

Fashioning ‘Body’: Sartorial Reforms and Namboothiri Women

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Clothing patterns have been a gendered expression of individual's identity throughout history. Societal concerns always played a major role in the making of sartorial choices. Morality and modesty were integral to clothing culture; when it comes to women, patriarchy was very cautious of the moral underpinnings of dress. Patriarchal notions were explicit in the traditional clothing style of women in every community. However, the ‘middleclass’ conviction was not in favour of continuing the traditional clothing patterns of women and sought to reform the same. The reformism again was in tune with the ‘new patriarchy’ and set out to ‘modernize’ women to cater the needs of new found patriarchy. This paper addresses the sartorial amelioration of Namboothiri women proposed by the male reformers of the community and how they conceived women in new attire.

Key words: Women, middle-class, patriarchy, dress reforms, *antharjana samajam*

Introduction

Patriarchy was always concerned about women's body, which was felt to be guarded from all ‘evil spirits and gaze.’ Female body, within patriarchy, was a property of the men or of the household. A woman had minimal control on her own body as it was under the strict surveillance of the family and society. Simone de Beauvoir observed that, ‘man thinks of his body as a direct and normal connection with

the world, whereas he regards the body of woman as a hindrance, a prison, weighed down by everything peculiar to it.' (Beauvoir 15) Moreover, the body of woman does not constitute a single category, as it undergoes further division as the body of upper-class woman, middle class woman, slave woman, prostitute etc. Body of woman belonging to these different sections were to fulfil varied responsibilities under patriarchy. (Omolade 350-367)

Woman's body is internalized by the society as the 'other' of man's body. Simone de Beauvoir has discussed about the phenomenology of body as lived through different stages of a woman's life, how the body is viewed in different stages of women's life, how the gendered conviction of the body is explicit in the attitude towards a boy and a girl etc. Throughout history, women have experienced their bodies in different ways. The body and its cover, 'clothes', get constructed differently right through a woman's life by forces of patriarchy, religion, caste, tradition, capitalism, liberalism and globalisation. Clothes, both of men and women, represent a culture and have been upheld as a symbolic entity of the culture. Feminists speculated that women's clothes were the result of male conspiracy to make women subservient by cultivating in them a slave psychology. (Riegel 390) Clothing was not socially neutral, dress was an immediate form of communication used to convey information about social, economic, and legal status; ethnicity; and religious affiliation. (Staples & Shaw 28) Society was stratified and hierarchical; appearance, including dress, was an outward and visible sign of a person's place in that society.

In Indian condition woman's womb and her body was to be rigorously safeguarded as she was the 'gateway' for ensuring caste purity - literally the points of entry into the caste system. (Chakravarthi 34) Hence the main threat to purity of the caste was female sexuality and this problem was solved by placing extreme restrictions on women like the pre puberty marriage and ideological controls like those prescribed by Brahmanical Patriarchy - the *Pathivratha dharma* and women's attire too was determined and dictated by the needs of the patriarchy. (Das 129-45)

Dress culture evolves in different economic and social conditions and will have periodic and regional variations. The earliest representations of women in India - in paintings and in sculptures etc. were shown with minimal clothing. Modesty has had different interpretations over time and in different regions and cultures. It was not just about covering your face and body and in many respects India's hot climate led the way. In most cases it can be seen that the upper part of the body was not covered as the lower part. However, changes were brought in the indigenous practices through the contacts with other cultures. One such force was colonialism and the resultant induction of Western concepts of modesty and morality. In the changed social scenario, the traditional architecture, education, casteism, physical appearance, clothing, hair style, jewellery all were undermined and deemed to change.

The present study tries to analyse the sartorial amelioration proposed for women by the twentieth century reformism among the Namboothiri community of Malabar region. The trajectories of reform are not always in uniform pattern; moreover, it is not necessary that all reforms are the outcome of genuine concern for amelioration. The study attempts to trace how the proposals for reforms have been internalized by the community.

Dressing in Malabar region was not linked to a sense of shame. The concept and conceptualization of shame 'concerning the female body' was quite incompatible with the pan Indian notion of women's body. The style of wearing clothes within each caste and sub caste was prescribed by customs. (Rajeevan 87) Men and women dressed according to the rules of the caste. Nobody tried to transgress these customs as it was equivalent to the violation of one's own caste identity.

The clothing of *Malayalees* up to twentieth century was not primarily related to the senses of nakedness of the body. Women's body in Kerala was an object or phenomenon of the joint family which was to be depended upon, feared, nourished and utilized. Devika notes that only Muslim, Christians and *attakarikal* covered their upper part of the body in late 19th century. The 'bare breast' was a mark of the *jati* identity for Hindu women belonging to various castes. (Devika

461-487) Bare breasted was not regarded as nudity, and so no sexuality was attached to it.

Clothing patterns of *antharjanams*-Namboothiri women

Namboothiris, the Brahmins of Kerala were the result of Aryan migration to South India. The temple- centred social system organized by them helped to sustain their dominance over other castes. The Namboothiris are different from the Brahmins elsewhere; as they follow *Sankarasmrithi* which prescribes laws concerning the life of Namboothiri, which includes laws regarding their daily activities, rituals, worship of gods, purity and marriage. They maintained their aloofness in their attitude towards women, family organisation and marriage.

Namboothiri *illoms* were built in typical architectural pattern of Kerala, ensuring well defined and mutually segregated spaces for men and women. The construction was so particular that women could not meet male members of the family except their husband and father. They were to remain confined to the kitchen, dining hall and bedroom. Moreover, most of the *illoms* had separate water tanks for women, which they could access from the rear side of the *illom*. They were not supposed to come to places used by men. *Illoms* housed several people in the patrilineal line; *kanishtans* or the younger members of the *illom* were to live in *pathayapura malika*, the outhouse, which was separate from the main building. (Schildt 79)

The women of the Namboothiri community were known as *antharjanams*; it literally meant women of inner quarters. As Namboothiris followed patriarchy, the male child was essential for the continuation of the family and every one longed to have boys. Disparity between girls and boys was shown in the food given, costumes used, jewels worn and in education provided. Among the sixty-four *anacharams* prescribed for Namboothiris, *anacharams* from forty-four to forty-eight were directly related to women. (Thurston 188) Following the *anacharams*, whenever an *antharjanam* went out of the *illom*, she covered herself from head to toe with a *puthapu*, cloak, and was to carry a *marakuda*, cadjan umbrella. In addition to all these when they went out, they must be accompanied by a maid, *dasi*, most probably a Nair woman. *Puthapu* and *marakuda* together formed the *ghosha* of an *antharjanam*, which

was a symbol of extreme seclusion inflicted on women. *Ghosha* amounted to be a prison for *antharjanam*, it was made strict by the patriarchy to ensure that *antharjanam* never went 'astray'. The confinement of *antharjanams* within the *illoms* was to make them immobile, to control their sexuality.

However, within the *illom* they were not to cover the upper part of the body and used only a *mundu*. *Antharjanams* though belonging to the wealthiest community of Malabar used only very limited jewellery. They were not permitted to use gold bangle, but could use brass and bronze bangles, in fact the number of bangles to be worn was prescribed by customs. Even though belonging to the highest caste of Kerala, *antharjanams* were deprived of 'freedom', education and even mobility. The rules of the caste, dress patterns and rituals of marriage all show that they were exploited and suppressed by the patriarchy.

Clothing patterns induced by reform

In the wake of nationwide socio-religious reform activities, Namboothiri community Malabar set out to address their age-old outworn customs. The Namboothiri reform movement had a well-defined reform agenda with magnificent organisational structures and what made the movement exceptional was its genuine concern for the amelioration of women's existence. The apprehension on women's enigma was largely out of the realisation that, the reformism can't be fruitful unless women folk of the community were uplifted. Consequently, *antharjanams* became the 'objects of reform' rather than its agents. In the reform discourses and literature, they became an entity who were to be 'rescued' by the male reformers. (Namboothiripad 647-654)

The increased sexual stereotyping in dress defended the wearers from the fears about uncertain sexual identity, gender identity and changes in society. (Fischer, 2001) Gender specific dresses were made to ensure the domesticity of women and it was developed as a symbol of true womanhood. Contrary to the pan-Indian tradition, in Kerala Brahmin women were to be in a half-naked fashion within the *illoms*. At the same time, the whole women folk of Kerala, even in the early years of twentieth century were bare breasted. By prescribing

a similar attire, *antharjanams* were made equivalent to that of the indigenous women. Hence the traditionally prescribed dress of *antharjanams* continues as an unresolved mystery as its intention could not be determined appropriately.

Namboothiri Yogakshema Sabha, Namboothiri Yuvajana Sangham and Antharjana Samajam devised their own strategies to indulge in women's issues. The reform literature created by the young reformers of the Namboothiri community was incredible and most of them had women as central characters. Started by V.T. Bhattathiripad and later continued by reformers like Muthiringode Bhavathrathan Namboothiripad, M.P.Bhattathiripad, M.R.Bhattathiripad and Lalithambika Antharjanam, by adopting new literary forms depicted the pitiable condition of *antharjanams*. The reform literature strongly stood for the transformation of family life, necessity of educating *antharjanams* and staunchly criticized patriarchy for exploiting women. The development of first generation of feminist thoughts in the Namboothiri community could be seen evidently in these works of Namboothiri men.

The changing concepts of women's body within the community has to be interpreted along the developments on a national line. The continued attention to bodily adornment was not simply a rehabilitation of femininity, but was also related to local sartorial styles, standards of beauty, appropriate expenditures and women's moral and sexual rectitude. (Gupta 76-84) The anti-colonial movement with its increasing women participation was striving to design an attire for the public appearance of women, which ended up with 'sari and blouse' - of course with regional variation. Sari was being symbolized as the national dress of Indian women and the concept was widely accepted and popularized through women associations and the anti-colonial movement. (Sen 56-60) The colonial perceptions displayed both admiration and denigration of the native women's appearance; sari was described as a sensual mode of dress and it was impugned for its transparency. In Bengal as a part of the dress reform the sari was also reformed by making women to wear a blouse, a petticoat under sari along with shoes. These reforms were along the feminine model provided by the English women. This new image of women

was propagated through newspapers and journals with advertisements playing a decisive role. The popularization and spread of a national ideal of feminine beauty based on 'tradition' was made possible initially by the printing press and later with cinema during the first half of the 20th century. Furthermore, women in processions, strikes and protest movements became agents of propaganda. The modernist painter from Travancore, Raja Ravi Varma whose paintings are examples of an ideological narrative of 'tradition' that not only standardized 'Indian' womanhood but also established it as a marker of national culture. (Wilton 190-205) The regional and local traditions of wearing sari was designed like - Gujarati, Bengali, South Indian, Assamese and so on. Surpassing all the variations in draping sari, a pan Indian pattern was developed and propagated during this period and the same was adopted by the middle-class women.

The reform movement while discussing the issues related to *antharjanams*, designed a 'new concept of womanhood'. However, this concept advocated an overall transformation of Namboothiri women, and it envisaged a considerable change in their dress, jewellery, hair style, education and in their practices. In short, 'a new modern *antharjanam*' was to be carved out from the traditional Namboothiri women. The reformers were aware of the fact that sartorial reforms were an arduous task, as they have to convince women to adopt new attire. Far more challenging was to end up the system of *ghosha*, which was to be strictly followed. The entire reform literature condemned *ghosha* and could foster a public opinion against it. Despite all the efforts, the community had to wait until 1929 for the first Namboothiri women to make a public appearance without *ghosha*. Such a great challenge to the orthodoxy was posed by Parvathi Manezhi, who was clad in a 'sari and blouse' when she attended the Edakunni session of the Namboothiri Yoghakshema Sabha. V.T. Bhattathiripad observed that until then no one had seen an *antharjanam* without *ghosha* in public. (Bhattathiripad 285) But following the incident, members of Manezhi *illom* were ostracized - *brasht*- and due to the pressure of the family members, they - Parvathi and her husband - consented to perform *prayaschitham*, but could not execute it. Throughout the reform literature of the period sari was

projected as the ideal and moral attire for women. One of the main agents of women's transformation was the Antharjana Samajam, as it turned out to be a platform for discussions among women outside the purview of male reformers. The Samajam stood for the comprehensive emancipation of Namboothiri women, aimed at rescuing them from the darkness of *illoms*. They discussed boycotting the *ghosha* and suggested changing their physical appearance. Leaders of the Samajam, Parvathy Nenmenimangalam, Arya Pallam and many others had already abandoned traditional dress and had accepted sari.

The proposals for refashioning *antharjanams* came from the male reformers of the time and one among them was Muthiringode Bhavathrathan Namboothiripad. He argued that *antharjanams* followed a dress pattern decreed by the community several centuries ago and such an outfit was not used by any of the civilized population. Namboothiripad was in favour of reforming the dress patterns of Namboothiri women, as women in every community are very conscious of their appearance; *antharjanams* could not be spared. He called upon the younger generation of the community to support the women in modifying their costume. (Namboothiripad 647-654)

V.T.Bhattathiripad demanded women to get rid of their half-naked attire, which was instilling contempt among Namboothiri men. V.T.Bhattathiripad assumed the role of an 'advisor' for *antharjanams*, so that they could be transformed to modern middle class *Malayali* women. V.T. Bhattathiripad's advices to women reminds one of the nineteenth and twentieth century advisory manuals written in Bengal addressing women, like the one composed by Dhirendranath Pal who promoted the development of a conjugal nuclear family in which women assumed the role of homemaker. (Pal) According to V.T. Bhattathiripad even the old Namboothiri men preferred to be with Nair wives rather than *antharjanams*, which was due to the filthy appearance of *antharjanams*. The Namboothiri men were embarrassed by the disgusting presence of *antharjanams* in pale clothes, wooden earrings and brass bangles. The body of a Namboothiri women has been objectified, by making it responsible for the sexual laxity of Namboothiri men. Women of the other communities pleased the Namboothiri men with their 'womanly appearance'; so as a solace

from the uninviting conditions of *illom* men approached Nair *Tarawads* and *Kovilakams*. In short even the spirit of reformism didn't relieve Namboothiri men from their notion of *antharjanams* as mere 'body' that negated the existence of women's individuality.

The sartorial reforms for women in nineteenth and twentieth century was the result of the influence of European middle-class culture on the Indian educated classes. (Bannerji, 2001) These experiments could be regarded as the expression of the middle - class culture imbibed by Namboothiri men. Quite naturally the guiding principle of the dress reform movement, which sited the body of native women as its terrain, was very much a Victorian concept of female modesty.

Antharjanams were requested to adopt sari and blouse, instead of their customary attire. Sartorial experiments advocated can be regarded as a project of morality, because the half-naked women were against the twentieth century moral concepts. The spirit of reformism and social development achieved by the women of matrilineal communities made them realize the drudged state of *antharjanams*. Hence by dressing them in modern attire, sari and blouse, the *antharjanams* could be made 'moral women' by the then standards set forth by patriarchy. When sartorial transformations were suggested for *antharjanams*, it was explained on the basis that reforms would make them 'more moral', ie. the reformers felt that their women were 'immoral' to the then existing concept of morality. Women with uncovered breasts were judged to be against the accepted notions of 'modesty', so women were exhorted to cover up themselves.

Besides the dress reforms *antharjanams* were asked to replace their wooden earrings, *marakoradu*, with golden earrings. However, this was not quite easy, due to the fact that most of them had long earlobes, often touching their shoulders, a result of wearing heavy *marakoradu* for several years. Hence a surgical makeover was essential for using small golden studs and led to the emergence of *Kathu murikkal prasthanam*, cutting earlobes. Devaki Nilayamgode has written on the change in the fashion of elongated earlobes. By 1930s and 1940s the young Namboothiris wanted their wives to stitch up their earlobes and wear normal earrings. Newly

married men brought their wives to hospital to have their earlobes stitched. After marriage Devaki's husband took her to doctor, and got her earlobes short and started wearing normal earrings. She wrote, "we returned to Nilayamkode, very happy", ie. this small change in their body was welcomed by them. (Nilayamkode 109) Namboothiri women who were not permitted to be treated by a doctor for any ailment, now went through surgery for shortening their ear lobes.

Next in the agenda of reform was the abandoning of the brass bangles, which *antharjanams* were to wear as per the conventional dress code, and the adoption of golden bangles instead. The reformers wanted *antharjanams* to refine their habits; for instance, women were asked to take oil bath every day and they were prompted to use toilet soaps for cleaning themselves. Similarly, women were exhorted to carefully maintain hair, by regularly washing and drying it properly to get rid of the funky smell. All these transformations would amount to a comprehensive change in the physical appearance of Namboothiri women. Paradoxically, the extensive changeover of *antharjanams* were conceived and decided by men, which would furnish a modern middle class *antharjanam* who could be a companionate wife of educated Namboothiri men.

The notions of sartorial reforms for *antharjanams* disseminated by male reformers were outrightly rejected by Parvathi Nenmenimangalam. She regarded that there must be a basic transformation in the traditional attire of women, but at the same time the exhortations to use costly dress materials and to adorn the body with ornaments were to be denounced. (Nenmenimangalam 15) She ridiculed the attempts of reformers like V.T.Bhattathiripad to carve out a sensual woman from the *antharjanam* so that she may appear pleasing for the husband. She said that there was no need to seduce men; mind was to be refashioned and not the body. Generally, the reformism proposed a desexualisation of women, but they were asked to acquire a new sexual exposition for satisfying the desires of middle-class men. Such criticisms were few and far between and so the sartorial reforms remained mostly a male desired reform and not one advocated by women themselves.

The 'reformed womanhood' though envisaged by men, was accepted by the community and the women in particular. *Antharjanams*, who enviously admired the Nair women during their visit to *illoms*, wholeheartedly stood with the proposed reformism. Unlike the other objectives of Namboothiri reform movement, the clothing reforms were easily materialized. Excluding certain occasional protests by the orthodoxy, majority of the community was in favour of reforming the attire. Namboothiri women soon began to adopt sari and blouse or *veshtiyum mundum* and blouse and it was not out of the desire to get modernized but the adoption was out of the genuine passion to become a 'woman' of the natural parlance.

Conclusion

Women's experience of her body is culturally and psychologically different from men. A sense of fear, sin and shame is attached to or imposed upon women's conviction of body. Furthermore, a kind of alienation of 'body' from self has been made to stay with women; which obviously is the creation of the patriarchy. Exigencies of patriarchy shapes the women's understanding of her body. When Indian patriarchy was faced with challenges posed by European colonialism, as a usual reaction social transformation followed. The introduction of western culture made Indian men to adopt new patterns of clothing and removed hair tufts which was socially approved as demanded by their profession. But the society debated on the proposals of sartorial change for women. Indian orthodoxy was not ready to accept the same for women, when propagated by male reformers.

European colonialism led to the development of a new patriarchy in India, which had imbibed western notions of modesty and morality. Here again the proposals of dress reform for women were initiated by middle class men, when they realised the traditional attire as outdated. The 'new Indian men' were desperate to reform their women by carving out a novel 'womanhood' ie. by inculcating the basic tenets of English education and by redesigning their physical appearance. Similar reformism can be seen throughout India during this period and the Namboothiri community also witnessed the 'clothing' of Namboothiri women. Ironically, *antharjanams* despite being the members of the upper caste and upper-class strata of Kerala society

were the last to acquire the right to cover their upper part of the body. Unlike the women of other communities of Kerala, *antharjanams* were barely educated and their articulations on themselves was depended on the male reformers.

The young generation of Namboothiri community wanted to make their women presentable and modest and this desire coincided with the sartorial reforms. Woman's 'body', her physique became an expression of the community's morality and social conviction. Moreover, there was change in sense of sexuality attached to female body and this change prompted them - *Unninamboothirimar*, young Namboothiri men - to argue for dressing up their women. The reformed patriarchy found fault with woman's attire and designed a novel one to cater its needs and aspirations. The sartorial reforms in the Namboothiri community were far more progressive than others as it resulted in a drastic shift from half nakedness to pan Indian woman.

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