

GENDERING MINORITIES: Muslim Women and the Politics of Modernity by Sherin B.S. Orient Blackswan, New Delhi, 2021.

Gendering Minorities: Muslim Women and the Politics of Modernity by Sherin BS is a critical intervention on the intersection of gender politics and minority politics, with a particular focus on debates in Kerala. The book analyses the entanglements of multiple identities such as minority, religious and gender in situating the agency of Muslim women's position in Kerala.

Primarily, Sherin BS questions the metanarratives surrounding the Muslim women's question in Kerala, which is abstractly centred on the binary of oppression and resistance. Here, Muslim women are categorized as victims who need saving from the patriarchal male culture of the minority Muslim community. This has become a hegemonic discourse across the whole range of the political spectrum, exemplified in the pan-Indian discussions on the Shah Bano case and further reflected in the mainstream feminist discourse in Kerala.

Second, Sherin BS problematizes the appropriation of gender discourse by the Hindu nationalists and other Islamophobic forces to systemically vilify the Muslim community. Sherin BS's approach opens a new pathway to identify and think through these entanglements of power, subjectivity, and freedom in contemporary feminist discourse in Kerala through a post-foundationalist framework. Sherin BS's task is not to abandon the foundation of feminism but to identify the changing foundations and contingencies of feminist politics to extricate the complex and ever-evolving subjectivity of minority Muslim women.

The first chapter is a historical reconstruction of Muslim women politics in Kerala by mapping the history of Muslim women's political and spiritual participation. The singular emergence of Muslim women agency is traced from the premodern Indian ocean world to 20th-century Islamic reform movements. The author mainly explores the evolution, continuity and discontinuities of matrilineal traditions and practices of Muslims in Kerala and further argues that Muslim women's agency is a central constitutive feature of the Muslim community's political existence in Kerala. Sherin BS analyses two key figures: Arakkal Beevi, ruler of the Arakkal Kingdom, a Muslim dynasty in Kannur, and Beema Beevi, a saint-preacher who hails from Trivandrum in order to show how the historical role of Muslim women as rulers and spiritual leaders has been crucial in the formation of Islam in Kerala.

The second chapter explores Muslim women's agency in the context of Islamic reform movements in Kerala by rethinking the politics of gender, modernity, and religion in Kerala. The reformist efforts of Hindu upper caste males are widely considered the driving force of Kerala's so-called progressive cultural space. The socio-political engagements of anti-caste, non-Brahmanic leaders like Ayyankali and Sree Narayana Guru have also received recognition within mainstream discourse after the emergence of subaltern movements. However, the Muslim

reformist movements were sidelined in the historiography of the reform movements of Kerala. Muslim identity itself is marked as backward and regressive in mainstream narratives, and it has been reproduced through the images of uncivilized, patriarchal Muslims in popular movies and literature, despite their social mobility and renaissance through education and transformative encouragement and acceleration of women's participation in various fields of society and politics (p. 91). As Sherin BS rightly points out, the uniqueness of Muslim reformist movements is completely ignored in the existing narrative of the Kerala renaissance.

Through this systemic ignorance, the 'burden' of patriarchy – which is universal to all reform movements – is misconstrued as the exclusive problem of Muslim others to make space for the progressive claims of modern Kerala. The otherization of the Muslim community in Kerala happens through a selective invocation of gender discourse. For instance, the early Muslim women reformist intervention of Haleema Beevi is deliberately excluded from the mainstream reformist rhetoric in Kerala. This is served to construct a patriarchal minority community that is less progressive, less gender sensitive and less secular compared to an ever-evolving progressive Kerala society. But the books show that Muslim women activists were involved and reconfigured gender relations within the Muslim community in the light of Islamic theological and political language over the last hundred years. Sherin BS summarizes: 'In their engagement with modernity, Muslim women attempted to accommodate the newly defined cultural space, redefining and internalising modernity integrated with the spiritual strength of Islam, which is usually construed as the antithesis of modernity.' (p. 127)

The final chapter is based on the contemporary debates on gender and Islam in Kerala. Sherin BS critically reviews the Malayalam novel *Barsa* (2007) by Khadija Mumtaz. The novel has received wide recognition in the Kerala public sphere as a critical feminist literary text to popularize gender issues within Muslim communities. Sherin BS observes that the reception of the novel is coupled with the post 9/11 context of Islamophobia and discourse on Islamic fundamentalism in Kerala (p. 166). Mumtaz develops a critical insider perspective to address gender issues within the Muslim community. However, Sherin BS argues that Mumtaz's critical reflection homogenizes Muslim women's lives in a singular narrative of oppressed Muslim women and fails to engage with the operations of Hindu nationalism and Islamophobia in producing the gendered narratives of Muslims and Islam. The third chapter concludes with a detailed analysis of other literary and political narratives in the academic spheres of Kerala.

Sherin BS's broader aim is to reimagine the Muslim women's question from a minority inclusive framework rather than exclusive gender discourse. One of the possible drawbacks is its focus on the minority status of Muslim women and its clubbing with the religious identity of Muslim women subject. Her analysis oscillates between the tensions of minority studies and Muslim women studies. However, the religious questions of Muslim women demand an autonomous interrogation considering the recent shifts in Muslim women studies across the globe.

Nevertheless, Sherin BS's reading is a rare attempt in contemporary scholarship to trace the construction of Muslim women in the history and politics of Kerala.

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