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Muslimvadam Literature: A Generalized Narrative of Muslimism in the Two Telugu-Speaking States of India

M Jagadish Babu

Postdoctoral Research Assistant, Goldsmiths, University of London, England, United Kingdom

Corresponding Author: M Jagadish Babu

Abstract

Muslimvadam Literature, literature of Muslimism, is an emerging form of minority literature in the two Telugu-speaking states of India. Shaik Yousuf Baba, one of the prominent writers of this genre, sheds limelight on the lives of Muslims through his stories and wishes to break the stereotypes weaved around Muslim lives. In doing so, however, his representation of Muslims residing in

Telangana and Andhra Pradesh states reduces the complex diversity of Muslim lives and homogenizes the Muslim 'experience'. This paper attempts to tweak his theory of Muslimvadam from the perspective of comparative literature by using concepts such as 'plurality' and 'difference' and come up with theoretical suggestions for the inclusiveness of diverse Muslim experiences.

Keywords: Minority Literature, Muslimvadam Literature, Muslim Lives, Prejudices, Muslim Lives, Skybaba

Introduction

In his *Minority Literature: A Critique of Retrospect*, Tatawad Nagnath Ramrao defines minority literature as a "literature of protest against dominant cultural and social categories" (2015: p. 01) ^[4]. The Minority literature depicts the issues concerning hierarchies and stigmas prevalent in society and addresses the normalized brutality committed against particular sections of society. These forms of literature portray the lives of the minorities, their concerns, and their cultures through fictional stories. In the Indian context, minority literatures emerged around the time of Independence and eventually spread across different states. That was the same time during which the subaltern historians of India began to write in response to how the European colonisers perceived India and other colonies and understood or rather disqualified the cultures of the colonies as irrational, mystical, and exotic. The subaltern historians were writing in response to such an oriental narrative of India and attempting to create a counter-narrative with appropriate representations of native cultures. During the same time, Feminism entered India with extensive women writing practices through which questions of patriarchy, hierarchy, and impurity attached to women were raised. The minority literatures in India took shape during the same time. These literatures were composites of the stories and lives of people from minority religions and socio-economically weaker cultures. It is these forms of literature that raised voice against social inequalities and cultural inequalities based on categories such as caste, gender, sex and so on. These literatures document the community experiences as a whole and presents stories centred strongly on their community and their dynamics. In contrast, in so-called mainstream literature, the content of literature is dominantly centred around a single or few subjects on a vast canvas. Literatures on the minorities is important in a country like India because it brings meaning to their unique existence among the diverse and hierarchical societal living. The minority literature enables a standpoint from which the reader can get an intimate view of the cultural, psychological and religious concerns of the minority group.

Minority Literatures in Indian context:

One of the many important genres of minority literature in the Indian context is Dalit literature which contained a variety of literatures such as "marginal, aboriginal, subaltern and other groups, including minority groups like Muslims, Christians, Neo-Buddhists and also other sections of women who are the victims of physical, economic and social discrimination" (Basha, 2016: p. 57) ^[2]. Many of these literatures are written with a realistic touch to bring to the readers the reality of the minorities, fighting the oppression of upper castes and dominant religions. The newly emerging *Muslimvadam Sahityam*, literature of Muslimism, was once an integral part of the Telugu Dalit literature, and most of the Telugu Dalit anthologies featured the works of Muslims and their reflections on their lives. The states of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh are motherlands of a significant Muslim population. While the rights of these Muslims were well protected under the constitution, their lives continued to be miserable because of religious reasons and most Muslims, therefore, lived in poverty, illiteracy, and poor

living conditions. As a result, they lacked employment opportunities. In the late 20th century, a new phase in Telugu literature was marked by the emergence of Muslim minority poetry. These Muslim writers identified themselves with Dalits, as writer Khaja, a well-known Muslimvadam author, opines, because “most of the Muslims in India are Dalits who got converted into Muslims on account of the fear of Brahminism” (Rao, 2014: p.03). Eventually, these Muslim writers established their identity as Muslims and wrote extensively on the same: their living conditions and concerns.

Muslimvadam Literature as a sub-genre of Minority literature:

Muslimvadam literature then emerged as a unique path of Telugu Muslim writers through which they presented to the world their concerns and “desire for recognition as human beings first and an uninhibited desire to be accepted as fellow citizens” (Rao, 2014: p. 04). Through their works, they revolted against the discrimination acted against them, showed resentment against their religious leaders for dictating Muslim lives in the name of Islam, and advocated for reforms that protect the rights of Muslim women. Telugu literature has been the arena that “condemned social evils and spoke about realizing social justice to the politically marginalized and socially, economically suppressed sections of the society” (Rao: 2014: p. 05). For centuries, the Telugu writers were predominantly Hindus. But, the recent poets like Ismail, Afsar, and Khadar are also writing in Telugu and expanding the Telugu literary space beyond the limits of the majority communities imagined. Although majority of Muslims in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana speak Urdu and Deccani in their houses, most Muslim writers are inclined to write in Telugu and bring the aesthetics of their language and idioms to Telugu literature. Their works condemn the trend of branding ordinary Muslims in the guise of terrorism. Muslims were made scapegoats whenever bombs exploded in India. These writers express their angst regarding such issues through their works. Muslimvadam literature started in the form of poetry first. One of the popular anthologies of poems penned by Telugu Muslim writers is *Jaljala* in 1998. Skybaba, a Muslim Telugu poet and editor of *Jaljala*, first coined the term Muslimvadam in this anthology. Later, *Watan*, a collection of Muslim short stories became the landmark of Muslim literature in Telugu. This particular genre first started in India, particularly in the context of Telugu literature.

SkyBaba, in his *Author's Foreword* to the book ‘Vegetarians Only,’ an English translation volume of Skybaba’s short stories, talks about the emergence of Muslimvadam literature as says:

The discrimination and oppression that our society subjects Muslims to has greatly pained and disturbed me. My writing is a response to the double standards practiced by society. The eighty-five per cent of non-Muslims in India should understand the truth about the lives of Muslims who live amongst them. They harbour several misconceptions about Muslims, they misunderstood them and suspect them. Hindutva politics makes them do so. But I wanted to demonstrate that what they believe is not true. In reality, most Muslims lead pitiable and

miserable lives. (p. vii)

In their introduction to the book *Vegetarians Only*, called *Of Mofussil Muslim lives*, A. Suneetha and Uma Maheswari Bhrugubanda, editors of the book, talk about one of the significant thematic aspects of Muslimvadam literature. They say, “Some of the most haunting images from Skybaba’s stories are of people walking. Men and women walking in desperation, in anxiety, walking with a faint but undying hope” (p. 02). As a Telugu critic, K. Srinivasulu has observed that Skybaba’s stories have most effectively conveyed the *ekakitvatvam*, ‘the internal and external loneliness’ and sense of utter abandonment experienced by the Muslim community. (p. 02). We will see this loneliness panning out in the literary text we will be discussing later on.

Skybaba and Muslimvadam Literature:

Skybaba is the pseudonym of Shaik Yousuf Baba, who was born in 1972 in a poor Muslim household of Keshurajupally in the Nalgonda district of Telangana. He finished his BA in Nalgonda town and began to work to ease the economic burden on his parents, who worked for the local municipality. He tried out several petty businesses such as money collecting agent for a cloth trade company, setting up a cycle rental, selling soda, opening a book renting shop, pan shop, and tried his hands as an insurance agent. He incurred heavy losses and mounting debts. After a great deal of difficulty, he became a journalist, worked for several Telugu newspapers, and was in charge of the literary page in a leading Telugu daily called *Andhra Jyothi* (Suneeta; 2016. p. 136)^[7].

His literary journey began later when he involved with the Nilagiri Sahiti group under the mentorship of Dr Sunkireddy Narayana Reddy, who motivated Skybaba to write about Muslim lives. In the course of several meetings and debates he organised for this group for the next 11 years, Skybaba gave birth to *Jagne Ji Raat*, which was an anthology of Muslim poetry that he wrote for the events. He also published *Chaand Tara* and started short-lived magazines such as *Telugu Dalit voice*, *Mulki*, *Chaman*, and *Singidi*. It is interesting to see how he ended up starting a magazine such as *Telugu Dalit voice* because the voices of Muslims through fiction were largely part of the Dalit literature till the first decade of the 21st century and also because most Muslims residing in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana are Dalits converted to Muslims and the society still treats them as Dalits (Suneeta; 2016. p. 137)^[7].

When he wanted to publish his short stories and poems, which are his stances on the reality of the Muslim world in correspondence to dominant Hindu society, many publication houses did not agree to publish them. As a result, he ended up founding *Nasal Kitab Ghar*, his own publication house, which brought several other works like his, into the Telugu literary sphere and extended the horizon of expectations of Telugu readers and structure of their feeling and association with Telugu literature. Later, he also started two forums called *Haryali* and *Marfa*, which worked for reservations for Muslims in the erstwhile Andhra Pradesh and also gave space for new Muslim writers to come out (Suneeta; 2016. p. 137)^[7].

In the light of our established understanding on how minority literatures emerged in the postcolonial Indian context and how Muslimvadam literature emerged as one of

the genres of minority literature, let us consider one of Skybaba's edited short stories and attempt to understand his standpoints with Muslimvadam literature and what it serves as a genre.

Aaku Pachchani Swapnam – A Sprouting Dream, by Anwar

Aaku Pachchani Swapnam, A Sprouting Dream, written by Anwar, is one of the short stories from the collection of short stories called *Watan*, edited by Skybaba in 2018. This collection of stories contains 52 stories from 39 Muslim writers. As these stories were written and published in Telugu and no one has attempted to translate them into English so far, I take the liberty as a translator myself and translate some of the sections of the story to contest my views with the views of Skybaba. My attempt to translate few excerpts from the original Telugu story only intends to present a lucid understanding of how the theory behind Muslimvadam literature is located in the story and how the story views Muslimness.

Aaku Pachchani Swapnam is a story of two friends; Manohar and Salim. They are part of a larger friend circle among whom only Salim is a Muslim. Some of the sections of the story are constructed in the third person narrative voice while the other sections are written in the first-person narrative voice of Manohar. The third-person narrative voice presented some of the previous impressions and later impressions of Salim and the Muslim community in the story while the first-person narrative of Manohar also made some impressions through his interior monologue. The basic plot line is that Manohar's parents are hosting his upcoming birthday party for which he invites his friends except Salim. He is hesitant to call him because he is a Muslim, there is no other reason. On his birthday, he decides to go to Salim's house and invite him to the party and encounters a 'Muslim colony' for the first time. He describes what he sees there and what he feels about it. Manohar enjoys a lavish party with his other friends, and Salim misses it. Later in the day, Manohar waits with his friends at a restaurant where they usually meet, for Salim. Salim brings Manohar a gift, greets him, and convey apologies for missing the party. Manohar, eventually, realises his prejudices against Muslim, visits Salim's house on Ramzan, sees an entirely different Muslim colony, and begins to embrace what Salim is, in correspondence to the rest of his community and their relation with the rest of the society.

The Encounter of Similarity, Difference, and Uniqueness in the story:

Although Manohar keeps talking about his Hindu friends throughout the story, he does not mention their names but rather his relation to them. On the contrary, he addresses Salim only by name. Since Manohar's natural understanding of his world is inherently from a Hindu perspective, the story stands out as an engagement of a Hindu with a Muslim, where Manohar represents his friends, family and rest of his Hindu community while Salim represents himself and his community. This is a concerning construction of the plotline of the story since there is no single way of leading a Hindu or a Muslim life. Manohar being the embodiment of his friends, family, and majoritarian Hindu society, homogenizes, reduces, and streamlines into a one Hindu way of perceiving Muslims and the world. Such a framework of the story erases the plurality among the

Hindus and represents all Hindus as a single-minded people, which is not at all true. The same applies to how Manohar is the only Muslim through whom the Muslim community is understood. There are a wide range of differences between these broad religious categories and their relations in the Indian context. Through the story, we get to look at how by viewing Muslims and their lives in a particular way, Manohar breaks through the misconceptions he held against Muslims and arrives at embracing the difference that Salim and his community stands for.

A close reading of 'difference' in the text:

The story opens with the *Azan* coming from the Muslim settlement in the morning, nearby where Manohar lives. Just a day before his birthday, he woke up to *Azan* and did not feel irritated for the first time. He used to get annoyed by *Azan* before and never understood why Muslims arrange mics for it and wake everyone up from their sleep. He never understood or tried to understand why they cannot just read *Azan* in their houses, why they have to call god such early in the morning, and what it is about the timings of *Namaz*. We do not know if he reacts to the late-night *Bhajans* hosted by Hindus and early morning *Suprabhat*, in the same way. Based on the text, we could say that this irritation towards early morning *Namaz* and about the timings, mics, and call to the god comes from the fact that he does not know why they do it, which is why he questioned them. If he had known why they do it and tried to understand their beliefs and culture, maybe he would have not felt the same way towards *Azan*. So, this is not simply a question of *Azan* disturbing his sleep and much deeper than that. This is the first encounter of his disregard to understand how Muslims lives are different from his.

But that day was a different day for him because he did not get annoyed by *Azan*. Rather, he got reminded of Salim and woke up from bed. He is been thinking about how he invited his other Hindu friends to his fancy birthday party but not Salim. He was wondering if he should. Because he knows that his other friends would not come if Salim is invited, and even if they come they will not be comfortable. As a result, he could not invite Salim when he invited his other friends. But Manohar has been friends with Salim for three years, so he decides to go to Hanmakonda where Salim lives and invite him. This conflicting interior monologue of Manohar presents his relation to two extreme and conflicting religious groups of India and their perceptions of each other. His monologue paints a picture of confusion. Manohar does not hate Salim. But he could not invite him because he would lose his other friends. But he had been friends with Salim for three years. So, he could not invite him. Another interesting detail of the story is that Manohar always disliked the sounds of *Azan* that caused irritation to him. He did not feel the same on the morning of his birthday because he has been thinking about Salim and the sounds of *Azan*, instead, reminded him of Salim and not daily discomfort. Salim's correspondence to his religion is deeply seated in Manohar's mind that he could not feel the same way about *Azan* because of his guilt for Salim. So, we see individual versus community conflicted dynamics here. Manohar hated *Azan* because he does not know why they do it. But he does not hate Salim because he knows him for three years. Manohar is scared about losing his other Hindu friends by inviting Salim. But, he wants to invite him.

The reasons for this conflicted phenomenon are unstated in the story. It seems like the author assumed that the readers understand the conflict because they know the conflict in reality. If this assumption is not made by the author about the knowledge of the reader about the true religious conflict in India, the conflict could remain mysterious to the readers. This close relation Muslimvadam literature has with the reality of Muslims, in general, is also an idea that the comparatist, the practitioner of comparative literature, do not agree with. Because the reality of the Muslims is a fact. Once the reality is put down in literature, in a story or a poem, the real or true aspect of it is no longer read as truth but rather as a fictional detail probably of a real experience. Thus, the relation between reality of Muslims in Telugu-speaking states and the conception of Muslimvadam literature leads to a series of serious alligations against the Hindus and paints a singular picture of the lives of Muslims as nothing but poor and vulnerable.

Manohar reaches the Muslim colony in Hanmakonda where Salim lives. He describes his first encounter with the Muslim colony in the following way:

He got off the bus in Hanmakonda and walked from Machili Bazar to Ujlibase. It was not walking that was uncomfortable to Manohar but rather walking in that locality. He vaguely remembered the address Salim once told him, and decided to invite him. He was uncomfortable, he began to wonder that he would not have come if he knew the condition of this place. Not even in his dreams had Manohar thought that the conditions of the locality would be this unhygienic. He thought that the locality would be one of the beautiful places in the district with the buildings of rich and educated people. In reality, some were lying down on the street road, some were sitting and relaxing, and others were taking showers. The locality looked like a great art director's setting of a *gareeb basti*, slum. The colony looked like it was not even part of the municipality. "That cannot be the beautiful locality of 'Saudi Ka Maal!' We had only seen those eyes and admired the beauty behind the burqa. Those ladies stay there? When I looked at the locality, although Salim was my close friend, I did not understand why at one corner of my heart I felt like Salim was not from our country and the same feeling remained in my nerves. The streets were narrow. The houses with soil walls looked like the discoveries of the archaeological department. The curtains of the street door shadowed the interior of the houses. If I knocked on the latch to call someone out, it looked like it would fall off. If I knocked on the doors, they seemed like they would break into pieces. When I touched the walls, the soil fell on the ground separating from the wall. Looked at my face of quest, 'Kaun Hona?' asked an old man." (p. 74, translated by M. Jagadish Babu)

This paragraph opens with the assumptions Manohar had about the Muslim locality to be something beautiful, progressive, and educated where those beautiful women who hide behind burqas live. He also assumed all Muslims to be rich and was shocked to see it was not true. Let us try to understand his perception of Muslims a little more carefully. In his imagination, Muslims are rich, which means

upper class. They are beautiful, progressive, and educated and live in such a locality that does not look like a slum or a middle-class settlement. From where possibly have he taken this particular kind of Muslim living to be the only Muslim way of living? Did the society teach him about a Muslim lifestyle or is the source of this information some other place? Why would anyone want to represent Muslims in a way that is not like the majority of the Indians living in the middle class and lower-class settlements? So, this assumption of Manohar is not simply a child assuming someone to be something. This assumption is fed into his mind by his community and surroundings. This assumption is implanted to create a narrative of difference of Muslims that are not like most of Indians. Author Anwar is trying to imply the political and other ideological motives of the Hindu or larger society that want to paint a particular picture of Muslims to 'other' them in a particular way. So, although Manohar finally experienced the reality of Muslim lives, he did not try to correct his misconceptions but rather related their conditions to him – him being an upper-class Hindu man, and felt disgusted. That was explicit through his descriptions of the locality and people. The paragraph also gives us an idea of how Muslim women are perceived by the non-Muslim world. They are seen as the objects of beauty who cover themselves under the burqa. That reminds me of another story I read in *Watan* book where a famous idiom is used in the short story to describe how Muslim women are perceived. The idiom is that 'it is worth spending a tola of gold to have sex with a Muslim woman.' That is an extremist and problematic objectification of Muslim women who are reduced to nothing but exotic sexual objects under the burqa. So, the Muslim women are not just subjected to objectification, patriarchy and other religious boundaries and rules, but also outside these demarcations and across the society.

When Manohar enquires an old man passing by about Salim, the old man asks:

Where does he stay? What is his father's name? he asked. For a moment, it felt like I do not know how to speak Telugu. I had been friends with some Muslims and did not learn at least four Urdu words. Would he tell me the address? Wishing he would, I spoke half languages, enacted the rest with gestures, and told him what I knew. 'He studies degree with me. He is fair, thin, and stands my height.' Dekho beta! There are a lot of Salim's here. One works in a hotel, one drives an auto, and another sells fruits. The Salim, who is fair, works in a leather shop. I do not know if he is studying. His house is at the end of this street. Ask for Yakubmia ka beta; you will get directions, he replied. (p. 74, translated by M. Jagadish Babu)

The first part of this excerpt portrays how despite his friendship associations with other Muslim friends, Manohar do not know a single word of Urdu and could not understand a thing the old man was saying. This shows his engagement with the difference his friends, particularly Salim come with. This depicts how deeply or otherwise, Manohar is in relation to his Muslim friends and how their difference is not embraced and unidentified and ignored. Following that, the rest of the paragraph talks about old man's response. While he is talking about different Salim's, he is

representing the oneness they are all connected through, that is poverty, underdevelopment, and mere scope of opportunities to make a living. The cultural identity of those Salims unify into one single identity of a Salim who is not progressive. The fact that the old man is not aware of that one studying Salim but is aware of every other Salim and their occupation also, at a level, erases the varieties of Muslim lives and condenses their identity down to one singular or kind of identity. The same community in which Salim lives think of themselves as nothing else but unprivileged, poor, and uneducated employees.

Manohar describes his birthday party. He says:

The birthday party had begun in the afternoon itself. We were all at my house till evening. We had ice creams, cold drinks, snacks, pastries, and biryani, played cards, watched different TV channels, listened to songs on the CD player and danced. We secretly smoked and avoided drinks. Everyone wanted to watch a film, but I knew that the first show was impossible. So, I told them that I had work, took them outside, and later went out with them. (p. 75, translated by M. Jagadish Babu)

This paragraph paints an entirely different picture of the cultural location Manohar comes from, in correspondence to previous cultural location. He seems to be a rich Hindu kid, and that could be the reason why his first encounter with a poor Muslim-living locality was not good. So, the difference here is not just of two religions but also classes. His response to seeing Muslims or people sitting, sleeping, and taking baths on the streets is not normal because he did not live in such conditions of life, and he belongs to a location that is clean, hygiene, and well-maintained. But, I wonder if his response to what he saw in the Muslim locality is purely a response from a class perspective. I wonder if he has never walked or passed by a slum where lower caste Hindus or migrants live. Will his encounter of Muslim colony for the first time and the following reaction be different from his encounter of lower caste or class Hindus? Is his encounter of poor Muslim colony and his reaction particularly different because it destroyed his assumptions of Muslim lives into shackles? This is an important question to raise.

Later in the story, when they were waiting for Salim at the restaurant because he could not make it to the party, Salim arrives and presents Manohar with a pen and wishes him a birthday greeting with a hug and apologizes for being late. Manohar looks at his other friends who are not comfortable with Salim. He remembers that they demanded parties, drinks, and film screening from him, while Salim expected nothing. Manohar, then, sees the differences existed within the differences they are living in, which is that 'his friends' demanded things from him while Salim, who was seen as another, did not expect anything. That brings several thoughts to Manohar's head, and he begins to question a lot of assumptions he has about Salim and Muslims and breaks through them.

Towards the end of the story:

Salim brought a big tiffin box full of Sheer Khurma on Ramzan. He wished Ramzan mubarak to my parents and took me to his house. It is the same locality. This time, the same locality is lit up and shining like the

moon. Everyone passed by greeted 'Eid Mubarak' and hugged me. All those propagations I stuffed in my head were broken into pieces. Muslims had vanished. My heart felt full in their dear embrace. Salim sprinkled scents on me and fed me biryani. I spent the rest of my day amid happiness, fragrance, handshakes, hugs and talks. On the way back home, on every wall passed by, I wanted to write 'Oh Muslim brothers! You are the sprouting dreams of this nation' with red mud. Instead, I wrote it in my heart..! (p. 76, translated by M. Jagadish Babu)

Manohar's perception of Muslim colony has changed. Now, he embraces this place and its culture. If he was the same old Manohar, despite the decorations and the heart-felt invitation of Salim, Manohar could have never felt this way about Salim and his cultural location. It is his effort to question his prejudices about Muslims and the way he looked for answers that changed his perception of Muslims. Manohar talks to his father if there are any Muslim employees in his office. And the father replies that there is only employee and he is a watchman. He wonders if his college has any Muslim employees and realizes that only workers in the canteen, lab attendees, and night watchmen are Muslims and the rest of them in the roles of power are Hindus. Then, he generally looks at the society outside and wonders what kind of work the Muslims do. And he could only remember auto drivers, mechanics, porters etc. and not in any other employment space that weighs some power in society. Then, he acknowledges the difference that Salim comes from and embraces it.

Criticism and Conclusion:

In his *Author's Foreword* to the book 'Vegetarians Only,' Skybaba writes about what he calls Muslim literature and Muslimvadam literature:

Muslim life has been excluded from the world of Telugu stories. Even Muslims did not write about their own lives. Such a trend truly began with people of my generation, with the growth of Muslimvadam. Despite this several writers still hesitate to call their stories Muslim stories. I have put together only those stories that narrate lives of downtrodden Muslims and have confidently called them Muslim stories. Through these stories I want to bring into focus the reality of their lives that remains *adhure*, incomplete or unfurnished. This may be one reason why there is much debate on these stories, directly or indirectly. (p. ix)

He is making several interesting claims here about Muslim writers before his time who did not write about their lives, and how his generation of Muslim writers have explicated the reality of Muslims through their works. Now, it is important to locate and understand the religious and socio-cultural contexts of the Muslim writers of his previous generation. Until recently, i.e., 40 years back, the literature of Muslim writers, at least in the context of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh that he is talking about, was predominantly religious in nature. The nature of art being literature or writing here, the Muslim writers were particular about their creation of art that does not overrule the creation of their god because it is sinful for them to create something outside the realm of creation of Allah. So, what was written in the

form of literature was a particular kind of writing practice that strictly adheres to the religious beliefs of Islam. To complicate this context further, we need to look at the socio-cultural location of Muslim writers before Skybaba's generation. This takes us back to the 1970s and before. The writers of those times were typically from upper caste and upper class with a little bit or grounded background in education and had the social mobility to come out as writers and publish their works. Let us not forget that there will be exceptions to this scenario. So, the background of these Muslim writers was a clear combination of a certain class and social privilege that enabled them to write and share their writings belonging to a particular school of philosophy. These same writers could have written prose and poetry that was not necessarily adhering to the religious beliefs and practices, but they never made their way to the public to break the structure of feeling or horizon of expectations of readers of those times. So, in a way, what Skybaba is saying is true. The Muslim writers of those days did not write and share with the world, what it means to be a Muslim in a country like India. Former Andhra Pradesh was no exception to such an environment. The religious Muslim writers writing in Urdu or Deccani did not allow any kind of literature that was outside the realm of religion. When people like Skybaba walked out of such institutions and began to write in Telugu, it was not easy for them as well. Because people like SriSri, Viswanatha Satyanarayana, Raavi Sastry, Gidugu Ramamurthy, Gurram Jashua etc. had set up a different structure of feeling and horizon of expectations for the Telugu literature audience. So, Muslimvadam as a literature to be identified by people had taken a long time. And yes, the generation of Muslim writers Skybaba belongs to had extensively written about what is meant to be a Muslim in South India.

However, what bothers me is what is being presented as Muslimvadam literature. Skybaba strongly claims that he had put together the life narratives of poor Muslims in the form of stories and called them Muslim literature, which he calls the incomplete reality of Muslims. This generalization is a problematic stake for the diverse Muslim population living in places like Hyderabad. Muslimvadam literature as a genre and literature produced under its influence strongly underrepresent the diverse Muslim population of the Telugu-speaking states. This perspective not only defines the conditions of living, opportunities for Muslims to work and progress, and how society treats them. Through the generalization of these varieties of elements that he got to present through his stories, he is defining the Muslimness of the Muslim population in the South-Indian context.

While I agree with Skybaba and many other Muslimvadam literature writers on the importance of voicing and representing the Muslimness of Telugu-speaking Muslims in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana in literature, I wonder what their theoretical standpoints, which gave birth to Muslimvadam literature, do to the identity of Muslims which in itself erases difference. Does Muslimvadam literature as a genre, construct an identity about Muslims? Is it one particular kind of identity or is it accounting for the differences among Muslim lives and incorporating those differences? If this literature is painting a particular picture of Muslims in India, is it an appropriate representation? Let me establish the fact that the stories in *Watan* are of various kinds of Muslims, starting from stories of Dalits converted into Muslims, poor Muslims, Muslim women, small-scale

businesses of Muslims, rich Muslims, to non-religious Muslims. Each one of these kinds of stories has a different story to tell and a different perspective of the Muslimness people live with. But if you look into the emergence of Muslimvadam literature, the need to voice and represent their lives came into being because the literatures that depicted Muslims till then did not represent the reality of Muslims accurately. The rest of the non-Muslim society of India also held prejudices against them and did not treat them well. As a result, they were forced into underdevelopment, poverty, and oppression. While this may hold as a fact, this is not the case with all the Muslims in the country or at least we cannot speak on behalf of everyone's experience with the non-Muslim society and if it was oppressive and other things. This underlying belief about the common crowd of Muslims negates the differences that exist among Muslims. This killing of difference gives rise to one kind of identity across multiple realities. For instance, there are rich and powerful Muslims in Hyderabad involved in several secular and religious businesses. Some of them marry from outside the country and have maids and servants working for them. Being in the place of power, they probably assert such natural dominance and power with which they live. But they are not part of the stories or their existence is not part of the Muslimness that Skybaba is depicting through these stories. So, he has a particular kind of Muslimness in his mind that exists in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana that he wants to represent through his stories. What kind of Muslimness is then he is talking about? Is it the religious beliefs, cultural life and routine, occupations, food, customs etc. that construct a Muslimness? Can this Muslimness be the same across the two states? Because there are all kinds of Muslims starting from converted Muslims and Muslims who are descendants of a foreign Islamic origin, to lower class and upper-class Muslims and Muslims living in rural and urban locations to Muslims who encounter other cultures. So, what Muslimness is Skybaba referring to? The problem with the theory of Muslimvadam literature is that it defines what Muslimness means through the stories for us, which should not be the case. It begins by assuming that all Muslims in the country or particularly in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana are poor and oppressed and backward and not progressive. While a proportion of such standpoint is factually true, stories like *Aaku Pachchani Swapnam* sheds a problematic light on the good cause of this minority literature genre.

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