

## Women's History: An Overview of Early Malayalam Periodicals for Women

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**Abstract:** '*Pennezhuthu*' (feminist writing or *écriture féminine*) entered common parlance in Kerala from the introduction written by the Malayalam poet cum critic Satchidanandan for a collection of short stories by writer and activist, Sarah Joseph. The term came to be used to condemn feminist writings in general. The original term, *écriture féminine*, was used by Helene Cixous suggesting that writings by women writers tend to show up the differences in women's world that undermine the phallogocentric logic and utilise free and flowing styles like the stream of consciousness. It was a means of escape for women or an antithesis to masculine writing. However, *pennezhuthu* does not differentiate among different types of women's writing, like feminine writing, feminist writing, or *écriture féminine*. The world we are allowed to see through women's periodicals in Malayalam is vivacious, fascinating and fraught with tensions. The article undertakes an in-depth historical reading of early Malayalam periodicals for women in tandem with the socio-cultural changes in Kerala society and women's history.

**Keywords:** Pennezhuthu, Kerala, Malayalam Literature, Malayalam Periodicals, Women's history, *Vanitha*

### *Pennezhuthu*

Those of us who grew up in the 1990s would be familiar with and shaped by the term, '*pennezhuthu*' (feminist writing or *écriture féminine*). The term entered common parlance from the introduction written by the Malayalam poet and critic Satchidanandan for a collection of short stories by well-known writer and activist, Sarah Joseph. (Devika 2013). He further

mentions that writings by women are criticised by conservative thinkers in Kerala. Thereafter, the term *pennezhuthu* came to be used to condemn feminist writings in general. Among the common people, the term is/was not exactly one laden with praise – both feminism and women-writing are demeaning, derogatory and abusive terms. The original term, *écriture féminine*, was used by Helene Cixous suggesting that writings by women writers tend to show up the differences in women's world that undermine the phallogocentric logic and utilise free and flowing styles like the stream of consciousness. It was a means of escape for women or an antithesis to masculine writing. However, *pennezhuthu* does not differentiate among different types of women's writing, like feminine writing, feminist writing, or *écriture féminine*.

If one looks at the canon of Malayalam literature, there is a definite dearth of women's work. Except for Mary John Thottam (1901-1985), Lalithambika Antharjanam (1909-1987), Balamani Amma (1909-2004), and K. Saraswathi Amma (1919-1975), most other writers from the period before Indian Independence is not known to the public in present-day Kerala. Works by these women generally find a place in textbooks put together for schools, not others. It is not that there were no other women writers from this period. Tharavathu Ammalu Amma (1873-1936), B. Bhageerathy Amma (year unavailable), K. Chinnamma (1882-1930), B. Kalyani Amma (1884-1959), Mary Poonen Lukose (1886-1976), Muthukulam Parvathi Amma (1904-1971), Anna Chandy (1905-1996), Halima Beevi (1918-2000), K. Kalyanikutty Amma (1920-1996), and so on are just a few of the writers and activists of the time (though many of them would not have labelled themselves as such since the category of writer, activists, etc. were in the nascent stages). They were employed in government jobs, were teachers, school inspectresses, social workers, professors, principals, public speakers, members of Sri Mulam Praja Sabha (First Legislative Council of Travancore constituted by the Travancore Maharaja in 1904), doctors, well-known authors and even members of the early political parties in existence in Malayalam-speaking regions. They published extensively, though not exclusively, in the women's magazines of the time. *Lakshmibai*, one of the women's magazines, published from Thrissur every month was estimated to have had 221 women writers at various times (E.K. 2001). Yet, neither these women nor their writings are recognised or present in the canon of Malayalam literature. They do not appear to have made it into the 'high' literature that Satchidanandan mentions. The essays, articles or treatises written by these women have been lost in time. There have been moves to re-claim and study some of these writers and their work in the past few decades through various media and at various levels (Velayudhan 1994, E.K.

2001, Devika 2005, Pradeep 2016, Antony 2013a, Jayasree 2015, Muringatheri 2019, Vinayan & Raj 2019) including unpublished theses at the various universities in Kerala (Satish 1990, Antony 2005, Padiyara 2013, Rekha 2016, Verma 2017).<sup>1</sup>

Books that deal with the history of Malayalam literature tend to overlook magazine writers. Magazines have always been located lower on the social ladder because they cater to the general public. They would have professional writers, but the writers may or may not have expertise on the subject being discussed. The articles would rarely have citations, bibliography or footnotes to back up the research. Both in contemporary times and colonial times, female and male writers would often publish their literary works in serialised form in magazines before compiling them into book form. This then adds weight to the fact that magazines were an accessible medium and stepping stones to the more concrete form of the book. A few of the early Malayalam women writers' works were later compiled and published as books. Hence, it is safe to assume that the articles of these writers did have some kind of readership, even though the figures are not available now. Academic writing, in the present, has been trying to throw light on the vibrant world of the women's periodicals (a publication that is published regularly or occasionally), both within Kerala and in other parts of India.

Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha in their seminal work *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the early Twentieth Century* outlines some of the important theories on women's writing. They espouse in the "Introduction",

Women articulate and respond to ideologies from complexly constituted and decentred positions ...Familial ideologies, for instance, clearly constitute male and female subjectivities in different ways, as do ideologies of nation or of empire. Further, ideologies are not experienced – or contested – in the same way from different subject positions. What may appear just and rational from a male or upper-class point of view may seem exploitative and contradictory from a working-class woman's point of view. If we restrain ourselves from enthusiastically recovering women's writing to perform the same services to society and nation that mainstream literature over the last hundred years has been called upon to do, we might learn to read compositions that emerge from these eccentric locations in a new way; we might indeed learn to read them not for the moments in which they collude with or

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<sup>1</sup> This is not an exhaustive list, but indicative of the relatively well-known or accessible records.

reinforce dominant ideologies of gender, class, nation or empire, but for the gestures of defiance or subversion implicit in them (1991, 35).

This anthology was put together nearly three decades ago. Yet, the framework it provides is still useful, especially in my work that looks at women's writings that have been forgotten or obscured intentionally or unintentionally. They provide a different standpoint to mainstream narratives of cultural history. Since this article is based on historical materials, any of the ideas that have been tentatively put forward is subject to change if and when new materials come to light. Additionally, my location within a middle-class, middle-caste position in society is the lens through which I read these materials located in the past. So, my reading of the materials and milieu of early twentieth century Malayalam-speaking regions is subjective even when I try to take an objective position.

### The print medium

Robin Jeffrey, speaking about the history and influence of the print media in Kerala in "Testing Concepts about Print, Newspapers, and Politics: Kerala, India, 1800-2009", says, "The authority of ordered type and the sobriety of the printed page legitimize challenges that would be difficult to articulate or take seriously if merely spoken. In its scarce form, partly by its specialness, print acquires its own authority and a certain magic" (2009, 478). This "scarce form" that Jeffrey mentions is the second stage of the growth of the print medium in a place or state where it had more reach and influence over the people and simultaneously created problems for authority than it did in the initial stages of the development of the medium. During this period, newspapers and magazines with low circulation were produced almost like "small handicraft business" (Jeffrey quoting Habermas, 181). The stage before this he calls "rare", when printing presses existed but were exclusive and rare. The third stage is "mass" when print becomes a mass medium. Historically, Kerala had a large number of publications including magazines and newspapers. As per the Information and Public Relations Department of Kerala, there were 76 newspapers and 560 periodicals registered in Kerala as of 2010 (*Proceedings of the Twelfth Kerala Legislative Assembly*). Compare this to the number of periodicals being published from Travancore at 92 with an estimated circulation of 82,000, from Cochin at 23 with an estimated circulation of 15,000 and from Malabar at 28 with an estimated circulation

of 23,017 in 1921.<sup>2</sup> From the 1900s, Malayalam-speaking regions saw the second stage of the development of print media.

The first Malayalam magazine was published in 1847, while the earliest women's magazine, *Keraleeya Sugunabodhini* (making Kerala women aware or educating them on good qualities to be attained) started publication in the 1880s.<sup>3</sup> Several magazines were published specifically for women in Malayalam-speaking regions. *Sharada* (1904), *Lakshmibai* (1905), *Maryrani* (1913), *Bhashasharada* (1915), *Sumangala* (1916), *Mahilaratnam* (1916), *(Christava) Mahilamani* (1920), *Sanghamithra* (1920), *Mahila* (1921), *Sevini* (1924), *Sahodari* (1925), *Muslim Vanitha* (1926), *Vanithakusumam* (1927), *Shrimathi* (1929-30), *Mahilamandiram* (1927), *Malayalamasika* (1929), *Sthree* (1933), *Vanitharamam* (1942), and *Vanithamithram* (1944) are some of the periodicals found in the various archives and mentioned in the administrative reports from Malayalam-speaking regions.<sup>4</sup> From the time the first women's magazine was published to the time of Indian Independence, there were around 20 Malayalam women's magazines being published at different times (E.K. 2001). Some of them were published for short periods, while others like *Mahila* which went on to run for 20 years was the longest-running women's periodical in pre-independent Kerala.

In the 1900s, magazines moved from a merely commercial venture into a literary venture in Malayalam-speaking regions. The aim or vision was to influence public opinion with the commercial aspect, if at all it existed, receding into the background (Jeffrey 2009). In the first issue of *Malayalamasika*, published in 1929, the opening essay titled "Swantham Karyam", which could be roughly translated as 'our purpose', the editor(s) wrote:

We have heard it being mockingly said that there are too many newspapers and magazines in Malayalam. Whether this be true or not, since our journey is with a specific purpose, we hope that our venture would not be mocked at.

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<sup>2</sup> A decade later, in 1930, 63 newspapers and 95 periodicals were being published from Travancore. Similarly, the number of newspapers decreased in Malabar to 21 with a slight increase in circulation to 24,800. From, "Travancore Administration Report 1105 M.E./1929-1930: Seventy Fourth Annual Report" and "Census of India, 1931, Vol XIV, Madras, Part I, Report."

<sup>3</sup> G. Priyadarshanan (1974) has done an extensive study of the early Malayalam magazines. However, the exact year of the publication of *Keraleeya Sugunabodhini* is mentioned as various years in the book, and other locations, possibly because the publication was stopped at various times and restarted after months or years.

<sup>4</sup> For more details on these magazines and writers see, Priyadarshanan (1974), E.K. (2001), Devika (2005), Antony (2013a, 2013b) and Rekha (2016).

This magazine is specifically for discussing matters pertaining to women's education and other issues related to women alone. We have not heard of any newspapers or other news medium being published in Malabar specifically for this purpose. There is a magazine called *Lakshmibai* that is being published from Thrissur in Cochin state from about two dozen years. Though it is for women, it is not run by women. There is a magazine and newspaper called *Mahila* and *Shrimathi* being brought out from Travancore with this same aim. They are both being run by capable women. However, it is doubtful if these magazines have sufficient popularity in Malabar. Whatsoever, if our understanding about the situation in Malabar is right, then starting a magazine here for women, run by women, would not be undesirable. Now even if there is another such publication, we believe there is nothing wrong in wishing for such a magazine for ourselves (1-2).

It is clear from the editorial note quoted here that the editors envisaged *Malayalamasika* as more than a commercial venture. It simultaneously gives one the feel of a handicraft business that Habermas mentions, i.e. independent editorship taking over from the printer-publisher. Critical/rational reflections become more important than monetary advantage in this phase. It is noteworthy that the editors thought that Malabar needed a separate magazine despite the concurrent presence of three other women's periodicals. Unlike Travancore and Cochin, Malabar was under direct British rule and the state of education, schooling and other social indicators were different for the region. This would be an added impetus to start a separate magazine in the region. Moreover, though people in the three regions spoke the same language and there seems to have been some amount of exchange of ideologies happening among the regions, the geographical divide did pose problems in terms of circulation and access. Furthermore, B. Kalyani Amma, one of the main writers (and possibly editor) of *Malayalamasika*, was the wife of Swadeshabhimani Ramakrishna Pillai. He had been banished from Travancore in 1910. They moved to Malabar and Kalyani Amma was working as a teacher and headmistress in Malabar at the time this magazine was started. Earlier, she had been part of the editorial team and a writer of *Sharada* (published from Thripunithura) which stopped publication in 1924 (Priyadarsanan 1974). So, it would seem as if this magazine was a continuation of her earlier work, but located in Malabar.

Interestingly, the editor of *Mahila*, B. Bhageerathi Amma, was the elder sister of Kalyani Amma (Awaya 2003). And K. Chinnamma, who started *Mahilamandiram* was a close

friend of Kalyani Amma. Even though magazines were being published from specific locations within pre-Independent Kerala and had limited circulation (in most cases), there was an overlap among the writers of the magazines. Additionally, it was not just women who wrote in the women's periodicals, there were men, some of whom were known literary figures and educationists like Ulloor S. Parameswara Iyer, Puthezhathu Raman Menon, Kodungallur Kunjikuttan Thampuran, Kuttipuzha Krishna Pilla, R. Eshwarapilla, etc. Similarly, a few of the women writers contributed their articles, poetry and fictional writings to the general magazines from the period.

Magazines mobilised people around social, cultural and political issues indirectly. Therefore, print media and the government had quite the contentious relationship, especially in Travancore. In 1910, *Swadeshabhimani* was banned by the Travancore government. Jeffrey mentions that all the governments in Malayalam-speaking regions kept a close watch on newspapers by the 1920s. *Malayala Manorama*, the newspaper, was banned in 1938 because it was seen as inciting people to disobey the law. The *Dheenabandu* (from Thrissur), *Deshabhimani* (Kozhikode), *Malabar Mail* (Ernakulam), *Al-Ameen* (Kozhikode), and *Prabhatam* (Shoranur) were some of the other newspapers that had their licence cancelled, staff jailed or banned by the various governments in colonial Kerala in the first half of the twentieth century ("History of Media in Kerala").

It is probably because of this, women's magazines were careful to distance themselves from anything that could be constructed as anti-British, anti-national or thorny political issues. There was a hegemonic sense of private/domestic/religious vs public/political divide (Devika 2007, Antony 2013b). It was assumed that women had only ornamental roles to play in the political sphere and their domain was the private/domestic/religious. For instance, *Mahilamandiram* edited by G. Parukutti Amma and published from Tiruvella (with an estimated circulation figure of 1400 copies in 1930) was noted as a social and religious publication in government record (*The Statistics of Travancore: Eleventh Issue: 1105/1929-1930*). The "tone and position of the journal" *Lakshmibai* (circulation figure of 1000 copies in 1911) was noted as being of literary and social nature in the *Report on the Administration of Cochin for the Year 1086 ME/1910-11*. The magazine with the highest circulation figures was *Vanithakusumam* (with 2000 copies being printed in 1930, edited by V.C. John). It is noted as "advocating the progress and welfare of women" (*The Statistics of Travancore*). The role

played by women and women's periodicals were assumed to be a non-threatening one. Or to put it differently, the role had to be a non-threatening one if the periodical had to escape government notice. It was not that none of the articles was political in nature. There were write-ups on the use of Khadi cloth, starting with small-scale industries influenced by M.K. Gandhi, the Home Rule movement, Temple Entry Proclamation, etc. But, the tone in which the idea or ideology was presented was different from that one would expect in isochronous general magazines and newspapers. One could even state tentatively that the early women's periodicals seem to have set the tone for contemporary women's magazines by distancing overtly political matters from them. The paradox here is that many of the women writers were part of nationalist movements and the daughters, wives and siblings of social, political and community reformers. Despite the presence of these women who were active in the political movements and community reform movements from the colonial period, and the continued presence of women in such movements, the hegemonic assumption (even in the present) is that women's sphere is not political.

#### Locating women's periodicals

The following section tries to place the unique position occupied by women's periodical in the social and cultural milieu of Malayalam-speaking regions in the first half of the twentieth century. The periodicals from before Indian Independence were being published during a time society was going through tremendous upheavals in the social, communal, educational, cultural and political arenas. Irony, humour, history, mythology, reason and rhetoric were used in varying levels to school women in the world view of the writers and editors. The women's periodicals were avenues where women could air their views, a public arena to voice their opinions without physically taking themselves out of their comfort zones and homes. A few of the women writers of the period were public speakers and members of women's groups called *sthreesamajams*. These public spaces were often hostile to women. The women's groups were jeered at by people and crowds were hostile at public meetings. B. Anandavalliamma mentions in her article "Sthreekallude Samuhyajeevithathinte Naveekaranathilantheerbhavikkunna Prashnangal" (issues faced by women in modern social spaces or public life) published in *Mahila* in 1939 that it was considered shameful to talk to men. Hence, these magazines opened out a new world to the women. They could read about other places, customs, reforms happening



in the social and political sphere. In a sense, this supplemented the schooling experience by providing women with the opportunity to brush up on their reading skills and to continue their education informally.

As the name suggests, *Maryrani* (Queen Mary) and *Muslim Vanitha* (the Muslim woman) were specifically for women from particular communities. *Sanghamithra* (the eldest daughter of Emperor Ashoka, who joined a Buddhist order and went to Sri Lanka for Buddhist missionary activities) and *Sevini* (one who helps, supports or serves) were purportedly aimed at the upliftment and awakening of Ezhava women (Rekha 2016), but the other magazines were supposedly for everybody. When the editor of *Christava Mahilamani* (with an estimated circulation of 1500 in 1930)<sup>5</sup> realised that the magazine's name was giving the impression that it was merely for Christian women, he removed 'Christava' from the title in 1932 (Pradeep 2016).

Academics like G. Priyadarshanan (1974, 2011), Meera Velayudhan (1994), K. Saradamoni (1999), E.K. Swarna Kumari (2001), J. Devika (2002, 2005, 2007, 2013) and Toshie Awaya (2003) have done pioneering work on and deriving from print media, specifically periodicals from the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries. Priyadarshanan's work is an exhaustive study of the magazines published in Malayalam-speaking regions in the past. He looks at the content, writers and other details of the magazines published from the late nineteenth century to (roughly) mid-twentieth century. Meera Velayudhan postulates the construction of a new gender identity by the early women writers through a thorough reading of the articles published in magazines like *Shrimati*, *Mahila*, *Sarada*, and *Yogashemam*. She states that though these women seemed to go back to earlier texts for role models, they "create a different self-image" (78) grounded in the social reform movements and women's movement of the period. K. Saradamoni's work concentrates on the feminist leanings of the early women writers. E.K. Swarna Kumari speaks about the social significance of women's magazines printed from Kerala and how they produce a discussion on issues related to women in her essay. J. Devika's wide-ranging work on the social reform period in Kerala draws from the writings of many of these magazine writers. She posits that Malayali society was structured on gender differences and one's individualism was based on or derived from this difference. She puts forward the idea of a public/domestic divide that shaped the discourse on social reform and

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<sup>5</sup> "The Statistics of Travancore: Eleventh Issue".

women's education in the period. Toshie Awaya has focused specifically on *Lakshmibai*, *Sharada* and *Mahila* in her essay and the emergence of a gendered citizen in colonial Kerala. She does mention that this reading is heavily influenced by the upper-caste and class positions of the writers in these magazines.

Among the periodicals published specifically for women, most of the issues of *Lakshmibai*, *Sharada* and *Mahila* are available in the various archives. As a result, theorisations on the social and cultural sphere of colonial Kerala have been largely based on these three magazines. Since magazines like *Lakshmibai*, *Bhashasharada*, *Sharada*, *Mahila*, *Mahilamandiram*, *Malayalamasika*, etc. were edited by or catered to a predominantly upper to middle caste and class Hindu women, they do not capture the social and cultural aspirations and world view of women belonging to other communities and classes. A study of the periodicals that include magazines like *Sanghamithra*, *Sevini*, *Sahodari*, *Muslim Vanitha* and *Vanithakusumam* would help to provide a more nuanced image of the lives and aspirations of women who lived in the period.

Though the general idea was that the periodicals were for women everywhere in Malayalam-speaking regions, a close reading of the articles reveal that they addressed women from Travancore, Cochin and Malabar, consciously or unconsciously, through use of terms such as 'my sisters from Travancore', 'women of Cochin', and so on. Today, one tends to think of Kerala as a unified unit, forgetting that less than a hundred years ago, the land was ruled by different entities. However, these phrases peppering the early magazines show one of the fissures along which Malayali women (and men) were divided during the colonial period. Moreover, even when the women's periodicals stated that they were meant for women in general, there would be articles addressing women from specific castes and communities, especially Nair women, in magazines like *Sharada*, *Mahila* and *Lakshmibai*. Nevertheless, these magazines were read by women from diverse communities. *Vanitharamam*, for example, carried articles on language and literature studies and catered to high school and college girls (Rekha 2016). Consequently, many colleges in Kerala had copies of it in their libraries and would have been read by women from different communities. Similarly, *Mahila* was subscribed in government schools. Many of the early magazines published their subscription list (Antony 2013a). These show the diversity of their readership in terms of caste and community. Besides, it reinforces the educational purpose of the periodicals.

In numerous articles in the various periodicals, one would come across the term Malayali woman being used to denote women from the Nair caste alone. There was a close identification of the Nair identity with the newly emerging Malayali identity (Kumar 2007) in the first half of the twentieth century. The community/religion/caste of the other women would be pre-fixed to the term *sthreekal* or *vanithakal* when referring to them (for example, *ezhavasthreekal*, *christianvanithakal*). The magazine writers from the Nair sub-castes seem to conflate Nair women with Malayali women and citizenship non-problematically. There is a sense of entitlement attached to religion and caste that is blind to the presence of this biased entitlement. While these magazines run by Nair women did deal with issues pertinent to the community there was also a kind of prejudice or reserve against women's magazines started by (wo)men belonging to other communities (Awaya 2003). This could also explain why *Malayalamasika* mentions only three magazines when at least three other magazines were being published concurrently in Malayalam, of which *Vanithakusumam* was the most popular (going by the subscription figures). Of course, these magazines were owned by men, which would have been why they do not count as proper women's magazines according to the editors of *Malayalamasika*.

In magazines like *Vanithakusumam*, there is a broader definition of the term 'Malayali woman'. A perusal of the articles published in *Vanithakusumam* shows that there were fewer articles in the magazine on matriliney and issues related to Nair reformism. When women models from the Puranas and mythology, like Sita, Damayanti, Savitri, etc. could be found abundantly in *Mahila* and *Lakshmibai*, other periodicals like *Vanithakusumam* and (*Christava*) *Mahilamani* had quotes, stories and examples from the Bible. *Vanithakusumam* especially had references to socio-cultural customs from Israel, Egypt, Rome and the Arab world (Antony 2013a).

Parallel to religious and mythological characters, Malayali women were introduced to national and international women and their lifestyles. Case in point, in one of the articles written by someone called K.L.P. ("Sthreekallude Vimochanam" [Women's emancipation or freedom]), there is a reference to Russian women who work alongside their husband. They are shown as having financial security and resultant freedom. Russian women used to serve in the army and the author mentions that Malayali women who ask for 'freedom' should be similarly ready to serve in the army as this was an important aspect of being a responsible citizen. One

would frequently come across articles on women from Western countries like Austria, Australia, Belgium, England, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and U.S.A in the periodicals. Some articles touched upon the lives of women in Asian countries like Burma, China and Japan. Chinese and Japanese women were always models worth emulating (Aandipilla 1909, Manjja 1928, Bhageerathamma 1932). The perceived soft nature of these women and their hardworking nature were appreciated. They were also seen as less disruptive and competitive compared to Western women. Though Western women's lifestyle and customs were not always presented as something to be imitated or followed in the Indian milieu, not all Western women were presented as being a bad influence on Malayali women. Florence Nightingale and Queen Victoria were offered as good role models to imitate time and again in the magazines. Occasionally one would also come across an article that spoke about Suffragettes like Christabel Harriette Pankhurst. However, it was difficult to find women who had a history of perpetrating violence against any kind of authority, particularly the British. In addition to the foreign models, there were also references to women and their lifestyles from other parts of India – these included Bengali, Parsi and Tamil women. At one point there was so much criticism of Malayali women imitating the dress and jewellery of Bengali and Parsi women that one of the writers was forced to state that though people spoke about imitating Parsi styles, most Malayalis would not have seen Parsis in reality to imitate their dressing styles (Kalyaniamma 1915).

Women's periodicals were an avenue for the writers, editors and publishers to 'educate' women. Not just in terms of schooling, which is to do with going to school and everything connected to that, but also in terms of women being taught to be better and ideal 'women'. They had to be educated on comportment, dressing, behaviour, moral values, ethical values, being a wife and mother, living in the conjugal unit of the nuclear family as opposed to the joint-family, taking up crafts and skills, cooking skills, physical well-being, hygiene, health, contraception, developing nationalist feelings, religious and caste affinity, modernity, dowry, child marriage, and so on. There were literary pieces based on mythology, religious texts, short stories, poems, novels and criticism; information on agriculture, Ayurveda, science and medicine; articles on art, music, historical figures, artists, and history; and general-purpose topics like economics, home economics, national news, astrology, lifestyle, and general knowledge.

Within the women's periodicals published before the Indian Independence, there is a general shift in ideology that one can perceive towards the 1920s. Until the 1920s most of the articles were on the need for women's education, training women in appropriate forms of domesticity (Antony 2013b), their duties, possible role models for women to emulate and so on. From the 1920s onwards the articles take on social and political issues – child marriage, Home Rule, contraception, dowry, marriage bills, suicides, educational curriculum, nationalism, Gandhian ideology and so on. Women's education, *sthreedharmam* (women's duties), *sthreeswathandryam* (women's freedom), and modernity<sup>6</sup> are the main concepts that are found repeatedly in a majority of the articles. Periodicals published from the late 1920s, like *Shrimati* and *Vanithakusumam* were more assertive and radical in the positions they espoused as opposed to an earlier *Sharada* and *Lakshmibai*.

By this time, it becomes a taken-for-granted idea that women need modern education. Education would not only make the women fitting partners for the menfolk, but instil qualities that would make them better women, and mothers. Until the 1920s there was a perceived difference among career-oriented women and married women. But, after this period, with the increase in the number of married, career women, that difference disappears. In the 1920s and 1930s, many women were entering jobs previously reserved for men and new avenues were opening up for them in the public sphere. The joint-families was giving way to nuclear families and matrilineal groups were moving towards patrilineal customs. Lifestyles and dressing styles of both women and men were changing as a result of colonialism, community reforms and the

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<sup>6</sup> Kerala Modernity was different from the Western definition of the term. This was ushered in by the advent of modern English education and institutions and influenced the social, literary, cultural, and political spheres of Kerala from the nineteenth century. In literature, it was a movement away from dependence on Sanskrit works. For more details read, Bose & Varghese, *Kerala Modernity: Ideas, Spaces, and Practices in Transition* (2015); Osella, Caroline & Osella, *Social Mobility in Kerala: Modernity and Identity in Conflict* (2000); Choukroune & Bhandari, *Exploring Indian Modernities: Ideas and Practices* (2018), P. Govinda Pillai, *Kerala Navodhanam Oru Marxist Veekshanam – Onnam Sanchika* (2004).

Western modernity arose out of Renaissance and Enlightenment in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It refers to specific socio-cultural ethos, practices, attitudes and norms that followed from these two moments in history in Europe. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's work on modernity is a useful starting point to know more about the Western understanding of modernity.

emerging nationalism. New ideas on health, hygiene, medicine and exercise had been ushered in different from the existing health practices. Following from these and other changes happening in the social sphere, there was the general perception that women were getting disconnected from their traditional roles. The fear was they would lose their *sthreetwam* (the essence of being a woman connected to her *sthreedharmam*). So, education had the double and opposing burden (1) of educating them in modern ways and (2) teaching them to become women (and men) firmly rooted in traditional values and morals. Among the various magazines and newspapers from this period in Malayalam-speaking regions, there are hundreds of articles dealing specifically with education (Antony 2013, 36, footnote 1) that shows how important the educational project was in colonial Kerala.

Women became more enmeshed within domestic structures than before in early twentieth-century Kerala. Many of the modern public institutions like the schools, hospitals and even the modern community were seen as working better with discretionary sense, persuasion, patience and the power of words (Devika 2007). It was suggested that women's feminine qualities or natural capacities made them naturally inclined to such spaces and jobs. Further, their natural capacities were needed for the functioning of these spaces. Education, the writers put forward, was critical to this process. By the 1920s, the debates were on what should be the content of this education. Since women had different roles to take on at home and in society, it was suggested by a few writers that there needed to be a differentiation in the curriculum for girls and boys. Women needed to be able to nurture the new generation and guide the men. They needed to run the household and be a moral disciplinarian and loving nurturer. The education of the mother would improve the household and the larger nation. However, writers or the common people from Malayalam-speaking areas were not particularly keen on an education that was dominated by the fine arts and domestic sciences (like it was suggested in Bengali magazines. Bengali women were quite frequently the 'other' to Malayali women [Antony 2013b]). Government reports from the period mention that they were hardly any takers for courses like Domestic Science instituted in government-run schools, and women and their families were more interested in acquiring skills that led to modern jobs (Antony 2013b). The socially acceptable industry or employment for women were ones that did not take her away from her duties at home and maintained her womanly qualities (*sthreetwam*).

*Streeswathandryam* and modernity were interrelated in the colonial Malayali psyche. Both these terms had multiple meanings and could connote negative or positive values depending on who was using it and in what situation. *Streeswathandryam* that developed into individualism which degenerated into egoism, self-interest, and the placement of one's own desires above that of one's family and community was looked down upon. Therefore, in the debates, education was charged with ushering in the right attitude within the women. *Swathandryam* that led to financial autonomy and ability to run the house and hearth autonomously were welcomed.

Various communities were in the process of reforming their dressing styles for women and men in the early twentieth century which was related to caste reforms and the emergence of nationalism. Therefore, *sthreeswathandryam* was, according to its critics, leading educated women to adopt styles from that of other communities/castes. Those supporting the dress reform went on to give examples of women from other communities wearing the blouse (Brahmins and Christians) or the sari (Parsis and north Indians) for years without falling into immorality or dissolution (Lakshmiamma 1906, R.P. 1921). These debates should also be read in the background of the Dress reform movement or Breast-cloth movement that shook colonial Kerala in the nineteenth century. While then, it was a movement that was seen as imitating European or upper caste women, here the imitation of other Indian women bears the brunt of traditionalists' ire (Any kind of dress reform involving women seems to draw intense debate in present-day Kerala as was seen in the debate on wearing Salwar-Kameezs to temples and educational institutions).

Modernity or *adhunikatha*, often conflated with *parishkaram*, was delineated into various strands – moral, intellectual and external/physical. Moral *parishkaram* was acceptable if women retained their womanly qualities. Morality was also seen as the forte of Indian culture as opposed to the worldliness of Western culture. Intellectual *parishkaram* was related to science, literature and arts and was acceptable. External *parishkaram* imagined as being related to customs, lifestyles, dressing, food habits, etc. were a complicated terrain. The progressive or radical thinkers had to defend any kind of change labelled *parishkaram*. *Parishkaram* had different meanings: it could mean change, progress, imitation, culture, and so on. In "Sthreejanangallude Abhyunnathi" (women's progress), written by Kochukrishnapilla in Sharada (1918), *parishkaram* takes on meanings like culture and civilization:

There is evidence that in olden times women had a talent for the arts, and also that they were not without *parishkaaram*. Like in the 20th century there were music experts, writers, fighters, experts in rulership at various stages of our history. But these women were not idealized as model women. Women like Sheelavathy, Satyavathy, Damayanthi and Sita were neither literati nor famous for their ability to rule. Mrs Annie Besant, Mrs Sarojini Naidu, Miss. Sathyabala Devi and Miss. Tarabai are known today not only in India but all over parishkrithalokham (civilized world). (Kochukrishnapilla, 1918: 269).

What is to be noted in all the discussions about education, *swathandryam*, or *parishkaram* is that there were several positions and meanings to these terms. A writer who would appear to be taking a liberal position regarding women's education would oppose modernity in another article.

Women from different communities were coming together in the space of the printed medium, and in physical spaces like schools, meetings, libraries, hospitals, and various kinds of jobs, different from an earlier time. There was the contradictory pull of wanting to and having to carve a space for women as a singular entity and as women belonging to separate communities in this new public sphere. The world we are allowed to see through women's periodicals in Malayalam is vivacious, fascinating and fraught with tensions.

In the present day, the Indian magazine with the second-highest number of readers is a Malayalam fortnightly, *Vanitha* (Audit Bureau of Circulations) with a sales figure of 3.4 lakhs. The online site of *Vanitha* mentions, "If Malayali women have broken through gender barriers and glass ceilings, a bit of the credit goes to *Vanitha*" (*Vanitha*, "Feminine Grace & Substance"). Launched in 1975, countless Malayali girls and women grew up reading *Vanitha*, which included articles on behaviour, etiquette, health (general & sexual), pregnancy and care, contraception, childcare, cooking recipes and tips, columns written by doctors, psychologists, academics, public figures, articles on actresses/actors, important events in the social and cultural sphere, housing and related issues and much more. It is not just women who read *Vanitha*, but also men. Catering to the aspirations of a middle-class woman and family, the magazine usually espouses hegemonic trend(s).

Periodicals published in the decades before Indian Independence had a sense of urgency and purpose that is no longer seen in contemporary Malayalam magazines for women. This



could be due to the change from a scarce medium that Jeffrey mentions to a mass medium. The focus of a magazine like *Vanitha* is entertainment. Information, education, reform, community issues and the other aspects that were extremely important for the early women's periodicals are secondary to entertainment. This is not to say that *Vanitha* does not do any of these. The very popularity of the magazine shows that it accommodates the desires and ambitions of contemporary society. Moreover, there is no doubt that the magazine has been instrumental in subtly influencing the worldview of generations of Malayali women. From a very Christian standpoint in the initial stages, the magazine now makes an effort to include content for women belonging to different communities (though possibly upwardly mobile lower-class and middle-class groups) in Kerala. There have been anecdotal references to Christian families beginning to cook the Onam *sadya* as a result of the plethora of Onam recipes in the magazine and the influence of other mass media (Until two to three decades ago, Onam was not celebrated in many Christian households, especially those that were located in predominantly Christian belts).

*Vanitha* is published in a post-feminist world. Women's education, freedom or modernity are not ideals to aspire for but have already been achieved or appear to have been achieved. If the writers in the first half of the twentieth century were trying to put together a coherent, utilitarian, nationalist, steeped in tradition but looking forward to the future image of the woman, for the writers of *Vanitha* now that the difficult war has been won, it is only the smaller battles that need to be faced.

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