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Authorial Voices and Minority Realities: South Indian Muslim Women's Narratives

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ABSTRACT

This research paper examines the narratives of South Indian Muslim women writers across three distinct waves: the first wave (late 19th to early 20th century), the second wave (mid to late 20th century), and the third wave (21st century). It explores how these writers articulate their experiences and social realities within the minority contexts of South India, utilising W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of "double consciousness" to analyse the internal conflicts faced by Muslim women. The study further expands upon this framework through the concept of "subjugated consciousness," as adapted by Joe L. Kincheloe and Shirley R. Steinberg, which highlights the significance of women's subordinated knowledge in understanding their responses to oppression. Additionally, the research incorporates the notion of "authorially defined social reality," as articulated by Raihanah M. M., to examine how these writers construct their social realities through their narratives. Using a qualitative, thematic textual analysis grounded in critical theory, this paper investigates the works of notable authors such as P.K. Haleema, Haleema Beevi, Sara Aboobacker, Banu Mushtaq, Khadija Mumthas, Rajathi Salma, and Andaleeb Wajid, reflecting the interplay of cultural, religious, and gendered dynamics. Key themes such as education, social justice, identity, and resistance are identified, providing insights into the socio-political landscape affecting Muslim women in South India. By emphasising the significance of authorial voices in shaping minority narratives, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of South Indian Muslim women and their assertions of agency within a complex environment.

Keywords: Andaleeb Wajid; Banu Mushtaq; minority narratives; Muslim women writers; Rajathi Salma; South India

INTRODUCTION

The literary landscape of South India is rich and diverse, yet the voices of Muslim women writers have remained underrepresented (Ayshath et al., 2020). This persistent underrepresentation reflects broader socio-political dynamics shaping the experiences of minority communities in India, where gender, religion, and cultural identity intersect (Hussain, 2007, p. 63). Over the past two centuries, however, Muslim women writers from South India have increasingly asserted their presence in the literary canon, articulating unique and multifaceted perspectives. Their works challenge prevailing stereotypes and provide critical insights into the complexities of being Muslim women navigating a predominantly non-Muslim society. The narratives of these writers span three significant literary waves, each shaped by distinct socio-political contexts and literary sensibilities. The first wave, emerging in the late 19th to early 20th centuries, coincided with social reform movements and colonial influence. Writers such as P.K. Haleema and Haleema Beevi emphasised the transformative power of education and cultural identity, laying the groundwork

for subsequent generations (Ayshath & Raihanah, 2023). The second wave, arising in the mid-20th century, was informed by growing advocacy for women's rights and social justice. Authors like Sara Aboobacker and Banu Mushtaq engaged with contemporary issues such as polygamy, dowry, and the quest for personal agency. This wave underscores the interconnectedness of gender, class, and religion and highlights solidarity among women as a form of resistance (Ayshath & Raihanah, 2023). In the 21st century, the third wave introduces a global perspective, engaging with themes of diaspora, multiculturalism, and Islamic feminism (Ayshath & Raihanah, 2023). Writers such as Khadija Mumthas and Andaleeb Wajid explore the nuanced challenges of selfhood, shedding light on the experiences of Muslim women as they assert their agency in a globalised world. This wave emphasises personal narratives and emotional interiority, showcasing the evolving dimensions of Muslim women's identities. Through these narratives, the paper underscores the importance of authorial voice in shaping minority discourse and rewriting dominant cultural narratives. By examining how these authors construct their authorial social realities, this paper argues that South Indian Muslim women writers play a critical role in reshaping both literary and socio-political understandings of Muslim identity in India.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Muslim women in South India, as a doubly marginalised group, experience exclusion from both mainstream literary discourses and the dominant narratives within their own communities. Scholars such as Sherin (2011), Hussain (2007), and Hussain (2009) critique the ways in which Muslim reform movements are categorised in mainstream historiography, noting that Muslim writers are often relegated to the margins, either omitted entirely or reduced to minor footnotes. Building upon scholars such as Amina Wadud (1999) and Leila Ahmed (1993), this study situates South Indian Muslim women writers within a global Islamic feminist discourse. Yet, prior studies rarely theorise the construction of authorially defined social realities among South Indian Muslim women writers, a gap this paper seeks to address. While these reform movements did encourage male intellectual and cultural participation (Tschacher, 2017), the literary voices of Muslim women were mostly confined to limited categories such as religious literature, Mappila literature in Kerala, Arwi literature in Tamil Nadu, and Beary literature in Karnataka. This categorisation has contributed to the generalisation and underrepresentation of Muslim women's contributions in broader literary discourse (Devika, 2010; Hussain, 2009). These writers continuously negotiate between religious fidelity and social engagement, reinforcing their cultural and spiritual identities while navigating gendered silencing.

The first wave of Muslim women writers in South India began in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, emerging within the context of colonial reform movements and early nationalist aspirations. These writers challenged prevailing narratives that painted Muslim women as passive or illiterate. Shamshad Hussain (2009) draws attention to the Mappila oral tradition in Kerala, where women played crucial roles as religious preachers, singers, and healers. Women like Amina of Ernad voiced personal resistance through poetry, her rejection of a marriage proposal is a notable early instance of asserting agency through literary means. Figures such as P.K. Haleema and Haleema Beevi advocated for both Islamic and modern education, using literature to promote self-respect and participation in public life (Bevinje, 2011). Despite being overshadowed by dominant narratives, these early writers significantly influenced discourses on identity, gender, and community, laying the foundation for the next generation of Muslim women authors.

The second wave, emerging during the latter half of the 20th century, coincided with critical shifts in feminist thought and social justice movements. Padikkal (1991, 1993) deliberates on the developmental orientations in Kannada fiction. He details the emergence of Muslim male and female writers into the literary scenario of Karnataka. Tarikere (1998), in his work *Karnatakada Sufigalu* (*The Sufis of Karnataka*), maps the origin and growth of Sufism in Kannada literature. Giriraj (2004), in her thesis entitled "Gender, Patriarchy and Resistance: Contemporary Women's Poetry in Kannada and Hindi," problematizes the absence of women's agencies in both North and South literature. She highlights the invisibility of Muslim women characters and writers in the mainstream literary circles. Tharakeshwar (2011), in his study, discusses how the colonial and national spirits influenced Kannada literature. He figures the emergence of new movements that helped Muslims and other marginalised communities to take part in the literary revolutions. These critics categorised Muslim writers into pre- and post-1975 generations, noting the growing visibility of women writers during this time. Authors such as Sara Aboobacker and Banu Mushtaq engaged directly with issues like talaq, polygamy, dowry, and gender-based discrimination within Muslim communities. Their works gained prominence during pivotal socio-political moments, such as the Shah Bano case of 1985, which foregrounded the tensions between secular law and religious personal law in India (Mullally, 2004; Patel, 1995). These writers used literature as a means of social critique, often at personal risk, as their narratives provoked backlash from conservative factions.

The Bandeya Protest Movement of the 1970s also created a space for the expression of marginalised voices, empowering writers to articulate their lived experiences of oppression (Haneena & Jazeela, 2024). Second-wave writers did not merely challenge stereotypes, they reshaped the literary field itself by demanding inclusion and legitimacy. Their works explored the intersections of religion, class, and gender with an emphasis on solidarity among women. Through this activism-inflected literature, they paved the way for more nuanced, emotionally complex narratives in the contemporary period.

Building on these foundations, the third wave of Muslim women writers from South India offers a more global and intersectional perspective (Ayshath & Raihanah, 2023). Writers such as B. M. Suhara, Khadija Mumthas, Saheera Thangal, Lazin, Sheeba E.K., Shahina E.K., and Andaleeb Wajid address the complexities of identity in a post-liberalisation, multicultural world. Their narratives explore themes such as transnational sisterhood, Islamic feminism, and the contested terrain of modernity (Ayshath & Raihanah, 2023; Haneena & Jazeela, 2024). Despite these varied approaches, third-wave writers are united in their efforts to redefine Muslim womanhood, engaging with Islamic feminist frameworks to critique patriarchy, reinterpret scripture, and construct new forms of literary agency (Amina Wadud, 1999). However, gaps remain in the scholarly engagement with these texts, especially concerning how they navigate transnationalism, intra-community tensions, and postcolonial identities.

Recent scholarship has begun to challenge monolithic and stereotypical portrayals of Muslim women, which have traditionally been shaped by Western ideological constructs. For example, Roselind et al. (2012) critically analyse Asra Nomani's self-narrative *Standing Alone*, emphasizing the fluidity and multiplicity of Muslim women's identities. Their study adopts an eclectic framework combining Slee's (2004) stages of concern with the Islamic Paradigm of the Correlational Self, highlighting themes of physical and spiritual journeys that transcend geographic and imaginary borders.

This approach foregrounds the intertwined concepts of self, conflict, and spiritual awakening, revealing a dynamic Muslim self that engages in continuous spiritual battles ("amr bi al-ma'aruf wa al-nahyi 'an al-munkar") and relational ethics ("hablum min Allah wa hablum min al-nas").

Muslim women in South India, as a doubly marginalised group, experience exclusion from both mainstream literary discourses and the dominant narratives within their own communities. Muslim reform movements are categorised in mainstream historiography, noting that Muslim writers are often relegated to the margins, either omitted entirely or reduced to minor footnotes (Hussain, 2007, 2009; Sherin, 2011). Building upon all these past scholars, this study situates South Indian Muslim women writers within a global Islamic feminist discourse.

By acknowledging the complexity and heterogeneity within Muslim female subjectivities, this research aligns with contemporary efforts to move beyond reductive narratives. Our study similarly aims to explore the diverse voices of South Indian Muslim women writers across three waves, investigating how they construct their authorial social realities amid intersecting cultural, religious, and gendered identities. This perspective reinforces the need for frameworks that capture the nuanced experiences of Muslim women in minority contexts, thereby enriching feminist and minority literatures.

Yet, despite substantial scholarship, prior studies rarely theorise how South Indian Muslim women writers employ their authorial voices to construct distinct social realities across literary generations. This paper specifically addresses this gap by analysing their narratives through the integrated frameworks of double consciousness, subjugated consciousness, and authorially defined social reality. Incorporating such nuanced frameworks enables a more comprehensive understanding of Muslim women's literary expressions as sites of agency, resistance, and identity formation.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative analytical framework grounded in critical theories of identity, oppression, and cultural representation. Central to this framework is W. E. B. DuBois' (1998) concept of 'double consciousness', which captures the internal conflict experienced by marginalised individuals as they navigate dual or fragmented identities within dominant social structures. This is complemented by Kincheloe and Steinberg's (1997) notion of 'subjugated consciousness', which emphasises the epistemological value of lived experience and the power of marginalised knowledge systems to resist hegemonic narratives.

To further contextualise authorial voice and narrative construction, the study draws on Raihanah's (2009) concept of 'authorial-defined social reality', which refers to how writers construct the socio-cultural world through their literary works, challenging dominant narratives. This lens is useful in understanding how these authors reclaim narrative agency and challenge monolithic representations of Muslim womanhood. The concept serves as a critical tool for analysing how personal and communal struggles are reimagined as forms of resistance and self-assertion. At the micro-textual level, the analysis examines narrative techniques, character development, emotional tone, and linguistic choices that reflect the internalised tensions and external constraints experienced by the characters. These elements reveal the everyday negotiations of identity, faith, and gender that these characters face.

However, by situating these textual choices within the context of the author's positionality and socio-historical background, the analysis shifts to a macro-level reading, where the author's worldview, cultural embeddedness, and resistance strategies come into sharper focus. Authorial social reality thus facilitates a layered interpretation, revealing how what appears as personal or localised struggles in the text is, in fact, a deliberate articulation of broader, collective struggles for identity and social justice. This movement from micro-text to macro-context underscores the political significance of the narrative, placing the author as an active agent in reshaping dominant discourses about Muslim womanhood and challenging oppressive structures.

The methodological approach consists of thematic textual analysis, focusing on selected works by P. K. Haleema, Haleema Beevi, Sara Aboobacker, Banu Mushtaq, Khadija Mumthas (2004), Rajathi Salma, and Andaleeb Wajid. These authors were chosen for their literary prominence, generational diversity, and thematic resonance with key concerns in Muslim women's writing in South India. The texts are analysed around core themes such as education, social justice, identity, and resistance, recurring motifs that structure the lived experiences portrayed in their narratives.

In addition to close reading, the analysis incorporates the broader socio-political contexts in which these authors write. This dual-layered approach, textual and contextual, facilitates a nuanced understanding of how gender, religion, class, and region intersect in the construction of literary identity. For instance, Du Bois' double consciousness is applied to examine the psychic tension faced by characters navigating between religious fidelity and secular modernity, while Raihanah's authorial-social reality is used to trace how personal and communal struggles are reimagined as forms of resistance and self-assertion. Finally, the researcher acknowledges the importance of reflexivity in interpreting minority narratives. While striving for analytical clarity, this study remains aware of its own interpretive position within broader academic discourses on gender and representation.

Building upon the gaps identified, particularly the under-exploration of author-defined social realities across literary waves, this study adopts a methodology that integrates theories of double consciousness and subjugated consciousness with thematic textual analysis. This integration aims to illuminate evolving narrative strategies among South Indian Muslim women writers clearly and comprehensively.

ANALYSIS

THE FIRST WAVE: FOUNDATION OF IDENTITY AND RESISTANCE

The first wave of Muslim women writers in South India emerged during a period of significant socio-political transformation, marked by colonial governance and early reformist impulses. Figures such as P.K. Haleema, Haleema Beevi, Amina of Ernad, Naduthoppil Ayesha Kutty, Kundil Kunhamina and B. Ayesha pioneered a literary tradition that challenged dominant narratives surrounding Muslim womanhood (Bevinje, 2011). While colonialism introduced modernist reform discourses, especially regarding women's education, these were often calibrated toward upper-caste Hindu ideals. Muslim women's foray into literary production was thus both a response to colonial modernity and a refusal to be subsumed by its selective emancipatory scripts. P.K. Haleema's writings offer some of the earliest articulations of what Du Bois theorises as double consciousness: the fractured self-perception of marginalised individuals navigating the dissonance between internal identity and external judgment. In a speech quoted by Devika (2005),

Haleema is seen criticising the Muslim male reformist of the time, for limiting the progressiveness of women within the bounds of basic education. She says, "As an enlightened group, our worthy plans of action cannot be realised by merely attending schools." (Haleema as quoted in Devika, 2005, p. 171). Hence, she requests the government authorities to resolve the economic instability of educated Muslim women by giving them equal participation in government services like her fellow female members from other communities. Haleema (as quoted in Devika, 2005, p. 172) states that, "I argue that we women must take up employment to foster our sense of self-respect. The government must also make some special arrangement for us".

These words become a defiant assertion of self-worth, directly confronting the layered forces, including patriarchal, colonial, and communal, that seek to suppress her voice. For Haleema, education is not merely a civilizing tool imported through colonial channels, but a means of spiritual and social emancipation rooted in community. Her work engages subjugated consciousness (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997) by centring knowledge drawn from lived experience and Islamic traditions, challenging the hierarchies that marginalise women's epistemic contributions. Through her poetry and editorial writing, Haleema constructs an author-defined social reality (Raihanah, 2009) by constructing a literary space where Muslim women are not passive recipients of reform but architects of change. Her vision reclaims education and faith as intertwined avenues of resistance, refusing the binaries of tradition versus progress imposed by colonial and patriarchal narratives.

Haleema Beevi expands this literary resistance into the public sphere with the founding of *Muslim Vanitha*, a pioneering magazine dedicated to Muslim women's issues. Her editorial voice encapsulates the tensions of *double consciousness*, advocating for women's education within a socio-religious climate that viewed female intellectualism as morally suspect. "Without reforming women, a society cannot progress" (Beevi, 2005), she writes, reframing education as a spiritual and social imperative rather than a Western import. Beevi's authorial practice actively constructs a communal discursive space where Quranic ethics, personal agency, and gender equity intersect. Within this space, her *subjugated consciousness* is not a condition to be overcome but a vantage point from which to critique and reshape cultural norms.

Amina of Ernad contributes to this lineage with her bold Arabic-Malayalam poetry. In one poem, she rejects a marriage proposal from a local goon with the line, "I won't carry your dirty linen for sure!" (Amina, as cited in Rizio, 2010), a moment of visceral resistance that transforms the personal into the political. Her use of Arabi-Malayalam, a script traditionally reserved for religious education and domestic use, is a radical act. It reclaims the intimate, gendered domain of literacy and retools it as a site of public defiance. Here, subjugated consciousness becomes linguistic and embodied, as Amina elevates a culturally specific form of expression into a medium of critique. Her work further exemplifies double consciousness, as her poetic voice navigates the disjuncture between societal expectations and her inner moral clarity. Through this reworking of script, content, and tone, Amina builds her own authorial social reality, a poetic universe where Muslim women are neither silent nor peripheral but central to cultural renegotiation.

B. Ayesha's stories, though less widely circulated, extend the first wave's foundational concerns. Her narratives often draw from oral traditions and localised cultural practices, weaving together tales where women negotiate identity through education and self-expression. Her protagonists embody double consciousness, struggling to reconcile self-worth with the communal pressures of conformity. Ayesha's work showcases how everyday acts, including reading, storytelling, and questioning, can become quiet but radical refusals of patriarchal expectations. In Ayesha's fictional universe, subjugated consciousness is not dramatised through grand resistance

but located in the slow, deliberate processes of awakening. Her use of vernacular idioms and culturally resonant symbols anchors her authorial-social reality in the lived experiences of rural Muslim women, asserting that these voices are valid, complex, and worthy of literary recognition. In conclusion, across these writers, the theme of literacy, both literal and metaphorical, emerges as a central strategy of resistance. Education is not simply instrumental; it is symbolic of subjectivity, autonomy, and epistemic agency. Whether through poetry, editorial essays, or folk storytelling, these authors create a spectrum of reform that ranges from institutional (Beevi's publishing platform) to deeply personal (Amina's rejection of marital control). Crucially, the first wave reclaims religious and cultural spaces from within, challenging the notion that progress must mimic Western paradigms. Their works lay the groundwork for a literary tradition in which Muslim women resist erasure by rewriting themselves into history, as thinkers, leaders, and creators of knowledge. These narratives do more than counter marginalisation; they model new ways of seeing and being. Their themes of resistance, self-representation, and epistemic reclamation resurface across the second and third waves, evolving in form but retaining the foundational urgency set forth by these early voices.

THE SECOND WAVE: SOCIO-POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT AND INTERSECTIONALITY

Building upon the foundational resistance of first-wave writers, the second wave emerged amid post-independence social transformations and increasing awareness of women's rights. This mid-20th-century literary movement marked a critical juncture in the landscape of South Indian Muslim women's writing, giving rise to a group of authors whose work displayed a heightened consciousness of social justice, gender equity, and religious critique. Figures such as Sara Aboobacker, Banu Mushtaq, and B.M. Suhara, brought an intersectional lens to their narratives, interweaving the complexities of gender, class, and religion to confront embedded structures of patriarchy.

A defining feature of this wave was its interrogation of religious and cultural epistemologies, specifically the misappropriation of religious texts and traditions to sustain male authority. These writers positioned their narratives as sites of epistemic resistance, challenging the legitimised knowledge systems that have historically silenced women's voices within both religious and secular domains. Their protagonists often navigate a space of double consciousness, embodying an internal split between societal expectations and personal truths. This methodological framework drawn from minority feminist thought allows for a nuanced reading of these texts as literary interventions that give voice to subjugated knowledge and lived resistance.

Sara Aboobacker's *Breaking Ties* (*Chandragiri Theeradalli*) exemplifies this shift, offering a pointed critique of the distortion of Qur'anic principles governing *talaq* (divorce) and "one-day marriage." Through the character Khaji Sahib, Aboobacker challenges the casual and unethical manipulation of Islamic law: "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" (Aboobacker, 2001, p. 76). This passage exposes the epistemological disjunction between the Qur'an's ethical foundations and the culturally sanctioned patriarchal practices that distort them. Aboobacker reclaims Islamic ethics by reasserting its spirit of justice, equality, and deliberation, demonstrating that oppression stems not from the sacred text itself but from its androcentric interpretation. Her work becomes a literary space for articulating subaltern consciousness, rooted in embodied experience and sustained by ethical critique.

Banu Mushtaq's *Black Cobras* (2007) presents a poignant exploration of the deeply entrenched gendered divisions within South Indian Muslim society, particularly through the prism of motherhood. The narrative focuses on Ashraf, a mother of three daughters, whose struggle for maintenance after her husband's polygamous remarriage reveals the stark societal preference for sons over daughters. Mushtaq critiques this inequity, illustrating how motherhood is bifurcated into "mothers of sons" and "mothers of daughters," with the latter often stigmatised and abandoned.

Ashraf's plight reflects this cultural bias: her husband, Yakoob, justifies his second marriage by invoking religious sanction, saying, "The law of God says that a man can marry not just once but four times. So why should this female come shamelessly to the mosque? I waited not just one year, but ten years to get a male child from her…What is wrong with that?" (Mushtaq, 2007, p. 55). Yakoob's invocation of Islamic law, however selective and self-serving, exposes the social manipulation of religious principles to uphold patriarchal dominance. This is sharply contrasted by the character Juleka Begum, an educated woman well-versed in Islamic jurisprudence, who challenges these misinterpretations. Her insistence on educating girls, securing their right to choose husbands, rightful inheritance, and divorce rights, voices a feminist critique rooted within Islamic discourse itself (Mushtaq, 2007, p. 60).

Ashraf's struggles encapsulate the lived reality of many Muslim women, whose legal and social rights are often subordinated. Her plea for justice for her children, "all set to get her children their due right to live. The lifeless faces of her children made her resolute" (Mushtaq, 2007, p. 56), highlights motherhood as both an identity and a site of resistance. Yet, while Juleka Begum embodies progressive knowledge and agency, Ashraf's acceptance of her daughter's tragic fate points to the limits imposed by entrenched cultural norms and the prevailing Mother India motif where sacrifice and endurance are valorised, especially for women of marginalised communities. Mushtaq's narrative thus navigates the intersection of subjugated consciousness and authorial social reality, illustrating how these women's stories articulate the contradictions within Muslim minority experiences. The portrayal of Ashraf's abandonment in a mosque, a sacred communal space, without intervention from fellow believers, underlines the normalisation of such gendered injustices (Mushtaq, 2007, p. 62). This situation starkly reflects Raihanah M. M.'s concept of "authorially defined social reality," where narratives serve as counter-discourses illuminating the socio-political marginalisation of Muslim women and challenging dominant hegemonies.

Furthermore, Mushtaq's text reveals how religious and cultural discourses intertwine to sustain systemic inequalities, but also how education and interpretation of Islamic texts can become tools for empowerment. As Juleka Begum asserts, "Let them educate girls… Let her have the right to choose her husband… Let men be ready to marry a widow" (Mushtaq, 2007, p. 60). This demand for reform within the religious and social spheres exemplifies the attempt to reclaim agency through knowledge and community activism, even as structural barriers persist.

The narrative also reflects on the emotional toll of these societal pressures, emphasising the psychological impact on women like Ashraf who are caught between religious ideals and social realities. Ashraf's innocent question about the Prophet's blessings visiting her "poor woman's house" (Mushtaq, 2007, p. 57) poignantly captures her alienation and the gap between spiritual assurances and earthly hardships.

In sum, *Black Cobras* exemplifies how South Indian Muslim women writers utilise literary narratives to define and contest their social realities. By foregrounding motherhood, legal struggles, and patriarchal oppression within an Islamic cultural framework, Mushtaq's work embodies the dual consciousness experienced by Muslim women, negotiating identity and

resistance in a complex socio-religious milieu. Her representation of educated women guiding the marginalised reflects both the possibilities and limits of agency, embedded within prevailing cultural motifs of sacrifice and endurance. Mushtaq's sharp observation, "Many of our Jannaths and Muthavallis (religious leaders) have not studied the law properly" (Mushtaq, 2007, p. 60), functions as both satire and indictment. By challenging the interpretive authority of male religious leaders, Mushtaq's fiction problematizes the relationship between law, knowledge, and power. Her protagonists embody double consciousness, often forced to perform outward piety while inwardly contesting the injustices sanctioned by their communities. Mushtaq thus constructs a counter-epistemology, a narrative space where women's emotional and legal realities gain legitimacy.

Her short story collection *Banki Malae* won the Sahithya Akademi Award in 1999, underscoring her impact within regional literature. The story *Kari Nagaragalu* was translated into English as *Black Cobras* in 2007 and adapted into the critically acclaimed feature film *Hasina* (2004), which garnered multiple awards and international recognition. Further cementing her literary stature, the English translation of her Kannada collection *Heart Lamp* (*Hridaya Deepa*) became the first short-story collection to win the prestigious International Booker Prize. In her acceptance speech, Mushtaq reflected, "This book was born from the belief that no story is ever small; that in the tapestry of human experience, every thread holds the weight of the whole" (Grenier, 2025). *Heart Lamp* poignantly captures the hardships and lived experiences of Muslim women in South India, offering profound insights into their social realities.

Mushtaq's political activism has deeply influenced her writing, which often delivers sharp critiques of fundamentalist religious autocracies. Her career began at *Lankesh Daily*, where she served as a reporter focused on pressing social issues affecting women, Muslims, farmers, and Dalits. Confronted by the systemic inequalities in the judicial system that frequently deprive women of their rights, Mushtaq pursued a law degree at the age of 42 and continues to practice law to advocate for the marginalised. Her dual engagement in literature and law exemplifies the intersection of personal experience, cultural identity, and social justice, core themes reflected throughout her work and aligning with the concept of authorially defined social reality, where writers articulate the nuanced struggles of minority women within patriarchal and socio-religious frameworks.

Turning inward, B.M. Suhara's *Kinavu* (*Dream*) explicates the emotional and psychic dimensions of women's resistance. Set within feudal Muslim households, Suhara's stories examine how women internalise and negotiate patriarchal expectations. Her characters often live in what Suhara describes as "a space of silence," where suffering is normalised and self-effacement is equated with virtue. The declaration, "Muslim women are expected to sacrifice everything for the sake of the whole family" (Suhara, 2012), captures the emotional labour demanded of women, who are taught to view self-denial as a sacred duty. Through intimate portraits of domestic life, Suhara deconstructs the myth of the content, submissive woman, revealing instead the tensions between care, resentment, and suppressed desire.

Suhara's narrative strategy is marked by quiet subversion: her characters rarely rebel outwardly but harbour rich interior lives full of longing, reflection, and contradiction. This form of resistance, which is often overlooked in patriarchal readings, asserts the validity of interiority as a site of agency. Through the lens of double consciousness, Suhara captures how women construct partial forms of freedom even within tightly constrained structures. Her fiction speaks to the psychic cost of conformity, as well as the latent possibilities of emotional self-recognition and autonomy.

Despite their stylistic and thematic variations, all three writers engage in a project of authorially defined social reality, a literary approach wherein fiction serves both as critique and as imaginative re-visioning. Their narratives resist essentialist portrayals of Muslim women by foregrounding complexity, struggle, and transformation. Each writer reimagines the ethical core of religious life, not as a fixed tradition but as a space open to interpretation, moral accountability, and justice.

Collectively, the second wave foregrounds intersectionality long before the term became academic shorthand for layered identities. Their protagonists stand at the crossroads of gender, religion, and class, grappling not only with interpersonal injustice but with broader systems of knowledge production and power. The emotional, psychological, and social textures of their stories expose the limitations of both legal and theological discourses when they ignore the lived realities of women.

Through the works of Aboobacker, Mushtaq, and Suhara, the second wave marks a literary and ideological transition: from documentation to transformation, from critique to reimagination, from resignation to moral and spiritual reclamation. Their fiction bears witness not only to structural inequality but also to the profound capacity for spiritual renewal and narrative agency. In these layered portrayals, the seeds of third-wave redefinitions of Muslim womanhood are already sown, awaiting new vocabularies, new audiences, and new visions of justice.

THIRD WAVE: GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES AND INDIVIDUAL AGENCY

The narratives of the third wave of Muslim women writers reflect a more expansive global consciousness, addressing the complexities of identity in an interconnected world. Writers such as Khadija Mumthas, Saheera Thangal, Andaleeb Wajid, and Rajathi Salma engage with themes of diaspora, multiculturalism, and Islamic feminism, presenting the experiences of Muslim women within an evolving global and cultural framework.

In *Barsa*, Khadija Mumthas explores the inner conflict of her protagonist, Sabitha, who embodies a dual consciousness as she navigates both her newfound Muslim identity and her traditional cultural upbringing. Sabitha's experience as a new convert to Islam forces her to reconcile conflicting religious and cultural expectations. One of the key moments that highlights this struggle is her imagined interaction with Hajra Beevi (RA) during Umrah: "Hajra Beevi! Tired wandering between Safa-Marwa, she sits in deep distress" (Mumthas, 2007, p. 18). This moment encapsulates Sabitha's internal turmoil. She questions her place within a religious system and seeks solace by drawing parallels with Hajra Beevi's journey, a woman who also faced distress in a patriarchal context. Sabitha's personal pain, amplified by her roles as a mother and new Muslim, reflects the emotional ambivalence many women face as they try to reconcile personal, cultural, and religious identities.

Mumthas critiques patriarchal norms and the misapplication of religious laws, particularly talaq, by challenging how dominant interpretations of Islamic practices are shaped by patriarchal ideologies. The use of religious language in Barsa becomes a means of surfacing marginalised forms of knowledge that question the status quo. This critique draws a clear line between the Qur'an's egalitarian ethos and the distorted, everyday applications imposed by patriarchal structures. Through her nuanced portrayal of motherhood and faith, Mumthas constructs a new narrative of Muslim women's lives that resists conventional archetypes. By reimagining Hajra Beevi (RA) as a vulnerable, emotionally complex figure, Mumthas transforms a symbol of strength into one that mirrors the internal struggles of modern Muslim women. This juxtaposition

allows for a richer, more inclusive representation of spiritual and emotional life. In doing so, Mumthas opens a space for questioning traditional roles and forging new paths of agency within a religious framework.

In *Rabia*, Saheera Thangal explores the protagonist's struggle with religious and marital expectations. Rabia's frustration with talaq and polygamy is powerfully expressed in her words: "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!" (Thangal, 2008). Her inner conflict reflects a form of double consciousness, the psychological tension between her moral compass and the patriarchal interpretation of faith. Thangal's critique represents an epistemic challenge to male-dominated religious readings. Through Rabia's voice, the novel questions interpretations that perpetuate male dominance, advocating instead for a re-reading of Islamic texts rooted in gender justice. Thangal reimagines the social landscape of Islamic society by foregrounding the lived experiences of women, particularly within marriage. Rabia's act of questioning becomes a form of narrative agency, allowing her to challenge norms from within. By advocating for a reinterpretation of Islamic teachings through a woman-centred lens, Thangal proposes an alternate vision of Muslim womanhood, one that is active, questioning, and empowered.

In *Kite Strings*, Andaleeb Wajid's portrayal of Mehanaz illustrates the tension between ambition and duty. Mehanaz's assertion, "When a man turns indifferent, a woman has to take firm decisions. Of course, it is to safeguard the family" (Wajid, 2015), encapsulates the burden of emotional labour and the conflicted sense of responsibility many women bear. This reflects the concept of double consciousness, as Mehanaz balances her own aspirations against the social expectation of self-sacrifice. Wajid deepens this exploration in *When She Went Away*, where Maria's conversation with her mother touches on emotional truths often omitted from traditional narratives: "Your father is a good man, Maria. But even before Shehriyar came on the scene, there was something missing in my life" (Wajid, 2015, p. 158). This moment exposes the invisible emotional deficit women endure in patriarchal settings. Wajid uses such dialogues to offer alternative epistemologies, forms of knowledge based on emotional intelligence, relationality, and personal truth that challenge dominant social norms. In both novels, Wajid constructs a space of narrative agency where women make autonomous choices, even within traditional frameworks. Mehanaz's protective resolve and Maria's reconciliation with her mother's choices showcase a layered understanding of agency, not as rebellion alone, but as a negotiation between duty and desire. Wajid thus redefines Muslim womanhood as multifaceted and emotionally resonant, offering a vision that values both strength and vulnerability.

Salma's work delves deeply into the sensual and emotional interiority of women's lives, critiquing systemic injustice and patriarchal control. In *The Hour Past Midnight*, she writes, "It is beyond doubt that women can face nothing but injustice in a world that refuses to see the common humanity beyond the barriers of caste, religion, gender, and sexuality" (Salma, 2009, p. iii). This sweeping indictment lays bare the intersecting oppressions faced by women, particularly those at marginalised intersections. Through characters like Firdause, Salma examines the epistemic challenge of reclaiming identity within a patriarchal culture. Firdause's resolve is crystallised in her reflection: "Hereafter, there was nothing left for her to hold on to… Hereafter, she could not appear in the outside world" (Salma, 2009, p. 15). This line signals a symbolic withdrawal from societal norms, asserting a radical reclamation of autonomy.

In *The Hour Past Midnight*, Salma critiques gendered religious practices. The character Wahida notes, "In no household had she known of men who kept this particular fast. Whatever difficulty a family faced, it was the women who vowed to fast in order to alleviate it" (Salma, 2009, p. 408). This observation underlines the disproportionate spiritual labour expected of women, revealing how piety and sacrifice are gendered expectations. Similarly, Rahima's observation, "Once the invitations had been printed, the guests invited, and all the arrangements made, would any bride dare to come out with her true opinion?" (Salma, 2009, p. 233), critiques the performative nature of marriage, where a woman's autonomy is sacrificed for social propriety. Salma's characters thus inhabit a contested space between cultural obligation and personal truth, offering insight into the emotional burdens women carry. By emphasising these tensions, Salma creates a nuanced vision of womanhood that reclaims emotional complexity as a site of resistance. In sum, the third wave emphasises individual agency and interiority, tracing deeply personal journeys that challenge societal expectations. These narratives reflect a sophisticated understanding of identity as shaped by intersections of culture, religion, and gender. Through diverse literary forms, these writers expand the visibility of Muslim women's experiences and reimagine what it means to be seen, heard, and self-defined in a globalised world.

DISCUSSION

FIRST WAVE: FOUNDATIONS OF IDENTITY AND RESISTANCE

Figures such as P.K. Haleema, Haleema Beevi, and Amina of Ernad pioneered a literary tradition explicitly using literary and editorial platforms as public interventions. They constructed their social realities overtly through educational and reform-oriented narratives, directly confronting patriarchal and colonial narratives. Haleema's work exemplifies double consciousness as she simultaneously critiques external colonial influences and internal community constraints. Through her poetry and essays, she elevates subjugated consciousness, women's marginalised epistemic positions, into valid and public discourses. Additionally, Haleema Beevi's establishment of the magazine *Muslim Vanitha* significantly broadened public conversations about gender equity, demonstrating how these first-wave writers actively reshaped communal dialogues about women's roles. Thus, first-wave authors strategically utilised educational platforms to manifest their double and subjugated consciousness into a public-facing authorial reality.

SECOND WAVE: SOCIO-POLITICAL ENGAGEMENTS AND INTERSECTIONALITY

Authors such as Sara Aboobacker and Banu Mushtaq employed their literary narratives as explicit instruments of socio-political critique, exposing patriarchal misinterpretations of Islamic law. They created confrontational and politically engaged social narratives, directly challenging oppressive community structures. In *Breaking Ties*, Aboobacker explicitly showcases subjugated consciousness through her critique of distorted religious teachings, positioning women's lived experiences as authoritative counter-narratives. Mushtaq's characters embody double consciousness, outwardly conforming while inwardly contesting unjust legal and religious frameworks. Furthermore, the second-wave authors' literary activism often placed them at personal risk, underscoring the tangible consequences of their public engagements and heightening the

socio-political resonance of their narratives. Consequently, second-wave authors constructed narratives deeply embedded in social critique, embodying complex layers of resistance through their subjugated and double consciousness.

THIRD WAVE: GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES AND INDIVIDUAL AGENCY

Contemporary authors such as Khadija Mumthas, Saheera Thangal, Andaleeb Wajid, and Salma focus inwardly, shaping increasingly personal and reflective narrative realities, prioritising emotional interiority and individual agency within global contexts. Mumthas, for instance, crafts characters like Sabitha, whose internal struggles vividly illustrate double consciousness in a globalised, multicultural context. Thangal and Wajid highlight nuanced emotional narratives, leveraging subjugated consciousness through intimate dialogues and internal reflections that critique patriarchal structures subtly yet effectively. These third-wave writers often interweave local cultural practices with global feminist discourses, illustrating how personal struggles become emblematic of broader societal transformations and intersections with transnational feminist dialogues. Hence, third-wave authors shaped nuanced and introspective authorial realities, blending personal narratives with global feminist discourses. While first-wave authors openly positioned themselves as communal educators and reformers, second-wave authors used their voices primarily for socio-political critique, and third-wave authors emphasise nuanced individual perspectives, leveraging personal and emotional narratives to challenge societal norms.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the literary contributions of South Indian Muslim women writers provide a powerful and transformative lens through which the complexities of identity, resistance, and agency can be understood. By crafting narratives that interrogate gender, cultural, and religious norms, these writers have redefined the possibilities for Muslim women within their communities, asserting their voices in a space that has long sought to marginalise them. Their works, through the lens of authorially defined social reality, challenge dominant narratives and offer a multifaceted perspective on Muslim women's lives, addressing their struggles, resilience, and aspirations. From the early works that advocated for education and cultural preservation to the later narratives that critique contemporary social practices, these writers have used literature as a tool of empowerment, resistance, and social critique. The first wave set the foundation for challenging patriarchal structures and advocating for women's education, while the second and third waves expanded the discourse to address issues such as religious interpretation, gendered violence, and the impact of globalisation on Muslim women's identities. As their narratives evolve, these writers continue to engage with global conversations on feminism, cultural identity, and social justice, providing invaluable insights into the intersectionality of gender, religion, and society. The ongoing transformation in their works underscores a growing recognition of the need for an inclusive discourse that not only acknowledges but also celebrates the diverse experiences of Muslim women.

The significance of this body of literature lies not only in its critique of societal norms but also in its ability to redefine what it means to be a Muslim woman in contemporary society. These writers offer a vision of empowerment that reclaims autonomy, challenges oppressive structures, and calls for a more just and equitable world. Future research into the global implications of their

works, along with an exploration of how these narratives are received and understood across cultures, will further illuminate their role in reshaping the discourse on Muslim women's agency and identity in a rapidly changing world. In essence, the narratives of South Indian Muslim women writers serve as both a mirror and a beacon, reflecting the realities of their communities while guiding the way toward a future where women's voices are not only heard but embraced as a powerful force for change. Through their stories, they invite us all to question the norms that define us and to envision a more inclusive, just, and compassionate society.

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