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Islamic Piety, Corporeality and Agency: Young Mappila Women's Dissensus Over the Notion of Ideal *Muslimah* in Malabar

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ABSTRACT

Occupied with the discourse of legal reformation of the Muslim community since the Shah Bano controversy in 1978, statist narratives of liberating Muslim women from Muslim patriarchy are conspicuous in India. However, Muslim leaders propose internal reforms and expect women to be good mothers. This article analyses the role of traditional *ulema* in Kerala in shaping the corporeal notions of pious Mappila women. The study also analyses the contestations and multiple discourses among pious young Mappila women toward the *ulema*'s preaching. The findings of this study are framed through the concept of piety and the embodiment of ethical self by Saba Mahmood and Talal Asad's notion of Islam as a discursive tradition. Semi-structured interviews, participant observation, digital ethnography with a sample of thirty respondents and secondary sources are the methods used. While the conception of an ethical self and piety among the pious elder Mappila women hinges on the respectful compliance of *ulema*'s preaching of the qualities of a 'good *Muslimah*', the pious young Mappila women focus on the deliberative aspects of discourses around 'the good *Muslimah*'. This has opened up the possibilities of contestation, argumentation, and cross-checking references from the Islamic tradition to pursue a dignified and pious living.

Keywords: traditional ulema, Mappila women, good muslimah, affective marital relationship, agency

INTRODUCTION

The entangled binarised stereotype of the victimised Muslim woman under the thumb of a predacious and oversexed Muslim man in public discourse, has offered discursive vindication for the contemporary Indian state's intervention in Muslim legal reforms. Since the Shah Bano controversy in 1978[1], the Indian state's narratives of liberating Muslim women from Muslim patriarchy are conspicuous, *vis-à-vis*, for instance, the ban of triple *talaq* (2019) and the ongoing demand for a uniform civil code[2]. The supposed motive of 'saving Muslim women' is part of a wider geopolitical strategising of the Hindu right-wing (Gupta *et al.*, 2020: 1). Leaders of the Muslim community, however, advocate for reform within the community and expect Muslim women to be agents of socialisation themselves within the religious world, to be 'good wives' and 'good mothers.' This article strives to understand the role of traditional *ulema* in Kerala in shaping the corporeal notions of the pious Mappila woman, as well as the contestations and multiple discourses among pious young Mappila women towards the preaching of traditional *ulema* in the notions of marriage, sexuality, and motherhood. At the intersections of the geography of Malabar as a home to various traditions, the Mappila Muslim community there, and their pious young women subjects; this article examines pious Mappila Muslim femininity and its engagements with traditional *ulema*[3] around the notion of 'good *Muslimah'*.

Two important contributions on ethics and modernity *vis-á-vis* religion inform my attempts to conceptualise these women's engagement with the *ulema*'s notion of a 'good *Muslimah'*. Firstly, Saba Mahmood's concept of piety and the embodiment of ethical self, which cannot simply be reduced to subordination and resistance (Mahmood, 2005: 15). Secondly, how followers of Islamic tradition express and invoke it, including discursive and embodied

[1] See Agnes (2012).
[2] https://m.economictimes.com/news/how-to/what-is-uniform-civil-code-what-does-constitution-say-about-it-why-its-such-a-controversial-topics-in-india/articleshow/101348565.cms
[3] Traditional *ulema* are Muslim scholars in Islamic law and jurisdiction, and are included in every sectarian division of the Muslim community namely Mujahid, Jamat-e-Islami and Sunnis.

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traditions that are interconnected by the impermanence of everyday life (Asad, 2009). Given that both the statist as well as *ulema* narratives depict Muslim women as passive recipients of Muslim patriarchy, it is crucial to discern the nuanced ways in which these young Mappila[4] women assert their agency. The normative notion of agency warrants critical re-examination as it discredits the agency of religious women (Mahmood, 2005; Lughod, 1990). The postsecular turn in feminism has problematised the European feminism in terms of its notion of political subjectivity and agency suggesting religious piety as a means of reinforcing and conveying agency which can even involve considerable spiritual dimensions (Braidotti, 2003: 1). A central query explored in the scholarly literature since the 1970s addressing the operations of human agency amidst structures of subordination revolves around the examinations of how women perpetuate their own oppression or attempt to resist or subvert domains of subjugation (Mahmood, 2005: 6).

In her work on Bedouin women, Lughod (1990) interrogates the romanticisation of resistance in anthropological and historical studies to raise the question of how one can understand manifestations of resistance without wrongly attributing to them forms of politics or consciousness that has never formed a part of their experiential realities—for example, feminist politics or feminist consciousness. Giving the example of Bedouin women wearing sexy lingerie to challenge prevailing social mores, Lughod illustrates that this is another means of subjugating oneself to alternative forms of power grounded in capitalist consumerism. Lughod observes that attention to 'the forms of resistance in particular societies' help us to critically analyse reductionist theories of power (Lughod, 1990: 47). Complicating this, Mahmood (2005) examines if it is worth identifying a universal categorisation of acts as resistance external to the political and ethical conditions in which those acts acquire its specific meanings. Mahmood also posits the question that does such a categorisation forces a teleology of progressive politics on analysing power—a teleology that leads us not to understand the different forms of action and being which cannot be limited within the binary of reinscription and subversion of norms. Here Lughod's observations are subjected to criticism as it fails to problematise the universality of desire to free oneself from structures of subordination, which remains a core value of western progressive and liberal thought (Mahmood, 2005: 10). Butler's (1993) concept of agency also developed mainly in such contexts where norms were either questioned or subjected to resignification, therefore can similarly give only a reductionist exploration into the functioning of norms in constituting the subject. However, Mahmood (2005) views that norms are experienced, inhabited and performed in different ways and not merely subverted or consolidated (Mahmood, 2005: 22). Further complicating this debate on piety Islam and everyday Islam, Schielke (2018) argues that the cultivation of ethics as explained by Mahmood can persist only for short duration as everyday lives of these people involve aspirations and ideals characterised by ambiguities and complexities (Schielke, 2018: 7). Nonetheless, intervening here, Nadia Fadil and Mayanthi Fernando observe that the unease with Islamic revivalism stems from secular-liberal sensibilities (Fadil and Fernando, 2015: 82). These thematic inquiries sheds light on the notion of piety among pious young Mappila women beyond the descriptive narrative of 'good *Muslimah'* fashioned by the *ulema* within the context of differential theological positions in the Mappila community of Malabar

To understand this further, a quick contextualisation of the historical and structural trajectories of Mappila Muslim women is required. The Indian Muslim 'reform' movements in Malabar during the late 19th century enabled a larger discourse of transformation of Muslim communities in the modern Kerala public sphere. The revivalist efforts in every community in Kerala during the nineteenth century were aimed at providing education for all, in order to reform the language, and resist colonialism. Since the efforts of Sana'ullah Makthi Thangal[5], Islamic revivalists have insisted on education, English and Malayalam language learning, translation of religious works and the Quran, reforms of the Arabic Malayalam script, and the importance of women's rights (Lakshmi, 2012: 87). In addition, Kerala's print media culture played a vital role in Muslim reforms. In order to advance the community in the surging political realm during this period, women engaged in intricate negotiations with modernity without compromising their religiosity (Sherin, 2021: 108). In her book, Shamshad Hussain emphasises the contributions of Muslim women in promoting the community and challenging patriarchal social structures by interpreting the Quran and prophetic tradition, but they were subsequently ignored in documented history (Hussain, 2019: 25).

Indian migration to the Gulf states in the Middle East also significantly contributed to changes in the socioeconomic status of the community in the 1970s and 1980s, when oil was discovered in Arab countries. In the absence of male members, Muslim women in India gained more autonomy in decision-making and mobility. The range of socialisation patterns was widening with their direct engagements with educational institutions, banks, and international communication networks (Gulati, 1995: 197). Through the reform activities of Haleema Beevi

[4] Hailing from South West India, the Mappilas constitute a distinct and sizable community with a population of more than eight million people. The Mappila culture is a blend of Islamic tradition and Malayalam which continues to the present day (Miller, 2015).

[5] He was a Muslim renaissance leader from Malabar during British rule in India. He ardently advocated for Western education among the Mappilas.

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and others, this period also witnessed the emergence of mobilisation of agency among Muslim women. F. Osella and C. Osella (2008) suggest that debates and discussions regarding Muslim women since the 1930s led to the establishment of women's organisations like Mujahid Girls' Movement (MGM) in 1982 and Girls' Islamic Organisation (GIO) in 1984 by Mujahid and Jamat factions[6] respectively (Osella and Osella, 2008). By organising religious speeches, symposiums, seminars, and many campus activities, which had been exclusively male spheres until then, they started marking their own space in the public sphere of Malabar. These movements were aimed at shaping Muslim women's lives with Islamic values, criticising practices like dowry and unlawful talaq, and encouraging the development of women's education (Saittu, 2015: 144). Mappila women were visible in Islamic attire during this period, spurring active public discussions about their appearance, emphasising religious identity through hijab, purdah, and shariah law. Additionally, this led to discussions among *ulema* to circumscribe Muslim women's appearance within religious terms by emphasising religious attire. Throughout these discussions, both in academia and the public sphere, the keyword 'pious Mappila women' has been featured as an essentialised category excluding the question of their agency, the multiple discourses and different theological positions among them.

Methodologically, this study draws upon a qualitative inquiry among thirty women between the ages of 18 and 35 from the Malappuram district of Malabar in coastal south-western India using a grounded approach. Employing snowball sampling, each ten respondents were chosen from the three important Islamic organisations in Kerala, namely Sunnis, Mujahid and Jamat-e-Islami in order to acknowledge the potential ideological differences between them. This sample was chosen because it includes pious, young Mappila women who are active in social media, wear hijab as part of their piety and invoke Islamic tradition in everyday life. These women are educated mothers and postgraduates from state-run institutions who participate actively in contemporary discourses about gender, nation, and citizenship. My data collection methods include semi-structured interviews, participant observation, digital ethnography, and secondary sources. This study aims to explore detailed and rich narratives conducive to building a conceptual framework that provides insights into the nuanced and subjective ways in which pious young Mappila women engage or contest the *ulema*'s gendered construction of corporeal notions around marriage, motherhood and sexuality in their everyday life.

The body has been the major focus of feminist analysis, where bodies are perceived as the site of subversion and resistance. The importance of examining non-European contexts and histories were highlighted by the third world feminists who also questioned the Euro-centric conceptualisations of gender. The precolonial and colonial histories were delved into by South Asian feminisms to challenge misogynistic norms and thus reconceptualised rights discourse and agency (Loomba and Lukose, 2012). Muslim feminists have explored women's bodies, socially constructed role of motherhood and sexuality within Islamic beliefs. Sparking debates over the need for egalitarian laws, Ziba Mir Hosseini analyses the link between sexuality, contemporary subordination of Muslim women and implicit inequality in classical Muslim jurist law (Hosseini, 2012) while Hadia Mubarak cautions against applying an egalitarian lens to classical Islamic texts informing the complexity of exegetical tradition (Mubarak, 2022). While Fathima Mernissi in her work 'Beyond the Veil: Male- Female Dynamics in a Muslim Society' indicate the position of early Muslim scholarship on the need to control female sexuality as a potential social threat (Mernissi, 1991), Barlas notes the concept of passive female sexuality contradicting the Islamic notion of justice to women (Barlas, 2002). Studies on female sexuality in Muslim contexts explore socio-cultural constructions of femininity and sexuality cover factors like enculturation processes (Sanjakdar, 2011), state gender ideologies (Bennett, 2005), and religious discourses (Hoel, 2013) in shaping their bodily perceptions. Existing studies on Mappila Muslim marriage practices revolve around early marriage practices (Basheer, 2004; Jafar, 2015), the social exclusion of Muslim women (Cherayi and Kumar, 2014), cross border marriages (Shani, 2021), *muta* (temporary) marriages (Osella, 2012; Koya, 1978) while some others focus on matrilineal marriages, endogamous alliances (Saidalavi, 2017) and its transformation (Sebastian, 2016; Osella, 2012). However, academic studies on the corporeal notions of Mappila women, specifically marriage, sexuality and motherhood are absent in the existing scholarship on Malabar. A shift is visible in the everyday lives of pious young Mappila women from the nexus of good mother-good wife and an ideal *Muslimah* in the *ulema* discourse which forms the core of this article.

The first section of this article explores the diverse conceptualisations of 'good *Muslimah*' by different Islamic organisations in Kerala with different theological positions. Here, I examine the different ways in which *ulema* persuaded a generation of elder Mappila women to become 'good *Muslimah*'. The second section examines how the pious young Mappila women engage with Islamic discourse in refining their everyday lives as they contest the *ulema*'s conception of corporeality and piety. The narratives of young Mappila women about their experiences with earlier generation and available second literature are analysed here. Drawing on Asad's anthropological account of Islam, instead of de-contextualising and schematising their actions, narratives about culturally specific actors should represent and translate historically grounded discourses as responsive reactions to discourses set by others (Asad,

[6] However, this doesn't mean that other women are 'backward', but the movements mentioned here are visible evidence of organised women's movements in the Kerala public sphere during the period distinct from the unorganised nature of Sunni women.

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2009). Hence, accounts of these women's narratives trace a running argument that the conceptions of self and moral agency (Mahmood, 2005) that underpin their contestations are in discord with conventional notions of pious self in the Mappila community and with the liberalist assumptions of agency and individual self that claim agency is the ability to recognise individual interests against transcendental will, tradition, or custom.

THE *ULEMA*'S NARRATIVE: MAKING OF THE 'GOOD *MUSLIMAH'*

Often binding Muslim women with the responsibility to be a good wife and a good mother, the *ulema* discourse on a 'good *Muslimah'* is laden with the socio-cultural apparatuses of femininity. The respondents in this study assert that traditional *ulema* plays a significant role in shaping the notions of marriage, sexuality, motherhood, and femininity among pious Mappila women of the older generation, and this section attempts to derive an understanding of how *ulema* construct such notions. How do the *ulema* create the pedagogical realm of their teachings by using Islamic ethical materials or sources? Among those elder Mappila women, what kind of authority is being invoked in the particular pragmatics of communication employed by the *ulema*? When the ideals of a 'good *Muslimah'* are invoked among the elder Mappila women of the community, what kind of self is produced? These questions are explored through an examination of various Islamic sources and by exploring the insights gained from young Mappila women's experiences with elder Mappila women's everyday lives.

The first part of my discussion focuses on the distinctive Islamic materials through which Muslim organisations in Kerala with diverse theological positions define the concept of a 'good *Muslimah*'. The materials published by these organisations comprise literature with a broad religious orientation aimed at disciplining and educating the community regarding Islamic practices such as Islamic Fiqh [the philosophy or theory of Islamic law based on Quranic teachings and Prophetic tradition]. Among these are laws governing the obligation to perform rituals such as *salat* [five prayers in a day], *zakat* [alms giving], sawm [fasting during the Arabic month of Ramadan], and *hajj* [pilgrimage to Mecca]. The other genre of literature specifically addresses women in the community with topics such as menstruation, the obligatory bath at the end of menstrual bleeding, the ritual of *janabah* [a state of major ritual impurity in Islam caused by any contact with semen], duties of a Muslim wife, advice for a successful marital life and the importance of socialising children with Islamic norms. There are other resources that address women, including Friday sermons, recorded sermons and speeches on CD, video recordings of *ulema*'s teachings on YouTube, women's magazines, and classes for Islamic learning. A particular focus of these materials is to construct the image of a pious *Muslimah* and to discuss her necessary conduct. They represent a combined form of knowledge that employs local interpretations of Islamic juristic tradition to discipline social life.

The book titled '*Kudumbajeevitham*' [7][*Family Life*] (Abdullah, 1966) attests to the popularity of these literatures among Mappila women. The original edition of the book was published in 1966, and the twenty-fourth edition was published in 2015. According to the publisher's note, family is the elemental unit of community, and women are the guiding force. It provides Islamic guidance on how Muslim women can fulfil their duties. The chapter titled *'Sthree Barthrgrihathil'* [Women at her husband's house] discusses the desirable characteristics of a 'good *Muslimah'*. When a woman blames her in-laws and forces her husband to move into a separate house, she cannot be considered a 'good *Muslimah'*. The chapter notes that educated women have more bad habits than uneducated women (Abdullah, 1966: 31), a claim that is not supported by any Islamic texts, undermining efforts to popularise modern education among women. Such indoctrination materials are not only derived from popular genres of Islamic literature, but also from the subjective interpretations of *ulema*, depending on the situation.

Another powerful source for shaping the rhetoric of 'good *Muslimah'* and good wife is the recorded sermons of the *ulema*[8]. An Islamic sermon in Malayalam, titled *'Nalla bharyayude lakshanangal'* [The features of a good wife], emphasises the character of a good wife. Using the Prophetic verse that 'a husband should feel peaceful when he looks at his wife's face', the speaker urges the audience to rethink whether their wives are faithful and good wives. To remind the male audience of how to deal with an undutiful wife, the speaker tells a story of an Arabian couple whose wife acts as if she were ill because she is lazy when it comes to cooking. When the husband recognised that she is acting her illness after failing to recite the Quran to cure her sickness, he recited a passage on polygamy from the Quran (4:3) that made her jump up from bed and go to the kitchen. Such sermons often focus on a man's rights in polygamous marriages without acknowledging the limitations and responsibilities[9] that come with it, which are included in the verse. Amina Wadud noted in her work 'Inside the Gender Jihad - Women's Reform in

[7] All translations are done by me from Malayalam.

[8] These recorded sermons are easily available today from online platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook and YouTube.

[9] 'And if you fear that you will not deal justly with the orphan girls, then marry those that please you of (other) women, two, three or four. But if you fear that you will not be just, then marry only one or those your right hands possess (i.e., slaves). That is more suitable than you may not incline to injustice.'

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Islam' that polygamy is a conditional and serious responsibility in Islam, and practicing polygamy is currently impossible as specified in Quran (Wadud, 2006: 114). Thus, we find certain *ulema* preaching, directly or indirectly affirming patriarchal positions through the common trope of polygamy.

Prior to the global onset of Covid restrictions in March 2020, one could easily find large posters and flex boards with Islamic sermons by popular orators in different parts of Malappuram. Thousands of people attend these sermons, mostly older women in the community, which are often held in large playgrounds or auditoriums nearby. In contrast to booklets and recorded sermons, such religious events contributed to the development of a widely shared public discourse of 'good *Muslimah'*, not confined to the private spaces of elder women, and, as a result, strengthened the sense of community identity among participants. In their sermons, speakers incorporate *ulema*'s interpretations of stories based on current contexts along with verses from the Quran to give them a scholarly flavour. Hirschkind's findings exhibits resonance with these observations. Weaving Qur'anic verses into preacher's own rendition of the local tales forms an integral part of the contemporary sermon practice in Egypt (Hirschkind, 2006: 191). The preachers' particular pragmatics of communication in sermons tend towards a strict tone or a style of storytelling that evokes '*thaqwa*' [fear of God] and '*khushu*' [humility]. It is interesting to note that many of the sermons do not include any Q&A sessions or questions about *ulema*'s teachings, contributing to the disciplinary nature and limiting critical engagements.

By inviting popular orators to these events, the *Mahallu* committees[10], Madrasas and 'traditionalist' factions raise funds for specific purposes, such as renovating mosques or Madrasas or doing charity work. It is common for Mappila women to attend such events organised by their own organisations. Taking a closer look at the micro practices surrounding such events reveals that the purely ideological indoctrination of Mappila women towards the 'good *Muslimah'* is intertwined with certain materialistic demands on these women by *ulema*. As a participant in one of the Islamic sermons, a regular attendee of such sermons, shared with me a nuanced view of fund collection. She said,

> I really enjoyed those sermons, but in the second half, when they start collecting funds, the speaker begins glorifying Allah's rewards for almsgiving. These sermons inspired many devout women to donate their gold jewellery to charity. Now I prefer to listen to sermons online. Topics covered include death, heaven, family life, duties of wives and husbands, etc.

Several Islamic organisations run madrasas and women's colleges that cater to the educational needs of the Mappila community. This is mainly due to the North-South disparity in instituting government educational institutions and the Malabar region belongs to the Northern part of Kerala which suffers from lack of public institutions and lack of infrastructure in Malappuram (Government of Kerala, 2006). Islamic organisations expect educated women with basic religious knowledge to cultivate Islamic morals in their children and families to cultivate true Islamic culture rather than empowering women to exercise their rights as Muslims. Therefore, bringing about a change in the existent gendered division of labour is considered problematic or undesirable, and sometimes interpreted as a sign of *fitnah* [temptation].

In his speech on women, a prominent preacher of a 'reformist' faction'[11] stated,

> Most of the family disruptions were caused by women working outside the home. The family would be peaceful if the men managed finances, but the women would become arrogant and overrule their husbands when they earned money. Men who promoted women for jobs now have extra-marital relations.

He continued by reciting the thirty fourth verse of the fourth chapter in Quran and said that

> Men have to support the family financially, and Allah has dignified some over others through the verse. The role of a woman in Islam is to be a mother, wife, sister-in-law, or daughter-in-law.

In her work 'Muslim Women and the Post Patriarchal', Rifat Hassan (1991) maintains that the Quran does not specifically mention Adam or Eve However, verse 4:1, which says 'O humankind, fear your lord, who created you from one soul and separated you from its mate, and made you into men and women' is a general teaching on how humans were created. According to the verse, men and women are created from the same soul, which underlines their equality. Hassan argues that it is through the popularity and circulation of some interpretations of Hadith

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[10] Here *Mahallu* means that each house in a particular location would be registered under an important mosque in that place. There can be more than one important mosque and *Mahallu* in a particular location which can be based on ideological differences *like Sunni, Jamath-e-Islami* amd *Mujahid*. Each *mahallu* has its own committee to take care of the people's religious matters included in that respective *mahallu*.

[11] https://youtu.be/qyb0M4kDK-4

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contradicting the Quranic narrative on creation that remains responsible for the general notion among Muslims that women are inferior in righteousness. Consequently, women's self-sufficiency is perceived as a threat to men's authority. As a result, women are perceived as a source of temptation [*fitnah*] and of easy enticement into immorality. It highlights the moral issues of women, which require the guidance of men who are *qawwamun* [caretakers] responsible for guarding their women and ensuring they don't deviate from their morals. Although the word *qawwamun* means the provider of livelihood, it is interpreted in various presumptive ways, such as maintaining or protecting women, in charge of them, and mastering them. In addition, Muslim societies generally take this verse as a normative division of labour in an ideal family, but this does not necessarily mean women should not provide for themselves (Hassan, 1991: 55).

A generational shift is palpable in the understandings of a 'good *Muslimah'* and the corporeal lives of young Mappila women when exploring their narratives on perceptions of marriage, sexuality, and motherhood. Pious elder women's notions of the self and self-respect are linked to getting recognition from their community as a 'good *Muslimah'*, sometimes at the expense of their personal freedom. The formulation of corporeal lives by elder Mappila women is largely determined by hegemonic discourses rooted in Islamic pedagogy. For their sacrifice in their individual freedom, the *ulema* continually invoke *sabr* [patience] through worldly hardships, along with *thawab* [rewards] for souls in *akhirah* [the life after death]. Analysing the *zar* cult which is a Muslim healing practice in Northern Sudan, Boddy proposes that *zar* practice can be understood as a means of contextualising their experiences within a gendered structure or cultivating a subordinate discourse. Though this may appear as 'instruments of oppression' within the liberal parameters of freedom, Boddy argues that it acts as a counter hegemonic process by women asserting their value collectively and individually through organising related ceremonies thereby embracing gender complementarity (Boddy, 1989: 345). Incorporating this vantage point, the elder Mappila women of the Mappila community manifest their ethical being while voluntarily submitting themselves to the traditional normative order and the will of God. Young Mappila women are also instructed to adopt the hegemonic discourse of the 'good *Muslimah'* to earn respect within the community. However, the palpable dissonance in these narratives we observe can be explained by Mahmood's (2005) observations about self and generational shifts. Mahmood (2005) states that there may not necessarily be a homogenous concept of self that coexists with a given culture or time period. Mahmood (2005) presents differential manifestations of personhood within the same cultural and historical settings, each a product of a distinct discursive formation rather than a broader cultural context. She identifies distinct ideas of corporeal lives taking shape among Egyptian Muslims with radically different conceptions of bodily behaviour (Mahmood, 2005: 120) by analysing the discourse of ritual obligations. Apart from the ways in which younger generation understand the elder ones, it is quite likely that elder Mappila women simultaneously possess distinct concepts of their self, piety and corporeal lives.

Recorded sermons and live broadcasts of sermons have ended up replacing booklets. These mediated communications were popular because of the methods of persuasion they used, the pragmatics of the ways in which they spoke, as well as their physical appearance, including dressing and a beard, which made their discourses sensible to the elder Mappila women. The contents of the sermons are deeply influenced by the fact that the majority of sermon audiences are women. Charles Hirschkind notes that the increased number of women listeners inspires preachers to speak about topics relevant to women, and argues that religious media and its disciplinary function produce a public that is subordinate to authority and results in homogenous moral behaviour rather than a free exchange of ideas (Hirschkind, 2006: 111). While their sacrifice of personal freedom for the family, in exchange for rewards from God, forms a vital element of their pious self, young Mappila women remain fundamentally different when it comes to notions around piety and self. In the following section, I explore the myriad ways in which young Mappila women contest the *ulema*'s conception of marriage, female sexuality, motherhood and a good *Muslimah.*

YOUNG MAPPILA WOMEN'S MODES OF CONTESTATION

The ongoing contestations in Malabar among the young Mappila women about the concept of a *good Muslimah* is symbolic of a decisive transformation in the corporeal notions of Mappila women. Against this backdrop, I intend to explore the articulations of pious young Mappila women with respect to marriage like partner selection and their organisational affiliation and property exchange and domesticity including sharing in household production, conjugality and financial responsibility in family life. This is followed by an inquiry into the question of sexuality in Islam, specifically female sexual rights, and the final part analyses mothering notions and practices of young Mappila women.

In this section, I will examine young Mappila women's notions of marriage and domesticity in detail. Firstly, I attempt to capture whether the young Mappila women choose their partners from one's own organisational background or from different organisations. Given the pressures of the patriarchal structure that demands women to stick to the religious norms of their husband's family in Malabar, partners belonging to different sectarian

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organisations often find it difficult to lead a harmonious life. Though most of the Mappilas in Malabar associate themselves with any one of the Islamic organisations in Kerala, some of the pious young Mappila women prioritise mutual respect and mutual understanding beyond the organisational affiliation in their marital life. In the words of Noushiya, [a research scholar]:

> My partner belongs to AP Sunni[12] family and I hail from a Mujahid family. I had said no to many Sunni marriage proposals as they told they would restrict my higher studies and going to mosque. But he never forces his ideology in me and I never force mine in him, it is based on a mutual understanding. This may not be possible for many to tolerate the sectarian differences.

Such narratives suggest a flexible approach of partners that mutually respect the differences without imposing one's mode of pious being over the other. While this is a common cause for conflicts in family life among many Mappila families, this level of understanding is possible here because of the conscience of two individuals regarding the importance of mutual and peaceful coexistence beyond sectarian affiliation. Living outside Kerala since marriage as part of their career mitigates the likelihood of facing contentious opinion from their family sphere. Sunnis belong to the 'traditional' group, however narratives from the field validate that caution must be exercised in impulsively assigning 'progressive' or 'conservative' label to individuals merely based on their sectarian affiliation. Thus, young Mappila women's partner preferences may not be necessarily embedded in sectarian identities in establishing affective marital ties.

Informal networks among the young Mappila women play a vital role in shaping their contestations. What I imply by informal networks here are the online collectives in social media platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook and Clubhouse where these women actively discuss the juristic positions on women's corporeality in the light of their practical contexts in negotiating with the traditional gender roles. The informal networks may be formed within or outside one's own organisational affiliations but includes women with a common interest in reading, discussing and debating Islamic discourses. Similar collectives including both men and women discuss and debate similar topics. The topics of the discussion ranges from women's rights in Islam regarding conjugality, sexual gratification, duties of household chores and parenting to Islamic perspectives on LGBTQIA issues and political issues *qua* Muslim in the Indian subcontinent. These women respondents are not graduates from Islamic colleges but are graduates from state run institutions who keeps their Islamic identity in the public realm.

Mahr, the obligatory property to be given by the groom to the bride, being one of the vital elements of marriage in Islam, leads me to identify young Mappila women's articulation of their right of mahr in marriages. Lately, there is a general awakening among the young Mappila women of Malabar that Mahr is the right of a Muslim woman. Many women demand mahr ranging from books, a copy of Quran, camera, scooter, money or a plot of land. For instance, a Clubhouse discussion on *Nikah, Mahr and Nafaqa*[13] was initiated by some of the pious young Mappila women on 6th June 2021 where they invited a few male religious scholars. During the discussion on the current trend of demanding *mahr* as things with no monetary value, the moderator who has a doctoral degree in Islamic *Fiqh* from one of the international Islamic universities abroad said:

> *Sidq* is the word Islamic scholars use for *mahr*. It's derived from the word *saduqatuhunna* from the Quran's fourth chapter. It's obligatory and the second condition is '*nihila'* [with respect]. So *mahr* should not be simple things like dates but can be as much as a pile of gold. That doesn't mean a bride can demand more than what the groom can afford.

The trending nature of young Mappila women demanding *mahr* is salient in the words of Sahila who is working as a copywriter. While sharing her experience with *mahr* in marriage, she contemplated with some level of culpability and explained:

> It was a time when 'no gold' marriages, couples in simple dressing styles and 'variety' marriages were trending. I had actually demanded a camera as my *mahr* just because it was trending to ask such *mahr*. Later I realised the importance of monetary value of *mahr*. Many friends had made better demands even before my marriage but they chose not to disclose - which is the more modest way of doing the same.

Here it is incumbent to analyse the complex juncture of individual desires and their ethical being. The impetus behind her demand was obviously her fascination for being recognised as a Mappila woman who takes a remarkable

[12] Based on ideological differences, we can find there are different Islamic organisations among Kerala Muslims. They are mainly *Sunni, Jamath-e-Islami* and *Mujahid*. *Sunnis* are again subdivided into *AP Sunni* and *EK Sunni* organised under A. P. Aboobacker Musliyar and E. K. Aboobacker Musliyar, respectively.

[13] Marriage contract, bride price, which is the right of a bride, financial responsibility of husband to his wife during marriage and up to a particular period after divorce, respectively.

decision in her own marriage matters. Her later realisation points to the Islamic virtue of '*muhasabah*' or '*ihtisab*' which means self-evaluation or self-assessment of one's own deeds. The trajectories of formation of subjectivity here complicates the secular liberal conception of desire for freedom from structures of subordination as innate and motivating all human beings (Mahmood, 2005: 14). The way their ethical being enables to impose limitations on their own individual desires and to attempt self-transformation help them to reevaluate their everyday practices.

The Clubhouse discussions also suggest the critical engagements of pious young Mappila women with Islamic pedagogy in rethinking their own Islamic practices without compromising their debate with patriarchal conceptions of marriage and sexuality. Schielke's work examines these intricate dynamics of everyday Muslim lives in which he observes the inherently tenuous nature of self-purification attempts (Schielke, 2010), a perspective critiqued by Nadia Fadil and Mayanthi Fernando who argue that the new scholarship on everyday Islam overlooks certain expressions of everyday Muslim lives (Fadil and Fernando, 2015: 61). Drawing on this position, I argue that the pious young Mappila women in this study exhibit a constant striving to purify and transform oneself despite occasional aberrations.

Coming to the household production, a WhatsApp group discussion can be analysed here that reveals the complicated relationship between the *ulema*'s conception of household chores and the young Mappila women's perceptions. Created in 2016, the group consists of around one hundred and fifty Malayali Muslim women studying or working in different parts of India in which I requested to join as part of my research. The group is described as a research/ study collective set up to discuss emerging trends in the study of Islam and gender. It aims to discuss various aspects of Muslim women's studies and activities as well as to record the new trends in the field of relevant research and practical interventions. In a discussion on household chores, these women attempt to redress the typical gender roles by means of argumentation, contestation, mediation and arbitration whichever fits into their own practical contexts of everyday life on the basis of evidence from Islamic tradition. Sama[14] [aged 34, working as a HR executive] reflected:

> I got married into a family with five sons. Even though I don't have a mother-in-law, I could see her lifestyle at their home. The men are trained to do every household chore, including cleaning toilets. My father-in-law taught me how to knead and roll *chapatis*. He cuts vegetables before I reach home after work.

The respondents recognise that as mothers and wives, their effective intervention can help better gender relations for the coming generation. The experience shared by Sama was not pondering the general habitual ways of living in the Mappila community, but a sign of invoking a women-friendly domestic atmosphere in an educated Mappila family setting, where the late mother-in-law had deliberately socialised her sons into the duty of household chores. Yet Sama does not accept that the family is not patriarchal but are practically more women friendly in their lifestyle. Here, I would like to draw attention to Saba Mahmood's observation about performative behaviours among Egyptian Muslims. The differential understandings of ritual performances and performative behaviours existing among present day Egyptian Muslims (concerning divergent notions of individual and collective freedoms) have essentially different consequences for the structuring of political life within personal and public domains (Mahmood, 2005: 121). Notably, the different notions of individual and collective freedom engulfed in the conceptions of marriage, sexuality and motherhood between young Mappila women and elder Mappila women have radically differing implications for the *ulema*'s attempts of organising an Islamic lifestyle specifically around the propositions of a 'good *Muslimah'*.

Many of the young Mappila women I interviewed opined that men should be trained to do household chores and care work. Sahila [aged 27, a copywriter] who has been married to her friend and lover described the term- a 'good daughter-in-law' in the Mappila community:

> A good daughter-in-law means one who wakes up early, sweeps the courtyard and cooks food, obeys her mother-in-law and attends to her husband's everyday needs. My mother-in-law was very strict. A series of conflicts led to her persuading my partner to divorce me, though there were no serious problems between us. I don't fall in the category of a good wife or daughter-in-law. When my partner cooked food and attended to our baby, he got called things like '*penkonthan*' [henpecked husband]. Now no further issues are there as we don't bother those things.

Here I would like to underline the differences in perceptions about a 'good *Muslimah'* among the different generations in Sahila's recalling of the past incidents. According to these young Mappila women, they are critical of the categorisations of good wife and good mother and in a way the idea of the 'good life'. They question the basis of the notion that a daughter-in-law should be stoic to do all the household chores and serve her husband and in-laws. Disregarding the traditional socio-cultural scripts of the community, these young women examine the

[14] Names of all the respondents are anonymised.

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canonical sources of Islam to understand how Islam has addressed these issues of household chores and women's duty. However, the discourse addressing household chores under Islamic law has been subjected to multifaceted debate (Katz, 2022: 7) in different times without adhering to a monolithic standpoint which do not come under the purview of this article.

Elaborating the discord in these women's modes of fashioning their self and *ulema*'s modes of persuasion, these women evince the indifference of *ulema* in general towards preaching the concept of a good Muslim husband. *Ulema*'s persistent focus on wives' duties appears to be at odd with young women's understanding of the rights and duties of *azwaj* [life partners] in an Islamic marital relation. To instigate anguish in Nubla [aged 34, who is working as a psychiatric social worker], she heard a mother's advice to her daughter to do every household chore as a woman is the slave of man in Islam. She sallied:

> Most lectures teach that the hell will have many women who misbehaved with their husbands, but I've never heard about any punishment for bad husbands. I truly believe Allah is merciful and not one waiting to put women in the hell.

Nubla's words clearly demonstrate her conviction that God is not determined to categorise and punish a particular section of his creations as sinners. Young women dissent from the expectations of *ulema* around an educated *Muslimah*/ working *Muslimah* to be a multi-tasker. Irrespective of their organisational affiliation many Mappila families prefer an educated girl or a working girl who *also* cooks well.

Pious young Mappila women think that the male exegetical tradition of Quran and *sunnah* [practices and tradition of Prophet Muhammad] underlying the *ulema*'s conception need critical exploration. These women seek instructions from scholars who are well trained in Islamic theology and doctrinal arguments, preferably those scholars who have pursued extensive research in Islamic theology from renowned Islamic universities. Their apprehension of the scholarly interpretation of women's rights in Islam, along with their engagement in the public sphere, modern education, liberal discourses on gender and citizenship contribute to their ethical and practical dilemmas in following the elder Mappila women's corporeal notions. Rinaldo's concept of pious critical agency among reformist Muslim women activists of Indonesia is notable in this context owing to its conception of comprehending women's attempts at a critical interpretation of religious texts (Rinaldo, 2014: 829). The present study however focused on multiple forms of contestations among the young Mappila women born and brought up under both 'traditionalist' and 'reformist' organisations and the linear fashion of shaping their corporeal notions irrespective of their differences in organisational affiliation.

Concerning the responsibility of maintenance of the family in Islam, during the Clubhouse conversations on *Nikah, Mahr and Nafaqa*, the moderator stated: '*Nafaqa* means a man has to provide his wife not only financial support but also a servant.' Quoting *Fathhul Mueen*[15], he continues 'a mother is insisted to feed the baby for only nine days, after that a lady should be allotted to feed the baby'. By sharing an inspiring article titled 'Women in the family: Some observations of the *Fiqh*'[16] by one of the young religious scholars [graduated from one of the important Islamic colleges in Kerala] in the WhatsApp group, the young Mappila women discuss the duties of a husband. The author refers to Imam Kasaani belonging to Hanafi[17] school of Islamic jurisprudence in the book *'Al-Badaai'* to advance the position on household chores and says:

> If a woman finds it difficult to cook, her husband must provide her cooked meals. Women's only obligation is to fulfil her husbands' sexual needs. Islamic *Fiqh* has several such teachings. No explicit *sharia* rule mandates household chores for women.

These young women orient their notions of individual freedom and justice towards the Islamic concept of the interdependence of men and women in family life. Mutual understanding and respect are deemed crucial by the young Mappila women to ensure peaceful coexistence within the family. Naja, mother of two kids and holds a doctoral degree in social sciences, explained:

> I don't believe in the general equation that a mother is solely responsible for taking care of the baby, but if husband is the only earning member [as I am still looking for jobs] I would spend more time to take care of the children and household chores.

Naja's narrative reflects the equal responsibility of parents towards child-rearing, hers is not perceived as a stubborn position grounded in the desire for individual freedom, but a stance that imbues mutual accountability. Most of

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[15] A *Fiqh* textbook belonging to Shafi school of Islamic jurisprudence written by a Malayali *alim*/ religious scholar.
[16] https://campusalive.net/fiqh-and-muslim-women/
[17] There are four major schools of Islamic thought namely *Shafi, Maliki, Hanafi* and *Hambali* each associated with the names of the scholarly leaders of the respective schools.

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the young women in this study are working and their conception of family life fits in well with their male partners having the willingness to unlearn habits and share the familial responsibilities within the rigidities of a patriarchal society. The juxtaposition between a more liberal sense of gender equality and the conception of harmonious interdependence in Islamic family life are addressed in the article 'Women in the family: Some observations of the *Fiqh*' by contextualising the different social order envisaged by Islam. The author was keen to observe that:

> In a society like ours in India, where the Islamic social order doesn't exist, the separate *Fiqh* rules for men and women are misconstrued as discriminatory. As men have more familial duties than women, women have a lower share in inheritance because she is not required to provide for the family. Even if she earns, she can spend as she wishes. Therefore, the thirty-fourth verse of the fourth chapter, which says Allah has given more powers to men over women, is about men's duty to support the family. Rather than obsessing over *Fiqh* rules, men and women should act with mutual understanding.

The article pinpoints that if women are doing household chores which are not her prescribed duties, she should be given enough dignity and respect in the family. Household responsibilities should be shared if both partners are working.

With respect to the marital relations and domesticity, here I aim to understand how young Mappila women negotiate social expectations around the 'good *Muslimah*'. Nubla shared her understanding of Islam's position on the residence of partners after marriage. She said:

> I understand that Islam prefers the bride and the groom to move to a separate home. In Islamic history, we can never see a woman being divorced for failing to look after her husband's family. Both partners have a responsibility to each other and their own parents. As a result of cultural accommodation, Muslims here have accepted patriarchal norms.

Nubla's explanations indicate the speeches of western religious scholars like Mufthi Menak and Nuhman Ali Khan regarding family life. In his speech on joint family system where the bride lives with the in-laws, Mufthi Menak said[18]:

> It's permissible only on the conditions that the women's modesty and respect is ensured and *hijab* rules are not disregarded. In Islam, a man has no right to order his daughter-in-law around as if she were an unpaid maid. Respecting each other is unity in Islam rather than sharing a roof.

This statement of Nubla reflects some delving of young Mappila women in their negotiation with the rigidities of the patriarchal social order. Their inspiration for the same emerges from their pious conviction about justice in Islam, which are rooted in their optimism in the *rahmath* [mercy] of Allah.

In short, the active discussions held among these young Mappila women on marriage, *mahr,* duties and rights of the partners and domesticity admonish the need to engage with the canonical sources of Islamic tradition in shaping their discord with the patriarchal structure. *Ulema*'s perception of the ideal *Muslimah* being lenient to patriarchal insecurities remains rather repugnant to young Mappila women, who find their inspiration from an Islam which respects and ensures the dignity of women.

In the following section, I attempt to draw attention to young Mappila women's notion of marital sexuality distinct from the *ulema*'s teachings. Given the public discourse which accentuates issues over Muslim women's sexuality, polygamy remains the primary subject matter of concern. Observing one of the discussions around polygamy in the WhatsApp group of young Mappila women, we can find differing arguments around polygamy in Islam and in the Mappila community specifically. Neila's [aged 27, a teacher] remarks reflect a critical analysis of the practice of polygamy in the Mappila community. She said:

> One often hears the argument that Arab men have three or four wives. How can we compare us with Arabs who have separate houses for each wife, provide maids and support each of their children, and spend anything for their wives? Many monogamous men here don't provide maintenance. These are two extremes.

Saja added:

> Unlike our women, Arab women don't devote their entire lives for their husbands and children. And for many other reasons, they have no issues with polygamy.

And Shahma (aged 34, working as a doctor) responded:

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[18] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S5tKkkjSrvE

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> In India, pogroms and sectarian violence have rendered many Muslims widows. Well-off Muslim men should marry such women by providing *mahr*... If a husband doesn't provide maintenance, his wife can divorce him and seek compensation. Our *mahal* system got weakened because of undue deference to the government set-up. We had a history of *qazis* who were women-friendly. Can we imagine these things today?

Nasha [aged 33, working as an Assistant Professor] said:

> And women who raise these issues are branded as impatient and 'liberal feminists'.

These exchanges reveal the debate and negotiation on online space, formed out of the informal networks that try to resolve the practical issues of women's everyday life in the community. The pious young Mappila women challenge the *ulema*'s conventional notions that overlook the validity and the conditions of traditional polygamy in Islam. They believe that a provision granted to ensure the protection and justice towards the disadvantaged women in the community should not be misused for fulfilling men's sexual desires. In response to a similar discussion on the importance of mahr and women's rights in Islam held in a WhatsApp group including both Malayali Muslim men and women, Siraj, a journalist commented:

> The question of whether women should demand *mahr* or not arises from the modern, colonial/Indian elite concept of monogamy. Polygamy is a very normal condition of Islamic marriages and family life. The real significance of *mahr* is that men wanting to marry more than one woman will realise its value because he has to give *mahr* again.

The term 'men wanting to marry more than one' in Siraj's words clearly reveals his preference for polygamy, which arguably ignores the serious responsibility laid down by the same. Over the last few years, polygamy continues to be a topic of heated debate in this group between young Mappila men and women where men favouring polygamy in association with male lust are strongly criticised. Some common members in two WhatsApp groups favour the women's group to hone their arguments because the WhatsApp groups have similar characteristics in terms of the topics discussed and the socio-cultural profile of the members in terms of their academic atmosphere and social life. The skills and strength developed within exclusively female spaces among Arab Muslims has been very much part of Leila Ahmed's study on Western ethnocentrism and *harems*. Ahmed attempts to unsettle the Western perception of subservient Arabian women by highlighting the homosocial space of females in *harems* where the institutional power of men is criticised and independent thoughts are cherished (Ahmed, 1982: 531). Hence, women's collective concerns about male control mean that a separate realm of discussing everyday issues within these informal networks have shaped a particular kind of feminist consciousness among these young Mappila women, enabling them to critique the patriarchal structure of the community.

As a response to my queries to participants about female sexuality in Islam, Nawal [aged 29, a housewife], quotes a popular *hadith* by the *ulema* saying that 'Angels will curse a woman who refuse to satisfy her husband's sexual desires'. This hadith is used as a common reference to enhancing the expectations around a sexually submissive wife. Nawal said:

> After marriage, I had read a book on married life written by a leader of our organisation. A section on sexual relations refers to this *hadith*. I found it very problematic. How can God curse us for that reason?

Nawal's concern revolves around the notion of the sexual obligation of a wife towards her husband, ignoring the knowledge and viewpoint of the wife regarding sex. As an individual with little prior knowledge about sexual relations, she could confide her concerns in her compassionate fiancé, Nawal found it difficult to comprehend a sense of justice in the *ulema*'s preaching of sexuality, as if her opinion over her body and mind was deemed insignificant. Examining such contestations among contemporary Muslims regarding sex and gender questions in the exegetical tradition of Islamic jurisprudence, Kecia Ali notes that though classical Islamic texts underscore the importance of women's sexual gratification, the association of 'good mother' with 'good woman' emphasises the perceived duty of wives to be available for their husbands' sexual gratification. Women's sexual rights in Islam did not enjoy adequate attention from the majority of the scholars (Ali, 2006).

Comprehending the difference between the ways in which men and women takes in sexual expression, arousal and satisfaction, the young Mappila women express that they have communicated their priorities and concerns effectively to their partners. Their male partners are compassionate enough to provide ample time and make conscious efforts for their wives to achieve sexual satisfaction. Some of my interlocutors are very enthusiastic sexual partners along with their husbands. In Nuha's words,

> We used to share very wildest sexual fantasies by attempting different positions, and I am happy in it. It helps us to become closer and able to satisfy each other.

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This narrative highlights the emotionality and intensity in female desire among the young Mappila women. Despite the repressive silence bounding female sexuality among the elder Mappila women, these women are willing to speak about desire, and discuss better ways of engaging with increasing satisfaction. Their discussions through the online platforms [including women's informal and online networks] enabled them to talk frankly about sexuality where the social stigma does not act as a barrier. They carefully confine themselves to the Islamic value of *adab* [good manners] which insists any form of vulgar discussions on sexuality is deemed unacceptable unless aimed at seeking medical help or knowledge. According to a *hadith* narrated in *Muslim* 'On the day of judgement, the lowest person in the sight of God will be the man who is intimate with his wife and then broadcasts her secrets'. The mutual respect and Islamic values of *mavaddath* [affection] and *rahmath* [mercy] between the couples also binds them to the Islamic standards of *adab* in their discussions on intimacy.

It was Shahma who shared a Facebook post[19] of one of the 'reformist' leaders from Kerala, regarding the prophetic teachings on sexuality in Islam. The article starts with the warning that men should not be selfish in fulfilling sexual pleasures without satisfying his wife.

> There are many defenders of this kind of *hadith,* for whom *deen* [religion] is purely a male affair. When a woman complained to the Prophet that she had been forced by her father to marry a person, he said no father had the right to do so. She said she had cited the incident to dissuade other men.

The author cites two women who complained to the Prophet that their husbands refused to have sex with them. It was the common Arabian practice of *lihar,* which means staying away from one's wife after declaring her to be 'like one's mother'. The author says that the Quran intervened in favour of the woman. The first three verses of the chapter '*Al Mujadila*' says that God heard the complaint and that the practice is despicable. The author concludes that womenfolk during the Prophet's time were bold enough to complain and asserted their sexual rights. He then asks us how many women would dare to complain here. In a nutshell, while polygamy is widely perceived as the marker of oppression and being a recurrent theme of *ulema*'s teachings, young Mappila women trace its Islamic roots in order to understand the notions of justice and protection within the Islamic family system. Their perceptions of fulfilling sexual needs within marital tie are equally applicable to men and women and seems to be contradictory with the male sexual mastery over women in the *ulema* discourse.

Finally, focusing on young Mappila women's perceptions and experiences of motherhood, writings of young Mappila women can be analysed. Writing articles in magazines of general interest or specifically in Muslim magazines owned by the different Islamic organisations remains another prospective mode of debate by these women within the patriarchal norms of the community. An article— 'The First Experiences of Motherhood'[20], written by a psychiatric social worker—in a 'traditionalist' Muslim organisation's magazine enlightens the readers about the mental support that husbands should provide in pregnancy and motherhood. She also spotlights post-partum mood disorder and depression. The article is notable for its criticism of how elderly women have a habit of making light of new mothers' concerns. They normalise labour pain and comment on the quality and quantity of new mothers' breast milk, perhaps unaware of the psychological effects of their words. She continues by narrating the case of Prophet: 'I wonder how our society would have responded if Amina lived among us because she had Haleema to breastfeed her son, the Prophet.' She quotes the words of Maryam who is the mother of Prophet Eesa when explaining the pain of delivery that 'if she could have died before her delivery' in the chapter 'Maryam' in Quran in order to make people recognise the hardships of labour. The articles reflect that the young Mappila women's perceptions of motherhood do not fit themselves into the category of 'good mother'. As most of these young women are either working or are students, they seek suggestions from the like-minded friends in their informal networks to embrace a motherhood which values their healthy mental state along with physical condition for the proper mental development of their babies, rather than listening to their elders, perhaps.

The pious young Mappila women discern motherhood as a stage of multiple emotions, struggles, pains, sacrifices and happiness which should not be taken for granted. They understand that the idealisation of motherhood and the ideal concept of self which deny women's needs should be dismantled, considering the Prophet's life and time as a tool of analysis for the same. The performative aspect of this conception of motherhood lies in their attempts to train their partners significantly in mutually responsible parental care work. This is obvious in the words of Afsa [aged 30, working as a behaviour technician] who has twin daughters:

> I don't believe that caring for children is a purely a mother's job. Usually, I make husband do things so that I can put my health—both physical and mental—first. So, I can look after my kids with family support.

[19] https://www.facebook.com/100001660089139/posts/pfbid0W8PsexYtJ8HU55qfHsb9ELxwZrVJtqaUK5gqeQt3RFSVH5mFuhephbbDr1ugBihPl/

[20] https://pravasirisala.com/archives/688

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Significant paternal parental involvement is associated with better maternal mental satisfaction in life (Mallette *et al.*, 2020: 1) and with lower symptoms of maternal depression (Maselko *et al.*, 2019: 789).

Often tagged with a pejorative label of being a 'feminist' or being unfit to the category of a 'good *Muslimah*' within the community, these young women find it a tiresome task to converse with the *ulema* or to convince their elders about the need to revisit conventional notions of Muslim femininity. Any instances of outspoken remarks against *ulema*'s teachings by women in the community would be perceived generally as marked arrogance. Thus, they advance their negotiating strategies conceivably by attempts of making their partners learn and unlearn new and habitual ways respectively in their everyday life. They deliberately attempt to wane the association of 'good *Muslimah'* with the notions of a good wife and a good mother within the community. They hone their contestations through intellectual engagements in light of the evidence from Islamic tradition characterised by cultivation of an Islamic ethos that significantly differs from traditional patriarchal conceptions of *ulema* around female corporeality.

CONCLUSION

Revisiting the authoritative position of *ulema* in shaping the notions of female corporeality, the conception of an ethical self and piety among the elderly Mappila women hinges on respectful compliance with *ulema*'s preaching of the behavioural qualities of a 'good *Muslimah'*. The Islamic ethical sources in the Mappila community share many of the characteristics of the popular Islamic sources used by the participants of the mosque movement in Egypt, in which their pedagogy was grounded in an idea of the practical conduct of virtuous life of Muslim women (Mahmood, 2005: 80). While the Islamic manuals circulated among the participants of mosque movements had a common nature that presented the commonly acceptable opinions of four schools of thought *namely shafi, maliki, hanfi and hambali* (Mahmood, 2005), in the Mappila community the Islamic ethical materials produced by each Islamic organisations separately reflects the respective single sectarian ideology. However, the pertinence of shared household chores and care work in the construction of Mappila femininity is obvious across the ideological differences.

Most of the pious young Mappila women in this study had grown up conforming to any one of the major Islamic organisations namely Sunnis, Mujahid and Jamat-e-Islami in Kerala. However, realising the essentially identical nature of *ulema*'s discourses on the notion of a 'good *Muslimah'*, they focus on the deliberative aspect of discourses that have opened up more possibilities of argumentation, contestation and cross-checking references from Islamic tradition in their pursuit of seeking justice for a dignified and pious living. Arendt (1958) conceives these deliberative practices as forging the conditions of their collective living through the exercise of their agency which also provides space for communal reflexivity. The role of intellectual reforms within the community in terms of defending the status of Muslim women was notable in its encounter with the Western critique of Islam. The engagements of Muslim women with modernity have been in a way where they discuss and debate with it without compromising their spirituality, redefining the community and themselves by constantly renegotiating with tradition, without negating it. Thus, these pious young Mappila women are primarily driven by the negotiations of Muslim women in Kerala for their agency and sense of belonging to a larger social system who assured their strong presence in 'reformist' dialogues (Sherin, 2021: 110).

This study observes that this shift is made possible for certain kinds of women through acquisition of a universal modern education, easy accessibility to religious literatures and the advent of new technologies. Being raised in an age of public literacy, technology, mass media and being active social media users, the digital space appropriated by them has enabled them to seek theological concepts and doctrinal arguments from Islamic traditions which was once purely a male realm. The digital space where these women effectively shape their contestations out of the solidarity gained through shared experiences of corporeality along with the deliberation of Islamic discourses indeed blurs the organisational boundaries of femininity.[21]

The study also observes that calling upon the Islamic tradition that illuminates the possibilities of affective marital relations, the right to choose their partners, the right to demand *mahr*, the right for peaceful coexistence with their partners, the right to a satisfactory sexual life and the importance of ensuring healthy mental state during motherhood are negotiated by the young Mappila women within the overall patriarchal structure of the community.

[21] Here, the contestations of the young Mappila women blur organisational boundaries. Organisational boundaries mean that expected feminine behaviour and ways of understanding women's agency among the women belonging to each Islamic organisations namely *Sunni, Jamath-e-Islami* and *Mujahid* are distinct among the community. These differences are shaped by the teachings of respective *ulema* belonging to different organisations. For e.g., Sunni women find it best to pray at home and do not attend Friday prayers in mosques; however, women belonging to *Mujahid* and *Jamath-e-Islami* consider attending Friday prayers as a virtuous deed. Women of *Jamath-e-Islami* find it protesting and attending rallies for social cause as part of their pious being, but women of Mujahid and Sunni do not consider it as good. These organisational boundaries are visible among Mappila Muslim life.

Mahmood suggests that the previously male-defined spheres are being occupied by the women asserting their presence with new forms of conditions and interpretations around the discourses that have subordinated the women historically (Mahmood, 2005: 5). The exchanges and arguments around exegetical traditions signify that founding texts serve as landmarks, but are contested, in the current conversations. Indeed, tradition can contain rupture, growth, splitting, reorientation and recuperation (Asad, 2009). Distinct from the elder Mappila women, for young Mappila women, piety is an attribute of experiencing closeness to the one God; extending the possibility of conversation between the God and their inner minds; a manner of being that necessarily invokes optimism in the God who guarantees their rights, dignity and respect entailed by Islamic tradition.

Young Mappila women and their particular way of embracing their religion also complicates the liberal discourse on gender, agency and the popular associations of social conservatism and women subjugation. Mahmood's re-evaluation of the concept of agency bolsters our potential for an informed analysis of the young Mappila women's distinct perception of the link between corporeality, femininity and Islam in challenging the conventional norms, while liberal perspectives fail to accommodate their consensual submission to Allah. This form of agency can be comprehended only within the structures and discourses of subordination that enable the conditions for its execution. Agentival capacity thus persists not only in the acts of defying norms but also in inhabiting the norms (Mahmood, 2005: 15). Alternatively, they include men in their discussions and debates on redressing or re-examining the conventional notions of corporeality through the social media that further contributes to smoothen the transformation of the community. Both younger and elder Mappila women's corporeal lives are informed by an Islamic tradition which Asad observes as a discursive tradition that associates the cultivation of moral selves in varying ways, exerting influences over populations or resisting to such influences and generating appropriate knowledges (Asad, 2009: 11). Following Asad's theoretical lens, heterogeneity in the traditional practices of Muslims in different places, times and populations, reflects varying Islamic reasoning that different historic and social conditions can or cannot sustain (Asad, 2009: 23). Hence, these young Mappila women's contestations have opened up the possibilities of representing their social concerns over their familial roles that can stimulate larger questions of belongingness and citizenship (Contractor, 2021: 639), transcending the subjectivity of victimhood of Muslim women in the current geo-political scenario.

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