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Attire as Agency: How Shifts in Dress Codes Reflect Social Change and Transformation with Special Reference to Kerala

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Introduction

Clothing has long constituted a fundamental aspect of human society, functioning not only as protection from environmental conditions but also a potent symbol of cultural identity and social distinction. Across diverse civilizations, garments have expressed societal hierarchies, collective values, and evolving moral codes. In modern socio-political contexts, clothing transcends its utilitarian role, emerging as a medium for the articulation of individuality, resistance, and transformation. The dress conventions embraced by communities frequently mirror broader social dynamics, signaling changing perceptions of gender, class, religion and modernity.

The article titled "Attire as agency: How dress code shifts reflect social change in Kerala" investigates the socio-cultural functions of clothing as a site of negotiation and assertion within Kerala's historical landscape. Drawing from interdisciplinary perspectives offered by historians and social theorists, with a particular focus on Kerala, the study analyses how transformation in dress intersected with pivotal social movements, reform initiatives, and identity-based politics in the region. Employing content analysis as its principal methodological framework, the research examines historical documents and literary sources that trace changes in clothing practices across practices and time periods. Through this analytical approach, the study positions clothing as an active participant in social processes rather than a passive cultural object, demonstrating how sartorial practices in Kerala have both influenced and reflected the region's trajectories of social transformation.

Dress, and Clothes in the World Setting

As mentioned in the introduction we try to invoke information from the existing stock of knowledge about clothing, dressing and the practices of dress wearing in the world including Kerala. Though not all regions are covered, only the regions that have

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gained academic attention due to the importance given to such practices presented. Without much introduction, let us move on to them.

A feature of nearly all human societies is the wearing of clothing or clothes, a category encompassing a wide variety of materials that cover the body. The primary purpose of clothing is functional, as a protection from the external elements, by providing a barrier between the skin and the environment, or keeping toxins away from the body and limiting the transmission of bacteria and viruses. However, outside of their purely functional purpose, clothes often play an important social and cultural role. Most societies develop norms about modesty, religious practices, behavioral appropriateness, social status, and even political affiliations in which clothes play an important role. Finally, clothing functions as a form of adornment and an expression of personal taste or style.

In most cultures, gender differentiation of clothing is considered appropriate for men and women. The differences are in styles, colors and fabrics. In Western societies, skirts, dresses and high-heeled shoes are usually seen as women's clothing, while neck-ties are usually seen as men's clothing. Trousers were once seen as exclusively male clothing, but are nowadays worn by both sexes. Male clothes are often more practical; that is, they can function well under a wide variety of situations, but a wider range of clothing styles is available for females. Males are typically allowed to bare their chests in a greater variety of public places. In some cultures, sumptuary laws regulate what men and women are required to wear[i].

Social Status

In some societies, clothing may be used to indicate rank or status. In ancient Rome, for example, only senators were permitted to wear garments dyed with Tyrian purple. In traditional Hawaiian society only high-ranking chiefs wear feather cloaks carved whale teeth. Under the Travancore Kingdom of Kerala, lower caste women had to pay a tax for the right to cover their upper body. In China, before the establishment of the republic, only the emperor could wear yellow. There are numerous examples throughout history of elaborate systems of sumptuary laws regulating what people could wear. In societies without such laws, which includes most modern societies, social status is instead signaled by the purchase of

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high cost, rare, or luxury items, the purchase of which are effectively limited to those with the wealth or status to acquire them. In addition, peer pressure may influence clothing choice[ii].

Religious clothing might be considered a special case of occupational clothing. Sometimes it is worn only during the performance of religious ceremonies. However, it may also be worn in everyday life as a marker for special religious status. For example, Jains wear unstitched cloth pieces when performing religious ceremonies. The unstitched cloth signifies unified and complete devotion to the task at hand, with no digression. Sikhs wear a turban as it is a part of their religion[iii].

Anthropological Perspective

The Clothing research has invoked fresh interest in Anthropology over the past two decades. The most noticeable trend in Anthropology is the preoccupation with agency, practice and performance that considers the dressed body as both subject in, and object of, dress practice. Dress has been analysed by and large as representing something else rather than something in its own right, although new efforts to re-engage materiality suggest that this approach is changing. Least work has been done on clothing production issues, though a few scholars examine the significance of dress in the context of the entire economic circuit and the unequal relationship between its actors.

Anthropology contributes to this growing body of research by giving new life to the study of clothing, which for a long time received only passing attention. Reigning theoretical paradigms are to be blamed for much of this neglect, by making dress as an accessory in symbolic, structural, or semiotic explanations. Since late 1980's, anthropologists have set a new research agenda on clothing as well as on placing the body surface at centre stage. Rather than defining culture in the initial sense of comprising the shreds and patches of a specifically bounded society, we now view culture procedurally as created through agency, practice and performance.[iv]

Clothing research is not a separately identifiable part of Anthropology; it shares the general reorientation of the discipline and incorporates many frameworks and concerns from other disciplines that also study the dressed body. Anthropologists

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are inspired by interdisciplinary scholarships on textile and dress, dress/costume history, design/art history and social economic history. Works on representation and textual analysis in cultural and media studies also provide stimulus. Compared to these disciplines, anthropology's hallmark has always been its holistic and contextual approach to the cross-cultural study of clothes and their symbolic and cultural meanings.

The questions which the new scholarship on clothing is addressing are shaped by the paradigmatic shift from social structure to agency and practice. Some works view dress as a set of competing discourses, linked to the operation of power, that construct the body and its presentation. Some works pursue historical questions about changes in dress practice brought about by a variety of encounters including colonialism and westernisation. Much of recent dress research explores the effects of globalisation. The research barely touches high-end clothing, despite the works on clothing designed for export and on the third-world middle-class efforts to construct class through consumer culture. Although many works focus on clothing consumption some scholars seek to link production and consumption when examining the significance of dress. Taken together, these new works demonstrate that fashion no longer is an exclusive property of the West. Contemporary fashion is created rapidly and in great volume from Latin America, Africa, and Asia, redefining both consumption and fashion itself in the process and propelling multidirectional style shifts across the globe[v].

While clothes are among our most personal possessions, they are also an important consumption good. The worldwide production, export and import circuits have altered the availability of apparel both on high streets in the west and in open-air urban markets anywhere in the world. This accessibility not only facilitated individualism but also pushed diversification of tastes in to numerous directions, turning local consumers into arbiters of stylistic innovations that are contributing to the breakdown of fashion's western hegemony[vi].

Across the world's major regions, clothing matters differently. Aside from examining the effects on dress practice of grand-scale processes such as colonisation and globalisation, regional scholarship differs in emphasis. Works from Latin America

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focus on “indigenous dress” and its transformation, African dress scholarship stresses the importance of dressing well and its significance for dress style dynamics in contemporary clothing encounters, and south Asian Scholarship examines the changing cultural importance of the *sari* in its interaction with other dress practices. East and Southeast Asian research explores multiple influences on local fashion and the export and import of “*Asian Chic*” styles, and clothing research in the Pacific poses new questions about the efficacy on material surfaces. The regionally specific preoccupations with dress are evident in dress Diasporas that domesticate elements of regional dress on global terms. Challenging us to shift perspective, the recent anthropological scholarship on dress outside of the West’s established fashion canon opens up new vistas for dress scholarship in general[vii]. Kerala scholarship examines how dressing is marginalising women's body through aestheticising the body.

By reviewing the pioneering works on dress by Joanne Eicher, Karen Tranberg Hansen (2000b) came to the point that this is the world of fashion dominated by the economic power of the West, even if the West no longer fully controls the creative inspirations. When arguing that anthropology's dress world is a world of fashion, she refers to fashion in several interactive senses including and extending beyond the West's fashion system: “Ethnic” dress is dynamic and changing, it even has facts. People everywhere want “the latest” by whatever changing definitions of local preference. Widespread desire “to move with fashion” and be “in style” now, (Hansen 2006), makes notions of fashion and style coverage on the dressed body, directing our attention to the combination of garments that construct identity on the surface, and in so doing, objectify it (Miller 1994). This is how dress becomes implicated in life projects, and why there is nothing quite like it in anthropology to enrich cross-cultural understanding[viii].

South Asian dress scholarship on the Indian subcontinent includes historically oriented work on negotiations over dress both by colonisers and the colonised and on the interplay of imperialism and nationalism in matters of dress choice. There is detailed work on historical changes in Indian dress in terms of regional, caste and class differences. Other works include attention to high fashion and contemporary style

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challenges. A growing body of work considers dress choices in the South Asian Diaspora and their effects on clothing consumption within India.

Tarlo (1996) offers rich insights into clothing choices over the past 100 years in India. Throughout the colonial period there were tensions between wearing cut and tailored dress and draped styles of clothing. More men than women adopted and then rejected different types of European clothing. Dress became a public issue in the 1920's when Gandhi promoted use of homemade cloth in an effort to restore both individual spirituality and public patriotism but achieved little success especially from the Indian elite and village women. Tarlo describes how members of different castes dealt with dress issues, including, "untouchables" who had the least to lose by changing dress[ix].

Banerjee & Miller (2003) take up discussion of the *sari* where Tarlo stopped, emphasising the complex personal and social relationships Indian women have with their clothes and examining individual life experience with *saris* from youth to adulthood into old age and hierarchical interactions between women and their maids. A special feature of this work is its attention to the *sari's* materiality and the consequences of this draped garment for the act of wearing it, especially the strategic possibilities of the *pallu*, the end of the sari that drapes over the shoulder. Acknowledging the popularity of the *salwar kamiz*, they suggest that the *sari's* dominant status as an expression of cultural identity may decline over the long term. Even then, they see the two dress forms as complementary in representing cotemporary Indian dress.

Nepal, which did not allow foreigners into the county until 1816 after the Anglo-Indian war, is an interesting contrast to India because it imported foreign goods without foreign interpreters. The elite eagerly embraced a selection of European goods, including clothes. During the transformation process from city-state to nation, these changing modes of elite distinction served to construct class. So does fashion today in the aspirations of middle-class Nepali consumers (Liechty 2003).

Question about cultural identity and belonging are salient in South Asian communities around the world. The *salwar kamiz* has become a widespread alternative to the *sari*

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among young East Asian women in the United Kingdom, Canada and the United states (Khan 1993m, Raghuram 2003) Asian women entrepreneurs have begun to manufacture *salwar kamiz* that now have become a common sight in public in the West (Bhachu 2004)[x].

Clothing research in Kerala

In Kerala, no much considerable research or studies have been carried out regarding the social substance of dress patterns. J. Devika (2007) however makes a noticeable attempt in this regard. It examines the process of how woman formed as an individual in Kerala context during the end of nineteenth and early of the twentieth Century. She tried to establish how dressing practices marginalised the body of women through two processes; first, by aestheticising the body to create a notion about the beauty of women, and then secondly, marginalises the body of women by dressing that body. According to her the body occupies an ambiguous position. The intriguing way in which the body's ambiguous placing haunts the project of fashioning woman is discussed. She draws up on the history of dress-reform in the late nineteenth and early twentieth Centuries in Kerala. During this period local society witnessed remarkable transformation in the modes and functions of dressing. An explication of the ambiguities in the advocacy of female dress reform suggests how the female body is re-inscribed as a source of pleasure. It also demonstrates how a non-reciprocal relation of seeing gets established between man as the one who sees and woman the one who is seen[xi].

In the nineteenth Century Kerala, dress and ornaments served to mark social differences. Anyone's caste could be identified at first glance by his /her dress. Besides different styles of dressing distinguished various groups linked together in a common network, dress and ornamentation also marked hierarchical distinction among people; groups lower in the *Janmabhedam* order were prohibited from using finer clothing, umbrellas and gold jewellery. Caste groups had to strictly maintain these signs any attempt from lower-caste to disregard such conventions were read as a challenge to Upper-caste authority. The well-known 'Breast-Cloth Struggle' (*Mulakkacha Samaram*) of the nineteenth century in South Trivancore involved not only the issue of feminine modesty but also the struggle against caste system.

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Wearing the upper cloth would signify the symbolic equality of lower class Channars with upper-caste Nairs. The Proclamation of 1865 allowed all classes to use the *kuppayam* (blouse), but not the upper-cloth. When the Public Works Department was setup in Travancore in 1863, the clothing of the upper body was a condition for the employment of women as labourers[xii]. In the nineteenth century Kingdom of Trivancore, dress code marked social distance and differences. At the same time, through newly emergent forces, qualities such as 'modesty', 'civilization', 'decency' or the lack of these were being 'read' in styles of dressing. Both these ways of reading dress are seen in the 'Breast-Cloth Struggle'.

The differentiating function of dress continued well into the twentieth Century with important additions. For example, adoption of new modes of dress was a factor which 'westernised people' could be identified from others. Wearing modern dress signified closes contact with modern institutions. Equally, those who closely interacted with such institutions were obliged to wear such clothes. So often, dress was seen to signify not only certain subjectivity, but also certain internality. Wearing white clothes by lower castes, therefore, could signify not only the rejection of the *Janmabhedam* order but also purity of mind[xiii].

The *purdah,* as veiling, was possibly influenced by Islamic custom, and the practice of covering the head and face is more prevalent in those parts of India believed to be more heavily influenced by Islam than others. But, in the sense of seclusion and the segregation of men and women, *purdah* predates the Islamic invasions of India. *Purdah* is the practice of preventing women from being seen by men. This takes two forms: physical segregation of the sexes, and the requirement for women to cover their bodies and conceal their form. *Purdah* exists in various forms in the Islamic world and among Hindu women in parts of India.

Physical segregation within a building can be done with walls, curtains, and screens. A woman's withdrawal into *purdah* restricts her personal, social and economic activities outside her home. The usual *purdah* garment worn is a *burqa*, which may

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or may not include a *yashmak*, a veil to conceal the face. The eyes may or may not be exposed[xiv].

Historians and social critics in Kerala who view the evolution in clothing and dress code went in tune with the social changes in Kerala history. Here are some viewpoints:

1. Historian P K Balakrishnan (1983), in his book *Jaathivyavasthayum, Kerala Charithravum*, gives detailed account of the social history of Kerala from the point of evolution of its agricultural villages. It deals separately with the birth of the agrarian economic structure, caste, royalty, ownership, language etc. Balakrishnan perceives that 1850–1890 is an important period in the social history of Kerala when substantial changes began in the caste society of Kerala.

   It examined the history afresh on the basis of first-hand evidence – the geographic evolution of land area, its resources, accounts of foreign travellers etc. According to Balakrishnan, in Kerala, the system of covering the whole body with clothes and standing behind a curtain while talking with men were largely related to Namboothiri women. Namboothiri women observed a sort purdah system and used to hide herself behind a Marakkuda while going out. He gives detailed account of Smaarthavicharam, adultery trial of Namboothiri women, where a Namboothiri Antharjanam is put on trial from behind a curtain that prevents her mingling even with family members.

   Balakrishnan refers about the dress practices of lower caste women as well. Many segments in the social strata of the Nineteenth Century Kerala were neither allowed nor bothered about the upper garments. As far as the dress code of Muslim women is concerened, *Jaathivyavasthayum, Kerala Charithravum* gives little details. However, the black long cloak gown which now being widely used by Muslim women was never mentioned in the book.

2. *Social Mobility In Kerala: Modernity And Identity In Conflict* by Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella (2000) deals with rich ethnography with an understanding of recent history and the issues surrounding upward social mobility, modernity and changing identities in Kerala's Ezhava community. The book examines how the

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Ezhavas, a relatively low-ranking caste in the sociologically untypical Kerala, have tried to improve their social situation. Being considered Untouchable a century ago, and were associated with impure pursuits such as toddy tapping and devil dancing, Ezhavas have sought to elevate their position in various fields like employment, religion, politics, migration, friendships - and have tried to assert their right to mobility, often in the face of opposition from their high-status Christians and Nairs.

In the nineteenth century, the Ezhava ranked near the bottom of the caste hierarchy and were forbidden by custom, enforced by physical force, to wear clothes above the waist, a mark of perpetual subordination before superiors. It examines the process of Ezhavas shedding their ethnic identity and acquiring modern identity which is more mobilistic. It describes the process of Ezhavas adopted Nair identity regarding culture, vocation and dress code in order to acquire higher social status. It also accounts the transformation Ezhava dress code from 19th century to 20th century.

3. *Mappila Muslims Of Kerala* by Miller.E.Roland (1976) analyses the Islamisation process of Mappila community in Kerala. He reveals that not only have they been neglected by the academic world and their neighbours—the Christians and the Hindus, but in a very real sense the Mappilas are yet to discover themselves. They have just begun to critically evaluate their relationship with the society around them, and to consider rethinking traditional Islamic tenets in terms of the contemporary situation. The confusion of the determined Mappila effort to become a progressive community and at the same time to remain true to orthodox Islam has made it difficult for observers to visualise the Mappilas and their condition.

4. *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies* is authored by the French cleric and scholar of Sanskrit J. A. Dubois (1966) who journeyed to and around India as a missionary in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Dubuis examines the Hindu rituals and lifestyles in Kerla between 1792 and 1823 in this work. This book also gives indications to the Hindu and Muslim dress code of that age. This book provides a fascinating and detailed description of everyday Hindu society and

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religion its manners, customs, institutions and ceremonies as existed in the early nineteenth century in south India. He adopted Indian clothing and lifestyle, and devoted himself to a long and thorough study of the life and character of the Hindus. Despite being a Christian missionary, Dubois was remarkably free from the theological prejudices of his day.

5. *William Logante Malabar Manual* by T V Krishnan (1985), is a concised version of the Malabar Manual compiled under the guidance of William Logan, the Collector of the erstwhile Malabar District during the British rule. The Manual gives details on the geographical features, religion, caste, dress code, customs of the people, language and literature. It also describes the attire of Muslim women in southwest coast of India called Malabar and the Lakshadweep islands. According to him, Muslim women freely moved in public spheres in the Malbar and Lakshadweep Islands and engaged in every activity, except seafaring. Malabar Manual chronicles the social life of 19th century Kerala,. It reports that Muslim women without any veil or Burqah were visible in public places in Kerala. According to Logan, aristocratic and rich Muslim women in Kerala weared Burqah while going out of homes. The then Malabar Special Commissioner, Mr. Greme's letter to the Company Governmnt were quoted in Malabar Manual in this regard.

6. *Engendering Individuals* by the Kerala schollar J Devika (2007) explores how, in early modern Malayalee society, the emerging notion of the individual, as distinct from an identity based on caste, region etc, was linked to the vision of a society based on gender differences. The process of individualizing thus also became a process of en-gendering. Social reform that claimed to set `free' people, to make them free individuals, in fact, started a process of individualization in the areas of education, home-making, parenting, and political work, that were seen to be gender specific. The book explores how social reform, notions of the individual, and the creation of a `gendered' individual came together in early modern Kerala.

   This lucid discussion of the concept of "gender" in feminist discourse deals with questions like the relationship between "gender" and "woman"; the difference

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between "women and development" and "gnder and development"; gender and patriarchy; and between gender, caste and class.

7. Kuttikkattu Purushotham Chon (2006) describes in his book, *Nayarude Aathimathavu Pulayi; Cherumi Eazhavarudeyum,* that a system of covering face with cloth was there among Saake or Ottamulachi community in Kerala. Every married Saake woman in Kerala revealed her face only in front her husband. Saake is community sect that belongs to Ezhava/ Thiyya clan. They were believers in Kodungallur Bhagavathi.

8. Kanippayyur Sankaran Namboothirippad (1963) describes about Ghosha of Namboothiri Antharjanams in his autobiographical book, *Ente Smaranakal* Volume1. A dress code that covers the entire body of woman was in practice among the Antharjanams in Kerala. When Namboothiri women go out of Illams, they ceremoniously carried out a "*Pothappum Kudayum Edukkal*", meaningly, taking long cloth and umbrella. Cloth covers her body and Kuda covers her face from public view. Kanippayyur says that while Christian women weared rolled clothes with fleets at backside around their waist to conceal the shape of buttocks, Nair and other Hindu women a special clothing of Onnara and Thattu for the purpose, the Muslim women wore plain clothing around waist.

9. P Bhaskaranunni (1988), in his book *Pathonpathaam Noottandile Keralam* points out that a man or woman in ancient Kerala could be easily identified by his or her dress code. Muslims in Kerala practiced a distinct dress code, considerably different from other religious groups. These differences were evident in clothing, ornaments and even hairstyle. Hindu men almost throughout the history, and Christians for many centuries maintained different forms of *Kuduma,* their hair on head in unique shapes to declare their caste or sect. But Muslim men, meanwhile, had to shave their hair head. While Hindus and Christians preferred clean shaving of face, Muslim men let mustache and beard to grow. While Christian women weared rolled clothes with fleets at backside around their waist to conceal the shape of buttocks, Nair and other Hindu women a special clothing of *Onnara* and *Thattu* for the purpose, the Muslim women wore plain clothing around waist.

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10. Thiruvangattu B Krishna Kurup (1962) describes in his book, *Kerala Charithram Parasuramanillode,* about social customs and systems in ancient Kerala. He states that excluding some religious rituals, Nairs and Siryan Christians had common signs of emotion, culture, dress code and language. While men belonging other religions rolled their Mundu towards right hand side, Muslim men rolled them towards left hand side for religious reasons. Apart from making wholes on lower ear to wear ear-rings, Muslim women took a number larger ear-rings on upper ears as well.

11. In his book, *Keralathinte Innalekal*, historian K N Ganesh (1990) gives great details of Channar Mutiny of Channar community to protect the rights underprevilleged women to cover breast. In Kerala, only women belonging to Brahmin community or Christian and Islam religions had rights to cover their breast with cloths.

12. Dr. Samuel Nellimukal (2003) analyses the transition of caste oriented social structure in 19th century in his work *Keralathile Samoohya Parivarthanam*. The book narrates the vocation, dress code, culture, education and wealth of 72 major caste groups and over 500 sub caste groups in Kerala.

13. *Keralam Arunooru Kollam Mumbu* by Velayadan Panikasseri (1962), the Malayalam translation of travelogues of Ibn Bathutha who visited Kerala in 14th century narrates the fashion of ornaments and clothing among Hindu and Muslim women in different parts of Kerala. Comparing to the dress code of Mulim women in the Muslim populated areas like Malai Island where even the Queen of the Emperor seen half naked, Bathutha says Kerala Muslim women maintained a common dress pattern. He reveals that people other than Muslims were bare-chested with no exemption even to the King. But Muslims, according to him, wore costly and expensive clothes.

Purdah studies in Kerala

The institution as well as dress code of *purdah* have always attracted the attention of scholars, feminists, activists as well as of creative writers in Kerala. Many active discussions and controversial debates on *purdah* are still there in Kerala. But yet, no much of serious studies and research works have been made on *purdah* in the Kerala context. Scholarship on *purdah* in Kerala primarily concentrates on the negative

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aspects of *purdah* as an enforced system that seclude the Muslim women, which curtails her rights and freedom.

Asha (2003) tried examine the treatment of *purdah* in the sub-continental novels in English. The multiple facets of the *purdah* are analysed in the light of some works written in English novels translated writings in Malayalam, Urdu and Bengali fictions. The overt manifestations of the *Purdah* and its metaphorical and symbolic ramifications such as the insistence on feminine modesty, the enslavement of the women to custom and tradition, the concepts of *izzat* (honour) and *sharam* (dishonour) and the denial/suppressing of female sexuality are analysed in her work through the texts of selected writers. She analyses the fictional representation of Indian Muslim women's life behind the *purdah* during the years of the Independence Struggle. By analyzing some selected novels, she pointed out that *purdah* in these novels becomes a symbol of the oppressive hold of tradition on a Muslim woman's life in a patriarchal/feudal society[xv].

The women novelists, by contrast, are sensitive to the doubts, questions, conflicts and turmoil in the minds of the young Muslim women who are caught between the forces of tradition and modernity. She tries to view the *purdah* as an image of the sexual repression in the Pakistani society as represented the novels of Salman Rushdie, Nadeem Aslam and Rukshana Ahamed. The domestication of women, the unequal power relations between the sexes, the exercise of patriarchal control over the female body and female sexual morality, the misinterpretation of the religious tenets and the consequent loss of freedom for women are some of the focal concerns in these novels.

By Considering the novels of Bapsi Sidhwa, Fahana Sheikh and Tehmina Durrani, the researcher analyses that the forms of Purdah in these novels range from the *Burqa*, the all-concealing cloak, to an ideology that exercices control over the Muslim woman's mobility, sexuality and labour. The theme of the *purdah* figures prominently in the novels of regional writers in the sub-continent. The strangle hold of tradition and convention, the smothering of a woman's desires in the name of safeguarding family honor, the suppression and exploitation of female sexuality and the women's own complicity in perpetuating the ideology of the *purdah* are some of the focal

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issues these writers address[xvi]. In Malayalam she examines only one fiction by Vaikom Mohammed Basheer, 'My grand Father had an Elephant'. Asha found that like female writers Basheer could also write in a female perspective by giving prominent concern to female experiences in contrast with the male writers who used *purdah* as a political metaphor or narratives in their veil discourses.

In an anthropological study in Kerala context, Mathhea Agnes (2004), who was a student of Amsterdam University, tried to seek the answer to the question as to whether the women contribute to their own submissive position. Agnes decided to study how this phenomenon of new veling is developed in the specific context of Kerala society. The purpose of his research was to understand how local, national and global forces influence the decision of young and educated Muslim women to dress differently and how this influences her movements in the public spaces.

First, he explains how the rise in *purdah* observance is connected with a new ideal religiosity, shaped through politics, education and an increasing contact with the Gulf. By examining the changing role of women in Kerala society, Agnes argued that the recent emphasis on *purdah* reveal underlying changes in social and heriarchial relationships due to this modern development. In third chapter he delves into the theoretical Concept of agency in relation to the family and community. Agnes pointed out that to understand how women can act as agents, we must pay attention to the limitations they face and the possibilities they have. Agnes described the importance of the family and community for the decision of the individual women and raise doubts about the autonomy of agency. The meaning-giving capacity reveal that the acceptance to dress in a certain way is by no means a passive process but instead must be seen as an act of agency[xvii].

Agnes concludes that dressing is never a neutral practice determined by taste or fashion. It is a means to manage and express identities. This is done both by the women themselves as by other social forms of authorities that assent control over the female body. The dress style of the individual woman reproduces social and normative values but also expresses individual ideas and desires and must therefore

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be regarded as a social act. Subsequently changes in dress style indicate changes in existing cultural ideas and shifts in social and hierarchical relationships.

Agnes sees *purdah* observance does not reflect traditionalism, but typifies the ideal modern Muslim woman instead. Many things discussed, gender relationships, safety and danger, social control and reputation, individuality and adjustment-are not confined to the Muslim community, but are important for other Malayalee women as well[xviii].

Much of these writings and discussions on *purdah* centers on the question of interpretation of the religio-social setting in which such practices gain meanings. This work is mainly focused on the Muslim community in Malabar. This community is far from monolithic; although *purdah* is an iconic influencing factor involved in the identity formation. For instance, for some women, the veil is indeed an indispensable practice and a means for both one's being and becoming religious. While some are self-conscious about the impact of their dress style, others never really questioned whether or not it was important to veil. And even while some are enabled by *purdah,* others accept this dress for relating themselves with the community, family and others.

Conclusion

This conclusion highlights the agency of clothing and dress in Kerala's social history, demonstrating that attire has been a critical site of of social negotiation, power dynamics, and cultural contestation. Through a critical examination of dress reform movements and their intersections with broader socio-economic transformations, this study reveals the performative potential of clothing in shaping social change. By analyzing the complex relationships between dress, power and identity, this research underscores the importance of understanding clothing as a technology of social change, rather than merely a reflection of cultural tradition. The study's analysis suggest that future research should prioritize nuanced analysis of the intersections between textile history, manufacturing units, beauty pageants, political economy, and feminist perspectives to further illuminate the ongoing significance of dress in shaping social relations and power dynamics in Kerala and Beyond.

End notes

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