ഇശൽ പൈതൃകം

ത്രൈമാസിക ലക്കം: 41

Ishal Paithrkam

Online issue 26 print issue 41 March 2025

Mahakavi Moyinkutty Vaidyar
Mappila Kala Akademi
Department of Cultural Affairs
Government of Kerala-India
March 2025

ISSN:2582-550X

ഇശൽ പൈതൃകം
ത്രൈമാസിക
ലക്കം: 41
2025 മാർച്ച്

പകർപ്പാവകാശം: പ്രസാധകർക്ക്

ചീഫ് എഡിറ്റർ
ഡോ. ഹുസൈൻ രണ്ടത്താണി

എഡിറ്റർ
ഡോ. ഷംഷാദ് ഹുസൈൻ. കെ.ടി.

അസോസിയേറ്റ് എഡിറ്റർ
ഡോ. അനീസ് ആലങ്ങാടൻ

എഡിറ്റോറിയൽ ബോർഡ്
ബഷീർ ചുങ്കത്തറ
ഡോ. പി.പി അബ്ദുൽ റസാഖ്
എം.എൻ. കാരശ്ശേരി
സൈദലവി ചീരങ്ങോട്ട്

പ്രസാധകർ
മഹാകവി മോയിൻകുട്ടി വൈദ്യർ
മാപ്പിള കലാ അക്കാദമി
കൊണ്ടോട്ടി: 673 638
ഫോൺ: 0483 2711432

Ishal Paithrkam
ISSN: 2582-550X
Peer-Reviewed
UGC CARE indexed
Quarterly
Bilingual
Issue: 41
Online issue: 26
March: 2025

Editor
Dr. Shamshad hussain. KT

Printed @
LIPI Offset
Malappuram

Publisher
Mahakavi Moyinkutty
Vaidyar
Mappila Kala Akademi
Kondotty, 673638
Ph: 0483-2711432

www.mappilakalaacademy.org
www.ishalpaithrkam.info

ISSN:2582-550X

Tawakkul, *Rizk*, and Reproductive Agency: Perspectives on Family Planning and Abortion in Malabar

Basima Shahna Muhammed

This paper looks into how Muslim women exercise their reproductive agency with regard to the pro-life ideology of Islam as practiced in Malabar by examining reproductive practices such as contraception and abortion. Muslim women's reproductive practices are often grounded within the patriarchal theological systems or seen as a reflection of socio-economic marginalisation of the community. However, academic studies which examine Muslim women's reproductive agency through a grounded reading of their everyday experiences - including the material and transcendental - are almost absent. This paper argues that women anchor their negotiations within the vocabulary of religion, specifically adopting the language of *tawakkul* (trust in God) and *rizk* (sustenance). However, this language centered on religiosity is not linear as women widely adopt contraceptive measures, negotiate religious laws in favor of their everyday reality while also remaining informed by scientific/modern discourses regarding procreation and parenting.

Key Words: Reproductive Agency, Contraception and Abortion, Ideology of Procreation, Muslim Women in Malabar.

1.0 Introduction

The fertility rate of Muslims in India has always been a site of political contestations since colonial times (see Shraddhananda,1926). The uncontrolled fertility rate among Muslims is often perceived as the impact of premodern, patriarchal elements

of Islam (Jeffery & Jeffery, 2006, p. 8-11) and the growth in population size of Muslims in India is often linked with restrictions of Muslim orthodoxy in using family planning methods (Bhat& Zavier, 2005, Jeffery & Jeffery, 2006, Kepkey, 2011, Bhagat, 2018). This paper analyses Muslim women's engagement and negotiations surrounding the Islamic ideology of procreation in Malabar, South India and examines how Muslim women exercise their reproductive agency with regard to the pro-life ideology of Islam by examining practices such as contraception, abortion, and child bearing. The paper predominantly relies on participant's views based on the in-depth interviews among ever married Muslim women who are in their reproductive age group (18-49) which were held during the course of 2019 to 2022. The participants of the study, i.e., Muslim women in their reproductive age group were selected from Malappuram district of Malabar (northern-Kerala) since Malappuram consists of the major share of Muslims both in Malabar as well as Kerala. This paper argues that women anchor their negotiations within the vocabulary of religion, specifically adopting the language of *Tawakkul* (trust in God) and *Rizk* (sustenance). However, this language is not linear as women widely adopt contraceptive measures, negotiate religious laws in favour of their everyday reality and are also informed by scientific/modern discourses regarding procreation and parenting.

1.1 Fertility, State, and the Muslim Women

Scholarly studies on Muslim women have explored questions surrounding identity, agency, and their relationship with religion, men, and the state. Most of these studies have often focussed on Muslim women's bodies with the hijab/veil as a point of critique as evident in the large corpus of orientalist literature (Said, 1979; Ahmed, 1992). The perception of Muslim women as pre-modern and opposed to Western values has been used to justify imperialist agendas - a notion which has been challenged by black and third-world feminists in their critique of the patronizing stance of mainstream feminism (Ahmed, 1992; Abu-Lughod, 2002; Mahmood, 2008). This section is concerned with the question of agency of Muslim women surrounding the questions of reproduction and other copulative practices. An extensive study of colonial literature reveals how Muslim women are perceived

to have aberrant sexualities, with heavily fertile bodies, and as reproducing a large number of children. Muslim representation in films and literature also replicate the hitherto existing stereotypes[1] with the popular narrative surrounding a Muslim family being "we five, our twenty-five"[2] implying Muslim are multiplying in large numbers by polygyny. On the other hand, Bhagat (2018, p.30) cites a study of the census commissioner of India (1911) as well as in the census of India report (1971) to argue that Muslim in generally practise monogamy and the rate of polygamy is higher among Hindus than Muslims.

Muslim women's question in post Independent India was mainly associated with discourses on reformation of Muslim personal law (Vatuk, 2008; Sherin, 2018). From the Shah Bano case to the recent debates over equal property rights, the prevailing concept is Muslim personal law, consisting of premodern practices like triple-Talaq, 'Hijab', gender disparity in inheritance of property etc., is a marker of confining Muslim women. The call for Uniform Civil Code including from feminists intensified the narrative that Muslim women are to be saved from the religious patriarchy (Sherin, 2018). Muslim women NGOs, which were formed especially from the 1990s have challenged the predominant dichotomy of gender v/s religion and have attempted to locate the complexities of women's gendered and religious self (Kirmani, 2011). Arafat (2022) observes that unlike the older generation who avoided adopting religious markers out of fear of being othered, university educated Muslim women in post-Mandal India confidently display visible religious symbols in public spaces (p.69). Their active participation in protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act and the Karnataka hijab ban (2019-2021) further challenges liberal narratives of "Islamic/Muslim backwardness" (Arafat, 2022, p. 70).

Within the context of the South Indian state of Kerala, Muslim community was often treated as backward, irrational, anti- modern, and misogynistic despite the evident presence of Muslim women in the public sphere with regard to education and employment (Devika, 2022). Muslim women's sartorial practices carry the label of being "patriarchal/foreign' while the clothing of other communities was hardly attacked.[3] In the case of the agency of Muslim women, appreciable acts were absent from the side of religious authorities including activists

or reformers within the community as well as religious scholars. Hussain (2014) states that Muslim reform movements in Kerala regarded Muslim women as the monolithic group who are subjected to the pre-set discourses of the patriarchy and Muslim clergy.[4] On the other hand the conventional modern framework was incapable of registering the achievements and engagement of Muslim women.[5] A similar argument is put forth by Sherin (2021) who suggests that relegating religion to a premodern consciousness overlooks modernisation and attempts of reform within the religion, particularly in relation to Sharia revision and mosque movement (Sherin, 2021, p.11). Sherin (2021) also argues that it is the inability of modern liberal discourses to address Muslim women's "ability of action within the religious system" that reinforced the construction of Muslim women as an agency-less category.

In analysing Muslim women's agency within a patriarchal context, it is essential to consider the pervasive patriarchal family system in India, which affects women across religions. The notion that Muslim women lack agency over reproductive choices is often discussed against the backdrop of India's demographic data, where stereotypes of high Muslim fertility have fuelled socio-political tensions. Historical events reveal that British colonial policies and Hindu right-wing narratives have exploited these stereotypes, casting Muslim fertility as a threat to the Hindu majority and national progress, often leading to calls for population control measures targeting Muslims. Scholars argue that socio-economic factors, rather than religion, are the primary drivers of reproductive behavior among Indian Muslims; disparities in education, infrastructure access, and socio-economic marginalization are more influential than religious doctrine. For instance, Unnithan-Kumar (1999) highlights that accessible, unbiased contraceptive education could support family planning in Muslim communities. Research further suggests that religious edicts minimally impact reproductive choices, with socio-economic marginalization being a key reason for delayed fertility rate declines among Muslims compared to other groups. This study explores how religious values impact fertility among Muslim women in Malappuram, emphasizing the role of religious education in shaping reproductive decisions. Here,

reproductive agency—defined as the ability to make autonomous choices—must be understood within the broader context of women's daily interactions with patriarchal structures in society and their community, where their responses to individual circumstances, whether through negotiation, reinterpretation, or agency, are shaped by both personal beliefs and systemic constraints.

1.2 *Tawakkul*, *Rizk* and Family 'Planning' in Islam

This section looks into the basic principles of pro-life ideology of Islam by emphasizing on the key Islamic concepts *Tawakkul* and *Rizk.* It also tries to understand how these concepts pave the foundation for decisions regarding procreational life. *Tawakkul* (reliance or trust in Allah) and *Rizk* (sustenance/ provision) are major Islamic intertwined concepts influencing the everyday decision making of Muslims.[6] These two concepts can be significantly linked with the decision making on procreation and birth control as well (for instance see Group Development Pakistan, 2019). The practitioners of Islam believe that the ultimate provider is Allah to each and every living being in the world. The Arabic term *Rizk* means provision which not only denotes just food but includes food, shelter and wealth etc and the term is mentioned in the Quran multiple times.[7] Hadith literature offers an extensive reference to *Rizk* with prayers and supplications where Prophet Mohammed stresses good familial relation as an effective way to increase one's own livelihood or sustenance[8]. Similarly, the concept of *Tawakkul* is also key with regard to the decision making of individuals. It is completely reliant on Allah's decision over human beings and the belief that Allah is sufficient to rely upon all matters.[9] The question of birth control in Islam is related to whether it is compatible with the idea of *Rizk* and *Tawakkul.* The question of permissibility to alter or limit the procreational capacity in order to have better livelihood for a believer when s/he thinks that Allah provides and plans the best for him or her is the problem here.

It is widely believed that Muslims do not practice family planning due to strict religious rules (Sotelo& Acharya, 2005; Bhat & Zavier, 2005; see Iyer, 2002). This section examines Islamic laws surrounding birth control measures based on in-depth interviews with contemporary Islamic scholars in Malabar. Secondly, researcher look

into various secondary sources on Islamic rules on family planning. Thirdly, the section attempts to critically locate whether Muslim women are granted a freedom of choice regarding family planning as per Islamic law. There exists an ideological difference with regard to the practise of birth control among Islamic scholars. For instance, according to the Quranic injunction Allah advises to breastfeed the child at least for two years (Quran 2:233) which is also further extended in Hadith literature. Therefore, generally scholars point out that at least a gap of three years (33 months) is appreciated for physical wellness of both mother and child (Karakunnu, 1986, p.210).

Scholars point out that *Azl* (coitus interruptus) was practiced by companions of the prophet Muhammed at the time of revelation but the prophet does not have forbidden it.[10] Imam Shafi (d. 767 AD-820 AD) has said that companions were not confined from doing *Azl*.[11] Imam Malik also has the same opinion regarding *Azl*.[12] According to Hanafi scholars' consent of the wife is a requirement for doing *Azl*.[13] Imam Ghazali (2014)[14] states that while several Hadiths permit *Azl* (withdrawal), it is considered undesirable (*karahath*). Imam Qurtubi views contraception and abortion as fundamentally the same in principle, though different in practice (cited in Musliyar, 2015). Imam Nawawi also holds that contraception is not desirable (Musliyar, 2015). Egyptian Islamic scholar, Dr. Yusuf Al-Qaradawi (1994) opines that *Azl* is permissible on the ground health risks for mother, health of already born children, and also the fear of doing forbidden things due to offspring. According to Islamist scholar Abul A'la Modudi (1962), family planning is anti-human and is very much a part of the Western capitalist project. At the same time, he argues that birth control was only allowed when it would be threatening to the health of the child or the mother.[15]

Malabari Islamic scholar Ponmala Abdul Qadir Musliyar (2015) opines that birth control is the reflection of heartlessness and greediness of the modern world. According to Karakkunnu (1986), natural methods like calendar method can be practised to avoid pregnancy since the consecutive pregnancy affects physical wellness of the mother and already born child. Loss of beauty of a woman due to consecutive pregnancy can is also a valid reason for adopting

contraceptives via natural methods (Karakunnu, 1986). Using family planning is not against the concepts of Rizk and Tawakkul (Omran cited in Roudi- Fahimi, 2004, p.5). At the same time scholars agree that sterilization is not valid until the health risk of the mother (Karakkunnu, 1986, Musliyar, 2015, Dilawar, et. al. (n.d), Wani& Anjum, 2019). All Muslim scholars interviewed by the researcher unanimously opined that temporary birth control measures are allowed.[16] Though there are different schools of thought concerning the adoption of family planning, the sanction for temporary methods is validated by the majority of the scholars. At the same time a few scholars outrightly reject family planning methods by equalising it as killing a life. The fertility of Muslim women is also seen as a lack of reproductive rights for women in Islam.

1.3 Fertility, Faith and Muslim Women in Malabar

Muslim women also are able to manipulate their religious belief according to the individual realities in their everyday life. In general, Muslims perceive that children are a blessing and gift from God. The same goes with Indian tradition[17] which perceives children as an epitome of abundance. The opinion of participants of the study regarding the size of an ideal family, particularly on the number of children, can be based on different value systems which need not always be religion. It can also be derived from the cultural conditioning of the larger South Asian/Indian society which is also pro-life oriented.

Researcher's interviews with Muslim women from Malappuram reveal how religion can't be always considered as a determining factor which decides the pro-life perspective of women or as restricting women from adopting family planning. However, it cannot be denied that religion has a role in motivating Muslim women to enter into marital life and further into motherhood. At the same time, many women interpret and practice their faith according to the lived realities. They manipulate, adopt, or reject Islamic laws and norms regarding contraception to achieve their own objectives which are also governed by their marginal socio-economic status (Weigl-Jager 2016).

Muslim women practise *Tawakkul* (trust) on religious teachings to a larger extent though they manifest it in different ways.

They are not negating religious/ textual rulings over conjugal and reproductive life in general. Albeit they either adopt it to a larger extent or use strategies to overcome mainstream socio/ religious patriarchal notions regarding fertility. They are also able to critically approach the established (read traditional) perspectives on procreation. Apart from this, living in the ambit of modernity and liberal education has enabled Muslim women to adopt a feminist lens which they often employ to re-read religion to interpret religious texts and scholarship to read the Islamic philosophy of procreation in a women's/ feminist perspective. Moreover, there are Muslim women who also manipulate their faith in accordance with their individual opinions and choices surrounding reproduction. To understand the influence of *Tawakkul* and *Rizk* and key concepts of Islamic philosophy of procreation amongst Muslim women, it is vital to understand how women practise those concepts while adopting family planning and abortion.

In popular discourse, Islamic belief systems are often perceived as contrary to modern family planning methods. This stands in contrast to academic studies which have shown that religion is a less impactful factor influencing the contraceptive usage among Muslim women. According to Iyer, 2002 and Jeffrey& Jeffrey, 2006; 1997, Muslim women's adoption of contraceptive methods is rather affected by socio-economic factors and other causes of marginality. Different Islamic schools of thought have divergent opinions on family planning and women's reactions to these *fiqhi* texts are also influenced by multiple factors. Muslim women either believe that the practice of family planning is *halal* (allowed) in Islam, or they practice the same despite being well aware that religion forbids family planning. Therefore, it is a complex question whether Islamic faith system influences or restricts different mechanisms of family planning. It is also significant to note how women's faith-based systems are inspired by their immediate life choices, and the embodiment of faith in reproductive practices is also entangled with the social, economic, cultural and political location of these women. The upcoming section analyses different positions in the practice Islamic philosophy of procreation among Mappila women of Malappuram district. The section further engages into how Islamic concepts such as Tawakkul

and *Rizk* find a reflection in their individual perceptions. There are active efforts from the side of women who want to know the religious rulings on reproductive matters. Women rely on self-study of religious texts, seek *fatwa*- (clarification of religious rulings) - from Islamic scholars *(Ulema)* and practise according to what they regard as correct.

1.4 Reading Muslim Women's Narratives on Family Planning and Abortion

The Researcher met Amna, a twenty-three-year-old Muslim graduate in the year 2022. Amna was completely into family planning. She added:

"Condoms are *halal* (permissible). I had studied about this when my friend told me that condoms are *haram* (forbidden). But I found that it is allowed. It was like a fatwa. However, sterilization is not encouraged in the religion if it is not recommended by a doctor".[18]

Unlike Amna, there are women who perceive family planning as forbidden in Islam and hence unwilling to adopt methods of contraception. Jinsha, who is a high school teacher and mother of two regards modern methods of family planning as completely impermissible in Islam. According to her, except in case of severe medical emergencies, family planning had to be dissuaded in the community. While talking about her desire to have three kids, Jinsha notes on how sterilisation without "valid reasons are not allowed in Islam" where one cannot intentionally "reduce the number of children into one or two"[19].

Women's reproductive choices are also influenced by other socio-political ideologies, and individual life choices though may not practice their religion in full meaning. In researcher's interview with Mufsina, a homemaker and a twelfth standard pass-out, she admits about her lack of religious knowledge while wholeheartedly assuming that "children are a gift from god and we (women) don't have freedom to decide on the same". When asked about her desired number of kids, she responded:

"Desired number of children? Maximum 3. Nowadays people don't have as many children as the times before. We know how our mothers are physically ill due to consecutive deliveries. Apart from

that, the way we raise our children is also important. Here, finance is a significant issue. We should be able to provide for them and finance their education".[20]

Women who perceive family planning (FP) as religiously or culturally prohibited may nonetheless choose to adopt it for various practical reasons. While they may believe that FP, or specific methods of it, are impermissible, they still engage in its practice due to circumstances encountered in their daily lives. These circumstances can include consecutive caesarean deliveries, health complications during the prenatal or postnatal periods, or financial constraints, all of which may influence their decision to utilize FP methods despite their personal or religious reservations. Rasiya, a 42-year-old homemaker and mother of three is willing to prioritize women's health over Islamic rulings on abortion. She says: "I have heard it is forbidden. But our health is also important"[21].

Young mothers like Rajhath and Shamla are confused, for they are unsure about any other ways by which they can increase the age gap between children. The participants informed that they are not strictly adhering to religion though they culturally practice Islam. These women do not abide by literal readings of the Quran regarding reproductive practices. However, they do not challenge religious principles nor do they negate their importance. These women believe that artificial /modern family planning methods are not permissible according to their faith. However, these women were unable to follow the dictums due to their everyday struggles and negotiations such as childcare, career or illness. These women do not outrightly reject their faith in God, but remain flexible throughout, and act in accordance with their individual perceptions if they encounter any mismatch between individual desires and religious edicts. In addition to that, some of the participants took initiative to change the perspective of their family members, including partners. For instance, Henna, a private school teacher and currently pregnant with her third baby talks about how she convinced her husband to use condoms and urge for sterilization after her current delivery:

"My husband believes that permanent sterilization is not allowed. It may be difficult in future in case we need another baby, he

says. Temporary methods are okay for him. But I always urge him for sterilization after this delivery. He has not agreed yet"[22].

Henna doesn't believe that sterilization is forbidden but her husband believes so. Although she is not able to take the decision as her own, she pressurises her husband for his consent. Though women think that it is beyond their capacity to raise many children, they believe that children are very important to them. However, these women are capable of using strategies with their husbands and family members if they have a difference of opinion. In such cases an overt case of conflict between the (family) members is not seen. But they try to inculcate their family members' opinion through conversation without much familial clashes. Some of the participants are also concerned about the medical side effects of using contraceptives apart from the overt influence of religious beliefs:

Shareefa (37, research scholar, mother of two): "I am not using artificial contraceptives. It is not because of faith in Islam, but rather an awareness of its medical side effects. But it is true that my faith has influenced my concepts about family and kids. I don't think I can raise more kids. But both of us are of the same opinion that permanent sterilization is not allowed in Islam".[23]

Shareefa believes that permanent sterilization is not allowed in Islam. But she doesn't want many kids. She is also hesitant to use temporary artificial contraceptive methods due to its potential health risks. She knows that only permanent sterilization is forbidden in Islam. More than the religious concerns, the reason for not adopting modern methods of contraception for her is her awareness of health risks surrounding these methods. Shahana's concern was also not based on her belief. She emphasized that sterilization is not a wise decision for her due to the uncertainties in her life which included lethal health risks. Despite doctors and other family members persistently compelling her for abortion, she was not agreeing to abort her five-month-old healthy fetus. Shahana says:

"I understand that Islamic rulings are flexible and empathetic to human beings in the case of a health crisis. In my opinion it is not good to prevent pregnancy for the sake of building a career. I would definitely opt for children if I was supposed to pick one from either

career or children. I may use contraception, but not sterilization. I am ideologically and ethically against sterilization. Our lives are too uncertain. So, in future we may wish for a child. What would we do at that time if we were sterilized? I would never opt for an abortion either. Doctors and other family members suggested that I abort my second baby as I was having critical health issues. Since it was during the fifth month of pregnancy I did not consent to that suggestion. I adopted alternative ways to sustain my pregnancy. And my baby is perfectly healthy. She has started her schooling now".[24]

Participants who are proficient in Islamic studies are of the opinion that women's physical and mental being as well as the health of the children is important in Islam. For instance, Ala (22 years) is a head of a religious educational firm, apart from pursuing her higher education from reputed religious and state universities. Ala adds:

"According to Islam, every child has a right to breastmilk for 2 years. The physical health of women, apart from their emotional willingness are also of primary concern. This would mean that temporary methods for the prevention of unwanted pregnancies are allowed in Islam." [25]

Ala's opinion, both as a participant of the study and as a young scholar in the Muslim community is not heard widely. As evident in the above anecdote, she interprets Quranic verses from the perspective of a woman where the emphasis is not on the number of children. Rather she underscores the rights of women and children in Islam with regard to reproductive practices. To comprehend the stand points on family planning among the participants, it is worth mentioning that most of these women often lack in-depth knowledge with regard to religious rulings on family planning. Women often use various methods of family planning by taking religious sanctions for granted. A minority of women seek religious sanctions from the religious texts or scholars and decide it accordingly as per their everyday requirements. However, it is interesting to note that women who had access to extensive religious knowledge often re-interpret the same from a perspective which is empathetic to women. There exists a faith-based opposition to contraceptive measures, wherein certain women adhere to the belief that the use of birth control is religiously

prohibited. As opposed to this, there is also a religiously grounded endorsement of family planning, where some believe that the adoption of family planning methods is sanctioned within their religious framework.

As evident in the above snippets, the participants of the study generally employed various family planning (FP) methods, which were guided by their individual lived experiences. They interpret religious guidelines in a manner that aligns with their personal circumstances, believing that God is understanding of their financial, physical, emotional, and professional challenges. This interpretation does not signify a direct challenge to religious laws or cultural norms. However, some women who are socially active among the participants question cultural conditioning which disregards women's health, mental state of being, and lived experiences. In contrast, a subset of participants expressed some concern for religious issues surrounding Family planning. Notably, while a significant minority perceive FP practices as religiously forbidden, many still engage in these practices, including sterilization.

When it comes to matters such as abortion, religious sanctions on reproductive agency of women emerge as a major field of contestation. In a pro-life oriented faith system such as Islam, voluntarily opting for abortion is not an easier choice. The upcoming section engages with impasses of Muslim women in practicing religion as well as reproductive agency on abortion. The way they manifest *Tawakkul and Rizk* with their individual realities in everyday life is complex albeit intriguing with regard to the theorizations of agency.

1.5 Abortion and Reproductive Agency

The religious sanctions on abortion are significant in the premise of recent debates on the legality of abortion as a reproductive choice. Induced abortion is forbidden in Islam unless it poses health risk for mother or foetus (Karakkunnu , 1986; 2017, Musliyar, 2015, CPET,n.d). Muslims universally believe that induced abortion is a sin and punishable offence in the life after. Majority of the Islamic scholars state that abortion is forbidden unless it is stipulated with valid reasons[26]. The Quran warns people who kill out of fear of poverty and it continues that it is Allah who is providing the food (CPET, n.d.) The higher sex ratio observed among Muslims, in comparison to other

religious communities, can be attributed to explicit references and regulations concerning the termination of pregnancy and female infanticide found in key Islamic texts. These religious injunctions may play a role in shaping reproductive practices within the community. Aversion to daughters is found least in Muslim families than among higher caste Hindu families (Borooah, et. al, 2009; Borooah& Iyer, 2005)

Muslim women participants of this study also shared a similar perspective. They believe that induced abortion is not allowed unless there is any risk for the mother's life or ill health of the fetus. A few participants suggested that, as per their individual belief, abortion is allowed till the 40th day of pregnancy. This is in par with the Islamic dictum which suggests that ensoulment of the foetus will occur on the 40th day of pregnancy. However, there were also participants who were not aware of religious teaching on abortion. Secondly, the influence of Islamic rulings regarding induced abortion was very evident in the life of participants. They see it as a very serious affair and a punishable offence if done without valid reason. During our conversations, researcher asked them whether they would accept or abort an unintended pregnancy. A steeping majority said that they would accept it if they would not face a major health risk. The unplanned pregnancies rarely get terminated in the context of other reasons like financial constraints, career/ education of mothers. For instance, Jasmin, a Muslim mother of two kids, who is currently widow foregrounds the role of faith while deciding to keep her second baby:

"I am motivated by faith to get married and to have kids. My faith in Allah helped to accept my pregnancies though I was planning to restart my education at that time. So, I postponed my plan".[27]

Participants also shared the belief that ultimate blessings are bestowed by God, and that some kind of divine intervention will ease their lives if they refrain from terminating a pregnancy. Nisha, a postgraduate medical student, shared her experience of an unintended pregnancy due to the failure of temporary contraceptive methods. Despite being fully aware of the challenges posed by balancing her studies and motherhood, she chose to continue with the pregnancy:

"My faith relieved my anxieties and stress associated with pregnancy. I think God blessed me to make my duties easier. Otherwise, I wouldn't have qualified for PG medical entrance. My bachelor friends and non-mother friends couldn't crack the entrance. But I could get through it with my two small babies".[28]

Asma, (Assistant Professor, mother of two) was doing her PhD when she became pregnant with the second baby. She also decided to continue the pregnancy though the decision was very painful for her. She said:

"My first baby was very small at that time. The decision to welcome the second one in between the difficulties of a new mother and the pressure of my studies was very painful but we did that. After a few months I was selected for the government job which was my dream. I believe that it is a gift for me from Allah for not terminating the pregnancy for the sake of my belief".[29]

Both Asma and Nisha were struggling with their unintended pregnancies. But termination of pregnancy was beyond their ability. They chose the struggle and pain for the sake of their belief systems. As evident from their narratives, these women were in strong belief that their struggle will be validated before God and they will be rewarded for their physical and emotional pain. These women, who happen to be educated, were ready to anchor their choices in such a manner that they set aside the ownership of their body for the sake of trust and hope in God. They believed that God will make their ways easier in the future, if they forsake the immediate material need of not wanting the baby. This submission by women, where they chose to go by the precepts of God, may be considered as a false consciousness in the framework feminist theorizations of agency which are grounded on modernity.[30] Their decisions were purely based on their exposure to religion though an aversion towards abortion due to socio-cultural upbringing can also be a factor. However, societal demands found least reflection in their responses. Instead, the fear of doing a sin and the pleasure of choosing the pain for the sake of their trust *(Tawakkul)* in God was more evident in their responses. Women's secular education and the legalization of abortion in a country like India played a negligible role here.

Participants have also shared stories of induced abortion. That particular moment of taking the decision to terminate their pregnancy was very painful for them. Noora,[31] who is a mother of six kids and a homemaker told:

"I got married at the age of 14 and I became a mother of three when I was just 20 years old. I was struggling to handle the 3 kids I already have. The construction of our new home was also happening around the same time. So, giving birth to a 4th kid was almost unimaginable to me. I told my husband to abort the kid. He agreed though he is ideologically against abortion. He was helpless because he knew my situation was beyond my capability. Now I am very fearful about that incident and I ask forgiveness to Allah everyday"[32].

Noushaja[33] had an unintended pregnancy just a few months after their marriage. At that time, she was a UG student and her husband was a research scholar.

Noushaja (30 years, Post Graduate, working in Government Sector and mother of two): "I had aborted one baby when I was in college. We both were students and economically unstable. When we searched about its possibility in Islam with some religious scholars, we found that it is possible within the first 40 days. It was very painful to make that decision. We donated some gold for the poor when we became financially stable in seeking forgiveness from Allah. My elder was only 1 year old when I became pregnant for the third time. At that time my husband also asked me to abort. But I did not agree with that".[34]

In the above said cases, Muslim women view abortion as a punishable offense in the afterlife, even though they may have undergone the procedure. They seek God's forgiveness for what they perceive as a sin committed under conditions of extreme vulnerability. Noora, a homemaker with only a basic education, and Noushaja, a feminist highly active on social media, both share a similar spiritual stance regarding the religious perspective on abortion. Despite their differing backgrounds, both feel a deep sense of guilt for having terminated a pregnancy in the past, while also placing their trust in God's mercy, believing that He will forgive their transgression. The

in-depth knowledge of Muslim women in Islamic laws helps them to interpret the rules in their own way. Ala was well aware of the Islamic sanctions on abortion since she had a bachelor degree from an Islamic university apart from a bachelor degree from the state university. She believes that Islam values the rights of the living children and the health of the mother more than the right of a fetus to live. Children born already have the right to get breast milk for two years. She says:

I had an experience of a contraceptive failure when my child was 7 months old. I was so depressed at that time thinking about how the future pregnancy might affect my child who is just 7 months old. I thought about abortion. There is an option in Islam for abortion within 3 months if we have valid reasons. But I got periods after a few days. So, I didn't have to go through the medical procedures of abortion".[35]

Shakira, another interlocutor in the study, doesn't have conventional religious education. A practising lawyer, she took initiative to understand the religious edicts on reproductive rights of women by accessing the digital media and by asking for fatwas from local religious clerics/ *ulemas*. Shakira doesn't want to conceive since she and spouse are not physically and emotionally ready to welcome a baby:

"Abortion is allowed in Islam until the fourth month of pregnancy. So, I will choose abortion in case of an unintended pregnancy. Our physical and mental wellness is also important."[36]

Though Ala's perception focuses on rights of the already having child, it might be helpful to the mother to overcome the frequent deliveries and child care. Contrary to that, Shakira's concern is regarding the couple who is not ready to have a kid. Her claims appear to be similar to the feminist demand for women's rights over their body. Shakira finds an interpretation of religious edict and co-opts the same with her feminist demand on women's right over their bodies. Muslim women's reproductive practices are also influenced by the demands of their family members. The role of the husband is vital in this. For instance, Sabeetha's husband is a health worker in the government sector and had to terminate her third order pregnancy due to the dislike of her husband. Unlike her, he never wished for kids or wanted a maximum of two children.

Sabeetha (35 years, Teacher, mother of two): "I had one induced abortion since my husband demanded it. He was not mentally ready to accept the baby. I had disagreements with him but finally had to concede to his demands"[37]

To avoid familial conflict Sabeetha agrees for abortion though she doesn't want it. She desires to have a baby, but is afraid of challenging husband's words. In conversation with the researcher, she narrates how her desire for another baby is linked to her childhood experience. She has only one brother and had always wished to have more siblings to get rid of with the loneliness she experienced during the time. She also doesn't want to have the same experience for her children too. Nevertheless, she was not able to act according to her wishes fearing her disagreement might affect her relationship with husband. This also has to do with the patriarchal code of conduct, where the figure of the husband is considered as the anchorage of women's lives. Sabeetha here transgresses the religious edicts to obey the demands of her husband.

Muslim women, as evident from the narrative of women like Sabeetha, choose safer options in their everyday life even though it is against their will or desire. In a patriarchal familial system, acting without external influence is almost impossible for women. Sabeetha didn't want conflicts and collapse in her marital life for her husband is supportive for career, passion to travel, and her personal preferences in clothing. Rather than obeying her husband blindly, Sabeetha opts for a less harmful option for her future. These modes of negotiation can be seen as a way in which women co-opt diverse strategies in their larger unequal familial settings. Sabeetha enjoys financial independence through employment, and hence there is a possibility that she also aimed to preserve her social status. Her decision was influenced by a desire to maintain harmony in a marital relationship that, aside from this particular incident, she described as 'smooth' and 'supportive'.

As evident from the above discussions, religion plays a predominant role in influencing Muslim women in terminating their pregnancies. However, induced abortions are lower among Muslims than other communities in India. Though this can be a case of under-

reporting, participants of this study have also underscored lower cases of induced abortions among Muslim women. One cannot ignore the possibility that strict religious edicts, and social norms against abortion may be the factors which prevent women from opening up. Women, as the above narratives reveal, may conceive against their will, which can be because of the absence of proper contraception or through its failures. Instead of terminating the pregnancies, these Muslim women regard this as Allah's will over their decision and accept the same. This trust in Allah (*Tawakkul*) is vested upon the premise that Allah's choice is better than theirs as he knows the best and He will not harm them. This *Tawakkul*, this study regards, perhaps could be a decisive factor influencing high fertility rate among Muslims.

Individual perceptions regarding abortion vary among the Muslim women. Strict regulations and severe punishment for abortion has made it a more serious affair than other family planning methods. Generally, participants view abortion as a sin. However, some have undergone pregnancy termination even in the absence of life-threatening health risks. They attribute this decision to financial, cultural, and social vulnerabilities, as well as constraints in their daily lives. However, as the narratives reveal, they express feelings of guilt regarding their actions. The women who argue for the legality of abortion within Islamic edicts emphasize the rights of women and those of existing children who were breastfeeding. Physical and mental well-being of the couples were also pointed out as valid reasons for abortion by some of the participants. Women's knowledge in Islamic laws and their capability to interpret those edicts in women's perspective is significant in this regard. Participants also opt for the less harmful option they have in order for conflict-free familial life centred on patriarchy which was highlighted as important for their social status and security.

1.6 Conclusion

Muslim women engage with Islamic principles of procreation—grounded in concepts like Tawakkul (trust in God) and Rizk (provision)—in diverse ways shaped by their interpretations of Islamic teachings and their lived realities, including education, career, family, finances, and societal contexts. Islamic teachings that encourage

marriage, allow remarriage, and endorse sexual pleasure within marriage may influence women to pursue marital life, viewing children as blessings and personal sacrifices in motherhood as divinely rewarded. Although a few participants expressed concerns about religious sanctions on family planning, many adapted religious teachings to fit their circumstances, with only a minority seeking formal religious guidance, such as fatwas. Most women believe that temporary contraceptive methods are permissible in Islam, despite a significant portion thinking that family planning is forbidden.

Regarding sterilization, it is widely viewed as impermissible unless medically justified, yet many women feel their personal circumstances would be accepted by God. Most participants consider abortion as haram, accepting unplanned pregnancies unless health risks arise, often trusting that God will alleviate their difficulties. Women who have had abortions frequently cite pressures from husbands or financial hardships as justifiable reasons before God, maintaining hope in their faith. In conclusion, Muslim women, regardless of their varying levels of religious understanding, interpret and negotiate religious laws in ways that accommodate their realities. They assert their agency in reproductive decisions by interpreting and sometimes manipulating religious teachings to align with their everyday experiences.

Endnotes

1. For instance, Hussain, 2015, p.43-50, Noushad,2021; Chembayil,2019.
2. See Jeffery & Jeffery 2006; Lobo& Shah, 2018; Bandukhwala, 2018; Sebastian, 2018; Visaria, 2018, Pinto, 2018, Quraishi, 2021.
3. See: Devika 2022
4. According to Hussain, Muslim women are always considered as an object which should be prepared for social recreation and for their freedom. For Hussain, Muslim women's agency and subjectivity will be at their fullest when there will be an opening towards the struggle for equity and justice in both private and public sphere (Hussain, 2014).
5. Hussain 2015; 2024
6. Tawakkul is an act of referring to Allah as their "*wakil*". Wakil is an attribute of Allah which means disposer of affairs. It generally means trustee, advocate or agent. It is also transferring responsibility to someone to make decisions on behalf of them.
7. See verses: 2:126, 11:6, 16:71, 29:62 35:31, 65:3, 89:16. "There is no moving creature on earth whose provision is not guaranteed by Allah. And he knows where it lives and where it is laid to rest. All is written in a perfect record" (Holy Quran, 11:6). In another verse of the Quran (17:31), it is stated not to "kill

children" as it is a great sin, emphasizing that God is responsible for the sustenance of His creations, and individuals are not permitted to end the lives of younger generations for the sake of better livelihood.

8. See Sahih Al-Bukhari: 5980, Sahih Al-Muslim: 2557
9. The Quran asks believers to trust upon Allah when they take a decision (Holy Quran, 3:159). The Quran also says that trust in Allah's plan is a requirement of the belief in Allah (5:23). (Also refer Surah Ahzab 3, Al-Anfal, 3: 159, 4:171, 5:2, 9:129, 11:8, 11:143, 64: 11-13). Tawakkul is the half of the religion (Ibn al- Qayyim quoted in Thahir, 2020). Refer to the Quranic injunction "And will provide for him from where he does not expect. And whoever places his trust in Allah, sufficient is he for him, for Allah will surely accomplish His purpose: for verily, Allah has appointed for all things a due proportion" (Quran, 65:3).
10. Sahih Al -Bukhari, 4138, p 278; Sahih Muslim, vol. 4, 80- 86.
11. Imam Shafi as cited in Karakunnu, 1986. P.214, Musliyar, 2015, Khan-online fatwa, 2017.
12. Karakkunnu, 1986, p.214, Musliyar, 2015.
13. Ibid.
14. Al-Gazali 2014.
15. Wani and Anjum (2019) Islamic Fiqh cite that temporary birth control measures are permissible to keep a proper spacing between children. Dilawar et.al. (n.d) cites Egyptian muftis formal- Al- Azhar university that Modern methods of contraception can be adopted by accepting the evidence from practice of coitus interruptus.
16. These interviews with male scholars are a part of my Ph.D thesis and are beyond the scope of this paper.
17. See Iyer 2002.
18. Amna (name changed), personal communication, February 12, 2022.
19. Jinsha (name changed), Personal communication, December, 18, 2021.
20. Mufsina (name changed), personal communication, November, 2, 2019.
21. Rasiya (name changed), personal communication, December, 21, 2019.
22. Henna (name changed), personal communication, December, 29, 2021.
23. Shareefa (name changed), personal communication, November, 17, 2019.
24. Shahana (name changed), personal communication, December, 20, 2021.
25. Ala (name changed), personal communication, January,3 2022.
26. see Jaser& Ahaddour, 2023
27. Jasmin (name changed), personal communication, November, 17, 2019.
28. Nisha (name changed), personal communication, October, 30,2019.
29. Asma (name changed), personal communication, November, 18, 2019.
30. Ahmed, 1992; Braidotti, 2008; Bullock, 2003; Mahmood, 2005; 2006; 2008
31. Noora is 35 years old and went to school up to her ninth standard.
32. Noora (name changed), personal communication, November, 30, 2019
33. Noushaja is a Postgraduate, and is currently working in the government sector. She is also a mother of two kids.
34. Noushaja (name changed), personal communication, November,18, 2019.
35. Ala (name changed), personal communication, January,3 2022.
36. Shakira (name changed), personal communication, October, 23,2021.
37. Sabeetha (name changed), Personal communication, December, 28,2021.

Works Cited.

Abu-Lughod, L. (2002). Do Muslim women really need saving? Anthropological reflections on cultural relativism and its others. *American Anthropologist, 104*(3), 783–790.

Ahmad, L. (1992). *Women and gender in Islam: Historical roots of a modern debate.* Yale University Press.

Al-Ghazali, A. H. (2014). *Book on the etiquette of marriage (The revival of religious science – Ihya Ulumiddin)* (Vol. 2, Madelain Farah, Trans.).

Al-Qaradawi, Y. (1994). *The lawful and the prohibited in Islam.* American Trust Foundation.

Arafat, P. K. Y. (2022). Hijabing, rehijabing, dehijabing: Women in scarves and triple humiliation in post-Mandal India. In P. K. Y. Arafat & G.Arunima (Eds.), *The hijab: Islam, women, and the politics of clothing* (pp. 65-80). Simon & Schuster.

Bandukwala, J. S. (2018). Muslim demography and democracy. In L. Lobo & J. Shah (Eds.), *Religious demography of India: Myths and realities* (pp. 151-154). Rawat Publications.

Bhagat, R. B. (2018). Transition in Hindu and Muslim population growth rates: Myth and reality. In L. Lobo & J. Shah (Eds.), *Religious demography of India: Myths and realities* (pp. 79-98). Rawat Publications.

Bhat, M., & Zavier, A. J. F. (2005). Role of religion in fertility decline: The case of Indian Muslims. *Economic and Political Weekly, 40*(5), 385–402.

Borooah, V., & Iyer, S. (2005). Religion, literacy, and the female-to-male ratio. *Economic and Political Weekly, 40*(5), 419–427.

Borooah, V., Do, Q.-T., Iyer, S., & Joshi, S. (2009). Missing women and India's religious demography. *World Bank Policy Research Working Paper, 5096*.

Braidotti, R. (2008). In spite of the times: The post secular turn in feminism. *Theory, Culture & Society, 25*(6), 1–24. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276408095542

Centre for Public Education and Training. (n.d.). *Usrathul Muslim – Muslim Kudumbasastram (Family science of Muslims).* Book Plus.

Chembayil, N. (2019). Cinemayile Muslim sthree; Samoohika chalanavum bhoomisastravum. *Utharakalam*. https://utharakalam.com/mollywood+muslim+women

Devika, J. (2022). Hijabophobia in Kerala. In P. K. Y. Arafat & G.Arunima (Eds), *The hijab: Islam, women, and the politics of clothing*(pp. 133-143). Simon & Schuster.

Dilawar, B., Saffiyah, S. A., & Adham, D. R. (n.d.). *Islamic edicts on family planning*. UNFPA. Retrieved from https://www.al-islam.org/islamic-edicts-family-planning

Group Development Pakistan. (2019). *Birth spacing in Islam.* Retrieved from https://gdpakistan.org

Hussain, S. (2014). Muslim streeyude navothana patha (Muslim women's path of reform). In K. K. Muhammed & A. Sathar (Eds.), *Mappila: Keezhala padanangal* (pp. 481–488). Vachanam Books.

Hussain, S. (2015). *Muslimum streeyum allathaval (Neither Muslim nor women).* Red Cherry Books.

Hussain, S. (2024). *Malappuram penninte athmakatha (Autobiography of Malappuram women).* Rat Books.

Iyer, S. (2002). *Demography and religion in India.* Oxford University Press.

Jaser, N., & Ahaddour. (2023). Mapping the Islamic ethical discourse on prenatal diagnosis and termination of pregnancy: A methodological analysis. *Journal of Islamic Ethics, 7*(1–2), 177–201.

Jeffery, P., & Jeffery, R. (2006). *Confronting saffron demography: Religion, fertility, and women's status in India.* Three Essays Collective.

Jeffery, R., & Jeffery, P. (1997). *Population, gender, and politics: Demographic change in rural India.* Cambridge University Press.

Karakkunnu, S. (1986). *Vaivahika jeevitham Islamika veekshanathil (Conjugal life in Islamic point of view).* Islamic Publishing House.

Karakkunnu, S. (2017). *Quranile sthree (Woman in Quran).* Islamic Publishing House.

Kepkay, J. D. (2011). Division, intersection, and demographics: Women's human rights and reproductive justice in India. *The Arbutus Review, 2*(1), 12-31.

Kirmani, N. (2011). Beyond the impasse: Muslim feminism(s) and the Indian women's movement. *Contributions to Indian Sociology, 45*(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/006996671004500101

Lobo, L., & Shah, J. (2018). Introduction In L. Lobo & J. Shah (Eds.), *Religious demography of India: Myths and realities.* (pp-23-44). Rawat Publications.

Mahmood, S. (2005). *Politics of piety: Islamic revival and feminist politics.* Princeton University Press.

Mahmood, S. (2006). Secularism, hermeneutics, and empire: The politics of Islamic reformation. *Public Culture, 18*(2), 323. https://doi.org/10.215/08992363-2006-006

Mahmood, S. (2008). Feminism, democracy, and empire: Islam and the war on terror. In H. Herzong & A. Braude (Eds.), *Gendering religion and politics: Untangling modernities* (pp. 193–215). Palgrave Macmillan.

Maududi, A. A. (1962). *Birth control: Its social, political, economic, moral, and religious aspects* (K. Ahmad & M. I. Faruqi, Trans.). Islamic Publications Private Limited.

Musliyar, P. Q. (2015, May 16). Kudumasoothram: Islam parayunnath (Family planning: What Islam says). *Sunni Voice.*Retrieved from https://sunnivoice.net

Noushad, M. (2021, March 7). Halal cinema ye bhayappedunnad endinu? *Utharakalam.* Retrieved from https://utharakalam.com/halal.cinema

Pinto, A. (2018). Demography, minorities, and communalism. In L. Lobo & J. Shah (Eds.), *Religious demography of India: Myths and realities* (pp. 135-150). Rawat Publications.

Quraishi, S.Y (2021). *The population myth: Islam, family planning, and politics in India.* HarperCollins.

Roudhi-Fahimi, F. (2004). *Islam and family planning.* Population Reference Bureau. Retrieved from www.prb.org

Said, E. W. (1979). *Orientalism.* Vintage Books.

Sherin, B. S. (2018). *Desheeyata, feminism, muthala: Prathi vyavahaarangalude raashtreeyam (Nationalism, feminism, triple talaq: The politics of counter discourses).* Open Read.

Sherin, B. S. (2021). *Gendering minority: Muslim women and the politics of modernity.* Orient BlackSwan.

Shraddhanandha, S. (1929). *Hindu Sangathan; A Saviour of Dying Race*. Edited by Vivek Arya (2016) Delhi: Arsh Sahithya Prachar Trust.

Sotelo, L. S. P., & Acharya, A. (2005). Religion and India's growing population: Evidence from some selected states of India. *Caminhos de Geografia, 1*(15), 1–12.

The Hadith Sahih Al- Bukhari, (M. M Khan, Trans.; vol.5.). (1997). Darussalam.

The Hadith Sahih Al- Muslim. (Imam A. H Muslim& Ibnu al- Hajjaj, Eds.; Vol.4.). (2007). Darussalam.

Unnithan-Kumar, M. (1999). Household Kinship and access to reproductive health care among the Rural Muslim women in Jaipur. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 34(10/11), 621-630.

Vatuk, S. (2007). Islamic Feminism in India: Indian Muslim Women Activists and the reform of Muslim Personal Law. *Modern Asian Studies,* 42, 489-518. Doi: 10.1017/S0026749X07003228

Weigl-Jager, C. (2016). Islam and contraception in urban North India: Muslim women's reproductive health behavior and decision-making. *IZAF,* 88–111.

Basima Shahna Muhammed
Ph.D. Research Scholar
Department of Sociology
Queen Mary's College
Chennai- 600004
University of Madras
Email: basimamuhammed@gmail.com
Ph: +91 9790736163
ORCID: 0009-0004-6247-9309