

## **Beginnings of Gender Discourses in Modern Keralam: Revisiting Early Women's Magazines**

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Gender has been a buzzword of the 21st century. Gender, another word for sexual difference, a column that asked one to spell out if you are a male or female, has become a term loaded with meanings in the contemporary world. Despite differing opinions on how gender is understood, contemporary critical theory has identified gender as one of the fundamental organizing principles around which social life is shaped. Biology as the final destination in connection with gender identity was questioned in the 1980s by Judith Butler, who took cues from earlier feminists like Simone de Beauvoir and Monique Wittig and suggested that women are an imagined group. Concepts like femininity and masculinity, which were until then considered as decided only by biology, were interrogated and found as contingent categories. The performative and socio-cultural aspects of gender proposed by Butler changed the way we look at the category gender and issues pertaining to it (Butler, *Gender Trouble*). However, old norms and prejudices too exist along with these new propositions, asserting themselves and finding newer ways to sell older essences in new bottles. Therefore, the contemporary world witnesses and bears the anxieties of a gendered society while also producing discourses on gender neutrality and postgenderism. Nivedita Menon explains the paradoxical ways in which gender is used in India. She looks at how on the one hand, it has challenged the notion of woman as a category and how it gets more

regressively used as a synonym for woman in state developmental projects on the other hand (Menon 94).

Early women's magazines mark an important phase in the history of women's writing, feminist movement, and modern gender formations. These magazines are probably the first organized documentations on beginnings of modern family, division of labour based on sex, women's education, and so on in a colony. The last decades of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century witnessed an explosion in women's magazines in the major languages spoken in the Indian subcontinent. Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha, in their landmark work *Women Writing in India* (1991), identify the period as "a high point of women's journalism" (xviii). They note that in the regional languages, women edited magazines for women. This trend across languages was generally the result of the projects of colonial modernity and reformist movements.

Curiously, many of the early women's magazines in Keralam were initially edited and published by men. This changed subsequently as magazines were launched by women editors and publishers, many of whom had benefitted from the colonial education system. These editors were mainly first-generation scholars from the upwardly mobile castes. The complex social formations resulting from colonial rule, English education, the rise of print media and press, the freedom struggle and the reformations that oscillated between tradition and modernity had urged women to rethink their position in society. The early women's magazines from Keralam reflected this cultural turn, critiquing hierarchical relations of authority between women and men that had historically functioned to the disadvantage of women. This rethinking and redefining delineated the social domains, bringing in notions of domesticity, social and sexual contracts and also reflected the enhanced public role of women. The nationalist as well as socialist interventions which deliberated freedom,

democracy and civic roles further complicated the responsibilities of women at home and in the world.

Malayalam had journals from 1840s onwards brought out by missionaries, social reformers and others. However, women's magazines started appearing in Malayalam only towards the last decade of the 19th century and flourished through the first three decades of the 20th century. Most economically and socially privileged communities which came to the fore during this period had their own women's magazines. Several magazines such as *Keraliyasugunabodhini* (1886), *Sarada* (1904), *Lakshmibai* (1905), *Mahilaratnam* (1916), *Mahila* (1921), *Sahodari* (1925), *Mahilamandiram* (1927), *Malayalamanika* (1931), and *Stree* (1933) were in circulation during this period. The early women's magazines covered topics like women's education, civic rights, leisure, culinary skills, beauty, health and hygiene, motherhood, chastity, conjugality and so on.

Early women's magazines have played a crucial role in the formation and structuring of modern gender identities and social relations. These interventions of a generation of women who stood at the crossroads of tradition and modernity tell us about the negotiations, revolts, and resistances they encountered in carving out a space for themselves. These women's magazines urged women to recast femininity, instructing them on the new social/sexual contracts and duties. Partha Chatterjee in his work "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question" points out that discourses on women's issues took a backseat in the post-independence phase. In the case of Kerala too, one can observe that women's issues were hardly discussed during this phase. As a result, these vibrant episodes of women's writing went into oblivion in the decades that followed. These forgotten episodes of women's history were revisited and researched closely only in the 1980s and 90s as part of reconstructing feminist genealogies. Pioneering works in this area have been carried out by scholars like J. Devika who explored and introduced the vastness of the field to the academic

community. Her contributions in this area were probably the first and the most significant in this regard.

As more than a hundred years separate us from the early women's magazines in Malayalam, it is essential to revisit them to understand the significant factors that have shaped the formative period of modern gender identities in Keralam. The apparent concern of these texts may be the question of femininity of a particular kind with certain social and economic privileges. Nevertheless, it is clear that any gender for that matter exists only in the context of a whole structure of gender relations as R. W. Connell puts it (30). Since gender identities cannot be understood in isolation, these texts also act as significant moments in the way femininities, masculinities and other forms of gendered identities were imagined and formed during this period. A revisit to these sites which combined the traditional and dominant notions of gender roles with that of western notions of self and morality enables us to understand the complex ways in which gender identities are manufactured and circulated. The discourses that unfolded in the pages of the early women's magazines interrogated the ways gender identities were constituted differently in different social classes/castes/sections. It is also crucial to note that women from non-privileged sections like sexual minorities, Dalit, tribal, and others hardly figured in these discussions directly but were indirectly counterpointed as the Other. These exclusionary frames too need to be studied with serious attention. The present issue of *Samyukta* is an attempt to revisit these documents and re-view the ways these magazines imagined and advocated gender identities in Keralam.

The issue carries eight articles from scholars and researchers who have worked in this area. The first article by Teena Antony titled “An Introduction to the Early Malayalam Women's Magazines” provides an overview of the early Malayalam women's magazines and introduces some important discussions that figured in these early writings. She observes that these magazines maintained a serious tone and focused on issues related to reform and

education rather than on entertainment. This aspect sure is in stark contrast with contemporary women's magazines, which focus more on entertaining the reader within the constraints of roles and duties assigned to women. She also observes that this change from the reformatory to recreational or emancipatory to entertaining could also be due to the loss of idiosyncrasies inherent in the multiple print media scenario. This shift from print media to mass media brought profitability and marketability as the focal aspects of magazines. However, entertainment here is not seen as frivolous, but are confined to the roles assigned to women. In that sense, Teena Antony's article reflects how women's magazines of contemporary times have stopped attempting to redefine femininity but revel within the available definitions of privileged feminine roles.

The article titled “Shaping of Colonial Bodies: The Ambivalence in the Writings of Early Women's Magazines in Malayalam” by Anna Karthika looks at the ambivalence of Malayalam women's magazines of the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century in negotiating the construction of gendered colonial bodies. The article looks at how these magazines simultaneously incorporated and interrogated the colonial reform discourse and attempted to regulate the native female bodies. She argues that these writings attempt to decentre the colonial project of shaping the colonial subject and body. Thus, she proposes that, these writings have, in turn, been critical in shaping the idea of the modern body. Anna Karthika's article calls for a closer look at these discourses as to how the present codes of femininity and masculinity were formed due to conflicting yet converging tendencies of tradition and modernity. Roopa Philip's article titled “The Woman's Question: Negotiating Modernity in Early Twentieth-Century Women's Magazines in Malayalam” takes it forward by looking at how “woman” occupied a centre stage in the discourses of reform and nationalism. The cultural anxieties that resulted from social changes brought in by colonialism, nationalism and reform identified women as representatives of

home/tradition/spiritual sphere, which stood in opposition to the public sphere. Roopa Philip's analysis, however, points to varying responses of women from these times that resisted the role assigning tendencies. These responses also critiqued and mediated the cultural anxieties and limitations that marked women's roles and rights. While these early magazines and the writings which appeared in them seemed to have carved and solidified modern gender divisions, identifying these moments of resistance is essential in contesting these gendered divisions.

In the article "Contesting Sartorial Reforms: The Discourse in Colonial Malabar," Ashwini. V. attempts an exciting inquiry into the discourses of sartorial reforms in the early twentieth century Malabar and the participation of women in these discourses. Sartorial codes were one of the most apparent forms through which modernity made itself visible. She observes how *parishkaram* (reform), a by-product of colonial modernity and nationalist reform, was ridiculed and mocked while also debating the level of 'modern' influence to be acceptable in the sartorial realm. Ashwini's work indicates how women's sartorial reforms had to encounter vigorous scrutiny compared to reforms in male sartorial codes. This shows how the social roles of men and women were intended to maintain undisturbed during these processes of modernising and reform. As androgynous sartorial codes transform the contemporary fashion world, it would be interesting to go back to these discourses to see how dress code became a code for gender, sexuality, sexual orientation, class, caste and other intersectionalities.

As mentioned above, women's education was one of the thrust areas of most of the reform movements. And a majority of these reform movements also operated differently at the level of various caste communities. Sreebitha. P. V.'s article "The Question of English

and Higher Education: Early Twentieth Century Ezhava Women's Magazines in Kerala” looks at the issue of English and higher education for women, which appeared in select Ezhava women's magazines and other Thiyya and Ezhava magazines. The paper focuses on the historical aspects of prejudices against the lower castes in opening schools for them, resistances of Ezhava reformers in facilitating English and higher education to women from their community while also linking it to the contemporary discourses on English education and lower castes in India. The article also highlights the paradoxical nature of reform itself, which often resorted to applying different standards depending upon gender, caste, and class and connects it to contemporary discourses on caste and colonial education.

Whyni Gopi's article looks at the positive changes of reforms and the role played by women's magazines in doing so. She looks at select writings which appeared in *Sarada* and *Lakshmibai*, the early women magazines in Keralam, to see how these writings worked towards the reconstitution of family. Reshma P. K. 's article titled “Representation of Women Through Centuries” takes a closer look at select texts from *Mahilaratnam* (1916) and *Sahodari* (1925). She attempts to demonstrate the role of these early women's magazines in shaping the contemporary women's world by talking about issues which were not traditionally considered as women's space or sphere. Binumol Abraham's article titled “Unequal Laughter: Cartoons and Gender Stereotyping in Modern Kerala” takes these moments of social change ahead to examine cartoons and comic strips that appeared in magazines and newspapers of the late 20th century Keralam and the stereotypical and archetypal representations of women and men portrayed in cartoons. Her analysis points out that while these cartoons ridicule modern women for their fashion, life style, and preferences, men are mocked at for being 'henpecked' and for their inability to exert any power over women. The analysis and arguments that the article put forward, despite focusing

on a set of texts that belong to a later period, suggest the contradictions present within reform and its gendered nature.

The present issue and the papers included here can only be considered as an attempt to open up this large field of inquiry for further research. The contemporary Keralam has witnessed many socio-political debates and issues pertaining to gender. The break of the millennium saw a series of assertions from groups belonging to different identities which tell us about a modernity that is partial and prejudiced. Minoritarian and subaltern protests from Keralam spoke about how the past has been unfair to the marginalised. These critiques have questioned the seemingly monolithic categories of men and women and all the binaries that are built in and around the gendered identities. Local and global issues – Adivasi land struggles, environmental issues and subaltern protests, sexual harassment, violence against women and the marginalized, controversies concerning religion and women, and so much more from the socio-political sphere have problematized the way gender identities are manufactured in our society. It is also necessary to read these moments in the light of recent self/life writings from social as well as sexual minorities. As V. Geetha points out rightly in her forward to *Her-Self* (2005): “These texts are part of our feminist genealogy and need to be read as such – not as testimonies to a greater or lesser political correctness, but as part of a past that is at once local and global” (“Texts That Dazzle” xix).

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