Chapter IV

*Barsa* and the Contemporary Dialogues on Muslim Women in Kerala

In theory, the self-owning liberal subject has the ability to choose freely, a freedom that can be publicly demonstrated.

The reality is more complicated. (Asad, 2009, p. 29)

In spite of Islam being a heterogeneous set of beliefs and practices, discussions on Muslim women in Kerala too has always been motivated by the assumptions and prejudices on Islam prevalent in the Eurocentric liberal humanist discourses. Orientalist images of the Muslim woman as a victim, suppressed by the rigid parameters of Islam and Islamic fundamentalism, rule these discussions. The shortcomings of the secular-feminist dialogues that treat religion as an oppressive tool have never been dealt with. The garb of a general secular perspective that surfeits the academic discussions in Kerala marks the Muslim woman as an anomaly in the nation’s progress towards modernity and development. For them, Islam is an oppressive tool and its women, waiting to be liberated by the secular, modern intellectual/feminist. Religion (Islam) is not a viable tool for feminist agency, but a homogenised anvil of patriarchy. In this context I would like to analyze the novel *Barsa* (2008) by Khadija Mumthas, and how it reinforces the widely circulating image of Islam as an oppressive system for its women. This reading of *Barsa* is annotated by the contemporary debates on Muslim women in the context of Kerala, and how
successfully these images merge into the Islamophobic discourses of neo-imperialism on Muslim women as passive victims of their religion and culture.

Women become a benchmark in accounting for a community’s backwardness or forwardness in the colonial context itself. The Europeans use this mode of argument to depict the west as the centre of all enlightened souls and human rights. The native modern male in the context of colonial modernity internalized these images and set out to reform their women. In Kerala also similar discussions on women’s status began with the reform movements. As described in the previous chapter, the reform movements shaped the intellectual context for Kerala’s future perspectives on cultural and political thinking, leading on to a secular platform. But women become a matter of lesser importance outside the context of the early-twentieth-century reform movements, and the reason for this has been identified as the result of the male reformers’ effort to structure the domestic worlds of their women rather than letting them enter the public world. In the case of the Muslim community, the reform movement itself has been an unfinished project, which later culminated into multiple reformist groups in the second half of the twentieth-century. The women’s question never left the context of these bifurcations, and consequently Muslim women themselves discuss possibilities of political agency within these movements. But in the wider context of increasing hostility towards Islam and Muslims, Muslim women provide the easiest tool for the modern intellectual to formulate the critique of Islam. Thus, in the intellectual discourses and cultural productions such as literature and cinema, Muslim women reflect the community’s downtrodden status, as victims oppressed by the barbaric systems of
the community. Every debate on Islam thus focuses on its women, the face of the veiled woman providing the political justification for marking this community as the uncivilized other in a culturally and intellectually forward society as that of Kerala.

There can be two broad categories of criticism against Islam and the way it treats its women. The first one is that of the prejudiced secular intellectual who, in Muslim women, finds the specific material to focus on the anomaly in the liberal aspirations and individualism of the modern enlightened society. The second group is that of the “critical Insiders”\(^\text{93}\) who take up the role of reformers in criticising the community and mending it from inside. All discussions on women and Islam get reduced to purdah and the associated oppression that makes the Muslim woman different from her liberated western counterparts. How much of a religion can be made available for a modern scrutiny is a question of concern, yet in demanding religion to fit into the category of a modern entity, these critics of Islam never fail to present its non-compatibility with modern ways of living.

Contemporary debates on women and Islam in Kerala have been generally motivated by an essentialist leftist approach that treats women as a category to be liberated, in spite of their heterogeneity and indigenous identities. While looking at the religion from the outside, the critics of Islam in Kerala look at it as a space of conservatism that stands as an antithesis to modernity. The basic analytical strategy

\(^{93}\) The term is often used in discussions on Islam in Kerala. The historian M. Gangadharan, in an interview in *Mathrubhumi Weekly* suggested that Islam in Kerala needed “critical insiders” (2010, pp. 5-9).
adopted by Hameed Chendamangallur94 his book *Pardayude Manasastram* (The Psychology of Purdah) is a typical instance of such a misreading. The book invariably presents a picture of purdah as the polarization of symbols and argues the defeat of reform values at the hands of religious fundamentalism. He associates Islam with religious fundamentalism and urges the Muslims in India to belong to the rich heritage of this nation. The responsibility of merging into this heritage and sharing a part of it lies with the Muslims alone. In almost a naive tone he insists:

The Christians of India should admit the legacy of non-Christian Indian tradition and heritage as part of the Christian tradition in India.

Likewise, the Muslims of India should admit the legacy of non-Islamic Indian tradition and heritage as part of the Indo-Islamic tradition. Only then we may rise to the perspective of integrating the philosophers varying from Brihaspathi and Buddha to Swami Vivekananda and poets from Valmiki and Vyaasa to Tagore as part of the cultural heritage of entire India and its people. (2002, p. 14)

He goes on further to elaborate the counter movement of this aspect wherein he demands the integration of the Sufi mystics and Sufi mysticism as part of the entire population’s cultural heritage including the Hindus. Splitting Indian heritage into Hindu, Islamic or Christian is unrealistic. Since culture associates with geographies

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94 Hameed Chendamangallur is a pro-left intellectual in Kerala, quite active in discussions on ‘Islam and its vices in destabilizing the secular outlook of the state.’ The book referred to here has been widely acclaimed by the Marxist historians of Kerala including M. N. Vijayan as a critical journey to shake the foundations of Islamic fundamentalism and religious conservatism.
than religions, the right way of integration is to look into our culture as the Indian
culture and our cultural heritage as the Indian cultural heritage (2002, pp. 14-16).
These arguments present at the Muslim or the Christian as the root cause of
religious separatism. The responsibility of holding the nation and its heritage
together is given to the minorities. Beyond that there is also a dangerous
homogenisation of identities that he argues for. The violent bulldozing of identities
that the modern state dwells upon to maintain the secular platform of its operation
informs this argument. This is the fundamental position of the discussion on purdah
undertaken in this work. Whether the author claims to be a critical insider in the
religion, being a Muslim, is a matter of concern. This term has been constantly
referred to in discussions related to Islam. M. N. Karassery, another pro-Marxist
intellectual of Kerala, also follows this path of interrogation. The subjective frame of
these two critics of Islam is very much outside the religion and their categorisation as
Muslims brings concern. Nor do they claim a space inside the religion. But in
contemporary debates, there is a constant effort to link them to Islam, sketching a
long tradition of critical insiders of the religion, ranging from Asghar Ali Engineer to
more recent figures, who insist on revising the religion and opening it up for the apt
consumption of the modern individual. These dialogues informed by a superior
notion of modernity over tradition and religion categorically place the modern state
as liberating for the individual compared to the oppressive measures of religion.
Khadija Mumthas enters this realm of reforming the religion from this context of
making the religion conducive to the modern individual. *Barsa* as a fictional
enterprise cannot claim any substantial aesthetic merits over many other works of
fiction in Malayalam. But the wide acclaim the novel received definitely owes to the wholehearted approval of prejudices against Islam and the way it treats its women as it has been circulated by the Islamophobic perspectives. Along with this, there is a wide demand for a critical space within the religion to challenge the patriarchal norms in the religion. Immense methodologies for formulating this critical space have been dealt with by many, especially women. There is of course a school of feminist theologians who demand a revising of the patriarchal framework of Islam. There are attempts to read the Quran from the woman’s perspective (Amina Wadud, 1999) and also attempts to attribute the patriarchy in Islam to the hadiths, the interpretations of the Quran (Mernissi, 2002). Before focusing on Barsa and its premises, a quick glimpse into the theoretical framework of this school of thought may help in delineating the itineraries of Barsa and also the problematic paradigms subscribed to in reading Muslim women.

The Muslim woman becomes a matter of interest in feminist readings only recently, as late as the late 1990s. Most of the feminist anthologies presented before never had a category on Muslim women. Feminists from the Islamic world marked their entry into the academic world with discussions on identities and anti-imperialist perspectives resisting the Eurocentric version of academic feminism. As early as the 1970s, women from the Islamic world started analysing the plight of Muslim women, as part of organised efforts. The school of Muslim feminists ranging from Mernissi to Wadud, while resorting to reading Islam from a woman’s perspective, attempts to present an ahistorical version of Islam that remains unchanged from time immemorial. While attempting to read the Quran from a
woman’s perspective they invariably attempt to frame Islam as the fundamental category of analysing Muslim women’s lives. The historical and contextual diversities of Muslim women’s lives find no place in their analysis.\footnote{Khadija Mumthas invariably follows an ahistorical interrogation of Islam that I intend to take up in my analysis of Barsa.} While resorting to this method of analysis these theologians fail to conceptualize the possible patterns of relationships between Muslim women and other factors in the society as kinship systems, political systems or economy.\footnote{Leila Ahmed’s reading of Muslim women stands as an exception. Her work \textit{Women and Gender in Islam} (1992), attempts to read Muslim Women as a lived reality than as a theoretical abstraction.} How far these perspectives counter the western imperialist attack on Islamic tradition as lacking agency for its women is debatable, but more than that, the basic frame of thinking that they all resort to in defining feminism along the lines of a modern liberal category makes them problematic. In reading \textit{Barsa}, I intend to look into the problematic construction of the Muslim woman as an ahistorical category; a victim of religion that remains the same anywhere anytime. Along with this my concern is also extended to the construction of Islam as a barbaric, anti-progressive category in \textit{Barsa}, and in disclosing how the novel projects popular stereotypes of Islam usually upheld in Islamophobic imperialist contexts. The third focus of my analysis is to relate \textit{Barsa} to the contemporary debates on Muslim women in Kerala, and the implications of the ideology of the novel in the contexts of Muslim women’s everyday existence.
The author contextualises Barsa in the beginning itself with an introduction linking her writing to a long school of thought that she calls the ‘Islamic feminists.’

The major names she lists out are those of Fatima Mernissi, Asma Barlas and Asra Nomani. Both Asma Barlas and Fatima Mernissi follow a modern methodology to analyse women in Islam. Amina Wadud also forms a member to this group.

Mernissi’s *Women and Islam* (1993) subtitled *A Historical and Theological Enquiry*, takes up a reading of Islamic history and the hadiths, in order to challenge the patriarchal version of Islam manipulated by the interpreters. She defines her work in the introductory chapter:

This book is not a work of history. History is always the group’s language; the official narrative that is pressed between covers of gold and trotted out for ritualistic ceremonies of self-praising. This book is intended to be a narrative of recollection, gliding toward the areas where memory breaks down, dates get mixed up, and events softly blur together, as in the dreams from which we draw our strength.

This book is a vessel journeying back in time in order to find a fabulous wind that will swell our sails and send us gliding toward new worlds, toward the time both far away and near at the beginning of Hijra, when the Prophet could be a leader hostile to all hierarchies, when women had their place as unquestioned partners in a revolution.

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97 I have reservations about the use of this term as a category to describe Muslim women’s political agency, as the term carries a referent of an ‘always the same Islam’ and Muslims.
that made the mosque an open place and the household a temple of
debate. (1993, pp. 10-11)

There is a clear distinction that she brings in between the authority of official history
and what she intends to do. There is also a suggestion towards a search between
lines, and an attempt towards reading the blurred areas of a patriarchal narrative,
sheding light on the distorted truth. While reading the text, it becomes impossible
but to notice the parameters she chooses to read Islamic history. By looking at the
women of the Prophet’s time and their involvement with his life and preaching,
Mernissi hints at a manipulation and distortion of realities by the men in
authoritative positions. Starting with the Prophet’s army chief Umar, this authority
extends to all patriarchal souls whom she thinks were intolerant to the great reform
the Prophet was bringing in the Arabian society in terms of man woman equality.
The problem with this kind of a reading lies in the fact that Mernissi is using the
Quran and the early Islamic history as the analytical base for their explanations of
the conditions of women’s lives throughout the Islamic world. The same position has
been adopted by the strict ‘patriarchal fundamentalists’ as well to assert a male
hierarchy. They also look up to the Quran and the hadiths. The crucial variations
visible in women’s condition both within and across Muslim societies are not
accounted for in this kind of reading. Islam becomes the unique and fundamental
category to analyse Muslim women’s life. Though Mernissi brings in some case
studies from the Moroccan society that she has been familiar with, the theoretical
underpinnings of her argument depend on generalizations across different Muslim
societies. Belief becomes the factor that directly connects the Quran to the Muslim
social organisation (DeLamotte, Meeker, and O’Barr, 1997, p. 80). While these feminists suggest a progressive way of reading the Quran and the Islamic history to read the lives of women across the Muslim world, new ways of conceptualising the role of religion on women need to evolve. Especially when the critique of these feminists go hand in hand with the ongoing process of ‘westernization’ in many of the Islamic countries, and the Eurocentric feminist cry about the marginalisation and oppression of Muslim women, the western notions of progress and the ‘uncivilized state’ of non-western people get asserted.

Amina Wadud also, in her progressive reading of the Quran from a feminist perspective, follows this trajectory of looking at the Muslim women as dictated by the religion alone. Wadud makes it clear in her preface to the second edition her motives in writing *Quran and Women*:

This is not a book on the general topic of “Islam and Women.” Nor is it a book about Muslim women. As mentioned before, these books abound on the market. These books are also limited to providing information for general readers about the particular case studies on which they are based. Although various cases are drawn: from history, cultures, nation-states, classes, literature, education, politics, and the like, all of them can benefit from the lens given through reading this book. *Quran and Woman* contributes a gender inclusive reading to one of those most fundamental disciplines in Islamic thought: *tafsir*, or Quranic exegesis. (1999, p. xv)
Even when this reading of Quranic exegesis makes sense, it implies a fundamental paradigm of modernity controlling all discourses on liberation or claims for political agency. Also here, the question of gender in Islam is limited to a discourse on the Quran, and Wadud does not make any large claim of including Muslim women in her discourse. But the problem with Khadija Mumthas’s *Barsa* is that these engagements with the Quran and modernity have been taken as the fundamental way of reading Muslim women. Thus, *Barsa* as a narrative that looks into the life of a converted Muslim woman and her attempts to have a personal experience with the religion makes the rather ambitious claim of representing the ‘Muslim woman.’ Further, to add on to this, the interpreters of *Barsa* in Kerala also move in the same direction. Those who applaud *Barsa* receive it as a realistic representation of the Muslim woman’s aspiration for freedom. On the contrary the critique against *Barsa* also rises from the same perspective, again as a violation of Islam’s hierarchical disposition of gender. Both the readings fail to see the essentialist identity the work intends to attribute to the Muslim woman, as they fail to question the adoption of the modern notion of the resisting individual as the determinant of one’s political agency. They hardly speak for women in Islam; women who are spiritually and materially within Islam. This failure is quite evident in the responses to *Barsa*. P. K. Pokker, the prominent left intellectual reads *Barsa* in his article titled “Sthree Mukhavaranam Neekkumbol” [When the Woman Unveils].

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98 It is to be noted that the title *Barsa* is taken from the Arab word *barza* meaning the woman who exposes her face. The title page of Khadija Mumthas’s *Barsa*, uses ‘s’ instead of ‘z.’ But
Writers have realized the factors inherent in the formulation of one’s identity along with the ideological premises of representing the self. The philosophical premises and living conditions that reflect the identity crisis exclusively experienced by Muslim women, different from that of men, have been discussed here specifically because *Barsa* represents the identity of the Muslim woman. The author of this work has been approached as a Muslim woman because the problematic space discussed in the novel can be narrated only by a woman and is inherent only in Muslim lives. (2008, p. 14)

Pokker carefully identifies the conflicting ideologies and hidden dangers that the work reflects through the rather careless preface, which in one way contradicts the entire narrative of *Barsa* in a naive manner. In the preface to the work the novelist recollects a debate on the topic ‘Muslim/non Muslim’99 where a speaker from the “Hindu” team places the anomaly in the Quran being the foundation for both the spiritualist and the terrorist. Khadija Mumthas’s response that she also shared his concern is rather shocking given the fact that she is attempting a work on Muslim women, and discloses her insensitivity to the entire genre of political manipulations to label the Muslims as terrorists. Pokker’s reading points out rightly that this

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99 Literal translation of the term used by the author (*muslim/amuslim*). I was struck by the possibility of such debates existing and also the contexts that initiate such debates, where participants form teams of Hindus and Muslims claim their religion to be the best in the presence of an invited audience. These kinds of dialogues often represent the different trajectories and conflicting interests in the civil society, contesting the apparently secular ideological premise of the state.
preface sabotages the possibility of reading *Barsa*. But he fails to see how the narrative portrays the Muslim woman as a homogenised entity through generalising the plight of Aysha with that of any other Muslim woman and also the merging of identities that the narrator at times makes use of. The question on Aysha’s chastity becomes a concern for Sabitha which is later reflected on her life, when her husband and the state mechanism, representing male supremacy in the text, put her under scrutiny for infidelity. Pokker’s idealisation of the cultural renaissance, as the liberating point for Kerala marking its entry into modernity, forces him to equate this to the great Malayalam poet Kumaranasan’s impatience with questions on Sita’s fidelity in *Chinthavishtayaya Sita* [*Pensive Sita*]. In his reading, Sabitha’s resistance to the systems of oppression marks the feminist agency in her. He extends his argument further: “The female circumcision that takes place in Sudan is not in practice in other parts of the world openly. But it is awful to note the possibility of establishing such grotesque systems to satiate the male desire” (2008, p. 17). Here, the author evidently states his concept of freedom and political agency along with striking chords with the established critique of Islam as the alternate other of modernity. The veil becomes a symbol in his discourse that represents the victim, the Muslim woman. Her ignorance and uncivilized existence manifests in wild practices that represent the community, as that of female circumcision. At this point one may wonder whether the author’s omission of a focus on the geographical and cultural location of this practice is deliberate. If such a perspective is brought in, the

100 In this work, Kumaranasan, the poet who represented the ethos of the reform movements the most, presents the rebelling Sita, who challenges patriarchy.
expected effect of placing Islam as the perpetrator of the practice may not be achieved. In Pokker’s reading the Muslim woman represents one entity, and Islam becomes the only determinant of her status in life. Thus, the woman in Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Kerala are victims of their religion and their political agency has been curtailed by Islam, the barbaric other of the civilized values of renaissance.\textsuperscript{101}

Mumthas follows a similar way of looking at Islam through the eyes of her narrator Sabitha. Sabitha is a doctor from Kerala, born into a Hindu family and converted to Islam after her marriage (or rather her conversion makes the marriage possible) who comes to Saudi Arabia with her doctor husband, a Muslim named Rashid. The entire narrative is Sabitha’s critique of Islam as she witnesses in Saudi Arabia, released through her responses to her experiences at the hospital. The whole process of marriage and conversion has been presented in a romantic visual reflecting the idealised vision of a society that allows religious syncretism. The author’s carelessness, or rather, the absence of a sense of history reflects quite well in this vision of conversion and marriage. Whether the author was unaware of all the allegations against the Muslim community on using marriage as a tool of conversion, or rather she was presenting an antithesis to the debate is not clear. But beyond that there are also hints that it was Sabitha who had to convert and her family being open to the marriage accepted this proposal and also her childhood associations with the religion made it easy for her to fit in. Now, these reminders somehow

\textsuperscript{101}By renaissance I refer to the cultural renaissance that is said to have happened in Kerala during the early-twentieth-century as a direct outcome of the reform movements, setting a secular background for Kerala’s cultural and political endeavours.
undercut the romantic notion of conversion, where the author contextualises marriage and conversion in the contemporary debates. In fact, there has even been an accusation labelled the “love-jihad”\textsuperscript{102} basically from the Sangh Parivar pockets accusing the Muslim youth in Kerala for using love and marriage as a convenient tool to draw Hindu women to Islam. In this context Sabitha’s conversion cannot be looked at as an innocent act. The romantic representation of Sabitha’s and Rashid’s relationship thus becomes a pseudo-secular framework that ignores contemporary realities. Like the religion that stands unadulterated from time immemorial, this relationship also becomes an idealised imagination brought straight down from the “cultural renaissance.” This ideal also caters to the Sangh Parivar agenda, by indirectly hinting at Sabitha’s conversion as the only possible way of materialising their love.

Sabitha looks at herself as a Muslim through the Quran and Islamic history. Constant parallels are brought in to compare her life with that of women in Islam’s history. There is also a fusion of identities, wherein sometimes Sabitha merges into Hajira Beevi, the mother of Ismail, or Aysha, the Prophet’s young wife. There are attempts of stream of consciousness where the narrator adopts meanderings through the minds of women in Islamic history. Parallel incidents also are consciously placed to support this juxtaposition of identities. The opening chapter presents the ritual of \textit{Hajj}, the last one in the five dictates that a Muslim should observe. Sabitha’s participation in the ritual is reflexive; her narrative challenges both the spirituality

\textsuperscript{102} The controversy involved is discussed briefly in footnote 122.
and the essence of this ritual. Here she juxtaposes the narrative with that of Hajira, the mother of Ismail, whose life had been determined by men including an extremely masculine ‘God’ for her. The narrator attributes her agency through the revolting vocabulary. Hajira speaks:

Have you not celebrated Id’ul Azha, the great day commemorating the sacrifice of Ibrahim? Have you not also listened to the story of the great father who obliged to God’s order to sacrifice his only son? . . . the only son whom he had abandoned, and had been brought up by his poor mother contesting the heat and storm of the desert who he had abandoned? That is masculinity! The greatness of unflinching piety, stubbornness, that sets out to materialize God’s orders even at the expense of blood ties. We the women are just inferior. The one who searches for water for her son even while encountering death . . . one who mends the orphaned souls of her children through affection, one who brings them up breathing life into them . . . one who bears the chains of serfdom fearing that any attempt to break it may also destroy the thread of love . . . Still what did you write in your hadiths attributing it to the Prophet? I looked into heaven. It was full of virtuous men. I looked into the hell. It was filled with women. (They disobeyed their men!) You should obey! Cover the beauty of your hair. Stretch your hijab to your face and to the breasts too. Never remove the black apparel. At night please your men like prostitutes. Live in harmony with his other wives and slave women, the objects of
his desire. Then you can enter heaven along with them. No, not with them! They get young and delicate women— as delicate as they have been maintained inside the shell of an egg— as their partners. What about you? Nothing has been stated about what you would get there. What greatness do you possess to be mentioned in particular? (2008, p. 19)  

At one point the narrative is juxtaposed into Sabitha, and her anxieties about gender injustice in Islam. As a converted Muslim woman from Kerala Sabitha seems to be an inappropriate subject to raise these questions. Sabitha’s subjectivity is in no way determined by the powers of domination described in this context. Except for the fact that they work in Saudi Arabia, Islamic history is not a baggage to decide the destiny of Sabitha as an individual. Being in Saudi Arabia in search of material prospects, she is only restricted by the norms of a foreign land as it would appear to any outsider. She in no way has the right to question these norms, though the author gives her the right by attributing her an essential Muslim identity. This is the basic premise from which Sabitha’s critique of Islam emerges which appear to be naive and immature in terms of the essentialism and universalism it subscribes to. In the context of Gender Studies opening up new avenues in terms of relating forces of domination to specific cultural contexts and countering the authority of resistance as the only viable political agency, Khadija Mumthas’s *Barsa* reflects an uninformed and illogical representation of feminist agency.

103 All the subsequent references from *Barsa* have only the page numbers in parenthesis.
Another instance of a universalised vision of feminist agency comes up in the narrative while describing Sukayna:

The Prophet’s grandson Hassan and his entire family have been brutally murdered at Karbala, Iraq: one of the darkest episodes in Islamic history. Sabitha read about the liberal daughter of Hassan, Sukayna, only yesterday, the only one who was left behind. She witnessed the murder of her entire family. Her intense experience may have made her a rebel later. She married four or five times challenging male chauvinism. She obtained consent from her suitors, who were after her beauty and scholarship, the privilege to monogamy and the ones who violated this were presented before the law. During the trial she exposed them and made them look ridiculous. She mingled freely with men and defeated them in debates. Feminist historians have devoted passages and pages to describe her attributes with a hidden pleasure! One may come across many more parallels for such single-handed rebellions in Islamic history against the male hypocrisy, similar to that of our Thathrikkutty. She has been named barza in Arabic. Barza! The woman who refuses to cover her face! The one who never accepts defeat! The one who asks questions . . . the one who surprises and excites us when we delve into history! (p. 86)
Sukayna is in fact an oft recurring image in all feminist narratives on Islam. Mernissi in *Women and Islam* devotes three pages to describe Sukayna’s attributes. Her description of Sukayna strikes some resonance in *Barsa*. For instance, read:

“. . . a barza woman is one who does not hide her face and does not lower her head.” And the dictionary adds that a barza woman is one who “is seen by people and who receives visitors at home”—men, obviously. A barza woman is also a woman who has “sound judgement”. A barz man or woman is someone “known for their *aql* (reasoning.)” Who are they, these Muslim women who have resisted the hijab? The most famous was Sukayna, one of the great–grand daughters of the Prophet through his daughter Fatima, the wife of Ali . . . (1993, pp. 191-92)

Now, anyone reading this passage cannot but ignore what is more than coincidence in the similarities between the two passages. There are instances where *Barsa* becomes a literal translation of some of these texts. More than the inter-textual presence let us look into the arguments that evolve in this context. First of all, while Mernissi locates her text within Islamic history, and pronounces her perspective as a reading of Islam from a woman’s point of view, *Barsa* locates the context in a twentieth-century (or even the twenty first-century) Muslim woman, and determines to establish that what Sukayna confronted in the budding years of Islam still exists. But Sabitha, or any other woman in Islam, does not have the courage exhibited by Sukayna. This reading of woman de-contextualised as an abstract entity
representing the Muslim woman all over the world, is highly inadequate under the present circumstances. While Mernissi presented this image of Sukayna as a model for the liberated woman first in 1984 at a conference where she was vehemently attacked as per her testimony, and subsequently in her 1991 work, *Women and Islam* (pp. 191-93), it was important for her to counter the western notion of Muslim women as victims. Also, placed in the context of her entire literature, Mernissi has written a book to talk about Muslim women who have risen to political power in spite of the odds. Her attempt is to prove that the erosion of rights enforced by a male constructed law did not silence or immobilize women entirely (Majid, 2006, p. 67). Even when one objects to her interpretation of rights and individualism, the context of her discussion presents adequate justification for these sketches. But *Barsa*, written some twenty years later, that too, in a phase of Western feminist discourses that freeze Muslim women in time, space and history, is an anachronism. While Muslim feminists like Nawal el Sadawi and Fatima Mernissi challenged the grand narratives of Islamic patriarchy some twenty years earlier, the contrapuntal critique was in a way necessary to mark their entry into new avenues of feminism. But in a context where women from othered worlds revise their strategies to counter the essential notion of freedom, liberty and equality that western feminism upholds and asserts, their entry into the feminist public sphere in terms of negations within structures of domination, *Barsa*’s presentation of Muslim woman as a category standing in a monolithic structure of gender equations is not a reliable narrative.
The second perspective that evolves out of my reading of *Barsa* is the reinforcement of contemporary prejudices against Islam carried out through *Barsa*. The campaign against Islamic nations in the west has always been motivated by discussions on Muslim women as victims of their community. By portraying the Muslim woman as a subject of the religion suppressed by its male oriented norms, western feminists establish a cultural supremacy over other women. Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s discussion in *Feminism without Borders* brings out the disparities in feminist politics:

... a comparison between Western feminist self-presentation and Western feminist representation of women in the third world yields significant results. Universal images of the third world woman (the veiled woman, chaste virgin, etc.), images constructed from adding the “third world difference” to “sexual difference,” are predicated upon (and hence obviously bring into sharper focus) assumptions about Western women as secular, liberated, and having control over their own lives. This is not to suggest that Western women are secular, liberated, and in control of their own lives. I am referring to a discursive self-presentation, not necessarily to material reality ... However, in the context of the hegemony of the western scholarly establishment in the production and dissemination of texts, and in the context of the legitimating imperative of humanistic and scientific discourse, the definition of the “Third World Woman” as a monolith might well tie into the larger economic and ideological praxis of
“disinterested” scientific inquiry and pluralism that are the surface manifestations of a latent economic and cultural colonization of the “non-Western” world. It is time to move beyond the Marx who found it possible to say: they cannot represent themselves; they must be represented. (2006, p. 42)

Mohanty presents the construction of a category called the ‘third world’ in the discourses of the western feminists. But now to look into categories as east or west in terms of rigid manifestations is impossible. The east and the west or the first world and the third world are not mutually exclusive categories. The interconnected networks of power that run through these categories may not go unnoticed. But Mohanty’s presentation of the monolith third world woman recurs in Barsa. At one point the reader gets confused as to who really the “Muslim woman” represented in Barsa is. If Sabitha, the narrator, is the symbol of Muslim woman there are anomalies in her construction, as she does not fit into the context of narration. She is a convert, she is not a native of Saudi Arabia and her identity is not reflected in any of the historical female figures discussed here. The Muslim woman who has no control over her life is a product of Sabitha’s discourse. While she sympathetically ponders over the plight of victim women, contrary to this, the reality of the narrative undercuts her own argument. Many of the Muslim female characters presented in the novel are in control of their own lives, making choices and display a life where the veil is not an obstruction to their aspirations. Doctor Shamsad, a native of Saudi Arabia, who makes choices regarding her sexuality, relationships and life, is one such
woman. But the narrator, Sabitha, does not approve of her. This is how she describes Shamsad:

Sabitha has felt that there was a wanton woman in Shamsad. She always engages in chit chats with male doctors. She mingles with a degree of expectation with each doctor. Despite the different nationalities they would all be Muslims. She doesn’t have to bother about caste and ethnicity. But so far no one has fallen into her trap. Perhaps the men are distanced by the legal formalities in marrying a Saudi woman, the possible friction between cultures and the usual air of pride that Saudi women carry along with them. The salary of natives is four times that of the foreign employees. Those who can get along with the relationship have the temptation of immense wealth. Though not a beauty of any exceptional degree she is pleasant. (p. 118)

This description reflects the moral standard the narrator presupposes while writing the novel. The narrator is torn between two loyalties: one is her prejudiced notion of women in Islam and the second is the real women that she encounters in the hospital. The frustration in their not succumbing to her image of Muslim women as victims comes out in these of statements. It is to be noted that the marking of doctor Shamsad as a woman of wanton desires is done by Sabitha, the so called liberated convert, who carries the tradition of a secular lineage. In her disappointment, it is Sabitha who places the moral judgement over the characters of Shamsad and other
men and women in the novel. That is why she is shocked to see Shamsad as a person who watches Hindi movies and also by the fact that she exposes her face. When the novel’s dominant narrative discusses and celebrates Sabitha as *barza*, the woman whose mind and face are open, the prejudiced notions and moral apprehensions of the author run between the lines to prove that Sabitha is not *barza* and she cannot approve of *barza*. There is a recurring moral policing that Sabitha does throughout the novel. This comes from her inability to be accommodating and open, which comes out as moral statements on many of the characters. If Sabitha is the woman representing *barza*, the ardent fighter, the vulnerability of this character is revealed many times. That is why she is bothered by the extra attention Iqbal, the senior doctor, pays to her. Realising this vulnerability she also prays to God for him to get married at the earliest. Her conscience finds herself guilty. In all these instances it is clear that Sabitha, the chosen woman to reflect the free spirit of Muslim woman, is the one controlled by moral inhibitions and her critique of Islam thus comes out of her frustrations.

In Sabitha’s logic all Muslim men are after sex. The extreme sexual virility of Arab men has been referred to many times in the novel. She does not even exempt the Prophet from this. The Prophet’s marriages to many women are viewed only as his means of satiating his sexual hunger. His wives, mostly beautiful and wise, are thus just objects of his sexual fancies and are ruled by jealousy and insecurity whenever he takes a new wife. Finally the novelist even hints that the restrictions on Muslim women have evolved out of the insecure psyche of the aging Prophet, who was worried about his nine beautiful wives. The incident of Aysha’s disappearance
for some hours on their return journey from the war with a young soldier had triggered rumours. The allegations are again reported in such silly and trivialized versions of casual vocabulary not to demystify, but rather, with a conscious effort, to distort. When the reference—“Muhammad is old. Consider his nine beautiful wives! How young Aysha is! How can he satisfy them any way” (p. 114) — is placed in the midst of a discourse on Islam and gender, the intention is not to discuss the problem of gender in Islam, but to challenge the religion and its authenticity. Following this, the narrator directly relates the character assassination of the Prophet and his wives to gender in Islam. Thus, gender in Islam is structured as per the rumours against the wives of the aging Prophet, who is disturbed by the challenges to his masculinity:

One day at the peak of the Prophet’s silence and uneasiness\(^{104}\) Allah began to speak through the Prophet’s tongue on the admonition for defaming the Prophet’s wives, with a warning not to look at them as sexual objects. He granted them permission to leave the marriage if at all they had wanted and cautioned on the impossibility of relationships with men even after his death if they decided to remain as his wives. (p. 114)

Sabitha’s observation of Islamic principles as reprimands on the personal issues between the Prophet and his wives trivializes the entire spiritual context of the religion. Thus, the political space of Sabitha’s narrative is disruptive and vicious. My

\(^{104}\) Resulting from the rumours against his wives and the insecurity due to his aging sexuality.
interest is not in defending the narrator’s arguments theologically, but rather looking at the politics of the disruptive strategy undertaken in *Barsa* which parallels with the contemporary dialogues against Islam.

Double standard in sexual freedom is the major concern that intrigues Sabitha in terms of the equality of the sexes in Islam. She is disturbed by the controls over female sexuality and the possibility of men to have multiple sexual partners. The reality of Sabitha’s existence does not in any way get affected by polygamy. It is extremely rare among middle class and educated Muslims in Kerala to observe polygamy. In such a situation revolting against polygamy is not Sabitha’s requirement at any time. Such references but need to be placed in the narrative so that the resulting picture evolving out of this narrative agrees with the popular imaginations of Islam.

Muslim men are portrayed as wild in their desire for women. The female circumcision described in *Barsa* is one such instance where Islam is put to blame for the practice. There is a Sudanese doctor in the narrative, who requests his friend to circumcise his wife, whose “civilized parents” had saved their daughter from this “primitive” custom during her childhood. The narrator also underlines the incident by a reductionist statement on the plight of women whose body is a mere tool for men to tailor as per his needs. The custom has been attributed to the sexual drive in Muslim man and his prejudice that female sexual mutilation leads to better sexual pleasure for him. Even the educated Sudanese men succumb to this drive at the expense of this mutilation. Sabitha’s observing eyes that witness almost everything
in the hospital, is like an omniscient presence scrutinizing the ‘other.’ At the end of every observation she adds her ‘evaluation,’ invariably reflecting her prejudices against the Arab culture. At times the reader cannot but see the reverse movement in this process of observation and comments. The knowledge precedes her inspection in most cases. Often she searches for instances to justify her prejudices, like a lawyer in search of witnesses. Her panoptic eye does not spare anything in the system. As an outsider in Saudi Arabia in search of better prospects and wealth, Sabitha should be the powerless and passive expatriate bound by the legal and political authority of a foreign country. But she escapes this passivity by unleashing a wild attack, a critique of the religion that shapes the legal and political base for the operation of the state and its machineries there, including the health system into which Sabitha enters as an outsider. Therefore, Sabitha as a narrator is definitely unreliable: her narrative faces constant effacement confronting her subject position.

Multiple instances of her apprehensions, jealousy and insecurity are openly placed contrapuntal to Sabitha’s status as the powerful subject of a ‘sensible critique.’ Inevitable comparisons creep into the narrative between women in Arabia and women in India, the modern democracy that Sabitha represents and claims to uphold the rights of women. Sabitha’s comparison between the maternity rooms in Calicut Medical College and the hospital in Saudi Arabia reads thus:

Any impression of misbehaviour will be reported to the Mudhir immediately by the patient or her relatives. Sabitha compares the pregnant Saudi women who cry and argue loudly conscious of their
rights to the helpless women at Kozhikode Medical College, where she completed her Medical Degree. There is no comparison between those two or more screaming women in the same bed, in a concoction of amniotic fluid and faeces, with their wet clothes shrunk to expose their nudity and the proud and confident women in Saudi Arabia, wrapped in tidy dry white clothes, demanding in loud voice a solution for her intense pain, ordering, “th’aali ya dhakthura, th’aali sister, shoofi ana” (doctor come here, sister you too, examine me). Saudi women and Mazarin are the loudest. Indian, Pakistani, Bengali and Burmese women do not fuss usually perhaps due to their genes or consciousness of their inferior status as wives of less paid employees. (p. 102)

The narrator here reveals her disappointment in finding the women in Saudi Arabia conscious of their rights as pregnant women in hospitals. Also, she is very much aware of the situation existing in her home town, maintained by the secular state. As much Saudi Arabia as a nation follows the Islamic law it maintains the welfare machineries of the modern state. Health is one such system that permeates the power of the state to its subjects. The repulsive description of the maintenance of the subject at her home town revealed through the narrative, thus, ironically shows how women as subjects have been repressed by the mechanisms of the modern state. Thus, Sabitha’s critique develops out of her inferior status, and also from her disappointment in finding the women in a Muslim country different from her prejudices against Islam. There are more of such instances where Sabitha reveals
herself as a jealous and prejudiced narrator. She is all in wonder to notice the women of Saudi Arabia asking about the length of the cervical dilation to see if she has still time to go home and come back for delivery. She exclaims to Waheeda, her colleague, “How informed these Arab women are on medical issues! Is there a possibility of our women asking their doctor about the status of their cervical dilation ever?” (p. 30). The answer of the doctor is even more interesting:

They interrogate and understand everything. They also know how to use it at the right time. They are not diffident on their ignorance in scientific matters. No one can defeat them in rhetoric, doctor. I have read somewhere that the Arabs have been good at rhetoric from time immemorial. They call the foreigners, “Ajami.” “Ajami” in Arabic means the dumb. (p. 30)

So the problem with Sabitha is more or less a disappointment in the self-confidence and disposition of Arab women, which was contrary to her prejudices. Also, she is conscious of the economic disparities between the two countries, which she does not expect from an Islamic country. Her frustration often comes out in jibes against Saudi Arabia, where she attributes the ‘arrogance’ of its citizens to the wealth attained through petroleum. Here, the innuendo suggests that if not for petroleum, the country would have been uncivilized and much behind her ‘civilized nation.’

Her criticism of Saudi Arabia often ignores the wide human resource it invites and the support it offers many national economies including Kerala. Rather, this has been portrayed only as exploitation. Sexual exploitation of maids has been
generalized in the novel, once again referring to the extreme sexual appetite of Arab men. The *mahrt system*\(^{105}\) and many other Islamic practices to support women have been presented as fraudulent in the actual practice. The Muslim women Sabitha wants to meet and her actual experience with the Muslim women in Saudi Arabia are entirely different. The disparity between these two images results in the disruption of the entire narrative of Sabitha. Like the juxtaposition of historical women and Sabitha, the Islamic state and the men in the novel are superimposed. Thus, the state that casts doubt on Sabitha’s fidelity is juxtaposed with Sabitha’s husband Rashid, the Muslim male. Such instances are plenty in the novel. Even Doctor Iqbal, with two Fellowships from London, behaves like a conservative Muslim after his marriage. He, as per Sabitha’s impression, was after a civilized bride. But the marriage to a traditional Sudanese woman makes him a subject of religion and the Islamic state and there is a transformation in him after his marriage and promotion. He cannot but be a representative of the torturer, the imposing Muslim man in Sabitha’s narrative.

The Prophet in Sabitha’s narrative is equally a symbol of male desires; Sabitha is not willing to accept any of the contextual explanations given in Islamic history and the *hadiths* for polygamy. According to her he is an aging man, driven by his sexual aspirations. This is how she reports the Khyber war and its aftermath:

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\(^{105}\)The custom of giving money to a bride at the time of marriage. This is a reversal of the dowry system.
Aysha and Ummu Selma\textsuperscript{106} were anxious to hear the success of Muhammad in the war. The Jewish women seem to be extremely beautiful! Won’t there be damsels to impress the vulnerable Prophet? The news of the war has been reported by Abu Hureira, a male attendant in the harem . . . His exaggerated report to Ummu Selma and Aysha adds oil to their already burning minds: “Look at the wife of Kinaina, the commander of the Ban Nadir army! Ya Allah! Such a dainty she is! After defeating the fort the army reached the harem. Rasool\textsuperscript{107} was also present. When everyone was spellbound in that exceptional beauty Rasool wrapped her in the shawl hung at the fort gate. Everyone realised that Muhammad had desired her. That was quite just also. Such a beautiful and aristocratic woman was unapproachable for an ordinary mortal. Now people wait to watch whether she would be taken as a slave woman or a wife? My mind suggests she doesn’t deserve to be a slave at any cost.” (p. 111)

Along with all Muslim men, the Prophet also is a vulnerable man seeking beautiful women, exploiting them for sex. Sabitha’s construction of male sexuality is highly informed by the existing myths on Arab men and their insatiable sexual drive. The

\textsuperscript{106}The young wives of the prophet.

\textsuperscript{107}The rabbi
way maids from Indonesia have been discussed is one such instance of
generalisation in a conversation between Sabitha and Waheeda:

‘Most of them are over thirty five, though they don’t look so. Fair and
slim as they are, the Arabs are fond of them. They are good looking
and pretty too. Most of them insert Copper-T or implants before
coming here. They are well aware of the dangers involved.’ Doctor
Waheeda chuckled . . . “Are you not convinced? The dialectics of
master and slave woman is not new in Arabia. Earlier they were
possessed as captives of war. Today they are imported from other
countries in the arrogance of petro-dollars. Can the Arabs come out of
a habit that is embedded in their genes?” (p. 31)

The only parallel that strikes Sabitha’s mind is that of Soopi Muthalali, the local
Muslim landlord, and his rumoured relationship with his maid, back in her home
town in Kerala. Loaded by the strange and intricate patterns of caste system deeply
rooted in Kerala and the prolonged history of exploitation by the upper caste Hindus,
the only resemblance to the Arab exploitation of female servants that Sabitha could
think of in Kerala was that of a Muslim. The fact of Sabitha being a convert, who has
an equally live Hindu past, which she does not reject or look down upon, informs the
political context of her comparison. The generalisation of Muslim men in Sabitha’s
narrative recurs in the description of Waheeda husband and family too:

Doctor Waheeda is alone here. Her children are grown ups. The elder
one studies engineering. The second one is doing graduation in
commerce. Once in every year her husband and children visit her. They may stay for one or two months. This has been the same for many years. The rest of the year she would be alone in her flat close by the hospital. In her opinion her husband’s presence is more difficult to tolerate than loneliness. “He comes and the next day I get urinary infection. Therefore, their visits do not make me happy. Even otherwise I can tolerate the family only for a short span of time. There are many things to adjust. I prefer to be independent. Just make money and send home at regular intervals. They are happy and I am happy too, extremely happy!” (p. 32)

Doctor Waheeda’s life as a lone female is not acceptable for Sabitha’s morality, and her declaration of her insistence on not accepting her visa unless her husband also gets clearance as a symbol of her virtue and devotion to her husband, shows her apprehensions about living ‘alone.’ Therefore, Waheeda’s living-alone needs to be justified in terms of her ‘demanding husband’ who gives her nothing but “urinary infection.” Reading Islam as a material than a spiritual religion, Sabitha’s observation is thus punctuated by many such generalisations and allegations.

Arab women’s indifference to their men’s wanton desires has been attributed to the provision in Islamic law that permits the man to marry any number of times. The conversation between Sabitha and Waheeda further adds to the silent participation of Arab women in the sexual exploitation of the maids by their husbands:
Once they reach here, even before they learn the language the Arab owner tells her of his need through gestures. They will be asked not to lock the doors of their rooms. If they do not comply with it, there will be physical harassment. Recently we heard the story of an Indonesian Khaddama\textsuperscript{108} who jumped down from her window and committed suicide. Arab women do not seem to have any problem with this. Otherwise he may marry again. There would be lots of money involved in the marriage. Unlike our country, they have to pay mahr to marry a woman. (pp. 31-32)

Apart from portraying the male Muslim as a sex-driven animal, there is also an indirect hint to subvert the fundamental systems of support that Islam offers its women. The mahr system is basically intended to improve the status of women within Islam, and also to counter the pre-Islamic tradition of dowry system. My intention is not to refer to Islam as a context for female emancipation. I am well aware of the internal patriarchies that a woman has to face within the theological as well as historical existence of Islam. But I am concerned about the subject position of Sabitha as a “critical insider.” How far she has been inside Islam is the point I have been debating with. To add further to this ambiguity, the author carefully places the narrator at the threshold of the religion as a newly converted Muslim. Her observations can be diplomatically inside and outside the religion. The author’s reference in the introduction to the remark from her friend Civic Chandran, “you are

\textsuperscript{108} The maid in Arabic.
not Taslima Nasreen” as giving her confidence hints at the diplomacy of the author and the equivocal position she intends to take in terms of religion. The implication that she was scared of being read as Taslima Nasreen definitely shows her fear of being thrown out of the religion. In turn, she would rather choose her place between the inside and the outside, where she can very well express her critique, but of course be within Islam as a woman who represents Islam to the intellectual audience outside, where there is a dire need for ‘secular-Muslim women’ in Kerala.

Sabitha’s discussion of Arab men and their sexuality needs to be read against the contemporary realities of the ‘modern nation’ from which she hails. Entrapped in stories of sex abuses, scams and inhuman rapes of women, the contemporary reality of women in Kerala is not a secure one. While she points at the Arab men as the symbol of wild desires and insatiable sexual hunger, the reality back home laughs at the face of the narrative and the reader. The security that the Islamic law of Saudi Arabia provides its women and the capital punishment extended to rapes and sexual exploitation of women do not form parts of Sabitha’s narrative. Contextualising the critique of Islam in Barsa in Kerala where the media celebrate sex-scams and where the social and personal lives of the accused are least affected, the intention of the author becomes dubious and the credibility of the arguments thwarted.

In the third section of my discussion on Barsa, I intend to focus on how the novel positions itself in relation to the contemporary discussions on Islam in Kerala. Barsa was an instant hit in the market, flooded by books on Islam and Muslim women, especially in the post 9/11 context of Islamophobia and discussions on
Islamic fundamentalism. In the immediate polarisation of the world into pro-Islamic and anti-Islamic groups after the 9/11 attacks, the context in Kerala was conducive to discuss and debate Islam as a lost project in the history of renaissance. The literary historiography in Kerala has also always excluded Muslim literature from its terrain. In terms of anti-colonial literature of the past or representing modern literature of Muslim writers, the mainstream literary history has followed a stepmotherly attitude. The failure of renaissance and its ideal project of cultural secularism have been reflective in the careful exclusion played by literary histories. (Tharamel, 2007, pp. 23-29) The acceptance of Muslim writers in mainstream histories has always been problematic. Even the reputation of secular writers like Vaikom Muhammad Basheer, have entered phases of fluctuations. In his “Introduction” to Barsa A. P. Kunjamu mentions the context of Muslim lives in many novels in Malayalam. But unfortunately these contexts have been homogenised through a disruptive uniformity to mould into a liberal context or at times, ignored to the margins of a dominant Hindu discourse. Kunjamu observes Barsa as the sole attempt to describe the life of the Muslims in the perspective of the marginalised. He looks at Barsa as the reading of Islam by the Muslim woman (2008, p. 14). When there is a conscious and organized effort to marginalize the Muslim writers in mainstream literary histories, what invites attention and reputation to Barsa is its approval of the victim status of Muslim women. The more Barsa underlines the backwardness of the community the more it has been approved by the mainstream. The “confession” in the preface regarding the social responsibility of the individual to ask questions makes it an important thesis on the resisting Muslim woman: her
resistance marks her entry into the modern world. Likewise, the only two choices before the Muslim woman have been asserted here. She can either reveal her body, discarding purdah, thus become a barza and liberated or she can remain veiled and be the suppressed woman. All the symbols in the novel point to this inevitable duality of choices available for a Muslim woman. When Kamala Das converted to Islam the discussions in the mainstream journals were directed towards the possibility of her writing My Story as a Muslim woman. Thaha Madayi in his article on Madhavikkutty and her conversion to Islam after the poet’s death asks a couple of questions along these lines:

Why do Muslim women of Kerala always veil their experiences? Even in a time of innumerable autobiographies and biographies why do not Muslim women publish their narratives like the beautiful Mappila Pattu?\(^{109}\) . . . If a Muslim woman had written My Story\(^ {110}\) what would have happened? Such a thought is relevant now. A community that had ostracised N. P. Muhammad and similar reformers cannot be expected to accept Surayya.\(^ {111}\) Not only that she wouldn’t be accepted, she would also be defamed. The sympathy extended to Surayya at her death wouldn’t have been extended to Madhavikkutty

\(^{109}\) The traditional Muslim songs.

\(^{110}\) The controversial autobiography of Madhavikkutty.

\(^{111}\) The name taken by Madhavikkutty after her conversion to Islam.
had she been a Muslim by birth . . . The concise argument is this; the world got a great work like *My Story* because Madhavikkkutty was not a Muslim. Had she been a Muslim, like my grandmother Asyumma, she would have spent her days in prayer and Quran recital, and would have died without revealing her “self” to the world; without even leaving behind any symbol of her existence. This is not a communal argument. This is just my testimony as a Malayali Muslim. If anyone can counter my argument let them produce the evidence. Which Muslim woman’s open self-narrative can you provide? (2009, p. 46).

Here the author’s reference is again to the binaries of revealing and not revealing. Madhavikkkutty, who wrote such a revealing autobiography, is a veiled woman in Islam. She cannot write *My Story*. Rather than questioning the possibility of revealing and not revealing, I would like to extend the question why revealing becomes the only viable political agency for a woman? How could the author conclude unilaterally that his grandmother, who lived the pious life of a Muslim woman, wasted her life? The *barza*, the unveiled woman, thus becomes a potent symbol in all our discussions of woman’s emancipation. It is also the only viable form of agency for a woman. The woman who negotiates with her familiar premises, the one who fits into the contexts of religious compulsions, is not liberated. Madhavikkkuty as a woman revealing her personal space is in a way the symbol of our liberal aspirations. The controversial autobiography, informed by the longings of Malayali modernity, also represented the free woman in our cultural representations. The Muslim woman who is always an outsider in this liberal-secular space is thus represented in our
literary and other cultural productions as the eternal outsider. Through her clothing, through the vocabulary and also through the victim status, our movies and literature mark her as the alien. Most of the popular movies represent her as a victim; a backward, suppressed woman in the backyards of our culture. The conversion of Madhavikkutty to Islam thus, becomes a violation of this popular notion of Islam: the free woman turning to Islam to be the victim creates confusion and sabotages the normative conception of all individuals aspiring to be liberated from forces of domination. Thus, the dialogues on the conversion of Madhavikkutty itself lead to contradicting interpretations among the critics. The barza woman is liberated and the author of My Story is the barza woman, whereas the veiled woman is a victim. Thus, barza is also our archetype of the free woman, the one who opens her life to the doors of interpretation and observation is making a statement in terms of her existence. Self-narration opens the possibility of asserting one’s existence. But the political context of this self-narration becomes compulsory, at least in the case of confessions. The sinner confessing to become the ‘disciplined subject’ is the other extreme or the contradictory picture to this self-narration. Revealing, thus, secures person subjectivity within the structures of domination. So the woman unwilling to speak or to open up is a threat to this project of existing through disclosure.

The woman who comes out throwing away her veil becomes acceptable to modernity, to the secular state and to the liberal intellectuals. Thus, Khadija Mumthas’s Barsa secures a stable position in the literary history, where many other Muslim writers have failed. The fissures in literary and cultural historiography in
Kerala are quite evident in the conspicuous absences of Muslim women writers\textsuperscript{112} and reformers in our histories. But by producing the image of the Muslim woman that is in demand \textit{Barsa} and Khadija Mumthas succeed to secure a prominent position where Haleema Beevi or Puthoor Amina has failed.

In relating \textit{Barsa} to the contemporary debates on women and Islam in Kerala, I feel it may be a great omission if I do not refer to Rayana Khazi, a young student from Cherkalam in Kasargode. Recently she had been in the news after she came out to speak to the media about the threatening letters and phone calls that she had been receiving. All these demanded her to wear purdah. After Rayana’s revelations, media, human rights and feminist activists rushed to her aid. In the already ignited public sphere of Kerala due to the attack on T. J. Joseph,\textsuperscript{113} a college teacher, this was immediately attributed to Islamic fundamentalism. Rayana’s issue gave an opportunity for discussing the ‘Muslim woman’ once again in the public. Rayana became an object of discourse and she constantly claimed her position inside the religion though she insisted that she would not wear purdah. The discussions finally led to a demand for internal public spheres within religion to discuss and debate

\textsuperscript{112} The genre of \textit{Mappilapattu} (Mappila songs) is not explored in this thesis. There are many women authors and singers who popularized this genre, and there is a strong presence of women’s agency in the oral tradition of Mappila creativity.

\textsuperscript{113} T. J. Joseph, a Malayalam lecturer in a college managed by the Roman Catholic community in Kerala, initiated a controversy through a mid-term question paper. There had been criticism that this paper had explicit verbal defamation of the Prophet. He was later attacked by a group of young men, alleged to be representatives of Popular Front, a Muslim political organization. This initiated a loud round of talks on Islamic fundamentalism and the branding of Muslim activists as fundamentalists.
gender. J. Devika in a discussion forum looked into the issue as an opportunity to counter internal patriarchies in the religion:

In this particular juncture of the history of our society in which a large number of young Muslim women are gaining education, why is there so much fear, such reticence, about them entering the internal public sphere as full members of the community? I do feel that if these women do manage to break through the barriers—set up variously by Reformer-Men (the older ones, from Rayana’s case, seem to deploy either veiled coercion, or resort to cajoling, and the younger men, to just the latter!) —it is they who will strengthen the community beyond all expectations. (Devika, 2010, n. p.)

This is Devika’s response to the article “Rayana R. Khazi and the Spectre of Religious Fundamentalism in the Kerala Public Sphere” in the blog Kafila.org on Rayana Khazi debate by Jenny Rowena and K. Ashraf. There is a call for an internal public sphere within the community to discuss and debate the possibility of freedom within religion. But what Devika suggests here is again a monolithic identity of the Muslim woman. The multiple layers of Muslim woman’s identity have not been taken into account in this discourse. What Devika suggests here, the possibility of educated Muslim woman taking up the responsibility of speaking for the community is not viable in Rayana’s case, as how far she represents the Muslim woman is disputable. As much as she claims to be a Muslim, Rayana is not accepted as a ‘critical insider,’ like Khadija Mumthas, because the question of faith is not a personal choice in Islam.
Islamic theology stresses Islam as a community business than a personal one. The self is not the determinant of one’s belief in Islam, but the community gets priority here. In “Politics of Feminism in Islam” Anouar Majid asserts the impossibility of thinking of feminism in singular. He challenges the western acceptance of the individual as central to all discourses:

If the crisis of the individual is one of identity, the solution does not lie in accepting a bourgeois definition of the human, but in examining the historical and cultural background of the prevailing (western) capitalist equation of the individual with an “autonomous, contract making self,” where the “self” is conceived as property. (2006, p. 78)

Even when we do not accept the west and the east as mutually excluding rigid categories, the differences between the notions of the self in these two discourses need to be emphasized. Reading Rayana as an aspirant of a productive debate within the community, thus, results from a homogenised vision of the self and the concept of freedom itself. The term “critical insider” as framed by the enlightened souls in search of a more open and liberated space in Islam rises out of a different perspective of individual and freedom, one that does not accommodate Islam. Thus, discourses on Rayana Khazi and Barsa move in the same direction, categorically carving an identity the secular, liberal society would aspire for the Muslim woman. Also, as the object of these discourses, the Muslim woman’s political agency has been determined by the liberal platforms of a monolithic feminism.