

The Woman's Question: Negotiating Modernity in Early Twentieth-Century Women's Magazines in Malayalam

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Abstract:

Women's questions can be defined as discourses within larger movements that focus on improving the women's condition and status in society articulated not in partnership with or by women in question but by others who speak for them. The woman's question was of particular importance in colonial Kerala attempting to 'modernise' itself. And many of the debates and discussions contained in women's magazines in Malayalam in the first half of the twentieth century reflect the centrality of 'woman' in the contemporary discourses of reform and nationalism. These magazines were vehicles for the dissemination of ideas and reveal how women in particular mediated the binaries of home/world, tradition/modernity, spiritual/material binaries. The cultural anxieties of a changing society led to women being assigned and defined as constituting the home/tradition/spiritual. However, many of the articles analysed reveal the way in which women of the time critiqued and mediated the cultural anxieties and limitations that marked women's role and rights within the larger discourses of reform and nationalism.

Keywords: Early women's magazines in Malayalam, woman's question, home/world binary, early modern Kerala, women's voices

In colonial India, women were often the torch bearers of the community and national honour and as a result, discourses of reform and nationalism were often played out on the bodies of women of the communities. In a speech, Ayyankali, a prominent social reformer from Pulaya community persuaded the Pulaya women to throw away their bead necklaces that were the

badge of the slave community, as well as to cover their breasts with an upper cloth in defiance of the caste regulations. Mala Khullar in her introduction to *Writing the Women's Movement* notes:

This was a period during which campaigns for societal reforms were undertaken and issues relating to women were tackled within a broader agenda for change. While these movements were not homogenous, they did have a common concern for rooting out certain practices, so-called 'social evils' or undesirable cultural practices such as widow immolation (sati), discrimination against widows and child marriage, partly in response to charges of barbarity and lack of civilisation from the colonial rulers. On one hand, Indian men were preoccupied with western ideas – seeking to emulate, assimilate or reject these – and on the other, they wished to incorporate revivalist elements by reassertion and reinforcement of a cultural identity distinct from that of the British rulers. (2)

However, in speaking for women, a characteristic of such discourses, the women's voices run the risk of erasure. Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak illustrates this in "Can the Subaltern Speak." According to her, in the discourse of sati, the women's voices are unheard. It is not that women do not speak but they are either 'misheard' or erased from the discussion. Maitreyee Chaudhuri argues that "women actually appeared in this public discussion more as a symbol of the moral health of the 'tradition' itself, as this was debated among male colonial officials and Indian reformists, nationalists, and conservatives to exclude, largely the views and voices of women themselves" (80).

A woman is a concept through which issues of space, culture, identity, community, and honour are represented and negotiated. In the discourse of nationalism, the binary of the material, and spiritual (that was referenced to express the binary of the coloniser and the colonised) was compounded into other binaries – the external (the material) and the internal (the spiritual), man (the public) and woman (the private/domestic): "The world is the external and the domain of the material; the home represents our inner spirit, our true identity...The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world – and woman is its representation." (Chatterjee, "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question" 238-39).

A woman's question can be defined as a focus on improving the women's condition and status in society through ending customs that cause suffering, humiliation, and restricts their

freedom. But they are articulated not in partnership with or by the women in question but by men who spoke for them. “Despite the many pronouncements of good intent by the male leaders, however, most of them still saw a woman’s role basically as that of a housewife within a conservative family structure” (Jayawardena 99). For the British, the treatment of women frequently served as a cultural yardstick by which they reinforced the inferiority of the colonised cultures and practices. Seen in this light, the attempts to uplift women were partly driven by the need to ‘civilize’ society. The women’s issues addressed within larger discourses of reform, nationalism, and conservatism cannot all be considered feminist since in many instances the woman’s question leads to consolidation and institutionalisation of new patriarchy or continuation of old patriarchal practices. For example, the new ‘modern’ woman of early twentieth-century colonial Bengal was defined against the western woman and/or the common woman. The common woman was defined as “coarse, vulgar, loud, quarrelsome, devoid of superior moral sense, sexually promiscuous” and therefore necessitating the violent suppression by the male (Chatterjee, “The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question” 244).

It was no different in colonial Kerala. J Devika notes in *En-Gendering Individuals: The Language of Re-Forming in Twentieth-Century Keralam* (hereafter *EI*),

Along with nationalism, community reform efforts and community politics, and early socialist and trade union assertions, the 1930s also saw the articulation of demands made upon the government on behalf of ‘women’ as a group for job reservations, representation in political bodies etc. These decades saw the spread of modern domesticity and the conjugal family; earlier modes of domestic life and marriage came under increasing threat due to legislative interventions and economic change, and as new ideas regarding civilised and moral family life and personal freedom gained greater velocity of circulation. (12)

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were times of significant change in Kerala. The various reform movements that were in turn responses to the changing political and economic scenario of the time, resulted in social and cultural change. The British colonial presence and their increasing power and influence led to the fashioning of what is often termed the ‘modern’ period in the history of Kerala. This resulted in changes to traditional social arrangements, hierarchies, and practices, particularly with regard to caste. Devika mentions that early modern Kerala re-envisioned its ‘jati’ centred view of community grounded on “external determinants like birth or inherited social authority” into a “liberal

vision of a society of equal individuals” valued for their “inherent, internal qualities,” that was based on the sexual character of one’s body” (15 - 16).

During the modernisation of Kerala society, “women were integrated into it largely as subjects of a certain Womanliness ... modernity did not abolish female domesticity. If it did away with traditional family arrangements, it also instituted new forms of family and female domesticity” (Devika, *EI* 18). Devika notes the patriarchal nature and limitations of the new woman in colonial Kerala evident in the heroines of late nineteenth Malayalam novels who are “characterised by their strong internalities, developed through suitable training” (*EI* 45). So while on one hand women were given agency, this period was also one of gendering and institution of new patriarchies. “With its focus upon the internal and naturally given, and its recognition of sex as foundational, individualism in Keralam logically entailed a perspective of gender-difference. But this difference was at once organised through the projection of the Man-Woman relationship as a complementary, power-free one” (Devika, *EI* 49).

Therefore, gender emerges as a crucial concept for identifying and classifying citizens, spaces and roles, and responsibilities. And those practices and institutions that did not fit into this ‘modernity’ were termed deviant and abnormal and ‘reformed.’ This is evident in the outlawing of matriliney and *sambandam* during this time. Until the nineteenth century, the matrilineal model went unchallenged. A custom that was initially prevalent amongst the Nairs and extended over time to Mappilas, Ezhavas, and Tiyyas, it appalled the European missionaries. Robin Jeffrey notes that Hindus from other parts of India tittered at the “looseness of the prevailing morals,” and the state of “all but promiscuous intercourse” (25). Instead, the model of the modern nuclear family was projected as the ideal. K Saradmoni notes that Kerala aspiring toward modernity and modernisation, especially in the realm of marriage and family, began to view matriliney as an abnormality (10-12). Reform in some cases manifested itself in accepting new notions of marriage and family that were even more patriarchal and therefore more acceptable. As a result of the move toward modernisation,

the state was virtually welcomed to legislate upon such intimate matters as marriage, to enable the reconstitution of the ‘inner domain’ in a form that appeared the most civilised ... Within them, whole sets of practices, some restrictive and others positive, were recommended as aids to develop these given gendered capacities ... more powerful were practices of the more positive type which ranged from elaborate schemes like female education that integrated several minor practices and

were ensconced within new institutions like modern schools, streesamajams (women's associations) etc., to relatively simple schemes like wearing a blouse, a ravukka (Devika, *EI* 28).

It is in this period of bifurcation and reconstitution that the first women's magazines in Malayalam emerge, shaped by and evolved from this popular notion of the Man-Woman relationship as contractual and complementary. The first magazine dedicated exclusively to women, *Keralasugunabodhini* is generally believed to have been edited by an all-male editorial team and contained mostly contributions by male writers (Priyadarshan 14). *Sarada* was the first women's magazine to have a woman editor. Later women's magazines like *Lakshmi Bai*, *Mahila Ratnam*, *Mahila*, *Mangalodayam*, and *Mahila Mandiram* also had mostly women as contributors and editorial team members.

Women's magazines of the time were important mediums for the dissemination of ideas especially to women and acted as means of social conditioning by propagating and reinforcing norms and ideals. This is evident from the range of topics found in these magazines – from beauty and health to features on prominent women of the time and articles of issues of marriage, family, femininity, dowry, female education, history as well as poetry, and fiction.

As per the dominant view of social relationships ordered along lines of gender, women were responsible for “domestic life, familial relationships and the emotional environment attached to them, while Man must locate himself in competitive activities pertaining to the public domain” (Devika, *EI* 45). However, the presence of many educated women advocating women's rights and freedom in the first half of the twentieth century, led to increasing challenges to this notion of ‘complementary sexual exchange.’

Indeed throughout the 20s and 30s, one comes across persistent complaints that they went against the spirit of complementary sexual exchange and were detrimental to the creation of ideal modern society ... The complaint that Western-style education eroded women's ‘natural’ qualities and that ... women are turning wanton and disobedient in their imitation of the west’ – had begun to be heard since the turn-of-the century, but now it came to be linked to modern educated women's aspirations regarding entry into public domain.” (Devika, *EI* 138).

This is what makes the study of these women's magazines important. While many of the articles in these magazines do not challenge the new forms of patriarchy, they also contain critiques and perspectives that subtly undermine and transgress the complementary nature of man-woman roles in society. When studied against the backdrop of the larger discourses of reform and modernity, they reveal the negotiated positions of the women and their claims to agency and freedom that they were excluded from. They contain women's reactions and responses to the 'woman's question' that was central to the formation of modernity and community during the time. Some of the articles articulate views considered as early feminism, negotiating the binaries of the public/private, man/woman, and home/world.

The "Prasthavana (Editorial)" of the first-anniversary issue of *Sarada* states, "We are proud to proclaim that many women who out of excessive humility were under the belief that they could not write, have entered into the field of literature through our encouragement and support. Women through the writings of articles are working towards their own reform" (1). Women writers according to Gilbert and Gubar, suffer from anxiety of authorship. Likewise, Susie Tharu and K Lalitha in their Introduction to *Women Writing in India* have illustrated the policing and silencing of women's writing in India. Therefore, the editorial's claim that the magazine acts as a space for women to express their opinions as well as encourage literary efforts amongst women becomes significant. The magazines therefore can be seen as a space for self-representation in the woman's question.

They become spaces of dialogue, where different perspectives and views on the woman's question are expressed – by both men and women. There are many instances of responses to and refutations of views deemed inappropriate and controversial within these magazines. Anna Chandy in "On Women's Liberation" attacks the double standards of the reform movements on the issue of women's education and its patriarchal attitudes – though they wish society and the position of women to change, they are still patriarchal in their demand that women should be given a 'modern' education so that they can become suitable companions to 'modern' men. She is also critical of nationalist "veneration of women as deities" which "condemns her to tragic suffering" when they are reduced to "Empresses of the Home" or "Sanctified Goddesses" (15). In "The Craze for Imitation" by C P Kalyani Amma, she refutes an earlier article by a prominent intellectual Puttezhattu Raman Menon that attacks 'modern minded young women as chief perpetrators of a shallow and superficial modernity':

Western women, Tamil women or Parsi women ... do not dazzle us ... On the whole, Mr. Menon's article reminds one of the thrashings meted out by some old *karanavanmar*. They thrash others for good reasons and for bad reasons. Very often the whipping would be for 'telling the truth' ... we ascribe no value at all for Mr. Menon's article which has been written with the sole purpose of nagging us." (9)

Mr. Menon is constructed here as the figure of male authority attempting to dominate and silence women's desires and voices – the 'we', according to what 'he' finds acceptable. The final statement of rejection can be interpreted as a rejection of the attempt to speak on behalf of women.

One of the most popular topics of the time seems to be women's education. Modern education was seen as a major reason for the changes across the economic, social and cultural spectrum. It was perceived as instrumental in breaking down existing systems of domination and to bringing about agency and upliftment. In his article "Malayala Streekalum Vidhyabhyasavum," K Vasudevan Musthi speaks of a modern education for women that imparts knowledge of "history, poetry, drama and grammar in Malayalam as well as basic knowledge of English and Sanskrit" (3). This he argues, can contribute to the development of qualities such as common sense amongst women. His view and intention of woman's education mirrors the idea of middle-class women's education in England of the nineteenth century – to create able and refined women with the requisite skills to assist and enable her husband, to manage the home and children. Musthi's view seems to be echoed by others who perceive women's education as part of the process of modernisation of society in general. Often the women of Europe and America are presented as examples of what education and modernity can contribute to women's rights and national progress: "In countries like Europe and America, women are educated like the men and in all aspects of life they both have equal amount of freedom and we can see that those countries have attained prosperity and progress" (C. Rukmini Amma 6). Rukmini Amma's argument differs subtly from Vasudevan Musthi's. For her, the education of women should have the same intention and focus as men and must translate into freedom and rights for women.

It is not only to the West that these writers turn to in order to find arguments and examples to support the cause of women's education. N A Amma draws on pre-colonial India to justify the education of women: "A Woman scholar made it possible for the author of *Sakuntalam* to assume the name of Kalidasa ... Therefore it is proven that there were women scholars in

ancient times” (1). Not only is education presented as a mark and need of progress but as sanctioned by pre-colonial practices. These arguments assert the fact that women’s education is ‘necessary’ as well as ‘normal.’ By aligning it with progress, rights, and freedom, these writers affirm its necessity for women and modern Kerala. At the same time, by evoking examples of women scholars from ancient Indian texts and legends, they assuage the cultural anxiety that marks the ‘woman’ in colonial India. Education for women, in their arguments, is historically acceptable and even endorsed in the ‘glorious’ ancient pasts of the nation and through this, they refute the anxieties against providing women with an education that is considered as ‘modern’.

In “*Malayalikalum Stree Vidhyabhyasavum (Malayalees and Women’s Education)*” K Padmavathy Amma rejects attempts that she considers mere lip service to the cause of women’s education.

Reform is not complete if one lets one’s daughters complete primary school education. This is just a sign of modernity and one should not be satisfied by such small moves. Any reform that is external and does not significantly change our attitudes and beliefs is ineffectual. Right now, we don’t want education that would enable us to become lawyers or barristers like men. And we have not reached the state for such aspirations as yet. Only after sitting should one stretch one’s legs. However, at this stage it is necessary for women to acquire at least enough education to raise themselves from their present state of ignorance and to enlighten them on duties as wives and mothers. (7)

The varying positions and justifications in these texts illustrate the different strategies and arguments used to present the need for women’s education. The language and logic often conform to and reiterate existing patriarchal beliefs about women’s education. While being conciliatory to the modern patriarchy, some like K Padmavathy Amma’s article reveal the ultimate ambition for women’s education – the entry into the public space and potential for economic independence and power.

In “*The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question*” Partha Chatterjee identifies in colonial Bengal of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the existence of two seemingly oppositional forces – modernity and nationalism. Reform movements were the consequence of the influence and internalisation of western ideas. However, as the nationalist discourse gained widespread popularity, the aping of western customs and manners became

something that was derided. “The new politics of nationalism ‘glorified India’s past and tended to defend everything traditional;’ all attempts to change customs and lifestyles began to be seen as the aping of western manners and thereby regarded with suspicion” (234). In the nationalist discourse of the time, there is, on one hand, a desire for modernity (especially the advantages that education and technology could bring) and on the other the anxiety of moral corruption and cultural loss it could entail. “But in the entire phase of the nationalist struggle, the crucial need was to protect, preserve and strengthen the inner core of the national culture, its spiritual essence ... In the world, imitation of and adaptation to western norms was a necessity; at home, they were tantamount to the annihilation of one’s very identity” (Chatterjee, 239). This home/world binary becomes the foundation for the identification of gender roles and gender identity in twentieth-century colonial Bengal. Likewise, the cultural anxiety of this binary shapes the gender identity and roles in Kerala of this period as well. Mini Sukumar and J Devika note in “Making Space for Feminist Social Critique in Contemporary Kerala” the similar structure of the discourse shaping colonial Kerala.

Something in the shape of a “public sphere” began to concretise in Malayalee society only around the second half of the 19th century ... Early discussion on the established order of caste in Malayalee society frequently put forth, directly or indirectly, the ideal of a society based on gender difference as an alternative. It was and projected as characterised by the broad division of social space into the public and the domestic, deemed appropriate for men and women, respectively. (4469 – 4470)

Consequently, identities and roles were demarcated through a gender that was simultaneously something that required training and inculcation as well as “sexed identity.”

Woman’s “moral authority ... is effective not through coercion or threat, but through gentle persuasion which made use of words and emotion, advice, prayers, entreaties, tears, affectionate gestures ... Crucially, the maintenance of the contract in which Man and Woman engage in activity amicable to their ‘natural’ qualities is absolutely necessary for the availability of such authority to women. Woman should not aspire to cross over to occupy Man’s roles. (Devika, *EI* 47)

Women and home remain the locations beyond the control and changes brought on by the encounter with the coloniser and his ‘modernity.’ But the reform movements often propagated the ‘reform’ of the woman as well. As a result, women of the time seem to be caught between the discourses that desire to reform them but also simultaneously preserve their traditional roles and identity. The cultural anxiety and the simultaneous desire for

modernity are revealed in the inception of magazines intended exclusively for women – what Devika terms the assigning of ‘special slots’ for women.

However, these divisions that mark modernity are not fool proof or fixed. Partha Chatterjee in “Our Modernity” states that there is not one single definition or understanding of the term. It is subjective and historically constituted. For example, in Europe, it is associated with enlightenment and individualism. In India, it is “intertwined with the history of colonialism”(14). Twentieth-century nationalist discourses often construct modernity as antithetical to traditional cultural practices and the woman within this discourse is relegated to the realm of the anti-modern. However, according to Chatterjee, even at its inception, Indian modernity is marked by incompleteness and selective acceptance of European “liberal ideas.” (16) This is evident in the way reform movements continued to maintain caste hierarchies and patriarchal authority within the family. Using the example of medical education, Chatterjee illustrates the co-mingling of the modern and the traditional:

Since 1916 all medical education in our country is exclusively in English. But the story does not end here. Curiously, this was also the time when organized efforts were on, propelled by nationalist concerns, to give to the indigenous Ayurvedic and Yunani systems of medicine a new disciplinary form...by producing standard editions of classical and recent texts, to institutionalize the methods of training by formalizing, in place of the traditional family-based apprenticeship, a college system consisting of lectures, textbooks, syllabuses, examinations and degrees to standardize the medicines and even promote the commercial production of standard drugs by pharmaceutical manufacturers. (17)

Therefore, the binary of tradition and modernity does not hold but instead is closely related with one shaping the other. Modernity reshapes tradition and likewise, the traditional also determine the experience and structures of modernity in India. This ambiguity within the binaries is what many women writers play on to demand rights, freedom, and increased access of women to the public realm. For example, the life stories of eminent women from India and abroad focus not only on patriarchally designated roles of mothers, wives, and homemakers but also on their contributions to the public realm. The features on Marie Curie in *Sahodari* (“Maryum Peeriyum” – Mary and Pierre) and “Dr. S Muthulakshmi Reddi” in *Vanitaratnam* focus on their roles as wives as well as women achievers. Curie is celebrated as a prominent and pioneering scientist while Dr. Muthulakshmi is a philanthropist and the first female doctor in India. Another feature “Sarojini Naidu” in the same issue of *Vanitaratnam*

designates her as an example of ‘*streetwam*’ (womanliness), sister and mother as well as an accomplished poet. These women are simultaneously celebrated as ideals of womanliness (the essence of a woman) as well as pioneers in professions and spaces conventionally designated the realm of the male. They reveal the increasing public presence of women as well as the cultural anxiety caused by the fear that this would ultimately lead to a loss or at least dilution of women as identities within the control of patriarchy.

T B Kalyani Amma in “*Streedharmam* (Woman’s Duty)” argues for women’s presence and engagement in politics and social change: “Women have two sets of duties as members of their community. At present, the women of India only fulfil the first set of duties ... And that is why India has not seen the light” (4). Kalyani Amma uses the argument of ‘civilising’ the nation to justify the involvement of women at the level of the social. Likewise, T Narayani Amma in “*Streekalum Rashtriyavum* (Women and Politics)” appeals for increased representation and role of women in decision-making bodies like panchayats, courts, and legislative assemblies. She puts this as part of basic rights that should be accorded to women so they can contribute to the “nation’s progress” (6). She draws on Mahabharata to illustrate how women were active in political decision-making in precolonial times. The editorial of *Vanitakusumam* by Vengalil Chinnamallu Amma also exhorts women to take up the struggle for representation in the government:

The right to serve the country is not a male monopoly. Women have the right and freedom to engage in such service ... In these circumstances, all we can say to the women of Travancore is this: you must not while away any more time in idle slumber. Open your eyes to the realities of the world, ascertain your needs, recognize your rights, and move to secure them ... Therefore, awake, fight for political freedom. You will surely have the support and sympathy of progressive men. In the current Popular Assembly, you have been granted no place. If this experience is not to be repeated in the coming legislature, your efforts must begin now. (76)

Articles supporting women’s employment outside the home also transgress the home/world binary. The arguments against women working outside the home use the need to preserve the innocence of women’ and potential neglect of home and children by working women, to justify their stance. The arguments for women’s employment outside the home range from the conservative to the defiant. For instance, in “*Streekalum Vaidyavum* (Women and Medicine)” the writer argues that women make better doctors because they instinctively have

the qualities most sought after in doctors: “a thinking mind and the ability to grasp what is seen; the ability to endure, love for all living things, mercy towards the sick, patience ... Since these qualities are inherent in women, they are beyond doubt, better suited for this work than men” (2). Another article “Our Economic Position and Women” sees women’s employment as a matter of economic necessity: “Men are somewhat less than half the world’s population. Today the world subsists on their labour. The remaining half is inert. Just think of the difference that will be made if both parties enter the field of labour” (156). Anna Chandy in her speech “On Women’s Liberation” connects women’s employment with respect and financial independence: “When both enjoy economic independence, the other may not meekly suffer the violent quarrels and autocratic commands of one” (15).

Possibly as a consequence of the naturalisation of women’s association with the domestic space, marriage and family feature as one of the prominent subjects of discussion within these magazines. Marriage during this time emerged as a combination of western and traditional values. Meera Velayudhan illustrates this emergence of new patriarchal structures replacing old ones:

On issues such as monogamy (‘singleness of union’), male head of household, women’s and children’s dependent status, western liberal traditions were cited ... Legal changes in the early part of the century extended the power of men over women, particularly among the Nair, Ezhava and Syrian Christian communities in important spheres: inheritance, property rights, rights to divorce (66-67).

Articles like “*Pauranikakalathe Hindu Streekal* (Hindu Women in Ancient Times)” published in *Unninamboothiri* and “*Vivaham Oru Manasikaprashnam* (Marriage, A Psychological Problem)” present views that endorse nationalist and imperialist positions. The first one endorses a utopic vision of pre-colonial Indian society and attributes the current practices of forced marriage of women to the Mohammedans and the coloniser. The second reduces the problems that Indian women have with marriage to polygamy and proposed monogamy as an ideal alternative. Both articles root their notions of ideal marriage on ‘romantic love.’ In contrast, the article “*Streekalum Swatantryavum* (Women and Freedom)” by B Pachiamma discusses the need for freedom to act and speak without restrictions for women within the institution of marriage. She extends the ideas of ‘freedom’ and ‘individuality’ – terms associated with modernity into the realm of the private/domestic (20). “*Vivahitakalaya Streekalum Udyogavum* (Married Women and Employment)” also challenges the restriction of women’s roles and identity to the home. Both articles critique the

naturalisation of gender hierarchies in marriage and the reduction of women to only homemakers and mothers.

While women did not just write in these ‘women’s magazines,’ these magazines reveal the tensions and cultural anxieties around the question of woman’s freedom and rights during this time. Houtart and Lemercinier maintain that “the written word, carried through the medium of newly established daily papers and periodicals played an important part in the movement.” The content of these women’s magazines reveals the contending opinions on ‘woman’s issues’ of the time. It also reveals how these women writers were often caught between and had to negotiate contending forces of modernity and tradition that they were subject to. The assertion of the home as the site “for expressing the spiritual quality of the national culture,” meant that women were invested with the “main responsibility of protecting and nurturing this quality” (Chatterjee, “The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question” 243). As a consequence, the anxiety of modernisation (i.e. westernisation) was felt more acutely when it came to women’s rights and freedom. This affected and shaped women’s access to modernity. As the writings reveal, educated women had to simultaneously affirm their ‘feminine virtues and qualities.’ Pachiamma’s article illustrates the contending tensions when she uses Europe as a reference point while advocating a larger social role for women and simultaneously defends them from accusations of ‘excessive’ westernisation and consequent cultural ‘corruption’:

To turn the demand for liberty advanced by the women of Kerala into the dancing, the strolling-in-parks and the theatre attendance of western women, whose ideals of life are entirely unlike [ours], is definitely a foolhardy thing to do. I do not think that any Malayalee sister who asks for liberty will desire all that. There are many able ladies in Kerala today who have passed the higher examinations and struggle for the freedom of women...Do desist from assessing women by the same standards of change that seem to have guided today’s men... (63-64)

Her text negotiates the fine line between the modernising women and anxiety of cultural loss that characterises the ‘woman’s question.’ Another article “Modern Women and their Husbands: A Rejoinder” is a defence against accusations of moral and cultural corruption of modern young women—

The first charge raised by the author, M Krishna Menon, against modernized young women is that ‘they have begun to abandon social mores completely’ ... The further misdeeds detected by the author are that these women harbour deep contempt and

revulsion towards their husbands, and do not ‘respect’ them ... However, if some women do, there may be good reason for it. (35)

These articles illustrate “the shifting roles and perceptions of women” during the time as well as the ways in which women negotiated the cultural anxieties that marked women’s aspirations for progress and change during this time.

They become illustrations of how women, especially those who had experienced the advantages of a ‘modern’ education defended modernity while balancing the anxieties of nationalism and emergent patriarchies. However, there is no evidence in these articles of critical engagement with modernity and the narrative of progress that is implied in the use of the term in the context of nineteenth and twentieth-century Kerala. Likewise, they constitute largely a *savarna* perspective. This is evident in the discussions for women’s employment outside the home. Though lower caste women have traditionally been employed outside the home (albeit unpaid labour) the discussion of women’s employment is largely confined to that of upper-caste women’s concerns.

However, despite the limitations and moderate feminist positions that mark them, these writings reflect the ways in which women of early twentieth-century Kerala negotiated the binaries that marked modernity and challenged the limitations it placed on women’s rights and freedom. In arguing for women’s participation in the politics and nation-building, access to modern education, women’s rights, and freedom within the home and marriage, they infringe on the neat bifurcations of home/world and modern/traditional that historians see as instrumental to the emerging of ‘modern’ Kerala. These articles reveal how ‘women’ of the time negotiated and at times challenged the boundaries and limitations of the ‘woman’s question’ within the discourses of nationalism and reform.

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