Conclusion

Very few serious studies have been attempted on women and Islam in Kerala. In the contexts of the reform movements and in the later progressive discourses, Muslim women have been portrayed as passive victims. Illiterate and destitute, are the two adjectives that are often associated with Muslim women in these discourses. I have tried to contest these images of Muslim women, through a nuanced reading of the state of women in general and Muslim women in specific, during the pre-reform contexts and also by presenting the active participation of Muslim women in the reform movements. Presenting an alternative history of Muslim women brings out the inherent prejudices in the mainstream historiography, and its flawless commitment to the registers of liberal modernity. In her engagement with the immediate cultural and social contexts the premodern Muslim woman had different modes of participation which have not been explored in a significant manner.

The Arabic-Malayalam script, the special script of the Muslim community in Kerala, was the medium of communication and education used in the premodern times. The reformers in the community insisted on the need of learning Malayalam and English and attributed the community’s backwardness to the insistence on learning this script. But the accessibility of this script to all Muslims, without

114 Shamshad Hussain’s work on Muslim women of Kerala needs to be acknowledged here. The work Nyunapokshathinum Lingapadavikkumidayil (Between Minority and Gender) is the first of its kind to attempt a serious engagement with women and Islam in Kerala.
reservations of class or gender, shows a more egalitarian society that thrived among the Muslims. It is to be noted that at the same time, among the Hindus, caste played a major role in denying Sanskrit education to the lower castes. While attributing illiteracy to the entire community of Muslims, this medium with a rich tradition of various genres of literature has never been taken into account. The Madrassa education of the premodern past also included songs (maala) and baiths.\textsuperscript{115} The Mappilas had songs on almost every aspect of their living experience, ranging from resistance to colonial rule and the hagiographies of saints to celebrating occasions like marriages, ear piercing, and ritualistic ablution after child-birth. The domestic and public spaces are intertwined in these songs and they reflect the socio-cultural engagements of the Mappilas. Women had a major role to play in the production and circulation of Mappila literature. Many women were involved in the literary tradition of paatukettu which roughly means making songs.\textsuperscript{116} Songs written in Arabic-Malayalam script were kept in many traditional families. Women had the sole possession of these songs which were transferred from generation to generation. These manuscripts of songs were called sabina edukal (the sabina folios). Groups of women used to render songs like \textit{Nafeesath Maala}\textsuperscript{117} and \textit{Mohiyudheen Maala} \textsuperscript{118}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{115} Arabic narrative poetry.
  \item \textsuperscript{116} In Malabar there are women who both write and sing songs for such celebrations. But this tradition has been employed in a more powerful manner, with songs on the struggles of Mappila’s against the Portuguese and the British. There are plenty of songs valourizing the warriors of 1921 Mappila Revolt.
  \item \textsuperscript{117} Hagiography of saint Nafeesa.
  \item \textsuperscript{118} Hagiography of sufi saint Shaykh Mohiyudheen.
\end{itemize}
during child-births, for alleviating the labour pain. When such a lively tradition thrives, whose remnants exist even in the contemporary society, it is illogical to look at Muslim women as helpless, illiterate victims. With the emergence of the print media many of these oral engagements slowly died out, but the role of secular modernity in disabling many of the premodern practices cannot be over looked. The defining of cultural engagement as an activity entirely outside the domestic frame and the determination of the domestic space of the woman through a gendered structuring of the public domain that occurred during the reform period had a role in the extinction of these practices. But there are strong female presences like that of P. K. Haleema and Puthoor Amina in the twentieth-century Mappila literary tradition. There was a magazine named *Niza-ul-Islam* meant for Muslim women, in the nineteen twenties, in the Arabic-Malayalam script.\(^{119}\)

The scope of this thesis does not allow a detailed reading of women’s agency in both the oral and written forms of Mappila literary tradition. But I definitely point towards the possibility and necessity of further research on the area of Mappila literature to look into it as a mode of feminist cultural endeavour. Rather than looking at Mappila literature as exotic ethnographic possibilities, the theoretical propositions emerging out of these literary endeavours need to be engaged with. There has been hardly any effort on the part of the literary critics or cultural theorists to look into Mappila literature as a political medium, or to delineate the

---

\(^{119}\) Shamshad Hussain gives a picture of the front cover of an issue in 1929, in her book *Nyoonapakshathinum Lingapadavikkumidayil* (p.48).
politics of dialogues that this literary tradition undertakes with the public sphere. My focus on the premodern Muslim women in the first chapter is basically centred on the role of women as interlocutors in a dynamic society at the interface of transition. A nuanced reading of the social milieu of the premodern times has been attempted to show women as mediators between religions and rituals. The active agency of women as promoters of the religion has been later transformed to more spiritually inclined platforms, where subaltern communities challenge the universalized version of the aristocratic religion.

The next two chapters have analysed the political positions proposed by the Muslims in India in connection with women in the reform context. The second chapter is a review of the contemporary feminist revisiting of the reform movements in India which provides a rubric under which the Muslim discourses on women and by women have been discussed. The third chapter focuses on the reform movements in Kerala and the strong presence of Muslim women in them. Through many “little magazines” that were in circulation during the time Muslim women pondered over the possibilities of negotiating between religion and modernity. The absence of Muslim reform movements and Muslim women’s agency in mainstream histories of the reform movements in Kerala reveals the flaws in mainstream historiography.

While taking up the question of historiography, I have attempted to critically engage with the conception of secular history. The attempt has been to unsettle the normative political positions within feminist and liberal scholarships. Saba Mahmood
points out that critique is a “situated” practice that abides by the protocols of what is considered normative within a particular historical moment (Mahmood, 2004, pp. 573-9). She presents the impossibility of a teleological understanding of history and the need to explore the possibility of a self-remaking through an engagement with “another” perspective. This approach to history challenges the certainty of one’s own political commitments, but also makes it important to re-think them from within the context of “subjectivation.” Regarding this openness to a “radical Other” Mahmood further elaborates:

This does not mean that one has to adopt the lifestyles of medieval women, or that one stops fighting against the oppressive and unjust practices imminent to one’s own life. To do so would be only to mimic the same teleological certainty that we have been criticizing under the register of secular history in the first place. It does mean, however, to keep open the possibility that one can come to question the contingent importance of emancipation and freedom (to mention only two conflicted terms here) in a manner that one did not think was possible when one embarked upon an inquiry in the first place.

(2004, p. 579)

So feminist historiography, as has been attempted through the thesis, definitely presents the necessity of revising our notions of history as an essentially secular category. While secular rationality has revised notions of law, knowledge and forms
of modern governmentality, it has also revised institutions of religious life.\textsuperscript{120} While these reflections complicate the state of academic debate about the religious and the secular, they are also interpreted in terms of “religious extremism.” There is a kind of imposed necessity to choose between secular values and religious extremism.\textsuperscript{121} A similar discussion evolved out of feminist interventions in Rayana’s issue, which has been mentioned in the fourth chapter. This chapter reads the popularity of the novel \textit{Barsa} among the secular-liberals as a reflection of their empathy with the critique of Islam that the novel highlights. Locating the novel in contemporary Kerala, where Muslims and Muslim women are translated into a polarized realm of fundamentalism and victimhood respectively, the chapter also looks into some of the prevalent discourses on Muslim women. My reading of \textit{Barsa} and the arguments that follow may be presented through a rubric of thinking that facilitates the idea that the secular-liberal principles of freedom and emancipation associated with feminism and other left-liberal imaginaries cannot be universal.

In universalising a vision for freedom and emancipation in the western imagination, the possible ‘other modes of articulation’ and other ways of conceptualizing political agency have been compromised. Also, the policies of the

\textsuperscript{120} Further on this can be read in Saba Mahmood (2009, pp. 836-862) and Talal Asad (1993; 2003; 2009).

\textsuperscript{121} My own article in \textit{Mathrubhumi Weekly}, titled “Islamile Sthree” [Women in Islam] (2010, pp. 52-59) has been interpreted in terms of religious extremism. Maina Umaiban, a budding Malayalam writer, who claims a secular-Muslim identity, criticized the argument in the article that had challenged the generalization of liberal aspirations, as fundamentalist. Hameed Chendamangallur pointed out through the article, “Pothusammathikaile Chathikkuzhikal” that many Muslim intellectuals, are committed to an “intellectual Jihad” (2010, pp. 8-19).
secular state blatantly ignore the inherent contradiction within its own conception. In Rayana Khazi’s issue that has been mentioned in the fourth chapter, this contradiction becomes extremely evident. As a citizen of the secular liberal-democratic state she has the right to the choice of clothing. But the same state also claims to offer a freedom of religion that allows the religious structure to uphold its beliefs and codes of moral behaviour.

While conceptualising the Muslim woman’s existence it is also important to take into account the minority status of Muslims in India. The normative disposition of the legal system and the entire mechanisms of the state to the majority culture and religion often conflict with the claim of equality and freedom in the secular state. The intervention of the court in the context of “love-jihad” in Kerala or in the larger frame the verdicts of many of the legal cases related to the Babri-Masjid demolition and the Gujarat genocides challenge the notion of the impartial execution of law. Justice Sankaran’s controversial order to the Government of Kerala to probe into the allegations regarding coaxed conversions of Hindu and Christian girls to Islam through the medium of love reveal the inherent prejudices that underlie the legal mechanism in the country.122 The secular liberal principles of

122 In September 2009, Justice K. T. Sankaran rejected the anticipatory bail plea of two Muslim men and ordered the DGP to conduct a probe into ‘love jihad.’ In the same month, a court in Bangalore ordered a similar probe during the hearing of a habeas corpus petition. The woman in question was an adult, but the court ordered her to stay with her parents until it was clear that she had indeed married for love. The controversy had wide impacts on the young Muslim men of Kerala. There emerged an immediate coalition between the Hindu and Christian upper class in Kerala against this phenomenon, labelled “love jihad.” The Catholic Church circulated “guidelines” to its subjects to protect their girls from the seduction of Muslim men. (Kerala Kaumudi Daily October 5, 6, 7 and 8 2009)
freedom of religion and speech are thus not neutral mechanisms for the negotiation of religious difference, but remain partial to certain normative conceptions of religion, subject, language, and injury (Mahmood, 2009, p. 861). In this atmosphere of an indifferent legal framework, the suggestions for a unified civil code accentuate the problematic realm of jurisprudence in the country. Shah Bano case and the discourses it evoked mostly centred on a critique of *shari'at* and its gendered manifestation. But beyond law and its liberal manifestations there needs to be a greater understanding across religious differences and a vision of the whole array of traditions of ethical and inter-subjective norms that provide the substrate for legal arguments. There is a need to address the impossibility or complexity involved in translating the ethical and religious norms across cultures while discussing the Muslim woman.

The new school of Muslim women scholar-activists who critically study the foundational texts of Islam challenge canonical texts and conventional histories. But the potential danger involved in this kind of thinking has been discussed in some of the earlier chapters. The formation of All India Muslim Women’s Personal Law Board and many of the Muslim Women NGOs are attempts on the part of Muslim women in India to develop a dialogue among themselves, with the religion, with the community and at a wider level with the society on issues related to women. While attempting to locate themselves within the community, these organisations attempt to address issues pertaining to child custody, guardianship and adoption, women’s rights in marital home, marriage and divorce, *mahr* (dower) etc. Muslim Women’s Rights Network, whose All India meeting was held in 2005 in Lucknow, discussed the
role of state in protecting women’s rights, communal violence’s impact on Muslim women and the challenges ahead Muslim women’s activism (Vatuk, 2008, pp. 500-501). Definitely these initiatives are reflections of the community’s attempt to develop a politically vibrant dialogue with the contemporary realities. At the same time when women become prominent participants within the Muslim public sphere they do not contest their identity as Muslims. But it may be a misreading to look into these organizations as platforms to address gender within the community. While the politics of gender is just one of the causes, they engage with the contemporary realities of living in India as members of a minority community, in an effort to address the internal discrepancies within the apparently secular framework of the nation. Sylvia Vatuk in her article, “Islamic Feminism in India: Indian Muslim Women Activists and the Reform of Muslim Personal Law” differentiates between Islamic feminist activists and Islamist women. Looking at the discourse on women in contemporary Islamic reform movements she finds all of them sharing a pre-occupation with the need for women to conform to “Islamically prescribed norms” of modest behaviour and appearance. In well marked prescription she charts out the entirely different trajectories of Islamist women and Islamic feminists:

In these respects, ‘Islamist’ women, ‘less concerned with the advancement of women’s rights than with the advancement of Islamization’ seems to have little in common with the Islamic feminist activists whose ideas and work I have discussed here. That is not to say that some of the individuals involved in women’s rights activism may also not ‘Islamist’ views and be engaged in promoting these (for
themselves and others) in their personal capacities or as members of religious organisations that share such an orientation. But the Muslim women’s rights ‘movement,’ per se, is not concerned with identifying or enforcing particular standards of dress or deportment, teaching women, how to become better Muslims or encouraging them to pray more regularly. Its leaders are indeed outspokenly critical of—and, as I have mentioned above, have at times have publicly protested against—reformer’s attempts to control women’s behaviour. Although I never heard it explicitly verbalized in this way, their attitude seems to reflect a conception of religion that is very far from that of the Islamists, one that sees religious faith and modes of observance as private matters, to be negotiated by each individual between herself and God. (2008, pp. 517-18)

It is precisely this conception of a political agency that I have been attempting to contest through this thesis. There are certain liberal assumptions that frame the context of Vatuk’s discourse. By defining rigid categories of Islamists and Islamic feminists, she definitely attempts to prioritize the individual over religion. There is an essential identity of the progressive individual that she asserts through her ideal of the Islamic feminist against its antithetical other, the Islamist. By presenting religion as a private matter that needs to be resolved between the individual and God she abides by the normative pejorative of the modern secular state that demands a recession of religion to the private sphere. It is because of this ambiguous itinerary of the term Islamic feminism that I have carefully excluded the term from my
discourse. Also, my own convictions as a feminist do not conceive feminism as a necessarily emancipatory movement but as an abode that accommodates the theoretical proposition for all kinds of identity struggles. This kind of a feminist sensitivity accommodates women in purdah into its fold without raising questions about the role of the choice of clothing in emancipation. Feminism in this sense does not originate in the thrust on individualism and liberal assumptions of European modernity but develops as a tradition that conceptualizes in various patterns in different histories and different modes of thinking. It is precisely this different trajectory of feminism that books like Women Writing in India have presented before us.

In conceptualising the Muslim woman, the feminist discourses have framed her along two oppositions, either progressive and anti-religious or religious and therefore oppressed. Between these two binaries there are plenty of positions that feminism needs to explore. Charles Hirschkind and Saba Mahmood in their article, “Feminism, the Taliban, and Politics of Counter-Insurgency” discuss this phenomenon of portraying the Muslim woman as a victim of Islamic fundamentalism. They precisely point out how the choice to veil by young women, which is an act of modesty as per Islamic norms, is interpreted as opposed to the notion of freedom as per social conventions:

This points out the degree to which the normative subject of feminism remains a liberatory one: one who contests social norms (by wearing torn jeans and dying her hair blue), but not one who finds
purpose, value, and pride in the struggle to live in accord with certain tradition sanctioned virtues. Women’s voluntary adoption of what are considered to be patriarchal practices are often explained by feminists in terms of false consciousness, or an internalization of patriarchal social values by those who live within the asphyxiating confines of traditional societies. Even those analyses that demonstrate the workings of women’s subversive agency in the enactment of social conventions remain circumscribed within the singular logic of subordination and insubordination. A Muslim woman can only be one of two things, either uncovered, and therefore liberated, or veiled, and thus still to some degree, subordinate. Can our bras, ties, pants, miniskirts, underwear, and bathing suits all be so easily arrayed on one or the other side of this divide? Can our daily activities and life decisions really be captured and understood within this logic of freedom or captivity? (Hirschkind and Mahmood, 2002, pp. 352-53)

This is an important proposition in terms of the agency of Muslim women. Outside the logic of this opposition we need to conceptualize women in Islam. Those values and practices the liberal-progressive individuals espouse may not be the ideal existence of a human being. Our imaginative possibilities of the Muslim woman centre on misogyny and patriarchal violence. Our ability to conceive Muslim women beyond these set patterns determine the credibility of our discourses on Muslim women. While looking at veil as an oppressive measure, the fact that veil and harem
are modes of social norms that connect the Muslim woman to her immediate public sphere is often ignored.

Besides the problematic position of the Muslim woman in terms of her existence outside the realm of emancipatory politics, in India, the fact of being part of the religious minority complicates issues. There is an inherent hostility in the depiction of Muslims in general that one needs to counter while proceeding to an impartial history. My engagement with women and Islam in Kerala is an attempt to present Muslim women as subjects of differently conceived notions of the religion shaped by different variables of time, region, class, ethnicity, etc. In my attempt to conceive the Muslim woman of Kerala at specific moments in Kerala’s history I have presented her as a heterogeneous subject whose agency has not been determined by a singular political formation. In her negotiations with religion and the larger society she enacts her political concerns in modes of expression that may be termed religious conformism by liberal secularism. As much as I explore the possibility of feminism within the category of Muslim, I also reconnoitre the obvious omissions and distortions in conventional historiography in order to project a particular effigy of the nation. By doing so I am well aware of the possible dangers involved, as there is every chance of these analytical reflections being read against the dichotomous characterization of “religious extremism” and “secular necessity.” By challenging the normative claims of secular reasoning one indeed faces the charge of supporting religious fanaticism. But as someone who often takes asylum under a progressive, liberal, secular protocol, I feel, I need to take this inexorable risk in order to rethink the very categories I succumb to.