



the south asianist

ISO-certified pardahs and agency mechanisms among Muslim women in Kerala

Julten Abdelhalim

Vol. 2, No. 2, pp. 10–27 | ISSN 2050-487X | journals.ed.ac.uk/southasianist

ISO-certified pardahs and agency mechanisms among Muslim women in Kerala

Julten Abdelhalim

Cairo University / University of Heidelberg, Abdelhalim@asia-europe.uni-heidelberg.de

Increasing waves of labour migration from the Southern Indian state of Kerala to the Arabian Gulf have led to a series of new developments exemplified by rising consumerism, especially among middle class Muslims in the state. An interesting result of migration has been not only the adoption of the Arabian female black dress, the *pardah*, but also its enforcement as a uniform and a marker of religiosity by Islamic groups. Whereas global forces leading to the creation of job opportunities in the Gulf have positively impacted the state of Kerala in relation to levels of human development and education, Muslim women are witnessing increased social controls. Paradoxes lie in attempts to create emancipatory tools out of the confining frameworks of patriarchal domination characteristic of much of Keralite society. This paper is based on ethnographic material seeking to unravel the different dynamics of agency and domination in Northern Kerala.

Introduction

Starting from the late 1970s, South India, and especially Kerala, witnessed intensive labor migration to Gulf countries following the oil boom of 1973. Nowadays Kerala is considered the main source of labour to the Gulf and hence Kerala's economy has become reliant on remittances from Gulf migration. Since job opportunities are scarce in Kerala due to the low industrial level and the rural nature of the state, migration seems to be the main option. However, migration is heavily directed towards the Gulf and not towards other states of India. High levels of income that match the high consumption levels of Keralites are not the only reason for this orientation. Muslim Malayalees also feel more culturally attached to the Arabs than to the rest of Indians. In fact, Malayalees regardless of their religion do not feel strong cultural ties to the rest of Indians (apart from Tamils) because of language barriers. Perhaps a major factor and result to this is the cheap daily direct flights to the Gulf, which implies that it is more accessible than going to Delhi (almost everyone who was living in the Gulf whom I spoke with has never been to Delhi).

In today's Kerala, especially Malabar or the Northern part, the majority of Muslims, who are known as the *Mappila* Muslims of Malabar, one can see the prevalence of the traditional Gulf female attire called '*Abbayyah*' in Arabic, which was introduced in the Keralite setting as *pardah* and as a word does not have any resonance in

Arabic. Although the term *pardah* has a different connotation in the Indian context (mainly the act of hiding the female face in public spaces with the shawl, regardless of religious affiliation), it came to denote the black long dress worn by the Arab Gulf women. And in the North Indian context, the black attire is called *burqa*, which is actually an Arabic word. How the word *pardah* traveled to the Keralite context remains an undiscovered linguistic domain.¹

The discourses concerning *pardah* have been raging for about a decade. The arguments are manifested on multiple levels: everyday life, the media and intellectual circles. The forces of contention are concentrated among two groups; those who call themselves the secularists and those labeled as Islamic feminists. They stand against the Muslim orthodox voices, sided by the common woman who in the majority of cases does not hold a specifically apparent sociopolitical orientation to the question of *pardah*. After 2005, with the conversion of the Malayalam poet Kamala Das (later Kamala Surayya) and her propagation of *pardah* as a means of a sense of liberation, the perception of *pardah* as an oppressive veiling instrument was

¹ According to Osella&Osella (2007) the Malayalees use the word '*abayya*' to denote the expensive imported *pardah* that carries rich symbolic capital since it is originally worn by the wealthy Arab Women of the Gulf. However, during my stay in Kerala, I did not encounter anyone who says '*abayya*'. Eventually the differences came down to how much embroidery or "work" on it that gives it its value, and whether it is locally produced or imported.

entirely absent from the psyche of the common Keralite woman, who as I would be showing dealt with it in a manner different from the intellectuals.

The opponent camp's argument coincides with the rejection of the de-traditionalisation of the Keralite society and the adoption of contemporary foreign Arabic cultural icons, especially consumerist and hegemonic ones. In a society characterized by a strong ability to accommodate foreign elements, this case of adoption of the *pardah* dress is associated with other phenomena such as the introduction of Egyptian, Saudi and Yemeni popular food in all restaurants in and around Kerala. The cultural flow is mixed with strong economic incentives that led to successful business enterprises in manufacturing and selling these Arab popular lifestyles. Male-based cults conspired with market mechanisms to create trends that dislocated the agency of women in deciding or 'coding' their dressing style. During the last ten years, the consequent forces of social change and globalization have led to an interesting alteration in conceptions of fashion, especially in a society characterized by strong traditional rural values.

The South Indian society witnessed massive social changes linked with women's forms of dress. Though they were not conceived as agents in setting mainstream rules of decency, women, especially Muslims, were the most evident subjects of social change. Inherent and

traditional conceptions of decency and sexuality in the South Indian society were reshaped through different phases often trespassing the barriers of caste and religion (Jones 1989; Kertzer 1988; Devika, 2007). These phases started with the Breast Cloth controversy of the early nineteenth century that culminated in wiping out the ban on low caste Hindu women to cover their bosoms, to the adoption of the originally Brahminical North Indian attire, known as the *saree*, then the switching to the *salwar qameez*, and lastly the *pardah*.

Should we hence regard the *pardah* trend as a Gramscian phenomenon of hegemony since there is some implied consensual internal acceptance, or should we borrow Bourdieu's (1977) hybrid concept of symbolic violence that refers to the contradictory or double reality of conduct that is intrinsically equivocal? The case of the Keralite Muslim women illustrates these interwoven questions of agency, consumerism and fashion. This paper attempts at demonstrating these different arguments and showing the paradoxes of the symbolic meaning of agency, self-image and domination. One observation is the irony of how in a society where women outnumber men and hence control the outcome of the political process, their agency is continually denied and manipulated. However, the picture is more complex, once we employ the feminist outlook of situated knowledge (Haraway 1998) and take account of the absent narratives of the common

woman. As I would be showing, dress in many cases appears as a political tool and not merely a reflection of a consumerist attitude (though this is also taken into consideration). This paper, hence, relates to ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the state of Kerala from December 2010 until April 2011 in the two districts of Malappuram and Kozhikode with the predominant Muslim population.

The Keralite-Arab linkage

Interestingly and as it will be shown in the coming sections of this paper, Muslims in Kerala are not linked to the center of India (the capital) as much as they are economically and culturally linked to the Gulf. The practicality of trajectories evident in the financial linkages between Kerala and the Gulf led to multiple changes in the issue of identity. In fact, the history of Arab relations with Kerala goes back, according to certain accounts, even before the time of the emergence of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century. Black gold, or pepper, was the main reason behind relations based on trade. The northern districts of what is today known as Kerala comprise the historical area named Malabar. This area is characterized as dominantly Muslim. Malappuram is the district with the highest Muslim population amounting to 68.5 percent. Emigration to the Gulf states plays a major role in shaping the Malabari society, especially that Malappuram district is considered to outnumber the rest of

the districts of Kerala in emigration (17.5 percent of emigrants from Kerala are from Malappuram) but not in return emigration. In Kerala, 52.5 percent of Muslim households have one or more non-resident Keralite. In Malappuram alone, 71 percent of the households have in them either an emigrant or a return emigrant each. The largest amount of remittances in 2007 was received by Malappuram district, which amounted to Rs. 4.6 thousand cores or 19 percent of the total for the state. Around 50 percent of the remittances to the state were received by the Muslim community, which forms less than 25 percent of the total population of the state. Malayalee Muslim residents in the Gulf amount to 1.6 Millions. 22.9 percent of married Muslim women are Gulf wives (whose husbands live and work in the Gulf) (Zachariah & Rajan 2007). The United Arab Emirates decided to open a consulate in Kerala to accommodate for the demands of its largest Indian workforce community and to encourage business (Padanna 2011).

The city of Kozhikode, formerly known as Calicut, has a rich history of trade with the Arab world. By the twelfth century it became a commercial center between the Arab World, Southeast Asia and South Asia. Historically, trade relations did not only result in an exchange of material goods of spices and wood. In fact, the impact of trade was witnessed in the cultural goods that came in a dualistic form; artistically

and literarily (hybrid language and folklore); and socially (inter-religious marriages, conversions and later on women's education and their dress code) (Karassery 1995; Dale 1980; Kurup 2006; Kunju 1989).

To briefly showcase the cultural goods resulting from this migration, there was the innovation of a hybrid language known as *Arabi-malayalam*, which is basically Malayalam written in Arabic script, with a vocabulary emerging from Malayalam, Arabic, Tamil, Urdu and Persian. It was initially used as an educational and anti-colonial method of teaching Muslims without resorting to either English or the Hindu-associated sanskritized Malayalam.

Malabar's folklore is composed of hybrid art forms in which indigenous dancing and poetry were fused with Arabic themes. *Duffmuttu*, for example is an art form using the traditional Arabian *duff* (an Arabian drum). Contemporarily, Muslims stand in a circle singing an Islamic song in Malayalam while playing the *duff*. *Kolkali* is another performing art from Malabar, which is taken from the traditional *Kalarippayatt* (a form of Dravidian martial art using small sticks or swords). The change to the original 'Hindu' form is that Islamic songs accompany it, the boys are not bare-chested, and their heads are covered with a piece of cloth. One of the almost vanishing art forms now is the *oppana*, which is a form of singing and dancing presented by females

during a wedding ceremony. The singing is of folk Mappila (Malabar's Muslim) songs. The Mappila songs themselves (in Malayalam: *Mappillapattu*) also represent another hybrid form of art.²

These art forms now are almost exclusively existent in Islamic schools' celebrations or in TV programs. Whenever I attended a wedding, I was surprised with how void it is of any Music, dancing, or celebration sight apart from the incredible amounts of biryani and beef curry. Nowadays since the oil boom, this cultural exchange is not only one-sided but also consumerist to a great extent. As I noticed during my stay, goods, dressing and eating styles came in to replace and suppress the artistic forms of exchange.

Consumerist trends as a result of migration and the enlargement of the middle-class

Migration led to many results, among which is the enlargement of the Middle class in Kerala. Most people I interviewed, especially the elderly, stressed how Kerala fifty years ago was a very different place. Hunger, poverty and modesty were major features of everyday life. These were transformed by 'Gulf money'. According to a survey conducted by the National Council for Applied Economic

²A version of Arabi-Malayalam is found in the Muslim Mappila Songs sang in Malabar. These songs are divided in various categories. Of these categories are the weddings songs (*kalyanapaattu*), praising prophets and saints (*madhpattu*), and war songs. See: Karassery, M.N. 1995.

Research, Kerala's Muslim households average earnings was 29,991 INR/year in comparison with Hindus households' average of 26,344/year (Iype 2004).

The increased rate of food consumption, especially among the Muslims is a major trend. Muslims do a thriving business in restaurants all around the state serving usually the same menu. The appearance of Arab diners is a notable feature. Several restaurants in Kozhikode carry names such as: Arabian Diner, Arabian food, and Albake (a famous fast food chain for fried chicken in Saudi Arabia). Their almost identical menus are comprised of Saudi and Yemeni meat dishes.

Another Gulf-influenced trend is the shops selling what Malayalees call "Gulf Products". These products are not all manufactured in the Gulf, but are usually imported. Examples of these goods are mobile phones, computers, kitchen and cooking devices, blankets, a specific washing liquid called Fairy and the Tang drink (an orange powder drink always served to guests).

The prevalence of a strong consumer culture is linked to an established purchasing power of women. This is not only attributed to consumer goods, but also to the common goal of directing remittances towards building or renovating houses; a goal that ended up as a trend. Perhaps what is most significant about this trend is that women's agency and autonomy appear here particularly strongly. Usually it is the women

who are the recipients of money that their husbands send through bank transfers or Western Union, and hence are often solely responsible for all the paperwork concerning obtaining construction permits from the municipality, choosing a design for the house and managing all construction-related steps. In a survey conducted by Zachariah & Rajan in 2007, the role of the wife in managing the finances of the household was very apparent; 60 percent of respondents manage on their own and 69 percent have their own bank accounts. Whereas this strong agency in using the money is observable, there is no labor mobility for Muslim women in Kerala. It is even inconceivable for a woman to decide to travel for work purposes. However, the emphasis on education is slowly changing this mind-set since traveling for educational purposes has been sanctioned socially, although still limited to Kerala.

Appearance of *Pardah* and different dressing styles

Analysing the trend of wearing a standardized dress as the black *pardah* collides with the reality of how religion and fashion cults operate in a rural society that is increasingly globalized and witnessing massive cultural cross-border interactions. These dynamics are manifested through the empirical examples demonstrated in this paper. According to a survey conducted in Calicut, there was a notable increase in *pardah*

usage³ from 3.5 percent in 1990 to 32.5 percent by 2000 in the northern regions of Kerala (Basheer 2002). Osella and Osella (2007) observed an even higher percentage while conducting their research in 2002-2004: around 50 percent, with 90 percent usage in the old Muslim area of the city, Thekkepuram. This is also obvious from the increase in the sales of the major *pardah* manufacturing company (Hoorulyn) in Kerala since its inception in 1992 from 100 dresses to 10,000 by 2002 (De Jong, quoted in Osella and Osella 2007).

During my fieldwork, I observed the hegemony of the North Indian Salwar-Qameez (referred to as *churidaar* in Kerala) in Calicut University and its affiliated non-religious colleges, as well as in the city itself. This is contrast to the dominance of *pardah* in Islamic colleges and in its outdoor usage in the villages of Northern Kerala.⁴ As opposed to the reason of practicality that led to the dispersion of *pardah* among housewives (being a quick dress as opposed to the *saree*), the stipulation of *pardah* as a compulsory uniform in educational institutions carries symbolic significance, which will be further investigated.

³ Defining 'usage' is a problematic issue since there is a noted flexibility in the decision to wear a *pardah*. Basheer (2002) himself in his article does not specify what he means by using the *pardah* and whether it is an exclusive choice of dress or as it is in Kerala, one of the options women adopt besides the *saree* and the *salwar-qameez*.

⁴ For those women working in field, the commonly used dress is the "maxi" or the house long cotton dress or the traditional Keralite dress formed of a blouse and a skirt (here the religious differences will dictate the form of the blouse).

Although some studies have pointed out the difference in the appearance of women in the public space,⁵ the Keralite case offers an exception to the common narratives on India that focus on the Northern states. In fact, Muslim and non-Muslim Keralites appear to be concerned an obsession with decency in public spaces (or to be more precise with the male-dominated conception of decency).⁶ Not only are Muslim women constrained in their dresses, but Hindus as well. You would rarely see a Hindu woman wearing jeans or a T-shirt especially in Calicut. This leaves Christians as the most liberal in their choice of 'Western' clothing, especially in the districts of Ernakulam and Thrissur, where they are concentrated.

Interviews showed the expected conformity to concepts of modesty and decency. "The *saree* shows every single part of the woman's body, but with the *pardah* it is impossible, but of course you can still see the shape, but not like the *saree*," a female student informed me. The definition of modesty, however, varies from the Muslim perspective to the non-Muslim one. For the non-Muslim and especially the Hindu,

⁵ Examples are J. Abu Lughod (1987), who touches upon this difference, yet in a reductionist manner focusing only on North India, in her article the Islamic city, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, pp. 160-161. Otherwise, C. Gupta (2002), *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims and the Hindu Public in Colonial India*. New York: Palgrave, discusses general gender identity formations in colonial India.

⁶ This was obvious to me during their everyday conversations and their remarks on my dress (both in India and in Egypt), in addition to what is being dispersed through the written media.

modesty revolves around wrapping, restraining, and binding: clothes are tight, wound around the body, and jewelry such as anklets and bangles contain the bodily extremities. There is an emphasis on binding, sealing, and restraining (Osella&Osella 2007: 4).

The obsession with wrapping as a form of protection of the female comes in contrast to the Muslim idea of covering and hiding. Islamic texts clearly stress avoiding any tight and thus revealing forms of clothing. Hence, for Muslim women, the *saree* would still be appropriate if the blouse underneath is full-sleeved and covering her midriff or stomach and back. Not to mention wrapping a scarf on her head or using the end of the *saree* to cover her head. Consequently, Muslim women could be easily identified from non-Muslim ones by looking at the way they wrap their *sarees*. Muslims never show their stomach, and thus the *saree* end is always loose enabling them to wrap it over their heads in case they are not wearing a headscarf, whereas the Hindu style is what Muslims call 'steps', because the end of the *saree* is multiply folded and pinned allowing the midriff or at least part of it to be shown. Still, some elements in the mentality of decency remained common between communities, and this is of tight sleeves. While non-Muslims prefer tight short sleeves, Muslims differ only in the fact that their sleeves are long. But they still stitch them tightly. I had a personal encounter on this matter when I tried to convince a lady tailor to make

my blouse that she had just stitched a bit looser, and she kept looking at me puzzled and not understanding why I would wear it loose.

This proves that there is a constant puzzle when it comes to being practical and being fashion-conscious. In an extremely hot place like Kerala, one would guess that women would automatically opt for cotton headscarves. However, wherever I searched for one, I could never find any cotton *mafta* (Malayalam for head scarf). These *maftas* were always made of the same polyester material and found in exactly three colors: black, beige, and white. They were always in the same shape. This gave a clue on how standardized the society is, not to mention the strong tendency to conformity. I wondered how that the range of what could be called fashionable scarves was very limited. When comparing with Egypt or Turkey, where there is a widespread custom of covering the hair, there is always a huge array of scarves. Interestingly, you can find very colorful headscarves that are made in India and sold in Egypt. However, throughout my trips all over India, I never found these *maftas* (which have a specific size rendering them easy for wrapping on the head).

The fascination with fashion is linked to a trend in boutique business in Kerala among the upper class Muslim women. Opening a boutique is a popular option for women without a professional degree, allowing them to work.

During my stay in Kerala, I encountered a recently divorced woman who decided to open a

boutique. She traveled with some members of her family to Mumbai to get fabrics for *salwar-qameez* suits and *sarees* and sold them at higher prices to gain profit. They were elegant yet simple fabrics, which symbolized upper class taste.

There is a noticeable attentiveness in asking for the price of what one wears. In addition to this, whereas there is rarely a discussion over the fabric, there is great interest in buying clothes with heavy embroidery or appliques (what they call 'work') and a trendy color and design. This means that if someone wears polyester clothes in extremely hot weather, their mentality is highly fashion-blinded and practicality does not play a significant role in their choice of clothes, especially that there was a witnessed disregard for cotton suits which were looked upon as a form of cheap house dress. This is not limited to women, but extends to men also. Since skinny tight jeans were trendy (according to what they see in Gulf markets and TV) then it became a cult among young men. However, those who are still studying at *madrasas*⁷ would refrain from going to the *madrasa* with these trousers because they know such attire is not accepted by the religious people. Young men also have an allure towards what they call a *jubba*, which is simply the

North Indian *Kurta* (long Indian shirt). This could be translated as an attempt to copy the North Indian political elite image and to break the stereotypical image of a South Indian man. These empirical examples are meant to show the clash resulting from the interaction between urban values and rural societies. Kerala is a fascinating example to show how globalization managed to penetrate the rural society and inject in it urban trends and fascinations. A culture of appropriated consumption was inherently related to a negotiative space of women's agency and empowerment, which was reflected in small-scale boutique and beauty parlour businesses.

Coming to the usage of *pardah*, the case of Kerala presents us with a different scenario than the already studied one of Egypt, Northern India, and Western European societies. In some societies, the shift to wearing a *pardah* is an ideological decision based on a conviction that it is exclusively Muslim and decent dress. A woman in Egypt who chooses to wear a *pardah* (or '*Abayya*' to be contextually correct) would not easily return to wearing standard clothes (skirt and blouse, or blouse and trousers). And most definitely, would not be switching her dressing styles in the public sphere. In Kerala, it is a matter of context and convenience. Most women in villages would wear one on her house dress (the maxi: a long loose half or full-sleeved simple dress). The same woman when going to a wedding would wear a *saree*, and perhaps

⁷ Madrasas are Islamic schools in which children are taught the basic principles of Islam and the Quranic teachings. In Kerala, most Muslim children go to a Madrasa either from sunrise till eight in the morning and then head to the modern school, or they go in the evening once they finish school.

when going shopping for clothes or when visiting some relatives would wear a *salwar-qameez* suit. Apart from female students of Islamic or Arabic Studies, the use of *pardah* in public is never compulsory, not even from the family. The northern Indian context gives us another contradictory image, since the decision to wear a *pardah* comes out of compulsion and not a free choice. In this case, it is associated with covering the face in most of the time. In Kerala, however, it is a rare case to see a woman with her face covered, and if this happens, then they would be often labeled by other *pardah*-clad women as extremists or belonging to a *tablighi jama'at* family.⁸ Interestingly, the spaces for a public discourse on *pardah* functions in a Lefebvrian manner, as they appear not only to serve as a tool of action, but also as a means of production, social control and domination (Lefebvre 1991) as I will show in the next section.

These discourses concerning the usage of *pardah* are entangled within a matrix of multiple identities in Kerala; the Pan-Islamic identity meets the South Indian Malayalee's customs and directs her through a gulf-centered lens. Osella & Osella (2007) appropriately capture the reasons Muslims attribute their use

of *pardah* in addition to the above-mentioned reason of convenience. The first emerges from the role of social and religious reformist organizations such as the Kerala Nadwatul Mujahideen. The second is the growing sense of marginalization and insecurity of the Muslims as a minority community due to rising Hindu chauvinistic nationalism. This is particularly obvious in northern parts of the country, but not in Kerala. The feeling of being a threatened minority does not find fertile soil in Kerala, especially in the heavily populated Muslim areas. This is why I will focus more on the role of reformist organizations in the “religious marketing” of the *pardah*.

Reformists and their obsession with the body

Since the early nineteenth century, reformist movements started appearing in Kerala in different communities. For the Muslim community, reformist organizations emerged in the early twentieth century after the Malabar Rebellion when religious leaders (*ulema*) started facing the deteriorated conditions of Muslims particularly in the educational field. Apart from Nadwatul Mujahideen, or the *Islahi* (Reformist) Movement in Kerala, *Jamaati Islami- i-hind's* Kerala chapter is gaining increasing ground in the social spectrum. In addition to educational and economic uplifting of the community, these reformists assumed a role of the responsibility in policing women's moral conduct. They considered themselves responsible in front of

⁸The *Tablighi Jama'at* is one of the several Muslim organizations in India that has an international network and is basically focusing on preaching and proselytizing principles of Islam. For more information on this organization, see: Sikand, Y. (2002). *The Origins and Development of the Tablighi Jama'at (1920-2000): A cross-country comparative study*. New Delhi: Orient Longman.

God, not just to educate women and be financially responsible for them, but also to ensure their decency and their compliance with their own version of divine rules of decency. In an article published in the Jamaati Islami Women's wing magazine (Aaraaman), the editor had referred to *pardah* as “a modern dress for moral women” (Basheer 2002).

Interestingly, not only Muslim women were subject of this mentality, but all Malayalee women in general (the upper caste Namboodiri Brahmins or the lower caste Ezhavas). Devika and Husain (2010) share my opinion by calling this process ‘re-forming women.’ They point to two constant and contemporary pressures on Muslim women in Kerala: the pressure on the young woman to “conform to norms of dressing found desirable by certain elements claiming to represent community interest”, and the pressure of the threat to life in some cases.⁹

A great paradox of the reformist agenda appears. Not only do the reformist ulema allow women to go to mosques, but they also encourage them to do so, unlike the prevalent and dominant attitude of the Sufi (called Sunni in Kerala) trend to ban women from entering mosques. Mujahids and Jamaati Islami reformers stress on education for girls and

women (both secular and religious). Their social, cultural and educational activities are always intermingled (both sexes are in same classrooms and same conference venues) without any physical barrier separating them. Girls are given spaces to voice their opinions through GIO (the Jamaati Islami Girls Islamic Organization) and MGM (The Mujahid Girls Movement). However, all this is performed while a strict dress code is being inscribed. Choosing what to teach, choosing which experience to write about, and choosing whom to talk about are all in the hands of men (especially through media). It was interesting for me to see that the role of women in anti-colonial struggles of the Arab world was totally invisible in any of the publications, curricula, and topics of research (many girls had the same topic of studying Bint Alshati',¹⁰ but none dealing with political feminist figures). There was a perplexing and noticeable gap between women's roles in the Middle East in deploying charity organizations as spaces for assertion of their public role, and the nonexistence of this in a developed state like Kerala. GIO and MGM's activities remain limited to a great extent and ends with the marriage of students.

⁹ By showing the In the case of Rayana (a Muslim college student in her twenties who received death threats in 2010 to shift to wearing the *pardah*), Devika and Hussain (2010) explain how it was obvious that there was inadequate support from media, religious and feminist organizations, as well as the police to seriously condemn the pressure to conformity.

¹⁰ Bint alshati' (the Arabic for the Daughter of the Riverbank) was the pen name used by one of the most famous Arabic literary figures. Her real name was Ayesha Abd El-Rahman and she was an Egyptian writer who lived from 1913 until 1998. She specialized in writing the biographies of early Muslim women.

Of the established social realities in Kerala are the hurdles put in the path of a married Muslim woman inhibiting her from venturing into public action affairs (with few individual exceptions).

Despite the high index of human development that Kerala witnesses and the advanced progress the Muslim-dominated district records, another gender paradox remains. Educated and employed women are strong victims of violence (whether physical through sexual harassment or getting threat letters, or symbolic through rumors). They easily become victims of individuation, stress and depression (mental illnesses). Individuation is a serious problem that resulted from education (Devika & Mukherjee 2007). No matter how the society tried to solve this problem through molding girls' minds into the utter belief of their indispensable domestic function; they end up suffering from depression. The role of reformist organizations enters in the dynamics by offering a public space through which these individuated spaces of seclusion could be overcome. However, this space is controlled by the adherence to the *pardah* as a code of entry.

Discourses on *Pardah* (Secularists versus Islamists) versus what women *themselves* say

The increasing appearance of *pardah* in Kerala's public spaces triggered an incredible volume of debate within the Malayalee society. These debates emerge on a spectrum encompassing the

liberal secularists on the one hand, and the Islamist Secularists¹¹ on the other. Women as subaltern individuals or agents remain somehow outside this spectrum. The dilemma that this classification poses is being trapped in reductionist analysis of the reality of *pardah* in Kerala. The liberal secularist intellectuals perceive it as an enforced adoption of an alien Arab oppressive tool and thus a threat to the communally harmonious nature of Kerala, while the Islamists perceive it as an indicative expression of freedom of belief and practice guaranteed by the Indian Constitution. Both interpretations ignore the perspective of women either as agents or as subjects to the phenomenon.

Some intellectuals who do not align themselves in any exclusive category signaled their concern over the increasing critique of *pardah* since it might be strongly related to Hindu nationalistic forces. They often exclaim as to why only Muslim women appear as subjects of contention in media. In a family magazine published by the Mujahid organization, the following comment was noted in one of the letters of readers as a response to an article on *pardah*. In his letter, titled "Should

¹¹ Since the Islamists emphasize secularism as a domain giving them freedom to work and thus opting for it as an ideal system, it would be unfair and contextually incorrect to override their opinion by juxtaposing them against the Liberals. Mainstream theorization on this matter portray Islamists as inherently anti-secular forces, whereas liberals as carrying the secularist torch. For matters of precision, I decided to refer to both as secularists.

we fear *pardah*?" he ridiculed modern dresses showing the body and the women who wear them. According to him, people have no problem if Sister Maria (any Christian lady) or Devi Kumari (any Hindu Lady) wears *pardah* or any dress. People have a problem only when one Khadija wears it (Putare 2011).

Haraway (1998) and the feminist standpoint of situated knowledge affirm the need to avoid a doctrine of transcendence-based objectivity or a theory of "innocent powers" and instead to seek "an earth wide network of connections, including the ability partially to translate knowledge among very different- and power-differentiated communities" (580). To Haraway, the position of the subjugated is preferred because they promise more "adequate, sustained, objective, transforming accounts of the world" (584). Hence, power and resistance need not operate exclusively in dualistic forms. Domination is always attributed to a distinction between persuading and coercing, as Mitchell (1990) argues, and this dualistic conception fails to capture several analytic aspects. I see it most fitting to apply this logic to the debates on *pardah*. The emergence of the trend of *pardah* is not about women being forced to adopt it, but it is more complicated. *Pardah* spreading is about a trend that acquired a wide base of legitimacy. On the one hand there is the authority of the *ulema*, which acts as the power that persuades the Muslim mind (both male and female) of the requirement of the *pardah*. On

the other hand, there is the wealth and luxurious lifestyles of the Gulf Arabs convincing the female of being modern, fashionable and prosperous.



Figure: Malayalam newspaper advertising of *pardah* shop depicting the Muslim woman as a modern one.
Source: From Author's collection.

When interviewing students, it was obvious that their recourse to *pardah* comes out of it being the school or college uniform, but they will hardly wear it in any non-school related activity. As for school teachers, interestingly, they also had to abide by a certain dress code, in some schools it was exclusively the *pardah*, and

in other schools, some teachers told me that the churidaar was banned and that only sarees with an overcoat or pardah were permitted as the uniform.

One day I went to a municipality in Kerala with a predominantly Muslim population, and I interviewed a middle-class Muslim lawyer. I had lunch with his family in his house, which was another big mansion (his father lived all his life in Saudi Arabia). His wife, who was also a lawyer, was wearing a half sleeved suit and not covering her hair. I enquired if this was her normal dressing style. She told me that she had come originally from Trivandrum, and that there was no culture of *pardah* or covering the hair over there. But when she went to work where she was living, then she was compelled to wear a *saree* and use its end to cover her head. With a sarcastic smile on her face, she told me: “Otherwise, I just wear half sleeves like now and look like a Hindu. But I do not mind it.”

One of the novelties about the Keralite case, in my opinion, is that the decision to conform should be seen as a rational decision in many cases. Weighing the consequences of nonconformity to the *pardah* as a moral dress would only mean more contentions, whereas the conformity leads women, especially those belonging to orthodox families, to spaces otherwise denied to them. Education and work, classically seen as women-free zones, became zones in which a woman can appear and intermingle with the other sex freely as long as

she is conforming to the uniform of the *pardah*. In addition to this, *pardah* signifies upward mobility, and especially in a caste-based society, affluence is linked to the desire to be fashionable. Thus, the decision to wear a *pardah* is not just about conformity, but also about being fashion-blinded and desiring to be looked to as a higher class person. Here it should be noted that although caste and class are profoundly linked, they are not identical social categories.

There is also an interesting fascination with the black color; some would attribute it to being modest, and thus avoiding flamboyant colors. However, my ethnographic work revealed that this fascination is not restricted to the Gulf-imported *pardah* color, but also when it came to henna that women apply to their hands. Black not only makes you look fashionable (because it is related to the Gulf), but also white, meaning not so dark-skinned (because of the perception that white skin is more beautiful and thus there is some contrast once black is worn or applied to one's hands).

Gifts, from a woman to another, are usually a *pardah*, especially from those arriving from the gulf. I was also told that when someone brings some fabric to a tailor to be stitched into a simple *pardah*, the tailor would charge more, although logically it is easier than stitching a *salwar-qameez* suit.

Concluding remarks

There are certain factors affecting and shaping Keralite society and thus the formation of the *Pardah* cult. The first is growing consumerism as a result of Gulf migration and the aspirational values linked to a desire to mimic the affluent Gulf lifestyles. The second is the disruption of older social and individual values that happened due to Islamic reformist movements, migration and elevated standard of living. Third, the influence of media in promoting *pardah* through editorial pieces or through advertisements is easily discernible. Finally, the increasing crime rate and violence against women (Malappuram district being the highest) led women to easily adopt a dress that is perceived by everyone as a safety-inducer.

Kerala is considered to be the land of contradictions. On the one hand, it has the highest levels of literacy, human development, life expectancy, and income in India. And on the other hand, it suffers from the highest levels of alcoholism, suicide, crimes, and dowry in comparison with other states of India. The state of contradictions extends to the topic of this paper. In the Muslim dominated state district where female voters outnumber the males, and thus they determine political destinies, their lives are heavily designed by the males.

What is witnessed in Kerala is the constant regulation of the public space of freedom of choice within a secular democratic state. An interview respondent spoke to me about how

she perceives the relationship between the dress-code and freedom on the one hand, and building a model on the other hand. To her, an important question was in whose hands does legitimacy lie?

‘Why should we not follow the Arabs, but why should we follow the upper caste Hindus? The *saree* was never a south Indian dress. It is a northern Brahminical dress. We all know that the women in the south were allowed to wear only a piece of cloth from her waist onwards to the knee. So is this what we are supposed to go back to wearing?’

For her, the *saree* appeared as an imposed national dress with an upper class Hindu identity (the cream and gold embroidered handloom *saree*).¹² Resisting this enforced image of the Keralite woman was an important task in her non-religious fight against casteism. And while a girl like her was fighting the caste battle, others were fighting another identity battle, of the cultural infringement of the Saudi version of Islam on Kerala’s harmonious society. But this is one side of the story, a story often narrated by the intellectuals.

What this paper seeks to demonstrate is the everyday account of the common Malayalee woman and her position in relation to these

¹² The national image included other ornamental additions that were considered non-Muslim in the Keralite context (there was the *bindi* (which only non-Muslims apply), and the jasmine garland on the hair (which Muslims put only in their own weddings and is usually covered with the end of their *saree*).

discourses. I have sought to show how, unlike the heavily studied cases of *burqa* or *hijab* or *niqab* in the Middle East and Europe, the Keralite case is one of complexity and flexibility. The paradoxical situation resulting from the entanglement of the private sphere with the public sphere is a major factor contributing to this complexity. To some, *pardah* gives an opportunity to be fast and spontaneous and in many cases a housewife

finds in the *pardah* a tool to escape the traditional confines of class and fashion. For others, *pardah* is their access key to education and employment and while some are obliged to wear it as a uniform, they still have the option to shift to any dress of their choice.

“Hurry up, put on your *pardah* and let us go to have ice-cream,” this was a statement I often heard from the Malayalee lady I was living with. 🙄

References Cited

- Basheer, M.P. (2002). The Tribune , November 10th 2002. Retrieved from <http://www.tribuneindia.com/2002/20021110/herworld.htm#1>
- Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dale, S. F. (1980). *Islamic Society on the South Asian Frontier: The Mappilas of Malabar 1498-1922*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Devika, J. and Mukherjee, A. (2007). Re-forming Women in Malayalee Modernity: A Historical Overview, in S. Mukhopadhyay, (ed.) *The Enigma of the Kerala Woman: A Failed Promise of Literacy*. New Delhi: Social Science Press, pp. 102-128.
- Devika, J. (2007). *En-gendering individuals: the language of re-forming in twentieth century Keralam*. New Delhi: Orient Longman
- Haraway, D. (1988). Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective. *Feminist Studies*, 14(3):575-599, p.580
- Hussain, S., & Devika, J. (2010, September 10). *Dressing and Death-Threats in Kerala : Re-former Man's Second Coming?* Retrieved February 15, 2011, from Kafila <http://kafila.org/2010/09/10/dressing-and-death-threats-in-kerala-re-former-man%E2%80%99s-second-coming/>
- Iype, G. (2004, September 15). *Behind the Veil*. Retrieved September 02, 2011, from Rediff: <http://ia.rediff.com/news/2004/sep/15igi.htm>
- Jones, K.W. (1989). *Social-religious reform movements in British India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Karassery, M.N. 1995. "Arabic Malayalam", in A.A. Engineer (ed.) *Kerala Muslims: A Historical Perspective*, (pp.168-173). New Delhi: Ajanta Publications.
- Kertzner, D.I. (1988). *Rituals, Politics and Power*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Kunju, A.P.I. (1989). *Mappila Muslims of Kerala*. Trivandurum: Sandhya Publications.
- Kurup, K. N. (2006). *The Legacy of Islam (Kerala). A Study of the Mappilas of Kerala*. Kannur: Samayam Publications.
- Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The Production of Space*. (D. Niholson-Smith, Trans.) Oxford: Blackwell.
- Mitchell, T. (1990). Everyday Metaphors of Power. *Theory and Society*, 19(5): 545-577.
- Osella, C., & Osella, F. (2007). Muslim Style in South India. *Fashion Theory*, 11(2/3): 1-20.
- Padanna, A. (2011, July 19). *UAE to open consulate in Kerala in a year*. Retrieved September 02, 2011, from The Gulf Today: <http://gulftoday.ae/portal/9bed3109-9e2b-4aed-a93d-6a91bcb2c916.aspx>
- Putare* magazine, January 2011 (In Malayalam).
- Zachariah, K., & Rajan, I. S. (2007, December). *Migration, Remittances and Employment: Short-term Trends and Long-term Implications, working paper 395*. Retrieved December 01, 2010, from Centre for Development Studies: http://cds.edu/download_files/wp395.pdf