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Islam, Women and Patriarchy: Reading through Select Muslim Women Writers of Twentieth Century India

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Abstract:

The position of Muslim women has been contested on the world stage and the onslaught of social, religious and nationalist movements in India helped Muslim women emerge on the public space— whether as victims or as active participants of freedom struggle. While trying to grapple with issues of purdah, polygamy, basic health and education, Muslim women garnered attention from all spheres. Amidst the question of social uplift of Muslim women, many Muslims wrote extensively on sensitive topics such as veiling, illiteracy of Muslim women and therefore their backwardness from other social and religious classes. In India, during the first half of the twentieth century emerged prominent Muslim women writers such as Iqbalunnisa Hussain, Ismat Chughtai, Zeenuth Futehally, Rokeya Sakhawat Hosain, Khadija Mastur and many more whose main concern was to provide voice to the problems Muslim women faced in the Muslim society and India at large. The paper focuses on intricate issues of veiling, polygamy and education when placed within the pyramid of Islam, patriarchy and society at large. These women not only voiced their concerns on these issues, but also shed light on the relevance of social, religious and political up lift of Muslim women to provide them recognition in society.

Keywords: Muslim women, Islam, veil, education, patriarchy, social reform, public space

It was not God who wronged them,

but they wronged their own souls (30:9) (Barlas 1)

This verse from the Quran, as brought to attention by theoretician Asma Barlas, clearly states that the regulations laid down for Muslims have been misinterpreted time and again not only by Non-Muslims but by Muslims themselves. The underlying assumption in this paper, therefore, is that what Muslims practice is not necessarily what Islam preaches and that important matters concerning veiling, education and the status of women in Islam have become topics of contestation across the world mostly due to the misconceived and distorted practices in patriarchy-governed Muslim societies. The focus of this paper is to disentangle the two and to analyze these themes by citing examples from the Quran and the *hadith* and juxtaposing it with the empirical practices in Muslim societies.

This paper seeks to analyze select Indian Muslim women writers' novels such as Iqbalunnisa Hussain's *Purdah and Polygamy* (1944), Ismat Chughtai's *The Crooked Line*, translated from the Urdu original (1995) and Zeenuth Futehally's *Zohra* (1951). These novels have been chosen in order to explore the complex position occupied by Indian Muslim women writers at three different levels: firstly, within the Muslim society which is wrought with patriarchal biases, secondly within the national discourse concerning identity and position of women in Indian society at large and thirdly within the ambivalent space of colonial modernity selectively claimed by both these groups. What brings together these writings is the treatment of women socially and culturally and the way these writers redefined the literary space for themselves. The texts chosen emphasize the lives of their women protagonists that center in and around the *zenana* (inner space reserved for women) and its perpetual effects on their lives. In doing so, they expose the chasms within the fabric of Muslim society and its inherent ambivalences.

Reading through Islam and patriarchy

Does Islam preach sexual inequality between men and women? Is patriarchal control over women sanctioned by the Quran? Leila Ahmed is one theoretician who tries to apply a fresh approach towards the understanding of Quranic teachings as far as women are concerned. She believes that what the Quran attempts to educate is perceived differently by Muslims around the world. She believes that if "fundamentally different Islams" (Ahmed 71) arise in different readings, then the patriarchal reading of Islam needs to be scrutinized because they are affecting the lives of Muslim women all around the globe. What becomes important here is how the Quran is read, how is it perceived and how its teachings implemented.

Asma Barlas points out that to understand the patriarchal readings of the Quran, we need to study the relationship between the content of knowledge and the methods by which it is generated (Barlas 10). The method here can imply a patriarchal or feminist understanding of the Quran. It is not "enough to ask what we know about religion, but equal attention must be paid to how we come to know what we know" (King 20). Therefore, mere textual knowledge of the Quran and its dealings with women is not sufficient; why and how they are discussed is more significant.

One must also decipher the relation between gender as perceived by Islam and its relation to patriarchy within the Indian context. Quran throws light on the creation of humanity even before it was defined by gender differences, "He created you from a single self (*nafs*) and of it (literally her), created its (her) mate" (4:1; the Quran repeatedly refers to the creation of mates and spouses "from among your selves/ souls" as in 30:21). Many verses also refer to the similar treatment of men and women alike. Male and female believers are each other's friends and protectors (9:71). Those who do good deeds will be rewarded, whether 'male or female' (4:124). Therefore, all are equal in the eyes of Allah, as per these verses. However, women are regarded as being socially and economically reliant on men, as per patriarchal norms. They must follow

the *shariat* or the Muslim Personal Law which gives primacy to male authority. Leila Ahmad comments, “Family law is the cornerstone of the system of male privilege set up by establishment Islam” (242), bespeaks of the patriarchal nature of Muslim personal laws especially in India, where men are accorded higher status as opposed to the women.

The basic idea behind exercising patriarchal control over women in the Indian context has leanings towards sexuality. Sexuality as defined by Michel Foucault is a “dense transfer point for relations of power... one of those endowed with the greatest instrumentality” (103). It is this instrumentality which places the men above women and leads to demarcation in society. Patriarchy is defined by Asma Barlas in her book *Believing Women* (2002), as the politics of sexual differentiation that privileges male by “transforming biological sex into politicized gender, which prioritizes the male” (12), thereby making the female as weak or the ‘other.’ Barlas believed that patriarchy confuses “sexual/biological differences with gender dualisms/inequality” (differences based on sex or biology with inequality based on gender dualisms) (12). But this does not recourse to there being a dualism that makes the men superior to women or vice versa. This is one way in which women in India deal with a flawed perception of patriarchy, especially the select Muslim writers.

Purdah and Polygamy: The Life in an Indian Muslim Household by Iqbalunnisa Hussain is a novel that discusses multiple issues of veiling, polygamy and the treatment of women in a Muslim society. It is a story about the role of polygamy and veiling in the lives of Muslim women. It paints a realistic picture of Muslims in pre-independent India where women are subject to patriarchal control. As Hussain ironically points in her novel about patriarchal control in society:

It is a well-known fact that man is superior to woman in every respect...He is not expected to show his gratitude or even a kind word of appreciation to a woman: it is his birthright to get everything from her... a woman as a wife should be subservient in everything to man’s comfort and exist for him and him only. She should have no particular liking for anything. Her work should as a matter of course begin and end with him. (49).

The entire purpose of being a woman in a patriarchal society is summed up ironically by Hussain when she opines in chapter XV:

Submission, subjection or servitude as it is variously called has its own significance as far as the feminine world is concerned and its very effective in making man favorably minded towards a woman. It creates pity for her and quenches the fire of his passion. It is applauded by members of both sexes. The greater her submissiveness and her ignorance the greater is the self importance felt by him (198).

Thus, Zuhra's dream of asserting her authority on her son proves futile towards the end of the novel because despite having married thrice, Kabeer settles for another marriage with the beautiful Noorjahan because he is dissatisfied with the first three marriages.

In Islam, the Quran has etched out certain rights and duties for both men and women. Muslim theologians (*ulama*) in the late nineteenth century viewed women as *fitna* (potential disorder). This in turn automatically called for a regulation over women's social interface with men, which in turn translated into control over female sexuality and thus absence of Muslim women from the public space (which also included the literary space till now dominated by men). Fatima Mernissi, the Moroccan feminist, points out that what is attacked in Islam is not sexuality but women, as the embodiment of destruction, the symbol of disorder. The woman is "*fitna*, the epitome of the uncontrollable, a living representative of the dangers of sexuality and its rampant disruptive potential" (44).

Defining the woman as "the guardian of national culture, indigenous religion, and family traditions" became important to Muslim social and religious reformers who were concerned with the preservation of Islamic society. The *ulama* and Muslim reformers also worked for the eradication of differences between men and women. Although the *ulama* worked for the reformation of the Muslim community, the rights of women were neglected by ascertaining that they only needed education about Quranic teachings and about how to be good wives and daughters. While on one hand Muslims were engaged in participating towards a modern India, many contradictions came up when it came to the social uplift of women; the *ulama* started preaching a reinterpretation of how Islam was about to revive the Muslim community and bring it at pace with a modern India.

Islam and the Veil

Veil is both "a marker of autonomy, individuality, and identity, and a marker of inequality and sexist oppression" (Hirschmann 184). The veil can be liberating but that also depends upon the kind of society in which it is practiced. In India, the veil more than being a religious emblem, becomes a symbol of patriarchal oppression. The main reason for confining women behind the veil is also deciphered as trying to keep a check on their sexuality. The concept of veiling is discussed by various theoreticians around the globe. Key theoreticians such as Amina Wadud, Fatima Mernissi, Katherine Bullock, Asma Barlas have discussed their opinions regarding the position of women in Islam and the question of veiling right from pre-Islamic times to the present. The verses of the Quran that state the importance or functioning role of veiling is as follows:

(O Prophet), tell the believing men to restrain their eyes (from looking at the other women and guard their shameful parts; this is a purer way for them; surely, Allah knows full well what they do. And (O Prophet), tell the believing women to restrain their eyes (from looking at the other men) and guard their shameful parts, and not to display their decoration except what is unavoidable. They should draw their over-garments close to

their breasts, and should not display their decoration except before their husbands, fathers, father-in laws, sons, step-sons, brothers, nephews (sons of brothers and sisters), their own women, male attendants lacking sexual urge or boys who are not yet conscious of the feminine secrets.... (24: 30-31).

The above-mentioned lines from the Quran clearly indicate that it is not just the women but also the men who have been asked to restrain their eyes and cover themselves from prying eyes and behave modestly so that they remain pure from wrong intentions.

Katherine Bullock in her book *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil* (2002), talks about multitude interpretations about what the Quran says about women and what is practiced by patriarchal societies. She says: “But the truth that some Muslim women are suffering, often in the form of a male-biased cultural practice of the faith, is not equivalent to the claim that “Islam’ oppresses women” (116). The controversy surrounding the issue of veiling is not as much in practice as it has now become a political issue. The veil is looked at from dichotomous angles: oppressive/liberating, compulsory/optional, and intimidating/emancipatory. Amina Wadud rightly points out that one cannot judge “a woman’s sense of personal bodily integrity or piety from 45 inches of cloth than you can spot a fly on the wall at two thousand feet” (219- 220). Therefore, one cannot judge a woman wearing the veil as being oppressed as is the view of the western world today. Irrespective of the occidental or oriental view, a woman however, does become the symbol of other/ness firstly because she is a woman and secondly because she is a veiled Muslim woman and this position is contested by Ismat Chughtai in her novel *The Crooked Line*.

Therefore, can a veiled woman possess power/agency? In her famous work on subalternity, Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak discusses the impossibility of women, particularly of those of the third world having ‘agency’ or ‘voice’. She argues that the figure of the third world woman disappears into “pristine nothingness” since her displaced figure is “caught between tradition and modernization” (306). But the subaltern woman cannot speak because of fear of being misrepresented. This however, gets altered during fictional representation by select women writers because they attempt to subvert patriarchal discourse that governs the position of Muslim women in society.

Iqbalunnisa Hussain is very sensitive to the multifarious issues of veiling, education, polygamy and the lower status of women in her novel and states its usage right in the beginning of her novel:

Umar, the owner, had let three of the sides and in the fourth he himself lived. In the absence of the male members the women of all the four families spent their time in the common courtyard... There was only one common door leading to the road, so all the males while going out or coming in had to give an alarm to the women of the other families... (1).

This kind of segregation only leads to a suffocating life for the women as they are not allowed to breathe in open spaces and are confined to the inner quarters of their homes. Kabeer, the hero of the novel indulges in polygamy despite have a wife who fulfills all his needs. His father-in law tries explaining the same to his daughter Nazni about the polygamous nature of men when he says, “Often second marriages take place without the first wife’s knowledge.. It is neither uncommon nor a sin according to social injunctions. He has every liberty to do it... Men with polygamous instinct fish for an excuse... (86).

Despite warnings from his father, Nazni is unable to grasp the meaning of his words and finds herself sharing her husband with another woman. Iqbalunnisa Hussain in another book *Changing India* (1940), writes extensively on the topic of polygamy. Taking queue from the Quran, she cites examples by saying that polygamy was allowed in Islam to stop illicit relations from brewing between men and women; certain conditions were however laid down for the Muslims in matters of polygamous practices: “And if you fear that you cannot act equitably towards orphans marry such women as seem good to you, two and three and four, but if you fear that you will not do justice between them, then marry only one” (29). These lines clearly indicate that the purpose behind allowing polygamy was to raise the position of destitute women and was not meant for the men to practice as when they could feel the need to have a new wife.

Meanwhile, there ensues an argument between Doulat Khan (Nazni’s father) and her brother on the issue of polygamy. Doulat Khan defending Kabeer’s polygamous nature says: “A man depending upon one wife feels himself equal to her. Plurality of wives maintains his self-importance” (114). To this Nazni’s brother replies: “So his faithlessness should be interpreted as virtue! A woman in spite of her loyalty should be submissive and servile. Why this double standard of morality? Is it not the creation of society and man? Has she not the same feelings as she”? (114) Though the father and son do not see eye to eye about the topic of polygamy, Zuhra, Kabeer’s mother is in support of both monogamy as well as veiling for women. It is only to keep her son happy that she consents to his polygamous nature. There are arguments regarding the same between Maghbool, Kabeer’s third wife and her father Faiz Mohammed. Iqbalunnisa Hussain through the depiction of contrasting characters’ highlights that the concept of veiling as well as polygamy was practiced in the first part of the twentieth century to subjugate the position of Muslim women and present the life in purdah with realism.

Modernity and its impending effects on women and Islam

The representation of third world women is treated differently by the West and the rest of the world. However, with the advent of colonization, modernity emerged to the forefront, bringing with it a new system of administration, western education and industrialization, aiming for a reorganization of the socio-cultural space which had at its center the role of women in family and society. A question arose as to why was there a need to associate modernity with its western aspect while dealing with Indian texts? Mansoor Moaddal and Kamran Talattof in the book *Contemporary Debates in Islam* (2000), write about modernity:

Generally, the Islamic modernists: accepted an evolutionary view of history with the West being at the pinnacle of the world civilization; praised the Western model... reformulated Islamic methodology in the manner congruent with the standards of nineteenth century social theory... and formulated a modernist discourse on women by rejecting polygamy and male domination (3-4).

But the point of contention is whether polygamy and male domination was done away with? There seems to be a dichotomy between what modernity aimed at and what it achieved. Anti-western for Muslims did not mean anti-modern. Modernity, for David Washbrook, addressed itself within colonies in contradictory ways, its rhetoric and practice being at variance (414). This dichotomy is well explored by Iqbalunnisa Hussain, Ismat Chughtai and Zeenuth Futehally in their own ways as they seem to be in sync with Partha Chatterjee's views on modernity. He believed that modernity cannot be dismissed simply by saying that it takes after Western principles. The integration of the Western principles of rationality and technological development need to be limited to the material world; the spiritual essence however, remains uncontaminated (38) and this is what is beneficial for the Indian women writers as they began to depict the orient and the third world women as absorbed in tradition and yet aiming towards a modernist approach.

Muslim women remained absent from this space as the Muslims responded late to the modernizing needs of the time. With the emergence of women writers on scene, such condescending attitudes towards women were rejected and the women writers decided to reorganize the literary space for themselves. These writers aimed at formation of alternative modernity to re-establish themselves as potential writers. Abha Avasthi and A. K. Srivastava believe that feminism is a constituent aspect of modernity (19). The female body in Indian literature became a site for struggle between 'proponents and opponents of modernity' (Moghissi 20), thereby engaging Muslim women writers to a new task— that of authentic representation of Muslim women in literature. This difference is explored poignantly by the three writers who engaged with the ongoing project of modernity in India.

Therefore, what affianced the writers of twentieth century, especially Muslim women, was the alliance they formed with the project of modernity, which though a western construct, came to imbibe new meanings in the Indian context. For these women writers, modernity began with the advent of colonization in India, and aimed at the distinct reappraisal of women, irrespective of the western postulation of the third world woman as subjugated/oppressed

Zeenuth Futehally

Zohra by Zeenuth Futehally is the story of the female protagonist Zohra, born in the early twentieth century in a privileged Muslim family and her journey for independence-both personal and collective. The novel covers the life of Zohra from being a girl of independent thoughts to becoming a wife who leans towards education of women, believes in social elevation of women and who despite being a modern girl, is traditional when it comes to religious practices. The

novel in the very beginning highlights the upbringing of girls in early twentieth century when Zohra's nurse Unni exclaims: "In our days, girls behaved like girls...girls never entered the outer garden, not even when it was high-walled. What is the zenana courtyard for? Your mother- may Allah bless her- never dreamed of doing such things when she was your age" (2). The very beginning of the novel brings to the forefront the theme of veiling and the female space. Veiling is also strictly adhered to in Zohra's family and she receives Quranic lessons amidst veiled boundaries. Zohra undergoes veiling even at her husband's abode where the house is divided between the *mardana* and the *zenana* and the demarcations of which must be strictly followed. Education of girls also forms a core theme for this novel. Zohra's mother is constantly chided for letting her daughter acquire education which would only lead to ill talks about her. Unnie exclaims and tells Zohra's mother:

Begum Sahiba, how can you allow Chotti Bibi to go on with her studies? What is she going to do with all this... Besides, I tell you this school is no place for our girls to go to. What can you expect when it is run by mems? As you know, ladies often come on the pretext of seeing the school; but owi! What have they to do with learning? They simply come to cast an eye over the girls and select brides for their sons... (5)

Unnie makes Zohra's mother believe that education was not fit for women of respectable families. Despite constant arguments between Zohra's mother and father, Zohra acquires education and ostensibly emerges as a projection of an ideal modern 'educated Muslim woman.' Zohra epitomizes a woman liberated in mind and spirit but tied down to traditions in a lived reality, a split which the half-baked 'modernity' espoused both by the reformers as well as the nationalists with their patriarchal biases, tended to perpetrate.

Ismat Chughtai

The Crooked Line by Ismat Chughtai is another text which traces the life of a woman Shamman, from her childhood till the time she is in her twenties where she transgresses the boundary of being a gendered being to becoming an independent entity. The entire novel discusses how the behavior of girls should be right from childhood and hints at their hidden sexuality which is boldly brought to the forefront by Chughtai through the character of Shamman. As professor M. Asaduddin opines about Chughtai in the "Introduction" to his book *A Life in Words: Memoirs* (2012), "As the subcontinent's foremost feminist writer she was instinctively aware of the gendered double standard in the largely feudal and patriarchal structure of the society she lived in and did everything to expose and subvert it" (ix). Throughout the novel, Chughtai explores the hidden side of female sexuality, that is, homosexuality and its impact upon women. The narrative draws heavily upon Chughtai's own life experiences and carves a sketch of multifarious experiences of female consciousness in a male dominated patriarchal society. Chughtai on the very first page of the novel introduces the protagonist as follows: Suddenly dark clouds rolled in... and 'she' appeared. The minute she arrived into the

world she let out such a thunderous howl... God help us!" (1). Her birth is hardly celebrated as she is the tenth child in the family.

Tahira Naqvi in the "Introduction" to the novel's translation says, "In the early chapters of *The Crooked Line* we see how women unempowered in a man's world and unable to govern their own destinies, develop a flawed and second-class mode of empowerment within the confines of their limitations and begin to oppress other women" (ix). An apt example to explain this sort of behavior is Bari Apa's character. Being the oldest sister of Shamman, she is widowed after a few years of her marriage and comes back to live with her parents. Becoming sexually frustrated and emotionally fragile, she makes Shamman her scapegoat and vents out all her frustrations on her by ill-treating her own sister. Even though a male authoritative figure is missing within the first part of the novel, patriarchal control is still very poignantly at play.

During the latter part of the novel, Chughtai explores the young side of Shaman when she enters college and experiences a mixed wave of emotions in and around her. Talking about the various levels of friendships in the boarding school, Tahira Naqvi in the "Introduction" says, "Rasul Fatima's endless and pitiful fawning and her secretive, nightly physical advances repel and sicken Shaman, but only a short time later Shaman herself experiences similar feelings for the beautiful Najma only to be rebuffed because Najma and Saadat... are already bound in a jealously guarded relationship" (ix). She is made to realize that it is natural to be attracted to girls by her friend Bilquis, but "Apa Bi told me we should be crazy about boys not girls" (78). Entering a new world, Shamman compares the sexually oriented behavior in her home and the world outside and realizes that most of the things are patriarchally governed and women have no role to play either in their home or the world.

However, while Shamman also practices veiling, that does not stop her from acquiring education and achieving what is best for her. This is also reflective of Chughtai's own life, wherein she achieved the status of being one of the foremost feminist without entirely giving up her Muslim identity. Thus, through the mode of her writing she exposes the threats posed by feudal patriarchal society. She constantly exposes the follies of the female space, that is, the *zenana*. They resist, react and establish an agency of their own. Thus, Shamman as a heroine proves to be a reminder of a struggle—both inner and outer. Chughtai like Shamman, is a 'crooked line' herself; she is a rebel who refuses to yield to society's stereotypes about women, but in turn celebrates womanhood.

To conclude, these women novelists achieved the desired literary space for themselves by problematizing patriarchal representations of womanhood in Indian society. They, while adhering to Quranic practices, became markers of a new woman—a woman who was assertive, self-reliant and a spokesperson for the entire female space. These writers can be termed as revolutionary in their respective ways because they emerged on the literary sphere at a time when Muslim women writers were perpetually absent from the literary scene as it was predominantly and undisputedly a male-dominated space. These women through their novels not

only highlight the rights and status of women in Islam as propounded by Quran but also point towards the all-round socio-political and cultural development of women. Even though there remains gap between the teaching and implementation of what the Quran and the *hadith* have laid for Muslims, the novels of these women are crucial even in contemporary times as they raise important issues of veiling, education, and sexual understanding of women in a patriarchy-oriented Indian Muslim society. Contributing to the literature of the Indian subcontinent these writers are pivotal in breaking through the typecast image of women and yet retaining their Islamic identity.

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