

Re-forming the Muslim Woman: Contextualising the Arabic-Malayalam novel *Khadeejakutty* in the History of Muslim Educational Reforms in Kerala

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Muslim reformers' engagements with the idea of colonial modernity and modern education in late nineteenth century and twentieth century Kerala is embedded in the socio-political and historical contexts of the period. Amongst other factors, the idea of gender in Islam predominantly figures in the reformist deliberations and provides interesting perspectives on aspects of a gendered discourse on education that emerged in the early twentieth century. To further elaborate this point, this paper analyses an unfinished Arabic-Malayalam novel *Khadeejakutty*, in the context of the debates on educational reforms of Muslim women. The novel, written by an anonymous author and serially published in the Arabic-Malayalam women's magazine *Nisaul Islam*, during the 1930s, offers a significant point of departure in analysing the role of literary texts in the reformist enterprises within the Muslim community of Kerala. The study attempted in this paper helps historicize the discourse on Muslim women's education and also reclaim the authenticity of these "little narratives" in constituting the lifeworlds of Muslim women.

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The history of Muslim reform movements presents both similarities and differences when compared to the reformist enterprises

in other communities of Kerala. Initiated by Sayyid Sanaullah Makti Thangal in the late nineteenth century, the call for a purer and more scriptural form of Islam, distinct from the traditional *Ulema's* teachings, took a unique trajectory due to various demands it had to address. These challenges included reshaping the Muslim image, countering stereotypes of being uncivilised and fanatical, asserting Islam's compatibility with modernity, promoting social progress through modern education, defending the concept of 'pure' Islam against pre-reformist interpretations, creating new gendered identities, countering Islamic traditionalists, and responding to the broader calls for national political consciousness, secularism, and modern ideals.

The reformers called for a new form of religiosity or 'Muslimness' based on the reinterpretation of scriptures. This heightened focus on religiosity, forms a key feature of Muslim reform. The movement aimed at a reorganisation of the social and individual worlds of the Muslims, by exhorting them to return to a pristine form of Islam. Appropriating the reformist ideas from the *Islahi* (reformist) movements in other parts of the world and in India, the reformers of Kerala addressed the specificities of the Muslim question in Kerala (Abraham 17). In the process, the ideals of modernity were visibly appropriated by them and they also raised their claims about the compatibility of Islamic tradition with modernity. Francis Robinson, in his study "Islamic Reform and Modernities in South Asia" (2013), observes that the rationalisation of religious beliefs and practices was one of the fundamental traits of Islamic reform. The reformers critiqued local customs and practices and declared traditional values, perceived as incompatible with science and reason, to be "un-Islamic" (274–275). Besides redefining religion to suit the ideals of modernity, the reformers also explored the modernity inherent in Islam. A period of intense democratisation of religious knowledge ensued, which mandated the individual to seek true Islam as opposed to the "blind" following of the *Ulema's* traditionalist version. In this juncture, imparting modern education, with sound knowledge in the vernacular, became crucial in reforming the Malayali Muslim. The reformers campaigned for modern education as a means of change and a prerequisite to be part of the emerging public sphere in Kerala

(Muhammadali 95). Ira M. Lapidus observes that, it was imperative for the reformers to redefine the nature of modern education that may be imparted to the Muslims, in order to ensure the survival of the community (457).

Muslim reformers' engagements with the idea of colonial modernity and modern education, is embedded in the socio-political and historical contexts of the period. Amongst other factors, the idea of gender in Islam predominantly figures in the reformist deliberations and provides interesting perspectives on aspects of a gendered discourse on education that emerged in early twentieth century Kerala. To further elaborate this point this paper analyses an unfinished Arabic-Malayalam novel *Khadeejakutty*, in the contexts of the debates on educational reforms of Muslim women. The novel, written by an anonymous author and serially published in the Arabic- Malayalam women's magazine *Nisaul Islam*, during the 1930s, offers a significant point of departure in analysing the role of literary texts in the reformist enterprises within the Muslim community of Kerala. The study attempted in this paper helps historicise the discourse on Muslim women's education and also reclaim the authenticity of these "little narratives" in constituting the lifeworlds of Muslim women.

When the colonial government implemented modern education as a means of their "civilizing mission", there was reluctance from the members of the community to join the drive. The reasons for the hostility of the Mappila community towards modern education are often located in the history of the cultural resistance of the Mappilas. The question of Muslim community's education foregrounded issues of compatibility of the Islamic tradition with ideas of colonial modernity. Hence the reformists had to engage themselves in appropriating the very idea of education. The idea of an appropriate modern education that may be imparted to Muslim women, significantly differed from that of the education meant for the Muslim men. These differences in the notion of education were largely based on the differences in gender roles and the centrality of religiosity in Muslim reformist discourse. The discourse on distinct gender roles of men and women, rampant in the early twentieth century public sphere of Kerala had considerable influence on Muslim reform movements as well.

Central to the reformists' advocacy for women's education was their belief in the pivotal role of women as bearers of so called correct Islamic values and symbols of Muslim identity. Much was written during the period about the nature of education that may be imparted to Muslim women. Most of the reformist texts produced in the Malayali cultural milieu also focussed on education as a means of cultivating a "new feminine interiority" that can suit women's feminine disposition and nature. For instance, in a speech delivered by Thachattu Devaki Amma's in 1913 on "The Purpose of Female Education", she explains how a suitable education can help modify a woman's essential femininity as a wife and mother.

It seems that giving the same kind of education to men and women is inappropriate. That Nature has not ordained Man and Woman for the same tasks is amply revealed by the difference in their bodies, dispositions and mental ability. In some matters, men may have superior strength. But in others, Man is quite unable to display the kind of stamina Woman is capable of.... Examining Woman's physique and disposition, one may be sure that she has been created for activity that requires greater endurance but less physical strength. Normally Woman's mental make-up is gentle, maturing faster, imaginative, easily stirred by emotions, attentive of detail and easily irritated. Man can never come close to Woman in such qualities as compassion, love and patience. (Devika 47)

Devaki Amma further adds that even if women do not participate in public life, contributing to the world's prosperity through raising capable children is significant. Therefore, the goal of their education should be to enhance qualities like compassion, sympathy, love, maternal affection, and patience rather than moulding them into inferior versions of men. Besides, she says, a woman's role is to support and assist men in life's challenges, alleviating their burdens through her feminine qualities. They can achieve success through acts of compassion and understanding, rather than through competitive means (Devika 47). In this argument, she emphasises that the fundamental feminine attributes of her body and mind serve as limitations in her active participation in the public sphere.

Makti Thangal's reformist efforts in the late nineteenth century, which marked the beginning of the debates on Muslim women's education in Kerala, had also asserted the centrality of women's gender roles. He argued that Muslim women ought to get the necessary literacy (elementary education) alone to fulfil her roles within home. He criticised the waywardness of some members of the community for advocating western model of education for its men and women (Thangal 662). The idea of an appropriated form of education put forward by Makti, served to establish notions about the binary nature of the public and the private, where the public space legitimately belong to the man. He dismisses the question of gender equality as un-Islamic and sets out to define specific gender roles for men and women (Thangal 649-650). The new Muslim woman is thus carefully conceived as one with a malleable self, who can be placed within the private space of the home as wife and mother. For performing these roles well, education is a pre-requisite, he said.

Makti advocated both religious education and literacy in the vernacular for women, with the aim of nurturing their piety and presenting an exemplary model of Muslim women dedicated to their families and husbands. He advised the Kerala Muslim community that a woman's foremost duty should revolve around matters related to homemaking and child rearing, conforming to what were considered 'appropriate' gender roles. He says:

Women should acquire both religious and practical knowledge to enhance their personal development. They should pursue education that aligns with their natural inclinations and aptitudes. Although the early years of Islam saw female poets, intellectuals, philosophers, and doctors, contemporary women must be encouraged to focus on subjects related to homemaking and child-rearing for their educational pursuits. (Thangal 662)

Makti Thangal underscored the physiological differences between men and women to justify their distinct roles, asserting that Islam dictates women to follow men. He emphasised that men are primarily responsible for tasks outside the home, such as providing for and protecting women, while women are intended for domestic

responsibilities. His writings also reflected a common concern among Muslim reformers: the delicate balance between the necessity of educating women for the moral improvement of the community and the fear that they might overstep established moral and social boundaries. Barbara Metcalf's work demonstrates that women's reform in most Islamic societies aimed to establish a hierarchy within the domestic sphere (2-12). Makti's assertion that "Islam orders women always to follow men" also sought to establish this hierarchy (Thangal640). Muhammed Niyas Ashraf observes that Makti cited and interpreted scriptures selectively to support his arguments about gender roles in Muslim society, selectively ignoring Quranic verses that emphasise women's equality and rights. In essence, his modernization program for women reflects contradictory and ultimately conservative notions of Muslim womanhood (80). On one hand, he stressed the importance of women's education, but on the other, he firmly asserted their essentially subordinate position. Makthi's idea of an Islamic womanhood, it may be argued that, ultimately resulted in the subordination of women, limiting the emancipatory aspects of modernisation programs.

Vakkom Abdul Khader Moulavi, another significant figure in Kerala Muslim reform, followed in Makthi Thangal's footsteps in his reformist endeavors. Yet, differences can be discerned in Moulavi's views on Muslim women's education. He acknowledged that "no man is born in the world without woman, or no woman without man. It is difficult for a man to live in the world without a woman's help, and vice versa" (Moulavi 83). Despite recognizing biological, physical, and temperamental differences between men and women, Moulavi maintained that these disparities merely reflected distinct physical obligations and lifestyles, rather than indicating an inherent hierarchy. He emphasised that there was no difference in status between the genders (Moulavi 83). More importantly, he argued for the intellectual equality of men and women, asserting that women possessed intelligence and they are equally bound by religious rules, capable of comprehending concepts of virtue, vice, happiness, and sorrow just like men. Consequently, he advocated that women should have access to religious knowledge (*ilm*) and should adhere to religious etiquette

(*adab*), for which he endorsed education in both religious and modern spheres (Abraham 79).

Vakkom Moulavi made extensive use of the print media to disseminate reformist ideas on education. His journal, *Muslim*, played a crucial role in promoting the education of Muslim women. The journal featured articles showcasing the biographies of esteemed Muslim women, with the aim of inspiring women in Kerala to embrace modern education. An article titled “The Duty of Muslim Women,” authored by B. Kalyani Amma, wife of Swadeshabhmani Ramakrishna Pillai, highlighted biographical details of noble Muslim women to encourage Kerala Muslim women to embrace modern education (Abraham 80). In another article Hamadani Sheikh wrote on the centrality of religion in women’s lives and the importance of education in making them capable of fulfilling those duties. He says:

Women were equally bound to discharge their religious duties like men. Without sound knowledge, they could not perform it well. Moreover, as long as our “kitchens” are full of darkness, our life would not be comfortable. Hence, our womenfolk must be provided with ample facilities of education.(Samad 63)

These initiatives helped to counter the prevailing belief that Islam discouraged women’s education and asserted the importance of educating women in the new family order. It was the prerogative of the reformers to defend Islam against the un-Islamic practices of the pre-reformist Islamic tradition and its ideas prevalent in erstwhile Kerala. The reformers attacked the infamous traditionalist dictum, “Muslim women should not be taught to write” (“*Muslim Sthreekale Kaiyeshuthu Padipikkaruthu*”). Vakkom Moulavi vehemently criticised the traditionalist *Ulema* for misinterpreting scriptures to oppose the reformist moves to promote education for women. Being one of the most pertinent issues addressed by the reformers in the community, Vakkom Moulavi cited and reinterpreted scriptures to counter the traditionalists and to argue that, Islam not only permits women’s education but mandates it. Besides, Moulavi’s efforts at conceptualising a new education for women added to the emergence of a discourse on women’s rights in Islam in Kerala. His advocacy

for women's rights paralleled the sentiments expressed by other reformers like Rashid Rida, of Egypt, who emphasised the equality of rights and responsibilities of men and women (Hourani 238–239).

The debates on the question of gender equality and education of women, initiated by the early reformers eventually evolved, under the aegis of Aikyasangham, a Muslim reformist organisation established in the 1920s and various other regional reformist organisations, to address more pressing matters associated with Muslim women. At the fourth annual conference of the Muslim Aikyasangham, the reformers called for the establishment of separate schools for Muslim girls, emphasising the importance of women's education in the community's progress (Mangad 100-101). In the consecutive meetings and conferences, the members of the organisation reiterated the necessity of education for both Muslim boys and girls as a necessary prerequisite for the upliftment of the community and strongly advocated their attendance in public schools.

K M Maulavi's article "Sthree Vidhyabhyasam" ("Women's Education") is significant in this context. Concerned about the nature of education imparted to girls in schools, KM Maulavi suggests that while designing the curriculum for girls' schools, careful consideration should be given to crucial aspects of gender roles. He states that one can observe a range of viewpoints among adherents of a religion that strongly promotes women's rights and education. He highlights a few critical facets of this issue. Muslim women stand in need of educational institutions tailored to meet their unique requirements and it is advisable for female educators to guide girls approaching adolescence within these dedicated schools. According to him, the utmost essential quality possessed by women is the purity of their spirit and physical being and they should diligently fulfill their duties towards their husbands. Moreover, while designing the curriculum for girls' schools, careful consideration should be given to this crucial aspect. K M Maulavi adds:

The objective of educating women is to nurture their inner selves, shape their characters, and equip them with the skills to manage their households and impart good values to their children, ultimately

preserving family wealth and well-being. Furthermore, emphasis should be placed on their capabilities in handling economic and political matters within the community. To cultivate their souls and wisdom, Islamic teachings are deemed most appropriate. Muslim girls in our region should learn Arabic, Arabic-Malayalam, and standard Malayalam. Based on the Quran and the *sunnahs*, they should delve into subjects like *aqeed* (faith), *aqlaq* (morality), *ibadath* (worship), *haraam* (forbidden), and *halaal* (permissible). (12-13)

K M Maulavi's ideas are in tune with that of Thachattu Devaki Amma's except for his thrust on the religious aspect of education. He says that the natural endowments of women must be fortified through an education rooted in Islamic principles so that they play their domestic roles efficiently. K M Maulavi insists on religiosity as a crucial aspect of women's education and claims that this alone can contribute to the making of the new Muslim woman who embodies values of modernity and yet is different from her Western and non-Muslim counterparts

Numerous texts were published in Malayalam and Arabic-Malayalam journals of the period to disseminate the reformist ideas on female education. The reformist efforts were not limited to articles, speeches and monographs. They used relatively new literary genres like novels to spread the reformist discourse on education. Novels were written and published in Arabic Malayalam targeting sections of Muslim readers, especially women, who were yet to get introduced to the new Malayalam script. These new literary texts seamlessly integrated ideas of reformed womanhood into its narratives. A look at the novel *Khadeejakutty*, serially published in the Arabic-Malayalam magazine *Nisaul Islam* during the 1930's can help further explain this point. Considering this text within the framework of the reformist endeavors of the Muslim reformers briefly outlined in this paper can highlight certain significant aspects regarding the reformists' efforts in shaping the concept of Muslim women's education.

The unfinished narrative in the novel *Khadeejakutty*, delves into the life of the protagonist Khadeejakutty, a newly educated Muslim woman with a strong sense of individuality and freedom. The

anonymous author presents a series of episodes that portray the protagonist's struggles as an educated Muslim woman attempting to reconcile her modernity acquired through education with her religious beliefs. Throughout the narrative, Khadeejakutty faces hostility both within her community and from outside due to her identity as a Muslim woman. The character Khalid plays a significant role in the novel by explaining the principles of 'true' Islam, in his attempts to reinforce Khadeejakutty's Muslim identity. The narrative subtly hints at the complex negotiations undertaken by these reformers with hostile sects within and outside the Muslim community as well as with the emerging community of educated Muslim women.

Khadeejakutty, the only daughter of Madayippurathu Ahmed Haji, is presented in the novel as an extremely intelligent girl, whose brilliance and smartness was noticed by the villagers right from the time when she was a little girl. She attends a nearby school run by Aryasamajam and learns the basics by listening to the classes given to the other girls. Seeing her intelligence and enthusiasm, the school headmistress enrolls her in the first standard. She learns to read and write Malayalam from there. The school has classes only upto fifth standard and she wants to pursue her studies. Here, the narrative gives the readers a glimpse into Khadeejakutty's character, her determination, and agency:

Upon completing the fifth grade, Khadeejakutty chose to enrol in a different school for her education. About one kilometre away from Madayippurathu house, there was a mission school exclusively for girls. Khadeejakutty visited the school, met the headmistress, and made the required arrangements for her admission. Initially, her father Ahmed Haji declined permission, but eventually, he had to relent and grant her request due to her persistence. She was only ten years old then. (*Khadeejakutty* 108)

Ahmed Haji and his family faces much backlash from the Muslim community for sending their only daughter to a school operated by Christian missionaries. Some members criticised him while others went as far as ostracising him from the community. Many perceived this decision as a step toward his daughter's conversion to Christianity.

Disheartened by the series of events that unfolded, Ahmed Haji speaks to his daughter about the potential risks involved in a Muslim girl hailing from a modest farming family, attending a Christian mission school and gaining ‘more’ education. He emphasises the traditional roles she would be expected to fulfil as a woman within her future household, emphasising her responsibilities for all domestic chores. Khadeejakutty’s response to her father’s words is succinctly conveyed by the author: “She began to weep, reflecting on the biases of the Muslim community, which believed that Allah has created women solely for the purpose of tending to the domestic duties.” (*Khadeejakutty* 108)

When Haji’s neighbours and family members gathered to discuss the issue, no one supports Khadeejakutty, except for a young man named Khalid. He voices the opinion that denying her education would be foolish. However, an older man rebukes him and drives him away, accuses people like him, affiliated with Aikyasangham and Wahabism, of causing the community’s decline. Despite the strong opposition, Ahmed Haji remains steadfast and sends his daughter to school. Khadeejakutty, grateful for her father’s support, successfully completes her education. She later enrolls in Madras Medical College, eventually becomes a doctor and secures employment at a government hospital in Thirurangadi.

Though the narrative doesn’t provide any glimpse into the feelings and thoughts of the protagonist, the author’s empathetic treatment of Khadeejakutty’s predicament is worth analysing. Her hostility towards Islam and Muslim community is subtly justified by the author by giving detailed accounts of the traditionalist opposition her family had to face:

Khadeejakutty distanced herself from the Muslim community due to their humiliation and multiple *fatwas* (religious orders) labelling her a *kafir* (non-Muslim). Muslim women avoided talking to her, but she found acceptance and affection among Hindu women. Consequently, she held disdain for her own community while holding respect for the Hindus. (*Khadeejakutty* 165)

Besides, Khadeejakutty's lack of faith is not presented as her fault. Her lack of knowledge in 'true Islam' has consequently led to her drifting away from the religion (*Khadeejakutty* 164). The traditional *Ulema*'s criticism of educating her also contributed to her understanding of Islam as a religion that is incompatible with ideas of modernity (*Khadeejakutty* 165). The need for an understanding of true religious education which alone can build aspects of faith in educated Muslim women, is thus highlighted in the text. Khadeejakutty's education is thus presented as an incomplete or partial one since it has not ethically fashioned her 'self' with a true knowledge of Islam: "While studying at the Madras Medical College, she frequently attended the discussions on religion held by the *Arya* girls. Her lack of knowledge about her own religion led her to accept everything those girls said about Islam" (*Khadeejakutty* 164). Within the Islamic reform, education cannot be separated from acquiring knowledge of Islam. Any education without true religious knowledge can be harmful to the individual's self since it can adversely affect the individual's *ilm* (devotion), and practices of *tawheed* (monotheism). Khadeejakutty's lack of access to the true principles of Islam and the hostility she had to suffer at the hands of traditionalists is presented in the novel as the reasons that subsequently led to the dilemma she faces in her life (*Khadeejakutty* 210).

The reformists had long been positing Muslim women's uneducated status as a reason for the community's backwardness. They negotiated with the then colonial government to open girls only schools for Muslim girls. The possibilities of violating gender segregation in these spaces coupled with the general hostility to modern education had triggered the *Ulema* to highlight the presumed dangers in educating women. These educated women might overstep the boundaries set by Islam. The novel is a critique of these notions and presents before the readers varied aspects of Muslim women's access to education in Kerala. Even when schools were opened for Muslim girls, the conservatism of the community jeopardised all the efforts. It also discusses how the hostility of the community can affect educated women and how the other groups, who are hostile to Islam and Muslim community, take advantage of the situation by both trying to convert

these individuals into their religion and by criticising Islam as an epitome of backwardness (*Khadeejakutty* 229).

The novel can be considered an important text within the reformist enterprises of the Muslim community for its succinct portrayal of its protagonist Khadeejakutty. In the course of the narrative, Khadeejakutty evolves as an agentive user of language and space. She declares that she is not willing to get married and tells her father about her decision to serve the society as a doctor, following the footsteps of the headmistress of her school. Her decision thus challenges the dominant notion that a woman is capable only of household chores. She claims the public sphere, hitherto a male space, with her education and takes crucial decisions about her life and future. The author repeatedly refers to her as an intelligent woman and states that she is by no means inferior to her male counterparts. By presenting Khadeejakutty's brilliance as an individual, this text eventually subverts not only the traditionalist positions on women but also some of the reformist notions about imparting an appropriated form of education to women. This is to say that Khadeejakutty's portrayal surpasses the reformist assumptions of an educated woman. Thus, the novel forms an important text in the Muslim reformist oeuvre by subtly subverting some of the dominant notions about Muslim womanhood in Khadeejakutty's portrayal. The evolving discussion on the education of Muslim women finds itself situated between the opposition to modern education from traditionalists and the more selective approach to modernity taken by reformists. The reformist stance primarily advocated for a tailored form of education for women. The portrayal of Khadeejakutty in the novel goes beyond the boundaries established by both the traditionalists and the reformists regarding women's education.

Recently researchers have been probing into how the pre-reformist cultural worlds and enterprises of Muslims were delegitimised both by the colonial narratives and the reformist discourses within the community as "backward". The drive initiated by the reformers in favour of the vernacular and its constitutive cultural contexts led to a neglect of existing structures of knowledge within the community (Muneer423-424). T.A. Sajna, in her study of the history of Muslim

women in Kerala, observes that despite their remarkable contributions in the realms of spirituality, religious teaching, and culture, Muslim women's history still remains obscure (68). These studies point toward the complex nature of the Muslim reformist enterprises in Kerala and pose some very pertinent questions about the “perceived illiteracy” of those women who were subjected to the new education.

Some scholarly investigations into the history of Muslim women have also sparked a new interest in reformist texts and their historical contexts. However, this interest has predominantly focused on non-literary works, leaving the use of literary genres by reformers largely unexplored. This oversight is often attributed to the perceived minor status of these texts, which were published in periodical magazines of the time, as well as the inaccessibility of many of these works, written in the Arabic-Malayalam script, to the general readership. The analysis presented in this paper aims to demonstrate that these literary texts, when examined within the specific socio-political and historical framework of the Muslim community in Kerala, can offer valuable insights into the history and development of diverse discourses related to identity formation and the role of religion within it.

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