Muslim Women in South India: Reading Selected Narratives of Sara Aboobacker

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Abstract

This paper explores the narratives of Sara Aboobacker (1936-), a prolific South Indian Muslim woman writer. In her thirty years of literary production, Aboobacker's narratives showcase female characters from the South Indian Muslim community and highlight the varied experiences and the multiple identities they possess in a multicultural society. This study relies on the term "Muslimwoman" coined by Miriam Cooke whereby she homogenises Muslim women all over the world. The study proposes that undifferentiating the female experiences of Muslim women as suggested by Cooke requires a more refined categorisation incorporating the heterogeneous identity of Muslim women especially in multicultural societies. The current reading attempts to address this concern with a two-part discussion of Aboobacker's narratives. The first part focuses on the three primary religious concepts of *talaq* or divorce, polygamy and *purdah*, and conveys that though Aboobacker's female characters are situated in a local environment, their concerns mirror some of the issues pertinent to Muslim women around the world. The second part problematises the gendered, inter-ethnic and inter-religious connections in Aboobacker's works through which she constructs the heterogeneous identity and experience of South Indian Muslim women parallel to the female issues of all downtrodden classes in a multicultural society like India. We contend that while Aboobacker's narratives provide us with an insight into the ways in which South Indian Muslim women navigate various pathways that demonstrate the magnitude of their challenges in integrating multiple identities, they should also be recognised for showcasing perennial, universal challenges relating to Muslim women's rights globally.

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Introduction

For the past few decades, there have been many debates in the political, cultural and academic quarters of the world regarding the works of Muslim women writers. One argument is that much of the 20th-century and later literature in Muslim societies does not deal directly with religion, but rather comes under the more fluid and easily categorisable rubrics of language, ethnicity and nation (Hermansen). Another argument is that studies of literature are often grouped according to their use of language or the national context of the author. In a report prepared by the Federal Research Division, Washington DC, titled "Women in Islamic Societies: A Selected Review of Social Scientific Literature," Offenhauer and Buchalter observe that more than half a billion of the women in the world are Muslims, but Western understanding of Muslim women remains unduly influenced by evidence from a single region focusing disproportionately on the Middle East and North Africa (1). This narrow range needs to be widened; we need to incorporate Muslim women from other parts of the world too in formulating our opinion on their condition.

Representation of Muslim women can be seen in works of fiction that are being produced across the world. Diana d'Almeide, a Boston University Librarian, published an index of Muslim women writers whose works have been translated into English. This impressive list comprises works of writers from over a dozen Muslim countries including Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria and United Arab Emirates. However, the list focuses on writers from the Middle East and Africa. What appears missing in the list is the names of Muslim women writers from South Asian countries such as India. Recent studies on Indian Muslim women writers focus on the double alienation of these writers from both the mainstream literary and social scenarios.

In a study of Indian Muslim women, Zoya Hasan and Ritu Menon suggest that "the literature on Indian women in general is characterized by three broad tendencies: it ignores Muslim women, considers their status a product of Personal Laws,[4] and assumes sameness in the status and forms of oppression, cross-community" (3). With some important exceptions, most investigations on Indian

[4] In the Indian constitution, laws related to family relations are specified as Personal Laws, which are governed by various religious principles. Due to their religious orientation, Personal Laws are often regarded as the root cause of gender discrimination. The claim for equal rights for women is usually framed as "religion versus women's right" (Herklotz 376). "The Muslim Personal Law (Shariat) Application Act or Act XXVI of 1937 was enacted by the British government in India, as a part of the Government of India Act, 1935" (Patel 45).

women take no notice of Muslim women. Such findings consider Muslim women's problems as products of Personal Law without considering their socio-economic status and gender. The studies that assume a commonality in the problems of women are unaware of the fact that the outcome of economic and social development processes has not been the same across communities and regions. In other words, most of the inquiries on Muslim women in India so far, with their overarching emphasis on Personal Laws and identity issues, have failed to address their concerns in relation to their particular socio-political or regional realities.

A number of South Indian writers' works have been translated from various South Indian regional languages into English, including the works of several Muslim women writers. Sara Aboobacker is notable in this context. Her works have been translated into many regional languages as well as English. This article focuses on Aboobacker as an example of a South Indian Muslim woman writer who articulates the realities of South Indian Muslim women. The scope of this article is restricted mainly to the following novels of Sara Aboobacker: *Chandragiriya Theeradalli* (1984; *Breaking Ties*, 2001), *Sahana* (*Tolerance*, 1985); *Vajragalu* (*Diamonds*, 1988); *Kadana Virama* (*A Stop to the Struggle*, 1991); *Suliyalli Sikkavaru* (*Caught in the Current*, 1994); *PravahaSuli* (*Flood-Current*, 1996) and *Tala Odedha Doniyali* (*In the Boat with a Broken Bottom*, 1997). However, her other writings, including translations of her works and speeches, as well as one of her personal interviews, have also been taken into consideration. Her writings, as this paper problematises, provide insights into the notion of "Muslimwoman" and the disparities that exist among Muslim women in her community.

The Deployment of "Muslimwoman" Identity in a Multilingual-Multicultural Ethnicity: Towards a South Indian Perspective

Today's literary world encompasses brilliant works by Muslim women writers who narrate varied female experiences, which highlight their resistance against the monolithic interpretation of Muslim femininity as static. They strategically deploy their religious-gender identity along with their ethnic-cultural identities to reflect their political consciousness in a multicultural society. Writers such as Margot Badran (1936-), Fatema Mernissi (1940-), Heideh Moghissi (1944-), Afsaneh Najambadi (1946-), Miriam Cook (1948-), Asma Barlas (1950-), Amina Wadud (1952-), Faegheh Shirazi (1952-), Shahla Sherkath (1956-), and many more, orient the readers towards a better understanding of the Muslim woman's role in society, particularly in a hybrid or multicultural society where Muslim women become part of a minority community (Boland 2014).

Miriam Cooke coined the term "Muslimwoman" to evoke a singular gender identity for all Muslim women, following the Afro-American scholar Sherman Jackson's use of the term "Blackamerican" which connects race and citizenship,

and the "womanist" theologian Joan Martin's "blackwoman" which links race and gender (Cooke 140). Such a generalisation becomes a potential tool of collective agency but it fragments Muslim femininity within the political and religious contexts around them and within the diversity of their own individual lives (Tasnim).

Homogenising the heterogeneous female experience under a single roof may need more refined categorisations incorporating the subaltern positions it takes in multicultural societies. A conceptual framework is necessary to assess the multiple identities of Muslim women. Examining Asra Nomani's self-narrative, *Standing Alone*, based on Slee's stages/generative themes of concerns and Islamic paradigm of Self, R. Roselind, Ruzy Suliza Hashim and Raihanah M.M. challenge the "much accepted assumptions of a monolithic Islam as typically static and traditional" (115). Their effort was to prove the insufficiency of available frameworks in capturing the rich and varied experiences of Muslim women across the world (105) and present a distinct analytical framework that could detail the author's "journey of self, formation of identities, and growth of consciousness" (105). This paper attempts to conceptualise the "Muslimwoman" identity along ethnic, communal and national lines and endeavours to codify the Muslim gendered depiction in the works of Sara Aboobacker, a writer whose narratives may offer compelling evidence of different realities for South Indian Muslim women.

Muslims in India are culturally, politically and linguistically diverse. Construction of a unique gendered religious identity as Cooke (2007) suggests, seems difficult here. Discussion of Muslim female identity in India would rather locate her as part of a secular nation, a multicultural society and a conventional religion. B.S. Sherin, in her doctoral thesis "The Labyrinth of Dissonance: Islam and Women in Kerala" discusses the layered existence of Muslim women in India being minority subjects within a secular nation, with the added complexity of gender inequalities. This further reflects the politics of inclusion and exclusion at various levels, complicating the multiplicity of "Muslimwoman" identity. As Sherin argues, "Modern interpretations of Muslim woman as the victim of her religion without considering the ethnic, cultural and geographical heterogeneity do not supplement in any way to an understanding of the inherent complexity of her identity" (26).

Aboobacker envisages a multi-faceted identity for South Indian Muslim woman who exemplifies this layered existence through all possible intersections of her gendered, cultural and national identities. She deploys her religious identity to critique the anarchies prevalent in the guise of religion. Simultaneously, she declares that the position of women is secondary in India irrespective of their caste and religion, thus generalising the gendered experience as an amalgam of religious, social and national identities ("Personal Interview"). The following section examines how Aboobacker integrates the intra-communal issues

particular to the South Indian Muslim community and the inter-communal issues pertaining to the global Muslim community, thus at once combining both local and global issues.

South Asian Muslim Women in Sara Aboobacker's Works

Partly as a response to growing Islamophobia, Muslim scholars[5] are increasingly directing their attention to the interpretation of the religious text of Islam (the Qur'an) and the Islamic law (Sharia). Asma Barlas in her book, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretation of The Qur'an*, details the need for such a rereading. She contends that hegemonic patriarchal norms derive not from Qur'anic teachings, but from attempts by Muslim exegetes and male commentators of the Qur'an to justify their actions (8). She invites academic examination of the "extra textual contexts" of the Holy Scripture and expresses her disappointment at the fundamentalist approach represented by a monolithic reading of Islam and Qur'an (xi).

Throughout her works, Aboobacker critiques the limitations of such monolithic interpretations of the Holy Scripture, as well as how they affect the people's lives. Her concerns dwell on various issues pertaining to the Indian Muslim women of South Asia including *talaq*, polygamy, *purdah* and dowry. While these issues have been debated in Arab-American literature, South Indian Muslim literature has not received similar critical focus. This neglect is probably due to the lack of attention previously given to South Indian Muslim writers in the canon of Muslim women writers. The current reading attempts to address this concern with a two-part discussion. The first part focuses on three primary religious concepts, namely *talaq* or divorce, polygamy and *purdah* – a word taken from the Urdu word *pardah* and used in India to mean veiling which leaves only the hands, feet and face of a woman uncovered (Osella, Caroline and Filippo Osella 241). This section argues that though Aboobacker's female characters are situated in the Indian context, their concerns mirror some of the issues pertinent to Muslim women across the world. The second part problematises the gendered, inter-ethnic and inter-religious connections in Aboobacker's works showcasing the innate concerns relevant to the South Indian context, thus integrating both intra- and inter-communal issues pertinent to Muslim women.

[5] In his book *The Future of Islam,* John L. Esposito postulates the emergence of Muslim scholars in the 21st century with refined explanations of Qur'anic verses, which promote a practical and concrete Islamic spirituality of empowerment.

Intersection of Gender, Religion and Ethnicity: Problematising *Talaq*, Polygamy and *Purdah* in Sara Aboobaker's Selected Works

(a) *Talaq*

Talaq or dissolution of marriage contract[6] has been detailed in the Qur'an. The Holy Scripture discourages *talaq* until both the spouses are willing to dissolve their marriage. The decree of "triple *talaq*" should be uttered over a period of three months, to ensure the physical and mental comfort of women. "The reason for making the waiting period obligatory is to ensure the achievement of the following: first, to give the spouses more time to reconsider their attitudes and resolve their differences; second, to determine whether or not the wife is pregnant, for if she is expecting a child there is always a good chance that the spouses might be willing to effect a reconciliation" (Jawad 78). Asma Barlas discusses in detail the different interpretations of the Quranic verses on divorce and surmises that "the Qur'an does not allow men to divorce wives freely or unilaterally, as they do in practice" (Barlas 196). In the general practice, most often the Qur'anic verses are misinterpreted to satisfy the male conceptualisation of social dominance. Aboobacker depicts such social follies where religion becomes a tool to privilege patriarchal dominance.

In her first novel *Chandragiriya Theeradalli* published in 1984 (*Breaking Ties,* 2001), Aboobacker critiques the social practice *of talaq*, which does not require the consent or even the presence of the wife. Further, she shows that *talaq* is often declared in a fit of anger or an impulsive moment. She extends her critique to the system of "one-day marriage." With the aid of a character named Khaji Sahib, a religious leader, Aboobacker emphasises the claim of Muslim women that the Qur'an ensures the rights of women.

> Khaji Sab: People have no sense. No one bothers to understand Qur'an properly. When we say that the husband has to utter *talaq* three times, it does not mean that he can say it all in one breath. He has to say it separately, in three months. That is the Qur'an's way of giving us another chance to think. We really have to think long and hard before we say it the third time. Only when the husband is convinced that he cannot live with his wife should he use this option. Until the end of these three months, they should live under the same roof. If they can come together even after the second *talaq*, the divorce is nullified and they can start afresh. But if one has to marry the same person again after the third *talaq*, the wife should be married to another and then should seek divorce from him because they are truly incompatible.

[6] In her book, *The Rights of Women in Islam* (1998), Haifaa A. Jawad explains the etymology of the word "talaq" which, according to her, originated from its Arabic verb "itlaq" which means to set loose or leave. She equates it with the English word "dissolution" and suggests that this word is more suitable to define "talaq" than the term "divorce" which simply means splitting from one's spouse.

> Nowhere does the Qur'an decree that the wife has to go through a one-day marriage to remarry the first husband. (*Breaking Ties* 76)

This lengthy monologue is the response of the religious leader Khaji Sahib (*Breaking Ties*) to Rashid's consent to re-marry his ex-wife. These lines shed light on the incongruence of actual religious laws and the laws commonly used in the name of religion. The Qur'anic verses 2:228, 2:229, 2:230, 2:231, 65:1 detail the Islamic rules concerned with divorce. Khaji Sahib's words reflect the teachings of the Qur'an. But his conclusion by the end of his preaching is more interesting. "However, majority of the pundits would consider a marriage nullified if the husband pronounces *talaq* three times" (76). Apart from all the Quranic laws, there exist certain laws within a society. If one wants to be a part of that society, then one has to follow those unwritten rules and regulations of the society. Rashid's outburst at the time is understandable: "all these senseless practices should be set on fire, confounded!" (76). But he fails to direct his anger further, as to do so would represent resistance against established socio-cultural norms. "Although the Quranic legislation on divorce aims at protecting women and allowing them to free themselves from the marital bond if it becomes necessary; in today's situation, there is a huge gap between the Divine principles and the actual practice" (Jawad 82). Aboobacker's aim is to portray how the religious ideologies are intertwined with social anarchies. She explains, "My intention is not to make corrections to the Qur'an" (*Breaking Ties* viii) but to show the follies in which it gets interpreted in a society where women are enslaved by the patriarchy. In the novel *Breaking Ties*, the protagonist, Nadira, protests against her *talaq*: "But what kind of law was this that the man who called himself 'husband' should pronounce *talaq* three times from wherever he was, and the marriage was null and void!" (49). Here Nadira's words reflect Aboobacker's thoughts.

In looking at the implications of legal systems for women, it is important not just to look at the substantive content of laws but also at the structure and culture of the legal system which may present contradictions to the status of women and their rights (Baden 7). V. Padma, in her book *Fiction as Window: A Critique of the Literary Cultural Ethos in India Since 1980s* (2009), places Aboobacker's *Breaking Ties* in the context of legal reforms of family and religious laws of minority communities and presents the fate of the protagonist as a direct offshoot of the government's decision not to implement any such reforms: "The background of the novel may be drawn from the debates over enacting a Uniform Civil Code" (Padma 17). Aboobacker critiques the fact that the predominant male orientations of the Indian legal system are endorsed in *Sharia* laws. In *Breaking Ties*, Rashid, the protagonist's husband, takes away their child without her consent. Nadira is helpless, as the father is the rightful guardian of his children and she has no legal rights over the child. Ayesha Rafiq in an article entitled "Child Custody in Classical Islamic Law and Laws of Contemporary Muslim

World" (2014), examines child custody laws in classical Islamic texts and contemporary Muslim practices. Examining various laws of *Sharia,* she affirms that:

> Islamic law lays down that as a general rule in initial years child should remain with the mother and a thorough study of Islamic legal literature shows that even if the child custody is contested by the father in the initial years when the child is unable to make a sound judgment, custody has been granted to the mother in majority of the cases. (Rafiq 270)

On the issue of various child custody laws across the world, Rafiq points to the Indian Judicial system where custody is governed by the Guardians and Wards Act 1890 which allows for the classical *Hanafi* position which takes the father as the guardian of the child "that is male to seven years and female till puberty" (Rafiq 276). The Muslim Women Protection Act 1986 (Protection of Rights on Divorce) states that the husband is obliged to maintain his wife only during the *iddat* period (the first three months after divorce). The responsibility of maintaining her after that falls on her parents, heir or relatives in that order (Caroll 366). Even in Hindu Law under the Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act, the father is the natural guardian of his legitimate child over five years. In case of conflict, custody of the child goes to the father (Kishwar 5-6). Aboobacker seems to bring in this similarity in the civil laws, where men gain absolute power over the helpless women.

In *Vajragalu* (1988), when Badruddin gives *talaq* to Nafisa, the protagonist, she has to go back to her parents' home without maintenance from her husband. In *Kadana Virama* (1991), the protagonist Nirmala, from a Hindu family, is abused by her husband for dowry, and he continues to threaten her with divorce. Aboobacker here asserts that women are deprived of legal reprieve irrespective of caste and religion. Unlike Nirmala, who ends her life as a form of protest against her husband's greed for dowry, Nafisa embraces *bhutha* (a condition of being haunted by the devil) as a form of resistance to her threatening husband. She steps out from the home and builds a house for herself and adopts a girl child abandoned by her family. Aboobacker carves new paths for her characters whereby they step out from socio-cultural expectations. These women do not wallow in self-pity. The novelist offers a positive model of strong Muslim women who can build and lead new lives for themselves and others. Explicating Islamic concept of *talaq* in the South Indian context, in her narratives Aboobacker exposes the apparent intersection of religion and culture which further emphasises the gender disparities in South India. Her female characters challenge such disparities by reclaiming their own position in society, hence demonstrating their multilayered identities connecting the Muslim women within and outside the South Indian context.

(b) Polygamy

The practice of polygamy in Islam continues to be one of the most controversial subjects concerning women and Islam. Regarding polygamy, while the Quran permits men to take up to four wives, it adds that a man should not practice polygamy unless he can be sure of treating his wives fairly (*Interpretation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur'an in the English Language* 4:3). In the Indian context, polygamy was practiced widely in the past irrespective of religion. The practice of "Sambandham"[7] prevailing among Brahmins and Nambutiris (two different castes) in pre-modern South India, is a perfect example of this. Thus, we can say that in the immediate cultural past polygamy was a cultural norm in the Indian context rather than a religious one. But currently, only Islam is criticised for this practice (Sherin 44).

In her narratives, Aboobacker constructs monogamy as the norm and polygamy as something backward. Through simple narrations located in village environments, she portrays how the man becomes the sole proprietor of his wife. In *Breaking Ties*, the protagonist's mother Fatimma passively submits to all the cruelties of Muhammed Khan, her husband. In the narrative, Fatimma is grateful to Muhammed Khan only because he does not impose a second wife on her. In the novel, the protagonist Nadira's belief in monogamy is the dominant cause of her anger against her father, husband and the *maulavi* or religious cleric who forces her into marrying a second time. Due to some personal disputes with her father, Nadira's husband pronounces the declaration of *talaq* three times on her. Later he realises his mistakes and is willing to re-marry her. However, as the *Sharia* on divorce states that the ex-husband cannot marry his former wife after declaring *talaq* three times, he can only remarry her after she has married another man. Nadira refuses to accept this edict to marry another man. This episode depicts the ignorance of the male characters about Islamic teachings on marriage. *Talaq* is not to be uttered whimsically as it could break the foundation of trust and acceptance between a couple.

Aboobacker appears to challenge this ignorance by positioning a strong female character who acts on the strength of her character rather than the expectations of her family and society. Investigating the concepts of *talaq* and polygamy in Islam and their incongruent practices in the Muslim community of South India, Aboobacker critiques the religious-cultural inclination of men towards a male fraternity. She challenges such male dominance by highlighting her strong female characters who negotiate with all their possible identities to remain steadfast in their own beliefs and actions.

[7] "Sambandhams" are institutionalised sexual relationships between Nair women and Nambutiri men, practiced in pre-modern South India.

(c) *Purdah*

Among the Muslim critics and writers, *purdah* has two facets – those who view it as an oppressive tool against women and those who view it as a liberating tool that assures an aura of respect for women in Islam. Aboobacker portrays *purdah* in a different mode. In a personal interview, Aboobacker expressed her aversion towards the donning of *purdah* among Muslim women. She also discussed the new social inclination among certain members of South Indian Muslim society who view the donning of purdah as a means to indicate modesty (Ayshath, "Personal Interview"). The influx of people from South India into the Middle East in search of jobs has influenced this rise in *purdah* as fashion,[8] imitating customs from the Middle East. A survey conducted among the people of Kerala, a South Indian State, entitled "Behind the Veil," throws light on this aspect of *purdah*. Most of the people who participated in the survey asserted that the recent boost in the *purdah* market is due to the fashion sense of South Indian Muslims who work in West Asia, "especially in Saudi Arabia" (Iype). The majority of Muslim women in South India, especially the emerging youth, view *purdah* as being more desirable than any other form of dress, as it is seen to elevate both their religious and social status.

In her work, Aboobacker outlines the beginning of this trend where *purdah* becomes the iconic tool to classify the modesty of Muslim women. In *Suliyalli Sikkavaru* (1994), when the character Mamooty, who belongs to a lower-class family, returns from Dubai with a lot of money, he presents his wife and mother with a veil each. Both the mother and wife are pleased to receive the gift. They quickly grab it from Mamooty and embrace it, for they have seen women from wealthy households wearing it. They start wearing it whenever they go to the market place and their neighbours foolishly begin to admire them. Here *purdah* elevates their social position and projects their identity as a woman and as a Muslim in the Indian context. Thus Aboobacker shows how *purdah* is used as a tool to measure social status and cultural elegance. By showcasing the transfer of cultural fashion from the Middle East to the Indian landscape, she has expanded the gendered religious concepts of *purdah* to something that also has relevance or significance within the realm of socio-cultural alliance.

Gendered, Inter-ethnic and Inter-Religious Connections in Selected works of Sara Aboobacker

Aboobacker constructs the identity and experiences of her Muslim characters as a parallel to the female issues of all downtrodden classes, thus combining gender

[8] In an article entitled "Muslim Style in South India," Caroline Osella and Filippo Osella extensively discuss contemporary veiling among South Indian Muslim women. They observe this new orientation of fashionable purdah as "logic of modesty and protection" indicating "a more developed consciousness towards Islam" (4). They also link this trend to global styles of Islamic "decent dress" (2) making *purdah* dress code for Muslim modesty.

identity along with the cultural and religious identities. This intention is evident in *Kadana Virama* (1991) specifically dealing with Hindu society. In *Kadana Virama*, which is Aboobacker's only novel about Hindu society, she criticises the dowry system, which is an upper caste Hindu custom but has become a practice among Muslims and in lower-caste marriages today. In Muslim marriage, a bride price (*Mehr*) is stipulated within the marriage contract and may be paid before or during marriage, or on divorce (Hoodfar). In verses 4:4, 4:25, 5:5, 33:50, 47:3, 60:10, the Qur'an advises men to pay *Mehr* to women whom they marry. However, in India, the practice of *Mehr* is a mere façade, and the dowry system, where women pay the men, is dominant in all marriages irrespective of caste and religion. This is the reason behind the troubled lives of Nirmala, the protagonist in *Kadana Virama* (1991) and Nasima, the protagonist in *Sahana* (1985), whose poverty makes them undesirable in the marriage market. However, both the characters fight for their rights and continue to live according to their wishes.

Nasima decides to keep Rosy, a lower caste Dalit girl, and dreams of a better future for her. Nafisa, towards the end of *Vajragalu*, moves out of the house and builds a house for herself in a corner of her brother's land. She decides to adopt a girl who was left alone in the streets by her family. Using these two characters, Aboobacker creates a cultural bond between Muslims and Dalits, a potential relationship which the author promotes in her essay *Muslim Samvedane Mattu Nanu*, in which she discusses how Muslims and Dalits face similar problems in India, suggesting the need for and importance of an alliance between the two groups.

Besides the intra-communal oppression which plagues the Muslims in India, the community is also subjected to inter-communal oppression as a religious minority in a non-Muslim society. Individuals are constantly assessed according to their religion, caste, class, language and gender in every sector of life. When they are derided as occupying a minority position, and alienated from the predominant ethnicity, they seek alliance instead with possible ethnic connections. In *Tala Odedha Doniyali* (*In the Boat with a Broken Bottom*), when Ayesha asks if her husband can manage to get a transfer to the regular division at their village, Saifuddin laughs and asks, "Have you forgotten that we are Muslims? Do you think they would give us ducks that lay golden eggs? You must be mad..." (Aboobackar, *Tala Odedha Doniyali* 64). The character indicates that as Muslims they do not appear to have any rights in their society. Here Aboobacker points at the folly of the management of multiculturalism by the State where minority rights are not recognised.

Aboobacker's women characters sustain each other through inter-communal oppressions to an extent, through ethnic interconnections. In her autobiographical account *A Muslim Girl Goes to School*, Aboobacker illustrates real incidents from life, where her mother reads Qur'an in the neighbourhood

irrespective of her religious difference from her neighbours. She pictures the lively ambiance of the afternoon-meetings, where women gather and share their worries, anxieties and views, dwelling on all possible topics about which they can converse. In *Breaking Ties*, the female character Paru, a fish seller, acts as a mediator to mend the broken marriage of the protagonist Nadira. Despite patriarchal dominance, Aboobacker's female characters construct a world of their own where they deconstruct social norms and develop an optimistic view of life ahead. This act apparently shatters the monolithic construction of Muslim woman identity as passive, oppressed and caged. The women are victims but they are also survivors: strong and willing to struggle. Even in their bleak and poverty-ridden life, they find small pockets of colour and emotional sustenance (Kurian 237).

Aboobacker's identity as a Muslim and a woman should be understood as a gendered "other" within a marginal ethnic community in the Indian context. She firmly tries to nullify this subaltern position of Muslims in general and Muslim women in particular in her works. Her effort, as this paper asserts, seeks to overpower such discrimination by establishing possible ethnic interconnections between Muslims and other minority communities in the country. As much as the writer appears to challenge the gendered, cultural and religious values of South Indian Muslim women, these selected works indicate that Aboobacker also contests the marginalisation of Muslims and Muslim women by mainstream Indian society. In addition, she attempts to defy any narrow perception of literature by portraying characters from different religious and social groups through the incorporation of Muslim, Hindu and Dalit characters in her fiction.

Conclusion

With the forging of different multicultural identities at the individual, ethnic and national levels, a multicultural self is formed. In the context of the South Indian Muslim identity, Aboobacker seems to address issues pertinent to Muslim women across the world such as *talaq*, polygamy and *purdah*. She further re-defines the "Muslimwoman" identity along gender, religious and cultural lines particular to the South Indian context, thus merging the global and local at once. In Aboobacker's constant assertion that the South Indian Muslims are part of the mainstream culture, she has succeeded in bringing the multilayered identity of Muslim women which had been muted in mainstream literature until her first publication in 1984.

In conceptualising the Muslim female identity, academic and social discourses have framed Muslim women writers along two binaries, either as progressive and anti-religious or religious and therefore backward and oppressed (Sherin 258). Through the reading of Aboobacker's narratives, the current discussion illustrates that there exist other alternative positions to be explored. As suggested earlier, Aboobacker's writings do not appear to criticise the Islamic

canon of Qur'an and Hadis; rather her criticism is directed at individuals in the society who abuse the Holy Scripture to legitimise their individual agendas (*Breaking Ties* vi-vii). The writer herself asserts that she has not disowned her Muslim identity. Her strong stance as a Muslim woman is carried through to her public position as a writer and social activist who champions equality for South Indian Muslim women through reinterpretations of the Islamic canon beyond the patriarchal lens.

Furthermore, through the exploration of Aboobacker's narratives, readers develop a better interpretation of Muslim women's identity, breaking the monolithic conceptualisation of their layered existence. This article has revisited and contested the "Muslimwoman" identity proposed by Miriam Cooke and presented Muslim women as heterogeneous subjects whose individuality is shaped by different variables of gender, religion and culture from the intra-communal viewpoint particular to South India and from the inter-communal perspectives of global Muslim women. Cooke's homogenisation of Muslim women all over the world under the label "Muslimwoman" is a misnomer because different Muslim women experience dissimilar realities and confront them differently. The contemporary Muslim woman, as represented in fiction, can be better understood only at an intersection of all these identities. Negotiating their agency within the context of patriarchal culture and minority existence, Aboobacker's illustrations of South Indian Muslim women share certain common problems that other Muslim women face in other parts of the world, and yet she presents different ways in which her characters play out the actualities of their lives. On the one hand, we can recognise the universality of similar perennial challenges relating to Muslim women's rights; on the other hand, Aboobacker's narratives provide us with an insight into the ways in which these South Indian Muslim women navigate various pathways that demonstrate the magnitude of their challenges.

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