

Shaping of Colonial Bodies: The Ambivalence in the Writings of Early Women's Magazines in Malayalam

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Abstract: Women's literary writings, particularly the women-centered magazines published in Malayalam – the local vernacular – was critical in shaping the “idea of the modern body” in the making of the colonial subject in Kerala, a coastal, peripheral southwest state in India. These magazines emerged towards the end of the nineteenth century and flourished in the early twentieth century at a time when Kerala was witnessing a constant colonial attempt to tame and regulate colonial, native female bodies. The body, especially its sexual aesthetic and desires, became precarious to the historical project of shaping the modern colonial subject. The discursive public space of these magazines interrogates the colonial reform discourse in the region, which imposed a new gender and sexual order in shaping governable subjects, publicly articulating the social relationships of colonial time and space. Thus, early women's writings in Malayalam acts as a critical tool in decentering colonial dialectics, deconstructing cultural spaces, expressing alterity, and articulating multiplicity towards the decolonization of gender.¹

Keywords: Colonial body, Malayalam, Women's Magazines, Decolonizing gender, colonial modernity

The Episteme of Colonial Body in the Decline of Matriliney

¹ Judith Butler, in a lecture-seminar session titled “Who is Afraid of “Gender”?” as part of Makerere Institute of Social Research's Global Conversations webinar held on the 29th of April, 2020, states that gender is neither “a universal theory,” nor “a category” that is continually applicable, and therefore, be understood as “a contested site.” (“Who is Afraid of “Gender”?”).

Colonial bodies have been transformed through practices, meanings, and regulations that have been altered in the historical processes through which asymmetrical categories were created by colonial encounters. A decolonized interpretation of gender would thus mean decolonization of Western, imperialist knowledge production foregrounding modern state, which manifestly grips the concept of gender. The colonial body forms a central element of this analysis to the extent that it forms a metonym questioning the Eurocentric, androcentric, racist, class-conscious bourgeois, heteronormative order of the modern liberal able-state.² While the colonial body emerges as a discernible object of control, desire, contempt, fear, and fetishism, there is an ambivalence in the vulnerability of critical consciousness through which theoretical discourse about the colonial body is perceived. In the discursive context of colonial hetero-patriarchal expectations, the colonial body is ambivalently produced in the abjection and erasure of the history of the “Othered” bodies through technologies of colonial governmentality.

The bodies that transgressed the gendered colonial discourse of power accounted for those histories of bodies, which were detached from histories of hetero/homo binary in the gender perception of imperialist sexed bodies.³ Those “historied bodies” were conceived outside of the hegemonic, heterosexual, and monogamous idea of marriage and family percepts defining the social values for sexed bodies of heterosexual women and men alone (Montrose 6).⁴ This implies criticism of “the hegemonic culture, the legal system, and the gender structure” that defines the central epistemic form of the colonial body (Ruvalcaba 2). The gendering of the colonial body, thus, forms an understanding of the *deviant* body as a subject of historical change in the cultural and political realms (2).⁵ This paper explores the inverted relation that characterized the position of women as gendered colonial bodies within the decline of the

² Colonial subjects are unequivocally gendered subjects who have their bodies enforced with a gender configuration that had to strictly comply with the heterosexual binary codes of maleness or femaleness in the gender insertion of normative male and female behaviours. The gender characterization of colonized bodies ensued disturbingly intrusive and invasive practices directed on non-normative, non-procreative, non-heterosexual, and alternate bodies and sexualities in an attempt to control sexuality, desire, and possibility.

³ Oyèrónké Oyewùmí reads historical processes in the social construction of gender, which render the “social category” of “woman” non-universal. Oyewùmí, illustrating upon the traditional Yoruba society in southwest Nigeria, recounts it was “non-gendered” and that heterosexual, gendered social categories under the colonial gaze were forcefully assigned on the native bodies (“Conceptualizing Gender”).

⁴ Decolonization of gender indorses a modern social theory of the body deconstructing the heteronormative discourse of gendered, colonial power that stresses on gender and gendering of native, colonial bodies as empire’s undeniable and concrete tool.

⁵ Emphasis added.

matrilineal system and the beginning of Malayalam women's magazines in the late-nineteenth-century propagating an idea of "ideal womanhood" in Kerala.

Women's magazines in Malayalam act as local archives accounting for their roles as sites of archival presence refuting any speculation of "conspiracy of silence" (John and Nair 1). Needless to say, these archives, mostly elapsed and seldom retrieved, acknowledge their epistemic limits of archival knowledge in recognizing the conceptual history of the colonial body as a social fact.⁶ Reading early women's magazines just as regular magazines offer limited archival hermeneutics in re-orienting the image of the colonial body. They often exhibit an ambivalent incongruity disrupting the "past" as ontological dispossession in the gender performativity of colonial bodies.⁷ This ambivalence occurs when "As Carol Gluck and Anna Tsing put it, "words - and world - are made in cosmopolitan and power-laden encounters at multiple scales.'" (D. M. Menon 65). Ambivalence in the writings of early women's magazines in Malayalam is fractured in the temporal fissure, which draws from Dilip M. Menon's argument against "the putatively regnant homogeneous, empty time of empire or nation" (66). Menon writes:

I argue that there is an immanent time *in* texts (arising from the conventions and protocols of the form, the predilections of the thinker, and imagined affinities with ideas coming from other times and places) and the historical time *of* the text. These two "presents" ceaselessly intersect: "one of which is endlessly arriving and the other is already established," as Gilles Deleuze puts it. (66)

Therefore, the textual reckoning of the category of the colonial body in these magazines unveil several epistemic registers of "one regime of historicity and one set of protocols [that] were instituted by the transfer of the Enlightenment project, which then rendered the history of the colony in terms of categories derived from European historical experience" (D. M. Menon 66). The contributions of these magazines in crafting gendered social categories thus evinces the

⁶ Anjali Arondekar has reflected upon the hostile margin of theoretical interpretations of the "absence" of the archive and the "archival desire" itself (6).

⁷ In articulating the gendered body as performative, Judith Butler affirms the "materiality of the body's sex" through a "forcible reiteration of norms" ("Bodies That Matter" 2). Butler theorized on the performance in the construction and disposition of gender as a form of social and cultural interaction ("Performative Acts and Gender Constitution").

process of what Haydée Bangerezako calls “indirect writing” where the writing of the colonized elite “adapted to the historical narratives pushed forth” by the colonizer suiting the interest of native elite men (12-14). Hence, “Treating texts as porous rather than hermetic allows us to move beyond the idea of “tradition” and “canon” to apprehend the uncanny affinities, improbable genealogies, and deep time present in the act of historical reflection,” which is significant to reading these magazines (D.M. Menon 65).

The historical project of shaping the “idea of the modern body” in the making of the colonial subject in Kerala commenced with a series of subtle moves to dismantle matrilineal households as a social structure in this region since the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century.⁸ The modern body or the colonial body is a mutable concept. In the nineteenth century, nearly fifty percent of the “Malayali population, of different castes and communities, were matrilineal (N. Menon, “Sexualities” xx).”⁹ The idea of communal property, polyandrous relationships, and matrilineal descent was considered the stagnation of a savaged past, and the patrilineal monogamous marriage assumed the character of progress defined in the exertion of control on both sexuality and fertility of native women. The “idea of the modern body” is thus constructed through the imperialist narratives of the “Other” critically inquiring the historical conjecture between colonial modernity and the gendering of colonial bodies. It evolved in Kerala in a constant colonial attempt to tame and obliterate its constitutive “Other” – history of diverse non-heteronormative imaginations of the body and excess of women’s sexuality within the history of matrilineal family kinship. The shaping of the Malayalee populace under colonial modernity signalled towards attempts to “reform the customary practices and hierarchies of particular castes” to shape “modern communities (Jeffrey, “Decline of Nair Dominance”).

The body, especially its sexual aesthetic, became precarious to the reform project of shaping the modern body/colonial subject or the “ideal woman” and “ideal man” (Devika, “The Aesthetic Woman” 460). J. Devika contends “that the formation of modern gender identities in late 19th and early 20th Century Kerala was deeply implicated in the project of shaping governable subjects who were, at the one and same time, ‘free’ and already inserted into modern

⁸ Throughout this paper, “modern body,” “colonial body” and “modern colonial body” are alternatively used to refer to the same heteronormative idea of the body which emerged historically since the nineteenth century in colonial India.

⁹ Malayali or Malayalee/Malayalees are ethno-linguistic group of people residing in the state of Kerala in India speaking the language Malayalam.

institutions” (460). This facilitated recasting matriliney in order to construct the patrilocal family as the base unit for the society of Kerala to enter into modernity. Between 1869 and 1896, the colonial state legally instituted monogamous marriage by instilling responsibility of the family on the man at the behest of native elite upper-caste Hindu men (Devika 523).¹⁰ In the aftermath of Queen Victoria’s Proclamation of 1858 on India that fetched an indirect governing system in the Indian subcontinent, the Madras High Court in 1869 declared its judicial interpretation of the customary marriage within the matrilineal kinship groups of Nair¹¹ woman as “state of concubinage and is at liberty when and as often as she pleases (Awaya 293).”¹² It was a direct colonial intervention encumbering woman’s sexual freedom informed by Henry Summer Maine’s Patriarchal theory, which detailed the legal understanding of the matrilineal family.¹³

The legal and institutional mechanisms of colonial governance did shape the shifting identity dialectic of women in Kerala.¹⁴ In this regard, the ambiguities of liberation for Malayalee women, and not their simple inclusion in the social modernization project, are now more recognized as characteristic of Malayalee modernity (Devika, “Rethinking ‘Region’” 259). The enactment of the Malabar Marriage Act in 1896 was considered to be the first and most important step in the direction of abolishing all non-monogamous, non-normative conjugal relationships in the region. It was an event that occurred amidst a Western liberal discourse of

¹⁰ See Robin Jeffrey, *Decline of Nair Dominance*.

¹¹ In the archetype of Indian caste structure, Nair/Nairs are supposedly Sudras, lowest in the caste hierarchy, but unlike the rest of India, there is considerable fluidity to Nair caste identity. To refer to Robin Jeffrey, they are (“Decline of Nair Dominance” 13):

The lords of the country, guardians of the public wealth; they wielded the distinctive privileges of the Kshatriya...these distinctive privileges...added their close bond of union with the Nambuthiri Brahmin...point to their unmistakeable pre-eminence.

Jeffrey further states that Nairs weren’t egalitarian and consisted of many sub-castes or lineages: those of ‘royalty’, of local chiefs, of the village headman, or of ‘commoners’ who acted as retainers of the first three or of Nambuthiri Brahmins (“Decline of Nair Dominance” 13-14).

¹² See Mahmood Mamdani, *Define and Rule*.

¹³ According to Praveena Kodoth, Henry Maine’s work “which set up a comparative legal perspective on evolution using Roman, Greek and Hindu law” in the nineteenth century “made it possible to move easily between Roman and Hindu law and to interpret matrilineal families in terms of the patrilineal (whether Roman or Hindu) i.e., as the archaic form of the patriarchal family in a linear evolutionist theory of society. From this it became possible to identify with the matrilineal family characteristics associated with the patriarchal family in its archaic form and matrilineal customs was interpreted in analogy with more familiar customs of patrilineal and patriarchal societies – both western and ‘Hindu’ – albeit of another time” (“Framing Custom, Directing Practices” 8).

¹⁴ Mahmood Mamdani in his work historicizes the political legacy of colonialism in the complexity of legal institutions of the colonial state in its construction of different political identities (“Citizen and Subject”).

progress, freedom, and individual identity. The introduction of the act led to an “epistemic shift” that marked “a pivotal change” where the sexual practices of Nair women became “a primary object of knowledge for the British colonial state” (Mitra 98).

Under the colonial regime, conceptual articulations by the local male, upper caste intelligentsia of notions of sexual morality not only embraced the colonizer’s perceptions of civilizing mission through disciplining the body but also popularized it as an essential component of a progressive modern society.¹⁵ Hence, the matrilineal family structure in Kerala as one of the multiple sites of colonial gaze on female bodies unravel the polemic edge into understanding the gendered categories of Eurocentric and imperialist knowledge production. This remoteness or seclusion of the body and sexuality of the “Other” reflects Edward Said’s observation of “epistemological difficulty” in the gendered distinction between “man” and “woman,” which translated itself into a sexual exchange between the “domestic” body of the woman and the “public” body of the man (Said 189; Devika, “The Aesthetic Woman” 460).

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the colonial denunciation of Indians as “degenerate and barbaric” body had become an irrefutable fact for the emerging modern educated Malayalee population, especially the elite, upper-caste, bourgeoisie, male populace like in other parts of India (Chatterjee, “Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonialized Women” 622). The privileged group in Kerala includes sections of the Nair caste in Kerala who had gained early access to modern ideas, education, and colonial institutions. They responded fiercely through extensive publications in the print media.¹⁶ In addition to merely interpreting the Victorian moral values, this space of Malayalam writing and publication in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Kerala offered to reform the moral constituency of both the body and the individual of the colonial subject to attain “modern” and “progressive” ethics and ideals.

¹⁵ Michel Foucault states that there was a propagation of disciplinary regimes in relation to sexuality in the West manifested in intensification in the management and policing of sexuality in the modern period, leading to distinctions of bourgeois identity. Similar conditions in the non-West have been the consequence of colonial capitalist interests (1978; 24-5, 145-6.)

¹⁶ Rajeev Kumaramkandath in his observations of the early modern Kerala public sphere “included only a few English educated local elites and left out the masses who never had an opportunity to go to English schools”, departs from Jürgen Habermas’s “universal access principle” to Sean Cubitt’s claim that “public sphere has always existed only in terms of excluding many groups including the poor, women and so on” (Cubitt 2005, 93).” Kumaramkandath asserts that the views propagated through the magazines belonged to a “handful of elites and they captured the wider imagination of the society very soon and in the subsequent periods. Their significance remains in the fact that they laid the foundation for addressing issues concerned with modernity” (119).

This modern redefinition can be discerned in the sexual imageries of a fetishized ideal womanhood that began to emerge in modern Malayalam literature and literary publications. Such works which began around the latter half of the nineteenth century in Kerala were repositories of Victorian moral troupes on self, body, society, and progress, which began to concretize “public sphere” (Devika, “Negotiating Women’s Social Space” 45). This was furthered through journals brought out by the missionaries, and later through other newspapers and magazines, claiming to articulate the “public interest” (Devika and Sukumar 4471). The interests of the imperial governance did ensure that publications of women writers were banned as “objectionable” if they were believed to “endanger the moral health of their Indian subjects” (Tharu and Lalita, “Women Writing in India” 4). The emergent institution of the “public space” perpetuated the colonial idea and ideal of the female body. The distinction between feminized “domestic” and masculine “public” was found at the alignment of a relationship between order and disorder that shaped the colonial bodies in Kerala within the heterosexual, gendered binary codes of maleness/femaleness, deviancy/respectability, tradition/modernity, and primitive/progressive.

Textual Ambivalence of Colonial Body in Early Women’s Magazines

Thirty years after the mutiny of 1857, at the cusp of colonial modernity, in 1892 began the publication of the first women’s magazine in Malayalam, *Keraleeya Sugunabodhini* (Devika, “Negotiating Women’s Social Space” 45). J. Devika emphasizes on this magazine’s clearly stated stand on delineating public/domestic notion of social domains in its very first issue, “which proclaimed that politics and narrow argumentation about religion would be strictly avoided (Raghavan 1985: 141)” (45). *Keraleeya Sugunabodhini* (1892), affirmed this at the outset:

We will publish nothing related to politics. Principles of physiology, entertaining tales, writings that energise the moral conscience, stories, Womanly Duty, the science of cookery, biographies of ideal women, the history of nations, book-reviews and other such enlightening topics will be published... (Raghavan 1985: 141). (Devika and Thampi, “New Lamps for Old?” 142).

Thus, as far as the modern educated new elites “in late 19th century Malayalee society was concerned, ‘politics’ was delineated, early enough, as a terrain unfit for women, in early

discourses on modern gender ideals in Kerala” (Devika and Thampi 147). Although *Keraleeya Sugunabodhini* was short lived, a range of women’s magazines including *Sarada* (1904), *Lakshmi Bai* (1906), *Bhasha Sarada* (1914), *Mahila Ratnam* (1914), *Sumangala* (1915), *Sahodari* (1925), *Christava Mahilamani* (1920), *Mahila* (1921), *Vanitha Kusumam* (1926), *Muslim Vanitha*, *Sreemathi*, *Sthree* (1933) and others emerged.¹⁷ Often, the titles of these magazines are quintessentially “coterminous with the notion of the ideal woman” (Vinayan and Raj 401). They largely identified as their reader the woman seeking advice about transforming herself in the shape of the ideal womanly self, ensconced in the modern domestic domain (Devika and Sukumar 4472). These magazines seem to reckon with an almost ambivalent autobiographical voice with the magazines reflecting upon the intertextual commentary flexing the structure to echo their life processes to establish continuity. It is as if the disruption of colonial encounter is nearly expunged by the ambivalence in their writings compelled by the necessity to have a sense of continuation to serve a kind of imagined community of “nation,” as Benedict Anderson would propose.

These magazines reinforced the colonial composition of social categories of monogamous marriage, cohabitation, deviancy, concubinage, and prostitution, which indirectly slipped into normative contestations about cultural alterity lodged in the gendered bodies of colonial subjects. They reflect upon the lively debates on “subjects such as changing conceptions of the institutions of marriage and family, and the changing roles for women as mothers and housewives” (Vinayan and Raj 401). In an article titled “Modern Motherhood” published in *Mahila* (meaning “women” in Malayalam), the unnamed author claims that men and women have different and disparate responsibilities in life, and women should not expect to be able to “think” like men.¹⁸ It is not a woman’s duty to aspire to have the qualifications of a man but to heal and guard the Man’s World with certain freedom concerning reproductive rights (“Modern Motherhood”). The impression of freedom in this article is defined within an ontological space of “possessing the self-means for survival” within regulated norms of a Western liberal frame of gendered hierarchy (Devika, “En-gendering Individuals” 118). Moreover, like education, this freedom is expected to equip women to “conform to ideal subjectivities as Man and Woman” (Devika, “En-gendering Individuals” 119).

¹⁷ See Sruthi Vinayan & Merin Simi Raj 401, K. Pradeep, March 18, 2016.

¹⁸ Translation/paraphrasing from Malayalam to English by the author.

Mainly emblematic of self-discipline in compliance with the imperial codes of gendered body and sexuality, there has been an effort at mimicking the White Victorian “ladies” in these magazines. These magazines regularly published articles on women from foreign countries like the United Kingdom, France, and Japan indicating a strong partial leaning and interest in the lives of women of colonizing countries. For example, M. Chellamma in 1915 showered praises on Queen Mary of the United Kingdom for her efforts to support her country and the dominion during the First World War. The manufacturing of this new class-based respectability in Kerala was a path-breaking entry to colonial modernity. The social respectability of women from the emerging middle-classes was being “defined in counterpoint to the “crude and licentious” behavior of lower-class women” (Tharu and Lalita 8). This manifestly recognized a class differentiation on the basis of “sexual mores for women” in accordance with the emergence of “new bourgeoisie,” which inscribed its identity “on the bodies and souls of women” to churn the proper lady through regulations of sexual morality in Indian society (8).

Typically, heterosexual women of the so-called respectable monogamous marital relations, bourgeois, upper class, and upper caste embodied what characterized a nation. The other groups of female colonial bodies outside of those categories were the deviant bodies excluded, marginalized from the idea of womanhood that is predicated on the modern state. Therefore, it is in the lived experiences of those erased bodies that postcolonial and subaltern scholarships fetched their instruments of knowledge to dispute and dissent with the Western universal notion of gender. Women belonging to the elite Nair caste seem to assume a position of leadership amongst the Malayali woman, as contributors to early women’s magazines. Most of the writers for magazines like “*Sharada*, *Lakshmibai*, *Mahilamandiram*, *M.N. Nair Masika*, and *Mahila* were upper and middle caste Hindus. However, other magazines like *Vanitha Kusumam*, *Bashaposhini*, *Sadhguru*, *Gurunathan*, *Maryrani*, *Mathrubhumi*, etc. had Christian writers too” (Antony, “Women’s Education” 21). *Vanitha Kusumam* was radical in its views when compared to magazines that had exclusively Hindu writers. In their articles, they refer to themselves as Malayali women, while “women from other caste/religious groups are addressed or tagged using their religion or caste” (21).

Although uncontested, this appears to indicate that the modernity of Malayali women is represented by Nair modernity (21). The upper caste, educated, Nair reformers did initiate a

language that acted as a centripetal force in crafting the collective social ethos in the capitalist inventory of a newly emerging Malayali identity where caste has been rearticulated as a community in the caste reform movements (Antony, “Women’s Education Debates in Kerala” 37). There was an “emergence of a hegemonic image of the “ideal Malayali woman” strongly influenced by the caste markings and customs of Nair women” (Antony, “Women’s Education” 21). While most of the women contributors were educated, it was riveting to note a few identified themselves as wives, using the prefix —Mrs. This was an emerging trend of the time, as women of the matrilineal kinship groups were not used to identifying themselves with their husband’s name or family (Antony, “Women’s Education Debates in Kerala” 30).

The demarcation of space in the writing of these magazines was not only ambivalently made through the choice of content but in the very choice of identity chosen by women appropriating the social evolution of “ideal Malayali woman”. In one of the editions of *Lakshmi Bai* in 1914, V. Narayani Amma in her article titled “Certain Practices of Women in Kerala” advises and reminds women of their wifely duties, which is to be responsible for controlling the domestic/household expenses to support their husbands who work hard to provide for their families.¹⁹ J. Devika concisely states, “women’s magazines defined for women [...] the domain of modern domesticity” (Devika, “Negotiating Women’s Social Space” 45). This certainly accounted for indirect writing wherein Judith Butler’s concept of “repetition” gains visibility, as these magazines allowed for an ambivalent reading of gender as socially imposed or discursive code that is responded to and performed (Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution”).

Modern education was at the core of crafting the “ideal Malayali woman” in the women’s magazines. According to Teena Antony, “Of around 460 articles collected from various magazines published in the early 20th century, 80 were specifically on education and most of the other articles more or less referred to women’s education in some capacity” (Antony, “Women’s Education” 35). It was asserted that the absolute commitment of modern education was “the development of a self with a focus on *interiority* – both in the sense of a supposed inner-space that pre-exists any education, and in the sense of the act of looking inwards” (Devika, “Negotiating Women’s Social Space” 46). Then prevailing understanding was that colonial state-supported education and education sponsored by missionaries were essential to “nurture their

¹⁹ Translation/paraphrasing from Malayalam to English by the author.

innate “womanly” qualities” to perform their roles and duties as wives and mothers within their domestic sphere – “ideas suggestive of the patriarchal underpinnings of the imagining of the “new woman” by the nationalist reform movement, as explicated by Partha Chatterjee (1989)” (Vinayan and Raj 404).²⁰

To an extent, early feminists in Kerala have felt compelled to dislodge some of these homogenizing female identities publicized in these magazines. This includes, for instance, the writings of first-generation Malayalee feminists like Anna Chandy, Parvati Nenminimangalam, and Kochattil Kalyanikutty Amma who published their articles in magazines like the *Mahila*, which tried to attain a balance between critique and pedagogy by blurring the gap between the domestic and the public (Devika and Sukumar 4473). Under the title of “Today’s Women,” the article in *Sumangala*, 1916, urged women to break free from the shackles of being a “securely domesticated ... fragile object of men’s desire” to “empower themselves to complete the world which they occupy” (“Today’s Women”).²¹ Likewise, in *Lakshmi Bai*, 1905, P. Kavamma warns fellow women of the respectable men in society who are responsible for not just committing violence on female bodies but also projecting women as “deviant,” “unqualified” and “selfish” beings.²²

These articles firmly contested the social norm that considered women whose behaviour did not conform to the sexual complementarity of gender difference to be denied any “Womanly power” in society (Devika, “Negotiating Women’s Social Space” 51). The “Womanly power” was recognized in the “innate talent” of women for compassion, patience, and tolerance, and their experience as married women, which were perceived as necessary qualifications for women to seek employment in public institutions (51). According to Robin Jeffrey, with the dismantling of matriliney, “matrilineal women lost at least as much as they gained” (Jeffrey, “Matriliney, Women, Development” 373-376). While they “lost a measure of sexual independence as well as

²⁰ J. Devika contends that Partha Chatterjee’s argument claims “the nationalist ‘protection’ of the domestic domain as a sacred ‘inner-space’ outside the purview of the modern state (Chatterjee 1989: 233–249)” is not relevant in understanding Malayalee society of the early-twentieth-century. Devika argues that “in Kerala...it was precisely at this time that the state was called upon to legislate in order to transform the ‘inner-most’ social spaces, those of marriage and family, by community [reform] movements whose major agenda was the transformation of internally-heterogeneous, loosely-structured pre-modern caste groups into internally homogeneous, strongly bound and mutually exclusive modern communities” (“Negotiating women’s social space” 46).

²¹ Translation/paraphrasing from Malayalam to English by the author.

²² Translation/paraphrasing from Malayalam to English by the author.

a guaranteed, lifelong place in their family home,” they were able to acquire positions of salaried employment in public institutions during the “transition from matriliney to patriliney” (373-376).

This provokes a theorization within Durba Mitra’s concept of “epistemic doubling,” wherein women’s magazines in Kerala emerged as ambivalent by-products of the colonial heteropatriarchal capitalist register to parade the colonial troupe of civilizing the debased native female bodies condemned by the violence of native men (134). If the West is understood to have been built on the erasure of its premodern history and defined as the antithesis to the “Other,” then decolonization of gender, in this case, is compelled by the universalism of Western Enlightenment defining West/non-West (Raghuramaraju, “Rethinking the West”). This is echoed in the single, universalized understanding of the term “emancipation,” which the colonial administrators perceived to have achieved with respect to the women in Kerala in providing them with education and bestowing them with a publishing platform to voice their thoughts, views, and contestations in exclusive vernacular magazines.

At the same, the emerging space of women’s writings and their publications was ambivalently gendered as women were assigned women’s only magazines to express their thoughts and views away from/outside the mainstream, public space denied to non-male, non-heterosexual, non-upper caste bodies. Therefore, an angular reading of colonial modernity, thus, reflects on Nivedita Menon’s argument that modernity has not been “unambiguously emancipatory” and it has “eradicated spaces of relative autonomy and produced new forms of subjection” (“Sexualities” xvi). Further deployment of “epistemic doubling” reflects on the content of these magazines that was patently sanitized by the gendered moral codes envisaged within the arc of colonial modernity, which obsessively attempted to equate all forms of sexual desires into forms of sexual deviance. Although there were attempts by women to utilize the space to resist gendered disciplinary regimes of colonial modernity, there were few attempts to dismantle the social articulation of “indirect writing” accumulated on racist, casteist, and ethnicity- and class-based gendered hierarchies.

Conclusion

Undeniably, the publication of women’s magazines re-centers the role of knowledge production in the making of colonial governmentality of power etched on the gendered colonial bodies in

Kerala. Embedded within a social history of colonial or modern body, these early women's magazines were ambivalent in their inquiry upon the shifting frames of time and space in the decolonizing of gender. These magazines were informed by the imperialist project of knowledge production to produce a heteronormative idea of "modern colonial body" advancing the gender construction marked an erasure of bodies and their histories. An attempt to historicize the colonial origins of the modern body in Kerala engages with hermeneutical forms of loss and historical recovery of a past exhibited in the ambivalence of Malayalam women's magazines of late nineteenth-century literature and early twentieth-century. Therefore, conditions of historical knowledge in the spatial forms of translation, objectification, and categorization have produced the modern/colonial body as a social fact with the conceptual history that transcends fixed social categories

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