Embodied Faith and Marginalized Motherhood: Decolonial Insights into Iddah through Interpretative Phenomenology

Dr. Ambika T[1], Mohamed Salihu M[2] and Dr. N R Suresh Babu[3]

[1]Assistant Professor, School of Law, Sathyabama Institute of Science and Technology, Chennai, Tamilnadu, India-600 119,

[2]Ph.D Scholar, Department of Sociology and Population Studies, Bharathiar University, Coimbatore, Tamilnadu, India-641046,

[3]Professor, Department of Sociology and Population Studies, Bharathiar University, Coimbatore, Tamilnadu, India-641046

*Corresponding Author

ABSTRACT

This study examines the lived experiences of Muslim single mothers in Coimbatore who observe Iddah, the mandatory waiting period prescribed in Islamic law after divorce or widowhood. While Iddah has been widely discussed in theological and jurisprudential contexts, limited attention has been paid to how women themselves negotiate this practice in everyday life, particularly when they are single mothers balancing faith, livelihood, and motherhood. The research is grounded in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and informed by a decolonial perspective, seeking to highlight women's voices as authoritative sources of knowledge rather than subjects of external interpretation. Fifteen Muslim single mothers, aged between 23 and 40 years, were selected for the study. The sample included both employed and unemployed women, representing diverse socio-economic backgrounds. In-depth interviews were conducted, allowing participants to reflect on the spiritual, social, and economic dimensions of Iddah. Thematic analysis revealed four major themes: (i) faith as a source of strength and struggle, (ii) gendered expectations and community stigma, (iii) economic survival during Iddah, and (iv) Decolonial reinterpretations of faith and agency. The findings indicate that while Iddah imposes certain restrictions, participants also view it as a meaningful spiritual practice that provides emotional healing and resilience. At the same time, community surveillance and economic pressures exacerbate their marginalization as single mothers. By foregrounding women's narratives, this research challenges orientalist and patriarchal readings of Iddah, offering decolonial insights into how faith is embodied, negotiated, and reinterpreted in the lives of marginalized Muslim mothers.

Keywords- Iddah, Muslim single mother, Interpretative Phenomenological Approach, Decolonial lens

INTRODUCTION

The practice of Iddah occupies a central place in Islamic family law, prescribing a waiting period for women after divorce or widowhood. In the textual tradition, Iddah is framed as a religious safeguard for lineage, modesty, and reflection. However, when this obligation is lived out in specific contexts, particularly by Muslim single mothers, it carries meanings that extend beyond the letter of the law. The contrast between "law in the book" and "law in action" becomes especially visible in the lives of women who must balance the spiritual dimensions of Iddah with economic responsibilities, motherhood, and the pressures of social scrutiny.

Although there is growing interest in lived religion, the experiences of Muslim single mothers remain largely absent from current scholarship. Most existing studies either examine Iddah through theological interpretations or consider Muslim women through generalized discussions of patriarchy and tradition. Fletcher (2023)

stresses that lived religious practices are always dynamic and resist being reduced to doctrinal formulas, while Hjarvard (2020) emphasizes religion is continually reshaped through social and institutional mediation. Ives and Kidwell (2019) point out that questions of gender and embodiment are essential for understanding religious experience, and Jenkins et al. (2018) highlight how women's religious lives are situated within both devotion and structural limitations. In addition, Paul Victor and Treschuk (2020) note the importance of resilience as a strategy among individuals facing vulnerability, a theme directly relevant to single mothers negotiating Iddah.

By situating this research within these debates, the present study highlights an overlooked dimension of Muslim women's lives in South India. It examines how Iddah is interpreted and practiced by single mothers in Coimbatore, exploring the tensions between religious obligation, gendered expectations, and socio-economic survival. Drawing on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis and informed by a decolonial perspective, the study argues that women themselves must be recognized as authoritative interpreters of their faith. Their voices not only complicate orientalist portrayals of Muslim women as passive subjects but also reveal Iddah as a site of both constraint and agency.

Objectives of the Study

The first objective of this study is to explore how Islamic faith influences the experiences of Muslim single mothers who observe Iddah. While the practice is often described in religious texts as a period of waiting and reflection, its actual meaning for women depends on how they embody faith within their everyday lives. For single mothers, Iddah is not only a matter of religious obligation but also a deeply personal experience that intersects with their role as caregivers and their status within the community. This research therefore seeks to understand the extent to which faith acts as a source of resilience, comfort, or restriction, and how women themselves interpret its spiritual significance.

The second objective is to identify decolonial insights into the practice of Iddah through the lived experiences of the participants. Much of the existing literature on Muslim women has been framed by either theological debates or Western feminist critiques, which often overlook how women in specific cultural contexts define their own religious practices. By adopting a decolonial lens, this study highlights the agency of Muslim single mothers as interpreters of their own traditions. Their voices challenge orientalist portrayals of Muslim women as passive subjects and instead reveal how Iddah can be reframed as a practice of dignity, continuity, and cultural identity.

The third objective is to examine the socio-economic and emotional challenges faced by Muslim single mothers during Iddah. Observing seclusion or reduced mobility may limit their ability to participate in paid work, leading to financial strain. At the same time, these women may experience heightened social stigma, as widows and divorcees are often marginalized within their own communities. Emotional struggles, including loneliness and anxiety, are further compounded by the demands of child-rearing and the absence of spousal support. This study aims to capture these layered challenges in order to better understand the lived realities of single mothers who observe Iddah, and to provide insights that could inform more culturally sensitive support systems.

Reviews

The sociology of religion has increasingly moved away from viewing religious practices as fixed obligations and towards an emphasis on lived experiences. Scholars in this tradition argue that faith must be understood as it is embodied and interpreted by practitioners in their everyday lives. Fletcher (2023) highlights that lived religion resists essentialist understandings by focusing on individual meaning-making and the contextual negotiation of belief. Similarly, Hjarvard (2020) notes that religious practices are shaped by social institutions, media, and local communities, underscoring that the actual observance of rituals often differs from their prescriptive forms. This broader perspective is crucial when examining practices such as Iddah, which are not only prescribed in sacred texts but also mediated by cultural and socio-economic realities.

Research on gender and embodiment has also contributed to understanding how women interpret religious

obligations. Ives and Kidwell (2019) stress that women's religious practices cannot be reduced to compliance or resistance, but must be seen as embodied negotiations of identity, spirituality, and social norms. Jenkins, Meyer, and Thomas (2018) similarly argue that women's religious lives often move between devotion and structural constraint, showing how gendered expectations shape the performance of faith. These perspectives are particularly relevant for Muslim single mothers, who not only engage in Iddah as a religious duty but also experience it through the lens of stigma, community surveillance, and motherhood responsibilities.

A parallel strand of scholarship on resilience highlights how individuals in marginalized positions draw upon cultural and religious resources to navigate adversity. Paul Victor and Treschuk (2020) demonstrate that resilience in vulnerable populations is often sustained by spiritual practices and social support, suggesting that rituals like Iddah may serve both as a source of struggle and as a coping mechanism. This resonates with earlier insights by Mahmood (2011), who showed that Muslim women's agency cannot always be understood through secular feminist categories, but must instead be recognized within their own faith traditions.

At the same time, decolonial scholars have critiqued the dominance of Eurocentric interpretations in studies of religion and gender. Mignolo (2018) argues that decolonial thought seeks to value knowledge systems that emerge from the Global South, challenging orientalist portrayals of Muslim women as passive or oppressed. Applying this perspective to Iddah allows researchers to shift from external judgments about the practice to the voices of the women who live it. Such an approach aligns with Zurba and Papadopoulos (2023), who emphasize that decolonial methods require centering marginalized voices as producers of knowledge.

Taken together, this literature suggests that the study of Iddah among Muslim single mothers offers a crucial opportunity to bridge the gap between "law in the book" and "law in action." While religious texts define Iddah in prescriptive terms, the practice itself is negotiated within everyday struggles of survival, stigma, and resilience. By situating this research within the frameworks of lived religion, gendered embodiment, resilience studies, and decolonial thought, the present study contributes to a more holistic understanding of how marginalized Muslim mothers interpret and live out their faith.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design, guided by the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA is particularly suited for research that seeks to understand how individuals make sense of their lived experiences, especially in contexts where personal faith and cultural practices intersect. Since Iddah is a deeply embodied and spiritual practice, the method provides the opportunity to foreground participants' subjective interpretations rather than imposing external theoretical categories upon their narratives.

Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in Coimbatore, a major urban center in Tamil Nadu that hosts a sizeable Muslim population with diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Coimbatore was chosen for its cultural vibrancy and its significance as a site where traditional religious practices coexist with urban transformations. A purposive sampling strategy was used to identify Muslim single mothers who had personally observed Iddah. A total of fifteen women between the ages of 23 and 40 were included. Both employed and unemployed participants were represented, ensuring diversity in socio-economic conditions. Single mothers were identified through local women's networks, mosque committees, and community organizations that support widowed or divorced women.

Data Collection

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were employed as the primary method of data collection. Interviews allowed participants to describe their experiences of Iddah in their own words, with prompts guiding them to reflect on emotional, spiritual, and socio-economic aspects of the practice. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was conducted in Tamil, the mother tongue of the participants, to ensure comfort and ease of expression. Interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and later transcribed verbatim. Field

notes were also maintained to capture contextual details, body language, and non-verbal expressions that contributed to meaning-making.

Analytical Strategy

The transcripts were analyzed thematically, following the step-by-step procedures recommended in IPA. First, each interview was read and re-read to identify initial impressions. Emerging themes were coded manually, allowing patterns to be drawn inductively from the data. Special attention was given to how participants articulated the role of faith, the challenges of negotiating community expectations, and their strategies of resilience. Thematic clustering was then employed to develop sub-themes that reflected commonalities across different participants, while also preserving unique aspects of individual narratives. This process ensured both idiographic depth and broader interpretive insight.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical sensitivity was maintained throughout the study. Participants were briefed about the objectives of the research, and written informed consent was obtained prior to participation. Given the sensitivity of discussing personal and religious matters, anonymity was guaranteed by assigning pseudonyms and removing identifiable details from transcripts. Interviews were conducted in private settings to safeguard confidentiality and emotional well-being. Care was also taken to avoid intrusive questioning, allowing participants to exercise agency in how much they chose to disclose.

Rationale for Methodological Choice

The decision to employ IPA was influenced by the study's central aim: to explore the embodied faith of Muslim single mothers and to uncover decolonial insights into Iddah. Unlike positivist approaches that seek to generalize findings, IPA focuses on depth, interpretation, and meaning-making. It acknowledges the researcher's interpretive role, while striving to represent participants' voices faithfully. This method is therefore appropriate for capturing the nuanced and layered experiences of women whose lives are shaped by both religious devotion and structural marginalization.

The Researcher's Positionality

The researcher's position as a man belongs to Islam, studying the experiences of Muslim women placed in a dual role. While the shared faith and familiarity with religious contexts like Iddah provided a crucial bridge of understanding, the researcher's gender marked as an 'outsider' to their specific lived experiences. The investigator recognized that this gender dynamic, combined with the role as a researcher, created a complex power imbalance. Therefore, building trust was an active, deliberate process. I approached the women not as subjects, but as the sole authorities on their lives as knowledge-holders whose interpretations of faith and daily life are valid and definitive. Throughout our interactions and the analysis, the researcher had to be doubly reflexive. He continuously questioned not only his academic assumptions but also the potential for a gendered lens to color my interpretations. His goal was to ensure that their voices and meanings guided the research, consciously working to set aside his own preconceptions as both a man and a researcher. This reflexive stance was essential to ethically prioritizing the agency and narratives of the women.

FINDINGS

The findings of this study are drawn from in-depth interviews with fifteen Muslim single mothers residing in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, who were between the ages of twenty-three and forty. The participants represented a range of socio-economic positions, with some engaged in informal labor such as sanitary work, domestic assistance, tailoring, and petty trade, while others were unemployed and reliant on extended family members or charitable networks for survival. Their educational backgrounds were varied, with a few having completed higher secondary schooling, while others had dropped out at earlier stages due to marriage or financial constraints. This diversity in life situations allowed the study to capture a complex picture of how Iddah is lived and experienced in a contemporary urban Indian setting.

Coimbatore as a study site provides an important backdrop. Known as a growing industrial city, it is also a space where traditional religious practices intersect with the demands of modern economic life. For single mothers widowed, divorced, or separated navigating Iddah in such a context is not only about observing a prescribed religious ritual but also about negotiating the expectations of community, kinship, and workplace structures. The participants' socio-economic vulnerabilities heightened the challenges of observing Iddah, particularly when employment, mobility, and caregiving responsibilities for children were at stake. This created a tension between what Islamic law in principle prescribes and the realities of life as lived by women at the margins.

The practice of Iddah is deeply rooted in Islamic tradition, symbolizing both a spiritual process of mourning and a socio-legal safeguard related to lineage and inheritance. However, in practice, it also functions as a cultural marker that positions women within a set of visible expectations enforced by family members and community structures. For the women in this study, Iddah was not merely a religious duty performed in private devotion; it was also a lived social experience shaped by surveillance, interpretation, and adaptation. Several women described Iddah as a test of faith and patience, a moment when they felt a strong sense of closeness to God and an opportunity to find solace in religious rituals such as prayer and Qur'anic recitation. Yet, at the same time, they recounted the difficulties of being confined to their homes, the scrutiny of neighbors, and the emotional toll of combining personal grief with the care of children.

The dual nature of Iddah as a sacred obligation and as a lived social reality emerged consistently in the narratives. On one hand, participants articulated its value as a religious practice that reaffirmed their identity as Muslim women. On the other hand, the constraints associated with Iddah revealed how faith practices could also become arenas of social control, where widows and divorced women were reminded of their subordinate position within patriarchal systems. This paradox underscored the need to analyze Iddah not only through textual sources but also through the lived experiences of those most affected.

In approaching these complexities, thematic analysis provided a useful framework to capture the nuances of the participants' accounts. Data from the interviews were coded manually, with initial codes emerging around recurring words, metaphors, and stories that women used to describe their everyday realities. These were then grouped into broader categories such as faith and resilience, social surveillance, economic vulnerability, emotional landscapes, and strategies of resistance. Each theme reflects both the shared experiences of the women and the unique ways in which individual participants negotiated their circumstances.

Importantly, the thematic analysis was informed by the interpretative phenomenological approach, which emphasizes giving primacy to the meanings constructed by participants themselves. Rather than imposing a pre-determined framework, the analysis allowed for the exploration of how women understood and embodied Iddah in their own terms. At the same time, a decolonial lens guided the interpretation, pushing the analysis beyond surface descriptions to interrogate how colonial legacies, gender hierarchies, and socio-economic inequalities continue to shape the practice in postcolonial India. This dual methodological grounding enabled the findings to highlight not only the women's voices but also the structural conditions within which those voices are situated.

By weaving together the socio-economic context of Coimbatore, the religious dimensions of Iddah, and the methodological rigor of thematic analysis, this section of the paper situates the findings as both deeply personal and profoundly social. The lived realities of the women interviewed remind us that Iddah cannot be reduced to a ritual observed in isolation but must be understood as a practice embedded within broader networks of faith, community, economy, and gendered power.

Thematic Analysis

The thematic analysis yielded four major themes with sub-themes. To maintain anonymity the respondents' names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

Theme 1: Faith as a Source of Resilience

One of the strongest themes that emerged from the narratives of the participants was the centrality of faith as a

coping mechanism during the period of Iddah. While their socio-economic circumstances often heightened vulnerability, participants consistently described their religious belief as a source of strength that helped them navigate emotional pain, social stigma, and uncertainty about the future. This theme underscores the role of faith as both an internal anchor and an interpretative lens through which hardship was reframed in meaningful ways.

Sub-theme: Spiritual Anchoring during Uncertainty

For many of the single mothers interviewed, the period of Iddah coincided with a stage of life marked by instability. Whether the separation had been caused by widowhood, divorce, or desertion, participants described feelings of loss and disruption. Yet, rather than being entirely overwhelmed, they turned to religious practices such as prayer (salat), Qur'anic recitation, and remembrance of God (dhikr) as stabilizing rituals.

Nafeesa (age 29, widowed, unemployed) recalled: "The first weeks after my husband's death felt like darkness all around. But when I sat alone and prayed, I felt calmer. The words of the Qur'an reminded me that nothing happens without Allah's will. That gave me the courage to continue."

Sameera (age 34, divorced, working as a domestic helper) explained how the routine of prayer helped her organize her day during Iddah: "I could not go out much. I worried about paying rent. But when I prayed at fixed times, it gave me a sense of order. Even if life outside was uncertain, my prayers reminded me that Allah sees my struggle."

These accounts highlight what Pargament (1997) terms "religious coping," where spiritual practices provide a structure that helps believers make sense of stressful events. In contexts where women face both economic precarity and social surveillance, faith functioned as a stabilizing force that offered not just solace but also a framework for resilience.

Sub-theme: Perceptions of Divine Protection and Meaning-Making

Alongside spiritual anchoring, participants also articulated a sense of being under divine protection. They often interpreted their suffering as part of a divine plan, which, while painful, held meaning beyond their immediate understanding. This theological interpretation did not necessarily remove the hardship but reframed it in ways that reduced despair and fostered endurance.

Ameena (age 40, widowed, tailoring worker) reflected: "People looked at me with pity and sometimes spoke harshly, saying a woman without a husband is a burden. But I told myself Allah is my guardian. He gave me this test, so He will also give me strength to pass it."

Farzana (age 26, separated, mother of two, unemployed) also found meaning in her faith: "I felt abandoned when my husband left me. During Iddah, I used to cry alone. But then I remembered the stories my grandmother told me about Prophet Ayyub's patience. That reminded me suffering can bring blessings if we remain strong in faith."

Such interpretations resonate with existing studies on meaning-making in religious contexts. Park (2010) suggests that believers use faith frameworks to reconstruct meaning when faced with crisis, allowing them to integrate traumatic experiences into broader life narratives. In this study, Iddah became not only a religious obligation but also a context where women reinterpreted personal pain as spiritually significant, enabling them to sustain dignity in the face of stigma.

The reflections of participants echo findings from wider literature on faith and coping among marginalized groups. Research in psychology and sociology of religion has consistently highlighted that religious belief can foster resilience by providing existential meaning, a sense of community, and strategies for emotional regulation (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005; Koenig, 2012). In contexts of poverty and gender inequality, faith can become an especially vital resource, compensating for the lack of institutional or social support.

In the case of Muslim single mothers in Coimbatore, faith emerged as a deeply personal resource that helped them endure both the spiritual demands of Iddah and the socio-economic challenges surrounding it. Their testimonies suggest that while the practice may intensify isolation, it simultaneously opened a space for intimate encounters with the divine, producing strength from within. Also the interpretative phenomenological approach helped uncover how these women were not passive followers of doctrine but active agents interpreting religious practices through their lived realities. For some, Iddah was a painful confinement; for others, it became an opportunity for spiritual renewal. Yet, in both cases, faith acted as a protective shield, shaping the ways in which suffering was endured and reimagined.

Theme 2: Social Surveillance and Gendered Expectations

While faith provided a source of inner resilience, another powerful theme that surfaced was the weight of social surveillance and gendered expectations surrounding Iddah. For many participants, the religious obligation was not only a spiritual practice but also a deeply social phenomenon, subject to the scrutiny of neighbors, extended kin, and the broader community. In this context, Iddah became a visible marker of a woman's identity as a widow, divorcee, or single mother, and her behavior during this period was often interpreted as a reflection of family honor and religious respectability. The experiences of the women highlight how religious practice is not only personal but also embedded in community norms, collective judgment, and gendered control.

Sub-theme: Community Monitoring and Moral Policing

Participants described intense observation by neighbors, relatives, and sometimes religious leaders, who acted as informal enforcers of the "rules" of Iddah. This surveillance often went beyond religious guidance and entered the realm of moral policing, where a woman's smallest actions stepping out for work, speaking to a male neighbor, or even dressing a certain way were interpreted as signals of piety or transgression.

Ayesha (age 32, divorced, small shop worker) recalled: "Every time I left the house, someone would ask why I was going out. They would whisper that I was careless about my Iddah. It felt like I had more eyes watching me than before. I wondered if they cared about my faith or just wanted to control me."

Ruksana (age 38, widowed, mother of three) described her experience: "Even buying milk became a problem. People said, 'During Iddah you should not be outside.' But who will bring food for my children? No one asked that. They only judged."

These accounts resonate with Foucault's idea of the "panopticon" (1977), where surveillance disciplines individuals into conformity through the fear of being watched. In this study, women's identities as pious Muslims were constantly under negotiation, shaped by external monitoring that often intensified their vulnerability rather than supporting their spiritual journey.

Sub-theme: Restrictions on Mobility and Identity Negotiation

For many participants, Iddah was experienced not only as a religious confinement but as a broader curtailment of mobility imposed by community expectations. Women spoke of how their identities as workers, mothers, and community members were restricted and reshaped during this period. The demand to remain indoors clashed with their economic needs, creating an internal negotiation between survival and social respectability.

Shabana (age 27, widowed, garment worker) shared: "I had to go to work to keep my job, but I also had to observe Iddah. Some people in my family said I was disobeying religion by working. But if I stayed home, how would we eat? I felt torn between being a mother and being a 'good Muslim woman' in their eyes." This tension highlights how religious identity was not only spiritual but deeply gendered, with women shouldering the dual burden of being caregivers and carriers of religious respectability. Existing scholarship on gendered piety, such as Mahmood's (2005) work on women's religious movements, shows how women often actively negotiate between religious norms and everyday survival. In the case of single mothers in Coimbatore,

mobility restrictions placed them in difficult positions where survival needs often conflicted with communal notions of religious propriety.

Sub-theme : The Gap between Law in Book and Law in Action

A striking aspect of participants' narratives was the difference between formal Islamic prescriptions of Iddah and the way these prescriptions were practiced in their communities. While Islamic law outlines clear guidelines—widows observe Iddah for four months and ten days, and divorcees for three menstrual cycles participants found that community interpretations often added additional restrictions or intensified enforcement.

Fathima (age 30, divorced, unemployed) remarked: "The Qur'an says Iddah is for a period. But people around me acted like I had to stop living. They expected me not to attend weddings, not to visit relatives, not even to sit at the doorstep. It felt harsher than what the religion asks."

This gap between "law in book" and "law in action" reflects what sociologists of law like Galanter (1989) describe as the difference between formal rules and lived legal culture. In practice, women experienced Iddah less as a set of scriptural obligations and more as a socially policed performance of modesty, with local traditions and patriarchal expectations shaping its enforcement.

Theme 3: Economic Vulnerability during Iddah

The narratives of participants revealed that the period of Iddah was not only a spiritual and social challenge but also a time of heightened economic vulnerability. Many single mothers in this study were already in precarious financial positions due to widowhood or divorce, and Iddah placed additional burdens on their ability to sustain themselves and their families. With restrictions on mobility and the weight of communal expectations, women found their livelihood options shrinking, pushing them to depend on unstable forms of income, kinship networks, or charitable assistance.

Sub-theme: Unemployment and Household Survival

A number of participants described how their work opportunities diminished during Iddah. For those already unemployed at the time of widowhood or divorce, the confinement period prolonged their dependence on others. For women who had been working, absences caused by Iddah often led to job loss or reduced earnings.

Farzana (29, widowed, mother of two) explained: "When my husband died, I had just started a tailoring job. They told me to take leave for four months because of Iddah. But when I returned, my place was gone. They said they needed someone who could work continuously."

Haleema (35, divorced, homemaker) added: "People told me not to look for work until Iddah was over. But how can a mother feed her children by waiting? Every day I worried about the rent."

Such accounts resonate with feminist economic scholarship, which emphasizes how religious and cultural practices intersect with structural inequalities to intensify women's economic marginalization (Kabeer, 2015). The lack of formal support systems left women to navigate Iddah in contexts where employment was already fragile.

Sub-theme : Employer Attitudes toward Women in Mourning

Participants who were employed before Iddah often faced unsympathetic attitudes from employers. Some were pressured to resign, while others were subjected to subtle discrimination upon returning to work. Employers' reluctance to accommodate Iddah reflected not only economic pragmatism but also cultural discomfort around widowhood and single motherhood.

Zeenath (40, widowed, part-time cleaner) recalled: "My employer said, 'It is unlucky for us if a widow works

in the house so soon.' They told me to stay away for months. I needed the money, but they did not want me back until they felt it was acceptable."

This illustrates how mourning and widowhood are often stigmatized in workplaces, particularly in informal sectors where protections are minimal. The exclusion of women during Iddah reflects a combination of patriarchal norms and superstitions, producing what scholars like Chen (2016) describe as a "feminization of vulnerability" in informal labor economies.

Sub-theme : Reliance on Kinship and Charity Networks

With limited earnings and employment insecurity, many participants turned to kinship support or community charity during Iddah. Relatives sometimes stepped in with financial help, but this support was often conditional and inconsistent. Some women also depended on zakat (almsgiving) from mosques or charitable organizations.

Naseema (26, divorced, unemployed) stated: "My brothers helped me a little, but they also said I should not go out during Iddah. It was like the money came with conditions. I felt I had no independence."

Razia (34, widowed, mother of one) added: "I received zakat from the mosque during Ramadan. It helped with food, but it made me feel like a beggar. I wanted to earn with dignity, not wait for charity."

These accounts show how reliance on kin and charity can create cycles of dependency and disempowerment. From a decolonial perspective, such reliance reflects both historical and structural inequalities: colonial disruptions of Muslim economic institutions weakened women's access to autonomous resources, while contemporary neoliberal economies leave them reliant on informal support systems (Osella & Osella, 2008).

Theme 4: Emotional Landscapes of Motherhood in Iddah

The experiences of Muslim single mothers in this study highlight that Iddah is not only a religious observance but also an intensely emotional journey. While some participants found spiritual solace, many also described layers of grief, loneliness, and a sense of being emotionally restrained by cultural expectations. For mothers with young children, the burden was compounded by the need to provide emotional care while managing their own mourning. This duality created a complex emotional landscape where resilience and vulnerability coexisted.

Sub-theme: Navigating Grief and Maternal Responsibility

For widowed mothers, grief for a lost spouse overlapped with the urgent need to maintain a sense of stability for their children. Participants often emphasized that they could not afford the luxury of prolonged mourning because they had dependents who needed care, reassurance, and practical support.
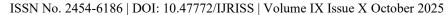
Parveen (32, widowed, mother of three) explained: "My children were crying every night for their father. I had to control my own tears to comfort them. Inside, my heart was breaking, but outside I had to stay strong so they would feel safe."

Shameema (27, divorced, mother of one) shared: "I was told to remain quiet and not show too much sadness in front of others during Iddah. But my child asked me, 'Why can't you laugh anymore?' That question hurt more than anything."

These accounts highlight the gendered expectation that mothers must prioritize caregiving even in the midst of their own trauma. Scholars on motherhood in South Asia have argued that maternal responsibility often silences women's grief, forcing them into roles of emotional self-sacrifice (Ahmed, 2014).

Sub-theme : Emotional Burden of Silence and Isolation

Participants described Iddah as a period marked by silence and isolation, enforced by cultural expectations to remain indoors, avoid gatherings, and limit social interaction. While some valued the privacy as an opportunity

for reflection, others felt it was an enforced loneliness that deepened their sense of loss.

Sameera (23, recently divorced) reflected: "Everyone said, 'Stay inside, don't talk too much, don't show yourself.' It felt like my voice was taken away. I was alive but invisible."

Ameena (38, widowed, employed) added: "I wanted to talk to someone about my fears and sadness, but people told me, 'Be patient, it's part of religion.' Sometimes patience felt like silence being forced on me." This aligns with research on widowhood and isolation, where enforced social withdrawal intensifies women's psychological distress (De Souza, 2017). The practice of silencing, though framed as protection, can reinforce emotional marginalization.

Sub-theme: Children's Adjustment and Intergenerational Impacts

Mothers also observed how Iddah affected their children. Some children struggled with the sudden absence of routine social interactions such as visiting relatives or playing outside because the household was expected to remain secluded. In cases where mothers were deeply absorbed in grief, children often experienced secondary trauma, manifesting in withdrawal, anger, or increased dependency.

Nilofer (30, widowed, mother of two) recalled: "My daughter asked me why we stopped going to the park. She thought she had done something wrong. It broke my heart to see her feel guilty for something she could not understand."

Sajida (40, divorced, mother of one teenager) shared: "My son became more rebellious during those months. He felt ashamed that I was called a divorced woman in the neighborhood. The stigma affected him as much as it did me."

These narratives suggest that Iddah can have intergenerational consequences, shaping children's sense of identity, belonging, and emotional resilience. Studies in family sociology emphasize that children of widowed or divorced mothers often internalize stigma and social exclusion, which may influence their long-term psychosocial development (Ungar, 2013).

Theme 5: Iddah

The fifth theme emerging from this study focuses on Iddah as a space where Muslim single mothers negotiate their identities, faith, and social roles within layered structures of patriarchy and postcolonial legacies. A decolonial lens makes it possible to see how women, far from being passive followers of religious injunctions, actively reinterpret and reshape Iddah as a practice that can sustain dignity and autonomy. This theme underscores three interconnected dynamics: reclaiming agency, challenging patriarchal framings, and negotiating between scriptural Islam and lived Islam in contemporary Coimbatore.

Sub-theme : Reclaiming Agency in a Ritualized Space

While mainstream community narratives often portray Iddah as a period of restriction and submission, several participants emphasized that they used this time to reclaim personal space and agency. For some, Iddah provided a socially sanctioned pause to step back from daily pressures, process grief, and reflect on their futures.

Razia (29, widowed, unemployed) explained: "For the first time, I felt nobody could force me to work or entertain guests. I told myself, this is my time to rest, to pray, to think. I used it to plan how to start afresh after Iddah. This shows that the ritual, often framed in oppressive terms, could be reimagined as a boundary that protects women from external interference. Instead of being wholly restrictive, it functioned as a temporary shelter, allowing them to prioritize inner healing. Decolonial theorists argue that marginalized groups often reclaim ritualized spaces by imbuing them with personal meaning, subverting the intended disciplinary control (Mignolo, 2011).

Sub-theme: Women's Reinterpretations of Iddah Beyond Patriarchal Framing

Participants frequently contrasted the way men in their families or local community leaders explained Iddah with their own spiritual understanding of it. While patriarchal framings emphasized obedience, seclusion, and silence, women described Iddah as an act of devotion, resilience, and continuity of faith.

Naseema (35, divorced, mother of two) shared: "My relatives told me not to speak or even smile too much because it would 'look bad.' But I read the Qur'an and understood Iddah as a time of patience, not punishment. That gave me strength."

Shazia (40, widowed, employed) similarly noted: "When elders said I should not go to work, I asked them where in the Qur'an it says a woman cannot earn bread for her children during Iddah. I follow my faith, not their control." Such reinterpretations illustrate what scholars call "everyday resistance," where women subtly reshape the meaning of rituals to align with their lived realities (Mahmood, 2005). By reclaiming scriptural interpretations, these mothers challenged patriarchal monopolies over religious knowledge.

Sub-theme : Tensions Between Textual Islam and Lived Islam

A recurring thread in participants' accounts was the tension between the scriptural injunctions on Iddah and the way these were enforced in practice. While textual Islam prescribes a waiting period of reflection and mourning, lived Islam in Coimbatore often incorporated additional restrictions that women perceived as culturally rather than religiously mandated.

Fathima (26, divorced) reflected: "The Qur'an says three menstrual cycles or four months and ten days. That is clear. But in my community they added many extra rules, like not looking in the mirror or not talking to neighbors. These are not religion; they are customs."

This distinction highlights the intersection of religion and culture, where patriarchal traditions and colonial-era social controls have blurred the boundaries of religious practice. Decolonial analysis helps us see how women differentiate between divine guidance and socially imposed surveillance. By doing so, they not only reinterpret Iddah but also resist the conflation of Islam with cultural patriarchy.

Theme 6: Strategies Of Coping And Resistance

Although Iddah is often understood as a period of withdrawal and quiet endurance, participants in this study demonstrated that it was also a site of negotiation, resilience, and subtle forms of resistance. The strategies they adopted to cope with the intersection of religious expectations, economic vulnerability, and community surveillance were neither uniform nor passive. Instead, these strategies reflect agency in constrained contexts, showing how Muslim single mothers in Coimbatore actively worked to balance faith, livelihood, and dignity.

Sub-theme: Negotiating Religious Obligation with Livelihood Needs

One of the most visible strategies was the pragmatic negotiation between observing Iddah and sustaining household survival. For many participants, strict withdrawal from public life was not feasible, particularly when they were sole earners.

Ameena (33, widowed, mother of two) recalled: "My mother-in-law said I should not step out during Iddah, but how will I feed my children if I do not work? I decided to go to my job quietly in the evenings, covering myself fully so no one would notice."

Others framed their decision to work as an extension of religious duty, emphasizing that providing for one's children was also an act of faith. This reflects what scholars describe as "situated religiosity" the selective adaptation of religious obligations in line with pressing material realities (Bowen, 2012). By reframing breadwinning as an Islamic duty, women resolved the apparent contradiction between livelihood needs and ritual observance.

Sub-theme: Quiet Resistance to Stigma

Several participants spoke of adopting strategies of quiet resistance to the stigma and surveillance surrounding Iddah. This resistance was rarely open defiance, given the power of communal sanctions, but instead took the form of subtle acts of self-preservation.

Safiya (30, divorced) explained: "Neighbors kept watching who came to my house. I stopped telling them anything. I kept my movements private. In this way, I protected myself without arguing with anyone. This "everyday resistance" (Scott, 1990) allowed women to maintain dignity without direct confrontation. Acts such as controlling information, redefining mourning in more personal terms, or selectively ignoring restrictive customs were strategies of survival. These quiet resistances highlight how women exercise agency even in contexts where overt rebellion may invite severe backlash.

Sub-theme: Collective Support Networks and Solidarity

A third set of strategies involved drawing on networks of kinship, friendship, and solidarity with other women in similar situations. In several narratives, participants described informal circles of widows and divorced women who provided both emotional comfort and material assistance during Iddah.

Halima (37, widowed, employed as domestic worker) described: "When I lost my husband, the women in my neighborhood came every evening. We prayed together and shared food. They told me how they managed their own Iddah. That gave me courage." Such networks created what feminist scholars term "counter-publics" (Fraser, 1990), spaces where marginalized women exchange strategies and reinterpret dominant norms. Beyond emotional solidarity, some networks also facilitated practical survival, such as pooling money for food or helping with childcare. Collective support transformed Iddah from a solitary, isolating experience into one where shared resilience could emerge.

Sub-theme: Intergenerational Resilience and Transmission of Strength Several participants described how their children adapted to the changes during Iddah in ways that reflected shared resilience. Some mothers used storytelling, prayer, or routine to help children make meaning of loss. Others emphasized maintaining emotional communication to prevent fear or loneliness in children. This highlights that resilience during Iddah was not individual but collectively negotiated within the family, shaping both maternal identity and children's emerging sense of belonging, patience, and emotional endurance.

Sub-theme 6.4: Coping Strategies and Intergenerational Resilience The women in this study navigated the emotional and economic challenges of Iddah using strategies that were profoundly relational. Rather than being solitary responses, these coping mechanisms were negotiated within the family, where children's needs and reactions were a central influence. Mothers frequently described their own emotional endurance as being inseparable from the presence of their children. This dynamic reframed Iddah from an isolated spiritual observance into a shared family transition, one in which resilience was constructed collectively. For many respondents, establishing routine was a primary source of stability. The familiar patterns of daily prayer, meal preparation, and storytelling anchored the household and provided crucial reassurance to children. Mariya (age 31, widowed, mother of two) encapsulated this mutual effect when she explained, "My children were frightened when everything changed. So I made sure we prayed together every evening. It reminded all of us that Allah was still with us. It calmed them, and it calmed me too."

Open communication emerged as another critical emotional strategy. Participants intentionally discussed grief, loss, and patience with their children, aiming to prevent the silence of mourning from transforming into a source of anxiety. Shabana (age 27, widowed) reflected on this shared process: "If I cried alone in the room, my son would become nervous. So I told him, 'We are both learning how to be strong.' I think it helped him grow up a little, and it helped me breathe." In some cases, children became active agents in their family's resilience. Several mothers recalled their sons or daughters taking on small household responsibilities or displaying an emotional maturity beyond their years. This shared adaptation reinforced the mother's own sense of purpose and agency. As Amina (age 34, divorced) stated, "My daughter would say, 'Don't worry, I will help you.' Her words gave me strength. I felt we were facing the world together."

These narratives illustrate that resilience during Iddah is not a static, internal trait but an intergenerational and relational process. The emotional bonds between mother and child were formative to the experience. The family unit, rather than the individual woman alone, became the primary site where patience, religious meaning, and emotional endurance were cultivated. This perspective highlights that coping in the context of iddah is a **shared adaptation**, reflecting both cultural continuity and the lived negotiation of faith in moments of vulnerability.

Reflection

This study has explored the lived realities of Muslim single mothers in Coimbatore who observe Iddah, highlighting the ways in which faith, social structures, and colonial legacies shape their everyday lives. The findings demonstrate that while Iddah is embraced as a spiritual duty and a source of resilience, it simultaneously imposes social, economic, and emotional burdens that extend far beyond the religious texts. Themes of faith as resilience, community surveillance, economic vulnerability, and emotional landscapes reveal a complex interplay between religious commitment and structural constraints. At the same time, the decolonial insights emphasize how women reinterpret and reclaim Iddah, moving beyond patriarchal and colonial framings to assert agency in deeply personal ways.

The contribution of this research lies in bridging the gap between "law in the book" and "law in action." By situating Iddah within a decolonial framework, the study demonstrates that women's practices and reinterpretations of the ritual are not passive acceptance of tradition, but dynamic negotiations that challenge both colonial residues and local gender hierarchies. This expands the scholarly conversation beyond theological or legalistic interpretations and places women's lived experiences at the center of sociological inquiry.

The study returns to its objectives by showing how Islamic faith influences single mothers in their observance of Iddah, what decolonial insights emerge from their practices, and how socio-economic and emotional challenges are navigated in everyday life. The voices of the participants underline that Iddah is not only a religious obligation but also a lived social experience that reflects resilience, negotiation, and transformation. This research, therefore, contributes to existing scholarship by foregrounding marginalized motherhood within Muslim communities and offering new pathways for understanding faith as both an embodied and contested practice.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight the complex and layered meanings attached to Iddah in the lives of Muslim single mothers in Coimbatore. Far from being a uniform or rigidly experienced practice, Iddah emerges as a space where both constraint and empowerment coexist. On one hand, women described the constant scrutiny of neighbors, relatives, and community elders, who frequently monitored their mobility, dress, and interactions. Such surveillance produced feelings of social exclusion and moral policing, reflecting broader patriarchal norms that construct widowed or divorced women as vulnerable subjects requiring control. On the other hand, participants emphasized that their observance of Iddah was not solely dictated by external pressure, but also motivated by their own spiritual commitment. For many, the practice offered a period of reflection, an opportunity to deepen their relationship with God, and a source of inner strength during a time of personal upheaval.

This apparent contradiction resonates with Mahmood's (2011) argument that agency among religious women cannot be understood only in terms of resistance to structures of power. Rather, agency often manifests in the capacity to inhabit and reinterpret religious obligations in ways that nurture meaning, healing, and dignity. The participants' accounts illustrate how Iddah is not merely imposed upon them, but actively re-signified through their lived experiences. This demonstrates that empowerment within religious traditions may operate through compliance as much as through resistance, challenging secular feminist assumptions that often equate empowerment with rejection of tradition.

From a decolonial perspective, these narratives disrupt Eurocentric portrayals of Iddah as an inherently oppressive or patriarchal institution. Colonial and orientalist discourses historically framed Islamic family laws as symbols of Muslim women's subjugation, thereby erasing the multiplicity of women's voices and interpretations. The accounts from this study complicate that narrative, as participants repeatedly stressed that Iddah provided emotional stability, continuity with cultural heritage, and a sense of spiritual safety. For widowed mothers, especially, the ritual period functioned as a socially recognized moment of mourning, allowing them space to process grief without immediate pressure to return to work or public life.

By foregrounding the epistemic authority of Muslim women themselves, the findings contribute to the growing body of scholarship that calls for decolonizing knowledge production about Muslim communities. Women in this study did not passively accept dominant interpretations of Iddah; rather, they actively engaged with the ritual to make it meaningful within their socio-economic and familial contexts. For example, some mothers negotiated flexible observance when livelihood responsibilities demanded their presence in the public sphere, while others interpreted the restrictions as a means of protecting their dignity from gossip and speculation. These examples reveal the fluidity of Iddah as lived practice, one that cannot be reduced to static doctrinal prescriptions or external judgments.

The discussion underscores the importance of viewing Iddah through a dual lens: as a site where patriarchal control and social surveillance are reinforced, but also as a space where women cultivate resilience, reinterpret religious duty, and assert a measure of agency. Recognizing this duality opens new avenues for understanding how marginalized Muslim women navigate faith, community expectations, and socio-economic realities in ways that are both constrained and transformative.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates the value of examining Iddah not simply as a theological requirement, but as a lived social reality for Muslim single mothers. The findings reveal that Iddah functions as a multilayered experience, simultaneously imposing restrictions through social surveillance and offering women avenues for spiritual anchoring and emotional healing. For many participants, the practice was deeply tied to their faith identity and sense of resilience, yet it was also shaped by socio-economic struggles, community expectations, and the persistent weight of patriarchal norms. By focusing on their narratives, this research provides a nuanced understanding that resists the tendency to homogenize Muslim women's experiences or interpret them solely through external, Eurocentric lenses.

The use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis enabled the exploration of participants' subjective meanings, while a decolonial perspective made it possible to foreground their voices as authentic sources of knowledge. This methodological combination emphasizes that Muslim women are not passive recipients of religious tradition but active interpreters who adapt Iddah to their own circumstances. Some women saw it as a protective space of dignity and reflection, while others negotiated its rules to accommodate livelihood responsibilities. In both cases, their agency was evident, whether in their quiet resilience, reinterpretations of faith, or strategies of coping with stigma and economic vulnerability.

Implications

1. Policy and Practice: Policymakers, NGOs, and welfare institutions need to design interventions that are culturally sensitive and respectful of religious practices. Support programs for widows and divorced mothers should recognize Iddah as a significant phase of transition, where financial assistance, mental health services, and community awareness initiatives can ease the pressures women face.
2. Community Engagement: Religious leaders and local community organizations should be encouraged to facilitate compassionate and non-judgmental environments for women observing Iddah. This could help counter practices of moral policing and instead affirm the ritual's role in offering space for healing.
3. Theoretical Contribution: The study advances sociological scholarship by showing how faith-based rituals intersect with gender and class. It challenges the binary framing of religious practices as either wholly

oppressive or liberatory, instead presenting Iddah as a dynamic practice that holds contradictory yet meaningful dimensions.

4. Future Research: Subsequent scholarship could expand this inquiry by comparing the experiences of Muslim women across regions, sects, and socio-economic groups. Research on rural versus urban contexts, or studies that include intergenerational perspectives, would provide a broader understanding of how Islamic traditions are lived and reinterpreted. Additionally, comparative studies with other religious mourning or transitional rituals could shed light on cross-cultural similarities and divergences.

This study situates the lived experiences of Muslim single mothers within their own religious and cultural frameworks, offering a counterpoint to homogenizing narratives that erase their interpretive agency. By centering their voices, the present study contributes not only to the sociology of religion and gender but also to the broader project of decolonizing knowledge production about Muslim women's lives.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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