Abstract

Feminism is going through the phase of a problematic re-structuring of its political positions while registering the predicament of women in religious communities. The challenges that Islam poses to normative conceptions of feminist agency through a liberal-secular focus on individualism and individual freedom form the rubric under which the theoretical propositions of this thesis can be articulated. Engaging critically with Islam and women in Kerala, I focus on the wide array of variables like ethnicity, class, sexuality and historical contexts that may have an impact on shaping women’s agency in Islam. The first chapter of this thesis explores the subjectivity of Muslim women in Kerala as influenced by multiple variables, ranging from geography to caste and class denominations, and traces the epistemic violence involved in projecting them as the sole subjects of Islam. The second chapter reviews the complexity involved in the religious reform movements in India in terms of women, as in the etched differences between ‘the nation’s women’ and ‘other women.’ The third chapter focuses on the participation of Muslim women in the early twentieth-century reform movements in Kerala, revealing the inherent contradictions in the formation of the secular civil society in Kerala. The fourth chapter is a critical reading of the novel Barsa by Khadija Mumthas in the background of the contemporary discourses on Muslim women in Kerala and finds the monolithic construction of “Muslim woman,” problematic. Reading Muslim women in contemporary times thus necessitates a reconstitution of our strategies of reading and understanding of the feminist enterprise, and a revision of liberal categories. 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.