



Sahitya Akademi

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meet the author

Sarah Aboobacker





named Aboobacker in May 1953 even before her results revealed that she had scored a first class and married off in October that very year.

She was forced willy-nilly to don the burkha at her marital home in Mangalore, even though wearing it had never been compulsory in her natal home. Such and similar restrictions on women and their movements in an educated family astounded Sarah, but she had to perforce flow with the tide. The next three decades went by with the birth of 4 sons and their growing up. Sarah was now a fulltime housewife with little opportunity to do anything remotely literary in a household that did not believe in women's education or liberty, though the men had opened up to modern influences. It was difficult for Sarah to even read a newspaper since that was meant for the men in the outer part of the house and rarely reached the inner rooms. Yet, over a period of time, Sarah was able to persuade her husband to get her books from the library, though not necessarily of her preference, for reading. As his was a transferable job, once they set up house by themselves around 1963, she herself became a library member and joined women's associations to further her own interests and slowly opened up to

Sarah Aboobacker, a prominent writer in Kannada, was born on June 30th, 1936 in a Muslim family in Kasargod. Her mother was Zainabi and her father Pudiypura Ahamed, a progressive advocate. Born as the only, much prayed for daughter alongside four brothers, Sarah, nevertheless, had to face considerable opposition from the conservatives around when her father chose to send her to the local Kannada school till her matriculation. This was a privilege that had been denied to all young Muslim girls of the region till then, as it was the norm to marry them off at 9-10 years of age. As community pressure precluded further studies, Sarah was engaged to an engineer from Mangalore



With her husband Aboobacker



The Family Photo

the world around, during their sojourns at various places in Karnataka.

Though Sarah did attempt to write some stories and articles during this juncture, these did not see the light of day as the important dailies and weeklies of the 1970s refused to publish them. It was only in 1981 that Sarah's first article written in response to an editorial about communal harmony was published in the progressive weekly "Lankesh Patrike". Due to the encouragement she received from the editor of the magazine, Sarah decided to give voice to the problems of Muslim women, which had not found a voice till then. Generally, the community she specifically portrays is the one she hails from that of the Malabar Beary. Yet, most of the generalities and problems portrayed are present in other Muslim communities as well. Quite a few of her preoccupations could also be seen as symbolic of oppressive structures in other communities and religions too.

In her first novel "Chandragiriya Teeradalli", initially serialized in "Lankesh Patrike", she portrays the agonies of the innocent Muslim women who are often subjected to triple talaq at one go (effectively, divorce) by their husbands in the

heat of the moment only to repent at leisure later to no avail. The main impact of the divorce is, however, on the innocent woman who must, as per the extant practice, marry another man and consummate the marriage with him for at least a day be divorced by him before she can remarry her first husband. Most of the women find this practice unbearable and repugnant so much so some even commit suicide. Through her portrayal of this very common problem faced by the Muslim women, Sarah has voiced the genuine need for change in attitude and law that governs her community. The novel's publication raised a furore of denials and accusations against Sarah and even ostracism in orthodox Muslim circles. She also had to face physical intimidation from some Muslim youths when she went to speak at a regional seminar in Puttur in 1985. The incident paradoxically had a positive impact on her writing career as it made Sarah all the more determined that her voice would not be silenced.

In her works, Sarah takes up women-specific problems of serial marriage and polygamy as in *Sahana* and *Vajragalu* or that of single / unmarried motherhood as in *Panjara*. Many of her novels are written from a Muslim woman's

point of view, "more acted upon than acting" since she is given hardly any say even in matters which concern her a lot. Short stories like "Huttu" deal with the problems of serial pregnancies and "Moole Muttida Hulu" with the agony of a woman who is abandoned even by the son she has struggled to bring up. Sarah's brand of feminism is not militant; yet, it raises important questions about the justice of the man-woman equations in Muslim societies as also other Indian communities. Yet, as Sabiha Bhoomi Gowda points out, most of the main male characters in Sarah's works are stereotypical: they are often uneducated and hail from the lower strata of society, wreaking considerable suffering on their women as they view them as puppets or sub-human things, to be pushed around at their will. Though considerable critical writing about Sarah's works highlights her concerns with the Muslim woman's world, it is also to be noted, as Asha Devi M.S. points out, that her world view has an emphasis that is rather life-centred, than merely woman-centred.

In fact, a considerable part of her work does deal with multi-dimensional issues such as

communal riots and the insecurity of the poor as in the short story "Arakshitha" or with the problem of corruption as portrayed in *Tala Odeda Doni* or her Kannada translation of DGP Srikumar's *Dharmada Hesarinanalli* about the Godhra carnage. Sarah even traces the rise of fanaticism in some of the misguided fringe groups in the Muslim community to the availability of black money once smuggling became common in the Kasargod region in her novels *Pravaha* and *Suliyalli Sikkavaruru*.

Sarah's main concerns in her works have thus not merely been about the Muslim women's dilemmas, but have also been concerned with significant issues such as linguistic and communal harmony and social advancement. She has been active both on the literary and the social front as a strong voice raised for social change and the uplift of the oppressed, be they silenced by caste, gender, class, race, ethnicity, language or religion. This is amply evidenced by the variety of themes and concerns she writes about both in her creative works as well as prose essays, besides the social forums in which she is present as an active member.



With Kannada Writers



Being Awarded the Honorary Doctorate by the Mangalore University

CHRONOLOGY

- 1936 Born at Kasargod, in Kerala
- 1953 Married to Sri Aboobacker, an engineer
- 1981 "Lankesh Patrike", publishes her response to its editorial on communal harmony
- 1982 "Chandragiriya Teeradalli" serialized in the same journal. It is published as a book 2 years later by them. Expanded and republished in 1991 by the author. Several other novels, books of essays, translations and short story collections follow (see bibliography)
- 1985 The Puttur incident takes place in January. In November, her husband passes away, but the Shahbano case and its impact on Muslim women's lives impel her to raise her voice soon after the traditional period of mourning is past.
- 1990-94 President, Karavali Lekhakiyara mattu Vachakiyara Sangha
- 1995 Karnataka Rajyotsava Award
- 2006 Nadoja award of Kannada University, Hampi
- 2008 Honorary Doctorate, Mangalore University
- 2009 Presented a felicitation volume, being the first woman writer in the district and the first Muslim woman writer in the state to be so honoured
- 2010 Publishes her autobiography "Hottu Kantuva Munna"
- 2011 A novel in progress "Hijaru"

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

I NOVELS

- 1984 Chandragiriya Thiradalli (Translated into Malayalam., Tamil, Telugu, Marathi, Oriya, and Hindi and prescribed as text in Bangalore, Mangalore and Kuvempu Universities) The Tamil version won the Sahitya Akademi Translation Prize and was made into a feature film.
- 1985 Sahana
- 1988 Vajragalu
- 1991 Kadana Viraama
- 1994 Suliyalli Sikkavaru
- 1997 Tala Odeda Doni
- 2004 Panjara

II SHORT STORY COLLECTIONS

- 1989 Chappaligalu
- 1992 Payana
- 1996 Ardha Ratriyalli Huttida Kusu
- 1999 Kheddah
- 2004 Sumayya (Folktales)
- 2007 Gaganasakhi

III TRANSLATIONS (FROM MALAYALAM TO KANNADA)

- 1992 Manomi orig. by Kamala Das
- 1998 Bale orig. by B.M. Sohara
- 2000 Naninnu Nidrisuve orig. by P.K. Balakrishnan
- 2007 Turthu Paristhithiya Karala Mukha orig. by Echara Warriar
- 2009 Dharmada Hesarinalli orig. by R.B. Srikumar (retired DGP)

IV COLLECTIONS OF ARTICLES

- 1997 Lekhana Guccha
2002 Anavarana
2007 Sahitya, Samskriti mattu Mahile (pub. Kannada Univ., Hampi)

V OTHERS

- 2001 Aisharamada Aladalli (An American travelogue)
2002 Teladuva Modagalu (A Collection of Radio Plays)
2010 Hottu Kanthuva Munna (An Autobiography)

LIST OF AWARDS AND HONOURS

I AWARDS FOR BOOKS

- 1984 Best Novel Award from the Karnataka Sahitya Academy for "Chandragiriya Tiradalli"; Mallika Award of Kannada Sahitya Parishat
1985 Vardhamana Udayonmukha Award for "Sahana"
1994 Anupama Niranjana Award of Karnataka Lekhakiyara Sangha for "Suliyalli Sikkavaru"; Smt Ratnamma Hegde Mahila Sahitya Prasasthi
1997 Shivananda Patil Award for "Tala Odeda Donialli"
1998 D. Javare Gowda Trust Award for "Pravaha-Suli"
1998 H.V. Savitamma Trust Award for "Bale"
2001 Bhasha Bharati Sanman of the Central Govt. for "Tala Odeda Donialli"

II OTHER HONOURS

- 1991 Karnataka Sahitya Academy Award
1995 Karnataka Rajyotsava Award
1999 Sahitya Bhushana Award of Chitradurga Basavakendra Murugarajendra Matha
1999 Smt Sarojadevi Sriharsha Award
1999 Danachinthamani Attimabbe Award, Karnataka Govt
2001 Best Story Award for the Tamil film "Jamila" based on "Chandragiriya Tiradalli"
2003 Dr. Baba Saheb Ambedkar Award of Gorur Foundation
2005 Alva's Nudisiri Award
2005 "Nadoja" Award of Kannada University, Hampi
2006 Sandesha Award for Literature
2007 Nanjangudu Tirumalamba Literary Award of the Saswathi Foundation
2008 Honorary Doctorate Award of Mangalore University
2009 Honoured with a felicitation volume

III MEMBERSHIPS

- 1987- 90 Member, Karnataka Sahitya Academy
1990- 94 President, Karavali Lekhakiyara mattu Vachakiyara Sangha
1991- 94 Member, Doordarshan Preview Committee
1991- 94 Member, Executive Committee, Kannada University, Hampi
1992- 95 Member, Advisory Board for Kannada Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi



Being Awarded the Nadoja Title by the Kannada University