a dominant discourse of the docile, oppressed, and objectified Muslim woman in Kerala. It can also be contended that the more recent discourse on Muslim women in Kerala as resistive subjects and Muslim female body as a sheer site of resistance to rising Hindutva nationalism in present day India is a reductionist view, since it invalidates the history of Muslim women's bodily acts and resistive practices to and negotiations with both dominant (patriarchal) religious and secular impositions on their body[1].

By way of illustrating the dominant religious discourses on Muslim female body in present day Kerala, this study attempts an analysis of an assemblage of texts. This includes recent speeches and interviews by the leaders and religious scholars of different Muslim religious groups, as well as social critics and writers who have been taking part in the debates on Muslim women. This chapter contextualises some of the recent debates in Kerala through an analysis of select texts– mostly speeches and interviews circulated in the digital media– against and in defense of the hijab and pardah, gender segregation, and issues related to Muslim

[1] In detailed ethnographies, the motivations behind wearing the hijab are not solely explained through the lens of ethnicity or religion in understanding clothing practices. Instead, they are interpreted as acts of resistance or methods of confronting everyday manifestations of patriarchy. Similar to Leila Ahmed, Emma Tarlo's research also suggests that the decision to wear a hijab can be seen as a result of thoughtful choices made by Muslim women, not necessarily dictated by patriarchal or religious pressures, while Katherine Bullock highlights the need to problematise the idea of choice. She states that she means to speak in her book "only of the relationship of hijab to choice in societies where there is the genuine freedom to adopt or not adopt hijab" (22). For more details, see Tarlo, *Visibly Muslim*; Ahmed, *A Quiet*; Bullock, *Rethinking Muslim Women*.

women's visibility and the permissibility of their bodies in public spaces. The study navigates through the intra-faith polemics and the liberal-secular responses to it in the recent years to find how these texts create a sustained narrative about Muslim women's bodily conducts that borders on the "oppressed-to be liberated" versus "religious- to be protected" binary.

This analysis is juxtaposed with an analysis of Muslim women's texts and a brief survey of contemporary bodily practices of Muslim women in Kerala. This helps weave together the narratives, hitherto disconnected, and reclaim them to see the whole, and thereby reveal the often surprising intersections and divergences. The research tries to venture beyond the rather redundant question of Muslim woman's dress (veiling) to create a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms at work in conceptualising the Muslim female body in contemporary Kerala.The analysis of Muslim women's articulations on their bodily conducts and sartorial choices locates varying levels of conformity to and deviation from the "male" Islamic discourse. It helps forefront subtle acts of resistance as well as articulations of piety and Muslimness by Muslim women from within the religious groups.

This chapter concludes with a brief survey of contemporary clothing choices and practices of Muslim women. It helps us get a glimpse into the complexity of the discourse on Muslim female body in Kerala and also the ways in which Muslim women subvert the dominant discourse produced by both the liberal and religious sects. The lived religiosities of Muslim women deviate considerably from percepts set by both the religious and liberal-secular discourses. Besides, this analysis can help us probe beyond the ubiquitous narratives of piety and resistance in Muslim

women's ethnographies to foreground plurality in the meaning of modest clothing and the complexity inherent in the question of choices made by Muslim women. This analysis also presents further scope for an extensive ethnographic study on the history and emerging trends in Muslim women's clothing practices in Kerala.

Post-1980s there is a proliferation in the number of women wearing pardah and other forms of Arab clothing. Considerably large sections of the community, especially women, could be seen flaunting their "Muslimness" using the same bodily markers like hijab and various forms of veils, which were hitherto considered symbols of sheer backwardness. Social critics hold varying views regarding the reasons behind the propagation of pardah. Some propose that it could be linked to the Babri Masjid demolition, spurring a desire among community members to become more introspective and revive Islamic practices.[2] It is also attributed to the growing visibility of Hindu customs and rituals backed by the RSS which has exerted an influence on Muslims (Devika, "Hijabophobia" 133-134). As the adoption of the pardah gained momentum, progressive and liberal factions interpreted it differently, viewing it as religious chauvinism that poses a threat to Muslim women. They assert that conservative clergy and organisations aim to confine Muslim women to traditional domestic roles, employing pardah as a tool. In response, religious groups often point to the substantial number of educated young Muslim women donning hijabs and modest attire while actively participating in public life in Kerala.

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[2] Sherin B.S. observes that the visibility of religion in public is a reality in the post-Babri Masjid India. This is a reality not about Muslims alone. Identity assertions by the mainstream are not often talked about. For more insights, see "The Hijab is a Liberation".

A detour into the history of this "new Muslimness" of women in Kerala reveals that organisational activities that targeted women, in particular, have played a crucial role in popularising Arab forms of modest clothing. The first steps were taken by the major organisations to replace the existing "syncretic" forms of dress with Arab ones. These organisations published in-house magazines, exclusively for women, which had wide reach amongst the members of respective organisations. In the 1990s, these in-house magazines published numerous articles and editorials in defense of pardah and abaya as an appropriate dress for the Muslim woman (Abdelhalim 253). For instance, *Aaraamam*, a women's magazine affiliated with the Kerala chapter of Jamaat-e-Islami and supported by the Malayalam daily *Madhyamam*, suggested the adoption of pardah for Muslim women when venturing out in public. Other publications like *Pudava*, controlled by the Mujahid Girls Movement, as well as *Sunni Afkar* and *Poonkavanam*, owned by Sunni Muslim sects, along with *Mahila Chandrika*, owned by the Indian Union Muslim League's Chandrika group, dedicated articles solely to Muslim women's clothing. Additionally, *Madhyamam*, one of the widely circulated newspapers in the state, frequently organised debates and published numerous letters to the editor defending the promotion of Arabian dress codes including pardah. Muslim women's publications and community organisations have played pivotal roles in propagating this trend.

Efforts at sculpting the religious woman, by these organisations, were not limited to merely advocating acceptable forms of clothing. It extended to explaining the religious strictures and rationalising them in the contemporary contexts. Earlier

versions of this advice rhetoric, that existed prior to the advent of digital media, mainly included audio cassettes and public speeches organised by religious groups, which aimed at mass mobilisation of the community in favor of their respective theological positions. The extensive use of print media to reach out to women added a new dimension to these modes of exhortations. Some of the pardah advertisements published in these magazines initially had faceless women, but later they presented modern educated women, often working on computers, wearing the pardah. Besides piety and morality, the religious sects associated these forms of clothing with safety and empowerment of women.

The history of new forms of veiling in Kerala, since the 1980s, is also the history of a new discourse on the Muslim female body. The religious organisations adopted a multistep regulatory mechanism to institutionalise the Arab form of hijab. The styles hitherto followed by majority of Muslim women, like using the free end of the saree to cover their head, using the shawl or *thattam* ("head scarf") of the *salwar kameez* or *pavaada* ("long skirt"), and even the "unfashionable" *makkana*,[3] which perfectly served the purpose of the new versions of the hijab, gave way to the Arabised forms. Participation in the Quran learning/ teaching sessions, meetings, and other organisational spaces mandates these forms of clothing. Madrasas run by different Muslim organisations started insisting that the female students wear the Arab form of the hijab. In the recent decades, pardah has become the mandate for

[3] *Makkana* is a form of Islamic veil usually worn during namaz and was commonly used by older women to cover their head. Paired with the *Mundu*(a long piece of cloth worn around the waist) and the *Kuppayam* (a long blouse usually worn by older women), this style of veiling was very common in Kerala prior to the Arab forms. Girls attending the Madrasa used to wear the *makkana*.

girls studying in the higher classes of the madrasas. Several Sunni madrasas insist that the female students cover their faces using the niqab (face veil) while wearing the pardah. Earlier, even a couple of decades back, girl students were expected to observe the hijab just by covering their heads using a headscarf fastened to their hair, and their uncovered necks didn't invite any censuring from the madrasa authorities. The change has been gradual, yet very drastic. Now, schools and colleges run by several Muslim managements insist on an Islamic dress code for its students, teachers, and other female employees. This includes a hijab added to the usual uniform and an optional pardah for those who want to use it.

These institutions, organisations, and its publishing houses have contributed much to the popularity of the pardah among women's piety groups by inscribing on it values of morality and modesty. Besides, the advocates of pardah claim that it can protect women from being leered at by lustful men and also promises to free the female body from its physicality, which can be a threat not only for the safety of women but also for the general moral good of the society, since the female body has the potential to incite sexual urges in men. For them, the attractive female body is also an attracting female body.

Though the general trend in the previous decades was one of Arabisation, there has been resistances to these new tendencies in Muslim women's clothing from within and outside the community. Veiling is often problematised in Kerala, and the debates on whether it is recommended by the Quran and related scriptures are ongoing. These debates on Muslim female body, which often centre on the religious strictures on veiling, brings to fore the arguments between religious

scholars and critical insiders about the legitimacy of the veil. Notwithstanding the numerous positionings adopted by different organisations as well as individuals on the Islamic premises of veiling, Muslim women have, in large numbers, resorted to the use of the new forms of hijab. There are varying degrees and modes of veiling among Muslim women today. Yet, most of them are Arab modes of veiling that deviates considerably from the "Kerala Muslim" styles that existed prior to the Arabisation of Muslim women's clothing. Concomitantly, the debates between the critical insiders and the supporters of Arab forms of veiling regarding the authenticity of recent veiling practices have intensified in the recent years. This, in turn, has led to the emergence of an "interpretative advice rhetoric" targeting Muslim women– an analysis of which is crucial in understanding the role of religious organisations in the production and dissemination of the discourses on Muslim women in contemporary Kerala.

In the recent decades, digital media and social media platforms are effectively used by both the traditionalist and reformist religious organisations. Recent years have seen a proliferation of YouTube videos as a medium of religious polemics and as a medium for the dissemination of their religious views. Easy access and great reach of videos make them the most popular medium of ideological debate. Besides, these videos are accessible to all and are viewed both by those who support these groups and their speakers, as well as by those who oppose them. The following analysis of select videos and other texts is an attempt to consolidate the views of major Muslim religious groups on some of the recent debates on Muslim women and their bodies. The analysis has its focus on how they conceptualise the female body

by expressing their views on aspects like dress, veiling, visibility, and mobility of Muslim women. As it is stated in the introduction to this thesis, there are three major Muslim religious groups in Kerala: Sunni, Mujahid, and Jamaat-e-Islami, who can be broadly divided into two sects– the reformists and the traditionalists. Since the Jamaat-e-Islami takes sides with the Mujahids in their criticism of the traditionalists, despite their differences with Mujahids over the latter's apolitical stance, they can be grouped with the reformists.

The dominant religious rhetoric on Islam and Muslim women is invariably created by the male religious scholars (interpreters) of these groups. Political formations like Muslim League and educational organisations like MES also partake in the making of this religious rhetoric. It is often in reaction to this rhetoric that the other discourses– secular-liberal, feminist, as well counter-discourses and subversive ones by Muslim women themselves– evolve and form part of the larger discourse. These major organisations partake in discussions with the government and other institutions representing the Muslim community of Kerala, and hence, the texts produced by them cannot be invalidated as mere religious obscurantism. Besides, these speeches are neither made in a homosocial environment consisting of only the members of the community nor are they limited to a specific set of audience. These texts are stored in the digital space in the form of "authentic sources of religious knowledge," perpetually triggering new narratives and counter narratives.

An analysis of the tracts and tapes of the advice rhetoric genre, circulated in the digital media, reveals that different groups have their own strictures about how to comport the female body. These rules are legitimised by their multiple

interpretations and often lead to internal disputations. The analysis locates some major points of convergences and divergences in the discourses on body produced in this domain of male interpreters. Though the hijab is posited as the Islamic dress, the mandate upon its use is not solely attributed to the religious insistence upon it. Some key tropes can be identified in the new phase of the "defense of the hijab" that make it significantly different from the history of its defense during the reform period in Kerala. The discourse on the hijab and pardah has, over the years, bourgeoned into a multifold narrative that reveals the complexity in religious interpretations and strictures on various aspects of Muslim women's lives– their bodies, femininity, aspects of gender segregation, and access to public space.

Religious scholars of Sunni, Mujahid, and Jamaat-e-Islami groups interpret the Quran, hadiths, books of *fiqh*, and *Shariah* laws to inform both believing men and women about Islamic ideals. These scholars instruct on the use of the veil as an essential Islamic practice. However, there are some differences in their definitions of the *awrah*. The Sunni scholars advocate the use of the niqab ("face veil") while the Mujahids are of the view that Islam has not insisted on covering the face (Zakkariya). The traditionalists have been strongly advocating the use of the nikab. They justify their position based on their understanding of the Islamic concept of the *awrah*, that a woman has two kinds of *awrah*: one during namaz and the other when she is in public space. During namaz, she can reveal her face and hands, but when she goes out, accompanied by a *marham* ("close-male relative*"*), she has to cover even her face and hands, since her whole body is *awrah* (Ahsani Ustad).The reformist scholars differ from Sunni scholars in defining the *awrah* of a woman.

They consider the niqab ("face veil") an un-Islamic practice, and are of the opinion that we need more religious deliberations on this (Kuzhippuram).

Muslim Educational Society, a prominent minority education management group in Kerala, issued a circular in 2019, banning the use of niqab in their institutions (Balan). This sparked heated debates which invited much critical deliberations on Muslim women and the veil. The two major Sunni groups, AP Sunni and EK Sunni, vehemently criticised the Muslim Educational Society for issuing a circular which stated that the students in its institutions cannot attend its colleges wearing the niqab[4]. Niqab is strongly advocated by the traditionalists and also by some splinter groups within the reformist sects as the most appropriate form of veiling. This debate intensified when groups like Jamaat-e-Islami and Mujahid Wisdom group vehemently criticised MES and cited it as an impingement on the rights of the minorities ("Nikab Nirodhicha").

The debates following the ban imposed by MES brought to the fore some pertinent questions about the choices of Muslim women, their agency, and also the Islamic premises of using the niqab. Besides problematising the question of choice and agency of Muslim women within the "male" interpretative Islamic tradition in Kerala, these debates highlighted the need to address the Muslim woman's question in the larger context of Hindutva politics in India. The Muslim League, its female

[4] The MES, in its circular, refers to a directive from the Kerala High Court that rejected the request by Muslim girls to wear headscarves. The circular cites an order issued by the Kerala High Court in December 2018, which dismissed a petition from two female students of Christ Nagar Senior Secondary School in Thiruvananthapuram. The students had sought permission to don headscarves and full-sleeve shirts. The High Court, supporting the school's decision to deny the request, emphasised in its ruling that the collective interest should take precedence over individual interests ("Kerala's MES Bans").

students' wing Haritha, and Jamaat-e-Islami asserted the need to see the problem in a larger political context in present day India. They took sides with Samastha by categorically stating that the ban on niqab is an impingement on the rights of Muslim women, their right to choose, and that it is a violation of the fundamental rights ensured by the constitution of India ("Niqab: Muslim Sthreekalkku"). Khadeeja Nargess, state president of MGM, Markazu Da'awa faction, representing the reformist groups and V. P. Suhara, the founder of NISA[5], representing the Progressive Women's Forum, held on to the view that niqab, the face veil, is not an Islamic practice.

Examining the shifts in Muslim women's clothing styles in Kerala, Caroline Osella and Filippo Osella assert that revived Arab and Gulf influences have expanded the array of religious dress styles accessible to them. They observe that while young Muslim women embrace the elegant abaya, which also serves as a status symbol, sign of youthful sophistication, and indicator of wealth and upward mobility, most men do not adopt Arab fashion trends ("Muslim Style" 249). Although reformist Muslim men refrain from adopting Arab clothing forms, such as the long white robe, there is in the recent years, a steady rise in the number of traditionalist men embracing Arab styles. Notably, the new traditionalist *Ulema*, particularly the AP group, proudly don long robes paired with turbans uniquely

[5] During the late 1980s in Kozhikode, V. P. Suhara took a pioneering step in organising Muslim women by founding NISA, described as a "progressive Muslim women's association." Engaging in social activism since the early 1970s, Suhara actively participated in secular women's movements. It was during this time that she recognised the distinctive nature of issues faced by Muslim women, leading her to establish NISA. Understanding the need for a systematic campaign within the community, she faced various challenges, including legal battles and physical assaults, as dominant religious segments of the community often vehemently opposed her organisation and activities (Santhosh, "Beyond" 99-100).

wrapped around their heads to signify their organisational identity. Furthermore, there is a gradual yet significant increase in the use of the niqab, alongside the abaya and parda, among Muslim women affiliated with traditionalist Sunni organisations, supplanting the older styles of long-sleeved blouses and headscarves.

In the controversy surrounding the ban on niqab in colleges under the Muslim Educational Society (MES) governed by reformist sympathisers, the Sunni leaders made it explicitly clear that Muslim women are obligated to wear the niqab in accordance with Islamic regulations when in the presence of strangers ("Kerala Niqab Row: Withdraw Circular"). These evolving attire choices bear little resemblance to traditional Muslim clothing in Kerala. While the traditionalists staunchly defend these transformations as the most appropriate Islamic attire, the reformists (Mujahids), notwithstanding their new found allegiance to Gulf Salafism, resort to the earlier view against the niqab.

The foregoing analysis reveals that there is much contestation within and between different groups on what constitutes the *awrah* of a woman and whether the niqab is required or not. Yet, there has emerged in the recent decades a consensus between these groups on the appropriate modes of veiling and the acceptable ways of comporting the Muslim female body. A closer analysis of the intra-faith discourse that supports the Arabised forms of veiling can help situate these convergences amongst groups.

A dominant trend in the defense of the hijab is the attempt to justify its use based on scientific principles. Though the trend was inaugurated by the reformists, particularly through the speeches of religious scholars like Dr. M.M. Akbar, this

rationalising rhetoric later became very common among speakers of different groups. In one of his debates with the public, Akbar presents his interpretation of the Islamic view on hijab. He advocates for women to cover all parts of their body, excluding the face and hands, and to wear loose clothing that conceals any voluptuousness. He further states:

> Women, if they are not covered enough can pollute the public space. It is a scientifically proven fact that female beauty in the public space can sexually excite man and make him violent. This can lead to crimes and violence on women. Hence veiling well, hiding the feminine shape of the woman's body, is essential for women's safety and men's morality. The primary reason for sexual violence is the recent cultural trend that commodifies the female body, and hence, Islam's insistence on hijab is scientifically correct. ("Sthreeyum Pardayum" 00.06.40 -44)

In another speech he enlists the religious rules around women's dress. He says:

> Whatever dress a woman wears, she should not wear it to attract a man. She should not wear transparent or tight fitting clothes to expose her curves. It must be a loose fitting one. It shouldn't be man's dress and it shouldn't be the dress worn by the members of other religions. ("Sthreekalude Vasthradharanam" 00.01.56 -03.55)

He repeatedly states that women should not dress in such a way that she attracts men. This is the first and foremost rule in Islam regarding a women's dress. In another public debate, he states that modern science and medical sciences like

endocrinology can help us understand why Islam insists on the hijab. Seeing the curvaceous body of women can lead to a testosterone spike that in turn can affect a man by criminalising him ("Yuvathalamurayile" 00.09.30 - 60). For him, Islamic principles must be keenly followed to prevent those potential dangers from happening. He further states that a strict adherence to Islamic principles is the only means for female safety and that nurturing the natural aspects of the female is a key element in the Islamic principles on women.

Numerous such argumentative tapes and videos by several speakers from the Mujahid-reformist sects can be found in the YouTube. In his attempt to rationalise Islam's insistence on the hijab, Akbar presents a justification for its insistence in Islam, which he claims are based on scientific research findings. While Sunni scholars mostly emphasise the religious and social aspects of veiling, Akbar and his creed of reformists skillfully use their professional identity as teachers, doctors, and educated, skilled professionals to validate their claims of scientific rationality that they attribute to Islamic principles and rules. Besides drawing on the scriptures, these speakers present their concern about the degenerate state of moral affairs in the contemporary world, often by using anecdotal accounts and making references to the incidents happening in their own professional spaces.

The traditionalist Sunni speakers too contend that women's inappropriate clothing is the primary reason for rape and prostitution. They say that a woman following wrong modes of clothing is *haram* (Hudavi, "Sthreekal Dharikkunna" 00.00.0.10 - 0.50). These speakers from different Sunni groups also focus on such aspects of female clothing like cross dressing and wearing tight garments. They

argue that such styles of clothing are not allowed in Islam, since it defeats the very purpose of hijab by attracting male gaze. The most important purpose that a woman's dress should serve is hiding her from male gaze. For them, the true intentions behind wearing the hijab can make a woman a "good *hijabi*" or a "bad *hijabi*". The amount of skin exposed, the curves revealed, and the elements of fashion motifs in hijab and pardah are closely scrutinised by these speakers to remind women that they should not be "bad *hijabis*".

The use of the Islamic veil in its different forms, including the hijab, niqab, and the pardah, is the focal point in most of the disputations about Muslim women in Kerala in the recent years. In the light of some recent controversies, those who advocate veiling and those who consider it a symbol of patriarchal oppression on women have been engaging in fierce debates on the meaning of the hijab, its functions, and the purposes it serve. A speech by a teacher from Malappuram sparked one such controversy. In his speech, probably addressed to an all women audience, he explains, in a rather animated manner, how some Muslim girls wear hijab and pardah in such a way that it defeats its very purpose. He criticises the new forms of wrapping the headscarf adopted by young Muslim girls and their use of leggings. He says that these girls wear the hijab in such a manner that they expose parts of their body to attract male gaze and he likens these bodily acts to "the way vendors cut a piece of watermelon to show and prove that it is ripe and red within" (Munavvir 00.01.50-4.35). He concludes by stating that these tendencies among women are the primary cause for the degeneration of modern families.

This speech, circulated in the social media, spurred huge controversy both in the virtual media and others. There were reactions from all corners, and Muslim religious scholars and leaders, irrespective of their adherence to different religious groups, supported him and his arguments. Some even saw the criticisms as an encroachment on the right to propagate religion. Abdussamad Pookottoor, a Sunni scholar and leader of Sunni Yuvajana Sangham (SYS), voiced his support for the accused speaker:

> Islam has clearly instructed Muslim women to restrain themselves to homes, to dress modestly, and talk modestly avoiding any salacious gesture. Women should not *uncover*. Women should not dominate, nor should men. But men are leaders of a family. Men are placed at a position above women. Men are more capable of decision making. Women need not go to mosques for prayer. She can sit at home and pray and be rewarded just like men. The fact that there has never been a female prophet is a testimony to this difference in status. The same concept of male spiritual leadership is followed in other religions too, since they also know that women are incapable of those faculties. ("Bathakka Vivadam" 00.00.0.30- 14.00; my emphasis)

Pookottoor adds more scientific details to argue that women are different from men physiologically also:

> Women have smaller brains and have lesser volume of blood in their body. These physiological differences can explain Islam's views on gender and women. Women must cover herself completely when she is in public or

> among other men. She must be protected, covered like gold and shouldn't be exposed like vegetables in the market. ("Bathakka Vivadam" 00.14. 40 - 15.55)

Though the controversial "Bathakka speech" was delivered by a non-traditionalist speaker, the Sunnis supported him and his views, simultaneously accusing the secular-liberal sects of having Islamophobic leanings. SYS organised protest rallies against the government for charging IPC 354 on the accused speaker ("Farook College"). The speech triggered reactions from amongst students' unions like SFI and ABVP, who were in turn opposed by students' groups like Fraternity and MSF, saying that this is a conspiracy to defame Farook College, which is a Muslim minority institution ("Bathakka Paramarsham"; "SFI Activists"). Political factions in Kerala intervened. The Muslim League representatives argued that the statements made by the speaker, in his address to a limited audience, cited out of context has led to an unnecessary uproar. Moreover, the government has taken a disproportionate action against the accused speaker by charging IPC 354 against him. This is nothing but state sponsored attack on minority rights, argued Najeeb Kaanthapuram, representing the Youth League ("Bathakka Vivaadathil Youth Leagindethu" 00.11.25 – 12.50). The analysis attempted here reveals how certain complex convergences evolve among the reformists, traditionalists and the major secular-political formation representing the Muslims of Kerala, the Muslim League.

The Islamic religious scholars have recently expanded their criticism of the "un-Islamic contemporary dress practices" among Muslim women to include larger structures of knowledge, like feminism and gender studies, which, they contend,

propagate ideas of gender equality which are antithetical to Islamic principles. The Mujahid and Jamath-e-Islami scholars highlight the need to locate the debates on hijab– as an antithesis to gender equality– in the larger context of Western capitalist interests that exploit women and her body as an object of pleasure. Mujahid scholars use the differences in the physiological aspects of men and women to oppose the idea of gender equality and to justify their criticism of feminism and its tenets. In their interpretative texts, they criticise feminism as an anti- woman ideology and states that feminism, in alliance with capitalism, reduces female body into a mere piece of flesh– a commodity– that is a mere pleasurable object to men. Akbar, representing the reformists, states that Islam is a religion that despises all kinds of fetishism of the female body and hence, Islam advocates the most modest form of dress that covers her body parts in such a way that its beauty is not revealed ("Islamanu Sheri", " Feminism Penvirudhamanu"). Mustahfa Thanveer, yet another prominent Mujahid speaker, holds that Islamic feminism is also an offshoot of feminism and Islamic feminists also ally themselves with these feminists in questioning the idea of gender in Islam (" Fathima Mernissiyude" 00.03. 00- 15.20). These speakers allege that Islamic Feminism is a product of European Capitalism.

The male discourse on hijab and other bodily practices of Muslim women produced by the traditionalist and reformist groups, inadvertedly or not, creates a sustained discourse on female body that objectifies and fetishizes the Muslim woman's body. In their efforts to uncover the hidden motives of feminism and current discourse on gender, which, according to these speakers, is a product of Western capitalist interests, they themselves reproduce the very discourse of

objectification that they are trying to resist. Besides, these speakers create an extended narrative on masculinity as inherently aggressive and violent (Thanveer, "Aankuttikalum Penkuttikalum"00.03.25 - 08.55).

Though the Islamic criticism of feminism in Kerala was kick-started by the reformist sects, all organisations, the Mujahids, the Jamaat-e-Islami, and the traditionalists, have lately started engaging with the question of gender equality with heightened vigour. Some recent developments in the state have made such an engagement inevitable for the Muslim religious organisations and the Muslim League. The CPM led government in the state, as part of their attempts to create gender awareness in educational institutions, introduced the idea of gender neutrality in school and college campuses. In 2022, the government introduced plans to revamp the school curriculum with an aim to sensitise the young generation on gender and gender spectrum. These steps to introduce ideas of gender neutrality met with severe hostility, with almost all the Muslim religious groups questioning the government's move and stating that these steps can lead to serious concerns in the future. It became evident that the government had to eventually rethink its position on these matters when Jifri Muthukkoya Thangal, the supremo of Samastha EK faction, who engaged in serious deliberations with the government thanked the Chief Minister of Kerala for paying heed to their concerns ("Padyapadhathi Parishkarathil").The religious groups persistently put to test the Islamic permissibility of emerging social practices as well as state interventions in matters related to gender. Emerging gender discourses in the Malayali public sphere are constantly pitted against principles of gender segregation and idea of an Islamic

public space by the Islamic scholars ("Aanano Pennano"). Reactions and responses ranging from strong protests to negotiations with the government often emerge from within these groups.

Key to an understanding of these organisations' engagement with the question of gender is the idea of a gendered Islamic public space, which mandates gender segregation as well as veiling of women. Both the idea of hijab and gender segregation in Islam is invariably rooted in this idea of an Islamic public space. The interpretative texts deal with aspects of both gender segregation and women's veiling as two equally significant aspects in religious bodyhood that the followers must rigidly adhere to. In the public space, which is organised around Islamic principles, a set of behavioural codes are prescribed for women. Rules on seclusion and visibility of women, which strictly regulate women's presence among men and the extent to which they can participate in the public domain, are a central concern in the interpretative texts of both the reformists and the traditionalists that deal with women. Besides defining appropriate clothing choices for women, these texts prescribe the dos and don'ts for them, while they are in the public space, and thereby create a sustained narrative on Muslim women's body in Kerala. The following analyses explicate some of the dominant patterns in the discourses produced by these texts around diverse issues that demand women's participation in public spaces.

One of the key concerns in the male interpretative texts in Kerala is a heightened focus on the corrupting influence of female body in the public space (Thanveer, "Aankuttikalum Penkuttikalum"; Karakunnu). The moral demand on

women in these texts thrusts upon them the responsibility of not inciting sexual desire in men. Here, an "irreciprocal" relationship of visibility is established with the female body as the perpetual site of control: they are seen, persistently looked at, and gazed upon (Karakunnu). The onus of public morality is thus thrust, invariably, upon women who have to perform a religious female bodyhood, overseen, sanctioned, and authenticated by these "male" texts.

The discourse on Muslim women's seclusion is a complex one owing to the way it encompasses in it multiple issues ranging from the age old issue of women's mosque entry to the more recent issues like the Islamic permissibility of Muslim women's right to contest in elections. Gender segregation of Muslim women is a major concern propagated through these texts. Tracing the history of the debates on Muslim women's mosque entry between the traditionalists and the reformists reveals that the objections to it raised by the traditionalists were based on the possibility of moral corruption when men and women share the same space[6]. Mujahid and Jamath-e-Islami groups support women attending the mosques for *jumua* ("collective prayers on fridays") and *jamath* prayers ("gatherings in mosques for offering namaz five times a day") while the Sunni groups oppose it.

Different groups take varying positions on the issue of segregation by defining how much and to what extent women must remain segregated in the public sphere, thus presenting diverse interpretations of the idea of an Islamic public space in Kerala. These interpretations have both differences and similarities and are based on

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[6] The ongoing debates between the traditionalists and reformists on Mosque entry of women in Kerala has a long history that can be traced back to the early twentieth century. This is discussed in detail in chapter 3 of this thesis.

the primary notion that women's presence in the public space needs to be regulated in the light of Islamic principles and that hijab and gender segregation must be strictly observed, lest it can have adverse effects on public morality. Though the hijab is the most important mandate for Muslim women in the public space, the use of it does not warrantee absolute freedom of movement and access to the public space for them.

The Sunni scholars can be seen voicing their apprehensions about women venturing out of their homes to work as well as to participate in other activities that require their constant presence and participation in the public space (Khasimi "Muslim Sthreekal Roatil Irangi"). Some scholars support Muslim women's rights to access the public spaces considering the peculiar condition that exists in contemporary India, which demands women's participation in public sphere like taking part in electoral politics, while majority of them oppose it. "Women can work if they want to, but it must be ensured that she will not have to mingle with men in her work space", says Sinsarul Haq Hudavi, who speaks extensively on various religious topics representing the Sunni sects ("Sthreekal Jolikku" 00.01.00 -02.10). These scholars recurrently voice their concerns on women going out alone without a male companion– *marham*. According to them, Muslim women should not act in such a way that they break the religious rules and it is for them to decide whether the current society they live in permits them to engage in social and political activities or jobs from within the limits prescribed by Islam.

Samastha consistently expresses its reservations regarding the involvement of Muslim women in politics and political events, whereas the reformists think

women's active participation in politics, including being candidates in elections may be permitted. Dr. Hussain Madavoor, a prominent Salafi scholar from Kerala who leads the *Markazu Da'wa* group, says that "women can contest in elections. Ban on women's participation in politics is as regressive a step as the ban on female education we once had ("Hussain Madavoor Says" 00:00:18- 01:15). Samastha opposes the Muslim League decision to contest women candidates in elections and states that Muslim women need contest only in reserved seats for women where there is no other option to represent the party, thus categorically stating that women must be restricted to their homes to fulfill their womanly duties and their participation in the public sphere must be strictly regulated. ("Sthreekal Samvarana Seatil"). They also opposed the government's move to form the *Vanitha Mathil* [7] ("Women Wall") in 2019, saying that such participation of women in public events and protest marches is detrimental to them, since their very sanctity and purity will be under question ("Muslim Organisation Samastha"). Such acts, in which women ventured out of their homes even to participate in protests, like those against the CAA- NRC bill which jeopardised the entire community's rights, did not fail to invite vilification from the traditionalists.

A Sunni scholar, Rahmathullah Khasimi, in his speech, threatens Muslim women who took part in the anti-CAA-NRC protests. He says: "Women wearing

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[7] The Kerala government proposed a *Vanitha Mathil* ("Women Wall") across the state, showing support for the Supreme Court's decision regarding women's entry at Sabarimala. This event, considered as a pivotal moment for feminist politics in Kerala, witnessed numerous women filling the streets from Kasaragod to Thiruvananthapuram, taking a collective pledge to safeguard the values of reformism and uphold gender equality. While organised by the state's Left Democratic Front (LDF), in response to the Supreme Court's Sabarimala verdict, the women's oath, it is reported, did not explicitly mention the shrine ("Kerala CM Announces Women Wall").

burqa are like *black bulls* thronging the streets. If women continue this, they will be put to their proper places by believing men" (00:01:48-0 8.00; my emphasis). He repeatedly says that the *karutha kuppayam* ("the black robe") that they wear make them resemble bulls. Wearing this they walk on the roads and raise slogans, which is un-Islamic. Ironically enough, the dress that is supposed to be the most suitable one for the Muslim women is referred to as the black robe that makes them resemble bulls thronging the streets. He adds that Samastha has repeatedly declared its stance on women's public presence. Khasimi's remarks on the pardah raise some pertinent questions about the permissibility of Muslim women's participation in public spaces even when they follow Islamic rules of clothing and wear the hijab.

In a programme organised at Ramapuram in Malappuram district in theyear 2022, M.T. Abdulla Musaliyar, a member of Samastha *Mushavira,* ("board of scholars") censured the organisers for inviting a fifteen year old girl to the stage to receive a prize. Fathima Thehaliya, the former president of Haritha (Muslim League Girls' wing), said that such instances of insults on girls can spoil the image of the community ("Niqab"). While Thehaliya registered her strong resentment saying that the girls who go through such bad experiences will end up hating religion and religious leaders, P.K. Nawas, the president of MSF, the students' wing of Muslim League, said that the attack on M.T. Abdulla Musaliyar is a reflection of Islamophobia[8] ("Samastha Mushavira Angathinu"). In a press conference organised

[8] The news media widely discussed the silence of mainstream political parties in this issue and the reasons behind it. "Justifying such incidents in the name of Islamophobia is suicidal", reported Mathrubhumi news, a leading Malayalam news channel. ("Penkuttikale Maatti Nirthunnathu" 00:07:30 - 08:30).

to respond to the controversy, Samastha leaders reiterated their position on the presence of women in public gatherings. They affirmed once again that Samastha is against girl's presence on the stage, since being among men can cause them discomfort and that the girl was not humiliated ("Penkuttikale Pothu Sadassile"). It is also worth noting that the girl who was invited to the stage was wearing a pardah and a hijab in the most conforming way.

A similar controversy was sparked by an incident earlier in December 2017, in which some Muslim girls from Malappuram district were subjected to severe cyber bullying after the video of a flashmob, performed by them as part of an AIDS awareness programme in Malappuram town, was widely circulated in the social media. These girls were accused of being deviant religious bodies by religious sects. This created such furore all over Kerala, both in the virtual and real platforms ("Kerala: Muslim Girls Shamed" 00:00:01- 01:47). Yet another incident, in which a set of Muslim school girls danced wearing the Kerala sari and hijab during the Onam celebration in the year 2022, ended up in inviting vehement criticism from the All India Muslim Personal Law Board itself. Dr Asma Zehra Tayeba, a woman member of the All India Muslim Personal Law Board is reported to have tweeted saying "dancing wearing the hijab defeats its very purpose. Hijab is not just a dress. It is a concept and ideology which ensures the safety of women" ("Muslim Body Angered" 00:00:12-01:22). For these religious vigilante groups such acts question the very sanctity of the hijab which is a symbol of modesty and chastity of women. Following religious dictums, the hijab is to be observed; yet, the hijab doesn't guarantee women's participation in the public space. The idea of an Islamic public

space, in these dominant interpretative texts, decrees strict adherence of women to principles of modesty that regulate every aspect of their bodily conduct.

The analysis reveals that the embedded discourses on hijab and the idea of an Islamic public space plays a key role in regulating and determining the bodily conducts of Muslim women. In the debates that followed these controversies, one can see that the hijab itself becomes a sanctified symbol, which defines the wearer and is simultaneously defined by the bodily conducts of the wearer. The hijab hides, yet it shows: it shows the extreme visible nature of the Muslim female body, which is not permitted in the public space.

Notwithstanding the fact that there are some differences in the ideological orientations of traditionalist-reformist religious groups that considerably influence their interpretations of religious tenets, one can draw close parallels between the Sunni scholars and some scholars who belong to the Salafi school of thought in their rhetoric on Muslim female body and gender roles of women. The Salafi scholars of Kerala had once made an impassioned plea for the education of women, their entry to mosques and their right to work. The statements made by speakers like Mujahid Balusseri in one of his controversial speeches stands in stark contrast to that of most of the early Salafi scholars and early reformers and are more akin to that of traditionalist Sunni scholars who state that women should not contest in elections, work outside their homes or engage in any kind of political activism. In his speech he presents a detailed account of the "perils" that a family will have to face if the woman is educated, employed, and self reliant ("Balussery" 00:00:03-05:21).

The recently emerged Mujahid faction, the Wisdom group, has made their stance more pronounced on gender segregation. Unlike the other two major Mujahid groups and Jamaat-e-Islami, this splinter group refuses to share space with the women members of their organisation in their conferences and seminars ("Sthreekale Vedikalil Ninnu"). It must be noted that in the state conferences organised by the two major Mujahid groups, KNM Official and Markaz'u Da'wa, also a separate venue is arranged for women speakers and it is named *Vanitha Sammelanam* ("Women's Conference"). This gradual shift in the discourse on Muslim women by Salafi scholars of Kerala is often seen as an outcome of the growing influence of the Middle East and Gulf Salafism (Sullami M.I.; Prasanth).

The Sunni, Salafi, and Jamaat-e-Islami groups simultaneously differ and agree on matters pertaining to Muslim women. All three sects insist that women practice the Islamic veil and diligently follow gender segregation to ensure modest comportment of their bodies, since it is an essential religious practice. Yet, the nature and form of veil advocated by each group varies and has also changed over time. A closer look at these texts reveals that only a few scholars take a very moderate position in matters related to Muslim women. Hence, the controverted arguments of those male scholars, who overtly objectify the Muslim woman's body, have primacy over the voices of those with moderate views, and the voices of Muslim women themselves. The rampancy of these male texts on women has, over the years, contributed to the making of a dominant religious discourse on Muslim women. Concomitantly, these texts invite scathing responses from secular-liberal sects outside the community and critical insiders within the community, which in

turn results in producing rather reductionist meanings of Muslim women's sartorial practices in Kerala that overlook the plurality of intentions and motives in determining those choices.

The analysis of some of the contemporary debates in Kerala attempted here reveals that there are some common patterns in these religious discourses on Muslim female body. These scholars and their respective organisations support Muslim women's adoption of Arab forms of veiling and claim that it is also a political act against fetishizing and commodifying the female body. But, paradoxically enough, these scholars themselves create a narrative that too objectifies and fetishizes the female body as emblems of beauty and pleasure, and hence, mere sexual bodies. Enmeshed in these overlapping discourses, Muslim women are at once exhorted to embrace and shun their femininity in order to embody a characteristic "public Islamic femininity." The perpetrators of this objectifying discourse relentlessly perpetuate the idea of both physical and visual segregation of men and women in public spaces and thus endorse their idea of an "Islamic public space." These narratives are further marked by a fear of the female body and its beauty as potential threats to women's own safety, as they can invite male gaze and attention, though unwarranted by these women's true intensions. The question of devotion or piety in women's adoption of the hijab hardly finds any place in these texts. This "hyper-sexualisation" of the Muslim woman's body, by the religious scholars, has intensified the dominant narratives about Muslim female body as an oppressed-victimised body and has triggered severe criticisms from amongst critical insiders and secular, liberal sects.

Secular narratives in Kerala, on the other hand, are replete with criticism of the rather pervasive nature of the "new" Islamic veil in the recent years. These narratives are characterised by some reductionist tendencies that assign a single meaning to the veil worn by Muslim women. Select texts are briefly analysed here to dismantle the biases and to show how these discourses converge with the religious discourses in creating and disseminating negative stereotypes of veiled Muslim women as oppressed victims, devoid of any agency. The poem, "Mathadeham" ("The Religious Body"), written by Rafeeq Ahmed, a renowned Malayalam poet, can be read as a manifestation of the liberal-secular reaction to the new forms of veiling adopted by Muslim women. The poet equates the pardah-clad female body to a dead body. The poem states that the pardah and niqab dehumanise the Muslim woman and deny her the basic right to have an identity and a face. The new Islamic veil is a threat to women's freedom (R.Ahmed). There are numerous instances of such reactions to the debates on Muslim women from secularists as well as critical insiders.

The poem "Pardah" by another poet, Pavithran Theekkuni, likens the veiled, pardah-clad body of the Muslim woman to an African country. These instances are indicative of some general secular anxieties triggered by the religious clothing of Muslim women in Kerala. Being a true Malayali Muslim, by inscribing visible markers of Malayaliness, is a necessary a priori to being accepted as secular, faithful citizens. Recent versions of Islamic clothing with stricter codes of covering, "adopted by /imposed upon" Muslim women, is seen as an encroachment of the "oppressive" Arab culture on the otherwise tolerant, multicultural Kerala. The

secular sects often nostalgically revisit the past forms of Muslim clothing as emblems of "Malayali Muslimness" and glorify it for its syncretic nature. The recent forms of veiling that have crept into the cultural space of Kerala from the Arab countries mark Muslim woman as an alien cultural-other in the public spaces of Kerala. This carries with it resonances of the right-wing discourse on Muslim women and their perceived oppressed status due to their veiled clothing.

These debates on the contemporary sartorial practices of Muslim women as an "outside influence" call for a closer study of the past forms of clothing, exploring "to what extent they were Malayali forms?" Considering the cosmopolitanism of the Malayali Muslim community, as evidenced in the varied influences in its arts and culture, the use of certain motifs in Muslim clothing prior to its Arabisation could also have been adopted from various other Muslim societies[9] (Ilias 450). The syncretism that the Muslim community of Kerala practiced always had a more cosmopolitan nature. The history of influences of translocal Islamic traditions on the Muslims of Kerala can unsettle the very idea of a "pure Malayali Muslimness." The question of Arab forms of clothing as an outside influence is at stake here. J. Devika in her conceptualisation of "Malayali hijabophobia", which she says has received only limited scholarly attention, puts forth some pertinent questions about the perceived alienness of Muslim clothing ("Hijabophobia" 135-136). She notes:

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[9] M.H. Ilias in his study of the influence of trading Arab diaspora on Mappila Musims observes that "[t]here were deep, underlying cultural and material commonalities across these civilizations in areas such as food, agriculture, clothing and a plethora of other themes" (438). Important scholarship remains to be done on this topic. See Ilias, "Mappila Muslims and the Cultural Content" 438.

> I want to dwell upon two claims of Malayali hijabophobia that seem to have received relatively less scholarly attention: the claim that the recent practices of veiling among Malayali Muslim women are an implicit rejection of indigenous Malayali identity, and that they are evidence for intensifying of Muslim patriarchal control on Muslim women. As hypotheses, these are not easy to test in empirical research; the sheer limitations of the survey method and interview-based methods make it hard to obtain conclusive results for either. Besides, it may be crucial to ask how and why they figure, in the first place, as hypotheses. For example, why is it that we do not ask if the saree, undoubtedly, cultural import to Kerala of the twentieth century, or the salwar-kameez, or the ubiquitous house gown ("nightie" in contemporary Malayalam) incites Malayali cultural anxiety around foreignness? ("Hijabophobia" 135-136)

The analysis reveals that the field's inherent ambiguity extends far beyond debates over the concept of modesty. It encompasses evolving and contradictory notions regarding the essence of religions, the characteristics of the spiritual realm, and the distinctions between the religious and secular domains. As described by Talal Asad, secular modernities often retain significant traits inherited from their religious origins, though with considerable variations (*Formations* 160). Such original traits got seamlessly woven into the cultural fabric of Kerala and are labeled as authentic Malayali Muslimness, while the "new" Arabised forms are seen as a more pronounced departure from the past. Consequently, it's not unexpected that the recent emergence of an Islamic public religiosity in Malayali cultural life is seen as a

"threat" to the secular fabric of Kerala, even though religiosity has long served as the foundation of Muslim social and political life in the state. Emma Tarlo elaborates on this "unhealthy preoccupation with difference" of religious clothing in secular contexts by exploring how

> [m]uch contemporary public debate, policy making, legislation and scaremongering concerning religious dress practices hinges on the assumption that visible expressions of faith not only pose a threat to secular values but also endorse, and indeed encourage, social segregation. Here it is assumed that the dress of religious groups acts as a boundary-making device, preventing interaction with others and discouraging the development of shared values. It is precisely these criticisms that were levelled against Jewish migrants to Britain in the 1920s and 1930s. Their dress was taken as proof of their inability to assimilate and of their supposed inability to act as loyal British citizens. A similar accusation has been levelled against Muslims in recent years, culminating in the introduction of restrictions and prohibitions on the wearing of headscarves and face veils in a number of countries. . . . Here dress practices are thought to inscribe unhealthy levels of difference, encourage insularity and prohibit sociality beyond the assumed confines of one's own religious group. ("Meeting Through" 69-70)

Studies examining orthodox or conservative religious attire practices find themselves situated in a thought-provoking context concerning discussions of secularism and diversity. These studies frequently display an interest in differences,

asserting that these differences impede the advancement of secularism, promote conservative values, are seen as oppressive to women, and pose a challenge to multiculturalism or, in some instances, contribute to its perceived failure. This intense fixation with difference is particularly evident in Kerala, and it has significantly shaped the conversations around Muslim women, portraying them as passive individuals who willingly accept oppression and thus negate any possibility of plurality in their bodily practices of religiosity. To unsettle this regnant discourse of oppression and to understand the plurality of meanings women attribute to the hijab, one has to go beyond the discourse of oppression as well as piety and resistance and locate the multiple motivations behind modest clothing. Gulf migration and Muslim women's increased exposure to other Islamic traditions have immensely influenced their clothing choices. Simultaneously, there is a growing need to authenticate one's clothing choices by placing it in pan- Islamic contexts and the contexts of other translocal traditions. Reina Lewis, in her study of modest fashion, makes the following observation about the diverse motivations behind Muslim women's clothing choices:

> Saba Mahmood (2005), in her study of Islamic revivalist women in Cairo in the 1970s, describes how for many women the initial and repeated experience of dressing in hijab is fundamental to the construction of the pious self. It is not that the subject is faithful a priori to donning the clothing, which might then merely clad the physical self. Rather, it is through the act of wearing, being seen in and comporting appropriately the veiled body that the pious disposition is cultivated and exercised. As well as

> this particular cohort, women may dress modestly for all sorts of reasons (making a political statement, avoiding unwelcome male attention, accommodating community norms, gaining social mobility or status), but the types of clothes they use and how they are worn on the body is rarely insignificant. Neither are women's dress decisions arrived at in a vacuum: the historically specific ways in which women's forms of modest dress are enabled and constrained by social, cultural and economic contexts includes the range and availability of garments from which women can choose. ("Fashion Forward" 44)

The debates analysed so far reveal that the campaigns against sexualisation and commodification of the female body is a key trope in both religious and secular-liberal feminist discourses, each sect attempting to take ownership of the efforts to liberate the Muslim woman from the other's corrupting influences. The popular genre of Islamic advice rhetoric connects outward appearance to physicality of the female body, thus locating aspects of bad hijab in their bodily conducts and putting the very motives of the wearer under question. The public sphere and cyber-public sphere of Kerala is full of vigilante groups. The religious ones are anxious about the moral corruption unveiled female bodies can cause and harass women for what they perceive as "improper hijab", while the other, with secular anxieties, persistently associate oppression with the religious clothing of Muslim women.

The overlaps that ensue prompt potential alliances and disputes that renders complex Muslim women's negotiations with these structures of knowledge and their unique ways of resisting dominant ideas of religiosities. Navigating into Muslim women's articulations on body and their religious bodily practices reveals that there

is a divide, rather clearly discernible, in the male discourse on body and the way Muslim women experience and comport embodied religiosities.

Reading the "male" interpretative texts has given a glimpse into how the male scholars of different religious groups hypersexualise Muslim female bodies. From their own vantage points of analysis, these male scholars deal extensively with contemporary Muslim women's nonconformity to religious strictures and share their apprehensions about it. While the religious discourses on Muslim women, in the recent decades, is characterised by a fear of the female body and its beauty that borders on extreme objectification and sexualisation, the secular narratives are replete with fear of the veiled Muslim body. The dominant narrative is that of Muslim women not being part of these processes of making the religious discourse. If at all they participate, they are accused of often validating the discourse created by male interpreters. A closer analysis of select speeches by Muslim women in the recent years is attempted here, since it offers a somewhat subversive picture that is potent enough to challenge these discourses about Muslim women as "passive, oppressed, and victimised" by the patriarchal religion.

Though the women speakers of various religious groups are rather uncritical of the hypersexualisation of Muslim female body in the male sermons, they vehemently criticise the secular-feminist readings of Muslim women as oppressed and justify the hijab in the name of their religiosity, choice, and agency. Unlike that of the male interpreters, these women's articulations are deeply rooted in their piety and they draw significantly from the Quran and Isalmic tradition to justify their position. In a debate organised by one of the mainstream television channels, "Muslim Sthreekalkku Parayanullathu" ("What Muslim Women Say") on the niqab

ban imposed by the MES, Muslim women representatives of various organisations put forth their arguments in defence of and against the use of niqab. These women take varying stances while answering the question "How Islamic niqab is?" The representatives of Haritha, Muslim League's girls wing, and JIH women's wing make an impassioned plea for the freedom of Muslim women to choose the niqab, as it is a matter of fundamental rights and individual freedom. These women place the debates in the context of larger political questions of secularism and nationalism in contemporary India, while the other members argue that the niqab is not an Islamic practice and hence should be restricted. A significant aspect of these women's views on niqab is the way in which they associate it with their religiosity, both when they defend the niqab and oppose the niqab, in a manner that is markedly different from the male discourse. Marked by a careful choice of vocabulary and expressions, it may be argued that, in these women's articulations the Muslim woman's body is neither objectified nor sexualised.

Many women speakers, like Amina Anwariya, Ayesha Cherumukku, Salma Anwariyya, Sainaba Sharafiyya, Jameela teacher Edavanna, and Ayisha Sajna of the Mujahid camp, as well as Rahmathunissa and Ruksana of JIH, can be seen making extremely nuanced engagements with the question of Muslim women and body. A careful phrasing of their motivations in their speeches makes these women's articulations subtly different from that of the male speakers. In their speeches in defence of the hijab, these women speakers give a nuanced expression to their "religious bodyhood" by passionately defending the Islamic premises of veiling. They address a range of questions pertaining to Muslim women, which include the position of women in Islam, gender, role of women in modern family and society, hijab as well as Muslim women amidst Hindutva politics. Though they articulate

their position in these debates with an exceptional clarity, they remain silent about the intra-religious debates on Muslim women. Their articulations are primarily aimed at the enemy outside, not the enemy within.

Many women speakers from within these organisations seem to validate the male speakers' criticism of feminism and ideas of gender equality as anti-woman. However, they offer a counter-narrative to contemporary feminism by locating themselves as Muslim women in the larger context of Islamic tradition: a tradition of women leaders and women warriors including Prophet's wife Ayisha. The position of women in Islam is testimony to the egalitarianism inherent in Islam and these recent ideologies like feminism can only help corrupt Islam and its followers, they argue. These women hold the view that these "corrupting influences" are no substitutes for Islam and the gender parity Islam advocates[10]. Many women locate their justification for veiling in the lives of prophet's wives and *Swahabi* women and their unquestioning submission to God (Cherumukku; Mampad). These speakers invite the audience's attention to ideals of femininity in Islam that is rooted in women's nurturing qualities as mothers. Occasionally some women speakers articulate their version of gender equality which is deeply rooted in Islam and its tradition. Safiya Ali voices her concern about the predicament of women in modern families with an apologetic note that the audience should not take her for a feminist and that hers is "Islamic" feminism. She says: "The bondage we experience in our homes is the result of our deviance from Islamic tradition" (00:17:00- 20:10). She emphatically states that not conforming to the Islamic tradition is the primary reason

[10] Many women speakers like Rahmathunnisa A and P. Ruksana of the JIH camp extensively deal with the compatibility of Islam with ideals of gender equality. For a sample of their critical engagements with religiosities of Muslim women, see Rahmathunnisa ; Ruksana.

for gender discrimination and to attain better living within the families Muslim women must revive their tradition. For these women, the idea of "an Islamic femininity" and gender in Islam is at odds with the feminist idea of an empowered women. Ayisha Cherumukku argues that gender equality is an approach incompatible with Islamic principles. Feminism is a product of the West and has in its core capitalist interests for exploiting women and it uses feminism as a means to commodify and exploit women, she contends ("Penswathwam").

Women speakers of JIH Kerala chapter vehemently criticises feminism and its associated ideas. They also situate their criticism in the larger context of Islamophobia and rising Hindutva politics. In her speech, Rahmathunnisa A states how the idea of gender in Islam is a pertinent issue that must be discussed and states that "Hijab, warrants women's participation in the public space. Our beauty is not the beauty of our body. Our beauty is the beauty of our devotion to Allah. . . . Women can be politicians and professionals. Women can keep secrets. Women too can protect" (00:28:00-31:50). She exhorts her sisters to deepen their faith in Islam, and its tradition to claim their rights and prominence as women. Many such instances of pious and political articulations on body and hijab can be found in the speeches of women. Sainaba Sharaffiya, another woman speaker says: "This body, my beauty is given to me by Allah and Allah has asked me to guard my body to be a noble woman" (00:00:03- 30). These instances are indicative of the critical engagement of Muslim women with aspects of gender in Islam. The precarity of Muslim community's status in contemporary India has triggered a more nuanced critical engagement from amongst these women. This now encompasses more

pertinent issues like secularism, hyper-nationalism, democracy, and the impact of rising Hindutva in India.

Girls Islamic Organisation, which acts as the women's wing of JIH in Kerala, organises conferences in which several young female speakers delve into the intricate challenges confronting Indian Muslim women. Positioned as critical insiders, these women pose thought-provoking queries about the role of women within the Quranic concept of justice, the representation of Muslim women in positions of authority, strategies to counter the stereotypical portrayals of Islam, the political positioning of Muslim women within the framework of minority rights, the difficulties in initiating gender-related discussions that may overshadow minority issues, and the quest for a platform where these concerns can be effectively articulated. These speakers also emphasise the feminist movement's failure to comprehend or provide solutions for the predicament faced by Muslim women strictly adhering to the religious framework of womanhood. They also argue that the disconnect that characterises the mainstream feminist engagements with Islam results in Muslim women distancing themselves from broader feminist movements[11].

Even when these women express their criticism to include such frameworks of thoughts like feminism, Islamic Feminism and militant Hindutva in contemporary India, they refuse to discuss the issues within and between organisations as well as

[11] In the Muslim Women's Colloquium organised by GIO in 2017, many young women speakers are seen voicing their thoughts and insights on Muslim women in contemporary India. For an instance of such an engagement, see "Marva M".

the objectification rampant in the male texts on women. Most of these speakers engage with a limited all women audience and their voices are often rendered feeble in the digital platforms, probably owing to the supposed lack of authenticity of these "women's interpretations" of religion. These resistive acts of contemporary Muslim women, though relatively subdued when compared to that of early Muslim women reformers, are more subtle and nuanced, since it emanates presumably from an acute understanding of their precarious position both as women and Muslims in contemporary India, and the complex negotiations that need to be made with ideas of modernity, secularism, and nationalism. Hence, the presence of these female voices itself has its significance, as they subtly resist the hypersexualised representations, from within and outside the community, that has over time led to a "negative visibility" of Muslim women and their bodies. Though they often echo their male counterparts in the ideas they put forth, the subtlety with which they contour their position as Muslim women performing their religiosities cannot be overlooked.

Along with the resistances emanating from within the religious groups, one can also locate resistances to these rampant objectification from outside the religious groups, from those who are referred to as either critical insiders or "Muslim for namesake" on account of their refusal to be part of these organisations and to conform to the dominant interpretations. A few of these women "opt-out" of the religion to become "ex-Muslims," and if they are still within, are often labeled as "Islam-bashing women" or "Muslim for namesake," whose Muslimness is perpetually questioned by the "insiders," thus rebutting their claims as Muslims and

labeling them as Islamophobic and products of certain vested interests. These women, who partake in the debates on Musim women, are often faced with the conundrum of proving and disproving their Muslimness. Thus emerges the binary of "the good Muslim woman": one who subscribes unquestioningly to the male versions of Muslim woman's bodyhood, and the "Muslim for namesake"–one who questions the male interpretative tradition and even the very Islamic premises on which the idea of veiling is based. Their negotiations with the dominant discourses require an exhaustive study that can uncover its complexity.

The interplay of rampant objectification and sexualising in the religious interpretative texts of both Islamic religious sects in Kerala– the new traditionalists and the reformists– and the victimhood inscribed upon her by the liberal-secular discourses have discursively evolved to form the dominant discourse on Muslim women and her body in Kerala. Notwithstanding the ubiquity of these dominant discourses, there is plurality in Muslim women's bodily practices in contemporary Kerala, locating which can significantly inform us on the varied aspects of their "bodyhood." Besides, such an analysis can take us beyond the entrenched discourse of the oppressed versus protected woman and help trace the intricacies in Muslim women's negotiations with secular and religious discourses.

To further elaborate this point and to help reveal the complexity of the discourses on Muslim women and her body, a brief survey of Muslim women's clothing practices in contemporary Kerala is attempted here. In the light of the analysis of the dominant discourses on the Muslim female body attempted so far, the study now navigates into the dominant trends in clothing practices followed by

Muslim women in recent years. This, presumably, can add a new dimension to this analysis of the discourse on body by locating numerous positioning between conformity to and deviance from dominant discourses on religious bodyhood of Muslim women.

Veiled women's visibility as Muslims in the public spaces casts their bodily practices under constant scrutiny, thereby making them an emblem of religion, either as conformists or as deviants. The subtle performances of veiling, unveiling, and sometimes not veiling enough, carry with them meanings that define women's religiosities, which are often at odds with the dominant male discourse on veiling. Emma Tarlo draws on the views presented by Linda Arthur in her introduction to the edited volume *Religion, Dress, and the Body* (1996).Tarlo states that Arthur effectively encapsulates certain key concepts on clothing practices put forth by Bryan Turner to succinctly outline how clothing functions to establish and uphold various aspects: personal and social identities, social hierarchies, definitions of deviance, systems of social control, and patriarchal power within ethno-religious subcultures . While this framework provides valuable insights into the social roles of attire in maintaining power dynamics within religious communities, Tarlo contends, it often perpetuates the notion that practices of modesty are characterised solely by their insularity and traditionalism. Though clothing is often viewed primarily as a tool for preserving boundaries, enforcing social control, and perpetuating established norms, recent research on religious fashion challenges these assumptions, revealing that seemingly conservative or orthodox religious attire practices can be remarkably dynamic and innovative, frequently engaging with mainstream fashion trends, Tarlo

states (“Meeting Through” 71-72). This kind of an engagement is particularly evident in Malayali Muslim women’s clothing choices.

The significance of the hijab and modest attire for Malayali Muslim women is far more intricate than can be simplified into the prevailing narratives that border on the oppression/liberation binary imposed upon them. A growing number of young Muslim women have been adopting distinct clothing styles. They opt for long, flowing skirts, wide palazzo pants, or straight-legged pants. Often, leggings and long skirts are layered beneath the pardah, with a printed or embellished headscarf complementing the ensemble. Headscarves are sometimes worn over a concealed coil of hair or a faux bun to create the illusion of volume. Various methods, ranging from securing hair with a large clip to using a scrunchie crafted from synthetic hair, are employed to achieve this effect, sometimes resulting in substantial protrusions. These clothing practices, including exposed ankles, glimpses of hair beneath scarves, and the use of leggings, faux buns, makeup, as well as salwars and pardahs with slits have been constantly drawing criticism from many male speakers as deviations from the expected religious attire norms as “grave clothing mistakes”.

It may be inferred that Muslim women maintain modesty in terms of coverage without adopting a demure appearance. The addition of volume to their attire serves to conceal the natural contours of the female body. Many women opt for loose pants resembling skirts, long billowing sleeves, and attires crafted from modern fabrics with precise tailoring, incorporating various colours, fabrics, and draping styles. Sporty hijabs and casual styles represent a dual expression, simultaneously adhering to and challenging established norms. Interestingly, what they find pious is also

aesthetically appealing, showcasing that these Muslim women's practices possess an intriguing duality.

The precursor of the Arab forms of veil in Kerala called the *makkana*– the kind of hijab fastened under the chin using a pin– is now worn mostly by old women, children and those women who are uninterested in being fashionable. This unfashionable form of the hijab, often integrated into school uniforms and Madrasa dress code of girls, is revered by the clerics. Nevertheless, it is less in practice, except in the educational institutions as a part of girls' uniforms. The once common *makkana* has been replaced by the Arabised hijab, which, according to the dominant interpreters, when used in a fashionable way, defeats the very purpose of its use. Using the hijab in an inappropriate context, like to dance in the public as in a flash mob, Onam celebration or while taking part in political rallies (as already discussed in the chapter), questions the very sanctity of the attire itself. For the male interpreters, such bodily comportments of women destabilises the very idea of an Islamic public space, which mandates clear segregation of genders, an absolute adherence to the ideas of hijab, and modest and restricted movements of women.

In the light of this brief survey of Muslim women's clothing practices attempted here, it may be argued that portraying Muslim women's dress practices as mere resistance to dominant culture under the Hindutva regime is as reductionist as claiming that pardah and hijab has erased socioeconomic differences and disincentivised consumption[12]. Even the seemingly demure and intentionally plain

[12] B.S. Sherin references Katherine Bullock's insights regarding feminist concerns about the veil being oppressive. Sherin argues that in a consumer-capitalist society, the hijab can be viewed as a means of breaking free from the constraints of the beauty myth and society's

styles carry specific motifs like beads, crystals, brooches, laces and other headscarf accessories that are indicators of upper middle class status. The fine sheen of the fabric and the layers added to the pardah signals refinement, style and luxury. Scarves and pardah embellished with crystals or sequins are also available. Some of them are quite glitzy with shiny crystals on the border. The pins that are used to attach the fleets together mimic an earring on the side of the head. Adopting numerous ways of wrapping, pinning and twisting the headscarf and wearing the pardah in a flattering way is a common phenomenon. Thus the hijab too is a fashion statement to make and the "fashionable" hijab is more in vogue than the earlier versions of modesty and veiling, like the *makkana*, that existed in Kerala. Contemporary fashion motifs, one may say, are thus meaningfully appropriated by Malayali Muslim women to make it Islamic and to adequately serve the motives of the wearer which are also as diverse as the forms of modest clothing. Reina Lewis's observations on the multiple motivations that determine women's choice of modest clothing can help gain some insights on Muslim women's clothing practices. Lewis notes:

> The ways in which modest self-presentation is achieved are myriad and so are the reasons that motivate it. For some women, modest dressing is clearly motivated by their understanding of their religion. For others, it provides a way to reinterpret community and ethnic norms in relation to

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expectation of an ultra-slim "ideal" woman. She also asserts that by compelling a woman to pick between her religious beliefs and the acceptance of liberalism, feminism is neglectful of its own influence and uses oppressive methods. Often, what we perceive as a choice in our clothing is not genuinely a choice at all. The fashion industry, capitalism, and various institutions make those choices on our behalf, she states. For the full interview, see "The Hijab is a Liberation".

> contemporary life. For others, modest dressing is less about faith or spirituality than about pragmatic options for achieving social or geographical mobility, or for responding to changes in their lifecycle (such as having children, getting older, going to a new job). Modest dressing can mean different things to different women and can change meanings over the course of their lives. ("Mediating" 3)

Within Muslim communities there are multiple competing opinions about what is modest and what is Islamic. A wide range of ideologies and stakeholders are involved in regulating and influencing women's dress: religion, secularism, public scrutiny, apparel industry, and local and global fashion trends. Elizabeth Bucar in her study of pious fashion in Indonesia, Turkey and Iran contends that "there is tremendous variation among locations, reflecting different aesthetic and moral values and different political histories and trajectories" (171). She states that modesty is understood also in relation to local perspectives on dress, gender, and aesthetics. These perspectives are themselves constantly in a flux. In Turkey sartorial choices are considered as a regulatory mechanism that controls their *nefis* ("inner self"). In Indonesia the narrative is on the "beautiful inside and the beautiful outside" and there is no need to hide a woman's womanly shape, while in Iran there is (174-175). In Kerala the religious discourse focus on the physicality of the female body, the outside, that can corrupt the inside of a man while the liberal-secular discourses focus on its perceived docility imposed upon it by religion.

Amidst these conflicting perspectives Muslim women's bodily acts in Kerala can be seen as subtly subversive, contesting both mainstream aesthetic and religious

authorities. The clerical and juridical elite scrutinise these sartorial choices with a discerning eye. Through their clothing choices, they purposefully deviate from the dominant local-Malayali dress codes and also subvert prescribed set of religious norms endorsed by clerics. These young Muslim women, with their modest yet contemporary fashion sense, appear to be resisting the male dictates regarding the hijab while remaining within the bounds of Islamic codes. This presents a conflict between the moral objectives outlined by religious experts and the aesthetic aspirations embraced by the women. In contrast to male interpretations of the hijab that align it with an Islamic femininity emphasising physical concealment, these women couple the hijab with local and global fashion trends, thereby creating unique religious femininities and boldly asserting their agency and autonomy in fashion decisions. Through these resistive choices, these women state their claim to their own versions of religiosity as well as visibility and access to public space in contemporary Kerala.

These clothing practices also represent an ongoing negotiation that Muslim women engage in by carefully balancing aesthetic and moral values. Within their expressions of religious femininity, they discover an aesthetic loophole that allows them to conform to cultural ideals of attractiveness while preserving their religious convictions. In a dynamic environment of fashion choices, women often find themselves navigating the intricate terrain of clothing decisions and bodily actions. They do so amidst the relentless criticism from secular elites who often view their Muslim identities as antiquated and oppressive. Simultaneously, they grapple with

the stern edicts periodically issued by religious authorities, further complicating their negotiation of self-expression within the confines of their faith.

This accounts for the contingent nature of the discourse on modesty and indicates that the very idea of modesty in a constant flux and is neither singular nor unitary. Reina Lewis in her introduction to the edited volume *Modest Fashion* elaborates on this complexity of the idea of modesty.

> Just as there are no garments or ways of wearing them that are intrinsically modest or intrinsically the property of any particular faith or sect, neither are there any guarantees that particular forms of dressing will be universally recognised as modest by those that observe them. All clothing is inherently polysemic and open to interpretation by different wearers and observers. Garments may acquire meaning as modest or as a marker of a particular faith over time, but this is also subject to change and contestation. ("Mediating" 3-4)

Among the diverse modesty markers used by Malayali women, Muslim woman's headscarf or hijab is singled out and is often perceived as visible indicators of oppression and growing religious identification among Muslims. Scholars like Leila Ahmed contend that the identification of the hijab as inherently Muslim is a historically constructed and politically motivated concept. She argues that Islamic revivalism has purposefully disassociated the hijab from its pre-Islamic origins and its earlier multi-faith regional use (*A Quiet*). Reina Lewis also notes that Islamic revivalism redefined the hijab as exclusively Islamic and a primary symbol of Muslim womanhood and female piety ("Mediating" 4). In parts of North India there

have existed different forms of veiling like the *ghunghat* which were considered as expressions of modesty and social status and also signified seclusion (Grehwal 51).

In Kerala, there still exist numerous "modesty markers", sanctioned and authenticated by the Malayali culture and tradition, to assess the appropriateness of female clothing. These markers are rarely put under scrutiny within the mainstream feminist enterprises for its patriarchal overtones, and they seamlessly blend in. Meanwhile Muslim woman's clothing is subjected to rigorous scrutiny for its difference and "foreignness." Despite the considerable appropriations and modifications made by the users, their sartorial choices are marked as sheer symbols of oppression. Concomitantly, the heightened emphasis on the global and local discourses surrounding the "authentic forms of hijab" has contributed to inadvertently labelling as less devout those Muslim women who choose not to wear it. Irrespective of their personal sense of piety or religiosity, women can experience judgment or anxiety when the practice of head-covering, and sometimes full-body or face covering, becomes prevalent within their particular community or environment. (Lewis,"Mediating" 4)

In the recent decades there is a significant increase in the number of Muslim women and girls in the public spaces of Kerala who flaunt their Muslimness using trendy scarves as their hijab and wearing the most fashionable clothes that is at once modest and attractive. These negotiations made by Muslim women sometimes border on patterns of downveiling[13] in which the very idea of the hijab as

[13] Linda Herrara uses the term "downveiling" to describe a subtle and seemingly expanding trend observed among specific circles of urban Egyptian women who opt for less concealing and more liberal forms of Islamic attire. The concept of downveiling

propagated by the male interpreters (as a practice that must be used to hide the beauty of the female body from male gaze) is flouted. Those who practice these varying levels of modesty are often clubbed together and referred to as "ultra-orthodox Muslims" in the secular discourses. But what is "ultra-orthodox" to some is merely orthodox to others. Levels of conformity and deviance–that determines who is a good hijabi and who is a bad hijabi– is also varyingly defined within the religious discourses. This reminds us that none of the popular terms – orthodox, ultra-orthodox, traditionalist, conformist, nonconformist, reformist and conservative are clear cut.

Only an extensive ethnographic study can reveal what the hijab and the bodily practices of religiosity signifies to Muslim women who practice a broad spectrum of Muslimness. The politics of inclusion and exclusion as the "true Muslim" and the "Muslim for namesake" can be addressed only through such an analysis of women's lived experiences. The brief analysis of vestimentary choices and appropriations by Muslim women reveal that there is an unbridged gap between the idea of the Muslim female body in the contemporary "male" religious texts and the bodily practices of religiosity followed by large sections of Muslim women.

The analysis of Muslim women's voices and bodily conducts offers a counterpoint to dominant binaries of the oppressed/protected body. It reveals that their fashion choices, the motives behind their clothing, and the discourses on body

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reflects not only the ongoing struggle between Islamists and the political elite to shape the daily practices of Egyptians but, more significantly, illustrates how various factors, beyond the control or manipulation of any singular group, converge to shape the socio-cultural landscape where ongoing debates and negotiations regarding dress, culture, and identity politics unfold. For a detailed analysis, see Herrara, "Downveiling".

are not unitary. It goes beyond the global narrative of Islamisation, the discourse of resistance to Islamophobia worldwide and in India, and responses to rising Hindutva politics in India. Reading resistance in the bodily practices of Muslim women and scripting her body as a symbol of political Islam is as problematic and as reductionist as inscribing symbols of syncretic Islam, i.e., a blend of Islamic belief and local Malayaliness on her body. Both predetermine an unchanging, essentialist "Muslim female bodyhood."

The analysis in this chapter reveals that Muslim women occupy an ambiguous position in her complex dialectical relationship with forces of religion and secularism. Problematising the excessive sexualisation of female body in the religious discourses of male religious scholars in Kerala undercuts the idea of Muslim women's bodily inscriptions as markers of devotion and faith. Barring a few, most of the secular narratives also pin down Muslim women as victims of a patriarchal religion whereby their bodies are seen as sites of patriarchal control and women as silent victims of it lacking any agency. Manoeuvring into the complex sartotial practices of Muslim women reveal that they subtly subvert the dominant ideas on hijab by choosing to downveil and thus challenge the idea of the Muslim woman as dowdy. They also explore the idea of the hijab as a fluid entity. Provided that the meaning of the hijab itself is contingent, its practices are also constantly evolving and are subjected to perpetual appropriations. It can be argued that contemporary Malayali Muslim women's bodily conducts thus establish a communication system that can be understood only with a keen awareness of the local contexts. A wide range of meanings are conveyed by women's bodily acts. This chapter aimed to make that communication explicit.

Conclusion

A recent controversy in Kerala, which has come to be labelled as the *Thattam Vivaadam* ("The Headscarf Controversy") has once again provoked the socio-political scene, which has thence witnessed many acts and counter-acts from within and outside faith, formations of allies and foes and, disputes and consensus, marking the ongoing nature of these debates on Muslim female body in Kerala. The debates that ensued, following a remark by K. Anilkumar[1], a member of the Legislative Assembly of Kerala representing the ruling political alliance LDF, in October 2023, triggered responses from diverse corners. In one of the responses, a Samastha leader Umer Faizy Mukkom, said that religious authorities will not let Muslim women remove their *thattam* and "tread the wrong path" (*azhinjaaduka*) and be libertines. In the interaction organised by a mainstream Malayalam news channel he repeatedly used the phrase to indicate the authority of "the male religious elite" to oversee Muslim women's body and bodily conducts. The implications in his statements were widely discussed, but no significant responses emerged from the reformist sects or other traditionalist factions ("Thattam Thalayil Ninnu Veenal").

Amidst the conspicuous silence of Muslim organisations and their women's wings, V.P. Suhara, the founder of NISA, expressed her protest through a radical act

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[1] In a speech given at a conference organised by the free thinkers group *Essence*, K. Anilkumar reportedly highlighted the empowerment of Muslim girls in Malappuram. According to his remarks, the influence of the Communist party has enabled these girls to confidently decline attempts to make them wear the *thattam*. The interpretations of his statements varied, with one version suggesting that the Communist party has played a role in encouraging Muslim women to reject the traditional *thattam*. For a report on Anilkumar's remark and the controversies that followed, see "CPM Faces Heat."

of removing her *thattam* and called Umer Faizy's statement an attack on both the honour of Muslim women and on Islam itself. She vehemently criticised the cleric for his remarks and extended her criticism to question the scriptural premises of veiling, stating that it is not mandated by Islam ("Thattam Thalayil Ninnu Veenal"). Her response was widely discussed in the Malayali public sphere, but Muslim women's groups from within faith maintained a "meaningful silence" on Suhara's activism. Such silences are often attributed to the precarity of the community's condition in contemporary India, yet the selective rights activism of these women's groups needs to be problematised (Santhosh, "Beyond the Binaries" 106).

Co-textualising this silence of contemporary Muslim women with that of a speech delivered by K.A. Aishabee at the Manappuram Muslim Women's Conference organised by the reformist organisation Aikyasangham in the year 1936 can help reveal certain ruptures and discontinuities in Muslim women's engagement with aspects of gendered religiosity in contemporary Kerala. Aishabee, in her speech, deals extensively with several issues faced by Muslim women in early twentieth century Kerala society and then shifts her focus to reflect on the injustices they face from within– specifically, the discrimination women face within the reformist groups– and questions the male religious authorities about their reluctance to seat Muslim women along with men in the meetings and conferences organised by them. She asks:

> While the religious authorities are willing to include newly converted Muslim women in the meetings organised at Mavelikkara and Kochi, they refuse to extend the same courtesy to us, who have long been believing

> women with a deep-rooted sense of piety. Why are you, men, reluctant to let us participate in those conferences? We, too, have the faculties, just like men, to work for the sake of humanity. By denying us the space and opportunity to do so, you are jeopardising the prospects of both Muslim women and the community. It is a perpetual curse to sustain un-Islamic veiling practices just to satisfy some male prejudices. We women respect Islamic hijab, and we are ready to practice it, knowing that it is a moral concept and an honor to women. In the name of Islam, I exhort the men of our community to stop promoting un-Islamic veiling practices. We are entitled to all the freedom assured by Islam. (181-182)

Being part of women's wings of various religious organisations, Aishabee's contemporary counterparts often resort to subtler and even subdued responses to patriarchy within the community. Despite the intense polemics between groups pertaining to issues on ideological orientations, in which women from within these groups also participate, these women maintain a defensive posture while faced with the double demand of ensuring their rights within religion and defending the community from within. This critical juncture that has emerged out of the changes in the overlapping socio-political contexts of contemporary Kerala, in which the global, national, and local variables intersect, presents a complex context for the analysis of the Muslim woman's question. The analyses attempted in this study can sufficiently help explain the contingent nature and complexity of the discourses on Muslim women and body.

Central to the analysis attempted in this study is the idea that the discourse on body, hijab, or any other sartorial practice of Muslim women cannot be understood in isolation. It has to be placed in context with a thorough focus on the specificities of history, culture, and politics that determine the differences in the negotiations the community makes from time to time. Drawing insights from methodological approaches such as body studies and Islamic feminism, this study attempted to examine the gendered Muslim woman's body as a text, trace its genealogy, and interpret the social-historical tensions that shaped Muslim women's religious bodyhood in Kerala. The analysis sought to illuminate the complex nature of negotiations involving ideas of modernity, secularism, and nationalism and understand how traditionalists, reformists, and Muslim women within these sects engaged in these negotiations within a multicultural society.

The history of dominant discourse on Muslim women, as the veiled, suppressed other traced in this study, provides an analytical backdrop to the study of gendered religious body in Kerala. Reading the biases within Western historical narratives, and how those texts were reproduced and reinforced in the colonies by the native moderns and resisted by traditionalists, uncovers the complexity in the history of Muslim societies' negotiations with ideas of colonial modernity. From within these contexts, the study attempted to analyse the global/local discourses on hijab and other bodily practices of Muslim women, as well as the methodological issues involved in using the Western feminist framework in reading the lives and experiences of women in non-Western societies. The embeddedness of the question that further ensues from the current socio-political situation in India, subsequent to

the rise of Hindutva, delineated in the chapter, forefronts the structural complexities inherent in the contexts of Malayali Muslimness.

Reading the discourse on veil and its history is crucial in understanding how practices of embodied religiosity determine Muslim women's identity in different contexts. The brief survey of hijab bans, forced hijab, "veiling-unveiling-reveiling" movements and their history, attempted in the second chapter of this thesis, reveals the embeddedness of diverse variables in diverse contexts. The analysis also reveals that though the context under study, Kerala, is also impacted by the conflicts between factors like secularism, nationalism, and religious identity, it requires a specialised focus owing to the uniqueness of the region, its history, culture, community ethos, and political milieu. Besides these, the chapter traces the emergence of traditionalist/reformist ideological orientations within the Islamic tradition of Kerala, which has significantly contributed to the dominant discourse on Malayali Muslim women.

Contesting notions of religiosity and its negotiation with ideas of colonial modernity in the reformist texts led to the emergence of a diverse spectrum of discourses on Muslim female body in Kerala. Between these two poles of the reformist/traditionalist binary, numerous positionings are discernible. The analysis attempted in the third chapter reveals this intricate nature of the discourse on female body that emerged in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century Kerala, subsequent to the traditionalist/reformist polemics on the "authenticity and legitimacy" of their respective theological positions on various matters. Numerous instances drawn from the rich corpus of Mappila literature and reform texts,

subjected to a co-textualised reading, reveals some major differences in the cultural imaginaries and reformist discourse of Malayali Muslims about female body during the period.

The discourse on body in the pre-reformist Islamic tradition of Kerala provides a significant counter-text to the reformist discourse on body, problematising the reformist claims on the making of the new Muslim woman. Apart from celebrating female beauty, the Mappila poets also endow women with such qualities like courage and power. From epitomes of beauty to saints and great warriors, these women, like Husn al Jamal, Nafeesath Beevi, and Saleeghath Beevi, legitimately inhabited the world of Mappila imagination. Vaidyar's Husn al Jamal is depicted as a woman of exceptional beauty, intelligence, and character, who is in control of her own destiny. The poem celebrates the strength, resilience, and intelligence of women and is an important work in the history of Mappila literature. More importantly, the female body, its beauty, and vigour are celebrated in this poem and numerous other Mappila songs. Such representations in literary texts and other practices of gender-fluid spirituality, that existed in the pre-reformist period, were gradually replaced by texts that abound in reformist fervor and a de-eroticised language. Aspects of female body and its beauty is meticulously erased in these texts, such as the Arabi-Malayalam novel *Khadeejakutty*, engendering a sexually de-marked language to refer to women in the texts that later emerged. The analysis has attempted to succinctly delineate how the dominant idea of the beautiful, erotic body in pre-reformist literature stands in stark contrast to the idea of a re-formed female bodyhood in the reformist texts.

Besides, this exploration of the history of gendered religious body has traced the evolution of the discourse on hijab through an analysis of select reform texts. Vignettes drawn from these texts reveal that the hijab did not signify a mere vestimentary practice for most of the reformists. Instead, it signified aspects of modesty and female honour that women should practice in their social interactions. Some male reformers, in their efforts to rationalise the religious strictures on hijab, often linked it to women's safety and honor, asserting that it serves as a safeguard against the perceived perils of being seen by men. Besides, hijab, for them, symbolised the very superiority of Islamic culture over its Western and Indian counterparts. In their texts, hijab is depicted as a symbol of modesty, elevated status, and a tangible marker of a Muslim woman's commitment to protecting her chastity from the gaze of men. For women reformers, the hijab symbolises not only modesty and religiosity, but, crucially, religious empowerment, granting them access to spaces beyond their homes and enabling and legitimising their presence in "male" spaces.

The examination underscores that Muslim women reformers' interpretation of the hijab primarily centers on principles of empowerment and modesty, extending beyond the idea of a mere superficial sartorial practice. Thus, for the women reformers, the meaning of the hijab remained fluid and implied a set of bodily conducts and aspects of modesty that Muslim women must follow, sartorial practices being only one amongst them. Women subtly subverted the patriarchal notions and defined the hijab as an integral part of their religiosity, empowering them with a legitimate access to the "male" public spaces.

In an attempt to foreground Muslim women's voices within the reformist rhetoric, this chapter has traced their negotiations with the dominant discourses on space, veiling, and women's access to the public sphere. Contrary to popular beliefs about them as passive victims of religious projects, it can be seen that women participated in the polemics, often resisting the dominant discourses from within and outside religion. They were at once reacting to the traditionalist *Ulema*, patriarchal implications in the reformist texts, and accusations by the Christian missionaries and Aryasamajam about Islam as the cause for Muslim women's degenerate status. Reading the feminist implications in these texts unsettles the notion of Muslim women as passive victims of the community's patriarchy. This unveils how women reformers claim their Muslimness rooted in Islamic tradition to negate, refute, and subtly subvert the male discourses to embody an Islamic femininity.

Leila Ahmed in her study of early feminist enterprises in Egypt, rejects the idea of a singular, uniform movement of reform in Muslim societies. In Muslim women's feminist engagements with ideas of reform in Egypt, she identifies two distinct strands of feminism and links them to Western colonialism (174-175). One strand, represented by Huda Sha'rawi (1879-1947), looks towards the West for inspiration, while the other, advocated by Malak Hifni Nassef (1886-1918), does not align itself with Westernisation. In contrast to Huda Sha'rawi, Nassef was highly skilled in Arabic. She delivered lectures fluently in Arabic and was a prolific writer in the language. She was at ease with her cultural heritage and had a strong foundation in Arab culture and her native Arabic language (178). The feminist enterprises of the Muslim women reformers of Kerala fall into the credo of Malak

Hifni Nassef and can be identified as antithetical to the ideas of Western feminism. Remarkably, these women individually and collectively negotiated with modernity from within Islam and asserted their claims to a fuller Islamic femininity.

The Muslim reformers' appropriation of the religious idiom has its ambiguities. In the drive towards a purer version of Islam, the reformers undermined the empowering aspects of the homosocial spaces of the homes inhabited by Muslim women. The narratives on the pre-reformist women's cultural spaces as a limiting one, both in the Muslim reform texts and criticisms of Muslimess from outside, pushed the rich Mappila culture to a liminality. In the process, they delegitimised the history of Mappila women's contribution to literature, culture, and religious scholarship; the ways in which they used these secluded spaces as spaces of cultural production, their literacy in Arabi- Malayalam script, their participation in devotional practices, and the female presence in the spiritual imaginings of the community. The women reformers, it can be argued, fervently tried to replace the "imagined" absence of Muslim women with their presence in the reformist religious enterprises of the period. Yet, the historiographic enterprises, both from within and outside the community, are marked with a conspicuous absence of Muslim women's engagements within the reformist and pre-reformist tradition.

The spread of modern education, primacy attributed to the Malayalam script, and the subaltern status attributed to Arabi-Malayalam and Mappila literature in the growing secular environment of Kerala resulted in a gradual drifting away of

Muslim women from their Mappila cultural texts and contexts[2].Thus, Mappila literature ceased to be a source of religious and cultural learning for Mappila women, as the reformers were trying to create the educated "new" Muslim woman who is distanced further and further away from those worlds and spaces that had hitherto provided them with a sense of belonging and gave them avenues for creative expressions and knowledge production. Equally marginalised are the reformist engagements of Muslim women in the mainstream historiography on Kerala reform movements.

These analyses reveal the need to problematise the reformist claims on "re-forming" Muslim women as well as the biases in mainstream historiography that overlooks Muslim women's agentive acts in the history of Kerala. The history of their cultural and spiritual engagements, contributions to journalism, politics, and religious reform is also marked by an absence as exemplified by the overlooked legacy of Haleema Beevi. Despite her substantial contributions to the field of journalism, politics and religious reform, Haleema Beevi remained "invisible" until recently. Efforts at reclaiming her legacy, in the form of a biography[3], by two researchers, Noorjehan and Noora, have helped raise some pertinent questions about the biases within the mainstream feminist enterprises and underscore the need to recognise and amplify the voices of Muslim women in historical narratives. The delegitimisation of Muslim women's voices needs to be read in the context of the

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[2] The role played by Mappila literature in fashioning the Mappila man and woman still remains unexplored, except for a few recent attempts by some researchers. For an ethnographic account of the role of *Malapattu* in Mappila man's self fashioning, see Hudawi, Muneer.

[3] *Pathradhipa* (*The Publisher*) published in 2020, is a long due corrective to the neglect of Haleema Beevi in the history of Kerala reform.

conflicts between practices of religiosity as "oppressive and backward" and modernity as "liberatory and progressive". The corpus of reformist literary texts by Muslim women, in the form of short stories, poems and plays, is yet to be explored. These literary texts can be read for vignettes of Muslim lifeworlds of the period and the community's interactions with changing notions of self and identity.

In the texts on hijab by Muslim reformers, there are numerous references to the dominant narratives of Muslim backwardness and the objections to hijab raised in the emergent Malayali public sphere of the period. The history of Muslim women and her body in Kerala is also the history of complex negotiations with the practices of Muslim religiosity. With the spread of modern education and an intensified discourse on modernity in nascent Kerala, Muslim religious practices were relentlessly pitted against ideas of modernity. These narratives, analysed in the larger context of the conflicts between practices of religiosity and modernity, present a useful background to the study of contemporary debates on Muslim women in Kerala. The cultural mechanisms that led to the emergence of a concept of the ideal Malayali is invariably the outcome of various negotiations and compromises that still has its discords within it, owing to the lack of inclusivity in it. Introduction of *manaka Malayalam* ("the new Malayalam script") and making of the Malayalam literary corpus can also be examined for the mechanisms with which it dislodged the literary and cultural traditions of the subaltern communities.

The discourse around "the secular-liberal Muslim woman" versus "the religious Muslim woman" gradually intensified, and Muslim women in large numbers had a tendency to shun their Muslimness, which was deemed to be a

marker of their social and cultural backwardness, until the 1990s. This period witnessed the resurgence of a "new Muslimness" in Kerala owing to some significant socio-political and cultural shifts. The factors include Gulf migration, rigorous organisational activities in the state by various Islamic groups, and the reawakening of religions globally in the 1980s. The bodily practices of Islamic religiosity or Muslimness, like the *thattam*, that hitherto represented sheer backwardness, now emerged in new forms of Arabised clothing like the hijab and the pardah.

The vulnerability of the Muslim subject in post- Babri Masjid India and rising global Islamophobia are also posited as potential reasons for the rampancy of such identity markers like the hijab and the pardah (Arafath and Arunima,"Banning the Hijab" 26).Though these two factors are of significant importance in predicating the Muslim question in contemporary India, they cannot be considered as the only factors that has led to the current dominant discourses on Muslim female body in Kerala. A more holistic approach reveals that Kerala has its uniqueness owing to the history of migration, intense religious and political polemics, a rich history of social reform movements and developmental narratives. The intra-faith debates between the traditionalists and the reformists on the scriptural legitimacy of various religious practices, gender, women's education, and mosque entry, added a new dimension to the discourse on Muslim women in Kerala. The conflicts between religious sects and the secular-liberal feminist discourses, which intensified post-1950s, have also contributed significantly to the evolution of the discourse on Muslim female body. An analysis of the patterns of representation and its contingent nature calls for an

even more rigorous analysis of the contemporary socio-cultural and religious contexts that caused these changes.

The debates on Muslim women in the recent decades reveal the entangled nature of this discourse in Kerala. The idea of Muslimness being a cultural and historical force in the lives of Malayali Muslims, this study has attempted to foreground its role and that of the contemporary religious interpretative texts in creating the dominant discourse on Muslim female body. Various religious groups act as contesting forces with regards to their insistence on religious markers on female body and control of its visibility and mobility. The analysis uncovers how the religious, secular, and political forces intersect in the making of a dominant discourse on Muslim female body and how and to what extent Muslim women in contemporary Kerala engage in resistive or subversive acts.

Reading contemporary discourses on Muslim women and her body in Kerala, makes it clear that these discourses signify both continuity and break with the past. Select speeches by religious scholars and representative leaders of traditionalist and reformist organisations examined reveal that there are certain dominant shared patterns in the discourse on Muslim women's body. Besides, there is a significant shift in the nature of the discourse on body both in the reformist and traditionalist discourses. The contemporary reformist discourse on Muslim women, with its rampant objectification and hyper sexualisation, differs significantly from the discourse created by early reformers. The traditionalists, notwithstanding their ideological differences with the reformists, ally with them in the "religious making" and objectification of the Muslim woman's body.

Despite the crucial changes in the ideological orientations of the traditionalists, with regard to aspects of religiosity and its practices, they remain steadfast in maintaining religious interpretation and leadership a male domain. Moreover, with the heightened focus within the contemporary traditionalist discourse in rationalising theological rules, they sound more like the "neo-reformists," and both sects echo the other in their views on women, ensuing some strange convergences in the discourse on women. The analysis demonstrates the surprising alliances that emerge from among these sects in creating the religious discourse of the hyper-sexualised, objectified Muslim female body, which is perpetually under the risk of being seen as an oppressed-victimised trope in Kerala's mainstream narratives.

The contemporary male religious interpretative texts, both reformist and traditionalist, present the female body as a substantial threat to the public space, as an object of fear (for the bodies pose a threat to men), constantly gazed upon, and hence highly sexualised, hyper-visible bodies. The language used by these scholars "negatively" eroticises the Muslim woman's body. They often present their apprehensions– which are rather subjective in nature– on women's veiling, visibility, and aspects of their participation in public spaces. These expressions form part of the corpus of religious texts on Islamic ethical self-fashioning perpetually produced and circulated by religious organisations. Yet, they signify a break with the earlier Islamic tradition of Kerala, which had previously employed a more neutral language in its interpretative texts. Reading select texts – in its respective contexts – reveals that there exist some dominant patterns of objectification in the

discourse on Muslim women's bodily conducts. For Muslim women, the hijab has multiple meanings, but, in the reductionist readings of these male speakers, it becomes a mere piece of cloth that must be used to hide women's bodies– to "de-feminise" them.

Amidst these male debates on Muslim women, there are women's voices. The study locates women's activism from within these organisations, the nature of which is more subdued compared to that of their early reformist counterparts and totally uncritical of the objectification rampant in the male texts. Texts produced by contemporary Muslim women from within these organisations overlook the sexualisation rampant in the male religious narratives, and there is no significant resistance to it from within these women's groups.

The rather subdued nature of contemporary Muslim women's resistances from within these organisations, needs to be put in context to explain their selective silences and responses to debates from within and outside faith. The sensitive political atmosphere in contemporary India, in which the Muslim community is faced with a precarious situation, presumably limits these women's articulations. Diverse reasons can be attributed to the shift in the nature of women's responses to religious debates. The subordinate status of women's wings within these organisations can be one of the reasons, which needs to be explored through an exhaustive analysis. Such sociological explorations of the nature of Muslim women's agency within these religious organisations can significantly inform us on the roles played by them in religious meaning-making and community formations in Kerala.

The analysis also shows that the male interpretations extends beyond hijab and aspects of Muslim women's veiling to include larger questions of the religious permissibility of Muslim women's interactions in public spaces, their visibility, and mobility. The idea of an Islamic public space in these male texts is intricately related to the discourse on hijab and is premised on certain regulatory principles rooted in what they perceive as the Islamic idea of gender. These spaces are predominantly envisioned by them as "male" spaces. While Muslim women from within these organisations resort to subtle mechanisms of resistance to these dominant ideas of an Islamic public space, those from outside these organisations perform their religious femininities, either with or without "appropriate" hijab and claim these male spaces.

A brief survey of Muslim women's clothing practices in contemporary Kerala, attempted in the fourth chapter, further elaborates this point. It reveals how the Muslim women appropriate the idea of hijab and seclusion in their everyday lives and subvert these dominant discourses of the protected/oppressed Muslim woman. Though the impact of the dominant discourses produced by the conflicting narratives of religious and liberal-secular sects cannot be completely overlooked, through the diverse bodily practices, Muslim women mark their bodies as sites of resistance to these discourses. In the process, they express varying degrees and forms of religiosities. Significantly, this brief survey of the sartorial practices of contemporary Muslim women opens up a host of new questions and new terrains for critical inquiries. The multiplicity of meaning and a range of appropriations made by women invite our attention to the need for further explorations of the intricate aspects of religious bodyhood and fashion. This analysis also reveals that the

reading of the hijab as a sheer symbol of resistance to rising Hindutva and Islamopbobia as well as a Muslim identity marker is also a reductionist reading, since it negates the plurality of aspirations in Muslim women's bodily acts. Liberal-secular discourses, which evolve in reaction to these religious narratives, also read the hijab as a symbol of oppression and Muslim women as victims of religion. Only an extensive ethnographic study can reveal the nuances in Muslim women's negotiations with dominant ideas of religiosity and their meanings of the hijab.

Sartorial practices of contemporary Muslim women are only briefly outlined in this study. There remains further scope for an exhaustive study that can uncover aspects of conformity and resistance within religious clothing. Further dimensions can be added to the inquiries by exploring how the wide range of veiling practices as well as the refusal to veil leaves their identity as "Muslim women" rather entangled. This is to say that, Muslim women, even when they are not part of these organisations, referred to as critical insiders, Islam bashing women, "just Muslims" or Muslim for namesake, make significant negotiations with aspects of religiosity. This needs to be explored to address the wide spectrum of religiosities these women perform. There remains the need to carry out sociological and ethnographic studies of contemporary Muslim women's gendered religious practices, which can provide insights on social change, changing patterns in the discourses on religion and gender, as well the problem of expressing Muslimness within multicultural societies.

Recommendations

The attempt made in this study to trace the history of religious bodyhood and its role in determining the contemporary discourses on Muslim women's body opens up a host of new questions about Muslim women's identity, subjectivity, and representation. The study, titled "The Muslim Female Body: Reading the Politics of Representation and Resistance in Kerala," is not an exhaustive analysis of Muslim women's representation in the context of Kerala. Foregrounding the specificities in the context of Kerala calls for a range of analyses that can be undertaken in the study of Muslim women.

The examination of reformist texts undertaken in this study emphasises the need to critically assess the reformist endeavors to "re-form" Muslim women. Besides, it highlights the biases present in mainstream historiography, which tends to overlook Muslim women's active contributions and their agentive roles in Kerala's history, their cultural and spiritual engagements, as well as their contributions to journalism, politics, and religious reform. An understanding of the biases within mainstream feminist initiatives underscores the imperative to acknowledge and amplify the voices of Muslim women. These omissions demand reparative efforts within academic undertakings.

The body of reformist literary works, authored by Muslim women, encompassing diverse genres like short stories, poems, and plays, remains largely unexplored. Vignettes from these literary texts can offer significant insights into Muslim lifeworlds and the community's evolving interactions with changing notions

of self and identity. Additionally, there exists substantial scope for analyses that can unveil biases in the stereotypical representations of Muslim women in mainstream Malayalam literature and cinema.

Within the reformist texts on hijab analysed in this study, there are numerous references to the prevailing narratives of Muslim backwardness and the objections to hijab raised within the emergent Malayali public sphere of that period. As modern education gained prominence and discussions on modernity intensified in nascent Kerala, Muslim religious practices found themselves in constant opposition to ideas of modernity. These narratives, analysed in the broader context of conflicts between religiosity and modernity, serve as a valuable backdrop to the examination of contemporary debates on Muslim women in Kerala. The cultural mechanisms that contributed to the idea of the ideal Malayali are inevitably entwined with various negotiations and compromises, which still lack inclusivity. Further exploration of the introduction of *manaka Malayalam* ("the new Malayalam script") and the creation of the Malayalam literary corpus can shed some light on the mechanisms employed to displace the literary and cultural traditions of subaltern communities.

The analysis of contemporary Muslim women's voices within religious organisations, attempted in this study, highlights their significant contributions to the realm of religious interpretation. However, understanding the relatively subdued nature of these women's resistances to male discourses from within these organisations requires a thorough contextualised analysis to elucidate their selective silences and responses to debates from within and outside faith. The sensitive political atmosphere in contemporary India, where the Muslim community faces a

precarious situation, likely constrains these women's articulations. Various factors contribute to the shift in the nature of women's responses to religious debates, and one such factor can possibly be the subordinate status of women's wings within these organisations. These women's religious engagements from within these organisations require an exhaustive study. Sociological explorations of the nature of Muslim women's agency within these religious organisations can provide valuable insights into their roles in shaping religious meanings and community formations in Kerala.

A brief exploration of Muslim women's clothing practices in contemporary Kerala, undertaken in the study, demonstrates how Muslim women adopt and reinterpret the concepts of hijab and seclusion in their daily lives, challenging the dominant discourses that portray them as either protected or oppressed. The varied bodily practices of Muslim women serve as a form of resistance, turning their bodies into sites of contestation against these prevailing narratives. This brief survey not only raises new questions but also opens up novel avenues for critical inquiry. The multiplicity of meanings and diverse appropriations made by women necessitate further exploration into the intricate aspects of religious bodyhood and fashion. Additionally, the analysis suggests that interpreting the hijab solely as a symbol of resistance to rising Hindutva and Islamophobia, or as a marker of Muslim identity, is a reductionist perspective, as it overlooks the diverse aspirations embedded in Muslim women's bodily expressions. Liberal-secular discourses often perceive the hijab as a symbol of oppression, casting Muslim women as victims of religion. These insights call for an extensive ethnographic study that can unveil the nuanced

negotiations of Muslim women with dominant notions of religiosity and their personal meanings of the hijab. Moreover, the religious bodyhood of Muslim women in emerging spaces, such as the digital media, can also be subjected to a comprehensive academic scrutiny.

The exploration of Muslim women's sartorial practices, briefly outlined in this study, provides an opportunity for an in-depth examination to uncover elements of conformity and resistance within religious clothing. Expanding the inquiry to explore a wide range of veiling practices and the choices of sects of Muslim women to unveil, in an era of heightened religiosity, can possibly reveal complex entanglements in their identity as "Muslim women". Muslim women not affiliated with specific organisations, referred to as critical insiders, Islam-bashing women, "just Muslims," or "Muslim for namesake," also engage in significant negotiations with aspects of religiosity. An exploration of these women's voices is necessary to address the diverse spectrum of religiosities Muslim women perform in Kerala. Sociological and ethnographic studies of contemporary Muslim women's gendered religious practices are needed to reveal layers of meaning indicative of social change, dominant discourses on gender, and the challenges of expressing Muslimness within multicultural societies.

At the core of this study is the idea that the discourse on body, hijab, or any other sartorial practice of Muslim women cannot be understood in isolation. It must be contextualised with a thorough focus on the specificities of history, culture, and politics that determine the differences in the negotiations the community undergoes over time. Reading the body as text, tracing its genealogy, and exploring the social-

historical tensions that constitute religious bodyhood in Kerala reveal the intricate nature of arbitrations with ideas of modernity, secularism, and nationalism. This endeavor, to uncover the historical development of religious bodyhood and its impact on shaping present-day discussions on Muslim women's bodies, raises numerous questions regarding the identity, subjectivity, and representation of Muslim women. An emphasis on the unique socio-political aspects of Kerala forefronts diverse array of questions that remain to be explored in the examination of Muslim women.

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