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Filmmaker's Biography

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'My' Camera and the Possibilities for 'Our' Stories

Mother…mother…mother…mother…
In the therapist's chair, the blame for every fold in life is outsourced to her.
She from whom I inherited wings.

Every day I walk past a thousand images of beautiful cages. They are everywhere; on the road to work, the ads that flash on my laptop, the films I love, the stories that make me cry.

My tired dusty wings and the shining comfort of cages.

But…the matriarch who ran the estates, the woman who ran away from home, the one who used to shut the door at her husband…
It must be them. As soon as I touch the edges of a cage, I flinch back.
The metal always hits me with electric shock.

As Alisa Lebow (2012) has pointed out, first person filmmaking could be termed as a ‘cinema of we’ instead of a ‘cinema of me.’ In the case of *My Mother’s Daughter* (Nizaruddin 2011) ‘my’ story was invariably entangled with the stories of earlier generations of women from my mother’s side of the family. Growing up in Kerala, India, during the 1980s and 1990s, in what can be termed as a conservative Muslim family, required negotiations that were often frustrating for my younger self. Interestingly, the trickiest dialogues I had were with the world outside of my family. To this world, a headscarf wearing Muslim girl was very often a ‘victim.’[1] Assumptions about the lack of agency of a Muslim woman who wears a headscarf or veil are hardly specific to Kerala (Hoodfar 2001). At the same time, the figure of a traditional Muslim woman from Kerala, an *ummaachi*,[2] who was a constant presence during many of my tricky interactions with the world outside of the family, was definitely rooted in the Malayali cultural landscape. As the only teenage girl in my neighbourhood and school who wore a headscarf, I learnt to hate this figure, whose rightful place was supposedly in an earlier era or generation.

Despite my resentment, the tag of the helpless *ummaachi* continued to follow me. The matrilineal tradition of my mother’s side of the family made things even more complicated. While growing up, I was surrounded by stories about great grandmothers who were formidable figures. According to these stories, they were key figures in managing the family affairs and were the ones to make important financial decisions. None of them fitted the victimizing description of the *ummaachi* that I frequently encountered. Of course, as one of the very few Muslim communities in South Kerala that continue to relate to its matrilineal past, the Muslims from my mother’s locality (Kurakkanni at Varkala in Thiruvananthapuram district) are not a representative sample of the Muslims in Kerala. In a situation where ‘the Muslim’ is often constructed as a flat essence (Devji 1992), however, it is important to map diverse forms of life.

The complexity of lived experiences in my family was beyond the scope of the stereotypical accounts about Muslims that proliferated around me. The film *My Mother’s Daughter* began as an effort to portray this complexity. At the same time, this portrayal was not intended to create a glorified picture of a Muslim matrilineal universe where women did not face any discrimination. How far the matrilineal tradition in Kerala can be viewed as a challenge to patriarchy is debatable (Eapen and Kodoth 2003). Any which way, after my grandmother’s generation, the matrilineal tradition was slowly on its way out. Rather than coming up with a ‘positive’ narrative about Muslim women, I was more interested in using the production and pre-production processes of *My Mother’s Daughter* to confront, and if possible, make sense of the contradictory positions that I used to find myself in due to my gender, religion, and family background. Being a woman, being a woman in Kerala, being a woman from a conservative Muslim family—none of this was easy. Unsafe streets, travelling on public transport with the ammunition of safety pins to deal with potential gropers, tales about grandmothers who were in control of their lives, hushed whispers about the dangers of any sexual transgression, the insistence that one should study hard and be very ambitious, expectations about the coy acceptance of an arranged marriage, snide remarks from acquaintances about the sad plight of Muslim women, having a headscarf-wearing mother who used to enjoy defeating neighbourhood *Maulanas* in bitter theological arguments about women’s rights in Islam—all these demanded a nuanced articulation.

I hoped that the filmmaking process would end with a narrative closure that will allow me to make peace with the chaos and contradictions around me. This must be the ill-placed belief that prompts many a filmmaker to turn the camera on themselves or their family. At least in my case, I can say with confidence that such a happy ending did not ensue. I started filming in 2009 and the film was completed in 2011. At the end of the process, my family still wanted me to have an arranged marriage and I found that my arguments with them were becoming all the more exhausting. Animating the memories of great-grandmothers who all seemed to have a mind of their own did not buy me any respite from the expectations about a dutiful ‘Muslim’ daughter. Still, there were moments during the filmmaking process when the camera served as a shield, which allowed me to confront and question instead of the usual routine of leaving the

room in anger or bursting into tears during an argument. This could be seen as a therapeutic use of video (Dowmunt 2010).

While the camera did allow me to probe deeper into the situation at hand, I was also anxious about charges of self-indulgence that often get levelled against autobiographical projects. As Tony Dowmunt[3] points out, it is 'difficult to separate self-indulgence from revelation' in autobiographical work and the need to separate both is questionable (Dowmunt 2010, 154). At the same time, my experience of constantly having to explain to almost every other person whom I met that I was not the headscarf-wearing-Muslim-girl-stereotype[4] of their imagination also made me less inhibited about charges of self-indulgence. 'My' story has been told again and again. Quarrelling with the victimhood in those stories was often almost like quarrelling with a shadow. In such a circumstance, opening up the complexity of my experience through filmmaking felt like a necessary act.

The *ummaachi* tag suggests that the choices available to Muslim women are pre-determined because of their upbringing and religion. This notion about the limitations that Muslim women face is prevalent in popular narratives and films. Let us take the case of an online article about two Muslim women characters in Malayalam films (Izzie 2013). The two films in question, *Padam Onnu Oru Vilapam* (Chandran 2003) and *Ayalum Njanum Thammil* (Jose 2012), depict very diverse social situations. Shahina from *Padam Onnu Oru Vilapam* is an underage girl from a poor family who is forced into a marriage with a much older man who already has a wife and family. Though Shahina's desire is to continue her education, her circumstances thwart this wish. Sainu from *Ayalum Njanum Thammil* is an educated girl pursuing a medical degree. However, she is unable to choose her Christian lover because of family compulsions. Despite the differences in their age and social circumstances, their 'Muslimness' becomes a cause for the tragedies in their life.[5] Izzie (2013) writes that such films will have a 'lasting impact on the parts of Muslim societies who see their daughters not as human beings with a right to their own life but rather a burden or a stalwart of their family honor' (Izzie 2013).

Based on my own experiences, I could not relate to such accounts that reduce the lives of diverse sets of Muslim women into an essence of victimhood. Because of the matrilineal tradition in my mother's family, a girl child was seen as the heir of the family and not as a burden. As far as the question of 'family honour' and the control of

female sexuality are concerned, they were major preoccupations for all communities around me. This does not mean that underage marriage or polygamy is not an issue for the Muslim community in Kerala. Narratives that define Muslim women in terms of their so-called ‘victimhood,’ however, turn a blind eye to the agency of individual women and their diverse life worlds.

So, for me, *My Mother’s Daughter* was part of an effort to articulate the heterogeneity of experiences, which are subsumed within the category of Muslim women. Here I was working with a framework which acknowledges that the subject is constituted through the ‘process of naming and imag(in)ing’ (Lebow 2008, xviii). The dominant imagination around me placed religious identity as the defining factor which limited the choices available to Muslim women. In *Padam Onnu Oru Vilapam*, Shahina’s Hindu friend leaves for higher studies and possibly a future with more freedom. All Shahina can do is yearn for such a future which is forever out of her grasp. The prevalent religious symbolism in the movie underscores that the diverse life trajectories of both the girls result from Shahina’s ‘Muslimness.’

The self that *My Mother’s Daughter* constitutes narrates a very different story of being a Muslim woman. This is because, unlike Shahina, religious difference did not determine the choices available to me and my non-Muslim women friends. All of us had to face the challenges posed by the patriarchal set up in which we lived. After finishing graduation, many of us wanted to move out of Kerala to pursue higher studies. Some of us were able to move out. Others could not because their parents insisted that girls should not go far off for higher studies. I was able to leave my hometown to study filmmaking in Delhi. Many of my non-Muslim friends could not make such a journey. Unlike what popular culture might portray, however, the lives of Muslim and non-Muslim women may not always follow predictable trajectories on the basis of their religion.

In fact, much of the social mores that tried to limit my own choices came from the local codes for young women in Kerala. Almost all the communities in the state insist on a heterosexual union, preferably through an arranged marriage. The ‘social conservatism’ (Osella and Osella 2007, 2) of my family’s ‘Malayali values’ was often a cause for confrontation between us. In this case, it is difficult to distinguish between the expectations from a dutiful Malayali daughter and those from a dutiful Muslim daughter. Stereotypical discourses around women from the minority Muslim

community in Kerala often eclipse such fluid identities. In other words, there are more ways in which ‘Muslim women’s issues’ could overlap with the ‘Malayali women’s issues’ than it is generally acknowledged.

So, in *My Mother’s Daughter*, my effort was to engender a relational construction of self (Lebow 2008) where my story was entangled with the stories of various other women. Some of them are women from earlier generations of my family. However, they are not the only ones who are part of my relational construction of self. The film also anticipates audience members, especially from Kerala, who can see traces of their own lives within the unravelling of the conflict in my family. I hoped that this could lead to an understanding about the shared nature of our situations, which might contain a possibility to destabilize common sense notions put forward by stereotypes.[6] The reception of the film at the International Documentary and Short Film Festival of Kerala in my hometown Thiruvananthapuram, in 2012 reassured me that this anticipation was not out of place. After the screening, several people came forward and talked about how the film touched a chord that resonated with their own experiences. Here, our interactions were based on the common features in our situation and not the ‘otherness’ of the figure of *ummaachi*.

The way in which *My Mother’s Daughter* engages with my family’s matrilineal past was also an attempt to invite audience members to move beyond historicist accounts that deny contemporaneity to minority experiences (Chakrabarty 2008). A linear notion of time that frames experiences of earlier generations of Muslim women as essentially belonging to a ‘dark past’ negates the complexities of their lived circumstances. The majoritarian narratives about Muslim women around me suggested that in order to redeem myself, I need to expunge the traces of the ‘dark past’ of my ancestors. However, the stories about great grandmothers from my mother’s family that were orally passed down through generations suggested differently. From these stories, it transpired that despite the limitations of the matrilineal system, inheriting family wealth and being the carriers of the family line enabled the women from earlier generations to have at least a certain amount of decision-making power.

Recounting these stories in *My Mother’s Daughter* opened up two different possibilities. On the one hand, it enabled a filmic expression that problematizes the linear and homogenous nature of common-sense notions about Muslim women’s past

in Kerala. Simultaneously, the process of filming these oral accounts with my family allowed me an opportunity to find a new set of allies in my confrontations over the choices that I was making in my life. My female ancestors became such allies in the narrative universe of *My Mother’s Daughter*. Aligning what my family saw as my ‘stubbornness’ with similar traits of other women of the family including my own mother was an act that claimed a legacy where women asserted their right to make individual choices. These choices may not always have been in tune with the wishes of the family. For example, in the film, my uncle recounts how he and others tried to dissuade my mother from covering her head at a time when most educated Muslim women in Kerala did not wear a headscarf. However, my mother stuck to her decision and the family did not pressurize her further. In a much earlier generation, another woman used to shut the door at her husband; the family members could not persuade her to change her behaviour towards the man. *My Mother’s Daughter* places my refusal to settle for an arranged marriage on a similar plane. While the film depicts some of my bitter quarrels with my family, it also stresses that I probably learnt the first lessons of defiance from the same family. The role of the stories about strong female ancestors in forming my sense of self find articulation in the film.

However, *My Mother’s Daughter* has also been criticized for using matriliny as a ‘trope to defend primitivism and lack of education of women’ (Nizar n.d.). Does the film imagine an idyllic past where women from earlier generations of my family had a certain degree of decision-making power? Contrary to such an imagination, were they really living in domestic drudgery (Nizar n.d.)? The thing with the past is that one will never know for sure. The oral accounts[7] about my ancestors contain stories about some very strong women. But, such narratives might repress many harsh realities.

In *My Mother’s Daughter*, I have certainly chosen to trace a positive picture of the lives of my female ancestors. Going back to the past with a camera is always a ‘process of remapping’ (Lebow 2008, 38) and the self which emerges from this process is ‘a product of the work’ (Lebow 2008, 4). In my case, the filming process enabled me to script a self, which refuses the label *ummaachi*. There are certainly other ways in which the multiple experiences that get subsumed under the category of ‘Muslim women’ can be narrated. But such narrations will require many more films.

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[1] I began to wear a headscarf regularly around 1991 when I was roughly 9 years old. I spent most of my childhood years in my hometown Thiruvananathapuram, in South Kerala, which does not have a high concentration of Muslim population. I left Kerala for higher studies in 2002. Today, many young Muslim women from South Kerala wear a head covering, which was not the case during my teenage years. I stopped wearing the headscarf regularly in 2013.
[2] ‘Ummaachi’ is a colloquial term, which is used in South Kerala to make fun of Muslim women who wear a headscarf or head covering. It refers to a traditional Muslim woman from Kerala and has strong connotations of being backward and behind the times.
[3] Tony Dowmunt was my teacher during my MA in Screen Documentary from Goldsmiths, University of London (2009–10). His mentoring certainly helped me during the course of the making of *My Mother’s Daughter*. My teachers at AJK Mass Communication Research Centre, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, from where I first learnt filmmaking were also instrumental in helping me to become more comfortable with the autobiographical mode of filmmaking. Just like it takes a village to raise a child, the anxieties of doing self-revelatory work in an atmosphere where “‘self’-denying norms” (Dowmunt, 2010, p. 155) prevail, also requires reassurances from various quarters.
[4] These stereotypes were not always the same.
[5] While *Padam Onnu Oru Vilapam* underscores the relationship of Shahina’s victimhood with her ‘Muslimness’, the plight of Sainu in *Ayalum Njanum Thammil* could also have been that of a non-Muslim Malayali girl.
[6] In Kerala, confrontations between family members and young women over the question of marriage occur across religious divides.
[7] Most of these accounts are very detailed and generally the women of the family narrate them at any given opportunity. The men in the family used to joke about the women’s confidence in the details of these stories, which were often about an earlier century.