

A Welcome Counter-Narrative to Problematic Constructions of Muslim Women's Identity

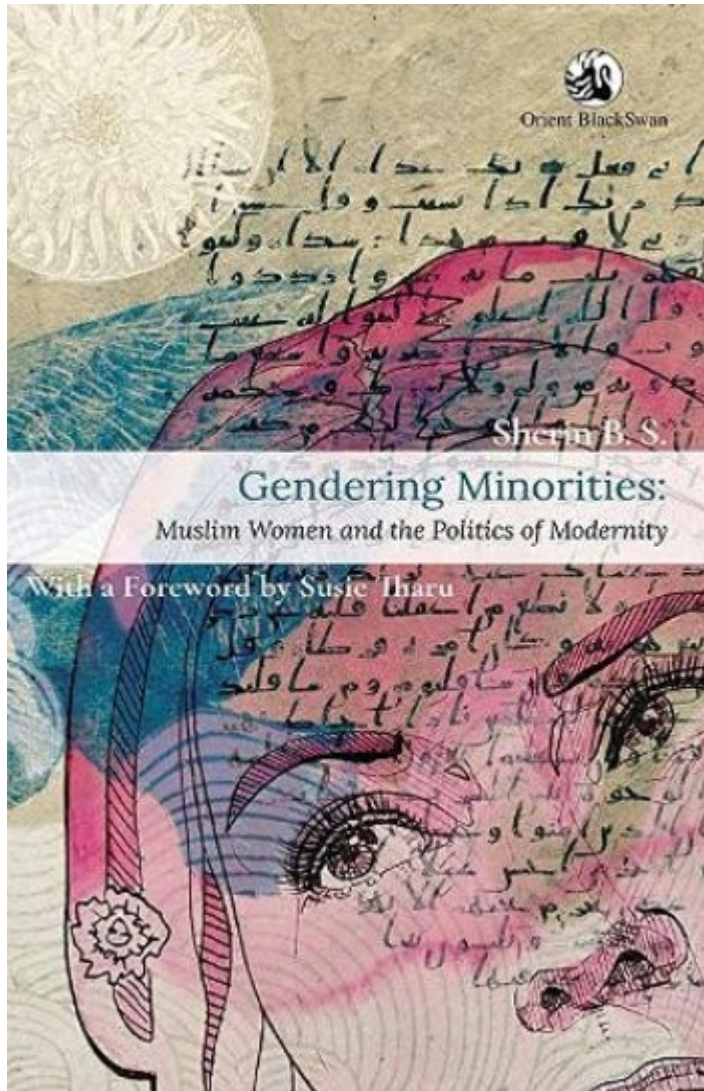
In her book, through explorations of interwoven modernity and gender intersectionality in the context of Kerala, Sherin B.S. asserts that the realities of Muslim women cannot be viewed without understanding their history and the political context.



The realities of Muslim women cannot be viewed without understanding the history and political context. Photo: Unsplash v

The image of Indian Muslim women as “victims” of Islam has been over-exploited by the mainstream discourse that Muslim women need protection from their religion and community. This furthers the alienation and marginalisation of the Muslim community and women at large.

The Indian leftist and feminist engagement with Muslim women has been only under the pretext of women’s rights without addressing the question of their state and citizenship as interventions of tokenism. Muslim women have been treated as a homogenous group in desperate need of liberation from their religion without addressing their heterogeneity. Sherin B.S, in *Gendering Minorities: Muslim Women and the Politics of Modernity*, presents a counter-narrative to the problematic construction of the Muslim women’s identity by exploring interwoven modernity and gender intersectionality in the context of Kerala. The book provides a cultural and historical context, in the form of oral and archival histories of Muslim women, by presenting an alternate history of Muslim women, and bringing out the prejudices in the mainstream historiography. Basically, it presents a broader framework within feminist modernity to capture the fuller narratives of the realities of Muslim women in the historical and political context.



Gendering Minorities:

Muslim Women and the Politics of Modernity by Sherin B.S. (Orient BlackSwan, July 2021)

It contests the stereotypical binary understanding of Muslim women through a nuanced reading of their state and participation in the reform movement.

Set against the backdrop of colonial and post-colonial modernity and nationalist movements in Kerala, it provides an alternative paradigm to the Muslim women's identity in different historical eras.

It is written in Kerala, where Muslims have different socio-economic demographics and histories as compared to the north Indian states. Unlike in north India, Muslims in Kerala speak Malayalam, and until the 20th century, Malayalam was also written in the Arabic script.

Sherin also analyses the historical attempts that led to the further exclusion and homogenisation of Muslim women that contributed to the redundant narrative of their oppression and why and how they are not viewed as political agents of change.

The discussions are centred around the following core themes:

- (i) Women as mediators between religion and rituals capturing the active agency of Muslim women as promoters of Islam, wherein, Islam is seen as a spiritual platform;
- (ii) Negotiation of Muslim women between religion and modernity through their participation in the reform movement;
- (iii) Critical examination of secular history to understand positions within the feminist and liberal engagement with Muslim women, and unfolding how secular-liberal principles of emancipation are not contextual to a heterogeneous group of Muslim women.

She has archived the glorious matrilineal histories and pasts of Muslim women and their contribution to the history of Islam and women's agency in Kerala in the form of oral narratives, local stories, folk songs, journal entries, magazines, and historical documents. The book also explores the heterogeneity of the lives of Muslim women by capturing their participation in varied fields like religion, governance, Sufism, and religious reform movement in the early 20th century in Kerala. The chapters explore the continuous bargaining and negotiation of Indian Muslim women with their political, social, and religious identities.

It captures the participation of Muslims in the reform movement, which has largely been ignored in the history of the nationalist movement in India.

The Muslim community witnessed a period of mobilisation through education, writing and publishing, social work, and formation of social organisations from 1910, which hardly appears in the mainstream narratives of the reform movement. The use of print journalism by Muslim reformers to reach out to the community to spread awareness about education, and their active involvement with cultures through songs called Maalas is used as an example to illustrate the participation of Muslims in the anti-colonial struggle.

Ansari, Al Islam, Mappila Review, etc. are a few periodicals in which women wrote consistently. The authors referred to the writings of Muslim women between 1920 and 1970 which were not strictly nationalist but reflected a larger humanistic perspective.

For instance, the authors referred to women like Haleema Beevi, a journalist, who wrote about the claims of Muslim women in the political sphere, and P. Beefathima, who wrote on the plight of Muslim women. These writings are a testament to the reformist ideas written by Muslim women within the religious space yet concentrated on women's agency.

Sherin approaches feminist modernity from the standpoint of decolonisation and contextualisation. The text pushes the reader to embrace the intellectual shift to develop a deeper understanding of Muslim women's agency by discarding the post-colonial narrative and a minority subject in a complex secular democratic context.

The negotiations of Muslim women in Kerala reflect a different narrative, within the realm of religion and social positioning on how they engaged with modernity, redefining themselves and their community. This constant negotiation for redefining themselves within the Islamic traditions is reflected in periodic literature by Muslim women writers during the reform era on issues like widow remarriage, the right to property, the purdah system, and the Islamic ways of life.

The de-historicisation of contemporary contexts in the trans-historical version of religion is intricately captured in mapping the histories of the matrilineal past of Mappilas and de-romanticising their relationships with Arab men.

The author also examines the novel *Barsa* by Khadija Mumtaz in the context of discourses on Islam in Kerala. She explains the problems in viewing Muslim women from a single lens of religion.

Her critique of *Barsa* is concerned with viewing the Muslim woman as an ahistorical category, a victim of Islam, in an Islamophobic imperialist context. She also gives an example of Rayana Khazi, a young Muslim woman who received threats forcing her to wear purdah. The authors meticulously articulate how women are always negotiating with power structures – religion, caste, class, and community.

In the contemporary context, it can be understood in the context of the hijab controversy in India and protests in Iran. The common factor remains Muslim women's agency, choice, and empowerment to raise their voices against the State and religious oppression. The realities of Muslim women cannot be viewed without understanding the history and political context.

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