

The Uncontested Questions of Gender: *Islahi* Movement and the Making of Virtuous Wife and Mother of Nationalist Imagination ¹

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ABSTRACT

The Renaissance movement among the Mappila Muslims of Kerala, the Islahi Movement, claims to have pioneered in uplifting the community which was wrecked by its inherent indigenous affinity with local tradition and culture. It contributed much for the modernisation of the Mappila community. It was also instrumental in strengthening the collective Islamic consciousness of Kerala. However, it is important to take a critical look at the attitude of this reform movement and its leaders on the gender questions. The age old syncretic rituals, rites and customs were denounced and an attempt has been made to bring in the pristine form of faith, Islam, combined with modern western education. Even when it tried to address some concerns regarding women and their education, it was meant partly for fitting the women properly into the moulds that were created for them by the system, and partly to impress the colonial masters and the other regional/national power centres in the society. The emphasis on women's education was focused mostly on making her a 'virtuous wife' and a 'good mother', as those have long been the qualities that the society attributed to good women. If one were to look at it from a religious/textual angle with a gender perspective, we now have a lot of studies and readings like that of Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas et al., that break this belief that women are secondary to men or they are only supposed to serve a supportive role if one goes by the teachings of Islam. Which means there is a need to address women's issues seriously, not just from a colonial/secular point of view but also from an unbiased reading of Islam and its principles.

Keywords: Mappila, Reform, Gender, Qur'an, Islahi, Wahabism, Malabar, Social reform

Introduction

Though the *Islahi* Movement, whose foundation stones were laid by Makti Thangal and Vakkom Maulavi and was taken forward by *Kerala Muslim Aikya Sangham* is popularly known as a reform movement,

there are a lot of dangers associated with such an understanding, as is the case with any other ‘renaissance’ movement. In particular, the movement did not emphasise much on any radical change in the situation of women. Even when it tried to address some concerns regarding women and their education, it was meant partly for fitting the women properly into the moulds that were created for them by the system, and partly to impress the colonial masters and the other regional/national power centres in the society. The religious side of the movement can be understood as a part of an attempt to get clear of the ‘impurities’ that made their way into what the leaders of the movement, or these reformers, considered as the ‘real’ and ‘sanct’ practices of the religion. This was true about all renaissance movements in general. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, known for his efforts to abolish the practices of sati and child marriage, was citing *Vedas* to counter the evil practices of Hinduism. (Mani, 1998).²

To make matters worse, all the readings of *Qur’an* and Islam till that point in history were mostly male-centric. So, the emphasis on women’s education was focused mostly on making a ‘virtuous wife’ and a ‘good mother’, as those have long been the qualities that the society attributed to good women. In addition to this, the reform’s leading personalities tried to make a place for the Muslim community in the ‘mainstream’, and for achieving this, they tried to align with those who were in power. At that point in history, this meant maintaining an amicable relationship with the British government, and also ‘mixing’ well with the ‘Malayali’ community in the geography of Kerala, though there was no Kerala at that time. This gave a ‘nationalist’ identity to the reforms. This is not to be confused with the nationalist movement against the British that was gaining strength during the same period, even though those who support and celebrate these reforms often try to portray it as an anti-colonial one. K M Seethi’s analysis, where he says “It was essentially anti-colonial in character; yet it did not seek to offer any Islamic alternative in political terms” (Seethi, 2018) is an example of such a portrayal, which is not very truthful to the history. Makti Thangal argued in favour of taking help from the British, and later Kerala Muslim *Aikya Sangham* leaders also enjoyed a stake in the power dynamics of the colonial administration. (Aboobacker, 1993:598).³

One main problem with these reforms was that it largely missed addressing the agency of women and considered them only as a supportive mechanism that was made for men, with very few exceptions. When it did take up the issues of women, it did so mostly to suite the modern European gaze. Looking back, if one were to look at it from a religious angle, we

now have a lot of studies and readings like that of Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas that break this belief that women are secondary to men or they are only supposed to serve a supportive role if one goes by the teachings of Islam (Wadud, 1999; Barlas, 2011). Which means there is a need to address women's issues seriously, not just from a colonial/secular point of view but also from an unbiased reading of Islam and its principles. A need to acknowledge women's role in policy making and making contributions to the society just like men do, if one were to understand Islam in its real sense. Whereas the reform movement of the 1920s was mostly a regressive one as far as this aspect is concerned, even as it had upheld some seemingly progressive and modern ideas like education for women and men alike.⁴

A Civilising Mission: Colonial India, Customs, Women and the Saviours

Partha Chatterjee tries to analyse the apparently “degenerate and barbaric” social and political condition that prevailed in the British India, including the situation of women, and how it was used to justify the colonial rule. Apart from just ‘colonising’ the land and ruling over the people, the colonial rulers assumed the position of a saviour as well, who took up a “civilizing mission” against the ‘scriptural tradition’ of Indians. (Chatterjee, 1989). Just like most other religious reform movements of India, the *Islahi* reformers also partly aligned with this civilising mission. Their aim was also to ‘civilize’ the society and get rid of superstitions and customs and practices they considered ‘uncivilized / barbaric’. The situation of Muslim women in India were probably better in comparison with that of the Hindu women, and hence these reforms were not as specific on women's issues as the Hindu/Arya Samaj reforms.

Writings and speeches of Sayyid Sana Ulla Makti Thangal served as a springboard for the so called *Islahi* reforms. He wrote about the need to get rid of the ‘impurities’ and ‘un-Islamic practices’, and also about the need to make use of the avenues of modern education that was becoming available at that time. He emphasised on the need for the Muslim community to gain modern education, and on the need to learn both Malayalam and English (Thangal, 2006:440-445). Another declared enemy of the *Islahi* reforms was the Sufi orders that had made its inroads into the Malabar Mappila psyche. P P Abdul Razack points out that a major concern of Makti Thangal was to liberate the Muslim masses from the clutches of the Sufi influence (Razack,2007:103). The works of Vakkom Moulavi can be seen as a continuation of these thoughts.

Both these aspects constituted the dual agenda of these reforms

throughout. Thus, the focus of the *Islahi* reforms can be divided into two broad classes: one, it was an attempt to revive a ‘pure’ Islam, trying to be true to the scriptures and ‘cleaning it’ of several elements and practices it accrued locally. The other objective was that of opening up to modern education and in turn preparing the community to get into a ‘good relationship’ with those who ruled. The latter one was able to gain more support from the community, aided by the pace at which changes were coming about in the area of education and employment. As part of those larger changes in the society, women from the Muslim community also did gain better access to modern education. It is difficult to measure the impact on women’s lives from the history books though, as the women are mostly absent from the historical works altogether. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak says, “within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effected.” She adds that “as objects of colonial historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow.” (Spivak, 1988:287).

Naari Narabhichari, an important work by Thangal, remains as a landmark evidence for what we can now understand as a regressive vision of the reformers, though we can blame it partly on the Kerala society of that period and the limited understanding of *Qur’an* and Islam at that time. This paper takes a look at that regressive nature of those ‘reformist’ thoughts in detail. Unfortunately, the Kerala society has not moved much from that point and it is yet to understand and accept a woman as an individual.

***Naari Narabhichari* : Revolution Meets Regression**

Naari Narabhichari is a book by Sayyid Sana Ulla Makti Thangal (1847-1912), the famous reformer and author whose name is closely linked with the *Islahi* reform movement (Thangal, 2006:633-666). Dr. M Gangadharan, in his foreword to the book *Makthi Thangalude Sampoornta Krithikal* (The Complete Works of Makti Thangal), observes that Makti Thangal’s views were instrumental in Muslim women joining public schools and gaining education along with the boys. Thangal was against having separate schools for girls, and he insisted that girls also should get Malayalam and English education. In a way it was a revolution, because education till then meant only Arabic and Arabi-Malayalam or religious education -- for the Muslim community in general and for girls in particular. However, as Dr. Gangadharan rightly points out, Thangal was against the idea of considering women and men at par (Gangadharan, 2006:17). We can see a lot of evidence for this in the above-mentioned book. The

title literally means that ‘woman is meant to follow / accompany the man’.

The book has some radical statements like ‘education is an ornament for women and men alike’ (Thangal, 2006:635). However, in the same book, Thangal argues that women are essentially different from men, they are different like ‘top and bottom’ (referring to a strict hierarchy between their positions) (Ibid:642) and that women do not have the right to be individuals who enjoy freedom and influence people (Ibid:643). He justifies this with arguments that might appear bizarre and outright sexist to the reader of today. The explanation goes thus -- ‘It is because women become the objects of the man’s need as one who owns the seeds (referring to the popular imagery that considers woman as a field where man sows his seeds, or sperms) but men do not become an object for the woman’s needs. A man’s disinterest stops the woman from fulfilling her desire but a woman’s disinterest does not stop a man from fulfilling his desire. Hence it turns out that women will have to wait for the man’s interest and his preparedness.’ (Ibid:643-644). These arguments can be seen as plain anti-women as they justify or normalise rape, and it is unlikely that he would have made such statements if he were to write that book today.

Ironically, Thangal, who was critical of Christianity on several other occasions, largely refers to the *Bible* and the *Manusmriti* to justify his arguments regarding women’s subordinate position when compared to men. The *Bible* quotes he uses for this purpose include ‘For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Saviour. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.’ (Ephesians 5:23-24), ‘A woman should learn in quietness and full submission.’ (1 Timothy 2:11) ‘And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence.’ (1 Timothy 2:12) ‘For Adam was formed first, then Eve.’ (1 Timothy 2:13) ‘And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression.’ (1 Timothy 2:14) (Ibid:645). This version of the story that woman fell to the trap that was set by the *Satan* and man did not, is given as the reason for not giving her the power to advice men (Ibid:646).

The book then quotes from *Skandapurana*⁵ and tells a woman shall drink the water after washing her husband’s feet with it, to emphasise on the power relationship between man and woman (Ibid:646). Quoting the infamous verse from the *Manusmriti* that says a woman is to be under the control of men all her life, Thangal says it is an evidence that women are intellectually weaker. He then lists a number of words that are used to refer to women in Hindu / Sanskrit scriptures, including words like *Abala* (the weaker one) and *Bharya* (one who is ruled by her husband) (Ibid:647).

In a weak sequence of arguments built around the word *abala*, Thangal says that freedom is a big power that allows one to protect oneself and what one finds right, and women are obviously lacking in it. The arguments include (i) The *Bible quote*, ‘Your desire will be for your husband, And he will rule over you.’ (Genesis 3:16), (ii) A man’s beauty is his strength and bravery whereas a woman’s beauty is her weakness (iii) By character itself they are divided as one on top of the other, among others (Ibid:648-649). While ruling out the arguments that man and woman look the same and are of the same species and hence they are to be considered equal, the book further argues that man is created as *Sarva Sreshtan* (the greatest), *Yogyan* (Worthy or Able one) and *Divyan* (Divine one), and woman is created from man as a supportive tool that is to be used for reproduction (Ibid:649). Dismissing the claim that men and women are equal in their intellectual capabilities, *Naari Narabhichari* refers to the *Bible* version of the story of Adam and Eve, and puts all the blame on Eve alone. Pain during labour and delivery is cited as a punishment that women received for this sin that they committed (Ibid). Interestingly, The *Qur’an* never does this transfer of blame (on to a single person), as Amina Wadud rightly points out in *Qur’an and Women* (Wadud, 1999).

The book goes on to establish a bigger stake for the father on the (male) child compared to the mother (Thangal, 2006:643). It also repeatedly refers to the origin story from the Bible of woman being born from the rib of the man as a matter without any dispute, (Ibid:643,645,649,664) even as the *Qur’an* is free from any such reference.

Countering Prejudice and Chauvinism: The *Qur’an* and Woman

From the readings available with us now in the twenty-first century, we now know many of the arguments that Makti Thangal uses in support of his views of women do not have much backing from the *Qur’an*. In the book *Quran and Woman: Reading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective*, published first in the year 1992, African-American scholar Amina Wadud presents a new ‘reading’ for the *Qur’an*, i.e., a process of reviewing the words and their context in order to derive an understanding of the text of the holy *Qur’an*. In contrast to the Muslim scholars including Makti Thangal who tried to defend their anti-woman standpoints using the texts from other religions, Wadud views Islam as a religion that breaks away from such anti-woman theories that had a long history and had roots in the culture and the society.

Justifying this effort, she says that there is no single method of the *Qur’anic* interpretation that is completely objective. Every person

who tries to understand and interpret the text will have some subjective choices to make. It is natural that these subjective choices decide the fine details of the way each person understands and interprets the scripture. It may deviate from the intent of the text. Yet, she observes that often people make no distinction between the text and individual interpretations (Wadud, 1999:1). Further, Wadud adds that her main concern was that all the 'traditional' *tafasir* (interpretations of the *Qur'an*) were written exclusively by men. It meant that they took men and their experiences into consideration in their interpretations, where as women and their experiences were either excluded or were seen only from a man's point of view. It was bound to be limited their perspective of women, their desires, and in general, their 'needs of a woman' (Ibid:2). It could include their sexual needs and home care needs among others. Looking back, Makti Thangal's interpretations of woman's status in the *Qur'an* can be seen as a classic example of this phenomenon that Wadud talks about.

This happens because men's readings are bound to be regressive or male-centric because they have the baggage of a 'prior text', or their own life experiences that allow them to see everything only through a man's eyes. Elaborating this a bit more, Wadud says that this 'prior text' adds a great deal to the point of view and to the conclusions that one arrives at while doing an interpretation of the text. The end result would certainly lay bare the individual who carries out this exegesis. It is neither good nor bad in and of itself, but it has the danger that when one individual who reads the text, with a certain world-view and a particular set of experiences insists that his (or her) understanding is the only possible or permissible interpretation of that text, then it closes doors on other meaningful and valid interpretations. It prevents other people who may have a different life experience and a different worldview from coming to terms with and understanding this text with those experiences in mind. At the same time, a text like the *Qur'an* can not allow too much of relativism, and the text does take care of it, as can be seen from the points of convergence of multiple readings / interpretations of the *Qur'an*. However, in order for it to achieve its objective of acting as an impetus that affects the way people behave in the society, each person should be able to understand the unchangeable and core principles of that text from their own social context. Then only they can put these ideas into action, applying their own individual thoughts. The text or its basic principles do not (and cannot) change, but the capacity of each individual to understand it, and the context in which one understands it and applies it, changes within a community of people (Ibid:5).

There is a belief among Muslims that there are essential distinctions

between men and women reflected in Creation, capacity and function in society, accessibility to guidance (particularly to the *Qur'anic* guidance), and in the rewards due to them in the Hereafter. Wadud argues that although there are distinctions between women and men, they are not of their essential natures. In particular, she argues against the values that have been attributed to these distinctions — values that describe women as weak, inferior, inherently evil, intellectually incapable and spiritually lacking.

Wadud refers to various verses in the *Qur'an* to support her argument. For instance, about the stand on a woman's modesty, she notes that modesty helps in maintaining a certain moral strength and character in cultures worldwide and it is important to maintain it, but it should be purely on the basis of faith and it should not be something that gets forced on a person. When it becomes based on economics, politics or other forms of access or when it is forced on, it becomes problematic. She argues that this is probably why Yusuf Ali translates verse 24:31 of the *Qur'an* in the following way: 'what (must ordinarily) appear' (talking about the body parts that remain uncovered), 'to indicate that (ordinarily) there are culturally determined guidelines for modesty.' (Ibid:10).

While explaining the *Qur'anic* text about Creation, Wadud clearly highlights the differences from the *Bible's* narration of Creation, thus countering the arguments like those mentioned in *Naari Narabhichari*. She observes that in the *Qur'anic* account of creation, it is never mentioned that God planned to begin the creation of humankind with a male person. Further, it does not ever say that the origin of the human race is from Adam. In fact it does not even state that God started the creation of humankind with the *nafs* (soul, or self) of the man alone. Wadud feels this omission is an important deviation from the *Bible's* version, because it means that the way *Qur'an* tells the story of Creation of humankind is not about who came first, man or woman. (Ibid:19-20).

It is important to note that nowhere in the *Qur'an* it is mentioned that Eve is made from the rib of Adam. Some people believe it because everyone already knows that part of the story from the *Old Testament*, but it is important to look at it as a point where the *Qur'an* chooses to drift from the *Bible* version of the Creation. It gives us an idea why people like Sana Ulla Makti Thangal had to resort to *Bible* or *Manusmriti* heavily for endorsing their anti-woman theories, as *Qur'an* has very little to offer them in that respect.

It is not only about the Creation. Explaining the events in the heavenly Garden and the sin of Adam and Eve, Wadud notes that the *Qur'an* does not put the blame of the sin entirely on the woman. This is also in

contrast to the *Bible* and the Christian version of the story that people like Makti Thangal use to support their arguments against women.

Wadud notes that the sin is referred to in the *Qur'an* as a collective responsibility or a collective failure of Adam and Eve. She quotes from the *Qur'an*: 'The offer he made to Adam and Eve was so great that they failed to remember the warning against him that they had been given. They failed to remember *Allah's* admonition and approached the tree. Upon recognition of the error that they had made, the original parents repented and asked for forgiveness' (the *Qur'an* 7:23).

She notes that the only exception to the *Qur'anic* use of the dual form, to refer to the temptation and disobedience of Adam and Eve in the Garden, is actually one that singles out Adam and holds him responsible for disobeying the Lord.

'And verily We made a covenant of old with Adam, but he forgot, and We found no constancy in him. . . . And the devil whispered to him saying: 'Oh Adam! Shall I show you the tree of immortality and power that does not waste away?' Then the two of them (Adam and his wife) ate of the fruit (of the forbidden tree)... And Adam disobeyed his Lord, so went astray' (the *Qur'an* 20:115-21). (Ibid:25).

Note that while the *Bible* and Muslim scholars like Makti Thangal put all the blame of the sin on Eve, the *Qur'an* not only refrains from blaming her but even goes to the extent of singling out Adam and saying that he disobeyed his Lord and went astray.

About the references to female characters of the *Qur'an* in general, Wadud notes that all such references have a common pattern that shows respect for women. (Ibid:32).

About the distinction between man and woman, Wadud notes that *Qur'an* does not distinguish between them as far as their individual capacity is concerned. Their relationship with God also remains same, one is not any closer to God than the other. With regard to their potential relationship with *Allah*, they are the same. There is no difference in their personal yearnings either. She says there is no indication that the *Qur'an* wants us to believe there is an essential distinction between men and women as far as their spiritual capacity is considered. Therefore, she argues that the differences that exist between men and women cannot be of an inherent value, because otherwise individual will would not have any meaning. She then points out that the problems arise when people try to determine the origin and cause of the differences that have come about. (Ibid:34-35). Talking about the folly of the interpretations like what Makti Thangal

does in *Naari Narabhichari*, though not referring to that one in particular, she says, that ‘such interpretations assume that men represent the norm’ and hence only they are completely human, and naturally it implies that women are less human than the men. They are incomplete, and hence of less value. Wadud adds that such interpretations end up strengthening the stereotypes in the society about both men and women, and it causes severe damage to the potential of both the sexes. Such interpretations also justify the restrictions that the cultures and societies put, using the pretext that Islam says so, on a woman's right to seek personal happiness. Even more dangerous and disturbing is the tendency of erasing the role of people who do such interpretations, and ascribing such interpretations to the *Qur'an* itself. As an individual, she says neither does she hold such views nor does she find support for these stereotypes in the *Qur'an*. She observes that interestingly, these interpretations do not do complete justice to women, and yet even those Muslim authors who make such interpretations believe and assert that the *Qur'an's* aim is to ensure social justice. Wadud compares it with Thomas Jefferson and the writers of the American Constitution saying that ‘All men are created equal’ and not giving a damn to even consider black men to be equal to white men. (Ibid:35-36).

Dismissing the readings / interpretation that men and women are hierarchically ‘top and bottom’, she quotes a statement from the *Qur'an, surat Al-Hujarat* (49:13): ‘We created you male and female and have made you nations and tribes that you may know one another. *Inna akramakum 'inda Allah atqa-kum* [Indeed the most noble of you from Allah's perspective is whoever (he or she) has the most *taqwa* (piety)].’, and says this statement sums up how the *Qur'an* looks at the differences that are present within the humankind. (Ibid:36). It talks about the creation as male and female, and says the distinctions or the grouping that the God made, be it male and female, or into nations and tribes, are not essential differences, it is only so that one can identify the other easily. If everyone looked the same or had the same set of identities, it would be difficult even to distinguish one person from the other. But from Allah's perspective, the only distinction comes from one's *taqwa* or piety. Nothing else matters.

Regarding the responsibilities of an individual, the rewards and the Hereafter, Wadud observes that the *Qur'an* repeatedly states that every person, be it a man or a woman, individually and every people and society collectively are solely responsible for what they do. (Ibid:25). To quote from the *Qur'an* itself, ‘all human activity is given recompense on the basis of what the individual earns’ (the *Qur'an* 4.-124). (Ibid:36). About the Hereafter, she feels that the *Qur'an* only emphasises this personal responsibility

and experience even more. The rewards that await an individual is completely based on the individual alone. It does not matter whether it is a man or a woman, each one gets their rewards individually, based on what kind of life they led and what all they did. The scale of judgment is not a gendered one. It is the actions performed by the individual during their lifetime that earns them the rewards. 'Or do those who commit ill deeds suppose that We shall make them as those who believe and do good works, the same in life and death? Bad is their judgement! And *Allah* has created the heavens and the earth with truth, and each *nafs* (soul, or self) may be repaid what it has earned. And they will not be wronged.' (the *Qur'an* 45:21-2). (Ibid:50).

In continuation to this, she adds that no one can take away or reduce the 'grade points' earned by another person, nor is it possible to make it any higher. The merits achieved by one person cannot be shared with another, and the same holds for the punishments as well. 'And guard (yourselves) against a day when no *nafs* (self) will in aught avail another (*nafs* / self), nor will compensation be accepted from it, nor intercession be of use to it, nor will they be helped.' (*Qur'an* 2:48). She ends this with an interesting observation that there is an 'unusual consensus' among the commentators and exegetes on this point, even as they may differ on several other details. Wadud attributes it to the 'explicit wording in the *Qur'an*' with regard to gender equity, or the absence of male/female distinctions, when it comes to recompense. To quote one such *Qur'anic* account of the final Judgement and the rewards: 'Unto men a fortune from that which they have earned, and unto women a fortune from that which they have earned.' (*Qur'an* 4:32). (Ibid:50-51).

Biological differences between men and women and the women's ability to give birth is another point that is widely used by male scholars to justify their readings that are biased against women. Wadud says women cannot be seen as mere tools that help men with reproduction just because she has the ability to give birth to children. It is a notion that many scholars continue to hold even in the current times, and such arguments are seen in Makti Thangal's book also. She says that the ability to bear a child is often seen as a woman's primary function because (biologically) woman's primary distinction from men is on the basis of this ability, and men often use this 'primary' in a negative sense and imply that women can only be mothers. That is why in various cultures it has become accepted that the main thrust of bringing up a woman must be on making them devoted wives and ideal mothers, and preparing them for childbearing. Wadud notes that in the *Qur'an*, there is no term that suggests that childbearing is the 'primary' function of a woman. There is absolutely no

indication that motherhood is her only or exclusive role. What it says, on the other hand, is that only women are capable of bearing children. It is only an additional and exclusive power that a woman has.(Ibid:64).

Wadud also counters the arguments that try to justify superiority of men citing that there have not been any women chosen as prophets. She notes that both men and women figure in the list of people who have received the divine communication, *wahy* (a direct communication from *Allah*). While it is true that there is no example of a woman prophet mentioned in the *Qur'an*, it is not that all men are given the responsibility of *risalah* (prophethood). That is, there is no reason to arrive at a conclusion that prophethood is a man's primary function. It was given to a chosen few, and there are many factors that influence this choice. She points to the difficulty that the prophets faced in getting others to acknowledge them as prophets and accept the message from God, especially when those chosen (exceptional) men came from poor classes, and notes that the challenges would have been higher for women. Since women are considered inferior beings in most cultures and societies, the message might not get many takers if women were chosen as prophets. She feels 'It is a strategy for effectiveness, not a statement of divine preference.'(Ibid:65).

Interestingly, most of the prejudices and misconceptions that Wadud tries to break find a comfortable place in the thoughts of Makthi Tangal. In that sense, the ideological base of the *Islahi* movement was also very much limited, mostly by the limited understanding of women's rights at that time. This understanding has long been missing, and we know that even in a so-called civilised and modern country like the UK, voting rights were granted to women only in the year 1918. It was only in 1870 that married women got property rights in England. (Comps&Beth:2005,1028-1057).⁶ That was also not an absolute right, it came with some clauses and conditions: The enactment of the Representation of the People Act of 1918 granted property-owning British women over age 30 the right to vote. It took another decade before women in Britain would have the same voting rights as men. In Spain, women gained voting rights in 1933, as a result of legal changes made during the Second Spanish Republic. In most parts of the world, women did not have any rights to their parent's property either, until recent years. In India, Hindu women were granted absolute right to property only in the 1950s, through the Hindu Code Bill. When we look at these facts, the *Qur'an* can be seen as a revolutionary text from the women's point of view. (Wadud,1999:87).

K M Moulavi and His Book : A Predecessor to the Feminist Readings of Islam

K.M Moulavi, one of the leaders of the *Islahi* reforms, took a stand on women that was different from that of Makti Thangal. He rightly observed that the position of women in Islam was theoretically better than the status they enjoyed in the then prevailing Muslim societies. His book *Islamum Sthreekalum* ("Islam and Women") was published in the year 1936. (Razack, 2006:152). It was a revolutionary work, considering the situation of the early 20th century Kerala Muslim society.

Like Wadud, K M Moulavi also takes supportive evidences from the *Qur'an* and other scriptures to support his argument that both men and women had soul, and both had equal rights and obligation as far as their belief and religious duties are concerned. (Ibid).

In the second part of the book, Moulavi quotes *hadiths* and further argues that women have the right to participate in the *Salat al-Jama'ah* (congregational prayers) held in the mosques just like men. Moulavi reminds the Muslim society that during the time of Prophet Muhammed and immediately after that, women used to take part actively in the battles, citing the example of Ayisha, the youngest wife of the Prophet, who led a battle on a horseback immediately after the death of Prophet Muhammed. (Ibid).

The third part of the book discusses women's right to education, stressing on the need for both modern as well as religious education for women. In the fourth and final part, Moulavi deals with another controversial topic, *Islamum Pardayum* ("Islam and the veil"). He argues that religion (Islam) only asks women to cover only what is considered the *awrah*, or the intimate parts of the body. He said it means covering body parts except for her face and her hands up to her forearms. Moulavi asserts that the women could go out in the public and engage in all activities without covering her face. He was trying to get the society out of the cultural trench it was trapped in.

Asma Barlas: Continuation of the Liberational Thoughts

In the book *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*, (Barlas, 2002) Pakistani academic / writer Asma Barlas extends the thoughts of Wadud and tries to further liberate *Qur'an* from the conventional patriarchal readings. She says she wanted "not only to challenge oppressive readings of the *Qur'an* but also to offer a reading that confirms that Muslim women can struggle for equality from within the framework of the *Qur'an's* teachings, contrary to what both conservative and progressive Muslims believe." She adds that "To identify Islam inseparably with oppression is to ignore the reality of misreadings of the

sacred text”.(Ibid:xi) In a follow-up essay titled *Quran & Women’s Liberation* first published in 2009 (Barlas, 2011), Barlas argues against the prejudice that most people carry which sees Islam (and monotheism in general) as a patriarchal concept. She says this representational prejudice is one that is faulty on at least three counts. First, it mixes or confuses the religion or the sacred text with a particular (patriarchal) reading of it. Two, such a representation is ahistorical and it misses the fact that different forms of discrimination and misogyny are acquired by various societies and though they are similar to what is seen in Muslim societies, there is nothing ‘Muslim’ about it. Ideas of women being inferior to men, polygyny, wife-beating and segregating women were customary among several societies, including societies with goddess cults (Ibid:10-11) While explaining this, she refers to Leila Ahmed who shows how the misogyny ‘pre-existing’ in the society was ‘seamlessly’ incorporated into Islam during the Middle Ages, in turn shaping the Muslim discourses on women and gender in many years that followed. She also sites the several secondary religious texts that assert that Eve was created from the rib of Adam, even as the *Qur’an* never makes such a reference. Nor does the *Qur’an* treat childbirth and menstruation as punishments for women. (Ibid:11)

Rajabhakthiyum Deshabhimanavum: Engagements with Nation and the Government⁷

Another key characteristic of the *Islahi* movement, as was mentioned earlier, was the way in which it ‘bowed before the King’ or aligned with the rulers. The reform leaders considered it important to have a healthy relationship with the government as well as the nation. Even as there are readings like that of K M Seethi that consider the reform “essentially anti-colonial in character”, they also admit that it was more complicated than that. Seethi tries to explain that complexity briefly in the same article: “Makhti Thangal, the pioneer of Muslim reform movement, began his career as a British official, but opted to remain in the realm of *Islah*, seeking to engage with modernity. On one end of the spectrum, he confronted the Church missionaries who propagated a highly distorted image of Islam; on the other hand, Thangal exhorted the Muslims to come out of their social seclusion to undertake English education (besides in their mother-tongue, Malayalam) and through it the emerging challenges of modernity. Makhti Thangal was not anti-British in his essential character, just as Sir Syed Ahamed Khan was during this time, but sought to uplift the Muslims from their self-imposed backwardness and to prepare them to face challenges of modern times.” (Seethi, 2018).

In the book *Rajabhakthiyum Deshabhimanavum* (“Loyalty to the

King and the National Pride”), Sana Ulla Makti Thangal gives an ideological base for this strategy / theory they followed through the reforms. In this book, he also stresses on the need to avoid getting into protests or riots. His teachings/arguments in this book are essentially in the backdrop of several rebellions that took part in Malabar during the last years of 19th century, and it also addressed the belief prevalent among the Mappila Muslims of Malabar that learning Malayalam and English languages or taking up a government job was against Islam. Thangal takes pride in his role in suppressing the riots that broke out in and around Malappuram in the year 1896: ‘It is well known that both the government and the subjects suffered a lot when Muslims got into riots in the belief that they would get rewarded in the afterlife if they get killed while killing their enemy. In the latest such riots that broke out in 1896, I was called from Changanassery [by the British administration] to Malappuram and as per their order I travelled around Malappuram and explained to the people that there is no virtue or reward [in it] and it is only a big sin, and there have not been any riots since then. Think who has benefitted from it.’ (Thangal, 2006:504).

There are many historians like Dr. M Gangadharan who appreciate Thangal’s efforts towards quenching the riots. In the foreword written to the complete works of Makti Thangal, he notes that in the riots of 1896, 94 Mappilia Muslims got killed in Police firings in connection with an incident where the Mappilias killed a Nair landlord and two others. He adds that Makti Thangal succeeded in his mission (of pacifying the violent crowds), and no further riots were reported till the death of Thangal in 1912. Even in the riots of 1915 and 1919, he says there was not much support from the Mappila Muslim community. (Gangadharan, 2006:18). However, the critiques of Thangal see this as a cowardly measure that resulted in Mappilas suffering many more years of oppression and repression from the landlords and the British government alike. M T Ansari, in his book *Malabar: Desheeyathayude Idapadukal*, feels it is a result of a formation of a ‘modern’ awareness that the Mappilas became aware of the futility of fighting with an enemy who is more powerful in terms of weapons. (Ansari, 2008:31).

Thangal calls for cooperation with the rulers of the land, whoever that may be, and justifies it using religion as well. ‘Even as the lord of this world and the other world is the divine and only one God, one shall respect and obey the kings who are assigned the responsibility to save and punish us, without any disobedience. There is one section who thinks the third (among those who the believers shall obey, *ulul amr*, as mentioned in the *Qur’an*) is the ruler.’ (Thangal, 2006:505). Here, he is referring to

the *Qur'anic* verse that says "O ye who believe! Obey Allah, and obey the Messenger, and those charged with authority among you." (*Qur'an* 4:59).

He makes multiple references to this *Qur'anic* verse in the same book. Referring to a speech he made in Thiruvananthapuram on this topic, he says, 'Oh people, *bhakti* (devotion) is of three types. Two are connected with the God's matters and one concerns with the material world. The material one is on the ruler who has the right to save us and punish us.' (Thangal, 2006:505).

Talking about the same speech, he adds, 'Just like the believers have the right to know the rules of the God, the subjects [of the King] have the right to know the law of the land. Knowing and obeying the rules is a devotional right and it also gives one a special power.' (Ibid:505). (Note that this speech is made in Thiruvananthapuram which was under the Travancore King's rule at that time).

Thangal continues with stressing further on the need for a devotion to the King and the government: 'Government job is a support you get from the rulers. That is also an important part of one's devotion.. Without doubt, it is a right of the subject, it is a matter of pride of belonging to the nation, and devotion to the king. It adds to the position of the individual and the community, and results in a good relationship with the government. Especially it makes one content in this devotion. There are enough reasons to believe that those who do not have [government] jobs are lacking in power and in devotion.' (Ibid:506).

In the same book he stressed on the need to learn Malayalam and English languages. In the second essay in the same book, Thangal repeats some of these points, and refers to the same *Qur'anic* verse once again : 'Just like belief in God and devotion are essential, belief in the King and devotion to the King are also essential. It is said that the third one in the *Qur'anic* verse [mentioned above], charged with authority, is the ruler.' (Ibid:508).

In the third and last essay in the book, titled *Deshabhimanam* (Love for the Nation), Thangal talks particularly about the need for loving the motherland as well. He says the slogan '*Vande Mataram*' that the people of the northern states used had the same meaning. He adds that it is important to have a 'husband for the land and a ruler for the people'. (Ibid:509). Here, Thangal reads '*Vande Mataram*' only as a part of a 'national' sentiment, and misses the Hindutva undertones of that slogan.⁸

Even though officially there was no state called Kerala then, Thangal stresses on the need for the Muslims of Kerala to take pride in being a Keralite, since Kerala is their land of birth. (Ibid: 510). In another book *Muslim Janavum Vidyabhayasavum* ("The Muslim

community and education”), he stresses further on the need for the Kerala Muslims to be proficient in Malayalam. (Ibid: 440-442).

Indian Context of the ‘National Model’ of an Ideal Womanhood

Right from the reforms within the Hindu / Brahmin communities of North India and Bengal, one can see the construction of an Ideal Indian womanhood. Sonia Nishat Amin observes that in the period of cultural nationalism, R C Dutt, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Dayananda Saraswati among others were the architects of the new ideal womanhood in India / Bengal. She adds that a similar reconstruction (of the ideal Indian Muslim woman) took place in the Muslim reform movement of Bengal, replacing the Aryan / Hindu Goddesses with modern-day Ayisha or Fatima, and calls it an ‘identity-seeking Modernism’ of the Muslim reform movements. (Amin, 1996:30-31). Both among Hindus and Muslims, the revivalists / reformists acknowledged the present dreadful status of women in contrast with a romanticised version of a ‘golden’ past where women supposedly enjoyed a better status. They sought to improve the not-so-enviable current situation through social reforms, with the help from the colonial government if necessary. The engagements with a colonial modernity provided the background to what turned out to be women’s reform movements that the reformist men were forced to take up. The backward status of women were seen as a sign of backwardness of the community. At the same time, they were cautious about the onslaught of the same modernity. They felt a need to counter it, as they feared otherwise it would end up putting the Indian (or Muslim) cultural existence in danger, observes Amin.(Ibid:31).

The analysis of the *Islahi* reforms shows that they also followed a similar pattern, and their fears and concerns were based on a wrong notion that the gender hierarchy and inferiority of women were essential to the Muslim cultural existence.

Breaking out of the Stereotypes: Influential Women

No matter how much the pioneers of the reform wanted the women to remain subordinates to men, education did open up a new avenue for women. There were women who made use of the opportunities they got, and made a space for themselves in the society.

Dr Shamshad Hussain traces the lives of some of these women in her book *Muslimum Streeyum Allathaval*. M Haleema Beevi, born in 1918, was one of the major woman personalities who benefitted from the changes that came about in the Muslim women’s lives. Hussain quotes Haleema Beevi’s words from a speech at a women’s conference held in Thiruvalla in the year 1938 : ‘even though we once considered modern

education a sin, now many of us have become educated. It is relieving that the belief that women's education will spoil women does not have many takers now. Education has helped us develop and articulate our thoughts better. I must acknowledge the fact that it is the broad mindedness underlying in the power of education that has enabled us to shed our inhibitions and attend this conference here today'. (Hussain, 2015:79)

Apart from Haleema Beevi, two more Muslim women, P G Khadeeja and Meytheen Beevi also spoke at that conference. Chapter 3 of this thesis mentioned about the three resolutions passed at the conference, regarding free education for girl children, compulsory primary education for girl children and employment for educated women. Meytheen Beevi was the first woman to pass Hindi Rashtra Bhasha Visharad examination and Dr. Habsha Marakkar who was the first Muslim woman from Kerala to pass MBBS. At the conference, Haleema Beevi stressed the need for claiming their rightful space in the public life and become a part of the development of the community and of the nation. She later wrote an essay titled "Muslim women in the organisational field", where she gives details on the follow-up actions to the decisions made at the conference. She says Sir CP Government considered the demands of the conference regarding education for Muslim women favourably and offered many perks for Muslim girl students. She also talks about the plans they had to extend their activities to Malabar. *Thalassery Muslim Mahila Samajam* was known to be active in Malabar during that time. Beevi writes about the communication that she had with the *Samajam*. T C Kunjachumma Saheba was in charge of the *Samajam*. But somehow, their Malabar plans did not work out.

Haleema Beevi proved her proficiency in journalism also. She was the editor, printer and publisher of a magazine titled *Muslim Vanitha*, published from Thiruvalla, that started in the year 1938. When *Bharatha Chandrika*, which later became a daily, began as a weekly in 1946, Haleema Beevi was the editor. Noted writer Vaikom Muhammed Basheer was one of the sub editors. Both these publications had to shut down later due to financial problems. (Ibid:79-81)

Conclusion

To summarise, *Islahi* movement was closely linked with European /Colonial Modernity, though one cannot count the movement entirely as a colonial project. The leaders of the movement took inspiration from reform movements world wide and tried to induce a new energy of modernity into the community, and tried to take the community back to a 'golden past' of their imaginations. However, pioneers like Makti

Thangal carried some extremely regressive views regarding women, and it reflected on the reforms as well. Thus, the reforms largely missed addressing the agency of women and considered them only as a supportive mechanism for men. To make matters worse, all the readings of the *Qur'an* and Islam till that point in history were also mostly male-centric.

The changes that came about in the society as part of the movement and also as part of the colonial modernisation gave women access to modern education, but at the same time, they were pushed back and were more or less confined to a few roles that the society assigned exclusively for them. There were exceptions though. One can see there were women who made a mark in the public sphere without compromising or confining themselves to the margins and boundaries set for them. But in general, it can be said that the reforms got them education, but in strict nationalist and patriarchal frameworks. A more Islamic or the *Qur'anic* frame would have emancipated them better. When we look back, we now have a lot of studies and readings like that of Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas that break the belief that women are secondary to men or they are only supposed to serve a supportive role, even when one looks at it through an Islamic eye. K M Moulavi and his book *Islamum Sthreekalum* (Islam and Women), was a notable exception to the regressive ideas that were underlying beneath the surface of the tryst with modernity. His book could be seen as sharing a less patriarchal reading of the *Qur'an*.

Another key characteristic of the movement was the way in which it 'bowed before the King'. The reform leaders felt that a cordial relationship with the rulers, be it the colonial masters or the local King, was the only way to ensure that the community remained in the mainstream and enjoyed the fruits of modernity.

Notes

1. The word 'nationalist' in the title of this paper mainly refers to the blending of one's identity with that of the system, or being an ally to the government. At a sub-national level, it also refers to projecting the 'Malayali' identity, or playing up the Kerala / Malayali sub-nationalism and blending oneself into the mainstream Malayali self. It is about coming to an agreement with the society and the nation one lives in, rather than being rebellious. Thus, the reform worked as a project that created an obedient and less violent Muslim in general, a 'tamed' one in the eyes of the state and the society. The women's role was to be a virtuous wife and mother of that nationalist imagination. The phrase "virtuous wife and mother of

nationalist imagination” is taken from Aamir R Mufti’s “A great Story-writer than God: Genre, Gender and Minority in Late Colonial India” an article in Partha Chatterjee & Pradeep Jaganathan (ed.), *Community, Gender and Violence: Subaltern Studies*, Vol. XI, Permanent Black, Delhi, pp.13-14.

2. In the book Mani re-examines the colonialist as well as nationalist historiography on the social reform and emancipation of women in the colonial period. She criticises the reform movements among the Hindus as in the debate on the prohibition of sati - the ‘self’ immolation of the wife of the deceased husband - the women who were burned alive had been marginalised. See Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1998.
3. Many of the organisers as well as delegates of the Annual Conferences of *Aikya Sangham* were government executives. For example the eighth Annual Conference of *Aikya Sangham* was presided over by Capt. Abdul Hamid Khan in 1930 and in the following year, the ninth Conference, it was Sessions Judge Mir Sainuddin Sahib. See Aboobacker, Kathiyalam (ed.), *Kodungallur Directory*, Vartha Publications, P.Vemballur, 1992, p. 598.
4. K M Moulavi, who wrote the book *Islamum Sthreekalum* (Islam and Women) however, was the only exception to this. His book can be seen more or less as a predecessor to the thoughts of Wadud. See K M Moulavi, *Islamum Sthreekalum* (Mala.). (trans., Islam and Women), Ishaath Committee, Aleppey, 1936.
5. *Skandapurana* is one of eighteen Hindu Purānās.
6. Before the legislation was made in 1870 to grant property right to married women, the property earned by a woman instantly would become the money of her husband, except that of dowry. The Act granted married women to be the legal owners of the money they earned and right to inherit property. See. Combs, Mary Beth, “A Measure of Legal Independence: The 1870 Married Women's Property Act and the Portfolio Allocations of British Wives”, *The Journal of Economic History*, December 2005, 65 (4):1028–1057. Link: doi:10.1017/s0022050705000392. JSTOR 3874913.
7. *Rajabhakthiyum Deshabhimanavum* which means “Loyalty to the King and the National Pride” is a Malayalam booklet written by Makti Thangal.
8. It may be noted that the nationalism and Hindutva discourses were closely linked with one another.

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