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Muslim Feminist Consciousness in Indian English Fiction of the Nationalist Era

Dr. Asha S

Assistant Professor,
Department of English & Comparative Literature,
Central University of Kerala, Kasaragod, Kerala

The dual identity of the Indian Muslim woman – as an Indian and a Muslim – often works to her disadvantage depriving her of the dignity Islam as a religion sought to safeguard. Understanding the specificity of location of the Indian Muslim woman is crucial to an examination of Indian Muslim feminist consciousness. The paper charts the patterns of Muslim feminist consciousness in four Indian English novels set in colonial India and mostly developing against the background of the Nationalist Movement. The novels selected for analysis are Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* (1940), Zeenuth Futehally's *Zohra* (1951), Mumtaz Shah Nawaz' *The Heart Divided* (1957) and Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961). Featuring the Indian Muslim society in a period of transition, the novelists, particularly the women writers, capture the complexities and contradictions inherent in the Muslim woman's attempt at forging her identity. The paper argues how a simple tradition/modernity dichotomy would fail to accommodate the experiences of the Indian Muslim women portrayed in these novels.

The life of the Indian Muslim woman is shaped by her dual identity as an Indian and a Muslim. The just and fair tenets of Islam as a religion often do not come to the aid of the Muslim woman, posited as she is within the hierarchical Indian tradition and the male dominant Muslim community. The minority status of the Muslim community in India leads to the privileging of community identity over gender identity and basic human dignity is often denied to the woman. The Muslim male orthodoxy rigidly and literally interprets the tenets of Islam which accounts for the circumscribed life of the Indian Muslim woman.

Chandra Mohanty defines feminism as “a mode of intervention into particular hegemonic discourses” and not a universal response to an assumed universal patriarchy (50). Marnia Lazreg observes: “To think of feminism in the singular is sociologically inappropriate” (101). Gender is a racialised/historicised concept and the universalist assumptions of Anglo-American feminism break down in an analysis of the concerns of the Indian Muslim woman. The heterogeneity of feminism has to be underscored before accommodating the concept in the Indian and the Islamic contexts. A militant feminism is inconceivable in the Indian scenario, given the hegemony of the structures of patriarchy and orthodox tradition. Islam and feminism, it is widely held, are incompatible. In Orientalist discourses Islam is persistently portrayed as a misogynistic religion. It puts its women in purdah, confines them to their domestic roles and reduces them to mere bodies sans creativity, sensibility or intellect. With this perception of the Muslim woman entrenched in the social psyche, any examination of a Muslim feminist consciousness would appear simplistic unless the contours of feminism in Islam are outlined and its parameters defined. This paper examines the patterns of Muslim feminist consciousness as they emerge in the novels of select Indian English writers. The novels selected for analysis – Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* (1940), Zeenuth Futehally's *Zohra* (1951), Mumtaz Shah Nawaz' *The Heart*

Divided (1957) and Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) – depict Muslim life and attitude in the India of the early twentieth century. Women remain only on the periphery of Ahmed Ali's narrative. Naturally, it is the women novelists who show a central concern with the life of the Muslim woman.

To accommodate the experiences of the Muslim women depicted in these novels within the fold of feminism, the term needs qualification. Tradition and culture, through their long surviving institutions and ideologies are a major determinant in the lives of these women. Anuradha Roy identifies this sway of tradition as an aspect of women's experience peculiar to the Indian context (15). At the same time, it has to be emphasized that neat dichotomies do not often hold. Tradition can be simultaneously confining and sustaining. Tradition and modernity co-exist. Along with a respect for tradition is an impassioned protest against the traditional Muslim society's curtailment of women's freedom and reduction of female roles, epitomised in its manipulation of the ideology of the purdah. Understanding the insidious workings of the ideology of purdah in patriarchal societies is crucial to determining the patterns of Muslim feminist consciousness. The institution of purdah, enforced to safeguard the dignity and honour of the Muslim woman, later lost its benevolent character, having acquired the biases of feudal, misogynistic and un-Islamic traditions. Clerical orthodoxy began advocating confinement for its own sake losing sight of the original intention of protecting the Muslim woman and upholding her dignity. In the novels taken up for analysis here, the practice of purdah, with its accompanying emotional, intellectual and sexual deprivations, is mostly viewed as debilitating. The novels, in fact, represent different phases in the evolution of the Indian Muslim woman from a life of 'contentment' behind the purdah and the high walls of tradition through an agonizing realization of the injustices inherent in the institution to the final breaking away.

The novels develop against the background of the Indian National Movement. The women in Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi*, both young and old, are cocooned within their private space; the Freedom Movement, the Western influence and the concomitant ideas of individual liberty do not invade their quiet lives. However, this life of confinement within the *zenana* – the female quarter of the house in Muslim families – unmindful of the tumultuous political developments outside has only a façade of happiness and contentment. Caged like pigeons, the women are seen as possessions rather than individuals.

The Indian Muslim tradition is a compound of diverse cultural strands – the Persian, Arabic, Mughal and even the Hindu go into its making. "The Indian Muslim population of today represents an interesting mixture of descendants of the successive waves of intruders, immigrants from the neighbouring Muslim countries and the local population" (Bhatty, 99). According to Jawaharlal Nehru, most of the early Indian Muslims were Hindu converts bred up in and surrounded by the old traditions; only a comparatively small number of them had come from outside (244). Hindu traditions, customs and values coloured the socio-cultural life of the Indian Muslims. "It is in the realm of their treatment of women that Muslims have been most deeply affected by the value system existing in the Sub-continent" (Brijbhushan, 8). Sociological studies show that the influence of the Hindu traditions has worked largely to the disadvantage of the Indian Muslim woman. In the intermingling of the two communities, the conservative and restrictive elements of one set have tended to dominate or neutralize the liberal elements of the other (Bhatty, 99). Ahmed Ali illustrates how the Indian Muslim woman is crippled by the influence of Hindu customs. Islam encouraged widows to remarry. The Prophet married mostly

widows to set an example for others. However, as Ahmed Ali reflects, the Indian “social code, derived mostly from prevailing Hindu practices, did not favour a second marriage” (TD 36). Mumtaz Shah Nawaz is indignant at the Indian Muslim society’s deviation from the egalitarian provisions of Islam:

Islam had been the first religion in the world to give the rights of inheritance to women and yet Muslim women in the Punjab were deprived of these. Islam had made divorces easy, yet not only was it considered a terrible disgrace, but under the British-made laws, there was hardly any way by which an ill treated, neglected or even abandoned wife could get it. Islam had enjoined widow-remarriage, but Muslim widows, who married again, were looked down upon. (HD 300)

The traditional Muslim society Ahmed Ali presents maintains duplicity in moral standards. The life of a widow, as Ali documents, is full of hardships and misery. Not just that a widow is not allowed to rebuild her life, but she also has to bear the blame for an early widowhood. She is expected to lead a life of self-abnegation; the male hegemonic society, however, places no restrictions on a widower. That gender discrimination and double standards for men and women have a social rather than a divine basis is one of the fundamental assertions of Islamic feminism. The repression and victimisation of the Muslim woman are to be attributed to the rise of patriarchal-feudal traditions in Islam and the Muslim community’s false adherence to custom rather than to any divine imposition. The equating of Islam as a religion with the subjection of women, a popular Western stereotype, can be interrogated and subverted only with this awareness.

The female protagonists in the novels of the women writers – Attia Hosain, Zeenuth Fudahally and Mumtaz Shah Nawaz – exhibit a tortured awareness of deprivation and subordination unlike the domesticated, uneducated and male-dependent *zenana* women in Ahmed Ali’s novel, who remain background figures in a male-operated universe. They are resentful of the injustices the orthodox, patriarchal tradition perpetrates on women and its curtailment of their rights Islam has legitimatised for them. Placed precariously, as they are, at the interface of tradition and modernity, the lives of the young Muslim women in women’s novels are conflict-ridden. Feminism is interwoven with Nationalism in these texts. The sculpting of these women’s identity has to be viewed in consonance with the ideas of progress and modernity ushered in by Western education and the Nationalist Movement. However, a simplistic tradition/modernity dichotomy would fail to account for the complexities and contradictions inherent in the Muslim woman’s journey towards self-realization.

The novelists mostly depict family and tradition as exercising an oppressive hold on the Muslim woman’s life. The confining spaces are physical as well as ideological. The woman is confined to the *zenana* and is barred from creative and intellectual pursuits, participation in politics and employment. There is a strict demarcation of gender roles. Family and tradition decree marriage and childbearing as the natural avenues of self-expression for the woman. Early marriage interferes with the education of the girls. The intellectual life of the Muslim woman suffers when purdah confinement is rigidly enforced. In Mumtaz Shah Nawaz’ *The Heart Divided* the hopes of Zohra, the protagonist, of representing her college at the Inter-university debate are dashed, with her grandfather putting his foot down: “I will not have any daughter of my house going about in public with her face uncovered [...]. The purdah of our women is sacred. I tell you, no

woman of our family shall break it, while I live” (HD 73-74).

The novelists highlight the crucial role mothers play in the orientation of the girl child to her destined roles as wife and mother. Mothers disapprove of higher education for girls as it reduces their chances of a ‘decent’ marriage. In Zeenut Futehally’s *Zohra* elder women frown at the benevolent Nawab’s attempts at educating his daughter. The mistress’ views on female education are as reactionary as the maid’s: “But some day she will have to marry and why sow discontent in her heart? She may never then willingly settle down to domesticity. Allah forbid, but she has not to pass any Doctorate, has she?” (*Zohra*, 13) Kalpana Bardhan observes that the status accorded to women in India and the behaviour expected of them vary within the family by age, marital and filial relations (167). As a wife, the woman is under the control of her conjugal family, ideally self-effacing and obedient. The older women, on the other hand, enjoy greater power and authority though not autonomy. They have a say in their children’s marriage. It has to be emphasized here that Indian feminism does not identify the male as the principal oppressor. The novelists portray elder women – mothers and mothers-in-law – as rigidly enforcing the patriarchal principle of female subservience, advocating a life of seclusion for the young woman and depriving her of education, opportunity for social life and even access to health and medical facilities. In Mumtaz Shah Nawaz’ novel, the mother-in-law, jealous of the attention her son lavishes on his wife, refuses to fetch the service of the nurse when her grandson falls ill, despising it as a new fangled notion. “Sughra (the daughter-in-law) had begged and pleaded, but in vain. The old woman would not give in. All her resentment against the daughter-in-law, who had stolen her son’s affection [...] had fortified her resolve” (HD 264).

As an antidote to frustrations and misgivings that a thinking female feels within the confines of her limited space, stand the uncritical love, supportiveness and emotional richness that characterize the network of female relationships within the *zenana*. In this configuration of the *zenana* as a site of female society, not just as an all-imprisoning enclosure, can be witnessed a divergent pattern of Muslim feminism. It is the comforting company of women like Aunt Abida and Hakimian Bua that Attia Hosain’s protagonist Laila seeks, when tormented by the conflicting values around her. We see how Ashiana is not just an intimidating fortress, which seals its women from contact with the outside world, but a comforting cocoon of love, loyalty, understanding and warmth. The celebration of the female space as cohesive, life-furthering and productive marks a departure from the recurrent representations of Muslim female spaces like the harem and the *zenana* as brothel or prison like. However, such representations of *zenana* life are rare in portrayals of Muslim life in Indian fiction in English. Attia Hosain herself presents a contrasting picture of *zenana* life, vitiated by rankling sexual jealousies, a preoccupation with sexuality and the neglect of emotional and intellectual development. The loveless relationship existing among the females of Aunt Abida’s spousal house and the antagonism they exhibit towards Abida, an outsider, is a case in point:

They resented the sensitiveness of a character beyond their reach and understanding. They attacked what was bigger than their comprehension with pretty thrusts. The jealousies and frustrations in that household of women were intangible like invisible webs spun by monstrous, unseen spiders. And yet without each other they had no existence. Physically and mentally their lives crushed each other (SBC 251).

Through such contrasting pictures Hosain suggests how *zenana* life can be occasionally

constructive but mostly detrimental in the shaping of a woman's destiny. Other women novelists too mostly replicate the negative picture of *zenana* life. It is negotiations for the marriage of the daughters, the festivities associated with marriage and childbirth and observance of superstitious beliefs and customs that constitute the major preoccupations of the *zenana* women. Reduced to mere contenders for male affection, the *zenana* women devise wily stratagems to gain advantage over one another, as illustrated by Mumtaz Shah Nawaz. Polygamy compounds the misery of a life of seclusion. As a woman, Zeenut Futehally is sensitive enough to discern that the frustrations of being a wife in a polygamous relationship could be behind a woman's quarrelsome and domineering ways. "Within that stern exterior (of her mother-in-law), what hopes lay buried, what passions lay smouldering," wonders Zohra (*Zohra*, 142).

The prevalence of prostitution alongside female segregation uncovers the sexist ideology that underwrites the principle of seclusion. The security of 'respectable' women of the privileged class has to be read against the vulnerability of the lower class women and prostitutes. Daughters of decent families are kept in purdah which leaves the men free to seek the gratification of their romantic/sexual yearnings in the company of prostitutes. The Quran explicitly forbids prostitution and its wages. It provides no sanction for extra marital sexual intercourse. Nevertheless, prostitutes and dancing girls formed an integral part of the cultural life of the Muslims. The position of prostitutes and dancing girls "represents a counterpoint to the lives of sheltered women" (Papanek, 44). The co-existence of purdah and prostitution is an important thematic concern in the novels under discussion. The idea of romantic love does not take root in the heart of a Muslim girl, made to lead a sequestered life. "By education and hearsay she is made to believe that passion is the worst kind of sin" (TD 188). Brought up in an atmosphere of restraint typical of a purdah household, Bilqeece in Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* fails to satisfy her husband's romantic yearnings. Asghar contrasts Bilqeece's coldness with the passionate romantic effusion which he once basked in, in the houses of courtesans. His father, Mir Nihal, finds little beauty or love in his wife's world and spends the whole of his income in running the establishment of Babban Jan, his mistress. "Here, at Babban Jan's, he had built a quiet corner for himself where he could always retire and forget his sorrows in its secluded peace" (TD 111). S. Das observes that the high art forms like music and dance were monopolised by the *nautch* girls and so were looked down upon by women of respectable families. Devoid of these entertainments, monotony crept into *zenana* life and this tended to draw men away from the boredom of their respectable homes to the stimulating company of the *nautch* girls (91).

The writers also document the misery and sordidness of the life of the courtesans, once hailed by the Muslim community as producers of culture. Mushtari Bai, who appears in the novels of Ahmed Ali and Attia Hosain, represents the accomplished class of courtesans, who enjoy the patronage of the rich because of their skill in dancing and singing. Ahmed Ali is sensitive to the agony of the dancing girl. "I am like a caravan-serai where people come, rest their tired bodies for a while and depart [...] my life is a desert in which no oases exist," laments the courtesan (TD 76). Through the recollections of Laila, the narrator-protagonist in Hosain's novel, we learn of the exalted status and dignity the feudal aristocracy accorded to Mushtari Bai. The richest and most cultured of aristocrats had been honoured by her favours. Laila's father, who takes her along on one of his visits to the courtesan, remarks that no English governess could teach her "as you (Mushtari Bai) taught us lessons in etiquette and courtesy" (SBC 64). Hosain also captures the pathos of the courtesan's life in her old age. Her voice "was a tortured whisper. After the illness which had robbed her of her voice, she had turned to God to expiate the sins of her life.

Her wealth, which she considered tainted, she had given to charities, and she herself became a wandering mendicant” (SBC 66).

The Indian English novelists mostly hail from the privileged classes and hence there is almost a centring of the Muslim woman’s experience in the upper and middle classes. The poor women, even when they appear, do so only incidentally and serve as mere appendages to the privileged protagonists. The novels under discussion here, being aristocratic accounts of Muslim women’s lives, do not foreground the experiences of the poor or lower class women. Nevertheless, the character of Nandi in Attia Hosain’s novel is boldly etched and deserves special mention. The portrayal of Nandi lays bare the dual form of exploitation a woman is subjected to in feudal societies – class and gender. Nandi’s indignant remark, “respectability can be preserved like pickle in gold and silver” (SBC 97) is a critique of the argument that the seclusion of women is a bulwark against sexual exploitation. In fact, it only serves to conceal the evils from public eye; beneath the façade of protection and respectability, immorality and wantonness galore.

That the Indian Nationalist Movement and the social reform movements of the 19th and early 20th centuries encouraged a critical introspection among the Muslims and fostered a feminist consciousness is indisputable. Nevertheless, the reach and impact of this consciousness need closer critical examination. The construction of the decent middle class woman in the social reformist discourse largely served the interests of the male reformer, who had to project images of enlightened womanhood before his European masters to prove his ‘progressiveness’ and preparedness for self rule. At the behest of their reformist husbands, the Muslim women were brought out of purdah and the confines of the *zenana*. Educated and redeemed from bondage to superstitious customs, they were to be ideal companions for their men in their fight against imperialism. As Gail Minault observes, women did not act in the public realm, they merely served as symbols (8). Naturally, the Westernization/liberation of these women remained skin-deep.

The women novelists mostly reject as simplistic, dualisms like tradition, backwardness/westernization, liberation and progress. While Attia Hosain projects Aunt Abida, a devout votary of tradition, as a symbol of enlightened Muslim womanhood, the characters of Zahra and Aunt Saira, who come out of their purdah confinement after marriage are portrayed with a touch of irony and sarcasm. Zahra and Aunt Saira are mentally relegated to the *zenanas* from which they have physically escaped. They are actively involved in women’s organizations and work for social welfare only because the lives of their husbands demand such a course of action from them. No wonder, after the death of her husband, Saira withdrew more and more “from the Western attitudes she had sought to cultivate just for her husband’s and her sons’ sake” (SBC 286). Zahra is only playing the role of a dutiful wife, as she had once played that of a purdah girl. She “had always lived in a protected world, flexible in accepting the conventions of whichever society she was in [...]” (SBC 302). The representatives of ‘liberated’ womanhood in Zeenut Futehally’s *Zohra* – Safiya and Jehan Ara Begum – are also negatively portrayed. Safiya’s husband brings her out of the purdah. She plays tennis and rides horses. However, she appears pathetic in her effort to live up to her dashing husband’s standards of stylishness. She is extravagant, fashionable and frivolous. Jehan Ara Begum hails from a family that discarded the purdah long ago. Voluptuous and flirtatious, she looks upon motherhood as a burden and neglects her duties as a mother: “One has also to consider one’s figure,” she says (*Zohra* 95). It is obvious that the author looks down upon these women. *Zohra*’s own brush with the European

culture and its libertine ways and her (superficial) acceptance of the European life style – she sheds her inhibitions, smokes, drinks champagne, dresses herself up gaudily, dances with men and mixes freely with them – only serve to add to her disillusionment and deepen her respect for tradition. She repents her behaviour: “The things she had done [...] were perhaps suitable for those who were brought up to them, but she could not fit into that pattern, and remain carefree” (*Zohra* 285).

Tradition may be an oppressive presence in the lives of these women. However, embracing Western ways is not a viable alternative. Besides, the repudiation of tradition in the process self-determination does not suit the Indian environment. The ideology of personal freedom prevailing over the collective interests of the family and society is alien to the Indian tradition. Individual fulfilment, especially when achieved at the cost of duty to the family has always been alien to Indian tradition (Mukherjee, 29). “You must learn that your ‘self’ is of little importance. It is only through service to others that you can fulfil your duty,” Aunt Abida, who herself is a willing martyr at the altar of tradition, tells Laila in Attia Hosain’s novel (SBC 252). The accommodative stance of Futehally’s *Zohra* and the nostalgia of Attia Hosain’s Laila have to be understood in the light of the Indian and Islamic traditions they are part of. Rushed into a marriage against her will, *Zohra* toys with the idea of rebellion. She even plans to run away. However, she soon abandons the plan and resigns herself to the idea of marriage: “I must make this marriage successful. There is no retreat; Allah forbid that I should bring shame upon my parents and upon myself by returning to my *maika*, disapproved. I would rather die than bring such shame upon the family” (*Zohra*, 52). Familial obligations supersede *Zohra*’s personal preferences. Except for a few indignant outbursts against the feudal society’s curtailment of individual freedom, especially in the choice of a marriage partner, *Zohra* hardly adopts a rebellious stance. It is her abiding sense of loyalty and obligation to the family and elders that smother her urge to rebel. Growing up in a patriarchal taluqdari Muslim family of Lucknow, Attia Hosain’s Laila finds her girlhood a burden; but she also basks in the security of a joint family existence, to forsake which would mean upsetting the tenor of her life. Laila’s decision to marry a man of low breeding in defiance of her family invites violent disapproval even from her beloved aunt, Abida. Abida cannot bring herself to forgive Laila for acting against the interests of the family. “You have let your family’s name be bandied about by scandal-mongers and gossips. You have soiled its honour on their vulgar tongues” (SBC 312). The security and supportiveness an individual finds within the folds of tradition have to be sacrificed, when one seeks an uncertain emancipation.

Meena Shirwadkar observes that very few Indian-English novels depict the participation of women in social life and in the Freedom Movement, which brought about a great change in their lives. She ascribes this to the writers’ own lack of understanding or experience of the Movement, for, most writers, especially women, were not active participants in it. Zeenuth Futehally’s *Zohra* turns to the poor only as a solace from the agony of unfulfilled love (122). Attia Hosain’s Laila remains an interested observer rather than an active participant in the nationalist agitation. Identification with larger social and political causes accelerates the personal emancipation of the Muslim woman and renders it less agonising, as illustrated in Mumtaz Shah Nawaz’ novel. Herself a fearless freedom fighter and an active Muslim League worker, Shah Nawaz had a definite political vision which not only colours her narrative but even decides the fate of her characters. She chronicles the Muslim woman’s participation in the social and political life of India during the period of the Independence struggle. It is significant to note that Nawaz’

protagonist Zohra is not assailed by guilt or misgivings when she has to take decisions that conflict with the interests of her family. While Attia Hosain's Laila lingers in shadowy corners wondering why she was brought up differently from the other girls of her family, Zohra finds her life together with that of many other girls of her generation inextricably bound with the larger forces of history and change. "It's a period of transition [...] and it's affecting many households" (HD 332). Nawaz' focus is not on the smothered lives of the Muslim women within the *zenana*; instead she chooses to depict their way out of it. In the novel the emancipation of the Muslim woman is part of a collective process: "An invisible transformation was taking place and their life was changing with a rapidity that they could not perceive because of the general change and the swift movement of events around them" (HD 333). The younger generation cannot remain unaffected by the spirit of progress and reform that is very much in the air. Living in seclusion, socially urgent issues often slip by the aristocratic Muslim woman. Attia Hosain and Mumtaz Shah Nawaz hint at the internal purdah – the inhibitions and a withdrawal into the self – the Muslim woman constructs round herself as a defence against the conflicting and constricting values of the outside world. It is an active involvement in larger social activities that shatters the romantic illusions and naïve idealism an aristocratic Muslim woman cherishes in her sheltered existence.

To conclude, while the depiction of Muslim women in the male narrative is largely stereotypical with images of passivity, timidity and voicelessness predominating, the women novelists document the complex, heterogeneous forces moulding the life of the Indian Muslim woman of the early 20th century. Caught in the vortex of socio-political transition, the Muslim woman, living in Hyderabad, Lucknow or Punjab, experiences a cultural dislocation, exposed as she is to antithetical influences. Modern education, influence of the Western ideas of individualism, intermingling with the other communities and an involvement, direct or indirect, in the socio-political life of the country, alienate the young Muslim women from their traditional cultural milieu. At the same time, the cloying materialism, selfish individualism and vicious communal politics underlying the new social order are depressing too. Given this complex dialectic, forging of the Muslim woman's personal identity is not a simple act of rejecting the old and embracing the new. It involves choices as divergent as resignation, accommodation and wilful assertion of rights. These choices mostly entail pain - at the conscious erasure of the self or at the severing of supportive ties. Passivity and silence would rob the woman of individual dignity. A militant individualism, on the other hand, would only serve to ostracize her. Implied is the suggestion that struggles for individual liberation gain potency and meaning when waged as part of organized socio-political movements. The writers also suggest that there is a possibility of women's issues being marginalized in wider platforms and that the foregrounding of women's concerns is the responsibility of the woman.

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