

THE PERSONAL, POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS: TRIPLE CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE RHETORIC OF MUSLIM WOMEN IN KERALA

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1. INTRODUCTION

Rahmathunnissa A., the Vice President of the Jamaat E Islami Women's wing, made a thought-provoking statement at the Muslim Women's Colloquium held in Calicut, Kerala, on February 25, 2017. She said, "There is no problem with lipstick under the burqa. But one has to brush their teeth before putting on lipstick," (Gokerala Gio, 2017,0:12:54-0:13:20). This remark was a take on the complex issue of Muslim women's liberation. Drawing from the debates sparked by the 2016 Hindi film *Lipstick Under My Burqa*, Rahmathunnissa pointed to the pressing need for Muslim women to seek models and inspiration from within their religious tradition rather than looking towards Western counterparts. She recounted the story of Ayesha, the ten-year-old wife of Prophet Mohammed, an exemplary figure according to her who had deftly navigated both domestic and international affairs, grounded in her deep understanding of the Holy Quran.

Rahmathunnissa's rhetoric gives an insight into the triple consciousness that shapes the experience of the twenty-first-century Muslim woman in Kerala. These women frequently find themselves at the crossroads of their gendered, religious, and political identities, negotiating their space and voice within the patriarchal structures of their community. This paper attempts to delve into this complex, multifaceted consciousness that underpins the rhetoric of Muslim women in Kerala as they strive to carve out a distinct space for their concerns and aspirations. The personal, political, and religious dimensions of Muslim women's identity in Kerala are linked with each other. The rhetoric of many of these women shows a deep engagement with the ambiguous political realities of being a religious minority in India, the personal struggles of asserting their agency within a patriarchal community, and the religious imperative to align their praxis with the ideals of their faith (Kabir, 2016) Desai and Temsah (2014).

2. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE ISLAHI MOVEMENT

A brief overview of the history of the status of Muslim identity in Kerala is enough to reveal that the Muslim reformation in Kerala, which began in the nineteenth century, was a significant movement that initiated dialogues on the position and education of Muslim women. Leaders including Sana Ulla Makti Thangal, Chaliyakath Kunjahammad Haji, and Vakkom Moulavi played a pivotal role in shaping public opinion on the importance of Muslim women's education. They sought to ensure the community's return to the core tenets of Islam, free from any polytheistic or superstitious practices. This reform movement, which was termed the Islahi movement, aimed to cleanse the community from within and ensure Muslim political participation in Kerala, which was already vibrating with echoes of a social renaissance. The Islahi movement was a transformative initiative that sought to empower Muslim women through religious education and discourse. The movement aimed to liberate the community from harmful cultural practices and encourage women to play a more active role in the public and religious spheres by emphasising a return to the fundamental principles of Islam. This marked a significant shift in the status and agency of Muslim women in Kerala, paving the way for their increased participation in the social, political, and religious life of the region.

Interestingly, the Islahi movement predated the mainstream Reformation movement in Kerala, as it had already initiated the process of empowering Muslim women through religious education. This was akin to the "engendering" project of the Reformation in Kerala, as described by J. Devika (2007), where the goal was to educate and politicise women, making them the "rulers" within the domestic sphere, nurturing a new generation and supporting men in their reformation efforts (p. 313).

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However, B.S. Sherin (2011), in her dissertation on "Islam and Women in Kerala" highlights how the contemporary debates on Kerala Muslim women have often been distorted, merging into the Islamophobic discourses of neo-imperialism that portray Muslim women as passive victims of their religion and culture. Contrary to this narrative, Sherin argues that the celebrated Kerala Renaissance had largely overlooked the significant role played by Muslim women in the public, literary, and cultural life of the state, silencing their participation and leadership. Sherin's work brings to light the agency and active contributions of Kerala's Muslim women, challenging the reductive caricature of them as oppressed and voiceless. The need to recognize the multifaceted roles of Muslim women is a complex process which requires a nuanced understanding of their religious, cultural, and political identities throughout Kerala's history.

The early twentieth century saw the emergence of a vibrant female rhetorical tradition in Kerala. The active involvement of Muslim women like Nafeesath Beevi, Haleema Beevi, Begum T.C. Kunjachumma, and Beefathima, who were writers as well as political activists is, in fact, a forgotten page in history. Notwithstanding their future shift instances, these women played a significant role in shaping the public discourse and advocating for the rights of Muslim women in Kerala during this period. Over time, there was a gradual shift in the focus of these women, as they transitioned from political engagements to religious discourses, as evidenced by Haleema Beevi's article about the entry of Muslim women into the traditionally male-dominated arena of religious speeches (Sherin, 2011, 196-202). This transition reflected the different complexities and socio-political necessities in which these women were mired and their struggle to carve out a distinct space for their concerns and aspirations within the Kerala Muslim community.

3. THE PATRIARCHAL MALE RHETORIC

This new identity formation had to be accentuated by creating rhetoric grounded in the Holy Quran while incorporating necessary changes to adapt to the new situations. Rhetoric has been at the centre of such an identity formation, especially with the various strands of reformist rhetoric, including the Tablighi Jamaat, Jamaat e Islami, and Mujahid movements, which are thriving in Kerala. Thereby, the female body and sexuality became the locus of reformatory possibilities sought after in Islamic sermons. Thus, in many Islamic sermons, the female body is a docile body to be patronised and channelised to the needs of an institutionalised patriarchal family. Noushad Baqavi, a popular Sunni speaker in Kerala, in one of his sermons, elicits the qualities expected of a good wife'; he says a wife who fears "rabb" (Almighty) is the ideal and elaborates on the qualities of such a wife. Such a wife is strong enough to sell herself to treat her sick husband (AM Noushad Baqavi, 2017, 0:02:55-0:05:00). Yet another argument for a rule-bound Quranic life in this world is the reward offered in the after-life: the refurbishment of youth and virility for men, along with the accessibility of beautiful women in heaven for their "use" (Malayalam Islamic Speech, 2017, 0:03:40-0:07:00). Women, being seductive by nature, are agents of "Sheitan"(the devil) (Halal Islam Only, 2017, 0:4:30-0:8:00). Thus, it is the duty of the Muslim male to regulate his woman through instilling Islamic values.

E. P. Abubacker Al Qasimi, a prominent Sunni speaker in Kerala, frequently delivers speeches that emphasise the control and regulation of male and female sexuality as espoused by the Quran (Yousuf, 2016). Many of his sermons are particularly popular among male audiences, owing to their "titillating" presentation, rhythmic tone, and sensual imagery. Ironically, his narration provides an objectified, sexualized view of women that he condemns as un-Islamic (EP Abubacker Al Qasimi Speeches, 2018, 0:02:00-0:03:15). Abubacker's speeches reveal the deeply ingrained sexism and fallacies inherent in much of the orthodox religious rhetoric surrounding gender.

Similarly, Hameed Yaseen Juhri, another influential speaker, dedicates a speech titled "Loving Wife" to elaborating on the duties expected of a Muslim wife. These include strict adherence to modesty and chastity, as well as her primary roles as a homemaker and mother. Crucially, Juhri emphasises that the wife's most important purpose is to serve as a means to the husband's well-being and reward in the afterlife (Islamic Speech Media, 2016). By emphasising the wife's subservient role and prioritising the husband's spiritual and physical needs over the wife's autonomy and self-actualization, Juhri's rhetoric reinforces a deeply patriarchal and oppressive vision of gender relations within Islam. These examples

further illustrate the complex, often contradictory, and contested nature of religious rhetoric surrounding Muslim women's position, identity, and agency in Kerala.

4. FALLACIES IN THE MALE “ULAMA” DISCOURSE.

These sermons, delivered by influential male religious figures, demonstrate how the rhetoric of Muslim reformist movements in Kerala has often relied on a narrow and regressive interpretation of gender roles and women's status within the religion. While these speakers may claim to be returning to the "true" principles of Islam, their rhetoric betrays a profound disconnect from the egalitarian spirit and liberatory potential of the Quranic worldview. A closer look presents a nuanced and critical examination of the rhetoric surrounding Muslim women's identities and roles in Kerala. However, it also exposes several logical fallacies in the arguments made by some influential male religious speakers.

The appeal to tradition or the "golden age" fallacy is rampant in many speeches. Several speakers, such as Noushad Baqavi and Hameed Yaseen Jouhri, invoke an idealised, historical view of the "proper" role of Muslim women, pointing to their subservience to men and prioritising their duties as homemakers and mothers. This is done in ignorance of the complex and evolving nature of gender relations within Islamic history and tradition. Another fallacy is the fallacy of false dichotomy by speakers like M.M. Akbar, who claims that Islam promotes "complementary cooperation" between the sexes rather than true gender equality. This oversimplifies a complex issue and fails to acknowledge the diversity of interpretations and experiences within the Muslim community.

Some speakers like Abubacker Al Qasimi make broad, negative claims about the nature of women and their "seductive" qualities. These hasty generalisations are then used to justify the control and regulation of female sexuality. This represents an oversimplified and biased view of women's inherent characteristics. Furthermore, the rhetoric of these male religious figures often exhibits strong appeals to emotion using sensual imagery and "titillating" presentations of man-woman intimacy to elicit a particular kind of response from their predominantly male audiences. This underscores the deep-seated sexism and objectification of women within much of the orthodox religious discourse. These logical fallacies inherent in the rhetoric of these influential male speakers highlight the need for a more self-reflective approach to understanding the complex identities and experiences of Muslim women in Kerala.

In contrast, M. M. Akbar, a Salafi/Mujahid speaker, takes a seemingly more progressive stance. He cites the fourth chapter of the Quran, titled "Women in Islam," as evidence of the inherent egalitarianism of Islam in terms of gender relations (Primshadpv, 2009, part 1 0:06:32-0:09:17). However, despite claiming that Islam does not permit the objectification of women, Akbar asserts that a woman's beauty is the exclusive property of her husband, to be protected by him. He accuses the consumerist Western culture and media of misinterpreting Islam, which he believes promotes not gender equality but rather complementary cooperation between the sexes.

These examples illustrate the complex, often contradictory, and contested nature of religious rhetoric surrounding Muslim women's position, identity, and agency. In a country where Islam is a minority religion, such patriarchal discourses tend to aid the parochial view of the majoritarian community that Islam is an out-and-out patriarchal religion which gives no freedom to its women. The rhetoric of contemporary Muslim women in Kerala must be understood within this historical context. They find themselves in a unique position, where they are required to negotiate their religious identity and political aspirations within the larger landscape of India's secularism and the communal politics that have shaped the state's socio-political discourse. In reality, the Muslim woman in Kerala is far from being just a passive recipient of the community's religious edicts or the state's political manoeuvrings. Rather, she emerges as an active agent, who consciously and critically engages with both her religious tradition and the political reality that defines her existence. This is evident in the work of organisations like the Jamaat-e-Islami Hind's women's wing, which has played a significant role in mobilising Kerala's Muslim women to assert their rights and forge a collective voice. This is not to forget the pitfalls in many policies and questions regarding political correctness from the very same women's wing. These women activists have more or less skillfully traversed the hard terrain of religious

interpretation and political negotiation, simultaneously challenging the patriarchal structures within their community while also navigating the dynamics of India's secular, democratic framework.

5. RHETORIC OF MUSLIM WOMEN

Given this, rhetoric being a field dominated by males, the visibility of at least some women is indeed a great change. This was precipitated by the activist rhetoric in Islam, mostly on the podiums of organisations like Mujahid, Jamaat e Islami and Quran Sunnath Society. While it has to be borne in mind that women are still not allowed entry into many mosques. In Kerala, the most popular women speakers include Ayesha Cherumukku, K. Jamida, Aysha Sajna, and a host of others who speak at various women's conferences. The reasons behind this inclusion are manifold. Most prominently, there is a need for presenting Muslim women as defences against the allegations raised against the religion as an out-and-out misogynistic and oppressive religion. Thus, the women speakers encounter a triple challenge. Firstly, the challenge of interrogating the patriarchal Ulama, secondly, of questioning the Western stereotyping regarding gender oppression in Islam and thirdly, of disagreeing with the secular feminists in India who dream of gender equity beyond religion. However, it cannot be assumed that they are a homogenous group. For example, Jamida who had been a vociferous speaker for the Quran Sunnath Society is considered 'un-Islamic' by the rest of the Islamic groups. She became the first Muslim woman to lead a prayer in Kerala on 26 January 2018, following Amina Wadud's similar act in 2005.

Ayesha Cherumukku, a Mujahid female orator narrates the history of Muslim women bound within the four walls of their kitchens and the role of Islahi (reformatory) movements in helping her wage a war against the domineering tendencies of patriarchs (Hidaya Multimedia Official, 2017). For her, it is the duty and moral responsibility of women to guard the Islamic values inside the family and transform the society (Barakkath Manu, 2015, 0:02:36-0:06:17). However, the gender equation within Mujahid is approached sceptically by critics who say that educated women"- by which Mujahids generally intend women with high school matriculation plus basic religious (madrassa) qualifications envisaged as the prop for the family as a whole, fostering religious morality and promoting the education of the children. (Osella & Osella, 2007, 329)

Jamaat e Islami (Hind) Kerala, another prominent sect in Kerala also projects as their objective the education and public participation of women. Notwithstanding its allegiance to the restrictive Maududian stand regarding women's position in Islam, the later followers have checked Maududi's concept of 'neo patriarchy' and have heralded women into the public sphere (Ahmad, 2008). As a result, the women's wing of JIH plays an active role in organising seminars, debates and colloquiums. It has also attempted to solidify its political visibility in recent years. It is important to note that there has been gradual but consistent progress in their struggles.

While Jamaat-e-Islami, Kerala claims to promote the education and public participation of women, its adherence to the restrictive Maududian doctrine regarding women's position in Islam is concerning. Despite the organisation's efforts to involve women, its foundational beliefs and structures remain deeply patriarchal. Critics argue that the Jamaat's concept of "neopatriarchy" continues to limit women's agency and autonomy, even as it attempts to present a more progressive image. The women's wing of JIH may organise seminars and debates, but their political visibility and influence within the male-dominated organisation remain constrained. Overall, the Jamaat's rhetoric of empowerment for women is undermined by its unwavering commitment to a conservative interpretation of Islamic principles that perpetuates gender inequality.

Nevertheless, in the female Islamic rhetoric, there is a glorification of the ideal past and an unwarranted assertion that the complete solution to the dilemma of the twenty-first-century Muslim woman is in the scriptures itself. Though they argue for a revival of in-depth analysis of the Quran and celebrate Islam as a pro-woman religion, the issues concerning gender equality are addressed only at the peripheral or superficial level. Their rhetoric lacks self-reflexivity and is at the most defences or justifications of their relative positions (Srividya 2019).

Most of these female religious discourses adhere to the crucial duty of the Islamic woman, the divine duty of a "mother" leading her spouse and her children towards heaven. (D4 Media Online,

2016,0:6:40). In addition, Amina Anwariya in her speech, illustrates the obligatory qualities of a Muslim wife: obedience and the imperative duty of guarding herself from other men. As opposed to the emulative male rhetoric, some other speakers pose questions about the position and perspective of Muslim women in the modern world. Ruksana, another strident woman speaker, reiterates the need for a veil. It is significant for Muslim women to have solid stands to tackle the questions thrown at Islam by other religions in the name of veil, polygamy, purdah etc. She also points out that a deeper study and interpretation of Islam has to come from the Muslim women themselves (Vanitha Sammelanam Qatar, 2017). These women speakers expose the political gaming behind the secular paradigms of freedom and human rights. They emphasise the need to uphold Islamic values to expose the hypocrisy of the discourse of rights of the Muslim women problematized by speakers outside Islam. The stereotypical notions associated with the Muslim woman are thus interrogated by these Muslim speakers. The foremost challenge, then, for these female orators is to fight the enemy outside their religion. Much of the public address stresses that aspect. Sylvia Vatuk (2008) notes in this connection: Muslim women activists involved in advocating for their rights frequently face the challenge of defending themselves against both overt attacks and more subtle, insidious insinuations from religious leaders and members of the wider community, including their own families. The activities they engage in often prevent them from strictly adhering to orthodox standards of seclusion and Islamic femininity. They are also vulnerable to criticism for prioritising their interests as women over the community's need to present a united front against the prevalent communal forces in society. Additionally, since numerous Indian women's NGOs heavily depend on funding from foreign aid agencies, they are sometimes viewed with suspicion on that front.

As a result, the rhetoric of these Muslim women often takes the form of a "triple consciousness" (Vatuk, 2007). They must carefully balance their aspirations and rights as women with the demands of their religious and cultural identity, as well as the political realities they face as members of a minority community in India. This "triple consciousness" requires constant negotiation and renegotiation of their position, as they seek to carve out a space for themselves within the confines of their faith, while also challenging traditional power structures and societal norms. It is a delicate balancing act, in which the personal, the political and the religious merge, but one that these Muslim women activists have embraced in their pursuit of greater equality and representation within their communities and the broader society.

6. THE CRITICAL INSIDERS

In the contemporary context, Muslim women in Kerala have become vocal advocates for their rights, both within their community and in the broader political landscape. The rise of Islamic feminism in India has empowered these women to challenge patriarchal interpretations of Islamic teachings and assert their rightful place within the faith. (Vatuk, 2007) As Zakia Soman, the founding member of Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan, has stated, "We are not against Islam. We are against the patriarchal interpretation of Islam" (Harel-Shalev, 2013). The contemporary debates around women's rights are filtered through an international perspective on gender equality and human rights discourse. Re-interpretations of religious texts of Islam are done by activists and scholars, much to the ire of the traditionalists. Nevertheless, the international trends influence the national and local opinions leading to discussions around legal approaches and revisions in Islamic law, especially, concerning marriage, divorce, property rights and inheritance.

Another significant development was the case of Haritha, a female student wing, which was formed in 2012 to provide a space for female students in Kerala to organise. However, its participation in electoral politics was limited as it was part of the male-dominated Muslim Students Federation (MSF). This led to tensions when the parent body Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) and the MSF interfered in Haritha's affairs. The Haritha state leadership faced discrimination and character assassination from MSF leaders, leading them to seek justice from the state Women's Commission, which resulted in the dismissal of the Haritha state body. The young women of Haritha, belonging to Gen Z, brought a new set of values and sensibility into campus politics, using the female-only space

to cultivate a spirit of sorority, which could have been a possibility in the male-dominated student politics of Kerala. Ashley notes:

One of the campaigns that Haritha ran in its initial years was “All Spaces are Ours Too”, a definitive feminist claim. They took up the IUML notion of “honourable existence” and refilled it with the social context of gender and in that, they liberated the women who were made visible in the communitarian debate, not just in the Muslim community but across communities of Kerala. (SabrangIndia)

The Forum for Muslim Women's Gender Justice, a prominent advocacy group, organised a groundbreaking state-level meeting in Kerala's Kozhikode on Sunday, March 12. The objective was to mobilise public opinion on the pressing need for gender equality in Muslim personal laws. Critiquing the Muslim Personal Law Application Act 1937 as archaic and deeply discriminatory towards women, the FMWGJ forcefully demanded legal reforms to grant Muslim women equal inheritance rights to property. This was a landmark event, being the first of its kind in the state, organised exclusively for and by Muslim women. The meeting was attended by over 1,000 Muslim women hailing from different parts of Kerala, as well as Muslim scholars, imams, and representatives from various religious and community organisations (Sukanya S. & Vidya S. 2023). This gathering represents a significant step forward in the struggle for Muslim women's rights, as they assert their agency and amplify their voices to challenge the patriarchal structures and outdated laws that have long subjugated them within their faith and community.

The forum argued that the current Muslim Personal Law being practised in India is entirely against the core teachings and principles of the Quran. The personal laws must be revised and reformed to fully incorporate the humanism, equality, and justice that are envisaged in the tenets of Islam. Such progressive changes and legal reforms have already taken place in many Muslim-majority countries around the world, but the conservative clergy in India have been persistently resisting and opposing such demands for much-needed reforms to personal laws. The rights and dignity of Muslim women must be upheld under the true spirit and teachings of the Quran. Suhra, the organiser, says:

There is severe discrimination in Muslim Personal Law in managing property and money, which is an integral part of women's existence. The Muslim Succession Act relegates women to second-class citizenship by giving them half the rights enjoyed by men.

The burden of making the wisest choice finds expression in some conferences of the Student's Islamic Organization, a feeder organisation of Jamaat e Islami (Hind), Kerala. As critical insiders within Islam, they express their double bind sometimes with much conviction and sometimes with a lot of hesitation. Certain questions tend to repeat themselves on such podiums. They include interrogations about the place of women in the Quranic point of justice, the question of power positions eluding Muslim women, and the methods of overcoming stereotypical portrayal of women in Islam. What must be the political stand of the Muslim woman especially in the wake of Muslim minority rights? How can the gender debates be opened up without compromising Islam and the minority cause? Speakers like Najjiya P. P. and Marva anxiously bring forward such critical questions inside these platforms. (SIO Kerala, 2016; Giokerala Gio, 2017)

Marva also discusses the incapacity of the feminist movement to fully address and include the unique challenges and concerns faced by Muslim women, thus inadvertently alienating them from the broader feminist movement and leading to disengagement between Muslim women and the feminist discourse. She highlights the need for the feminist movement to be more inclusive and intersectional, acknowledging the intersections of gender, religion, and minority status that shape the experiences of Muslim women. As Rajan (2011) observes: the truth is that -as happened in the Hindu community a century earlier and continues to this day, the extremist Muslim voices are more clear-headed than the moderate ones. After all, in a growing anti-Muslim sentiment in India and the Western world, it is very difficult for the moderates to succumb to the rhetoric that they are 'anti-Muslim' and 'anti-tradition'. As happened in the Rakhmabhai case, the Muslim moderates today aim to look for the "correct" interpretation of religious texts or to reform the Shariat, rather than to adopt a straight-forward gender-sensitive position. (165)

The Muslim women are forced "to confront a triple consciousness" - a complex interplay of their political, religious, and gendered identities. Nevertheless, the rhetoric of these critical insiders stands apart from the male ulama rhetoric in its multiplicity and a concerted move towards honest "Ijtihad" (independent reasoning) in reframing gender debates. Rahmatunnisa's voice rings loud like scores of Muslim women who dream of a free existence within the bounds ascribed by their religion. This evolution of the Muslim woman as a political subject, despite the shortcomings and challenges, is a laudable event in the history of the emancipation of women and has thrown open a space for a revival of the epistemic rhetorical tradition inherent in Islam in Kerala. This represents a significant shift, as these women assert their agency and autonomy in navigating the complex terrain of faith, culture, and gender, carving out a unique rhetorical space that challenges traditional power structures and redefines the boundaries of acceptable discourse.

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