

PARADOXES OF *PARDHA* AND AGENCY AMONG MUSLIM WOMEN IN KERALA *

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*Abstract: Following the oil boom of the 1970s in the Arabian Gulf, the region witnessed massive labour migration waves from the Southwestern Indian state of Kerala. The impact of the migration on the Arabian Gulf countries led to unprecedented advancements in the human development index of Kerala, especially among Muslims who were most affected by the tremendous social change. In this paper, I focus on only one sign of this socio-cultural change that was reflected in the adoption of the female Arab black attire, termed *pardha* in Kerala. What I will be arguing through the coming pages is the paradoxical formula where *pardha* was enforced as a marker of identity, but had nevertheless created emancipatory tools out of the confining frameworks of traditional patriarchy as characteristic of much of Keralite society. This paper seeks to convey the different debates surrounding this phenomenon and what women themselves have to say about it. This paper focuses on fieldwork undertaken in two districts of northern Kerala or what is known as Malabar, namely Malappuram and Kozhikode.*

Keywords: *Kerala, pardha, Muslim women, gulf migration*

Contextual introduction

Kerala, being the most south western region in India, had direct access to the Arab world via the Arabian Sea. The six northern districts of what is known today as Kerala comprise the historical area named Malabar, which had been involved in a trade-based history that goes back, in certain accounts, to even before the

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time of the emergence of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century.¹ Whereas the Arab World was historically dependent on the trade with Malabar, contemporarily, the cultural and economic ties are reversed.

Since the oil boom in the 1970s, the economical links between India and the Arab World became dependent on labour migration to build up the newly developing Gulf States. Kerala is considered the main source of Indian labour to the Gulf, where six million Indians reside (Government of UPA Report 2013), hence Kerala's economy has become reliant on remittances from Gulf migration.

In Malabar region, Malappuram is the district with the highest Muslim population amounting to 68.5 percent. Emigration to the Gulf states plays a major role in shaping the Malabari society, especially that Malappuram district is considered to outnumber the rest of the districts of Kerala in emigration (17.5 percent of emigrants from Kerala are from Malappuram) but not in return emigration. In Kerala, 52.5 percent of Muslim households have one or more non-resident Keralite. In Malappuram alone, 71 percent of the households have in them either an emigrant or a return emigrant each. The largest amount of remittances in 2007 was received by Malappuram district, which amounted to 19 percent of the total remittances for the state. Around 50 percent of the remittances to the state were received by the Muslim community, which forms less than 25 percent of the total population of the state. Malayalee Muslim residents in the Gulf amount to 1.6 millions. 22.9 percent of married Muslim women are Gulf wives (whose husbands live and work in the Gulf) (Zachariah and Rajan 2007).² Due to the rising numbers of Keralites in the Gulf states, both Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates decided to open consulates in Kerala to accommodate for the demands of the large (largest in the case of the UAE) Indian workforce community and to encourage business (Times of India, 12/10/2011; 6/01/2013).

Since job opportunities are scarce in Kerala due to the low industrial level and the rural nature of the state, emigration seems to be the main option. However, emigration is heavily directed towards the Gulf and not towards other states of India. High levels of income that match the high consumption levels of Keralites are not the only reason for this orientation. Another major factor is the cheap daily direct flights to the Gulf implying it is more accessible than going to Delhi (almost everyone who was living in the Gulf whom I spoke with has never been to Delhi).

¹ Malabar also features in Indian history records pertaining to the Independence struggle on the part of Muslims and the Malabar rebellion of 1921-22.

² Leela Gulati in her book *In the Absence of their Men: The Impact of Male Migration on Women* showcases narratives of Gulf wives covering different demographical and economical situations.

This led to cultural attachments especially among Muslim Malayalees (known as Mappilas) to the Arabs and a strong sense of emulation in food and dress habits.

In today's Kerala, especially Malabar or the Northern part, the majority of Muslims, who are known as the *Mappila* Muslims of Malabar, one can see the prevalence of the traditional Gulf female attire called 'Abbayah in Arabic, which was introduced in the Keralite setting as *pardha* and as a word does not have any resonance in Arabic. It should be noted that the term *pardha* or *pardah* has a different connotation in the Indian context. Historically, it referred to female seclusion from the public space in general and contemporarily it refers to mainly the act of hiding the female face in public spaces with the shawl or the end of the *saree*, regardless of religious affiliation as it was a practice (and still is in some rural areas) common among both Hindus and Muslims (de Souza 2004; Gabriel and Hannan 2011). However, in Kerala it denotes the black long dress worn by the Arab Gulf women. And in the North Indian context, the black attire is called *burqa*, which is actually an Arabic word. How the word *pardha* traveled to the Keralite context remains an undiscovered linguistic domain.³

The discourses concerning *pardha* have been raging for about a decade. The arguments are manifested on multiple levels: everyday life, the media and intellectual circles. The forces of contention are concentrated among two groups; those who call themselves the secularists and those labeled as Islamic feminists. They stand against the Muslim orthodox voices, sided by the common woman who in the majority of cases does not hold a specifically apparent sociopolitical orientation to the question of *pardha*. After 2005, with the conversion of the Malayalam poet Kamala Das (later Kamala Surayya) and her propagation of *pardha* as a means of a sense of liberation, the perception of *pardha* as an oppressive veiling instrument was entirely absent from the psyche of the common Keralite woman, who as I would be showing dealt with it in a manner different from the intellectuals.

The opponent camp's argument coincides with the rejection of the de-traditionalization of the Keralite society and the adoption of contemporary foreign Arabic cultural icons, especially consumerist and hegemonic ones. In a society characterized by a strong ability to accommodate foreign elements, this case of

³ According to Osella & Osella (2007) the Malayalees use the word 'abayya to denote the expensive imported *pardha* that carries rich symbolic capital since it is originally worn by the wealthy Arab Women of the Gulf. However, during my stay in Kerala, I did not encounter anyone who says 'abayya. Eventually the differences came down to how much embroidery or "work" on it that gives it its value, and whether it is locally produced or imported.

adoption of the *pardha* dress is associated with other phenomena such as the introduction of Egyptian, Saudi and Yemeni popular food in all restaurants in and around Kerala. The cultural flow is mixed with strong economic incentives that led to successful business enterprises in manufacturing and selling these Arab popular lifestyles. Male-based cults conspired with market mechanisms to create trends that dislocated the agency of women in deciding or 'coding' their dressing style. During the last ten years, the consequent forces of social change and globalization have led to an interesting alteration in conceptions of fashion, especially in a society characterized by strong traditional rural values.

The South Indian society witnessed massive social changes linked with women's forms of dress. Though they were not conceived as agents in setting mainstream rules of decency, women, especially Muslims, were the most evident subjects of social change. Inherent and traditional conceptions of decency and sexuality in the South Indian society were reshaped through different phases often trespassing the barriers of caste and religion (Jones 1989; Kertzner 1988; Devika 2007). These phases started with the Breast Cloth controversy of the early nineteenth century that culminated in wiping out the ban on low caste Hindu women to cover their bosoms (Hardgrave 1968), to the adoption of the originally Brahminical North Indian attire, known as the *saree*, then the switching to the *salwarqameez*, and lastly the *pardha*.

Should we hence regard the *pardha* trend as a Gramscian phenomenon of hegemony since there is some implied consensual internal acceptance, or should we borrow Bourdieu's (1977) hybrid concept of symbolic violence that refers to the contradictory or double reality of conduct that is intrinsically equivocal? The case of the Keralite Muslim women illustrates these interwoven questions of agency, consumerism and fashion. This paper attempts at demonstrating these different arguments and showing the paradoxes of the symbolic meaning of agency, self-image and domination. One observation is the irony of how in a society where women outnumber men and hence control the outcome of the political process through the electoral ballots, their agency is continually denied and manipulated. However, the picture is more complex, once we employ the feminist outlook of situated knowledge (Haraway 1998) and take account of the absent narratives of the common woman. As I would be showing, dress in many cases appears as a political tool and not merely a reflection of a consumerist attitude (though this is also taken into consideration).

This paper relates to ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the state of Kerala from December 2010 until April 2011 in the two districts of Malappuram and

Kozhikode. The observations and the narratives that are evident in this paper came as a byproduct of my initial fieldwork on Indian Muslims and citizenship, which formed my doctoral thesis topic. Data obtained for this paper stem from participant observation and semi-structured interviews, conducted in Malayalam with housewives, and in English with students and professionals such as lawyers and medical doctors. Having stayed for five months in a village in Malappuram district, the relations I built with the family I resided with in addition to my own identity as a Muslim Arab female facilitated my entry into the field especially as I adopted the same lifestyle comprised of specific dress code, food, travel limitations and curfew time. Throughout my travels for interviews, this research covered eight constituencies (five municipalities and seven panchayaths) in Malappuram district with the predominant Muslim population (68.5%) and Kozhikode district (37.4%) (Census of India 2001).

Consumerist trends as a result of migration and the enlargement of the middle class

The city of Kozhikode, formerly known as Calicut, has a rich history of trade with the Arab world. By the twelfth century it became a commercial center between the Arab World, Southeast Asia and South Asia (Narayanan 2006). Historically, trade relations did not only result in an exchange of material goods of spices and wood. In fact, the impact of trade was witnessed in the cultural goods that came in a dualistic form; artistically and literarily (hybrid language and folklore); and socially (inter-religious marriages, conversions and later on women's education and their dress code) (Karassery 1995; Dale 1980; Kurup 2006; Kunju 1989).

To briefly showcase the cultural goods resulting from this migration, there was the innovation of a hybrid language known as *Arabi-malayalam*, which is basically Malayalam written in Arabic script, with a vocabulary emerging from Malayalam, Arabic, Tamil, Urdu and Persian. It was initially used as an educational and anti-colonial method of teaching Muslims without resorting to either English or the Hindu-associated sanskritized Malayalam (Miller 1976).

Malabar's folklore is composed of hybrid art forms in which indigenous dancing and poetry were fused with Arabic themes. *Duffmuttu*, for example, is an art form using the traditional Arabian *duff* (an Arabian drum). Contemporarily, Muslims stand in a circle singing an Islamic song in Malayalam while playing the *duff*. *Kolkali* is another performing art from Malabar, which is taken from the traditional *Kalarippayatt* (a form of Dravidian martial art using small sticks or

swords). The change to the original 'Hindu' form is that Islamic songs accompany it, the boys are not bare-chested, and their heads are covered with a piece of cloth. One of the almost vanishing art forms now is the *oppana*, which is a form of singing and dancing presented by females during a wedding ceremony. The singing is of folk Mappila (Malabar's Muslim) songs. The Mappila songs themselves (in Malayalam: *Mappillapattu*) also represent another hybrid form of art.⁴

These art forms now are almost exclusively existent in Islamic schools' celebrations or in TV programs. Whenever I attended a wedding, I was surprised with how void it is of any music, dancing, or celebration sight apart from the incredible amounts of biryani and beef curry. Nowadays since the oil boom, this cultural exchange is not only one-sided but also consumerist to a great extent. As I noticed during my stay, goods, dressing and eating styles came in to replace and suppress the artistic forms of exchange.

Migration led to many results, among which is the enlargement of the middle class in Kerala. Many of the housewives I interviewed or just chatted with, especially the elderly, stressed how Kerala fifty years ago was a very different place. Hunger, poverty and modesty were major features of everyday life. These were transformed by 'Gulf money.' According to a survey conducted by the National Council for Applied Economic Research, Kerala's Muslim households average earnings was 29,991 INR/year in comparison with Hindus households' average of 26,344/year (Iype 2004).

One recurrent narrative in the interviews pointed to the increased rate of food consumption, especially among the Muslims. Connected to this is the observation that Muslims do a thriving business in restaurants all around the state usually serving the same menu. The appearance of Arab diners is a notable feature. Several restaurants in Kozhikode carry names such as: *Arabian Diner*, *Arabian food*, and *Albake* (a famous fast food chain for fried chicken in Saudi Arabia). Their almost identical menus are comprised of Saudi and Yemeni meat dishes.

Another Gulf-influenced trend is apparent in the shops selling what Malayalees call "Gulf Products". These products are not all manufactured in the Gulf, but are usually imported. Examples of these durable and non-durable goods are mobile phones, computers, kitchen and cooking devices, blankets and a specific washing liquid called Fairy.

⁴ A version of Arabi-Malayalam is found in the Muslim Mappila Songs sang in Malabar. These songs are divided in various categories. Of these categories are the weddings songs (*kalyanapaatu*), praising prophets and saints (*madhpattu*), and war songs. See: Karassery, M.N. 1995.

The prevalence of a strong consumer culture is linked to an established purchasing power of women. This is not only attributed to consumer goods, but also to the common goal of directing remittances towards building or renovating houses – a goal that ended up as a trend. Perhaps what is most significant about this trend is that women's agency and autonomy appear here particularly strongly. Usually it is the women who are the recipients of money that their husbands send through bank transfers or *Western Union*, and hence are often solely responsible for all the paperwork concerning obtaining construction permits from the municipality, choosing a design for the house and managing all construction-related steps. In a survey conducted by Zachariah and Rajan in 2007, the role of the wife in managing the finances of the household was very apparent; 60 percent of respondents manage on their own and 69 percent have their own bank accounts. Whereas this strong agency in using the money is observable, there is limited labor mobility for Muslim women in Kerala. It is often inconceivable for a Muslim woman to decide to travel for work purposes on her own. However, the emphasis on education is slowly changing this mind-set since traveling for educational purposes has been socially sanctioned, although still limited to Kerala.

Minor reference here should be noted regarding the legacy of matriliney in Kerala. Although it started as a tradition among the Nair Hindu caste, matriliney was adopted by many Muslims, however, it was restricted in the Cannanore region (now Kannur district) north of Malappuram and Kozhikode where I conducted my study. Matriliney does not refer to matriarchy; as it was restricted to the idea that the husband moves to the wife's house upon marriage, however, the decision-making capacity still resides with him (Lindberg 2009; Jeffrey 2004). This had some positive impacts nonetheless, especially on the presence of women in the public sphere through mobility, education and the job market.

Appearance of *pardha* and different dressing styles

Traditionally, Muslim women used to wear a long skirt with a long-sleeved blouse on top of it and a headscarf. Now this style is limited to old ladies and has been replaced by the North Indian attire called *salwar-qameez* that is made of three pieces: a knee-long blouse, a shawl and a pair of trousers. In addition to this, the *saree* is usually worn but mainly among the elder and married women. The most recent variation of what Muslim women wear is the black *pardha*. Analyzing the trend of wearing a standardized dress as the black *pardha* collides with the reality of how religion and fashion cults operate in a rural society that is increasingly

globalized and witnessing massive cultural cross-border interactions. These dynamics are manifested through the empirical examples demonstrated in this paper. According to a survey conducted in Calicut, there was a notable increase in *pardha* usage⁵ from 3.5 percent in 1990 to 32.5 percent by 2000 in the northern regions of Kerala (Basheer 2002). Osella and Osella (2007) observed an even higher percentage while conducting their research in 2002–2004: around 50 percent, with 90 percent usage in the old Muslim area of the city, Thekkepuram. This is also obvious from the increase in the sales of the major *pardha* manufacturing company (Hoorulyn) in Kerala since its inception in 1992 from 100 dresses to 10,000 by 2002 (De Jong, quoted in Osella and Osella 2007).

During my fieldwork, I observed the hegemony of the North Indian Salwar-Qameez (referred to as *churidaar* in Kerala) in Calicut University and its affiliated non-religious colleges, as well as in the city itself. This is contrast to the dominance of *pardha* in Islamic colleges and in its outdoor usage in the villages of Northern Kerala.⁶ As opposed to the reason of practicality that led to the dispersion of *pardha* among housewives (being a quick dress as opposed to the *saree*), the stipulation of *pardha* as a compulsory uniform in educational institutions carries symbolic significance, which will be further investigated.

Although some studies have pointed out the difference in the appearance of women in the public space,⁷ the Keralite case offers an exception to the common narratives on India that focus on the Northern states. In fact, Muslim and non-Muslim Keralites appear to be concerned with an obsession with decency in public spaces (or to be more precise with the male-dominated conception of decency).⁸ Not only are Muslim women constrained in their dresses, but Hindus as well. You would rarely see a Hindu woman wearing jeans or a T-shirt, especially

5 Defining ‘usage’ is a problematic issue since there is a noted flexibility in the decision to wear a *pardha*. Basheer (2002) himself in his article does not specify what he means by using the *pardha* and whether it is an exclusive choice of dress or as it is in Kerala, one of the options women adopt besides the *saree* and the *salwar-qameez*.

6 For those women working in field, the commonly used dress is the “maxi” or the house long cotton dress or the traditional Keralite dress formed of a blouse and a skirt (here the religious differences will dictate the form of the blouse).

7 Examples are J. Abu Lughod (1987), who touches upon this difference, yet in a reductionist manner focusing only on North India, in her article the Islamic city, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, pp. 160–161. Otherwise, C. Gupta (2002), *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims and the Hindu Public in Colonial India*. New York: Palgrave, discusses general gender identity formations in colonial India.

8 This was obvious to me during their everyday conversations and their remarks on my dress (both in India and in Egypt), in addition to what is being dispersed through the written media.

in Calicut. This leaves Christians as the most liberal in their choice of ‘Western’ clothing, especially in the districts of Ernakulam and Thrissur, where they are concentrated.

Interviews showed the expected conformity to concepts of modesty and decency. “The *saree* shows every single part of the woman’s body, but with the *pardha* it is impossible, but of course you can still see the shape, but not like the *saree*,” a female student in Calicut informed me. The definition of modesty, however, varies from the Muslim perspective to the non-Muslim one. For the non-Muslim and especially the Hindu, modesty revolves around wrapping, restraining, and binding: clothes are tight, wound around the body, and jewelry such as anklets and bangles contain the bodily extremities. There is an emphasis on binding, sealing, and restraining. (Osella and Osella 2007: 4)

Islamic texts clearly stress avoiding any tight and thus revealing forms of clothing. Hence, for Muslim women, the *saree* would still be appropriate if the blouse underneath is full-sleeved and covering her midriff or stomach and back. Not to mention wrapping a scarf on her head or using the end of the *saree* to cover her head. Consequently, Muslim women could be easily identified from non-Muslim ones by looking at the way they wrap their *sarees*. Muslims never show their stomach, and thus the *saree* end is always loose enabling them to wrap it over their heads in case they are not wearing a headscarf, whereas the Hindu style is what Muslims call ‘steps’, because the end of the *saree* is multiply folded and pinned allowing the midriff or at least part of it to be shown. Still, some elements in the mentality of decency remained common between communities, and this is of tight sleeves. While non-Muslims prefer tight short sleeves, Muslims differ only in the fact that their sleeves are long. But they still stitch them tightly. I had a personal encounter on this matter when I tried to convince a lady tailor to make my blouse that she had just stitched a bit looser, and she kept looking at me puzzled and not understanding why I would wear it loose.

This proves that there is a constant puzzle when it comes to being practical and being fashion-conscious. In an extremely hot place like Kerala, one would guess that women would automatically opt for cotton headscarves. However, wherever I searched for one, I could never find any cotton *mafta* (Malayalam for head scarf). These *maftas* were always made of the same polyester material and found in exactly three colors: black, beige, and white. They were always in the same shape. This gave a clue on how standardized the society is, not to mention the strong tendency to conformity. I wondered how that the range of what could be called fashionable scarves was very limited. When comparing with Egypt or

Turkey, where there is a widespread custom of covering the hair, there is always a huge array of scarves. Interestingly, you can find very colorful headscarves that are made in India and sold in Egypt. However, throughout my trips all over India, I never found these *maftas* (which have a specific size rendering them easy for wrapping on the head).

The fascination with fashion is linked to a trend in boutique business in Kerala among the upper class Muslim women. Opening a boutique is a popular option for women without a professional degree, allowing them to work. During my stay in Kerala, I encountered a recently divorced woman who decided to open a boutique. She traveled with some members of her family to Mumbai to get fabrics for *salwar-qameez* suits and *sarees* and sold them at higher prices to gain profit. They were elegant yet simple fabrics, which symbolized upper class taste.

There is a noticeable attentiveness in asking for the price of what one wears. In addition to this, whereas there is rarely a discussion over the fabric, there is great interest in buying clothes with heavy embroidery or appliqués (what they call ‘work’) and a trendy color and design. This means that if someone wears polyester clothes in extremely hot weather, their mentality is highly fashion-blinded and practicality does not play a significant role in their choice of clothes, especially that there was a witnessed disregard for cotton suits which were looked upon as a form of cheap house dress. This is not limited to women, but extends to men also. Since skinny tight jeans were trendy (according to what they see in Gulf markets and TV) they became a cult among young men. However, those who are still studying at *madrasas*⁹ would refrain from going to the *madrasa* with these trousers because they know such attire is not accepted by the religious people. Young men also have an allure towards what they call a *jubba*, which is simply the North Indian *Kurta* (long Indian shirt). This could be translated as an attempt to copy the North Indian political elite image and to break the stereotypical image of a South Indian man. These empirical examples are meant to show the clash resulting from the interaction between urban values and rural societies. Kerala is a fascinating example to show how globalization managed to penetrate the rural society and inject in it urban trends and fascinations. A culture of appropriated consumption was inherently related to a negotiated space of women’s agency and empowerment, which was reflected in small-scale boutique and beauty parlour businesses.

⁹ Madrasas are Islamic schools in which children are taught the basic principles of Islam and the Quranic teachings. In Kerala, most Muslim children go to a Madrasa either from sunrise till eight in the morning and then head to the modern school, or they go in the evening once they finish school.

Coming to the usage of *pardha*, the case of Kerala presents us with a different scenario than the already studied one of Egypt, Northern India, and Western European societies (for example Bullock 2002; Ahmad 2011). In some societies, the shift to wearing a *pardha* is an ideological decision based on a conviction that it is the exclusively Muslim and decent dress. A woman in Egypt who chooses to wear a *pardha* (or *‘Abayya* to be contextually correct) would not easily return to wearing standard clothes (skirt and blouse, or blouse and trousers) and, most definitely, would not be switching her dressing styles in the public sphere. In Kerala, it is a matter of context and convenience. Most women in villages would wear one on her house dress (the maxi: a long loose half or full-sleeved simple dress). The same woman when going to a wedding would wear a *saree*, and perhaps when going shopping for clothes or when visiting some relatives would wear a *salwar-qameez* suit. Apart from female students of Islamic or Arabic Studies, the use of *pardha* in public is never compulsory, not even from the family. The Northern Indian context gives us another contradictory image, since the decision to wear a *pardha* comes out of compulsion and not a free choice. In this case, it is associated with covering the face most of the time. In Kerala, however, it is a rare case to see a woman with her face covered and, if this happens, then she would be often labeled by other *pardha*-clad women as an extremist or belonging to a *tablighijama’at* family.¹⁰ Interestingly, the spaces for a public discourse on *pardha* functions in a Lefebvrian manner, as they appear not only to serve as a tool of action, but also as a means of production, social control and domination (Lefebvre 1991) as I will show in the next section.

These discourses concerning the usage of *pardha* are entangled within a matrix of multiple identities in Kerala; the Pan-Islamic identity meets the South Indian Malayalee’s customs and directs her through a Gulf-centered lens. Osella and Osella (2007) appropriately capture the reasons Muslims attribute their use of *pardha* in addition to the above-mentioned reason of convenience. The first emerges from the role of social and religious reformist organizations such as the Kerala Nadwatul Mujahideen. The second is the growing sense of marginalization and insecurity of the Muslims as a minority community due to rising Hindu chauvinistic nationalism. This is particularly obvious in northern parts of the country, but not in Kerala. The feeling of being a threatened minority does not

¹⁰ The *TablighiJama’at* is one of the several Muslim organizations in India that has an international network and is basically focusing on preaching and proselytizing principles of Islam. For more information on this organization, see: Sikand, Y. (2002). *The Origins and Development of the Tablighi Jama’at (1920–2000): A cross-country comparative study*. New Delhi: Orient Longman.

find fertile soil in Kerala, especially in the heavily populated Muslim areas. This is why I will focus more on the role of reformist organizations in the “religious marketing” of the *pardha*.

Discourses on *pardha* (secularists versus islamists) versus what women themselves say

The Muslim community in Kerala is far from homogenous. In general, there are three major Islamic groups in Kerala. The first is the most widely spread Sufi group, or *Ahlu-Sunnatwal-jamaat*, which are called *Sunnis*. It is claimed that around 70% of the Muslim community in Kerala follow this group. In popularity, Kerala Nadwatul Mujahideen (KNM) or the *Mujahids* follow with around 20%. The third small, yet powerful group is the Jamaati Islami-Hind’s Kerala chapter, with just below 10% of the Muslim population.¹¹ There is also a small fraction of the Tablighi Jamaat and the Ahmadiyya sect.

Since the early nineteenth century, reformist movements started appearing in Kerala among the different communities. For the Muslim community, reformist organizations emerged in the early twentieth century after the Malabar Rebellion when religious leaders (*ulema*) started facing the deteriorated conditions of Muslims, particularly in the educational field. Apart from Nadwatul Mujahideen, or the *Islahi* (Reformist) Movement in Kerala, *Jamaati Islami-i-hind*’s Kerala chapter is gaining increasing ground in the social spectrum.

In addition to educational and economic uplifting of the community, these reformists assumed a role of the responsibility in policing women’s moral conduct. They considered themselves responsible in front of God, not just to educate women and be financially responsible for them, but also to ensure their decency and their compliance with their own version of divine rules of decency. In an article published in the Jamaati Islami Women’s wing magazine (*Aaraaman*), the editor had referred to *pardha* as “a modern dress for moral women” (Basheer 2002).

Interestingly, not only Muslim women were subject to this mentality, but all Malayalee women in general (the upper caste Namboodiri Brahmins or the

¹¹ These data are obtained from an interview with Prof. Hafiz Mohamed from Feroke College, Kerala. The percentages are obtained through calculating the number of *madrasas* affiliated to each group. Faith-wise, Muslims would be actually divided into four groups, including the Ahmadiyyas who have their own mosques and act like a clan and are considered by non-Ahmadiyyas to be untrue Muslims. Politics-wise, Muslims would be divided into three groups. The majority are the Muslim Leaguers, followed by the JamaatiIslami, and finally the NDF supporters (SDPI and PDP).

lower caste Ezhavas). Devika and Husain (2010) share my opinion by calling this process ‘re-forming women.’ They point to two constant and contemporary pressures on Muslim women in Kerala: the pressure on the young woman to “conform to norms of dressing found desirable by certain elements claiming to represent community interest”, and the pressure of the threat to life in some cases.¹²

A great paradox of the reformist agenda appears. Not only do the reformist *ulema* allow women to go to mosques, but they also encourage them to do so, unlike the prevalent and dominant attitude of the Sufi (called Sunni in Kerala) trend to ban women from entering mosques. Mujahids and Jamaati Islami reformers stress education for girls and women (both secular and religious). Their social, cultural and educational activities are always intermingled (both sexes are in same classrooms and same conference venues) without any physical barrier separating them. Girls are given spaces to voice their opinions through GIO (the Jamaati Islami Girls Islamic Organization) and MGM (The Mujahid Girls Movement). However, all this is performed while a strict dress code is being inscribed.

Choosing what to teach, choosing which experience to write about, and choosing whom to talk about are all in the hands of men (especially through media). It was interesting for me to see that the role of women in anti-colonial struggles of the Arab world was totally invisible in any of the publications, curricula, and topics of research (many girls had the same topic of studying Bint Alshati’,¹³ but none dealt with political feminist figures). There was a perplexing and noticeable gap between women’s roles in the Middle East in deploying charity organizations as spaces for assertion of their public role, and the nonexistence of this in a developed state like Kerala. GIO and MGM’s activities remain limited to a great extent and ends with the marriage of students. Of the established social realities in Kerala are the hurdles put in the path of a married Muslim woman inhibiting her from venturing into public action affairs (with few individual exceptions).

Despite the high index of human development that Kerala witnesses and the advanced progress the Muslim-dominated district records, another gender

¹² By showing the In the case of Rayana (a Muslim college student in her twenties who received death threats in 2010 to shift to wearing the *pardha*), Devika and Hussain (2010) explain how it was obvious that there was inadequate support from media, religious and feminist organizations, as well as the police to seriously condemn the pressure to conformity.

¹³ Bintalshati’ (the Arabic for the Daughter of the Riverbank) was the pen name used by one of the most famous Arabic literary figures. Her real name was Ayesha Abd El-Rahman and she was an Egyptian writer who lived from 1913 until 1998. She specialized in writing the biographies of early Muslim women.

paradox remains. Educated and employed women are strong victims of violence (whether physical through sexual harassment or getting threat letters, or symbolic through rumors). They easily become victims of individuation, stress and depression (mental illnesses). Individuation is a serious problem that resulted from education (Devika – Mukherjee 2007). No matter how the society tried to solve this problem through molding girls' minds into the utter belief of their indispensable domestic function; they end up suffering from depression. The role of reformist organizations enters in the dynamics by offering a public space through which these individuated spaces of seclusion could be overcome. However, this space is controlled by the adherence to the *pardha* as a code of entry.

The increasing appearance of *pardha* in Kerala's public spaces triggered an incredible volume of debate within the Malayalee society. These debates emerge on a spectrum encompassing the liberal secularists on the one hand and the Islamist Secularists¹⁴ on the other. Women as subaltern individuals or agents remain somehow outside this spectrum. The dilemma that this classification poses is being trapped in reductionist analysis of the reality of *pardha* in Kerala. The liberal secularist intellectuals perceive it as an enforced adoption of an alien Arab oppressive tool and thus a threat to the communally harmonious nature of Kerala, while the Islamists perceive it as an indicative expression of freedom of belief and practice guaranteed by the Indian Constitution. Both interpretations ignore the perspective of women either as agents or as subjects to the phenomenon.

Some intellectuals who do not align themselves in any exclusive category signaled their concern over the increasing critique of *pardha* since it might be strongly related to Hindu nationalistic forces. They often exclaim as to why only Muslim women appear as subjects of contention in media. In a family magazine published by the Mujahid organization, the following comment was noted in one of the letters of readers as a response to an article on *pardha*. In his letter titled "Should we fear *pardha*?" he ridiculed modern dresses showing the body and the women who wear them. According to him, people have no problem if Sister Maria (any Christian lady) or Devi Kumari (any Hindu Lady) wears *pardha* or any dress. People have a problem only when one Khadija wears it (*Putare* 2011).

¹⁴ Since the Islamists emphasize secularism as a domain giving them freedom to work and thus opting for it as an ideal system, it would be unfair and contextually incorrect to override their opinion by juxtaposing them against the Liberals. Mainstream theorization on this matter portray Islamists as inherently anti-secular forces, whereas liberals as carrying the secularist torch. For matters of precision, I decided to refer to both as secularists.



Figure 1 on the right: Malayalam Newspaper Advertising of Pardha shop depicting the Muslim Woman as a modern one. Figure 2 on the left: an advertisement in front of a shopping complex in Calicut city assigning the pardha as “only for the enterprising woman” and characterizing the brand as India’s first ISO certified *pardha*. Source: From Author’s Collection.

Haraway (1998) and the feminist standpoint of situated knowledge affirm the need to avoid a doctrine of transcendence-based objectivity or a theory of “innocent powers” and instead to seek “an earth wide network of connections, including the ability partially to translate knowledge among very different- and power-differentiated communities” (580). To Haraway, the position of the subjugated is preferred because they promise more “adequate, sustained, objective, transforming accounts of the world” (584). Hence, power and resistance need not operate exclusively in dualistic forms. Domination is always attributed to a distinction between persuading and coercing, as Mitchell (1990) argues, and this dualistic conception fails to capture several analytic aspects. I see it most fitting to apply this logic to the debates on *pardha*. The emergence of the trend of *pardha* is not about women being forced to adopt it, but it is more complicated. *Pardha* spreading is about a trend that acquired a wide base of legitimacy. On the one hand there is the authority of the *ulema*, which acts as the power that persuades the Muslim mind (both male and female) of the requirement of the

pardha. On the other hand, there is the wealth and luxurious lifestyles of the Gulf Arabs convincing the female of being modern, fashionable and prosperous.

When interviewing students, it was obvious that their recourse to *pardha* comes out of it being the school or college uniform, but they will hardly wear it in any non-school related activity. As for school teachers, interestingly, they also had to abide by a certain dress code; in some schools it was exclusively the *pardha*, and in another schools, some teachers told me that the *churidaar* was banned and that only *saree* with an overcoat or *pardha* were permitted as the uniform.

One day I went to a municipality in Kerala with a predominantly Muslim population, and I interviewed a middle-class Muslim lawyer. I had lunch with his family in his house, which was another big mansion (his father lived all his life in Saudi Arabia). His wife, who was also a lawyer, was wearing a half sleeved suit and not covering her hair. I enquired if this was her normal dressing style. She told me that she had come originally from Trivandrum, and that there was no culture of *pardha* or covering the hair over there. But, when she went to work where she was living, she was compelled to wear a *saree* and use its end to cover her head. With a sarcastic smile on her face, she told me: "Otherwise, I just wear half sleeves like now and look like a Hindu. But I do not mind it."

One of the novelties about the Keralite case, in my opinion, is that the decision to conform is seen as a rational decision in many cases. Weighing the consequences of nonconformity to the *pardha* as a moral dress would only mean more contentions, whereas the conformity leads women, especially those belonging to orthodox families, to spaces otherwise denied to them. Education and work, classically seen as women-free zones, became zones in which a woman can appear and intermingle with the other sex freely as long as she is conforming to the uniform of the *pardha*. In addition to this, *pardha* signifies upward mobility, and especially in a caste-based society, affluence is linked to the desire to be fashionable. Thus, the decision to wear a *pardha* is not just about conformity, but also about being fashion-blinded and desiring to be looked to as a higher class person. Here it should be noted that although caste and class are profoundly linked, they are not identical social categories.

There is also an interesting fascination with the black color; some would attribute it to being modest, and thus avoiding flamboyant colors, which explains the prevalence of the black model of the *pardha*. However, my ethnographic work revealed that this fascination is not restricted to the Gulf-imported *pardha* color, but also when it came to henna that women apply to their hands. Black not only makes you look fashionable (because it is related to the Gulf), but also white,

meaning not so dark-skinned (because of the perception that white skin is more beautiful and thus there is some contrast once black is worn or applied to one's hands).

Gifts, from a woman to another, are usually a *pardha*, especially from those arriving from the Gulf. I was also told that when someone brings some fabric to a tailor to be stitched into a simple *pardha*, the tailor would charge more, although logically it is easier than stitching a *salwar-qameez* suit.

Conclusion

This paper sought to demonstrate the different discourses around *pardha* and how agency is reflected in a paradoxical manner. The concept of agency is often trapped between conformity (as a pragmatic solution) and domestic agency (as a realistic manifestation of the conceptual boundaries). However, with education and class or caste differences, the employment of the concept deeply varies. Consciousness forms an integral aspect of women's agency and their decision-making capacity. With the rising role and significance of revivalist Muslim organizations, it becomes obvious how women's agency incorporates Islam as a clear ingredient of the plot for social change. Educated girls prove their ability to make rational compromises and decisions. When I asked female informants if they follow *fatwas* issued by *'ulama*, 37.5% confirmed they always do, 40.3% said they do not necessarily always follow them, and it is up to them to choose what sounds rational and acceptable and what is not, and 22.2% said they do not specifically follow *fatwas* of *'ulama*, but they resort to what they conceive as right or wrong.

There are certain factors affecting and shaping the Keralite society and thus the formation of the *Pardha* Cult. The first is the growing consumerism as a result of Gulf migration and the aspirational values linked to a desire to copy the affluent Gulf lifestyles. The second is the disruption of older social and individual values that happened due to Islamic reformist movements, migration and elevated standard of living. Third, the influence of media in promoting *pardha* through editorial pieces or through advertisements is easily discernible. Finally, the increasing crime rate and violence against women (Malappuram district being the highest¹⁵) led women to easily adopt a dress that is perceived by everyone as a safety-inducer.

¹⁵ Kerala Police's Reported cases of Crimes against Women in 2009/2010, retrieved April 30, 2011 from: http://www.keralapolice.org/newsite/crime_against_women_2009.html

Kerala is considered to be the land of contradictions. On the one hand, it has the highest levels of literacy, human development, life expectancy, and income in India. And, on the other hand, it suffers from the highest levels of alcoholism, suicide, crimes, and dowry in comparison with other states of India. The state of contradictions extends to the topic of this paper. In the Muslim dominated state district where female voters outnumber the males, and thus they determine political destinies, their lives are heavily designed by the males.

What is witnessed in Kerala is the constant regulation of the public space of freedom of choice within a secular democratic state. An interview respondent spoke to me about how she perceives the relationship between the dress-code and freedom on the one hand and building a model on the other hand. To her, an important question was in whose hands does legitimacy lie?

Why should we not follow the Arabs, but why should we follow the upper caste Hindus? The *saree* was never a south Indian dress. It is a northern Brahminical dress. We all know that the women in the south were allowed to wear only a piece of cloth from her waist onwards to the knee. So is this what we are supposed to go back to wearing? (Calicut University Mphil Student, January 2011)

For her, the *saree* appeared as an imposed national dress with an upper class Hindu identity (the cream and gold embroidered handloom *saree*).¹⁶ Resisting this enforced image of the Keralite woman was an important task in her non-religious fight against casteism. While a girl like her was fighting the caste battle, others were fighting another identity battle, of the cultural infringement of the Saudi version of Islam on Kerala's harmonious society. But this is one side of the story – a story often narrated by the intellectuals.

By demonstrating everyday accounts of the common Malayalee women and her position from these discourses, I showed how, unlike the heavily studied cases of *burqa* or *hijab* or *niqab* in the Middle East and Europe, the Keralite case is one of complexity and flexibility. The paradoxical situation resulting from the entanglement of the private sphere with the public one was a major factor contributing to this complexity. To some, *pardha* gave an opportunity to be fast and spontaneous and in many cases the housewife found in the *pardha* a tool to temporarily escape the traditional confines of class and fashion. For others, *pardha* was their access key to education and employment and while some were

¹⁶ The national image included other ornamental additions that were considered non-Muslim in the Keralite context (there was the *bindi* (which only non-Muslims apply), and the jasmine garland on the hair (which Muslims put only in their own weddings and is usually covered with the end of their *saree*).

obliged to wear as a uniform, they still had the option to shift to any dress of their choice. “Hurry up, put on your *pardha* and let us go to have ice-cream,” was a statement I often heard from the Malayalee lady I was living with.

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