

B. S. Sherin, *Gendering Minorities: Muslim Women and the Politics of Modernity*. Orient BlackSwan, 2021, 240 pages, ₹615 (Hardbound). ISBN: 978-93-5287-669-3.

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Gendering Minorities by B. S. Sherin highlights how the present frames of feminism do not allow us to understand the lifeworlds of women from heterogenous communities. Her work is based on an in-depth

exploration of women and Islam in Kerala from the historical past to the present. She highlights time, geography and the multiple layers of class, caste and ethnicity that come together in complex ways to shape the identity of Muslim women. Foregrounding this complexity of heterogeneous identities, Sherin argues that women demonstrate multiple forms of 'capacity of action' and agency within the structure of religion at different junctures in the history of Kerala.

The book is divided into three chapters. The introduction highlights the ways in which Muslim women have been implicated in the modernity project in India and the uneasy relationship between feminism and the Muslim women's question. Chapter 1 focuses on pre-modern Muslim women in the erstwhile territories of Travancore, Kochi and Malabar and their role in the rise and spread of Islam. Sherin particularly focuses on histories of conversion to Islam in the context of Kerala, highlighting their importance in shaping collective memory and identity. For example, she draws attention to how short-term *mu'ta* marriages in their multiple manifestations laid the foundation of Islam in Kerala, arguing that this new community of Islam was 'not a hybrid between Islam and Hinduism but a dynamic restructuring of categories' (p. 43). She questions conversion histories that oscillate between assimilation and forcible change to highlight how matriliney and a women-centric family structure evolved from the alliances between Arabs and native women which were later institutionalised as *sambandhams* of the Nambutiris (p. 47). She also highlights how the tombs of matriarchs are sites of subaltern counter-resistance in Kerala. For example, Sherin discusses Beema Palli (Mosque of Beema Beevi), a tomb of a matriarch renowned for its miraculous powers, which is not held in reverence by mainstream male-centric Islam, not from a position of monotheistic rejection of tomb worship, but because it symbolises the presence of women leaders and the subaltern counter-resistance led by women spiritual heads (p. 81).

Chapter 2 focuses on the participation of Muslim women in early 20th-century reform movements in Kerala, visibilising the importance of the contributions of Muslim women to the reform efforts. Sherin foregrounds this discussion by highlighting an inherent contradiction in mainstream nationalistic accounts of reform movements in Kerala which have tactically incorporated such movements among other communities, such as caste assertion by Ezhavas as nationalist but neglected Muslim reform movements. Sherin argues that the prejudiced notion of Islam as anti-women and anti-modern plays an important part in this exclusion of Muslim reform movements. She points out that from 1910 onwards there

was dynamic mobilisation to modernise the community through education, writing and publishing. Focusing on the writings of Muslim women, the author highlights how they aimed to improve the status of women within the norms of religion. A range of women's writings in magazines and periodicals illustrating how they sought to confront the colonial critique of Islam's treatment of women by drawing on mundane arenas (p. 115) vis-à-vis men who drew from Islamist intellectual tradition are also examined. Sherin reiterates that in this phase too we see Muslim women participating in the reform movement, discussing social and economic progress without compromising on the norms of community and religion. She argues that Muslim women attempted to 'accommodate the newly defined cultural space, redefining and internalizing modernity integrated with the spiritual strength of Islam, which is usually constructed as an antithesis to modernity' (p. 127). Thus, women consciously negotiated both tradition and modernity reflecting political agency.

In Chapter 3, Sherin focuses on the cultural representation of Muslim women in Kerala. She highlights how the Left and feminist narratives in Kerala often produce similar essentialist characterisations of Muslim backwardness and patriarchy as right-wing discourses which emphasise women's oppression in Islam, leading to Muslim alienation. As a case in point, she offers a critical reading of Khadija Mumtaz's successful novel *Barsa*, highlighting how the novel presents a picture which upholds the common prejudices about Islam, and the lives of Muslim men and women. Sherin problematises the way feminist discourse conceptualises the agency of Muslim women in the binaries of being progressive and anti-religion or religious and therefore oppressed. She argues that this binary is pervasive in framing of feminist positions and definitive norms of modernity which do not allow us to understand the agency of Muslim women, who engage in questions of gender equality while actively practicing Islam.

Sherin's work makes a strong argument for rethinking the existing frames in which we look at Muslim women. She shows how a mere acknowledgement of intersectional identities does not provide an epistemic framework to understand the complexity of the everyday lives of Muslim women in Kerala—a minority-gendered subject in a secular nation marked by heterogeneities of caste, class, ethnicity and region. She painstakingly weaves together historical narratives, archival material, oral histories and little magazines to demonstrate how the agency of

Muslim women was constituted at different historical junctures. All through, she critiques and lays bare how these articulations of agency have been invisibilised and obscured in feminist and nationalist discourses on account of applying the lens (and assumptions) of secular modernity with little interrogation or contestation. What left me wanting after the incisive dissection was the question that Sherin begins with—what would constitute an epistemic frame for Muslim women that does not produce reified characterisations. Sherin's work deserves credit for taking this debate forward. The book would interest scholars of history, gender studies, Islamic studies and South Asian studies.

Hem Borker

*Department of Social Work,
Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, India
E-mail: hemborker@gmail.com*