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The Visibility of Muslim Women in the Islamic History of South India: A Review

Ayshath Shamah Rahmath*

Raihanah M.M*

Ruzy Suliza Hashim*

Abstract

Reading different historical accounts can provide the changing views of the past, proving that the historical truths can be un-reliable at times. Reviewing the prevailing history of South Indian Muslim community, we attempt to explicate the visibility of Muslim women in the socio-cultural and political discourses. Their contribution to the growth and propagation of Islam during its commencement in South India is not evidently recorded by historians. There are studies that delineate the matrilineal heritage of ancestral Islam in South India. But they fail to discuss the role of women in the cultural assimilation of Islam into a traditionally variant culture. The legal implications of Shariah and constitutional laws are still in dispute. The inconsistency in the existing jurisdiction often fails to provide her lawful rights. The participation of Muslim women in the social reform movements are largely unexplored. The literary history also does not attribute reasonable space for Muslim women writers. Our attempt is to bring in these disparities in the existing history, where Muslim women is posited invisible in the social, religious and literary discourses. We invite future studies in this area, which can explicate the visibility of Muslim women in the social and religious discourses of South India, marking her struggles at different junctures of socio-religious and literary history.

Keywords: Muslim women, South India, Matrilineal heritage, Legal implications, Socio-religious and literary history.

* Ayshath Shamah Rahmath is pursuing her PhD in Postcolonial literature at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (National University of Malaysia). She has worked in several educational institutions, both in the public and private sectors, in Kerala, India.
Email: shamah514@gmail.com

* Raihanah M.M. is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, UKM. Her research includes minority fiction and comparative literature. She won the National Academic Award in 2014.
Emal: raihanah.mydin@gmail.com

* Ruzy Suliza Hashim is Professor of Literature at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, UKM. Her research interests include gender issues in literature and comparative literature. Her book, *Out of the Shadows: Women in Malay Court Narratives*, won the National Book Award in 2003.
Email: ruzyhashim@gmail.com

Introduction

The role of Muslim women in the initial propagation of Islam in South India is often neglected. The first generation Muslims are the offspring of Arab merchants and the native women who converted to Islam. *Mut'a* (temporary) marriage alliance instigated a religious and cultural synthesis, thus nurturing Islam in most of the South Indian States of today. The family was left under the matrilineal supervision once the husband travels back. These women thus become the first propagators of Islam in South India. Unfortunately, the female legacy of Islam in South India is often belittled. The *Mappila* Muslims of Kerala, the *Beary* of Karnataka and the *Maraikkayars*/*Labbai*/*Kayalar*[1] of Tamil Nadu identify their geneses to these ancestral Arab Lineage. The historians of the past and present, the orients and natives, all acknowledge the origin of Islam in South India through an alliance marital cord, but they never analyze the role of women who bridged these cords. The trade alliance and the conversion of lower caste people are often highlighted, trivializing the influence and contribution of women in the socio-cultural growth of Islamic legacy. Mattison Mines observes this collaboration of Arabs with the local South Indians as not of marital bond, conquest or rule but of mercantilism and integration. The economic prosperity along with cultural integrations are discussed in detail in his article *Islamisation and Muslim Ethnicity in South India* (1975). But the participation of Muslim women in these cultural assimilations are not detailed in his work.

The role of Muslim women in propagating the traditional cultural elements to the succeeding generations are not explicated. *Mala* Songs, written in praise of Sufi saints and Prophet (PBUH), were part of traditional culture[2]. Shamshad Hussain in her *work Nyunapakshathinum Linkapathavikkumidayil*, acknowledges that Muslim women were orally transmitting these mala songs as part of their religious believes, and preserved the scripts written in Arabi-Malayalam for the later generations (13). The syncretic religious practices were normalized as part of traditional culture were women sung mala songs (*Sabeena* songs) to ease labor pain or to cure even life threatening diseases. Hussain explicates the presence of female religious scholars who preached Qur'an and Islamic principles to disciples from different age groups despite the gender. They were honored with the titles of 'Ustad' or 'Mollachi' (5). Since Hussain's focus is on the participation of Muslim women in the literary and socio-political discourses, she does not extend discussion towards the contribution of Muslim women to the cultural and religious assimilation. The role of Muslim women in assimilating the cultural elements of both Islamic and traditional South Indian culture is mostly unexplored. The huge gap in this area invites serious research. In the following sections, we pause some of our queries, which can help scholars to channel their focus.

Women in the Matrilineal Muslim Community of South India

The origin of matrilineal alliance in the Muslim communities of South India is in dispute. Does Islam introduce the matrilineal alliance in South India? Academic studies posit two different possibilities regarding the commencement of matrilineal system in Muslim community. either as a traditionally transmuted system from previous religion or as a culturally assimilated values taken from Arab merchants. In this section, we analyze some of the prominent historical studies to probe the details of matriliny in South Indian Muslim communities.

The familial coherence to matrilineal system was not specific to Islam in South India. Koya invokes the maternal roots of the ancestral Islam much before the Sufi missionaries in South India, as a prime reason for religious syncretism. He observes, "The Labbais of Mysore and the eastern coast also claim, as the Mappilas (Muslims of Kerala), descent from Arab Hashimites on the paternal side while their maternal ancestors were generally local Hindus. The progeny of Hindu wives Islamised before marriage were invariably brought up us Muslims" (6). He visions the rise and growth of Islam in this maternal pattern. Koya explicates the close similarity of *Mut'a* marriage alliance among Arabs and *Sambandam* among the Nairs, the Tiyas and the Mukkuvas (different castes in Hindu religion) of Kerala. Both are temporary marriage alliance and children were left with mother's tribe. Asma M. P. in an article "Mappilamarude Aavirbhavavum *Mut'a* Vivahavum" shares similar concerns where she details the practice of matriliny among different communities of South India even before the advent of Islam. In such context, Mut'a or similar marriage alliances, in South India, were part of the local culture as well. Though Koya highlight the matrilineal heritage of ancestral Islam in South India, he fails to develop the role of women in the cultural assimilation of Islam into a traditionally variant culture. Was her role limited only to the biological mothering? Her role as a believer and propagator of Islam in its initial stages and later, are not discussed in detail. Asma evaluates the economic aspects of Mut'a marriage, where the native women found *Mehr* (bridal money) a better substitute to the dowry system (money/property gifted to groom). While for Arab merchants the *Mehr* they spend on local women was very low compared to the high demands of Arab women. Thus the marital alliance became mutual beneficiary for both the parties (Asma, 98). Surprisingly, in the current scenario of South India, Muslim communities are following dowry system, rendering *Mehr* only for namesake. Studies should explicate these missing links of socio-cultural shifts in the general practice of Islam in South India, along with the positive and negative impacts it brought in the lives of Muslim women.

Muslim women in the matrilineal community, in South Indian context, are presumed to be enjoying better holds in family in terms of lineage, rights over children and access to property. Leela Dube in her article "Women in a Matrilineal Muslim Community", elucidate the socio-cultural positioning of Muslim women in the matrilineal Muslim community of Kalpeni, one of the islands of the Lakshadweep territory in South India. She observes matriliny as a traditional cultural practice induced from Hinduism to Islam at the juncture of initial religious conversions (100). Extending the discussion on Matrilineal Muslim communities, Dube in another article, argues that in South India Muslims synchronized the *Shariah* laws with the customary laws upholding matrilineal principles, particularly in transactions related to property and kinship ("Conflict and Compramise", 1273). She positions women in matrilineal communities of South India having better political hold within the familial system comparing to Muslim women in North India and elsewhere. But in the states of Kerala, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, the practice of matriliny has been reoriented to patrilineal system. N.P. Hafiz Muhammed in his study "Socio-Economic Determinants of the Continuity of Matrilocal Family System Among Mappila Muslims of Malabar" explicates the cultural and economic determinants of Muslims in matrilocal families until it disintegrated from the social sector of South India. He observes matriliny and matrilocality as part of socio-cultural dissimilation instilled by the Arab merchants, dismissing the possibility of cultural syncretism from Hinduism (3). He argues that the progressive social reforms during the last five decades had disintegrated the matrilineal system in various communities

including Muslims in South India. But he does not extend his discussion on the political stand of women in accepting the deterioration of a social system that offered them better social and economic status.

The shift in the legal orientations was gradual, implementing various laws at times. Koya in another article "Survival of a Social Institution: Matriliny Among the Mappilas" details the political intrusions in the introduction of the 'Mappila Succession Act 1918' (applicable to the members of the community in the states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka) and 'The Muslim Personal Law or Shariat Act' of 1937 (applicable to Muslims all over India), which preferred Sharia law over customary law (694). These legislative processes removed the legal base for the continuation of matrilineal lineage over property and custody of child. Even then in some parts of Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, matriliny is partly practiced along with *Shariah* implications. But the legal procedures are mostly under the act of the Muslim Personal Law. Did the female members of the community accept the legal reorientations in the family and social system without hesitance? Was there any resistance from Muslim women against these reversions of laws? Few cases are reported where Muslim women legally fought against the inconsistency of the Muslim Personal Law. Shah Bano's petition against her former husband for maintenance after divorce in 1985 was the first legal case that commenced heated discussions on Muslim Personal Law. The Supreme Court's verdict highlighted the religious controversies rather than the judicial implications on right to maintenance of a divorced women[3]. Various religio-political organizations and women wings throughout India reacted vigorously supporting and discarding the Muslim Personal Law.

The controversial ban on 'instantaneous triple talaq' by the Supreme court on August 2017 was another benchmark verdict which triggered serious discussions on *Shariah* and constitutional laws. The court was considering Shayara Bano's petition against the illegal utterance of triple talaq by her husband Rizwan Ahmed in 2015, without considering *Iddath* (three months) period[4]. The case elicited discussions on the disputes in the two legal systems, the constitutional and the *Shariah*, and the inconsistency in the simultaneous use of elements from both these systems. Examining various laws of *Shariah* practicing across the world, Ayesha Rafiq in her article "Child Custody in Classical Islamic Law and Laws of Contemporary Muslim World", points three principles of child custody largely practiced where firstly, the mother possesses priority right of child custody so long as she does not remarry, second, in a situation where both parents profess different religions, custody of the child should go to that parent who follows the religion of Islam and thirdly, when the child has gone past the years of minority (7 years) he will be given an option to choose between both parents (276). Unfortunately, Muslim women in the rural areas are not aware of the Islamic and constitutional legal systems and often they are misled by the sham principles in the name of jurisdiction and Islamic laws[5]. Detailed analysis is needed to evaluate the loopholes in both the constitutional and Personal Laws. Researchers should delineate the flaws in these legal systems and propose better legal coherence to ensure rights of Muslim women.

Muslim Women's Role in Religious Conversions and Reform Movements

The mass conversion of lower castes Hindus is another factor that fortified the religious domain of Islam in South India since its inception. What intrigued the lower caste to embrace

a new religion? Was it forced conversion? Koya says, "for the lower Hindu castes acceptance of Islam meant an escape from the degraded status (casteism) they had in the Hindu society to at least theoretical equality with the ruling community" (3). Rantattani also observes that the order of '*Sulh-i-kul* (peace with all)' and the principles of equality preached by Islam attracted the people from other religion (34). Equality irrespective of birth or social class or caste thus became an important marker in the progression of Islam in South Indian. Were these principles of equality homogenously implemented in the community without gender disparities? Probably not. The patriarchal norms inherent in the cultural and religious realms always relegate women towards secondary position.

What was the role of women in the context of such conversions? Were they merely following their male counterparts? We probe into some of the socio-political reform movements where women had strong imprints in establishing their visions. The lower caste men and women were not allowed to cover the upper body. But when they converted to Islam and Christianity, they had the liberty to cover their whole body. This intrigued tension in the prevailing caste system of South India and later resulted in various uprisings like 'Breast-cloth struggle' (Devika, 132). In such context the role of women in religious conversion is important. Her motivation was not only to upgrade the social status but also to hold the right to cover her body and practice the religious principles which she chose.

Malabar revolt[6] of 1921, an agrarian movement, is another important historical juncture where women's participation is not documented. The impact of Malabar rebellion in the social deterioration of Muslims in South India is inevitable. The disintegration of Ottoman empire at the end of the First World war was followed by Khilafath movement in India, whereby Muslims demanded the preservation of the Sultanate as the Kaliph of Islam. These peaceful negotiations were at some point succumbed into Hindu-Muslim riots, which disintegrated the religious harmony of India. Jaffrelot further discussed how the rising of peasant against the landlords on the coastal areas of the Malabar region of Kerala, became a religious riot that later became a cycle of inter-communal riots (20). The Malabar rebellion, as it is popularly known in the history of South India, had its positive and negative imprints on Muslim communities. While scholars, like Jaffrelot, K.N. Panikkar and Gangadhara Menon, view this outbreak in the 19th century as part of the long tradition of peasant protest and revolts, others like Stephen Dale connect the traits of rebellion to 15th century where Muslims were fighting against the two frontiers – the Colonial powers and the Hindu landlords (Razak, 10). But Muslim women seems invisible throughout these discussions. What happened to her in the midst of these violence? Was she a rebel or a silent spectator? Investigating on the narrative construction of this rebellion, Razak delineates its impact on the society that fragmented the religious harmony of South India forever. Highlighting the economic aspect of the rebellion, where poor farmers were fighting against the feudal landlords, Razak criticizes the media politics, the print media, particularly the English and vernacular press for creating communal cleavage in the society. Roland E Miller's seminal historical account on South Indian Muslims, "Mappila Muslims of Kerala: A Study in Islamic Trends", highlights the negative implications of Mappila rebellion and agrees with K.B.K Muhammed in terming these rebellion as "meaningless sacrifices" (109). Razak names such texts as the 'prose of otherness, which articulated Muslims as the 'other' in the socio-political context of South India (13). None of these texts explicate the participation of Muslim women in these outbreaks which lasted more than six months. Miller accounts that around one

million people were directly involved in the rebellion. Was it all male members of the community? Why there is no documentation of Muslim women's contribution in the course of these struggles? These questions need to be substantiated with extensive research apprising the social and political participation of Muslim women in the context of various uprisings in South India.

The huge gap in the historical documentation invites serious research whereby the contribution of Muslim women to the social, political and cultural realms can be delineated. Exploring the available historical and literary documents in regional languages, Devika and Shamshad Hussain in their respective works, delineate the problems Muslim women faced during these socio-political revivals. In the absence of male members, women were maintaining familial chores and were resisting the violence around (Devika, 220). Shamshad Hussain's study explicate the literary narratives of 19th century South Indian Muslim community of Kerala, to delineate some of the forgotten Muslim women writers of the past. She problematizes the absence of Muslim women in the written historical narratives of South India and attempt to delineate her role in the Malabar Rebellion in her seminal study "Oral Tradition of Malabar Rebellion". Hussain's works offers glimpses from the past where Muslim women's socio-cultural presence are more visible and reasonably significant. At the same time, it reveals that the available history has obscured the participation of Muslim women in the socio-cultural discourses.

Conclusion

Reviewing some of the prominent socio-historical studies on South Indian Muslim community, our effort here was to specify some of the gaps in the existing history. The matrilineal lineage of Muslims in the early history of Islam in South India might have provided women better political holds within the familial system. But in the historical narrations, her visibility is vague. Socio-cultural reorientation from matriliny to patrilineal system became a reason for the degraded positioning of women within the cultural realm of the community. Scholars should delineate the missing links in the history to explicate the socio-political context of women in Islamic communities of South India, during and after matrilineal system. The legal implications of Shariah and constitutional laws at a later stage, only heightened the confusions regarding the rights of Muslim women in the context of Muslim Personal Laws and Indian Constitutional Laws. This often ripped the legal privileges for women in Islamic and judicial domains. Serious research is needed to rectify the legal loopholes in ensuring Muslim women her rights. The controversial verdict by High court and Supreme court in Hadiya case, nullifying her marriage with Shafin Jahan, was extensively questioned by people across the country[7]. The judgement was crucial as it suspected the religious conversion of Hadiya aka Akhila Ashokan as a motif for commencing this marriage. This initiated religious disputes in Kerala, where the Habeas corpus was first registered by her parents in May 2017. The inconsistency in the existing jurisdiction in ensuring the rights of a woman and her liberty to embrace a religion or a marriage of her choice has been challenged here. Serious research is mandatory to upgrade the existing legal implications of *Shariah* and constitutional laws.

The largely unexplored arena of literary historiography of Muslim women also offers infinite possibilities of research. Both the mainstream and minority literary historiography gives no clue on Muslim women writers of the past. Unearthing and reinterpreting the lost

works by such writers, who were rendered invisible from the mainstream literary historiography, scholars can construct a female literary tradition of South Indian Muslim women writers. Our effort, in this review paper, was to elucidate the gaps in the existing social and literary historiography of Muslims in South India, where women seems invisible in the social, cultural and political realms. We invite researchers to explore the multiple contexts in the socio-religious discourses that empirically strategies Muslim women's visibility in the larger canvas of South Indian Islamic, political and literary history.

Notes

[1] Muslims in Tamil Nadu were differentiated according to the regionality and social class during early years of its advent. Labbai/Rawther were Hanafi Muslims living in the countryside and Maraikkayar/Kayalar were coastal Shafi Muslims. Read Bayly S., "Islam in Southern India: 'Purist' or 'Syncretic'?", *Two Colonial Empires: Comparative Studies in Overseas History*, edited by Bayly C.A. and Kolff D.H.A., Springer, Dordrecht, Vol. 6 (1986), pp. 35-73.

[2] The *Mala* (folk) songs were often written in praise of the Sufi saints like Shaikh Muhyuddin 'Abdul Qadar Jilani, Shaikh Rifa'i, Sayyid 'Alavi and Nafeesat-al-Misri.", Read Rantattani, H., *Mappila Muslims: A Study on Society and Anti Colonial Struggles*, (Kerala: Other Books, 2007), pp. 36.

[3] Read Patel, Vibhuti. "The Shah Bano Controversy and the Challenges Faced by Women's Movement in India", in Asghar Ali Engineer, ed., *Problems of Muslim Women in India*, (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1995), pp. 140-148.

Also read Laura Dudley Jenkin, "Shah Bano: Muslim Women's Rights", *Teaching Human Rights Online*. University of Cincinnati. www.law.uc.edu

[4] Read Agnes, Flavia, "Muslim Women's Rights and Media Coverage", *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. 51, no. 20, (May 2016).

[5] For more details on the legal rights of Muslim women, read Ayshath, S.R, Raihanah M.M, Ruzy Suliza Hashim, "Muslim Women in South India: Reading Selected Narratives of Sara Aboobacker", *Asiatic*, Vol 10, no. 2 (2016), pp. 215-229.

[6] In August 1921, rebellion broke out among Muslims of Malabar district in Colonial Madras Presidency, against the autocracies of landlords. But the British used the term 'outrage' to refer to these revolts to politicize the peasant outbreaks as violent ravage against Hindus and British. For more details, read Robert L. Hardgrave, Jr's Robert L. Hardgrave, Jr, "The mappila rebellion, 1921 Peasant Revolt in Malabar", Modern Asian Studies, Vol. 11, no. 1 (1977), pp. 57-99.

Also read Mines, M. "Islamisation and Muslim Ethnicity in South India", *Man*, Vol.10, no. 3 (1975), pp. 404-419.

[7] The accusation of her parents was that she was forced to adhere to Islamic principles. However, Hadiya had expressed before the High Court that she consciously adopted Islam without any one's intervention, but the High Court does not account her statement. She was forcefully retained at her father's house, without having any contact with media or outer world. Hadiya's liberty as a citizen, as a woman and as a Muslim woman has been continuously evaluated in local and national contexts. After one year of legal fight on March 8 2018, Supreme Court restored her marriage with Shafin Jahan.

For more details, read Charalwar, Vaibhav S, "The Jurisprudential Conundrum of Hadiya Case", *LiveLaw.in*, October 6, 2017. Web. November 15, 2017. www.livelaw.in

Also read Saxena, Anmol, "Hadiya Case: Supreme Court Says Consent is Prime in Marriage", *Aljazeera*, October 13, 2017. Web. November 13, 2017. www.aljazeera.com

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