

B. S. SHERIN, *Gendering Minorities: Muslim Women and the Politics of Modernity*, Orient BlackSwan, 2021, 222 pp., ₹615, ISBN 9789352876693 (Paperback).

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Recent Indian political developments have brought back the category of the ‘Muslim woman’ into politico-legal and academic discourse. The state’s fetish with Muslim women has included their being viewed as ‘victims’ of religious conservatism, as subjects in need of saving, and as ‘veils’ shielding Muslim men during the Citizenship Amendment Bill protest. The identification of the category of Muslim women as homogeneous, mostly as victims of their religious identity, has clouded their agency as subsumed to their religion while neglecting the intersections of caste, location, economic-situation, education, health and importantly the aspect of ‘choice’—to choose as an individual capable of making a ‘rational choice’ for herself. The book by B. S. Sherin is a welcome break as it aspires towards viewing women’s agency from a decolonial approach and breaks away from normative feminist interventions. Its view is provided through the lens of socio-religious heterogeneity. This is not an easy task to achieve, as Islamic feminist scholars writing on women often face the conundrum of swinging between Western Enlightenment and Islamic worldview.

Sherin’s book poses many hard questions about Muslim women in India by focussing on the state of Kerala. These include the paradoxes between constitutional rights of equality and secularism and everyday living experiences, where ‘being Muslim’ becomes the rationale of being viewed with difference, often translating into discrimination and hostility; and the stark ‘otherisation’ of Muslims as well as Muslim women in academic discourses, mostly confined to reforming Islam, highlighting on purdah and hijab rather than accepting ‘Muslim women’ as citizens of India and political beings. Such a discussion seems close to Yuval-Davis’s path-breaking work, *Woman-Nation-State*, and on *Citizenship and Difference* wherein the secularisation project gets antagonised by any religious identification other than Protestant Christianity (Yuval-Davis, 1997; Yuval-Davis & Anthias, 1989). Sherin stops short of elaborating on this in her work, although such an undertaking would have been an important contribution. She weaves the argument on how the erasure of Muslims from the Indian nation-building project and its secular vocabulary has continued in postcolonial India.

Chapter 1 traces the history of Islam in Kerala from the premodern to the colonial period, underlining Muslim women’s agency and role in the rise and dissemination of Islam. Starting from the trade relations between the Arabs and Kerala, which dates back to the second and third centuries, Sherin lucidly embarks on a narrative of how Islam has a unique history in Kerala where it was embraced voluntarily unlike in north India where it was a result of invasion (pp. 35–36). Drawing from a rich collection of archival, historical, and literary sources, she narrates various stories and legends related to the advent of Islam in Kerala and how it was mainly due to the Arab traders who entered into matrimonial alliances with native women during their short stays for trading purposes. This system of what is called *Muta* marriages was conducive to the matrilineal system that was common in Kerala and Arabia. The chapter reiterates that

conversion to Islam and Christianity has a very distinct trajectory in Kerala. Islam was accepted and converts to Islam were welcomed in society due to trade relations, while conversion to Christianity was not patronised by the state—a scenario that changed with the rise of colonialism. Sherin examines the layered history of conversion in Kerala. An important point that the author makes is regarding the role of women in the conversions and the cultural exchange between Islam and Hinduism in Kerala. Conversion to Islam and marriages with Arab traders were based not on spiritual grounds but on practical material realities, leading to the practice of polyandry, with women having autonomous agency over their bodies. Elucidating the layered history of Islam, Sherin identifies trade, the caste system, geographical location, class, and gender in Kerala as overlapping categories, each contributing to the history of Islam and Muslim women as agents of change in premodern Kerala. This situation is so intrinsic to society that the Nambutiri Brahmins continued the system of polyandry called *sambandhams* which they later institutionalised. Placing women as agents of change, Sherin argues that women played an important role in the institutionalisation of matriliney, examining how the Arrakal dynasty, based on Islam, allowed the eldest member, even when a woman, to become the ruler. Sherin also examines how Muslim women were treated as teachers of Quran in Arabic, which underwent a change with the advent of colonial modernity forcing women to the domestic sphere.

Muslim women and their role in reform movements in Kerala is the theme of Chapter 2. Aiming to address the problematic portrayal of the Muslim community as unrefined, hence neglected by most mainstream scholars writing on Kerala's history of reform movements, the chapter presents a systematic study of the representation of Muslim modernity and women's movement. Elaborating on how Kerala society has undergone a twin engagement with modernity—one headed by the Indian National Congress and the other by the Communist Party of India—Sherin illustrates how both these streams, under the garb of a monolithic narrative of secularism, neglected the Muslim reform movement and the participation of women. The disregard for the categorical absence of Muslim reform movements and discourses on dalits and other marginal voices is due to the zeal of the nationalist movement to claim a 'common past'. Sherin also asserts that differential treatment was met by the Hindu religious reform movements vis-à-vis the Muslim reform movements—while the reformist discourses of the Ezhava movement and of the Hindu Nambutiri community were treated as progressive, the Muslim community's attempts at reform did not get similar treatment. This resulted in the restricting of Muslim reform movements from becoming a part of the cultural renaissance of Kerala. The chapter elucidates Muslim women's agency and brings to light literature through print media, such as *Bharatha Chandrika*, *Muslim Mahila*, *Muslim Vanitha*, *Ansari*, and *Mappila Review*, which had contributions from Muslim women; one hardly finds such contributions by Muslim women in the feminist narratives in mainstream Kerala. An interesting account is of Haleema Beevi, who was the editor of *Muslim Vanitha* and *Bharatha Chandrika* and who later founded the magazine *Azad* in 1949. Haleema Beevi was very active not only in publishing Muslim women's voices but equally in organising conferences in which

Muslim women participated in large numbers. But mainstream history completely neglects such important contributions, which also find no mention in feminist movements in Kerala.

Contemporary dialogues on Muslim Women in Kerala form the subject matter of Chapter 3. The homogenisation of the category of ‘woman’ essentially from a leftist-liberal perspective has led to the scrutiny of Islam as conservative and against modernity. Here, the emphasis is on how the so-called secular schools of feminism do not focus on human rights violation against minorities and Islam-bashing while there is too much attention paid to the gender critique, wherein non-practising Muslim women smoothly enter Left and liberal circles while not welcoming progressive, educated Muslim women who practise Islam to enter these circles. In this manner, even feminist schools and scholars knowingly or unknowingly fall into the trap of liberal secular modernity, viewing Muslim women mostly as ‘women’ from a conservative religion and evading from a sincere, scholarly engagement with religion as such. Sherin argues that even Muslim feminists or Islamic feminists fail to recognise the heterogeneity and complexities within Islam while resisting a Eurocentric version and end up validating Islam as a fixed religious category, missing out on the contextual and temporally varied locations of Muslim women.

The book makes an appeal to identify minority women, in this case Muslim women, through a feminist methodology incorporating auto ethnography and rare archival sources. Subsequently, it challenges the representation of Muslim women by the mainstream media—newspapers and other outlets—which repeatedly targets Islam as responsible for the plight of Muslim women. It tries to unravel the embedded prejudices against Muslim women in mainstream historiography, arguing for coming out of the binary vision presented by most schools within feminism, that is, of women as either progressive and anti-religious or religious and oppressed, that fails to recognise the contextual intersectionality of women. The book is an important addition in the realm of studies focussing on diversities within feminist scholarship, as it puts the foci on the paradox within liberal feminist schools embedded in western modernity and failing to take due cognisance of the distinctiveness of women in global locations who challenge their religion by nonconforming and reforming rather than negating it altogether.

References

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