Chapter III

Muslim Women and the Reform Movements in Kerala

For the one who assumes that a secular modernity may be taken at its face value, that he can be a world citizen, aspire to poetry and to love, the real betrayal is not singular or by an individual; it is a many-layered betrayal by a politics, a government, an era. What he encounters is not a traditional taboo, but a modern stigma. It is assigned by modern means in a modern institution. (Satyanarayana and Tharu, 2011, p. 2)

Given the cultural context in which modernity is defined in Kerala, i.e., through a kind of definition of Kerala as a cultural society than a religious society, it is indeed fascinating to note the way in which the reform movements have been recorded by historians. With the intricate caste system and the notion of untouchability in the premodern Kerala society, the garb of secular modernity constituting the public sphere reflects a fundamental discrepancy in the constitution of Kerala’s political society. Though the terrain of the reform movements are highly rooted in the context of religion and caste, with all the reform leaders presenting critiques of superstitious practices within religion and demanding a reformulation of religious values and ethics based on higher ideals of equality, freedom of thought and the right to education, the presumed secular motives of modernity shape these movements in mainstream histories. The predetermined structure of European
modernity designs and ordains the trajectory of the reform movements in such representations. Besides, the evolution of the communist movements in the early half of the twentieth-century in Kerala as a strong presence in the public sphere, and also the strict loyalty with which Kerala’s polity has adhered to the Communist Party of India and its allies ever since except for occasional violations, have contributed to this conception. For instance, let us listen to what Sainudhin Mandalamkunnu says in his work, *Kerala Muslim Navodhanam* [The Muslim Renaissance in Kerala]: “A Malayali cannot be a mere Mappila, Christian or Hindu. Fundamentally, Kerala’s history and cultural background disagree to such a polarised structure” (2007, p. 33). The author’s confidence in promoting the secular identity of Kerala definitely owes its origin to the oft-quoted secular values of early-twentieth-century cultural renaissance in Kerala. Consequently, any discussion on identity politics in Kerala has been weighed against the legacy of this ‘pseudo-secular’ modus operandi that the political and cultural societies assume in Kerala. The imbrications of the religious reform movements of late nineteenth and early-twentieth-century with the cultural renaissance of early-twentieth-century highlight the enlightenment ideals of individual freedom, liberty, secular thoughts and progress as the foundation of Kerala’s public sphere. Moreover, the contradictions between these mutually challenging (or contradicting) categories are appropriated into the legacy of the nationalist movement so as to claim a common past. My attempt in this chapter is to look into how the Muslims of Kerala engaged with the reform movements, and how women’s agency functioned in the contexts of the Muslim reform movements. Thus, I also extend my concern to the construction of the history of the reform movements
in mainstream histories, and the conspicuous absence of Muslim reform movements in general and Muslim women’s participation specifically in these histories. My focus is also on the overlapping of these movements with the religious reform movements in other parts of the country and the interesting mediations and shifts they resorted to in order to accommodate each other. The absence of Muslim reform movements and Muslim women’s agency in the mainstream discourses has been structured by the biopolitics of Muslim existence in ‘secular’ Kerala, which in turn structured the discourses on Muslims and Muslim women later on.

While the nation as a reality emerged out of the nationalist discourses, there had been efforts on the part of the nationalists to hold on to the notion of a nation as an always already existing category. The construction of the history of this nation was along Hindu ethos, and the reform movements in a way contributed to this process of formulating such a history. In this context of historicizing, the national longings of different marginalized sections of the Kerala society got incorporated into the fold of the nation, their aspirations to assert the identity were translated into the larger movement of the nationalist struggle. The caste based movements in different communities, for instance, the Ezhava, Pulaya, or Nambutiri communities which of course originated from different ethos and undertones and with different empirical and ideological contexts were translated to the space of the nationalist discourses as a homogenous category through the tools of conventional historiography. But in Kerala’s history, parallel to the nationalist movement led by Indian National Congress, there was also the strong presence of the Communist movement, which was equally an expression of the society’s engagement with
modernity. If the freedom struggle was binding the society using the thread of the nation, the communist movements were highlighting the enlightenment ideals of the freedom of self, the liberation of the individual and the liberty of expression. The secular ideals of modernity were upheld in the communist movement, which was able to efficiently translate the anti-caste vibrations to the class issue they were addressing through a strategic manipulation of the antifeudal sentiments. At the same time they mobilized a potential human resource that had ever since remained loyal to the Communist Party. Thus, along with the nationalist history, the Marxist history of Kerala also appropriated the reform movements into their respective contexts.

Though the larger frame of the reform movements in India provided a stimulant for the reform dialogues, the early-twentieth-century reform movements in Kerala were flavoured by the undertones of Kerala’s social and historical pasts: attempts to retrieve, correct, assert and establish communal identities that marked the existence of various caste and religious identities in Kerala. Kerala has always been projected as a community of secular values though ironically on behalf of the cultural renaissance set forth by the religious reform movements even when the social milieu reflects wide religious and caste demarcations. It is interesting to note the way in which the values of reformation (‘navodhana moolyangal’) appear as a nostalgic vantage point for all the future discourses on Kerala’s political and cultural choices. Challenging the liberal secular silhouette that the values of the reform movements attempted to eradicate caste from the society, I argue that while resisting oppression based on caste the attempts of the reform leaders resulted in
demanding for one’s share in the political existence of the nation. For instance, Sree Narayana Guru’s spiritual guidance united the scattered existences of different sub castes among the Ezhavas into a unified community, where he promoted a unified set of customs and rituals to bind the entire community. Through this Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Sangham (SNDP) categorically demanded the entry of Ezhavas into the Hindu fold. The depth and diversity of the reform movements are too intricate to be included in a linear narrative. It can be generally argued that the lower caste movements of reform thus revised the contours of communities divided from within to more structured and unified caste groups. T. M. Yesudasan in *Baliyadukalude Vamsavali* [The Genealogy of Scapegoats] notices this overt focus on religion and caste as the distinctive feature of the reform movements in India, unlike the European modernity (2010, p. 69). Thus the domain of the reform movements is a conundrum of the lower castes’ diverse responses to mass conversions and the resulting disturbed upper caste sensibility and the conscious caste mobilisations to acquire the Hindu label from within, thus resisting conversions and redesigning each caste group after the *chathurvarna* system through a restructuring of the sub castes.

My argument here is that the secular motives of modernity and the vision of a casteless society in the political and cultural spheres of the nation is the picture promoted by mainstream historiography, in order to accommodate the reform movements into the fold of the nationalist movements. While the Kerala society of the early-twentieth-century accepted caste as a reality and tried to assert caste identities, in the nationalist historians we come across tendencies to read them as part of the nationalist uprisings. The Marxist historian P. Govindapilla in *Kerala*
Navodhanam Vol. 2 [Kerala Renaissance vol. 2] reads the reform movements as, “people’s resistance against the hierarchical systems of priesthood, landlord, power structure and knowledge dissemination” (2009, p. 10). If the assertion of religious identities and demanding equal share in the social structure had been the true motive of reformation, I intend to explore the repercussions of these attempts. The national leaders with an intention to make use of all organised attempts to refute authorities incorporated the history of the reform movements into the nationalist discourse, and structured reformation along the binaries of the conventional, religious versus secular and tradition versus modernity format. This structuring helped them to include the lower caste reform movements, into the fold of the nationalist movements.

Movements within caste could easily pass over as secular within the nationalist discourse, highlighting the higher ideals of equality, eradication of untouchability, claims for social justice and so on.\textsuperscript{65} Now, the reform movements within the Muslim community could not be included in such a manner through an easy tactics of generalisation as the history of Muslims in India is punctuated by the burden of aberrations within India’s historical and cultural pasts. Moreover, the prejudices based on the modernist contention of Islamic societies as anti-modern/anti-progressive/anti-women placed against the liberal/progressive/feminist societies provide ample justification for this omission. This explains the contradictory

\textsuperscript{65} Movements like Vaikkom Sathyagraha or Channar Lahala, were strictly caste based. But at later stages nationalist leaders tactically involved and there were subsequent attempts to incorporate them in the history of the freedom struggle.
references to the Mappila Revolt of 1921, Khilafath Movement and many other instances of Muslim participation in the nationalist uprisings by the national and colonial historians. Thus, discourses on reformation highlight the Ezhava reform movements or the movement within Nambutiri community as steps to Kerala’s passage into a liberal and progressive cultural space whereas the Muslim community’s attempts to embrace the modernising ideals of education, democratic rights, women’s emancipation etc. were strictly observed as a movement within religion. The rites of passage involved in the transformation of the religious reform movements to the cultural renaissance that defines and designs Kerala’s secular silhouette do not accommodate Muslims or the Muslim reform movements into its garb, reflecting conscious omissions and careful distortions.

Generally, the context of British rule, the attempts of Indologists and Indian scholars to rediscover the Indian tradition, the influence of creative Indian literature and Christian Missionary activities are traced as the inspiring forces behind the reform movements in India. While accepting the impact of these factors upon the reform movements, the wide variety and entanglement of varied structures of the reform movements in different parts of India cannot be ruled out. When in Bengal the upper caste Hindu men widely engaged with the reform movements and

---

66 M. T. Ansari points out how the history of Mappila Rebellion gets reduced to a footnote in the history of the national struggle for independence (2005, pp. 36-77).
modernity, this was more or less an affair involving a massive participation of the lower castes in Kerala. In a way the projection of Kerala as a hierarchically constituted secular society over the other states of India comes from this kind of a reading of the reform movements. This garb of secularism and modernity that hides underlying contradictions demarcate the reform movements into the genre of the cultural renaissance and justifies Kerala’s long standing loyalty to the communist lineage.

In the conventional history of reform movements in Kerala the names of Sree Narayana Guru, Vaikunda Swamikal, Chattambi Swamikal, Ayyankaali, V. T. Bhattathirippad, Pandit Karuppan, Sahodaran Ayyappan, C. Krishnan, T. K. Madhavan, Poykayil Yohannaan, Dr. Palpu, Mannath Padmanabhan, and Kumaranasan are highlighted as reform leaders, and occasionally they may accommodate a sub heading for Muslim reform movements to speak about Vakkom Maulavi. A critical engagement with the context of the reform movements initiated by leaders like Sree Narayana Guru and Chattampi Swamikal definitely bring out the caste mobilisation initiated by these leaders. Not only that these mobilisations countered the atrocities extended to the lower castes by the brahminical forces, but

---

67 The reform movements in Bengal are often projected as an upper-caste Hindu affair and the subaltern movements are in a way subdued in the later discourses on the same. Many scholars from the Subaltern Studies group have engaged with this.

68 Even within this group there are hierarchies to be maintained.
they also contributed to counter the increasing conversions to Christianity. At large, the efforts of these leaders resulted in incorporating the marginalised sections of the society to the Hindu fold, thus extending the margins of Hinduism. The impact of this attempt is evident in Kerala’s history as one may not observe mass conversions to Christianity or Buddhism as a strong resort against casteism as in other states of India, during the early-twentieth-century. Thus, the reform leaders could successfully bargain a place for the respective communities in the emerging Hindu political sphere of Kerala, leading on to a strong foundation for the intellectual and cultural supremacy in terms of its apparently egalitarian social structure that Kerala claims among the other Indian states.

Placing the Muslim reform movements within the context of the reform movements in Kerala is problematic. First of all, there is an already existing categorisation of the Muslim reform movements as an offshoot of the wider context of the cultural renaissance in which the reform movements have been incorporated. But apart from such a reflection, the mainstream historians have underplayed the significance of these movements by reducing them to a footnote or an insignificant

---

69. The status of the lower castes converted to Christianity has been one major focus of Christian reform movements initiated by reform leaders like Poyikayil Yohannan through Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha (PRDS). Refer to Sanal Mohan (2008); T. M. Yesudasan (2010).

70. The reform movements and their impact on Kerala’s social structure need to be examined further. Apart from being read from the perspectives of upper-caste Hindu approaches that follow a policy of tactical inclusion and exclusion and the Marxist historians like P. Govindapilla and E M S and the intelligentsia who back up the Marxist interpretation of the reform movements, the caste undercurrents embedded in these movements require detailed interrogation. As it does not fall under the scope of this thesis I do not get into its intricacies.
sub-heading at the end of their discourse. Another difficulty is to look into the Muslim reform movements as a response to the larger context of Muslim reform activities and political consciousness that evolved nationally. Though the reform consciousness among the Muslim community was influenced by both these phenomena, basically the response of the Muslim reform leaders in Kerala to the call of modernity was entirely a unique mobilisation. It had pan-Islamic tendencies and nationalist inclinations, but in spite of that the community engaged in a creative cultural and political upheaval imbibing the true spirit of reform. Moreover, the categorical representation of the reform movements within the temporality of early-twentieth-century also clashes with the Muslim reform activities, which bifurcates into more articulated movements by the 1950s. Invariably these reform projects cannot be named finished projects. Another problematic area in representing the Muslim reform movements is that of the fact that the reform movements in other communities attempted to locate the essence of their identity within the Hindu fold. All the reform leaders including Sree Narayana Guru and Ayyankali rejected conversion as a solution to caste oppression and demanded an entry into the Hindu fold. The historical Temple Entry Proclamation is equally an effort to resist mass conversions (Gopakumar, 2008, p. 76). In the midst of these efforts, movements like PRDS and Muslim reform movements get sidelined. There is a direct rejection of the Aryan supremacy and a celebration of the Dravidian past in PRDS as Sanal Mohan reflects:

Yohannan considered Dalit communities, whom he steadfastly termed Adi-Dravidas, as the original inhabitants of Kerala. He silenced critics
who felt he had squandered an opportunity to ask help of the king by saying that the true inheritors of the land and its resources should not hold out begging bowls. This was important to Yohannan’s view of the history of the Dalits, and it became entrenched in the minds of his people. It has been repeated endless times, through print as well as in ritual discourse. Many who did not share the religious views of the PRDS still accepted this notion of history. (2008, p. 380)

What is to be noted here is the pride with which the reformer asserted the essence of the community’s identity. But along with that in the subsequent lines Sanal Mohan also refers to the interest in documentation and history that was shown. The reformer thus undertakes the job of the historian, in documenting the history and also reinventing the identity of the community. In this effort how successful were Muslim reformers in general and Muslim women in specific is a pertinent question. If the movements within other communities shaped the political destinies of the respective community in post independent India, (at least in the case of Kerala) the success of the Muslim reform movements to carve a niche for the community in the emerging political space needs exploration. If the Muslim reform movements could not evolve into an active engagement that designs the predicament of the community in documented history, it definitely the points towards the double standards adopted in mainstream historiography.

71 It is not under the scope of this study to attempt an analysis of various reform movements, but in the course of my work I will be resorting to comparisons and parallel readings of some specificities, and their different reception in the mainstream history.
Muslim reform movements in Kerala can be traced back to the mid
nineteenth-century revivals in Kerala that was felt in all communities. But the
reform movements cannot be looked at as isolated from the past of Kerala. The
Bhakti movement of 15th and 16th centuries running on to the seventeenth-century
definitely had an impact in the cultural and social existence of Kerala’s population.
Sreedhara Menon looks at the cultural context of the Bhakti Movement thus:

The violence that had become a common phenomenon in the political
life of Kerala, the social restrictions imposed upon the lower castes,
the moral degradation resulting from Devadasi system, the
depreciation in the spice market, the recession resulting from the
monopolisation of foreign trade by the colonisers and the falling living
standards of many including the farmers resulted in a melancholic
atmosphere.

It is under these circumstances that people turn to piety for solace.
Into this scenario, Ezhuthachan made his entry intending a revival of
piety movements. (2008, p. 186)

The Bhakti movement was instigated by the colonial as well as native forces that
suppressed free expression of human will. The reform movements of the late-
nineteenth-century and the early-twentieth-century are definitely the continuation
of the reform spirit and resistance to forces of subordination that one may witness in
the Bhakti movement. In “The Cultural Background” Sreedhara Menon further describes Thunchath Ezhuthachan’s contribution to Malayalam literature and language:

In the 16th and 17th centuries Thunchath Ezhuthachan set a major revolution in the area of learning. The Brahmin monopolisation of Sankrit and the learning of Vedas and Upanishads, upholding ‘Sudhrakshara samyuktham durathaha parivarjjayeth’ was revolutionised by the literary achievements of Ezhuthachan. The Ezhuthupally system initiated by Ezhuthachan to educate laymen spread all over Kerala. (2008, p. 189)

Following this, the itinerary of the reform movements can be mapped in continuation with the efforts of Ezhuthachan and his companions. At the same time specificities of the historical moment, like the increased nationalist sentiments in the light of the freedom movement and the emerging reform activities all over India also would have contributed to it. However, more than reading them as an offshoot of the reform activities in North India, a historical understanding of the resistance to forces of oppression and the drive for ethnic, religious and cultural assertion reflect the essence of the reform movements. Parallel to the Bhakti movement there was a drive for literacy that popularised the Arabic-Malayalam script and an increased

72 E. M. Sankaran Nambutiripad reads the Bhakti movement as the stimulus behind later reform movements (Gopakumar, 2008, p. 43)

73 ‘The sudras are denied the learning of Vedas’
interest in cultural production in the Muslim community. *Mahathaya Mappila Sahithya Parambaryam* (The Great Tradition of Mappila Literature) documents the early efforts of literary and cultural upheaval among the Muslims of Kerala: “Ever since Islam spread in Kerala numerous scholars and writers have lived here. Ibn Bathutha, the 14th century traveller describes his meeting some Muslim scholars and leaders in his travelogue” (Ahamed Moulavi and Abdulkareem, 1978, p. 129).

As per the records of *Mahathaya Mappila Sahithya Parambaryam*, the earliest available work in Arabic-Malayalam script, *The Mohiyidheen Mala*, was written five years before Ezhuthachan wrote his *Adhyathma Ramayanam*. The parallel structure of narrative poetry in the vein of hagiography was an attempt to historicize the Muslim existence as well as to vitalize the community’s vigour in the light of Portuguese atrocities against the community. Another important work that needs reference here is *Tuhfat al-Mujahidin*, written in the 16th century. The book talks about the Portuguese atrocities against the Muslims and claims a position in history as the first anti colonial document. It also talks about the necessity of religious and spiritual awakening among the Muslims. Thus, the Bhakti Movement was not an isolated movement for Hindu revival, but had its impact on the Muslim community as well. The reform activities of late-nineteenth-century as well as the early-twentieth-century, definitely extends from this tradition. But unlike the concern of caste oppression in Hindu reform discussions, the Muslims took up

---

74 Roland E. Miller in *The Mappilas of Malabar* (1978) records the year of writing as 1607. The work itself talks of its construction in Kolla Varsham 782, which approves Miller’s contention.
questions of education, the journey back to the scriptures and resistance to colonial forces. The struggle to resist the Portuguese were one major concern, as the coloniser’s presence threatened the social security of Muslims the most. In his introduction to the *Complete Works of Makhthi Thangal*, M. Gangadharan writes about Veliyamcode Ummar Khazi, who campaigned for the Tax Defiance movement against the British in Malabar in early nineteenth-century. Gangadharan points out that perhaps Ummar Khazi could be the first person to start a resistance against the British Tax policies in India (2006, p. 12). Syed Sanah Ullah Makhthi Thangal was the son of a disciple of Ummar Khazi. The pioneer of the reform movements in the Muslim community, Thangal jumped into the public sphere of anti colonial resistance. *Kadora Kudaram*, Thangal’s first work attempts to resist the distortion of Islam and Hinduism by Christian missionaries. Partha Chatterjee in “Whose Imagined Community” counters Anderson’s notion of imagined nationalisms wherein he argues that Western Europe, Russia and America have provided set models for all subsequent nationalisms. Objecting to this notion of imagined communities Chatterjee brings in the dual existence for the nation, the political domain outside and the spiritual domain inside. Into this territory of the spiritual, nationalism seldom allows the colonial power to enter and this territory has been declared sovereign much before the political struggle for independence. This spiritual domain is not left unchanged and nationalism launches its most powerful project, “to fashion a modern national culture that is nevertheless not Western” (Chatterjee, 2008a, p. 7). The reform movements, thus, were attempts to equip the native language and the society for the modern culture, but not succumbing to the European
conventions. Looking at the Muslim reform movements from this perspective, we find efforts on the part of the reformers to reform the language, provide universal education, and to resist the coloniser’s impact. While noticing the gradual transformation of the society from the comfortable and familiar homeland to a difficult and contesting space where Islam as a religion from the outside had to struggle for identity and existence, the reformer’s task was dual: the first to assert one’s claim to the native identity and the second to equip the community with the machineries of the modern nation. Right from *Tuhfat-al-Mujahidin* such an effort is evident. As a historian of changing times, the author of *Tuhfat-al-Mujahidin* finds it important to document the pleasant lives of Muslims before the Portuguese in Malabar. The dialogues between Sanah Ullah Makhthi Thangal and the contemporary society was to establish an anti western essence and culture, that countered the orientalist assumptions of the Christian missionaries, fuelled by the coloniser’s unflinching support. Among his counter attacks on Christianity the major one was his attack on the holy trinity, the backbone of Christian theology. Not only that he challenges the scientific base of Christian belief, he also finds parallels between Christian and Hindu theology, connecting the holy trinity of Father, Son and the Holy Ghost and the Hindu concept of Tri Murthi, with Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. More than his arguments his approach to religion as a modern register, making it available for scientific analysis marks the dawn of modernity, with efforts to reform and modernize. The table given at the end of *Kadora Kudaram* comparing Hinduism and Christianity is one master thesis that marks religion’s entry from the premodern realm to a modern space (Abdulkareem, 2006, pp. 29-100).
Hierarchical dominance of the Islamic civilization and culture was taken up in an anti orientalist vein in Makhthi Thangal’s writings. Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* refers to the conscious construction of the western culture and knowledge as pure and free from all sorts of interpolations:

Consider, for a more complex example, the well known issues of the image of classical Greek antiquity or of tradition as a determinant of national identity. Studies such as Martin Bernal’s *Black Athena* and Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger’s *The Invention of Tradition* have accentuated the extraordinary influence of today’s anxieties and agendas on the pure (even purged) images that we construct of a privileged genealogically useful past, a past in which we exclude unwanted elements, vestiges, narratives. Thus, according to Bernal, whereas Greek civilization was known originally to have roots in Egyptian Semitic, and various other southern and eastern cultures, it was redesigned as ‘Aryan’ during the course of the nineteenth-century, its Semitic and African roots either actively purged or hidden from view. Since Greek writers themselves openly acknowledged their culture’s hybrid past, European philologists acquired the ideological habit of passing over these embarrassing passages without comment, in the interest of Attic purity. (One also recalls that only in the nineteenth-century did European historians of the Crusades begin *not* to allude to the practice of cannibalism among the Frankish knights,
even though eating human flesh is mentioned unashamedly in contemporary Crusader chronicles. (1994, p. 16)

What Said challenges here is not only the notion of the orient as culturally backward, but he also points to the hybrid nature of cultures that question the authoritative conclusion of the west as pure and superior. As a historian of Islam, Makhthi Thangal attempts to claim the indebtedness of the European civilization to the Islamic culture. He refers to Darvi, a book which according to him had been written by a French minister to state that:

Europe was once totally immersed in darkness. Knowledge of philosophy, Science, Mathematics, rhetoric, sculpture etc. was extended to them by the Islamic world. In Baghdad, Samarqand, Damascus, Kabaruvan, Egypt, Persia and Cordova there were plenty of institutions of scholarship where knowledge was imparted impartially. The knowledge dissemination during this period was mainly from these areas, and this is precisely where Europeans got the information on various sciences from. (Abdulkareem, 2006, p. 436)

Makthi Thangal’s arguments were widely supported by quotes from historians and scholars, many of whom were Europeans. As a true reformer handling the tool kit for a community’s entry into modernity, Makthi Thangal discusses education, women’s status and also registers the history of the Muslim community. He insisted on the importance of education and learning of Malayalam and English, and also undertook the translation of the Quran and other religious works from Arabic. Marking the
entry of the community into the modern realm of education, he undertook the reform of Arabic-Malayalam script. The short work, *Ta’leemul Iqwan* on the reformed Arabic-Malayalam script was published in Hijra 1310 (1892 A.D) and later a newspaper, *Tuhfat al Akbaar* in the new script in Hijra 1312 (Ahammed Moulavi and Abdulkareem, 1978, p. 127). Referring to the contribution of the print media and literature in the process of imagining the nation in the context of pre independent Bengal Chatterjee writes:

The crucial moment in the development of the modern Bengali language comes, however, in mid-century, when these bilingual elite makes it a cultural project to provide its mother tongue with the necessary linguistic equipment to enable it to become an adequate language for “modern” culture. An entire institutional network of printing presses, publishing houses, newspapers, magazines, and literary societies is created around this time, outside the purview of the state and the European missionaries, through which the new language, modern and standardized, is given shape. The bilingual intelligentsia came to think of its own language as belonging to that inner domain of cultural identity, from which the colonial intruder had to be kept out; language therefore became a zone over which the nation first had to declare its sovereignty and then had to transform in order to make it adequate for the modern world. (2008a, p. 7)
For the Muslim intellectual this imagining of the nation is problematic. The “spiritual inside” of the nation, which the reformer attempted to develop without the infiltration of the colonizer, was already trying to alienate them as outsiders. In the national longings, the nation was a confused terrain for the Muslim. At one end, the sense of belongingness needed to be asserted, at the same time a premodern religion from a pan-Islamic perspective needed to be defended, asserted and modernized. But in the Indian context, the religion has formed a syncretic mixture with Hinduism accentuating the tough task before the reformers. While establishing a Hindu identity that is definitely Indian, the Hindu reformers could claim the spiritual inside of the nationalist imagination of the nation, different from the Western notion of the nation, and at the same time alienate it from the Muslim attempts to claim this space. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the complexity involved in Muslim engagement with modernity was felt in Kerala as well. In Kerala it was all the more troublesome as Islam in Kerala has an entirely different relationship with the state’s history, different from the rest of India. It is almost free from the baggage of histories of invasion and attacks.  

Another surprising transformation that occurs in historiography is the general complacency with which the Muslim participation in the nationalist movement has been recorded in history. In spite of the fact that the first anti-colonial thesis from India, *Tuhfat-al-Mujahidin* has been written by a Muslim and there exist plenty of

---

75 Perhaps noting this difference the colonial historian has consciously created images like that of Tipu Sultan as invader and fanatic. This image was taken up by later mainstream historians.
songs\textsuperscript{76} in the oral tradition, praising the courageous Muslims who fought the 
foreigners, in the histories of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century, there is a 
conspicuous absence of Muslim participation. The Malabar Rebellion figures in the 
margins of India’s struggle for independence and often is treated as a peasants’ 
uprising against feudalism or even as an outbreak of Muslim fanaticism against 
Hindus. By early-nineteenth-century the status of Muslims had changed considerably 
in the political context.

It is in this context that we have to look into the Muslim reform movements 
in Kerala. Rather than claiming the nation, attempts were to modernize the 
community. But throughout the discourses on modernity, the ethnographic origins 
of the community have been traced in the historical roots of Kerala. At the same 
time resorting to an Islamic past of strict reading of the Quran and the Hadiths, 
efforts have been taken to detach the community from its superstitious practices.

Print journalism was one mechanism adopted by the Muslim reformers to 
reach out to the community. More than any other community, the print culture had 
a major role to play in the reform strategies of the Muslims in Kerala. From 1900 
onwards there circulated hundreds of regional newspapers and magazines, with an 
tention to popularize education, discuss the status of women and in general the 
Islamic ways of life. The relationship between the state and the Muslim reform 
leaders was interesting, especially when compared to the loyalty to the state

\textsuperscript{76} These songs are named as maalas. There is plenty of material and genres in Mappila literature 
that need to be further explored. A serious study of this literature has never been undertaken.
exhibited by leaders like Syed Ahmed Khan. Vakkom Maulavi, the great Muslim reformist, for instance, was the patron of Swadeshabhimani Ramakrishna Pillai, who was exiled on grounds of treason by the colonial regime. There had been two major organizations formed by the Muslims during this period. The first one was Muhammadeeya Sabha formed by Makhthi Thangal in Northern Kerala. Sheikh Hamadani Thangal formed Muslim Nishpaksha Sabha, intending to unite the Muslim brethren. Initially Vakkom Maulavi was a part of this movement. In 1905 he started the Swadeshabhimani newspaper with Ramakrishna Pillai as his chief editor. The newspaper attacked the rule of the king and the corrupt ways. In 1910, the state closed the press and banned the daily. Like most of the reform leaders, Vakkom Maulavi touched the political, social and economic aspects of the community’s development. He identified lack of education as the cause for the backwardness of the community. In the article “The Need of Muhammadeeya Sabha” that was published in his daily, Muslim, he wrote about the necessity of education:

It is to be accepted that the Muslims of Kerala are in a pathetic situation. They have not only ignored this reality, being hesitant to take the initiative, but have also been indifferent to the reminders from other communities through newspapers and other sources. Muslims of Kerala have been identified as “ignorant” and that reverberates all over the nation.

The necessity of a Muslim organization has reached its heights. If Muslims of Malabar, Kochi and Travancore unite to form an
organisation the backwardness of the community can be slowly rectified. Histories have taught us that all communities have risen to development solely through these kinds of organisations and meetings . . . (Vakkom Maulavi qtd. in Govinda Pilla, vol.2, 2009, p. 51)

While the reform leaders discuss backwardness they also point towards a better future, with education and active engagements with culture through printing, publishing and other resources. It is interesting to notice that the Muslim community focused into this area completely that most of the reformists had their own printing facilities. While dealing with the question of “backwardness,” they published plenty of materials both on the role of Islam in the modern world and also on the ways to lead Muslims forward as befitting citizens in the emerging nation. Unfortunately the later historians could only discuss this backwardness and leave out the Muslim negotiations with modernity. From 1910 onwards the community witnessed a dynamic period through education, writing and publishing, political and social work and so on. This never appears in the mainstream narratives on the reform movements. The community along with its women have been engaging in a complex negotiation with religion and modernity so as to relocate itself in the emerging political sphere during this period. The representation of women in the nationalist histories of South Asia as such has been problematic, and the added identity of the Muslim makes it all the more complicated.

While revisiting the nineteenth-century colonial documents on India, many historians, especially feminist historians, have identified conscious strategies of
documenting the Indian customs and practices as inferior and thus in need of rectification. The status of women was one favourite point to start on in attaining this end. The native reformer, taking the cue from the colonial master, strictly followed the prospect of civilizing their women, or perhaps uplifting the status of their women. In the context of Kerala this worked in a slightly different manner. Since the Muslim population of this densely populated state is considerably high, the reformers had to focus on the plight of the Muslim community, along with the rest. While the Muslim reformers took up the question of education and social awareness, the later historians followed the preconceived notions on Islam, depicting the community as backward and their women as suppressed by the customs of this ‘primitive religion.’ Thus, Muslim women whose destiny remained in the hands of their male masters remain in the murky world of ignorance and illiteracy, contributing nothing to the cultural renaissance in the documented history of the reform movements. In the nationalist models of reform, the emerging identity of the Hindu woman was both that of the preserver of ancient Hindu values and also the symbol of the evolving nation’s heritage. Metcalf identifies this phenomenon:

The social reformers ultimately identified the middleclass, educated housewife with nothing less than the preservation of ‘Hindu’ religion and culture, and even with India itself as Bharat Mata. The ‘New

77 Lata Mani’s (2009) reading of colonial documents on Sati referred to in chapter two serves as an example.

78 Barbara Metcalf, Islamic Contestations (2006); Katherine Bullock, Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil (2002).
Hindu woman’ was at once different from the unreformed, poor, and uneducated women; from English women, who were both a model and a threat; and from non-Hindu, above all Muslim women. To the extent that such an image was at the heart of Hindu cultural nationalism, it helps explain the failure of political nationalism to engage imagination and commitment of large segments of population. (2006, p. 100)

The identification of the Bengali bhadralok female as the new image of Indian woman, challenging the ‘ideal Victorian woman’s profile, definitely distanced other women from the cultural space of the nation. This phenomenon functions in all cultural productions and political designs ever since.\textsuperscript{79} The way in which this formula functioned in Kerala was slightly different, owing to the different context of nationalism that evolved in Kerala. Who constituted the genteel in Kerala corresponding to the Bengali bhadralok makes one difference. The impact of communist movements that put forth egalitarian frames of social structure, at least apparently, presented a distinctive model for Kerala. The fact that the reform movements in Kerala were not strictly upper class Hindu oriented phenomena as in Bengal, also added to the difference. Though there had been lots of discussions on women during the reform era, the question whether there was an apparent model for the ‘woman’ in this context needs to be further examined. Though the model of

\textsuperscript{79} Popular movies have women’s images fitting into this context. Muslim women’s portrayal in movies and literature of the mainstream is pathetic.
Hindu woman emerged out of the image of Bharat Mata was assimilated into the cultural space of Kerala in the post independent phase, where Kerala was very much imbibed into the space of the nation, this was not the case in the reform context.

Was there an ideal woman to uphold tradition in the context of the reform movements in Kerala? There were diverse models available and this diversity was camouflaged by the later historians of the reform movements. J. Devika’s reading of Malayalee modernity looks into the reform movements as a context of producing gendered individuals:

The revisioning of modern society outlined above serves as a base on which a new vision of gender relations are projected, implying new power equations between Woman and Man. Early-twentieth-century reformisms in Malayalee society, it may be recalled, put forth an ‘order of gender’ as the ideal alternative to the existent oppressive order janmabhedam, difference-by-birth, jati. The individualism they espoused entailed a vision of gender difference, which was immediately organised in terms of a complementary sexual exchange. Ideally, men were to remain within the public domain, and women within the domestic, exercising different sorts of authority and power. Both domains were to be shaped in such a way that they would be spaces in which individual qualities might thrive. These domains were

80 Malayalee is one who belongs to Kerala. Devika uses this vernacular term as she insists on using Keralam instead of Kerala.
found to be determined by the sexual endowments of the body.

Women, it was argued, ought to exercise supervisory authority within the home, assuming the responsibility for the management of materials and bodies within the home, so that the unique and positive dispositions, capacities, inclinations etc. of those within the domestic domain may be well-developed. (2007, p. 243)

Devika goes on to say that in women’s writing of the reform period, especially in Lalithambika Antarjanam’s writings, complementary sexual exchange seemed to be indefinitely postponed to future. In her reading, Antharjanam rejects the instrumental exchange as the basic nature of the relation between the sexes and challenges the project of re-forming women by men. Devika’s critique of the reform project as male attempts to control and redefine female bodies, have been raised by feminists in connection with the reform projects, (Gupta, 2008; Sangari and Vaid, 2009) especially in Bengal. While I agree with Devika’s reading of Antharjanam’s writings as an oppositional reworking of sexual complementarities (2007, p. 248), I realize the impossibility of making this observation a general thesis involving women’s participation in the reform context. The context of modernity was defined by different communities in different manner. The strained relationship with religion and tradition was a common phenomenon for the reformers, but the negotiations that each community adopted to accommodate religion in the context of modernity cannot be generalized. In terms of women these negotiations had wide implications.
I would like to elaborate this phenomenon based on different readings of the Channaar rebellion. The Channaar Rebellion of the mid-nineteenth-century was spurred by the determination of Channaar women to cover their breasts refuting the authorities. This act of wearing blouses, as read by many (for instance, Devika, 2007, pp. 269-73) cannot be read as violence inflicted upon the natives by colonial morality or as the reformer’s attempt to follow the colonial standards of morality:

In turn, the community reformisms gave the idea deeper reach through a variety of means. From the accounts of reformist activities, it seems that often these means involved outright intimidation; even coercion... The use of violence to clothe women who refused to cover themselves is sometimes mentioned in histories of reform and reformers. (Devika 2007, p. 273)

What is ignored here is identifying the role of jati, or caste in insisting a particular dress code for a community. Perhaps the notion of sexuality associated with bare breasts has been a colonial import, but denying a particular community access to clothe in the light of the revised sense of morality has got wider implications. Modernity is context specific and negotiations that each community makes with modernity in terms of relating to the community and to access the enlightenment ideals were different. It is in this context that I would like to read the agency of Muslim women in the reform movements, the negotiations they had with religion and modernity to contextualize Muslim women in the new world. Also, these mediations mostly functioned at an independent domain from the male discourses,
though there were points of intersection. The language of the new woman thus was a complex domain of multiple interests and loyalties, at times apparently contradictory in terms of a binary approach to tradition and modernity.

Within the patriarchal structures that formulate discourses on modernity, women had been portrayed as nothing but tools in the process of modernising. But in any nation’s progress towards modernity, we come across a tight linking between reformism and feminism. If we trace the history of non European nationalist movements we come across active participation of women in political struggles. The historical realities demanded the entry of women into mainstream politics and their active participation in the nationalist movements. But in documented histories, women become the symbol of the backwardness of the community and also the markers of the virtue and heritage of the community. This divided role was a convenient guise to counter the European critique of the oriental women, yet at the same time kept them in the same frames of patriarchy that shapes indigenous systems.

The history of the nationalist movements in India reflects gaps and silences in documenting women’s participation in the movement. The same pattern has been followed by historians while attempting the history of the reform movements in Kerala. It is ironic to note that most of the revolutionary acts of these movements

81 Kumari Jayawardena in *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* discusses the development of feminism in the third world historical context.

82 See Katherine Bullock (2002).
involved important decisions on the plight of women. There is the clichéd entry of Nambutiri women from kitchen to the forefront, widow remarriages in Nambutiri community, Channaar rebellion or the rejection of stones worn by Pulaya women (variedly reported as *Kallayum Maalayum*, *Kallu maala* etc.), or even the discussions on women’s education. It is indeed notable to see how discourses on women informed the enlightening ideals of reformation. At the same time historical narratives on the reform movements are crucially silent about the participant woman in these highly revolutionary events. Even the records of Channaar Rebellion of the mid-nineteenth-century, though a highly women centred movement, is unusually silent in terms of its female participants. Look at how *Kallu Maala* rebellion has been narrated by P. Sivadasan in *Kerala Charithram Sambhavangaliloode* [History of Kerala through Events]:

> Women from the Pulaya community defying the norms of the upper-caste and the police restrictions discarded the stones on their neck in public, under the leadership of Ayyankali and progressive leaders like Changanassery Parameswaran Pillai at the Railway station ground, Kollam. It has been reported that the stones, discarded by them, formed a heap of about four to five feet and remained in the ground for a long time. (2007, p. 86)

---

83 The lower-caste women were forced to wear heavy stones and glass pieces on their neck, marking their backwardness.
Apart from a few women who belonged to the Hindu upper caste, history does not acknowledge the participation of women in these movements. We listen to a couple of names as to that of Arya Pallam, Lalithambika Antharjjanam, Devaki Narikkattiri, Ambadi Ikkavamma, A. V. Kuttimalu Amma, and Akkama Cherian and so on. But in the recorded history of these moments of women’s intervention in the reform period women appear rarely, and if at all we come across the names of women, those are that of the Nambutiri women involved in the Nambutiri reform movements. In M. N. Vijayan’s Nammude Sahithyam Nammude Samooham (2000) we come across one such passing reference to Arya Pallam and Thozhil Kendhrathilekku. K. N. Ganesh too, refers to Tharavathu Ammalu Amma, Ambadi Ikkavamma, T. K. Kalyani Amma, Lalithambika Antharjanam and K. Saraswathi Amma while discussing the rising women’s movements (2002, 136). Apart from these vague references women do not make an impact to our historians to be included in the recorded history. Thus Channaar Rebellion, rising from Channaar women’s choice of wearing blouses, ‘Kallayum Maalayum Bahishkaranam’ of Pulaya women and even the widow remarriages that took place in the Nambutiri community came under the account of the male reform leaders like Ayyankali or V. T. Bhattachirippad in which of course they had a major role to play. Yet we never hear the history of the widows, who remarried, or the Pulaya women who refuted the norms discarding Kallayum Maalayum or

84 Thozhil Kendrathilekku [To the Work Place] (1945) is a play written by a collective of Nambutiri women under the patronage of Antharjana Samajam, formed in 1931. During the reform movements there were women’s small scale work centres, undertaking the task of providing destitute women means for living. The play centres on this theme of empowering women.
even the first Channaar woman who came out proudly covering her breasts in public.

It is in this context of historical narratives on the reform movements that I try to explore the implications of these changes in the Muslim community in terms of its women during this period of transformation. It is important to note that while the reform movements in other communities are marked by revolutionary refutations, the Muslim reformation circles around public talks, gatherings and more importantly discussions in journals and periodicals. There were about hundreds of periodicals that came out during this period and these journals were associated with the reform leaders. But most of these journals were seen as religious literature. Listen to how Miller talks about them in *The Mappila Muslims of Kerala*: “Mappila periodicals tended to be associated with narrow objectives and did not fall into the category of general literature. . . .” (1976, p. 290). Even when these periodicals were written off as religious literature, we cannot expect the women of the community, marked historically at an antithetical position to the enlightened and liberated European women to be included in the history of Kerala’s reformation. While we read the response of Haleema Beevi in an interview to a question on the materials published in her weekly *Bharatha Chandrika*, the obvious distortions at the hands of historians come to light. She says:

The weekly was named *Bharatha Chandrika*. Literature was given priority: the poems of Changampuzha Krishna Pillai, the stories of
Vaikom Muhammad Basheer, and so on. Thus *Bharatha Chandrika* was also the learning school for budding writers . . . O. N. V. Kurup, Gupthan Nair, Balamani Amma, Kamukara Purushothaman and many important writers of the time used to publish in this. (1995, p. 6)

Now, reading this testimony against the grain of Miller’s observation reveals the prejudices of historians, to exclude Muslim periodicals from the discourses on the reform movements. Haleema Beevi herself makes it clear that most of the prominent writers in Malayalam used to publish in her weekly. Miller’s contention that the periodicals published by Muslims were religious in nature thus proves contrary to reality. Also, Miller’s reading is informed by a preconceived notion of Islam as the primitive anti-modern religion. Interestingly, it was among the Muslim community that the reform movements flourished mostly in terms of printing and publishing. Many of the Muslim reformists like Vakkom Maulavi and Haleema Beevi had their own publishing facilities. These periodicals were used widely to mobilize the public.

Contextualising the participation of women in the Muslim reformation is problematic as it has been marked by two features that inform discourses on Islam and women. First of all the idea of placing this discourse within the wider context of discourses on nationalism and resisting imperialism as all the reformative movements have been placed may not be viable. I would like to refer to Kumari Jayawardena:
It is in the context of the resistance to imperialism and various forms of foreign domination on the one hand, and to feudal monarchies, exploitative local rulers and traditional patriarchal and religious structures on the other, that we should consider the democratic movement for women’s rights and feminist struggles that emerged in Asia. (1986, p. 8)

While going through the available issues of local journals and periodicals which were in circulation between 1920 and 1970 as part of the Muslim reform movement, I could come across many articles and of course a few stories and poems by Muslim women, reflecting the general air of the reform. But none of them could fall into this categorically presented ‘democratic movements for women’s rights’ in the discourse of Jayawardena. There were a few that discussed the downtrodden plight of Muslim women, but we cannot categorise them as a critique of religion. These writings, informed by the wider movements related to improving the status of women in the society, are placed very much within the norms of the religion. They have been widely circulated between the period of 1920 to 1970 and this creates issues while attempting to place them in the framework of the nationalist discourses against imperialism.\(^{85}\) Still, these periodicals cannot be written off as religious literature. The subjectivity of

\(^{85}\) It is to be noted that the reform movements among the Muslims of Kerala were not just a pre-independent process and it extends to the 70s and even to the 80s. Even the contemporary politicization of Islam in Kerala is vaguely the bifurcation of the early-twentieth-century reform movements.
women inside Islam and the treatment of Islamic societies as premodern or barbaric, against the liberal norms of modernist societies have been under serious revisions recently. The position of women inside religion, especially, inside Islam has been into revised considerations by feminists of late. Though we cannot rule out the colonial context, Muslim reform discourses are strictly not ‘nationalist’ in texture. The countering of imperialism also comes from a wider perspective that runs beyond the borders of the nation. Or, nation itself has become an anomaly for the Muslims by the 1940s due to the impact of political moves made both by the congress and Muslim national leaders.

K. M. Seethi gives a brief history of the periodical literature in the Muslim community of Kerala in the first issue of Chandrika Weekly in 1950, July 15. He lists out a number of publications widely circulated among the Muslims and gives references to Muslim Mahila of Moosakutty Sahib, Muslim Vanitha and Bharatha Chandhrika from Thiruvalla of Haleema Beevi which were entirely dedicated to women. He also refers to a good amount of readership from Muslim women which had been the motivating force for all these journals (1950, p. 4).

During my research I have come across many entries by Muslim women in periodicals, and certain issues were meant for women alone. Ansari, Al Islam, and Mappilla Review are a few journals in which women wrote consistently. Haleema Beevi entered the terrain of journalism in 1938 with Muslim Vanitha,

---

86 Most of the periodicals that I refer to here were short termed ones, though some of them struggled and continued to exist.
which was later modified as Adhunika Vanitha. Though it had discussed issues like women’s education and the need of reforming religion giving up superstitious practices, it strived hard to survive and after some time had to stop publishing. Bharatha Chandrika came out in 1946 and Vakkom Abdul Khader and Vaikom Muhammad Basheer were the co-editors of the journal.

Bharatha Chandrika became a daily after one year and it is surprising to note that the defiance with which Haleema Beevi wrote against the oppressive reign of Sir C. P. Rama Swami, the dictatorial Divan of Travancore went unnoticed. Acknowledging the recent efforts to place her in the history of the women’s movement in Kerala, however it is a disturbing reality to accept the absence of such a strong presence in our discourses on early women’s movements. Her invocation was definitely women-oriented and of course reformist. She was also an ardent member of the Indian National Congress. In 1949, the magazine Azad came out with Haleema Beevi as the chief editor. The following period of her break from active journalism saw the rise of an activist. In 1960 she organised a Muslim women’s conference at Perumbavoor, near Kochi. In 1970, she started a new magazine titled Adhunika Vanitha, with women in all major posts. In an article published in Aaraamam, immediately after her death in March 2000 Sasikumar Chelannur writes:

Haleema Beevi entered the world of print media when the world of letters was alien to women, especially Muslim women. This Muslim woman journalist is still an amazing presence in the history of print.
journalism in Kerala as she entered the public arena when women were hesitant to occupy political and public roles. This great woman who fought against the dictatorial rule of Sir C. P. is no longer with us. Her exciting life lies before researchers to be explored. (2000, p. 11)

What is interesting in this reading is the constant reminder that Haleema Beevi’s work didn’t get the public attention that it deserved. Also, the author reiterates her unusually strange presence in the public sphere. But in spite of that why did not she get the relevance she deserved in recorded history? Among the hundreds of journals and tracts that were in circulation among the Muslims from 1920s to 1970s none got acknowledged as secular literature. The evolving public sphere in Kerala with its secular-modern outlook failed to accommodate the cultural productions and political writings of this community into its domain.

The contribution of Haleema Beevi in asserting the existence of Muslim woman is of course notable. At the same time, there were other women from the Muslim community who too, wrote on the plight of women. For instance, let me quote P. Beefathima who wrote in Mappila Review of August 1945: “Men of Kerala do not treat women as per the instructions of religion. If women are ill treated in personal life, it is of course because of the ignorance of the community on the laws of the religion” (p. 40). A quick glance over these journals of course reveals a number of such reformist ideas by women, who, write within the space of religion, yet concentrating on women’s existence.
The Muslim women engaged in discourses with modernity often had a strained relationship with religion all over the world. The dialogues of Muslim women of Kerala with modernity but reflects a different trajectory as such. Without compromising the spiritual interiors of the religion they could debate and discuss modernity, redefining themselves and the community. But this re-defining is not in terms of negating tradition, but constantly negotiating. I would like to analyze three aspects in the periodical literature by Muslims on women and by Muslim women writers during the reform era. First of all I would like to focus on the context of colonial rule in which this literature was published. The reformist discourses, especially in the Muslim context discussed and defended the status of Muslim women and Islam in general confronting the western critique of Islam. The second aspect is that of the reform attempts, most often by the male reformer, that tend to identify women in general and Muslim women in specific as the potential material to be reformed. Finally, I would look into the Muslim woman’s own conception of reform and how their vision of their own essence is circumscribed by the two earlier aspects, and at the same time succeeds in etching a platform for her in the political and cultural domains of the nation. In their negotiations for both agency and connectedness to their larger social, religious, ethnic and national communities, women demonstrate their capacity for action defined by their strong presence in the reform dialogues.

The response to colonialism in the reform context comes out in many ways. Not only in differentiating the difference between ‘them’ and ‘us,’ but unlike the Hindu reformer’s vocabulary, the thrust here was to present an anti European
approach, upholding Islam in a wider historical and geographical perspective. In an article titled “Islam and Women” published in *Al Islam*, Vakkom Maulavi writes:

> It is equally foolish to say that polygamy is established by Islam as a practice, as to say that purdah is a Muslim practice. The so called civilized Greek and Roman men used to keep their women away from other men. Greece which is supposed to be the sacred centre of civilization and the birth place Socrates and Plato used to treat its women like animals. (Maulavi, 1918a, p. 32)

The article goes on to defend purdah and the virtues of the Islamic ways of life. It also claims that all communities used to separate their men and women and the present critique of purdah comes from the influence of American culture that lets unrestricted male female contact which was allowed only in the nomadic pasts of human beings. The article also gives a definition of purdah as stated in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, as the system that separates men and women and since it is a common practice among all oriental communities it could have come into existence much before Islam. The article is a defence of Islam, but more than that it counters the colonial projection of Islam as the barbaric other. There were many articles that attempted to define the Muslim woman as fundamentally different from, yet privileged over her European and Hindu counterparts during this time in various little magazines. Read for instance the editorial response that was published in the magazine *Isha’ath*, in October 1934 on the widow re-marriages in the Nambutiri
The lives of widows in Hindu community have been miserable. In the past they were burnt alive in the funeral pyres of their husbands as per Vedic instructions. It was the Muslim kings and the British who followed them, put an end to this practice. Yet Hindus have never extended the widows equal rights with other women or allowed them to remarry. The grievances of widows—“the poor widow also has heart and veins/she is not afflicted by insanity”—has never been attended to by Hindus, the strict followers of the Vedas.

But Islam has answered the plea of widows thousand six hundred years back. Not only that they were given equal status with other women in the society, their insecurity had been addressed to by the instruction, “you should marry the widows in your community.” Since this instruction has been strictly followed, widow grievances are absent in Islam. Now, after years of suffering, Hindus have come forward willingly to follow Muslims in this matter. This natural inspiration is the motivation behind the widow remarriage at Rasika Sadan in Thrithaala. As per newspaper reports, “along with entertainers, many famous personalities including poets and famous writers, independent thinkers and reformers had attended the function.” The couple received hundreds of telegrams, letters and
Mangala pathrams. Many great men who witnessed the great event praised this courageous deed and blessed the couple.

What is evident here is the open acceptance of Islamic principles by individuals when exposed to knowledge, progress and independent thought. As V. T. himself had declared in his vote of thanks, “yes, I am not a Nambutiri from now onwards,” as no Hindu who has empathized with this great deed is a Veda observing Hindu anymore. In refuting a strong imperative from the Hindu scriptures, at least this time the Hindus have followed the Muslim path. We appreciate the great youth from this community for refuting the scriptures that block the progress of the community and wishes are extended to the courageous couple. We advice them to consult the corresponding Islamic law in the future endeavours as well while encountering issues in the community. (1934, n. p.)

This is definitely an attempt to define and distinguish the way Islam treats its women from the Hindu and Christian ways. There are also articles that discuss the right to property enjoyed by Muslim women, placing them in a better position over Christian women. Since the discussion on the plight of women formulated discourses on the backwardness of Islam, the reformer’s dialogue is shaped by a defence of Islam’s better way of treating its women. Here the reformist is carving separate identities, defining what is meant by a Hindu or a Muslim, especially in terms of women. Combining the arguments in this extract and the previous one on purdah, the
A reformist attempt is to confront the colonial critique of Islam as backward in terms of its women, which was later abstracted into the Hindu nationalist discourses as well. The theme reiterates in many articles published between 1915 and 1960. Katherine Bullock points out the hierarchical privileging of Christianity over Islam in terms of the status of its women. Her work *Rethinking the Muslim Women and the Veil* is a journey into the conscious construction of Muslim women inferior over Christian women, attaining the desired effect of hierarchically placing Europe over the orient:

> The point of discourse on women was that a nation could not advance while its women were backward. Women as mothers were seen to play a crucial role in educating their children, and thus perpetuating the civilization. Christian mothers (the European mothers) exerted a healthy civilizing influence on their children. Muslim mothers did not. So colonialists, missionaries, and feminists, as well as native elites trying to ‘modernize’ their countries, all hoped to have access to the Muslim woman in order to influence her, so that the nation might progress. (2002, p. 18)

Muhammad Kutty Arimbra has an article titled, “Sthree: Padaviyum, Pravarthana Rangavum” [Woman: Status and Career] that compares women’s status in relations to Islam and other religions.
in Semitic religions and Islam. There is a comparison between various cultures and claim that all civilizations have come through superstitions and rigid patterns of restrictions. By claiming that barbarism was the common feature among all ancient tribes, the author contrasts this with the Islamic civilization. He also points to an inferior treatment of women by Jews and Christians as the woman is temptress and the epitome of sin in their lineage. His out lash against Europe’s way of treating women is definitely a defence of the status of women in Islam:

Yet, when did Europe that takes pride in itself as a progressive civilization, an ideal model for all, legally approved of women’s rights? Only in the recent past. This was not the reflection of an entire revolution in the male perspective, but just out of the constant demands by empathizing souls. That even now in many European countries, women’s rights have not been properly acknowledged and most of their claims have not been legally accepted prove this fact.

(1959, n. p.)

Thus the hassle was to counter both the European critique of women’s status in Islam and also to establish a different and distinct individuality for the Muslim woman over the Hindu woman. The Hindu reformist efforts to depict the Hindu woman as the symbol of virtue and tradition had to be addressed in the same context. Though, in the context of Kerala this was not as evident as we may find in the Bengal Reform scenario. One reason could be the fact that powerful reform movements from the lower castes of the Hindu community mark Kerala’s entry into
modernity. Nevertheless Muslim women’s better existence over their Hindu counterparts is often emphasized in these discourses.

While a hierarchy was maintained projecting women’s status in terms of civilizations by the colonial invaders, the same question was addressed by the native reformer as well. The second aspect mentioned earlier, Muslim women as subjects of male reformer’s project comprised most of the male reformer’s dialogues on women. In terms of being better wives and mothers, as well as preservers of tradition, women needed to be educated; their social world had to be extended outside home. But unlike the colonial standards, along with widening the social world of women, the domestic world itself became a space for re-forming. Making women available for the machineries of the modern state was of course important, but these machineries were also extended to the domestic world of women. Thus the male reformist determined the style and pattern of female re-forming. But in Kerala, among the Muslims this pattern functioned in a slightly different manner. Unlike northern India, there was no strict observance of purdah among the Muslim women in Kerala then. Therefore, the male reformer’s role in reforming the woman was limited as compared to Nambutiri or Hindu upper castes. Unlike the Nambutiri community, therefore, what we witness is not an utter refutation of tradition and on the contrary, there is a reverence and celebration of tradition that we come across here. The reformism in the Muslim community thus discusses a better following of the religious virtues. While adopting the organizational forms and the printing technology from modernity, the Muslim reformers are careful not to imitate the west and to delineate a distinct way of living from the western society. There is also
a careful distancing from the Hindu reformist spirituality that locates the nation and the heritage in its women. While articulating the destiny of Indian Muslims in changing times, they do not load their cultural hopes upon their women. While acknowledging the need for education and the extension of public lives of their women, the community’s reforming material was not just women. Gail Minault in *Secluded Scholars* identifies this kind of a phenomenon in North India among both the Muslims and the Hindus. She says women were identified as objects of male reform programmes as potential students, as readers of improving literature, as subscribers to magazines designed to disseminate new knowledge, as beneficiaries of the activities of men (Minault 1999, p. 9). This was true about the Muslim reform movements in Kerala as well. But how far there existed a distinction between secular and religious positions bring in the difference between male and female discourses on Muslim reform. While male reformists drew upon Islamic intellectual tradition to support reform programmes for women, women’s discourses anchored on more mundane arenas of life, articulating a number of issues ignored by men. Their views at times substantiate and at times challenge the male perspectives. The reform programme for women as charted out by male reformers mainly centred on discussions on women’s education. At times they also deal with the modern welfare mechanisms like health, hygiene, etc. where they thought women had a major role to play in safe guarding the family. In an article on the importance of breast milk, “Mulappalinte Kootuthal Pradhanatha” [the Greater Importance of Breast Milk] published in *Mappila Review* in 1945, there is a translation of an article by the
American scientist and thinker Alexis Carl. The article deals with the importance of breast feeding and as conclusion there are some observations:

Modern women are not informed on motherhood and its responsibilities. Some mothers prioritize many other things over child care. They neglect their primary duty. Girls do not get any information or specific training to cope with the responsibilities of life through education. Likewise they do not get privileged status in the community also. (1945, p. 15)

The reformer is well aware of the lacunae in modern education and therefore presents several models before the Muslim woman. These kinds of secular discussions often informed the reform concerns on women. Though purdah was a major concern for others to define the community, purdah has been referred to only in terms of defending Islamic law. Otherwise purdah is not a recurring theme in the reform dialogues. In this context let us also discuss a story titled “Sevika” (the woman in social service) published in Mappila Review of 1945. The short story written by P. A. Muhammad Koya, centres around a girl named Nafeesa, with a great passion to study despite the resistance of the majority of her community. Still she continues with her studies ignoring obstacles. Her notion of education is in accordance with the modern sense of enlightenment. For instance, when Nafeesa was asked to discontinue her studies by her father due to immense pressure from the community her response fits into the category of the modernized individual. She says:
“You mean I should discontinue studies? I cannot agree to that. Why should the community bother about my studies? Only educated men and women can lead the society and the community to progress. Can we dance according to their tunes? Let them blabber whatever they want.” (1945, p. 5)

This spirit of modernity in the individual’s right to choose one’s priorities reflect in most of the literature published in these periodicals. To continue with the story, Nafeesa actively engages in disaster management during an outbreak of cholera in the locality. She organises a cholera eradication cell with the aid of women in the neighbourhood and sets into action. She becomes a solace to many grieving families and soon becomes a favourite in the neighbourhood. Though the story ends with her death by cholera, the message it has to convey does not fail. First of all, education is given priority over everything else. Another aspect is the spirit of individualism exhibited by Nafeesa in making her choices. Beyond all this, there is the message that the educated girl can be beneficial to the community. The shaping of modern woman productive for the society as well as the family is the focus of this story. The ideal woman who can meet the demands of the modern family and society in general was the choice of the men of the time. These periodicals have wide range of entries meant to familiarize women with the new ways of child care and household management. There are also requests to women to contribute writings and mostly the editorials addressed women readership as well. These discussions and debates were going on in the larger context of efforts to open schools and institutions for
secular education for women. The editorial in *Mappila Review* of October 1945, reports:

The decision of the Govt. to promote Hobart High School in Madras to a Muslim Women’s College is a matter to rejoice for all Muslims . . .

The Govt. has agreed that from the secondary class onwards women need separate schools. For Muslim women this is a necessity as coeducation is not conducive to Muslim culture and tradition. This has blocked the entry of Muslim women into higher education. There have been grievances regarding separate facilities and reservations for Muslim women’s Higher education . . . We are happy to know that the Secretary of Tirur Muslim Girls High School, Janab Koyappathodi Ahammed Kutty Saheb has submitted a request to the educational advisor to Madras Govt., Sir Thomas Austin seeking free education in this college and free boarding in the associated hostel for Mappila girls. We expect a positive response on the part of the govt. in this regard.

With the establishment of Tirur Muslim Girls High school, Mappila women have developed a greater affinity to higher education. A majority of Mappila women who complete high School may consider higher educational possibilities. Their low financial status may prevent them from such aspirations. It is the responsibility of the Govt. to encourage such resourceful students. If their economic status alone
blocks their aspirations it is a crime on the part of the state not to
attend to it. We sincerely hope that Sir Austin succumbs to this
demand of Mappila women. (1945, pp. 29-30)

What we come across here is not merely the aspiration on the part of the
community to higher education but that in the process of modernization the citizen
realizes the mission of the state in welfare services. Tradition and culture are not
being given away, yet the state is identified as the primary responsible institution for
its subjects. This transition of power and authority from the priests and elders in the
community to the state becomes slowly evident in the reform discourses. At the
same time, the Muslim subject retrieves tradition as it is insisted by the holy book. A
shift from hadiths and other interpretations to the Quran was the trend of the time,
as reform leaders also initiated projects to translate the Quran. Education, health
system, hygiene and various other tools of modernity were often resorted to but not
in the sense of embracing the west, but mostly through negotiations.

During the 1940s and 50s Muslim women’s education was the major focus
around which the community’s reform attempts were centred. The Muslim Boys
English High School was opened in Tirur, in 1936 and following it in 1940, the Muslim
Girls High School was started. After one year, boarding facility also was extended.
Most of the Muslim journals published during this period urge the public to associate
with the functioning of this school. They also urge the parents to send their children
to schools. In the discussions modern education is presented as an enlightening tool,
required for the individual in her journey to emancipation. Clichéd descriptions on
ignorance and backwardness were the key feature: “Does the community hope to progress after pinning down their women to smoke filled kitchens?” the query in the Editorial in *Mappila Review* (1945, p. 49), and the exhortation “The Muslim’s Women’s Organisation should be able to throw out the demon of ignorance among its women and should improve their cultural and educational standards” in “Sthree Vidhyabhyasam” [Women’s Education] by M. Sheykh Muhammad Maulavi, the principal of Arabic college, Areekkod, in *Al Manar* (1959, p. 124) were a few. That there had been hot debates regarding the topic of Muslim women’s education is evident from many of the articles in *Al Manar, Isha’ath* and *Mappila Review*. A. K. Abu in *Al Manar*, has an article “Muslim Sthreekalum Vidhyabhyasavum,” (1960, p. 260) which refers to hadiths to approve of women’s education. He harshly criticizes the critics of women’s education as fraudulent manipulators. There is also evident confusion in this matter between scholars. They all agreed in one position which was to adopt education without compromising the obligations to religious traditions. There were extremists and moderates in this position. While analysing these dynamic dialogues, the most striking aspect appears to be the unanimity in terms of their purpose for educating women. K. M. Maulavi in “Sthree Vidhyabhyasam” shares his apprehensions on women’s education:

> It is surprising to see difference of opinion regarding women’s education among the followers of a religion that has evidently presented the rights and responsibilities of women and insisted on education for all. Let me draw your attention to certain important aspects of this matter. Muslim women need separate educational
institutions. Girls nearing puberty should be educated in these exclusive schools. If possible women teachers need to teach in these institutions. The most important quality of a woman is the purity of her soul and body. She should follow her obligations to her husband. While designing the curriculum for girls’ school, priority needs to be given to this aspect. The purpose of women’s education is to enlighten her soul, refine her character and make her adept in controlling the family and nurturing good habits in children aiming at preserving the family property and prosperity. Besides, their eminence in handling everything related to economical and political endeavours of the community need to be targeted. Still, for enlightening the soul and developing wisdom, nothing comes closer to Islamic preaching. Therefore, in our country Muslim girls need to learn Arabic, Arabic-Malayalam, and pure Malayalam. Based on the Quran and the sunna’hs let them learn aqeed, aqlaq, ibadath, haraam and halaal.\textsuperscript{88} Home making and child care cannot be exempted. Courses on weaving, tailoring and cooking can make them resourceful. Apart from this if they also learn Mathematics, Geography, Sociology that discusses the reasons for the fall and rise of various communities in human history, National history, and Economics that deals with the prospect of maintaining wealth, they

\textsuperscript{88} What is right and wrong, acceptable and unacceptable, as per the fundamental principles of Islam.
can contribute to the progress of the community as they had contributed in the beginning years of Islam to promote the religion. If a man marries a woman adept in all these areas of knowledge, and hands over the control of the home to her, she will definitely handle all her responsibilities as the Prophet has envisioned. Moreover that home evolves as the best school for our children. (1953, pp. 12-13)

This is precisely how modernity assigned roles to women. At the same time the vital element of preserving tradition becomes a crucial factor here. The woman is thus designed to be a super human equipped with the machines to face the modern world and at the same time emerging as a preserver of tradition in the changing time. The demand was too high and the image of the ideal woman becomes an obsession with the reformist discourses. The call was for a balance, which was again an added responsibility to the woman, as often where to draw the line was a matter of conflict, and became problematic in terms of conflicting ideologies of tradition and modernity. Also, the context of reform discussions on women in general in the larger society outside the community made it all the more problematic. Now she has to encounter modernity, and get all its gadgets but cannot compromise religion in the new venture. By making the woman responsible for the modern home, which was also the operational space for her newly acquired skills and the old tradition, the only available option was in terms of negotiations both with modernity and with tradition. In the writings by women during this reform period that stretches to about 70 years (1900-1970) these negotiations and coming to terms with changing times become a major theme.
This is where I would like to analyse the third aspect of the Muslim reform movements in connection with its women. That is, how women included themselves in this context of reform and revamped their ways and thinking as modern individuals without compromising religion and community. Here I consider the entries by Muslim women in the periodicals representing Muslim engagements with modernity, which run between a time span of fifty years from 1920 to 1970. The period from 1950 to 1970 is crucial for the Muslim community as it has been a dynamic period of critical discourses on religion within the community, forking the reform dialogues into well developed folds of Nad’wathul Mujahiddin and Jama’athe Islami. Besides these two, there is also the traditional group, who call themselves the Sunnis, sticking on to conventions while the former ones consider a more pan-Islamic view of the religion. The Nad’wathul Mujahiddin is strongly influenced by the Wahaabi tradition of Saudi Arabia, whereas Jama’athe Islami claims itself to be the face of political Islam. Women reformers, especially Haleema Beevi became a part of Nad’wathul Mujahiddin, as the organisation was more open to organising women’s movement. Jama’athe Islami also has got a strong women’s wing now. Likewise the Sunni’s women’s wing is also quite an establishment. During 1950s and 1960s most of the women engaged in the reform movement were incorporated into the women’s wing of Nad’wathul Mujahiddin. Many of the leading Muslim periodicals represented its ethos and in the beginning the organisational intention was to confront conservatism in the community and urge to open it up to new avenues of learning without compromising religious doctrines. Al Manar, Al Farooq and Ansari were some of the periodicals that reflected a focused dialogue with the
conservatives in the community at the dawn of reform and finally emerged into supporting this school in the post independent phase. But the reform wave among the women in the community goes much before this organisation. *Muslim Vanitha*, the first Malayalam magazine meant exclusively for Muslim women was published in 1938 with Haleema Beevi as its seventeen year old chief editor. Regarding the opening of the magazine Haleema Beevi speaks in an interview:

> My husband was the inspiration. He was a disciple of Vakkom Maulavi. He was also an Islamic scholar and Arabic teacher. He was running a magazine called *Ansari* then. He was also the editor. Constantly referring to the backwardness of Muslim women and the possibility of a women’s periodical to inform both the community and its women he instilled interest in me. Women’s journals were very few in number then. That is how we started the magazine *Muslim Vanitha*. I was the Managing Editor. Later the name was changed to *Adhunika Vanitha*. It was more than fifty years back . . .

Like the name signifies it stressed Muslim women’s issues: the importance of their social and educational progress. We tried to free Islam of superstitions and ignorance and to expose the real countenance of religion. The magazine presented a perspective of women’s progress and their status in Islam free of any distortions. Besides this, there used to be women’s conferences conducted by the magazine every month. We used to have talks on women’s issues . . .
can recollect a huge meeting in Perumbavoor around that time. Nafeesath Beevi presided over the meeting. (1995, p. 2)

An interesting feature of women’s participation in the Muslim reform movement is the presence of political activists. Rather than literature, conferences and meetings were treated as important media. Bringing women together and enlightening them about the necessity of education was also an important aspect. Most of the dominant figures placed themselves in the area of political activism. By 1950s the political climate of Kerala was also slowly materializing into the right and left fronts. Nafeesath Beevi was the first Muslim woman to be a lawyer, whereas Haleema Beevi was a municipal councillor and also an ardent participant in the anti govt. movement against the communist ministry organised by the Indian National Congress in Kerala, the *Vimochana Samaram*. Before them Begum T. C. Kunjachumma was elected to the Women’s committee of All India Muslim League’s 1938, Patna conference as a representative from Malabar. Kunjachumma was again a Muslim woman who placed herself within the frame of religion and communicated with the world outside and mediated the community to this world. Kunjachumma also used the medium of *Kessu Paattu* (narrative songs) to historically place Islam in the context of the nationalist movement. It is stated that Kunjachumma marked Kerala’s presence in the 1857 struggle for Independence through her songs. As per her hagiography there was a relative of Kottayam Thangal who shouted slogans against the British in public in Thalassery in September, 1857 demanding the British to leave India immediately. This great warrior was Mayan, who was imprisoned and later murdered in the jail by
Kunjachumma familiarised the local public with many such great figures important in the history of Kerala, never represented in the mainstream history.

Haleema Beevi’s opening speech at the inauguration of Muslim Women’s conference in 1938 constantly refers to sisterhood in the Muslim community, and the beauty and strength of women’s organising power. Opening with the necessity of women’s education Haleema Beevi urges educated women to apply and join the labour force in Govt. institutions. This, she feels, is important to foster self respect. There is a rising spirit with which she claims a portion of the modern state, of course without compromising religion. All her arguments favouring education are within the context of the Quranic verses that present knowledge and learning as imperatives (Devika 2005, pp. 168-73).

Among the early publications of Muslim Women there is the translation of the Urdu story Sultana’s Dream of Rokeya Sakhawat Hussain in Muslim Mithram, 1927. The well known feminist utopia reverses the roles of Muslim men and women and puts men in purdah and the reverse of zenana appears as mardaana. Since envisioning a feminist utopia during the early-twentieth-century was a revolutionary act, the translation in Malayalam definitely evoked controversy. It is to be noted that the renowned western feminist utopia Herland by Perkins was written in 1915.

---

89Kunjachumma’s history was narrated in the 58th part of a serialized news paper article in Chandrika Daily dated 14 May, 1970 (p.18), titled “Charitrathinte Thanka Thalukal” whose author is signed as K.P. I found this in a newspaper cutting without date in the personal collection of a veteran journalist in Calicut named K. P. Kunhi Moosa.
and had to wait till 1970s to be rediscovered in the feminist revival. The spirit of modernization as felt by the society in general is reflected in the publication of this story. Muslim Mithram also has an article on “Muslim Women and Education” in the same issue. The title page of the journal also has an epigraph from a Muslim woman. It reads: “To disseminate knowledge to the Muslim/ Muslim Mithram has born! / Let it live in eternal glory/ with the divine blessings of Almighty.” This epigraph is signed as A. Sainaba Beevi, Headmistress. The general wave of reformist thoughts were thus welcoming secular education, the promotion of free movement of women and making women ready to meet the challenges of the modern home. There was also resistance to patriarchal oppression as a general spirit of feminism evolving out of the reformist ideas. But the progress of the community from this secular context of reform ideals was to the platform of religion and spirituality which I find as a characteristic of the Muslim reform movement and Muslim women’s engagement with modernity. One reason for this could be the constant reference to the lack of proper understanding of Islamic principles as the cause for the community’s backwardness and the way it treats its women. Thus, the secular context of modernization itself leads on to a better reading of the religion for which along with secular education religious education also becomes a determinant. Another reason could be the spreading insecurity among the community in its political existence in the nation with the division of the nation into two and the

---

90 Sultana’s Dream cannot be read as a critique of purdah, as Rokeya Sakhavat Hussain’s opinion on purdah is quite divided. A complex relationship with modernity is evident in many of the Muslim women’s writings of the time.
resulting status of a religious minority in the apparently secular yet inherently Hindu nation. Anyway the shift in the trajectory and motives of reform ideals are quite obvious in the discussions in the periodicals. In the post independent phase the community completely revamps its ideals in terms of women’s education which is explicit in the new perspectives from renowned figures like Haleema Beevi.

In the decades following the nineteen thirties we observe a steady development towards a spiritual understanding of the religion on the part of Muslim women, even when they tried to connect themselves to the changing political contexts. In the October issue of *Mappila Review* 1945, there is an article by P. Beefathima titled “Muslim Sthreeyude Parathanthratha” [Muslim Women’s Slavery]. The author points to the necessity of a better understanding of the religion by its disciples, as the religion and its women are often misrepresented and misinterpreted by people from other communities. She clearly states how Islamic rules have been wrongly followed in Kerala due to which dowry and other oppressive practices flourish. She refers to the real Islamic practice of *Mah’r* that enables women to collect an amount from her husband at the time of marriage (1945, pp. 43-45).

Further ahead, in the special issue of *Al Manar* in September 1959, Haleema Beevi responds to the revival of *Al Manar* in the context of *Vimochana Samaram* in Kerala. She opens her article stating the difficulties and even the imprisonment she encountered while participating in this movement. She recollects the contribution of periodical literature in making her aware of the rights of Muslim women, where she
particularly discusses a magazine in Malayalam, called *Al Murshid*, which she read as a student:

> My association with *Al Murshid* had been vital in my life and career . . . Reading *Al Murshid* for about a year made us realize that many of the conventions that we had been following were un-Islamic and meaningless. We could also see that the general misunderstanding in the community about women’s education was due to a lack of proper religious education. *Al Murshid* also provided us with confidence if not to confront our opponents through a proper grasping of the superior status that Islam extends to women and the right to education it offers illuminated by the Quran, the *hadiths* and history. (1959, p. 87)

She discusses her starting the magazine *Muslim Vanitha* twenty years back and the revolutionary changes that occurred in the community in the span of those twenty years. Interestingly, she tries to compare Muslim women in different parts of Kerala. She finds women of Travancore forward in terms of modern education, yet much inferior to women of Malabar when it comes to knowledge of religion. This, she points out as her motive to start *Muslim Vanitha* in Thiruvalla, a part of central Travancore, thus making them familiar with the religion. There is a notable shift if we notice in perspectives regarding the sense of modernity in the later years. She urges the authorities to look for women’s readership for the magazine. While there is a remarkable difference in the tone of these articles from the one edited by Devika as
appeared in *Muslim Vanitha*, we find a distinctive perspective of woman in the changing time, emerging out of them (Devika 2005, pp. 87-90). In the November Issue of the same Magazine that year, Haleema Beevi also writes about the Cochin Women’s Conference which represented Muslim women delivering religious speech. She narrates:

I have been listening to many religious speeches since my childhood. My readers also must be familiar with this practice. We can decipher that right from the origin of Islam in Kerala this practice has existed. But men had always addressed and have been addressing the crowd comprising of both men and women all these years. We have Muslim women speaking in political, literary and other social venues at least occasionally. But in a religious conference addressing both men and women, here for the first time women spoke on behalf of the Quran and *Hadiths*. There are plenty of post-graduate and graduate Muslim women in various subjects. But it is in this conference that I witness Muslim women with degrees in Islamic theology. While listening to male scholars I had always wondered why women could not gain scholarship in religion and address fellow sisters. I know many Muslim sisters who can talk in depth for hours on mundane topics and material sciences. Are women not eligible to gain knowledge in

---

91 Religious speeches, for awareness among the devotees are a constant practice among the Muslim community. This gathering named as Matha Prasangam is done by a renowned scholar and generally conducted by jama’ath committees.
religion? Can’t they conduct speeches on religion? Won’t the history of great women as Islamic scholars repeat? Many others also would have shared thoughts of this kind. I think the Cochin Conference of *Nad’wathul Mujahiddin* replies these questions. (1959a, pp. 197-99)

The shift of focus from secular education to religious education is quite evident here. The reformer realizes the obviously different trajectory for the Muslim woman in accommodating modernity. Modernization thus becomes a project within the religion as much as it is extending the community to the secular world outside. I could collect about twenty articles by Muslim women on the spiritual aspects of education, where the demand was to understand religion. These articles appeared in magazines like *Ansari*, *Al Manar* and *Mappila Review* between 1945 and 1965. There are also poems and stories by various women with repeated appeal to understand religion in better terms. It criticizes parrot like rendering of religious verses without understanding anything. In a poem in *Al Farooq* titled “Are We not Lucky” by the students of Al Madrassathul Islaamiya, Chendamangallur (1952, 30), the persona in a plural subjectivity reflects upon the status of Muslim women. They identify different categories of Muslim women: one group that follows the immoral western civilization shamelessly, and another group which die up in the murky kitchens, just learning to read Arabic and renders Quran without following a single line and believe that this is enough for a true Muslim. The poem concludes with these lines: “Are we not members of the human species? /Isn’t here anyone to listen to our grievances? /Are we dull wits to remain in ignorance forever? /Are women machines meant for cooking and delivering babies?” (1952, n. p.)
As I had discussed earlier Islam’s precarious position in relation to colonial modernity underlies all mainstream discourses on Islam. Muslim women’s identity in the wider public space is marked by prejudiced notions on veil, Islam’s projection as a society that stands outside the civilized standards of modernity and so on. The discourses initiated by these women in the reform context and their conspicuous position as subjects need to be placed against such stereotypical notions of Islamic women as a group oppressed by their own community. In the context of reform movements in Kerala where non-secularist dialogues have been appropriated into the secularist framework of nationalism through discursive constructions, no wonder Muslim reform movements are misinterpreted and misrepresented. Moreover, as in the national context, political vocabulary denoting difference has been invented so as to mark Muslim women outside the project of ‘secular modernization.’ The complex platform of negotiations and mediations that the Muslim women resort to in terms of modernity demands a revising of the notion of feminist agency and the role of liberal thoughts and resistance in determining one’s feminist inclinations. The reading of reform dialogues by women becomes problematic in the context of the shift from secular to religious and from unveiling to veiling. Most often the binaries of tradition/modernity or veiling/unveiling or religious/secular do not work well to describe the reform project among the Muslim women. As Shamsul Alam examines, diverting the focus of Muslim women’s discourses to the platform of tradition versus modernity overlooks the continuity of patriarchal relations within both traditional and modernist discourses (2006, pp. 235-67). This often closes the possibility of representing the gendered subaltern. In the newly defined configurations of power
in the context of modernity, gender was re-articulated and re-defined along with other variables of caste, class and religion. Muslim women’s engagement with modernity, deals with measures resorted to by them to accommodate the newly defined cultural space. In this accommodation modernity was re-defined and internalized into the spiritual interiors of Islam, which is expected to be at an antithetical pole to modernity. It is of course interesting to note the re-invented relationship with tradition that Muslim women resorted to in the context of the reform movements. Their conscious negotiations with both religion and modernity reflect the political agency and investment, otherwise omitted in the reform agenda presented through the usual literature on reform history. The periodicals representing their engagements with modernity may not come to the category of the major established journals in Malayalam when considered individually as many of them circulated for a short span of time, but as a group they provided the space for representing a community’s aspirations, ideas of freedom and concerns about the limit and boundaries of this freedom, as their effort to fit into the modern nation. For the women, who wrote in these journals, were not again major writers considered individually (with the exception of Haleema Beevi or Thankamma Malik) but as a group they represented the Muslim woman’s voice and what modernity stands for her. That they received little attention from the mainstream critics or readers and have been totally forgotten or ignored while tracing the literary

---

92 I would also like to point out that some of the contributors to these periodicals were Muslim women holding powerful positions in the social system, as politicians, lecturers, teachers, govt. employees and lawyers, though not full time writers. In spite of that their contributions have been ignored and ‘veiled.’
or cultural history of Kerala, and even by feminist explorations, definitely reflect the
different trajectory of our concepts of women’s freedom, agency and subjectivity.