

ISLAMIC REFORM AND REPRESENTATION OF MUSLIM WOMEN: A READING OF THE NOVEL HIYALILAKATH ZAINABA

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Abstract

Very often Muslim women are portrayed as devoid of agency or as victims of internalized patriarchy within a rigid and oppressive religious structure. Her status has been largely defined and her agency has been widely curtailed based on her subjectivity in relation to the monolithic assumption of a Universal Islam. Every debate on Islam thus focuses on its women, the face of the veiled woman, providing the political justification for marking the community as the “uncivilized other”. In colonial Kerala, discussions on Muslim women’s status begin with the Islamic reform movement of the early twentieth century. The position and role of women within the religion was a major concern of these reformist leaders. But the reform movement mainly concentrated on structuring the domestic world of their women rather than letting the women enter the public world. It is in this context the paper tries to analyze the Arabic-Malayalam (malayalam written in Arabic script) novel ‘Hiyalilakath Zainaba (Zainaba of Hiyalilakath House)’ written by Ibrahim Moulavi, a reformist leader in 1929 and how Muslim woman has been represented in it. The novel has to be located within the social history of Muslims of Malabar during the early decades of 20th century. This paper attempts to probe the possibility of agency in Zainaba, the protagonist even within her confined existence.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Agency, Domesticity, Islamic Reform, Arabic-Malayalam.

The first half of 20th century witnessed radical changes in the social fabric of Kerala. Introduction of English education and the resultant need for reformist ideas were wide spread among the various religious communities. Though the Semitic framework of Islam was hard to change as per the demand of modernity, Kerala Muslims were pressured to change their socio- religious dimensions without compromising Islamic theism. Since modernity demanded a refashioning of traditional social structure, the reformists targeted the traditional norms and replaced it partly by westernized Islamic way of living. This produced a complex social life in which a purification of tradition was due without changing Islamic scriptures. Major concerns of the reformists were critique of the traditional religious practices, upliftment of women and, true adherence to Islamic scriptures etc.

In colonial Kerala, discussion on Muslim women's status begins with the Islamic reform movement of the early twentieth century. In fact the Muslim reform movement was an unfinished project. The reform movement mainly concentrated on structuring the domestic world of their women rather than letting the women enter the public world. In cultural productions such as literature and cinema, Muslim women reflect the community's debased status as they are represented as victims oppressed by the barbaric system of the community. It is in this context that I would like to analyze the Arabic-Malayalam novel *Hiyalilakath Zainaba (Zainaba of Hiyalilakath House)* written by KKM Jamaluddin Moulavi in 1939 and how Muslim women has been represented in it. This paper attempts to locate the novel within the social context of the time and probe the possibility of agency in *Zainaba*, the protagonist of the novel.

As pointed out by Stephen Greenblatt, the spokesperson of New Historicism, "history is the cultural context in which any literary text is embedded". The present text written in 1939 by a reformist leader, has to be located within the social history of Muslims of Malabar during the early decades of 20th century. During this period the Islamic reformist movement was sweeping across Malabar. The position and role of women within the religion was a major concern of these reformist leaders. They, in order to counter the attack of Christian missionaries and other European observers stressed the idea of gender equality.

By about 1920's books on women issues in Islam began to be published in Malabar. The first attempt was a translation of Husain Kidwai's Urdu *Work Women and Islam* by Ahammed Kammu in 1920. In the preface to the work, Vakkom Moulavi, a reformer states: "It is

pertinent here to admit that it was the pathetic condition of Muslim women that provided a chance for the western scholars to criticize the religion of Islam.”(Kammu 3) During the early decades of 20th century, Christian missionaries had been criticizing Islam for the low status accorded to women and for the lack of education among Muslim women. It was to wipe out that misconception, K.M Moulavi, another Muslim reform leader wrote a treatise Islamum Sthreekalum (Islam and women) in 1936. In the book, he observes: “the main impediment before Islamic missionary workers when they try to win over the lower caste Hindus to the fold of Islam is the misconception prevalent among the general public about Islamic conception of women” (Maulavi 1). He further points out that the position of women in Islam was theoretically higher than their current status. The reformers blamed the traditional Ulema for this pathetic condition of Muslim women. A couplet of the 19th century reformer of colonial Malabar, Makthi Thangal, substantiates this:

He has neither the hearth nor home
Nor has he met any learned
He has not learned any lore
Still, fatwas are not in dearth.(Makthi Thangal 4)

Those who dared enough to send their children to secular school were branded as ‘Kaffirs’ by traditional Ulema. It is within this cultural domain that the novel was written by an Islamic reformist leader, KKM Jamaluddin Moulavi in 1939. It was the first novel written by a Muslim writer in Kerala in a literary genre called Arabic Malayalam. The novel revolves around the life of Zainaba, an educated young Muslim lady. The other novel by the same author is Kidr Nabiye Kanda Nafeesa (Nafeesa who met prophet Kidr). Both novels are named after the heroines, as was the practice. Indulekha, Sarada, the earliest novels in Malayalam are examples of this practice.

The backdrop of the novel is the tension between tradition and reform within the Muslim community of Malabar. Zainaba and her lover, Abdul Karim interrogate and question many of the popular practices that exist among Muslims on the basis of Islamic scriptures. The universe of the novel is a Muslim middle class family in which forces of change and continuity struggle for supremacy. The plot of the novel is rather simple. It revolves around the love affair between Zainaba, an educated Muslim lady and Abdul Karim, an English educated Muslim youth who is committed to the reformist ideology within the community. The story predictably ends in the marriage of the lovers. More than a love story, it is a social and cultural statement of the times.

The love story is just the necessary skeleton; the flesh is provided by the contending religious sensibilities which inhered in the Muslim community of Colonial Malabar. It reflects the struggle for hegemony in Malabar Muslim religious landscape. The novelist conceived the main characters– Zainaba, Abdul Karim and Ahmed Kaka – to reflect the cultural traits which were in contention in Muslim society. Zainaba and Abdul Karim are educated and religiously progressive; both are well grounded in the basic scriptures of the religion whereas Ahmed Kaka, Zainaba's father represents the traditional orthodoxy within the community.

The novel *Hiyalilakath Zainaba* was written in the line of traditional realistic novels of 19th century. In a way, Zainaba, the protagonist of the novel has got strong resemblance with Indulekha, the protagonist of the first novel in Malayalam, *Indulekha*, composed in the last quarter of 19th century by O. Chandu Menon. Indulekha is the true representative of the English educated middle class women of late 19th century. In the novel, Indulekha, the educated Nair lady is questioning the traditions followed in her family like the 'sambandham' system of marriage that existed within the Nair community in Kerala. Her struggle was largely for her freedom to marry the man she was in love with. As Susie Tharu observes, "Indulekha's desire for freedom was a demand for repositioning of women in middle class bourgeois society". Though Indulekha fought for women's rights to equality, she was cast in a male perception of women.

Indulekha, the novel represents the tension between modernity and tradition. In a different way, the same tension can be seen here in this novel too. Zainaba being fortunate to go to school (though her father is not interested in her being educated), gets her horizon widened, and being able to read the scriptures on her own without the mediation of a Mullah, questions the age old customs and rituals imposed upon the community by the uneducated Mullahs, who interpreted Quran and scriptures to suit their interests and fancies. Zainaba grows to realize the degradation set in her society. An element of subjecthood can be noticed in her when she thinks of disobeying her father when he decides to marry her off to a man whom she disliked, without even asking her consent in the decision. She is bold enough to take a decision regarding her life which is unthinkable for an average Muslim girl of then Malabar. Again she shows the guts to question the religious instructor regarding theological issues. In all her polemical debates with the Mullah, her arguments are rational and are based in her knowledge on the scriptures.

The discussions on religious practices like mortuary rituals, *nerchas* (*urus*), tomb worship, etc. reflect the religious ferment that stirred the Muslim religious life of Malabar during the early decades of 20th century. Both strands of thought- reformist as well as traditionalist- are articulated through these discussions. There is the older generation defending the religious traditions while the younger generation providing a rational critique of those religious

practices. Very often Zainaba engages herself in polemical debates with her religious teacher who is a traditionalist blissfully ignorant of the scriptures.

Islamic reform movements in Kerala aimed at liberating women from the four walls of traditional Muslim households. It offered liberal education, equal opportunity to pray at the mosque and demanded men to keep away from social practices such as dowry. These were a result of the colonial encounter and the reformists interpreted scriptures as per the new insights. Though an active involvement of women in social life was a need of the hour, the reformists were constrained to abide by the 'sharia' laws of Islamic theology. This resulted in an ambiguous attitude towards women's discourses in Kerala Muslims of 20th century. The novel written by a reform leader shows that the upliftment of women was a liability for the reformer. How to translate women for the benefit of the community was the real concern of the reformist leaders. Like any other girl, Zainaba has also internalized the social norms prescribed for her gender. Enlightened as she is, she still can only aspire for domesticity. An idealized female subjecthood is being ascribed to her. To a certain extent, Zainaba is a liberated woman, unlike the mute, passive victim of the community.

But how far the novel was successful in giving agency to Zainaba is to be questioned. In the novel, Zainaba is forced to give up her formal education. Though the novel is titled on her and she is the central character, many a times we find her a mere puppet in the hands of the men folk who populate the novel. Though she was bold enough to question many blind customs and practices prevalent in the community, she never for once in the novel question her own status as a woman within the community or the injustices she had to face just because she was a woman. Unlike Indulekha, Zainaba is even unable to resist the marriage proposal her father decides for her. This bold woman who even raised her voice against the Ulema don't even speak a word about her dislike in marrying the man of her father's choice. Instead she chooses to suffer silently without any complaints. The readers may wonder why such a lady who had shown so much courage in fighting against the ill practices within the community rather kept silent when it came to matters that are of immediate concern for her. Zainaba is unable to resist the patriarchal regime within the structures of the family. We cannot see an instance in the novel where Zainaba expresses her resentment against the oppressive domination of males as well as their ill treatment of women. It is also important to note that even her protest against the ill-practices within the community are also just echoes of the concerns of her scholar-lover, Abdul Karim.

Though Zainaba is in love with Karim, she is not able to reveal her female passion to anybody, even to her lover. The novel also contains long letters exchanged between Zainaba and her lover. All the letters are dealing with the provisionality of the social practices like

mortuary rituals, intercessory prayers etc. but never related to her own emotions as a woman. Contrary to her wish, her marriage was fixed with an illiterate, wealthy man by his traditionalist father. It was not her immutable conviction but the play of chance in the form of a train accident that finally helps her to marry her beloved. It is an instance of her agency being denied. As Talal Asad remarked: "In theory, the self-owning liberal subject has the ability to choose freely, a freedom that can be publicly demonstrated. The reality is more complicated".

Throughout the narrative, Zainaba is projected as the symbol of domesticity and feminine virtues. All her virtues are due to her devotion to religion. The novelist depicts thus: "These days educated Muslim girls are averse to Islamic Purdah. They are under the impression that hijab or wearing scarf to cover hair does not suit to modern fashion. Instead of wearing the traditional attire called kuppayam, Muslim ladies have begun to wear blouse. But Zainaba is an exception to this new trend." Once, when her religious teacher stared at her hair that escaped her scarf, she covers it within no time. Thus Zainaba is projected as a modest lady who strictly follows Islamic dress code and averse to fashionable dress popular among the girls of her age. Zainaba is being depicted as a disciplined subject. Her body is to be veiled from male gaze. A modest woman, she believes, is the one who obeys the command of God.

The novelist has fused the awakened female character with the intelligent, scholarly woman of the tradition of Ayisha, wife of Prophet Muhammed. It is interesting to note that the intelligent, determined Zainaba was rather a submissive woman and her obedience is rewarded by the turn of fate. Zainaba reminds the 19th century women's cry for gender equality; her protest is silenced by the Islamic theological concerns. It will not be wrong to say that the present submissiveness of Muslim women follows the tradition of Zainaba. Like all awakened women, she realized the male-centeredness of her social disposition, but she was trapped in a theological system which muted her anger and anguish. A contrast between Indulekha and Hiyalilakath Zainaba will expose how Muslim women's demand for gender justice was marginalized by the patriarchal structure of Islam.

The progressive male characters are English educated at Madras and they enjoy the benefits of modernity. At the same time, Muslim women were kept away from the progressive main stream and religious scriptures were used to keep her within the household. The so called reformist movement also failed to bring the issue of women to the forefront. The novel reveals the fact that the attitude of male reformers, including the novelist, towards women were rather ambiguous. Though they promoted women towards the way of reform, the women they conceived was a stereotypical one and the image envisioned was a woman who is passive, mute and is subservient to patriarchy.

Gail Minault observes in her work titled *Secluded Scholars*, the kind of reformist phenomenon in North India. She says women were identified as objects of male reform programs "as potential students, as readers of improving literature, as subscribers to magazines designed to disseminate new knowledge, as beneficiaries of activities of men"(Minault 9). The case is same with the Muslim reform movement in Kerala as well. Women were conceived as a potential material to be reformed by the reform leaders. They projected the image of the ideal virtuous woman who is both educated, modern and at the same time, a preserver of the tradition, without compromising religion.

Though the reform project acknowledged the need for education among the Muslim women, they focused mainly on structuring the domestic world of women rather than letting them to be active agents in public life. Their model of the ideal woman was the one who is subservient to patriarchy. Hence the reform project for women as charted out by male reformers failed to provide any agency to women. Instead the destiny of women remained largely in the hands of the male masters who fashioned it according to their own interests. The novel *Hiyalilakath Zainaba* written by the reform leader KKM Jamaluddin Moulavi reflects the same trend among reformists of the time. Zainaba is denied of any agency in the novel; she exists merely as a tool for the novelist's reformist agenda. The general allegations that Muslim women are devoid of agency and are victims of an internalized patriarchy fostered by a rigid religious structure are buttressed by these kinds of novels.

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