CHAPTER 5: From the past to the present

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Representations of women in the present: making the connection

I had stated in the previous chapters that some of the ideas about women that got entrenched in the early 20th century discourse were carried forward to the 21st century. In the following section of this chapter I illustrate this primarily through a brief analysis of a popular magazine, *Vanitha*, and by presenting some of the statistics related to Malayali women.

*Vanitha* is the best-selling magazine in Kerala with an average readership of 23.53 lakhs (in 2012). It is a subsidiary publication of the Malayala Manorama group and was started in 1975. It is published bimonthly from Kottayam and edited by Prema Mammen Mathew. As the magazine describes itself, it “mixed tradition with modernity” (*Feminine Grace & Substance*, 2012). The early women’s magazines dealt with topics related to women, literature, science & health, art & history, and general (lifestyle, astrology, *parishkaaram*, national news, theology, general knowledge, ethics, economics, behaviour, and spirituality). *Vanitha* does not deal with the same range of subjects as the earlier magazines. An analysis of the magazine from the period 2007-2008 shows that it has articles on etiquette, grooming/fashion, actors, health (sexual & general), childcare, contraception, pregnancy and care, women achievers (academic and professional), cooking tips and recipes, housing and related issues, a serialized novel, two cartoons and a couple of pages for young children. Though *Vanitha* started out as a women’s magazine, it has almost as much male readership as female readership and so the articles are meant for the middle class family than for women alone. Take a look at figures 1 to 11 given in the following pages.
Figure 9

Figure 10

Figure 11
Figures 1-8 (except figure 6) have been taken from the August (2008) and December (2007) issues of *Vanitha*. Figure 6 is taken from the website of Department of Tourism, Government of Kerala. Figure 9 is of a church procession in Kerala. Figure 10 is from a temple procession in Kerala and Figure 11 is a photo from a polling booth in Kerala.

The first article in *Vanitha* (for the period mentioned above) is usually about a woman who has made her mark in some field – cinema, social work, overcoming a personal disability, teaching, or business. Other than that, there would be another article on an ordinary woman, not so well known, but who is financially independent. These women would normally be shown in an accompanying picture (sometimes family members are present in the picture). There would be another page listing out the women who had passed exams with first ranks or been awarded a Doctorate in their respective fields. Though all the topics mentioned previously are included, in most issues the focus is usually on the celebrity section, health-related articles and fashion. The visual aspect of the article is as important as the written part in these modern women’s magazines, which started with *Vanitha Kusumam* in 1927. In *Vanitha* there would be a picture in at least every second page, though mostly both pages would carry one (one of the pictures would usually be an advertisement).

Figure 1 and figure 2 are from the December (1-14), 2007 issue of *Vanitha*. The picture accompanies an article about Vineeth Srinivasan and Vinu Mohan, two young actors and their experiences while shooting for a film and the issues that these two men from actor-families face in the film industry (Renjith, 2007). The bubble in Figure 1 says: “My heart!”

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203 Available from: http://www.keralatourism.org/images/downloadHRI/ayurveda/big/1.jpg  
[A literal translation of the line means “the liver of my liver” – the lines of a popular song from a movie directed by Vineeth Srinivasan’s father.] The picture shows them looking at a model’s face with her legs foregrounded in the picture. The picture is not in anyway connected to the article, and then the reader turns the page and comes across figure 2. The reader realises that the young men were actually looking at a mannequin in this page. The bubble says: “Fooled you!” These two pictures are included in this chapter to show how the urban youth views sexual taboos and rules regarding gender roles. The fun and camaraderie the men show in the picture would not have been possible either in the early 20th century or even later. However, the men are also not looking at the legs, but are made to look up, probably at the face, the reader is not sure. So, even while the legs have been foregrounded, the men cannot directly look at them. Moreover, in Kerala, beauty of a woman is generally defined by her hair (long and thick hair), eyes (big and wide eyes), colour (fair) and body type (well rounded). The shape/length of the legs as being a marker of beauty is a Western concept that the photographer and the men are probably aware about.207 The clothes the mannequin wears are also indicative of the changes that have come about in the public sphere in Kerala. These might not be clothes an average Malayali woman wears, but they signify modernity, which these young men also stand for. Vanitha takes its subject matter seriously, but lately there would be one or two article in a lighter vein like this story mentioned here. However, the passion that one associates with the early women’s magazines is absent in Vanitha. This could be because the writers in the early magazines were women and men who were part of the larger social and political movements happening in Kerala at the time and most of them were also academicians and/or related to the literary circles while the writers in Vanitha are mostly new age professionals – journalists/doctors/psychologists who are not part

of the socio-political movements. Though there are changes in lifestyles, dressing styles, food habits, and family structures in the 21st century these are not considered as radical and are not accompanied by caste/community movements like in the 20th century.

The dress of the woman has always been a mark of tradition/modernity in Kerala’s history. *Vanitha* usually carries an article whenever there is some news/legislation involving clothes in the news media. In July 2007, the Guruvayoor Temple authorities decided to permit women wearing the churidar (as a Salwar Kameez is called in Malayalam) to enter the temple. But within a few months, in an astrological reading it was discovered that the presiding deity of the Temple was angry over this decision. Though the order was not revoked, it was given wide publicity that the women devotees switched to the sari voluntarily. *Vanitha* carried an article on the issue where many women devotees were interviewed and most of them agreed with the decision to not wear the churidar (Sreelekha, 2007). The writer evokes the breast-cloth movement and the beginning of the dress reform in Kerala before asking if it was necessary to ban a dress that had provided comfort and safety to women in public places in the name of custom and tradition. Here the writer is surprised that many of the interviewees were of the opinion that churidar was not the right dress to wear to a temple. She has to remind the readers of the fairly recent tradition of wearing a sari.

However, wearing a churidar does not always signify modernity nor does wearing a sari signify tradition as I show below. In the serialised novel section of *Vanitha* there would always be a sketch of the characters in the plot. Figure 3 is one such image from the December (1-14), 2007 issue of the magazine. She is not exactly the modern woman as

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208 Guruvayoor Temple has always been associated with tradition and orthodoxy. The Temple has been in the limelight before for conducting purification/cleansing ceremonies when non-Hindu dignitaries visited the Temple by mistake and for refusing outright entry to them (like Rajiv Gandhi because he was only half-Hindu). These examples have been given to show that, in spite of the nearly universal literacy rates and outwardly peaceful religious co-existence, there are still pockets within Kerala where traditional caste/religious distinctions and the idea of caste/religious pollution hold sway.
exemplified by the sari clad young girl next to her in figure 4. The body language of the woman, the way she drapes her clothes, the length and style of the hair, the ornaments used and the body type all play an important role in defining the modernity of the Malayali woman. The woman in the sketch is not thin (thinness being another marker of modernity in recent times). Thus the woman in figure 3 would not fit in to the category of the modern woman. Both the women also do not have overt markers of either their Hindu-ness or Christian-ness, but they are not Muslim since representations of Muslims always depict them with a veil over their head.

Government representation of the Kerala woman would be very different from how Vanitha projects the Malayali woman. In government representations Malayali woman would be someone wearing the mundum neriyathum (a two piece off-white sari with a colour/golden border) and usually it would be a Hindu woman. The sixth image is also used in relation to the Ayurvedic treatments that Kerala is known for. Figure 6 taken from the Kerala Tourism website is meant to sell the idea of health and Ayurveda to the presumably foreign tourist. Though Ayurvedic and other natural health practitioners do not exclusively belong to the Hindu community, there is a superimposing of the Hindu image on the generic figure of the Malayali woman. The Hindu-ness of the masseuse is indicated by the flowers in her hair and the chandan on her forehead. Though the white/off-white sari is worn by women from other communities as well, it is usually indicative of a Hindu Malayali woman.

The differences between the Hindus, the Muslims and the Christians are particularly highlighted in advertisements for weddings – wedding saris, ornaments, etc. This is true not just of Vanitha but is the norm for any wedding-related advertisements in magazines, newspapers and on roadside hoardings. The kind of clothes worn everyday in Kerala might not always indicate the differences between women from the different communities, but the clothes worn during weddings can differentiate which particular caste/group the woman
belongs to. The pictures in Fig 5, 7, and 8 are taken from the August (15-31), 2008 issue of *Vanitha*. Figure 5 is that of a Hindu bride, Figure 7 that of a Muslim bride and Figure 8 that of two Christian brides. Though Muslim women did not always wear the veil/burkha in Kerala, with the revival in Islamic studies and the various political and cultural movements happening on the international scene, many Muslim women are now opting to wear the burkha and/or a dupatta over their heads. Here the Muslim bride is distinguished through the placement of the coloured veil over the head. Since *Vanitha* is owned by a Christian group, the picture of the Christian bride shows the dressing styles of two different groups from among the Christians. The Syrian Christians generally prefer the sari and (the newer converts compared to the Syrians) the Latin Catholics and a few other Protestant groups prefer the gown. However in the last few decades, the progressive and modern families among the Syrian Christians have also been opting for the gown. The inclusion of the picture in the inset is also indicative of the changes happening among Malayalis as a result of wide scale exposure to Western movies and culture through the internet and the cable television. This is also linked to larger trends in the economy like globalisation and liberalisation of the economy since the 1990s.

The relationship between clothes, the body of the woman and modesty is something even the actresses have to be careful about. The older stereotype of the Vamp has been taken over by the “glamorous” heroine. The term “glamour” has become synonymous with “sexy”, both of which are not positive traits to be associated with a woman in common parlance in Kerala. The term is applied to a woman who wears skimpy/sexually explicit clothes in the movie. In an interview with the actress Lakshmi Rai in *Vanitha*, the interviewer asks her:

Q: You did some glamorous roles?

209 She is a well-known actress in Tamil and Malayalam language cinema. She has done a few critically acclaimed movies since her debut in 2005.
A: I did not know how to filter out bad projects at first. So I made some mistakes. I have
decided not to act in bad cinemas or do glamour dances. I am trying to change my bad
reputation. I have signed contracts for some good Tamil and Malayalam movies. I don’t mind
being glamorous, if the plot requires it (Nair, 2008: 14).

This interview appeared a few days before the scheduled release of one of her Malayalam
films. Earlier she had done the Tamil film Nenjai Thodu (2007), in which she appeared in
short outfits and sexually explicit scenes. Tamil movies have viewership in Kerala. The
actress has to shed her “glamorous” image to become acceptable to the family audience in
Kerala.

I started the thesis with an anecdote from my life and some questions. I have still not
been able to answer those questions to my satisfaction though the complex relation between
clothes and the Malayali identity is clear from the countless times the issue has come up in
the print media and the public sphere. Dress is an important aspect of the idea of a Malayali
woman. Transgressing sartorial codes is considered equivalent to a moral transgression. In
2008, the government passed a rule allowing teachers in government schools to wear the
churidar instead of the sari.210 This came about after two teachers decided to wear churidars
to school since they considered it easier to wear than a sari. This caused discussions among
the public, at the end of which the government passed the order. Many teachers of the old
school believed that discipline could be maintained and respect garnered from the students
only if the sari was worn. Many could not understand why a garment that had been worn for
ages had to be suddenly replaced by a style from another part of the country. Yet another pro-
sari group maintained that the sari was needed to differentiate between teachers and students
in higher classes. The supporters of the pro-churidar move argued that the churidar was easier

210 For details, see the article that appeared in The Hindu titled “Teachers hail new clothes norm” on 7 February
2012]
to wear, provided ease of movement, and covered the body better than a sari. If in the early 19th century dress was a marker of caste difference, in the late 19th century it had become a site of contestation and one of the ways to negate the hierarchical positions within the caste structure. The lower caste groups also used the argument of modesty in relation to clothes. In the early 20th century dress became a mark of one’s modernity and signified hygiene, correct training and discipline (in the project of making one an ideal citizen as is evident in the policy documents from the third chapter). It also became a way to signify one’s Malayali-ness (opposed to Parsis, Bengalis, Western women etc.). In the 21st century it reverts to one of the earlier signifiers – morality, modesty and tradition. In the 21st century, as the government teachers’ issue shows, ease of use is another factor that enters the discussions on clothes.

Reverting to the questions I had raised right at the beginning, it is easy to answer the last one where I ask why the issue was important enough to upset me. Growing up in urban Kerala in the late 1980s and 1990s, clothes were a constant site of contestation – any kind of minor change/alteration to the skirt, churidar, frock (which children and teenagers wore at that period) was commented upon by not just family members, but passers-by on the road and other public places; and the comments were usually harsh and negative. In the 21st century, the earlier strictures regarding clothes have eased up, but when some incident like this happens, it reminds one of a Kerala from an earlier period. The other questions I had asked were about why the student recounted/remembered only the dress in relation to the wedding and the strong reaction of her brother to the dress. One obvious reason is the newness of the short kurta. Another reason probably has to do with the fact that the other girl came from a town to the village wearing clothes signifying modernity; and modernity is not always a quality that is acceptable. [The episode in the Guruvayoor temple regarding the dress code is another example of tradition being proposed as the right path to take. Though the churidar is widely used, particularly by the younger generation, it is not completely accepted as Malayali
attire in all locations. In the earlier example (figure 3) where the churidar signified tradition, it was facilitated in conjugation with other markers of tradition. In could also be the way in which class and urban-rural resentments are focused on the female body. Clothes are strongly connected to modernity/tradition, modesty, decorum, caste, culture, and religion in Malayali consciousness as I have shown in previous chapters. Fashion is seen as replacing the ascriptive role of clothing styles as part of the larger move towards individuation. Any kind of transgression connected to dress is then read as a transgression against culture and gender codes; more so in Kerala as a result of the particular history of the region. While in many Indian states language, ethnicity and religion are sites of contestation, in Kerala with its nearly homogenous language/ethnic groups,211 gender seems to have become a major site of contestation/strife. In her work on gender, youth and consumer citizenship in India, set in the late 1980s and 1990s Kerala, Ritty Lukose speaks about attire structuring the way young women are enabled and constrained in their negotiation of public spaces (Lukose, 2008). The comportment of the female body (demure and modest), in some sense, was seen as resolving the tension between an indigenous tradition and a predatory modernity. A female body that was marked as modern was seen as propelling into a dangerous “West” out there in the city (Lukose, 2008). In the case of Kerala, I would extend this argument to say that it is not just the West, but any fashion perceived as non-Malayali is seen as a threat to indigenous tradition. While the churidar has become acceptable as a modest and easy-to-use garment, it has not yet been absorbed into the fold of tradition as the sari which has been in use for nearly a century. And probably for this reason, in many educational institutions in Kerala when wearing a churidar there are strict guidelines as to the kind of material that can be worn,

211 According to the 2001 census, Malayalam was spoken by 33 million people as their mother tongue, while the total population of the state was only 31 million and the percentage of Malayalam speakers in the state was 99.54. From: http://www.censusindia.gov.in/Census_Data_2001/Census_Data_Online/Language/Statement2.html [cited 01 February 2013]
the length of the sleeves, the length of the slit, the length of the kurta, and so on. This is a different manner of policing the modernity of the Malayali women in public spaces into acceptable qualities of modesty and demureness.

Another article in Vanitha in September (1-14), 2007 was about the problems faced by women drivers as a result of the attitude of aggressive male drivers (Sreerekha, 2007). While some of the incidents mentioned in the article could be read as cases of eve teasing, many of the women interviewed complained that even the more serious incidents are not taken cognizance by the traffic police. What this points to is a mindset that tends to sexually objectify women. Yet another understanding of such incidents is related to the early 20th century ideology of separate spheres of the public and the domestic, and the location of the woman within the domestic. An extension of this argument was the gendering of certain professions/tasks as female and male. And when certain tasks are seen as male/masculine then it becomes problematic when women take up these tasks [In the previous chapter I had mentioned how Gowriyamma’s sister was shouted and whistled at by people when she started to ride the motorcycle]. Another reading of these incidents is that masculinity/maleness is validated in competition with sthreethwam/femaleness [This is particularly true of the play by E.V. Krishnapilla in the previous chapter, where the masculinity of the male characters is validated by subjugating Bhageerathiamma]. Present day Kerala seems to have based her traditions and culture in the early to mid 20th century in terms of dressing styles, gender roles, and conjugality. This is also because until then there was no uniformity among the various castes/communities as to these, as I have shown in the previous chapters.

Gender difference is so deeply engraved in Malayali culture, it does not often allow women and men to mingle freely in public spaces. This often extends to religious places as

212 Vimala College, Thrissur is a good example of this. The website of the college instructs the students to wear plain sari/blouse and plain churidar/shawl. For details, see: http://vimalacollege.edu.in/index/dresscode/ [cited 05 February 2013]
well. In most churches in Kerala (including Catholic churches), there are separate pews/sides for women and men, while women and men often attend mass together in other parts of India. Take a look at the figures 9 – 11 taken from various internet sites. In the pictures of the church and temple processions (figures 9 and 10) from Kerala, one can see the separate queues for women and men. This separation between the sexes can be taken to extremes. In the 1970s in one of the colleges situated around 5 km from Kochi\textsuperscript{214} the college bus plying students had a vertical divider running from head to tail down the middle of the bus, to keep the boys away from the girls (Varma, 2012). The same college had separate verandas on both sides of the building; the front veranda was meant for the boys and the back veranda was for the girls until the late 1990s. The boys were not expected to use the veranda meant for the girls and vice-versa. In figure 11, a picture of a polling booth, one can see the separate queues for women. There is a separation of female/male roles and spaces even within public spaces in spite of high levels of education and entry of women in jobs previously reserved for men.

I had mentioned before how certain professions were seen as being more suitable for women. This has been clearly carried forward into later years: current statistics for gender differentiation in higher education states that women exceed men in graduate and post-graduate courses in the Arts & Science courses and in non-technical diplomas. However, when it comes to professional/technical education including accounting (B.Com) (except in nursing and teaching), women are less than one third of the total intake (Mungekar \textit{et al.}, 2008). In low level technical education, women were found more in stenography, dress-making, cutting and tailoring, secretarial practices and data preparation. Thus, women are

\textsuperscript{213} One of my interviewees, Dr. Santhakumari, said that even towards her retirement when she had to attend official meetings, if she sat in the area marked out for men, people used to stare. She said that she could understand the need for different seating arrangements for women and men at school/college levels, but could not understand the need for the same in professional life.

\textsuperscript{214} Kochi is considered the fashion capital of Kerala. It has a mostly floating population and is a major business hub.
clearly found in occupations that have been termed feminine, some from the time of the missionaries. The issue of education, which to the early writers was a serious bone of contention, is not discussed at all in Vanitha because in the current social setup, it is assumed that women have access to schooling/higher education. The percentage of women in decision making positions like managerial positions in urban Kerala is lower than for all-India (Mungekar et al., 2008). Women generally occupy low level positions (like stenographers, typists, computer operators) which provide few chances of career advancement. In spite of the high levels of literacy and educational qualifications, like in other parts of India, women are largely involved in unpaid work in the household premises and they often direct their skills towards invisible, home-bound services (Mungekar et al., 2008). Vanitha addresses the problem of unemployment of educated women at a superficial level. In Vanitha, one of the articles in every issue would be about ‘housewives’ making money through home-bound work like medical transcription, handicraft, food preservation, jewellery making, embroidery and related services. A small sub-column or title within the picture of the woman would list out her monthly income and the job she does. These women would also be from respectable middle class families and put forward as role models for the other housewives.

The assumption is that most Malayalis are housewives and opt to remain so. Conjugality is seen as the norm and put forth as the desirable state for women by the magazine. Health and sexual health are read as important aspects of conjugality like it was in the early magazines. During the period under review, there were two separate sections where readers could write to doctors – one general medic and another sexual health medic. There were also articles on caring for children and dealing with childhood problems. Even the recipe section would sporadically have recipes for healthy foods/snacks that can be packed for children’s lunch boxes. Awareness about health, childcare and cooking are still thought to be part of the domestic realm and therefore relegated to women. The articles are meant not
for the benefit of the woman in her own right, but for the benefit of the family and society. The advertisements in Vanitha are also targeted at a married woman or a woman who is young and will soon be getting married. Other than the advertisement for undergarments (not lingerie, since it is a family magazine now), the others are usually for household utensils and appliances, heavy sequin-worked party wear for women, especially the kind worn by young brides. There would be a feature on a dress pattern for a young girl child. This again is an extension of the missionary education curricula wherein sewing/embroidery/lace-work etc. were part of the girls’ education. In Vanitha the pattern and the cutting of the dress are shown for the women, who (it is assumed) have the training and skill to make a dress. Vanitha is also published from Kottayam, a strong hold of missionary education in the 19th and 20th centuries. The sexual health feature is addressed to married couples, young and old. Even the housing section assumes that the buyer(s) would be married couples with children. A different reading of the inclusion of house plans and advertisements for switches/bathroom fittings could be that (1) since men also read the magazine, it is targeted at them (2) the domestic duties of the educated women have been expanded to include even more details of the arrangement of the domestic space. This again can be explained in two ways that (a) since the woman is in charge of the space of the domestic she is expected to know this and (b) it is the choice of the woman as she is the one making the decisions regarding the house. In the first instance it is the duty of a woman and in the second instance it is right of a woman. In either case, the woman is still seen as intrinsically linked to the domestic space.

Crimes against women have been on the rise in Kerala, though sometimes this is explained as a result of better reporting. The Human Development Report for 2008 ranks Kerala as one of the states with continuous increase in the rates of cruelty at home. Violence against women is perceived to be on the rise in the state and in a study on psychiatric patients it was stressed that the common cause of stress among educated women was lack of
employment, and the roles that they were expected to assume after marriage (Mungekar et al., 2008). This trend had started in the 1930s, when some of the magazine writers pointed to the increasing cases of suicides among women, and suggested that many of these were the result of the gap between reality and expectations within marriages and the effect of employment after marriage. *Vanitha* carries a section on domestic violence, psychological and health-related problems and sometimes even cases from the family court. The incidence of girls and young women going missing from some of the villages in Kerala was the subject matter of an article from the same period (Jyothish, 2007a). Yet another article was on the cases of missing girls from all over Kerala (Gopinath, 2008). The cases are not reported so much as put out as examples of how people should behave, advice to parents/young girls on how to live their lives, bring up their children and even to show the problems people face in a changing society.

In the December 2007 issue of *Vanitha*, one of the articles was about a Muslim, Fasiluddin, married to a Christian, Agnus (Jyothish, 2007b). The article was about how they came to meet, fell in love and married in spite of protests from both their families and the subsequent pressures on them to convert Agnus to Islam. Fasiluddin named his first son, ‘Casteless’, and next son, ‘Junior Casteless’, to show their severance from religion and caste structures. The article has been mentioned here to underline that caste and religious differences are still issues in Kerala society, although they are not often mentioned as serious social problems. The second, is the act of naming of the children by Fasiluddin. I have mentioned in the previous chapter how the naming of a person was important in colonial Kerala. The new converts used to change their names to show their break with the older hierarchical position within the caste system and acceptance of the new religion and its egalitarian structure. The article in *Vanitha* is more a reporting of the novelty of the names of
the sons than an enquiry into the reasons for Fasiluddin having to choose such unusual names.

While caste differences and related issues are acknowledged as being present they are not considered a matter for serious discussion in a women’s magazine like in the early Malayalam magazines. None of the issues from the period 2007-2008 carried articles that could be termed political because, in some sense, politics is still not considered something women will be interested in. The early magazines carried short stories, literary reviews and biographies. *Vanitha* does have short stories and sometimes a serialized novel (and the popular novels are sometimes adapted for television serials), but the literary reviews and biographies have disappeared from the magazine. This has been taken over by the interviews with famous personalities and women, who do social service, which would also give a small life sketch of the interviewee. Thus, there is no looking back to a past in the form of mythological figures or figures from a recent history, like in the early magazines.

*Vanitha* is not concerned about the education of the modern Malayali woman because in terms of literacy and access to higher education, women have attained high levels of literacy and education compared to other parts of India. While caste/religious differences are acknowledged as being present and there is a Christian flavour to some of the articles, the articles are generally not addressed to any specific group. *Vanitha* does take into account that women work outside the space of the home, but it does not imagine them as being outside the frame of the domestic sphere. This section is not an analysis of education, but show how ideas about women that were entrenched through the debates on education in the early 20th century are carried forward to the late 20th century and the 21st century. The *sthreedharmam*

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215 Literacy rates for (7+ years) women in Kerala were at 91.98 % in the 2011 census. At all India level the share of girl’s enrolment at primary and upper primary levels of education are 47.2% and 44.2% respectively, while for Kerala the shares are higher at 49.2% and 48% . From: Mungekar et al., "Kerala Development Report."
of the woman is not very different though there are minor differences as to how the figure of the Malayali woman is imagined in the 21st century.

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**In Conclusion**

In the first chapter I introduce the archives and the materials used in this thesis. I also set out the work already done in the field of women’s education in Kerala and how my work differs from them. In the next chapter I set out how the concept of *sthreedharmam* is re-fashioned with the advent of education. Education itself comes to be seen as an important aspect of women’s *sthreedharmam*. Concepts related to it like *sthreeswaathandryam* were frequently invoked and the writers were trying to define the limits of *sthreeswaathandryam*. Defining and discussing these concepts were one way of assimilating the changes that had come in the lifestyles, food habits, dressing styles, family relationships, financial positions, etc. of the woman and generally in society. I have also tried to show how the class/caste/religious positions of the writers colour and define these discussions on the *sthreedharmam* and the education of the woman.

In the third chapter I have mapped how certain aspects or ideas about *sthreedharmam* are further concretised through formal educational structures in Kerala. This is done not just through the curriculum, but also through how the various agents imagine the role of education in women’s lives. Though the government and missionary agents were certain that women and men have different roles/duties to fulfil in life, after a certain point it was not possible for the government to separate the curriculum in place for girls and boys other than to suggest/make available certain optional subjects for girls. The general population was also not particular about having separate education for girls and boys. By the 1930s girls were aspiring towards the same kinds of returns from education as boys. There was tension
between imagining woman’s *dharmam* as being towards the home and towards the society/nation. There was also the tension between training them in skills useful to them and giving training that would make them receptacles of culture. To a certain extent this tension was resolved by imagining that certain jobs were more suitable for women because of their intrinsic feminine qualities that were needed for those jobs (like teaching, nursing etc.). The textbooks also show how the domestic ideology and *sthreethwam* were reinforced through other means.

In the fourth chapter I show how in the fictional and non-fictional material education was put forth as the defining factor in imagining the figure of the woman (and man) as being modern. In the fictional materials conjugality and the domestic sphere were the desired state and the desired space for the woman, but the women writers also question this formulation in subtle ways. The fictional and the non-fictional materials portray the different ways in which gendering of the woman/man was done in the period. Though, there are similarities in the figure of the modern woman imagined by the different writers, the caste/religious/temporal/ideological positions of the writers result in differences in the portrayal of the development of the self in both the real and imagined women.

The previous section of this chapter is not a critical analysis of the magazine or the social conditions of women in present day Kerala. It is more an indication of how the entrenched notions about the figure of the Malayali woman from the early 20th century are carried forward into the 21st century in popular imagination through a study of the popular magazine *Vanitha*. In 21st century Kerala, magazines are not the site where women’s issues are debated seriously; this task has been taken over or handed over to the women’s groups and the committees instituted by the government. It is also because to some degree *sthreethharmam* and *sthreethwam* are seen as being resolved.
The high levels of literacy, women’s education, general health indicators, life expectancy, male-female ratio in favour of women, and the matrilineal history of the region has meant that women in Kerala have been presented as having achieved a status and progress unavailable to women from other locations. While studies in recent times (Devika and Kodoth, 2001; Mungekar et al., 2008; Sreekumar, 2001; Varma, 2012) have questioned this notion, the celebratory mood is still present in many kinds of popular discourses as I have mentioned at the beginning of this thesis. I have tried to indicate that high levels of education and access to education did not necessarily translate into autonomy for women. This is not to say that women in Kerala experienced a fall from grace in a Biblical sense. While access to formal structures of education, co-education, training in useful skills in the form of vocational training (sewing, lace-making, etc.) and so on was easier for Malayali women compared to other Indian women, these also worked in other ways to place the idea of sthreethwam more firmly on her. The opening up of many new professions to women in the early 20th century and the subsequent feeling among the critics/public that women were moving away from the space of the domestic and competing with men meant that women had to be careful to prove that both these charges were not true. Women were enmeshed in the space of the domestic in new ways and had to show that they had not moved away from their sthreedharmam. The individuation of the Malayali woman was directed consciously or unconsciously by the different agents away from a Western understanding of the term while contradictorily being influenced by Western notions, ideas and practices in education. The tension in the writings was between imagining women’s sthreedharmam as being related to the home/domestic space and as being towards the public/community/nation. There was also tension as to whether education should lead to female individuation or merely equip women to be capable managers of the domestic space. Yet another tension was whether women needed to be trained in useful skills or whether they needed only cultural accomplishments.
There were so many different influences on Malayali women belonging to diverse communities, both internal and external (other communities within Kerala, within India, and from other countries), that the \textit{sthreedharmam} and the \textit{sthreethwam} of the woman changed in subtle ways. Conjugality and motherhood began to be important aspects of the new woman. In the earlier joint families, the relationship between the spouses, and the duties of the mother to the child were not as important or placed solely on the shoulders of the woman. Paradoxically, the woman was characterized as needing the right kind of education to take up/learn her \textit{sthreedharmam}.

I started out with a working hypothesis that the concept \textit{sthreedharmam} was used to construct the image of the Malayali woman and in the process \textit{sthreedharmam} gets reconstituted. I prove this through the various chapters: the debates in the magazines, the government policies, and even the fictional materials used in this thesis show how the writers posit education as being important to equip women to take up their duties towards the family, community and the nation. \textit{Sthreedharmam} used in the wider sense of the term encompasses these duties. The hypothesis also stated that through the debates on women’s education a category called a modern Malayali woman was constructed, which did not exist before. While I have been able to show that the idea of a modern woman is constructed through the education discourse, I have not been able to demonstrate that a homogenous category was constructed. Although the government policies and documents imagine a homogenous figure of the modern Malayali woman by eliding the communal/religious/caste differences, the writers and authors do not really make a similar move. The different writers/essayists/authors speak from their particular spatial and temporal positions. One of the difficulties of archival studies based on Kerala is that the preponderance of data on matrilineal communities and the Hindu state of Travancore tends to overshadow other communities and histories. While Robin Jeffrey’s account states that nearly 51% of Malayalis were from matrilineal
communities in the early 20th century, later studies have challenged this statistics (CDS, 2006). What this then means is that the history of Kerala cannot be just about the matrilineal communities and this work has tried to be as inclusive as possible, treading a fine line between the matrilineal and patrilineal women’s histories of education, though it has not been possible to include all the different communities and their differential access to education. However, as is clear from the census data/historical records from the 19th century (mentioned in the previous chapters), whenever Malayali women are mentioned the language used tends to see the whole of Malayalam-speaking regions as being matrilineal and this has continued to some extent into the 21st century. A cursory look at present day government websites and the widely read magazine, Vanitha, shows that the appearance of the generic Malayali woman is different in both the sites. While the government site superimposes a Nair image on the generic Malayali image, the image of the Malayali woman in Vanitha is not overtly caste or religion marked. However, there are similarities to the woman imagined by the different agents (in the 20th and 21st centuries) – their sthreedharmam is always directed towards the space of the domestic. When the matrilineal communities moved towards a patrilocal family set up, with importance given to the conjugal unit, the resultant idea/figure of the woman was neither entirely based on a Nair woman nor a woman from a patrilineal community. In that sense there is homogeneity to the figure of the imagined Malayali woman. I can only tentatively put forward that in official discourses there was a hegemonic image (in terms of appearance) of the Nair woman, but this hegemony did not extend into lifestyles, inheritance practices, food habits or even education.

This work contextualises the ideas and practices related to the education of Malayali woman within regional and national histories. It tracks the ways women’s education was structured and transformed by indigenous, national and colonial traditions/ideas/values. Well known works by other scholars on education and women’s education do not focus on the
cultural trajectory of women’s education. Works on the social reform period do consider and analyse the debates on women’s education, but they do not focus exclusively on education and therefore do not provide the micro picture or the implications of these micro pictures for 21st century Kerala. What I hope this work has done is to provide insight into a part of women’s history by capturing some of the nuances of what it meant for a Malayali woman to get educated in the early 20th century and that it was not just matriliny, missionary education and the native governments alone that made literacy and education possible for the Malayali women. The next step would be to further research the current common sense that fuels the idea of the Malayali woman and the entrenched notions regarding her sthree dharmam used in the wider sense of what she is supposed to be, her duties, her character, her comportment, the limits of her swaathandryam, etc. and to see if these can be/need to be contested.