

Representation of Women Through Centuries: An Analysis of Select Articles from the Path breaking Malayalam Women's Magazines, *Mahilaratnam*(1916)and *Sahodari*(1925).

Reshma P. K.

Abstract: The 21st century shows progressive spirit in many aspects. However, the representation of women can hardly be considered as an area which has shown much progress. Compared to 20th-century iterations, they show a steady decline. The Malayalam women's magazines which flourished towards the end of 19th century and early 20th century showed a promising phase in the education and development of women. The paper intends to show this contrast by a close analysis of some works from this period. In this paper, I analyze select articles from the Malayalam magazines *Mahilaratnam*(1916)and*Sahodari*(1925).I will be exploring an Advertisement, a Matrimonial Notice, and an article titled *Sthreekalude Abhinyuathi*(Women Empowerment) by Mrs. C. Jacob from the magazine *Mahilaratnam* (1916)and three articles titled *Streedharmam*(Women's Duty)by K.Ayyappan, *Grihanayikakalude Vidhyabhyasam*(Education of Housewives)by N.Kumaran,and *Sthreekalum Swathanthryabodhavum*(Women and their sense of Freedom)by K.C.Naryanan from the magazine *Sahodari*(1925).

Keywords: Women's Magazine, Empowerment, Kerala.

We live in the 21st century, where technological innovations happen day by day, and information is just a fingertip away. Still, the attitude towards women or the role assigned to

the women by the patriarchal society in Kerala has not changed much. Every day our newspapers overflow with news about dowry death and different kinds of abuse towards women, and the stories about attacks towards little girls are heart-wrenching. The recent dowry deaths in Kerala are one such example. The patriarchal society has effectively imprinted the parameters of a good woman, good housewife, good mother, and a good girl. These parameters are measured and analyzed with the help of patriarchal formulas, especially in the case of a girl's marriage.

These parameters are slapped onto women's bodies with the help of several advertisements and through mediums like women's magazines. Several branded cosmetics and jewellery makers define the beauty parameters required to label a woman as perfect. The glossy pictures in the magazines with a 'beautiful' woman jewelled with gold/diamond/platinum from head to foot bewitch the eyes of the reader. This is just one of many instances where the idea of the perfect woman is cemented. Thus, women's magazines in Kerala play a massive role in defining a perfect woman. But, when looking back at the late 19th and early 20th centuries women's magazines of Kerala, the portrayal of women in these magazines is peculiar. They fearlessly broke all conventional patriarchal roles assigned to womanhood. They adored the pages with achievements of women in various sectors and not just in jewellery advertisements. Susie Tharu and Lalitha identify the period (the late 19th century and early 20th century) in their *Women Writing in India: Volume I: 600 B.C. to the Early Twentieth Century* (1991), opined that "the early twentieth century, commonly considered a period when the women's movement was at a low ebb, had been a high point of women's journalism. In almost every region women edited journals for women (though clearly men also read them) and many hundreds of women wrote in them" (xviii).

While tracing the history of women's magazines, the beginnings can be traced back to early 1693. *Ladies' Mercury* is considered the first women's Magazine in Britain, and *Streebodh* became the first Gujarati Women's magazine published in 1857. In Kerala, we have *Keraleeya Suguna Bodhini*, as the first women's magazine published in 1886. In her *Feminine Mystique* (1963), Betty Friedan criticized how some women's magazines represented women, especially some which showed women from the light of Freudian psychoanalysis. They presented women only as homemakers; their sufferings were purposefully not addressed by anyone at that point. Friedan quotes in her *Feminine Mystique*: -

Each suburban wife struggles with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts, and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night- she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question-- Is this all? (15).

But some other magazines did portray women in a different light. As historian Joanne Meyerowitz argued in his "*Beyond Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Post-war Mass Culture*,"; "that many of the contemporary magazines and articles of the period did not place women solely in the home, as Friedan stated, but supported the notions of full- or part-time jobs for women seeking to follow a career path rather than being a housewife" (1459). The articles selected for the current study support what Joanne Meyerowitz opined through her book.

To begin with, it is necessary to take a look at the emergence of women's magazines in Kerala. The late 19th century and early 20th-century women's magazines played a huge role in the literary history of Kerala. The first printed Malayalam magazine in Kerala is *Njana Nishkhepam*(1848),printed at the C.M.S Press, Kottayam. The magazine was all about the Church in South India, and *Keraleeya Suguna Bodhini* was the first women's magazine in Kerala and published in Thiruvananthapuram. Later on, several women's magazines started to publish in Kerala, including; *Sharada* (1904), *Lakshmibai*(1905), *Mahilaratnam*(1916),*Mahilamani*(1920), *Sanghamithra*(1920),*Mahila*(1921), *Sahodari*(1925), *Muslim Vanitha* (1926),*Vanithakusumam*(1927),*Shrimathi*(1929-30),*Mahilamandiram*(1927),*Malayalamsika*(1929),*Sthree*(1933),exclusively for the Malayalam speaking women in Kerala.

"Critics did not seem interested in how the question of the education of women into citizenship and identity, as fascinatingly broached in Chandu Menon's *Indulekha*, 1889, and in Rabindranath Tagore's *Ghare Baire*(The Home and the World)" (Tharuand Lalitha xix). Both *Mahilaratnam* and *Sahodari*, intriguingly challenged and put emphasis on the less discussed arena of the very identity of women. *Mahilaratnam*(1916),published in Thiruvananthapuram, contained works of poets like Kumaran Asan and Ulloor S.Parameswara Aiyar and women writers like Mayyanattu Ikkavamma, Thaikkunnathu Kalyani Amma, and others, the

publishers include Smt. Mangalabhai Thamburatti, K.M.Kunju Lekshmi Kettilamma and ten others. *Sahodari*(1925)was published in Kollam by P.R.Mandakini.



Fig 1:- Front Page of *Mahilaratnam*(from Digital Archives, Kerala University Library)

Matrimonial notices are necessary advertisements in the 21st century public journals, moreover it is a highly profitable business. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, women's magazines emphasized education, especially English education. In the selected magazines, *Mahilaratnam*(1916)and in *Sahodari*(1925),particular pages were dedicated to celebrating the educational achievements of women in several fields, including law, arts, and science. A matrimonial notice which appeared in *Mahilaratnam*(1916)is quite interesting and thought provoking. The notice is in English, and adjacent to it a notice regarding the details for submitting the request is given in Malayalam. The English notice states that they are searching for a fair young Nair lady, not above 20 years of age, which is quite similar to the present-day matrimonial advertisement except for the period. The interesting aspect in the advertisement is about the educational qualification needed for the prospective bride; the notice says, the future bride should read and write "English" with a fair knowledge of music. Engaging in the sense, nowadays we have umpteen matchmaking websites in Kerala for different caste and religions, namely; 'Kerala Matrimony,' 'Elite Matrimony,' 'M4Matrimony', 'Hindu Matrimony,' 'Chavara Matrimony' and so on. The present parameters for the bride include fairness and age; even though education (maximum degree) is considered a yardstick, a job is not an essential aspect, especially for the elite class.

The parameters regarding education are notable because the matrimonial advertisements published in 1916 asks for a girl who is well versed in English and music; as mentioned earlier, for girls, English education was considered a requirement of the time, this doesn't mean that education is not required nowadays, education is essential but the way today's matrimonial notices demand the same is a tad different, it doesn't matter if they aren't proficient in English or Malayalam, they need the disguise of completing an undergraduate degree to be seemingly educated. Nowadays, as we all know, it is pretty easy to acquire a degree certificate as we have several fake universities and fake certificate issuing companies. Thus, without specifying the educational parameters, the patriarchal society demands that the credentials are asked only to get a status in the community, and no need for any 'job' because the role of a girl/woman is to attend to the household activities. So, these parameters have an important influence in moulding the society and majority of the families in Kerala, which consider marriage as a necessary qualification for a girl in her life, try to educate their children somehow to get a degree and thus can marry a 'respectable man,' and "live happily ever after under the feet of her husband!" And this cycle perpetually goes on and on.

There is yet another interesting jewellery advertisement in the *Mahilaratnam* journal; this one is diametrically different from present-day jewellery advertisements. During that particular time period, women were not equivalised with jewels. Today, a woman who covers herself from head to foot with umpteen jewels is considered the perfect bride, and jewellery owners play the role of a "guide" about how women should wear jewels and the number of jewels she needs to wear to get respect from the patriarchal society. But the *Mahilaratnam* jewel advertisement is completely different; in fact, we need to look back to all these progressive journals to learn many things. The advertisement is about N.R.Pillai and Co. Jewellers, Sreevaraham, Thiruvananthapuram, ask for the customer's interested jewels. Unlike the present-day jewellery advertisements, they don't canvas women into wearing specific jewels to be seen as a perfect bride. "Because the creators of advertisements hope to make some powerful symbolic connections with images that will spur people to consume their product, they often draw upon what they assume are widespread common-sense beliefs" (Sturgeon 27). *Mahilaratnam* challenged this ubiquitous 'naturalness', or the very stereotypes are contradicted dauntlessly.

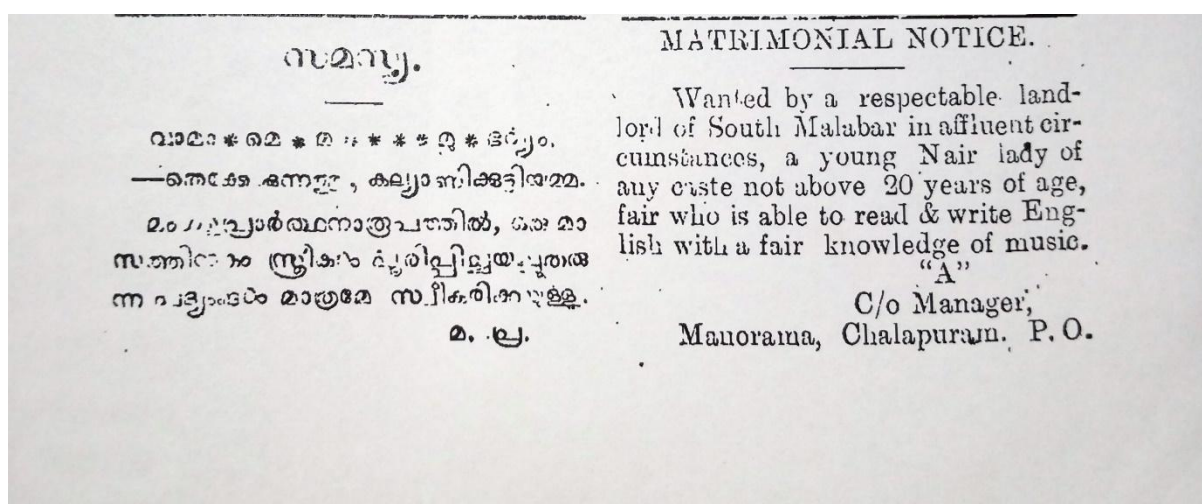


Fig 2:- A Matrimonial Notice in *Mahilaratnam* (from Digital Archives, Kerala University Library.)

Since *Mahilaratnam* carried vibrant discussions on womanhood, many scholars have studied this particular magazine and attempted to understand the 19th century discourses on women. In J. Devika's *Her-self: Gender and Early Writings of Malayalee Women*, by perusing early 19th century women's magazines in Kerala, V. Geetha expostulate in her Foreword that,

"The themes rephrased in this book, of distinctive male and female roles, the enabling power and authority of feminine duties and virtues, the transcendent claims of individual intelligence over bodily destiny, the vexed question of sexed identity, the conflicting claims of home and the world have been the subject of endless feminist debates across the world. And it is through adding their own to these contentious matters and providing a specific historical gloss on them and that these texts dazzle" (ix).

J. Devika, through her competent translation, shed light on the early 19th century women's magazines. Thus through such path-breaking works, the 21st century virtually walked through dusty corridors filled with mouse-gnawed women's journals which shattered the stereotypical moulds created by patriarchy.

In another article titled *Sthreekalude Abhinyuathi* (Women Empowerment) in *Mahilaratnam*, Mrs. C. Jacob, from Alleppey, elucidates the importance of giving primary and proper education to adolescents in understanding the concept of gender. During adolescence, children start to learn from their elders, and when the elders show discrimination towards gender, they imbibe the same. Parents teach their male children to be strong-willed and have a strong sense of mind from childhood itself, however the same does not apply in the case of young girls. Mrs. Jacob purports a difference in this. So, primary education for both boys and girls is necessary as far as our society is concerned; she elaborates about a lady in Bologna who taught the Greek language. She uses the example to suggest that teaching girls is a good thing for the betterment of our society. But in India, we only have a few ladies who learned medicine, which affects the female community. Mrs. Jacob purports the dizzying plurality in the patriarchal society and she voices what K. Lakshmy Amma wrote, “Woman is not merely a child-producing machine” (V.Geetha’s Foreword on “*Herself: Gender and Early Writings of Malayalee Women* xiii).

Mrs. Jacob through her essay lauded the government’s approach towards supporting ladies interested in pursuing medicine. She elaborated on the universal truth that when we know the importance of education, we only try to expand our knowledge in the same way. She suggests that women with education can easily handle their household chores and at the same time enlighten themselves with the education they’ve gained. She postulated the need to be a good wife throughout her essay; it is essential for a couple to be caring and supportive of each other, not just a one-way relationship, where the wife cares for the husband. She opines that 'Motherhood' is an essential aspect of a woman's life. She even quotes the words of European Missionaries. She criticizes how some children are taught to fear the Jabberwock, with eyes of flame, and such imaginary characters are introduced to make the children eat something. She says it is not good because it makes them develop a fear of the outside world, and it may affect the child's mental health adversely; this is caused due to the poor knowledge acquired by the mother. Only through proper education can one better understand the importance of equality, especially gender equality. She asserts that childhood is a crucial stage in a woman's life; sadly, only then could she be happy with the world and could lead a stress-free life. She concludes her essay by addressing the readers to give better education to the girl child from a very young age. It will indeed reflect in the betterment of society and to understand oneself.

Sahodari portrays intriguing articles like *Mahilaratnam*; the present study focuses on three essays from *Sahodari* titled *Streedharmam* (Women's Duty) by K. Ayyappan, *Grihanayikakalude Vidhyabhyasam* (Education of Housewives) by N. Kumaran, and *Sthreekalum Swathanthryabodhavum* (Women and their Sense of Freedom) by K. C. Naryanan. In the first article titled *Streedharmam* (Women's Duty), K. Ayyappan gives a note to the publishers that the magazine shouldn't deliberate on chastity, housekeeping, and such. The article is progressive in more than one sense because as a male author, talking from a woman's perspective is innovative for that particular time period. He rightly points out that there is no need to lay emphasis on being virtuous, which is a significant concern for a patriarchal society. He courageously talks about the need for *Bharya Bhakthi* (Devotion to Wife) among men. When we assert that a woman only needs a man, it should also be complementary. He points out the binaries: Women = Slave; Men = Owner. Ayyappan asks the patriarchal society to think differently when everyone blabbers about gender roles; we need to talk seriously about "equality" and not about "subordination." He breaks away from the stereotypes with his sharp words; he adds that we can't subjugate women by limiting them as an object to wash utensils and to cook food. He jokingly asks what if Annie Beasant and Sarojini Naidu were subjugated in their roles as housewives.

K. Ayyappan purports the need for education, especially higher education among women. He adds that women should be included in politics and given proper positions in the army. He attacks the patriarchal society. As Virginia Woolf purported in her "*A Room of One's Own*": "All I could do was to offer you an opinion upon one minor point—a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction; and that, as you will see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of woman and the true nature of fiction unsolved" (4). Ayyappan also talks about the urgency of women earning their own money, and for that, a job is essential. It can be a government job, teaching, lawyer, medical field, business, agriculture, etc. He adds that only by ensuring equality can we talk about '*Streedharmam*'.

In the second article titled, *Grihanayikakalude Vidhyabhyasam* (Education of Housewives), N. Kumaran, talks about women empowerment; it's highly appreciable because a man vocalizing about women empowerment at that particular point of time is rare. The progress in women's education in Travancore and the Government stipends supplemented for that were elaborated by N. Kumaran in this article; he quotes the 1911 census, where out of 100

women 17 Brahmins, 10 Nairs, 2 Ezhava were educated. Still, only after ten years (1921), did the numbers increase to 44, 32, and 10 respectively.

Women were often given primary education and used to advise them to lead a house properly, but Kumaran finds a huge difference where we should educate our women to gain knowledge and respect from society. He says that *Grihanayika* (Housewife) plays a significant role in the household. The happiness and sadness of the household is dependent on the *Grihanayika* in that particular house. Only when they are educated will they make a massive difference in every house. And he adds that education makes a person get rid of certain taboos inherent in our society. When K. Ayyappan talks about progressive changes in our community, Kumaran adds that housewives should be educated properly, this, in turn, will reappraise the very notions of “gender binaries” created by our patriarchal society.

The third article titled, *Sthreekalum Swathanthryabodhavum* (Women and their sense of Freedom), by K.C. Narayanan from Paravoor, talks about the importance of women's freedom in the ever-changing world. He elaborates what he meant by the word 'freedom'; he means it's a mental state pruned with the help of our society to cope with the worst conditions. Like the aforementioned articles, he adds that only through a better education could we bring the very idea of freedom into reality. Education has a number of benefits and that has already been proved by the westerners, especially western women. Through better education, we can be a part of good government jobs and, most importantly, understand the importance and need for women's freedom. He urges his women readers to understand the situation and to break the shackles they are winded up with. He suggests the example of Smt. Kalyaniyamma and to take her up as a model. He adds that it's essential to teach the future generation to enter the world with a broader perspective towards life. He vehemently criticizes society's internalized sexist mind; women are always seen as an object of pleasure and a servant in the kitchen. He says that women have already entered into the social affairs in western countries, and we are still confining our women within the four walls of the kitchen and distancing them from national affairs. He says that only when both men and women gain equal freedom in society will we get a completely free nation. We vehemently copy westerners' fashion but not their attitude towards womanhood and the freedom they assert to them. He says that we've only a couple of women here who have a better understanding of nationhood and the very idea of freedom, and Vaikom Satyagraha proved the same. He opines that it's great that at least some of the periodicals and

newspapers in Kerala try to impart the knowledge of freedom and the idea of nationhood among the women readers. Thus, through this article titled, *Sthreekalum Swathanthryabodhavum* (Women and their sense of Freedom), K.C.Naryanan congratulates and wishes for the efforts put forth by *Sahodari* in doing the same.

When compared to *Mahilaratnam* and *Sahodari*, it is really sad to say that modern-day women's magazines are doing the bare minimum in order to break away from patriarchal stereotypes. Even today, the "so-called progressive" magazines try to impart the patriarchal structures to the women readers. Recently when the "Black Lives Matter " protest gained worldwide attention, the famous beauty brand *Fair & Lovely* made a statement that they are going to rename their brand to *Glow & Lovely*. However, they are still using fair models to market their product! Our glossy Malayalam magazines happily portrayed this advertisement, too, saying it's progressive! In modern magazines, the writers try to assert the beauty standards required to be a perfect woman, "In advertisements taking place on women's magazines' pages, it is hard to come across with the portrayal of older women's faces; instead, the faces of women, which represent youthfulness, are always shown" (Wolf 6). "For women, aging is portrayed as a problem that needs to be treated" (Richardson & Locks 42). "For instance, skin products tell women that they need to get rid of the wrinkles on their faces and cellulite on their bodies, and they need to lift their face skin in order to look younger" (Ringrow 4). When comparing the current women's magazines to that of the 19th-century, the latter were way progressive.



Fig 3: - *Fair & Lovely* changed to *Glow & Lovely*.

The netizens commented harshly regarding this change; they even challenged whether the company has the guts to portray a girl with dark skin as their model. But at the same time, there were a couple of women's magazines in Kerala that were bold enough to challenge the

stereotypes by featuring a breastfeeding mother namely *Grihalakshmi* cover page, dated February 28, 2018, which won critical acclaim from all over India, and *Vanitha*, dated July 19, 2016 featured a trans woman named Deepthi on its cover page too and made a historic attempt to be the first Malayalam magazine to feature a transperson on its cover page and the cover page of *Manorma Aarogyam*, dated July 17, 2020 featuring the actress Molly Kannamaly, deliberated on the stigmas attached to dark complexion. But, recently, the *Manorama E-Weekly*, dated July 10, 2021, used the late dowry death victim Vismaya's wedding photograph in their cover, where she is decked in her jewellery. Netizens furiously attacked and trolled against this attitude of a popular magazine like *Manorama*, later the magazine called off it's cover. Talking of Malayali's obsession for gold, we've umpteen examples of dowry death to explain the same. The mushrooming jewellery shops, boutiques, and ubiquitous beauty parlours in Kerala are the best example to understand the people's changing attitudes towards the notion of weddings; it's a shame for them if they do not appear luxurious for their marriage. But there are some excellent examples too, where ladies appear without golds for their wedding.



Fig 4:- Representations that Matter. Source:- *Grihalakshmi*/Facebook, *Vanitha*/Facebook, *Manorama Aarogyam*/Facebook.

All in all, both *Mahilaratnam* and *Sahodari* played a massive role in shaping society, and it's really substantial that these two ground-breaking magazines talked about these many things years back; even though changes are accepted by society, we still have a minority that

believes that woman must be educated only to be a good housewife. The ongoing issues in the Taliban and their attack towards women are one such example. Rural, remote villages in India still practice black magic and on women to persuade them not to educate themselves on new things. The patriarchal society strangles womanhood in many different ways. Women's magazines can make a huge difference here; many innovative ideas emerge from here and there. Many women make daring attempts, and the 2021 Olympic winners including women athletes give a message to our society. The present-day Malayalam Women's magazines and the old magazines like *Lakshmibai*(1905), *Mahilaratnam*(1916), *Mahilamani*(1920), *Sanghamithra*(1920),*Mahila*(1921), *Sahodari*(1925), *Muslim Vanitha* (1926),*Vanithakusumam*(1927), *Shrimathi*(1929-30),*Mahilamandiram*(1927) played a pivotal role in shaping our society. The 19th-century womens' magazines provided opportunities for the women to talk from their perspective, and more importantly even educated men at that point of the time wrote furiously for the upliftment of women in our society and most of them purported the idea of spreading education among both female and male community. Through magazines like *Mahilaratnam* and *Sahodari* the social reformers at that early age itself spread the words of knowledge, but sadly most of the modern women's magazine fails to spread the same message; even though we boast ourselves as the most progressive society, we are still clinging on to the patriarchal norms and customs.

References

Devika, J. *Her-self: Early Writings on Gender by Malayalee women*. Kolkata: Stree, 2005.

Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. W.W. Norton & Company, 1963.

Mahilaratnam, vol.1, issue.6, vol.3, issue.6, Thiruvananthapuram, 1916. pp- 11, 28-29.

Mahilaratnam, vol.4, issue.6, Thiruvananthapuram, 1916. pp- 3-6.

Meyerowitz, Joanne. "Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Post-war Mass Culture, 1946-1958," *Journal of American History* 79, March 1993. pp- 1455-1482. p.1459.

Richardson, N. and Locks, A. *Body Studies*. Routledge, 2014.

Ringrow, H. *The Language of Cosmetics Advertising*. Palgrave Pivot,

<https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-55798-8>, 2016.

Sahodari, vol.1, issue.1, Kollam, 1925. pp- 3-5.

Sahodari, vol.1, issue.4, Kollam, 1925. pp- 26-29.

Sturgeon, Noel. *Environmentalism in Popular Culture: Gender, Race, Sexuality and the Politics of Natural*. The University of Arizona Press, 2009.

Tharu, Susie and K. Lalitha “*Women Writing in India: Volume I: 600 B.C. to the early Twentieth Century*.” Feminist Press, CUNY, 1991.

Wolf, N. *The Beauty Myth. How Images of Beauty Are Used against Women*. Harper Perennial, 2002.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. Hogarth Press, 1929.