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Gulfkaarande Bhaarya/ The Expatriate's Wife: Reading the Left- behind Mappila Woman in SA Jameel's Letter Songs

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Dubai Kathupattu [Dubai Letter Songs] by SA Jameel, written in the1980s, inaugurated a new era of literary expressions that captured the nuances of Mappila expatriate experience. Placed in the larger context of *pravasam* (migration) and the changing socio-political dynamics of Kerala, Jameel's letter songs reflect a set of new perspectives on the left-behind wives—their bodies, morality, religiosity, sexual anxieties, isolation, as well as various other aspects of their lives and separation from their husbands. Using a methodological framework that combines gender studies and Islamic feminism, this analytical study attempts to forefront the Mappila wife's representation from within the constitutive structures of *pravasam* ("migration"), religion, and emergent Malayali patriarchy of the period. This analysis is further necessitated by an understanding that the popular Mappila cultural texts can be read and reread for vignettes of Mappila Muslim women's lifeworlds. Although central to understanding the lived realities and related aspects of Gulf migration, these peripheral genres of Mappila literature and cultural expressions have received limited attention in academic scholarship. Hence these texts are in need of reparative efforts that can rescue it from the marginality within the Malayalam literary and cultural corpus.

Keywords: Mappila Literature, Left-behind Wives, *Kathupattu* ("Letter Songs"), Muslim Women, Kerala

Introduction

Migration from Kerala to the Gulf began during the 1950s, and intensified in the 1970s driven by a combination of economic challenges in the homeland and opportunities abroad. By the 1980s, a significant number of these Malayali migrants in the Gulf region, particularly Mappila[1] youth, hailed from Malabar, as the Gulf countries had emerged as a prime destination for employment during the oil boom (Shafeeq, 2024, p.11). Most of these migrants, Mappila men, who left their homeland in search of job and sustenance, found work in labor camps, often under demanding conditions and with limited personal freedom (Muhammed, 2010). Their family lives were deeply impacted, as they typically left their wives and children behind in Kerala, usually under the care of their family. Visits home were not so frequent, occurring once every two or three years, creating long periods of separation that tested familial bonds. This pattern of migration played a pivotal role in shaping the socio-economic fabric of Kerala in the following decades (Osella and Osella, 2000).

While the public discourse on the expatriate experiences of the period predominantly focused on measuring the success and wealth of the *pravasi*[2], the private discourse revealed deeper insecurities underlying their lives. Stories of unimaginable riches awaiting migrants in the so called "land of gold," the transformative potential of financial success to permanently elevate social status, and the myth of the benevolent Arab benefactor showering wealth were pervasive in the private narratives surrounding expatriate life. However, a central theme in these private accounts highlights the harsher realities of *pravasam*: the hardships and distress endured by migrants, the emotional toll of separation from spouses and children, the absence of women in their daily lives, and the anxieties that challenged the expatriate man's sense of masculinity. These facets of the migrant experience, often expressed in peripheral genres of Mappila literature and cultural forms, remain underexplored in academic scholarship despite their significance in understanding the lived realities of Gulf migration.

Academic explorations of Malayali migrant experiences have focused on socioeconomic aspects of migration and the subjective experiences of the expatriate man, often relegating the experiences of the left-behind wife[3] to the periphery of the migrant discourse. Hence, this paper seeks to explore select texts from Mappila literature to disentangle the private from the public discourse on *pravasam*, and attempts to uncover the emotional intricacies that characterised the lifeworlds of the left-behind wives—the Mappila women. A methodological framework that combines gender studies and Islamic feminism is employed in this analysis of letter songs written by the Mappila poet SA Jameel, a poet who pioneered the *Dubai Kathupattu* genre, to reveal aspects of stereotyping and the historically contingent nature of Muslim women's representation. This study also seeks to forefront *pravasam* and religiosity as significant categories determining the representation of left-behind Mappila wives.

In recent times, there has been a significant surge of interest in the religious and cultural selfhood of Muslim women in India, particularly within the context of shifting political landscapes and the growing politicisation of "the Muslim woman's question." While Malayali Muslim women share several commonalities with the broader pan-Indian Muslim identity, the distinctiveness of their historical experiences and cultural contexts cannot be overlooked. These differences necessitate a focused examination of their past, identity, representation, and various other aspects of their social and cultural evolution. The focus on the historical and sociopolitical contexts of female experience is a significant aspect of recent feminist academic enterprises on Muslim women. This new focus, popularised by contemporary Islamic feminists, emanates from the understanding that the regional and the historical are ever evolving factors and hence the question of universality in Muslim women's gendered experience needs to be replaced by a thorough focus on the contextuality of their lives. Athropological and sociological inquiries by many Islamic feminists like Saba Mahmood and Sherine Hafez focus on the overlapping structures of micro-macro politics and their historicity to reread Muslim women's representation.

Informed by theories of subaltern historiography, Islamic feminists also call for recuperative efforts that can help reclaim lost histories of Muslim women, advocating a bottom-up approach in which peripheral genres, literary and semi-literary texts, and cultural practices are subjected to rigorous academic study (Seedat). Recent scholarly works emerging from within Malayali academia shed considerable light on the cultural expressions and contributions of Mappila Muslim women. However, there remains need for academic engagements that challenge the persistent stereotyping of Muslim women both within and outside Mappila cultural narratives. The following analysis uses these theoretical insights to foreground the embedded contexts of *pravasam* and religiosity and their role in discursively constructing the identity and body of the Muslim Gulf wife.

Reading the Gulf Wife

The era of letter songs, inaugurated by "Mariyakuttiyude Kathupattu" ("Mariyakutty's Letter Song") by Pulikkottil Hyder, evolved into a distinct genre during the 1970s and 1980s, known as *Dubai Kathupattu* (Karassery, 2021). This genre expressed the nuances of expatriate experiences. The major proponent of this literary form, S.A. Jameel, wrote his first "Dubai Kathupattu" ("Dubai Letter Song") in 1977 during his visit to Dubai and performed it in various parts of the Gulf and Kerala (Jameel, 2010 b, p. 20). Recorded and circulated on cassettes, these songs attained immense popularity among expatriates and their families in the homeland. Major themes in these songs include nostalgia for the homeland, longing for the spouse, grief over separation, anxieties about lost youth, and the meaninglessness of pursuing material wealth while forsaking the pleasures of conjugal love.

Originally performed with deep emotion by SA Jameel himself, these renditions reportedly had a profound impact on many migrant husbands, so much so that numerous listeners were moved to abandon their jobs and return home, choosing a simpler, humble life. The letter format of "Dubaikathu" allows for an intensely subjective narrative, giving the song a deeply personal character. Jameel himself notes that the protagonist of the song was envisioned as a Mappila woman

from Eranadu[4], further giving the speaker a local identity (Jameel,2009, 00.01.25 – 02.50). This intimate structure provides a fluid space for expressing the wife's intense emotions of pathos and grief due to her separation from her husband. She says:

Our honeymoon lingers, a bittersweet spell,
Dreams steeped in longing and desires.
In the moonlit nights that bloom with a tender light,
The bridal bed beckons,
Yet slumber evades me; it won't draw near,
Memories awaken, vivid and clear.
Startled, I rise, dreaming of love,
Embracing the pillow, sleepless I remain.
(Jameel, 2010 a, lines 18–26)

Everyday incidents from her life are intricately woven into the narrative, lending the song a story-like quality. Through this, the listener is offered a glimpse into the couple's life and the deep anguish she feels, particularly when she describes how her bridal chamber has transformed into a prison (Jameel, 2010 a, lines 54–60). A significant element of this letter song is the wife's explicit expression of sexual desire. She acknowledges her own desirability and the potential temptations that may lead her to cross moral boundaries. The song stirred a controversy, especially over lines where the wife, likens herself to a fruit, which she refuses to share, while she hints at her human vulnerabilities (Jameel, 2009, 00.04.00 – 05.10). The Gulf wife in "Dubaikathu" says:

I won't offer this sweet fruit to another,
I'll guard it for you until my final breath.
But remember, love, I'm no angel,
Just a woman, with flaws like the rest. (Jameel,2009 a, lines 60–64)

These lines brought the fidelity of the left-behind wives under scrutiny, reflecting broader societal anxieties about their loyalty during prolonged periods of separation. Despite voicing her firm resolve to preserve her body and chastity for the sake of her marriage, she reminds her husband that she is no angel, but simply an ordinary

woman. She further reveals her moral vulnerability, and laments the loss of her youth. In the relentless pursuit of wealth, time slips away. She implores her husband to return, reminding him that both of them are aging quickly and that they must seize the fleeting moments they still have (Jameel, 2010 a, lines 69–80). The poet's poignant rendering of the song adds to its tragic charm. The song had tremendous impact on the psychological schema of the expatriate men and their left-behind wives: men succumbed to anxieties that hit their masculinity and women wailed about their lost youth and beauty. Yet, most of them had to withstand the anxieties and continue in the Gulf.

The *Kathupattu* tradition often involves paired letters, the *Kathu* and a response song called *Marupadikathu*. In the reply to the "Dubaikathu," which voices the agonies of the wife, Jameel wrote and composed the " Marupadikathu"("The Reply Letter") in which the migrant's response is recorded. In the song the *pravasi* defends his decision to choose migration over the comforts of family life, citing their previous hardships and reminding his wife of his consistent financial support. The frequent references to money underscore how remittances serve as a substitute for his physical presence.

Jameel's engagement with the emotional aspects of the *pravasi's* experience finds a poignant expression in this "Marupadikathu". Besides voicing his helplessness, he rebukes his wife for challenging him and threatening his male ego. He says, "You burn within me,/Your love tests me, /I am chained" (Jameel, 2010 d, lines 52–56). He further adds, "Your words strike like bullets/ piercing my heart,/My masculinity falters,/shattered, torn apart" (Jameel, 2010 d, lines 41–44).The husband admits that a wife, left alone in her spouse's absence, might succumb to "mistakes." Despite this awareness, he pleads with her to remain chaste. He argues that a man's failure to understand a woman's needs is often the root cause of her transgressions. The letter also alludes directly to the rumors and scandals surrounding extramarital affairs among Gulf wives, a subject that fills the husband with dread. The mere thought, he says, makes him shudder (Jameel, 2010 d, lines 32–40).

These letter songs, subjected to an intertextual reading with another song, "Gulfukarande Bhaarya"("The Expatriate's Wife") by SA Jameel himself can throw some light on how intense the male anxieties were in that period of *pravasam*. An alternate title of the song is "Yakshipattu"("The Yakshi[5] Song").The very title that equates the Gulf wife with the *Yakshi,* who is the incarnation of an unbridled sexual desire in Malayali cultural imagination, hints at the Gulf wife's sexual promiscuity. This song presents male anxieties of female sexual infidelity and betrayal that can cause shame, and humiliation.

The rumours and scandals about the left-behind wives' extramarital affairs circulated in the form of secret stories in the homeland and in the Gulf posed a significant threat to the emotional well being of the migrant husbands. The Gulf man's wife leaving the husband and children is a recurrent theme in migrant literature. Jameel addresses these fears of marital infidelity explicitly. These songs composed for popular singing present animated emotions that vividly capture the *pravasi* husbands' anxieties about the "loose morals" of their wives.

The left-behind wife is simultaneously empathised upon and censured. Potential chances of trespassing the moral strictures of the community calls for greater vigilance from the male elders and the juridical elites. Thus, these songs contributed considerably to the emergence of the "Gulf wife" stereotype, whose body has to be kept in constant surveillance.

A significant aspect of the representation of Mappila women in some of these songs by Jameel is the vividness with which he portrays the psycho-emotional churnings of the female heart. Yet the sermon like fervor in the songs overshadows the emotional yearnings of the woman and thrusts upon her the brunt of marital fidelity. Placed in the larger context of Mappila literature, these songs of the 1970s and 80 s also reveal a major shift in the way Mappila women are represented. The representation of women in the premodern Mappila texts like Moyinkutty Vydyar's *Badarul Muneer Husunul Jamal* often bordered on the erotic with its explicit portrayals of female beauty and sexual desire (Vallikunnu, 2012). In other texts like

Padapattukal (War Songs) and *Malapattukal* (Devotional Songs) also we find women characters drawn from Islamic tradition presented as agentive users of language and space. These representations gradually shifted to present more sombre, docile women, as Mappila literature became a tool for social reform in the hands of Islamic reformers. This is to say that the Mapplila texts of the period also evolved to contain the reformist Islamic advice rhetoric[6] that demanded Muslim women to exercise moral control, marital fidelity, and embody an Islamic demeanor. The representation of women in the dominant genre Mappilapattu clearly shows this shift. Several songs by Pulikkottil Hyder (1879-1975), a major Mappila poet, clearly reflects this reformative sensibility. The song "Kaliyugam" ("Kaliyuga") is an example, in which the poet employs this medium of Mappilapattu to censure the new Muslim woman from using new modes of clothing in an "inappropriate" way. The "reformist fervor" in Pulikkottil's songs echoes in numerous other popular songs of the 1950s and '60s, of which some exclusively dealt with the "wrong" ways of draping the *saree*[7] (Elettil).

These shifts can be seen as a natural corollary of Muslim reformers' organisational activities since the early twentieth century that focused on defining an ideal Malayali Muslim femininity. Post-1950, there was a significant increase in the spread of Islamic advice rhetoric which dealt with the Muslim woman's question. The history of Muslim reformist-traditionalist negotiations with ideas of secularism, modernity, national consciousness, and Malayaliness, in the nascent public sphere of Kerala shows that they rigorously engaged with the question of making the new Malayali Muslim woman, who embodies an Islamic modernity and femininity. Muslim woman's body, her chastity, religious embodiment and veiling are key tropes in this discourse on religious womanhood.

In the era of *pravasam,* both the reformist Salafi sects and the traditionalist Ulema used the emergent technologies like cassettes and print media to address the fears of women transgressing moral boundaries. Post-1970, the genre of Islamic advice rhetoric, in the form of speeches which circulated in cassettes, closely echoed the fears and apprehensions presented in the letter songs. Several cassette

sermons asserted the need to see the issue also as a religious-ethical issue that must be overseen by the Mahallu[88] committees and requires constant societal vigilance. Though the poet also evokes some of the religious strictures on marriage when he says Islam has clearly instructed the husbands to take care of their wives' needs, the onus of marital fidelity is on the wife, who has to reassure the absent husband about her chastity.

Conclusion

The analysis attempted here reveals that the contexts of *pravasam* and Islamic womanhood have played key roles in forming the dominant discourse on the Mappila Gulf wife. In the private discourse on the left-behind wife, rumours and scandals often intertwined with other peripheral genres to produce the stereotype of the "Gulf wife." The genre of *Kathupattu* offers some interstices into the world of these Mappila women, which can be fully explored only in an exhaustive ethnographic study. In the embedded texts analysed here, the glamour and glory of the Gulf is set off by narratives of sexual anxieties of and about the left behind Mappila wife: her morality, bodily conducts, marital fidelity and potential chances of transgressing the moral bounds set by the society. These narratives led to the making of the dominant discourse of the "Gulf Wife" who is newly rich and well sought after. Yet, her personal life is strewn with rumours and her sexual life is shrouded in mystery and fear. The "Gulfkaarande Bhaarya" is thus simultaneously a source of fear and sympathy.

Endnotes:

1. Mappila typically refers to a Muslim community in the state of Kerala, particularly among the Malayalam-speaking population. The Mappilas are known for their unique cultural and historical background, often associated with trade, commerce, and maritime activities. They have a distinct identity with a blend of Arab, Persian, and Indian influences.
2. The Malayalam terms *pravasi* and *pravasam* are used in this paper instead of "migration" and "expatriate," as they evoke a deeper connection to the emotional and cultural experiences of Malayalis associated with migration.
3. The term "left-behind wife" typically refers to a woman whose husband has migrated elsewhere, often for work, while she remains in their home community. Left-behind wives often take on additional responsibilities, managing households, raising children, and sometimes supporting the family financially, while also facing emotional challenges due to separation. The term can also highlight the social and economic impacts of migration on families
4. Eranadu (also spelled Ernad) is a historical region in the present-day Kerala. It primarily corresponds to areas in the Malappuram district and parts of Kozhikode and Palakkad districts. Eranadu is notable for its cultural and historical significance, including its role in the spread of Islam in Kerala and the legacy of the Mappila communities.
5. The Yakshi, often portrayed as a diabolic feminine figure, symbolises an uncontrollable sexual desire or *kama*, which is subdued and domesticated in certain narratives.
6. Islamic advice literature, or rhetoric, addresses various aspects of a Muslim's daily life with the goal of shaping an ideal Muslim character. These texts form an integral part of the Islamic interpretative tradition.
7. In a personal communication, Faizal Elettil, a scholar in Mappilapattu and related genres, discussed the extensive criticism directed towards the bodily conducts of "modern" Muslim women by Mappila songwriters in the mid-twentieth century. Gender representations in these popular songs, which fall within the genre of advice literature, still await a comprehensive study.
8. A Mahallu refers to the local Muslim community organised around a mosque. It functions as a socio-religious administrative unit that manages the affairs of the local Muslim population.

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