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Colonial Modernity and Muslim Women: Interventions by Selected Muslim Women Writers in English of Twentieth Century India

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Abstract:

It merits mention that notwithstanding the polemics involved in the use of the term 'Muslim', in this paper, the term 'Muslim Women' writer merely indicates women writers of Muslim ancestry or kinship who reflect on Muslim identities through their fictional characters. From writers like Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Attia Hosain to diaspora writers like Samina Ali, these women have succeeded in voicing their lived experiences. They have problematized western notions of modernity and have succeeded in addressing issues such as education and purdah to expose the machinations of a patriarchal society that lead to their subjugation. This paper looks at Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's "Sultana's Dream" and Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* as a case in point and how they dealt with the issues of modernity as a governing factor that had a huge impact on the lives of Indian Muslim women.

Keywords: Muslim Women, Modernity, Education, Zenana, Mardana.

Modernity and Muslim Women: A Brief Overview

Modernity triggered by the colonial presence in India launched a reformation and reorganisation of Indian socio-cultural space which was centred on rethinking of women's roles in family and society. Muslim women, however, remained outside this debate for a long time as the Muslims responded late to the modernising needs of the time. In the beginning of the twentieth century, we come across many women writers who either rejected the roles assigned to women in didactic literature or renegotiated their space within the realm of Muslim household. This paper aims to analyse the works of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and Attia Hosain to explore how they engage with issues of modernity such as education, purdah, marriage, gender asymmetry and the boundaries between the public and private spheres to offer alternative modernities.

"Between patriarchy and imperialism ...the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third world woman' caught between tradition and modernization" (Spivak 306). The plight of Muslim women was similar at the time when these women writers started writing. They were secluded from the public space by purdah which further isolated them from social space than men. This made Muslim women totally invisible to historical and social analysis as compared to other

Indian women. This perhaps is the reason why even in the nationalist discourse Muslim women represent a negative space marked by backwardness. Partha Chatterjee in his essay “Nationalist Resolution of the Woman’s Question” explains the ‘disappearance’ of the women’s question from the political domain by the end of the nineteenth century as the result of nationalism’s “refusal to make the women’s question an issue of political negotiation with the colonial state” (249). He felt that a re-articulation of Indian womanhood was important in the formation of Indian identity. For him, the central problem for Indian nationalism was of modernizing the nation on western terms and yet retaining an essential national identity as the basis for a political claim to nationhood which was resolved by drawing a dividing line between the spiritual and the material, in which women were identified with the spiritual space.

Muslim women, however, remained outside this debate for a long time as a section of Muslim society remained strongly opposed to the idea of education for women. The early Muslim social reformers also excluded women from this project. Even when education for Muslim women was accepted, it was merely to groom them to become ideal wives and daughters, thereby privileging piety, frugality and self-restraint etc.

At the start of the twentieth century, despite pressures of religious orthodoxies, social prejudice, Muslim women successfully emerged out of the isolation of traditional roles to become self-aware individuals. With modernism emerging within the Muslim middle-class, it paved way for the women writers to engage reflexively with modernity as an ongoing project in their lives and the lives of the Muslim community and the nation. It must be noted that the middle class among various communities had a varied relationship with the project of modernization. It is acknowledged that gender had a major bearing on the construction of nationalism and modernity but little attention was paid to the ways in which women writers not only negotiated with a ‘fractured modernity’, but also helped in its construction. This experience can be seen in the works of Progressive writers such as Ismat Chughtai, Razia Sajjad Zaheer, Rashid Jahan, where these women posited the question of what it meant to become ‘modern’, not just as women, but as professionals, as Muslims and as Indians

Zenana versus Mardana: Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, a Bengali Muslim feminist and educationist, a crusader of the women’s cause, defied all stereotypes. Her story “Sultana’s Dream,” which first chronicled in *Indian Ladies Magazine* in 1905, is clearly subversive in its approach. It is an evocative story that portrays a feminist utopia where women preside over the society and the men are isolated in the *mardana*, just as the women were secluded in the *zenana* in Indian society.

The central concerns of the story are the tug of war for dominance between the men and women, the use of natural resources to govern a society, women’s education and a subversion of the practice of *purdah* in the utopian land created by Hossain. She learnt to read and write English

from her own brother and encouraged by her husband, used this medium as a weapon in asserting her opinion about the position of women in the Indian society and predominantly in relation to Bengal.

While analyzing Hossain's work, one must answer the question position of Bengali Muslim women in colonial India. Mahua Sarkar throws light on the reception of Bengali Muslim women in colonial India in his influential essay, "Muslim Women and the Politics of (In)visibility":

The representation of Muslim women as "backward/victimized" were initially related to the production of the category modern "ideal Indian women" as Hindu, upper caste/middle class and the category "Muslim" as predominantly male, violent, dissolute and "medieval" in late colonial Bengal (227).

The dual colonization of women— western as well as patriarchal is spoken about at length in this poignant tale about Sultana and her journey to the 'Ladyland', a 'Utopia' which is free from the restraints of male autonomy and is like the 'Promised' land for the women on earth. The story, thus aims to 'deconstruct' the conventional parameters laid down for women and 're-casts' a feminist ideology based on liberty and equality for all women. Hossain brings into play the trope of fantasy as a device to undermine the dominant male discourse. The story thus alters the feminine site that is related to the 'home' into the very 'nation' itself. How does Hossain amalgamate the two contested sites of the 'home' and the 'nation' or the 'traditional' and the 'modern' into one? For this, the beginning of the story is crucial. The most vital theme of women's position in the Indian society is hinted at in the very first line of the story: "One evening I was lounging in an easy chair in my bedroom and thinking lazily of the condition of Indian womanhood" (3). This line points towards the disappearing issue of womanhood that was supposed to be the fundamental question to the nationalist movement but which pressed the problem to the rear. The recurring motif in the story is the education of women in Indian society. As Barnita Bagchi states in the "Introduction" to the story: "It is evident from the focus of Rokeya's activities that in *Sultana's Dream* the driving force behind the success of the utopian feminist country of Ladyland is women's education" (xiii). Hossain's own dream of educating Muslim women is reflected in the story when Sister Sara tells Sultana, "Our good queen liked science very much. She circulated an order that all the women in her country should be educated. Accordingly, a number of girl's schools were founded and supported by the government. Education was spread far and wide among the women" (7).

Hossain's dream was not just for a basic education of women; she wanted women to apply their educational achievements to their lives. She challenges the notion of women's subordination within the private sphere and men's claim to political power by reversing the whole order in favour of women. She also engages with the social constructs of *zenana* and *mardana* conceived as the rightful spaces for women and men in her times. In Ladyland, it is the men who occupy all the womanly qualities, thereby being forced to move to the *zenana* whereas the women, no

longer obliged to be cultural dolls and preserved for the sake of honour of the nation, are at the forefront, ready to tackle every obstacle with their intellect.

The discussions between Sultana and her Guide bring out the differences between gender segregation in India and the freedom enjoyed by women in the Ladyland. When Sultana tells her Guide that “We have no hand or voice in the management of our social affairs. In India man is lord and master, he has taken to himself all powers and privileges and shut up the women in the zenana”, her Guide chides, “You have neglected the duty you owe to yourself and you have lost your natural rights by shutting your eyes to your own interest.” (5). The Guide also informs Sultana how all this was achieved by women earlier confined to the *zenana* by using their intellect in saving the country at the time of invasion when the men of the country failed. The idea of men being put into seclusion, the ‘*zenana*’ now called ‘*mardana*’, to perform all household chores and women engaging with matters of governance and economy, a privilege achieved as a reward of their scientific knowledge, is quite radical though appropriate given the number of women in the forefront of the national movement. The radical edge of Hossain’s feminism gets foregrounded in Sister Sara’s polemics, “Men, who do or at least are capable of doing no end of mischief, are let loose and the innocent women are shut up in the zenana! ... (5). Do you think they work all the seven hours...They dawdle away their time in smoking...they talk much about their work, but do little” (6-7)? Hossain deftly deals with the inner-outer world that demarcates and distances the men and women. By inverting and using the outer world for the women, she seems to revert to and redefine the nationalist position regarding the women’s question which as Partha Chatterjee has demonstrated, conceived of “the inner/outer, spiritual/material worlds as feminine/masculine respectively” and assumed that Indian womanhood represented the “inner/spiritual world of the home and therefore was burdened with an authentic national identity (“Nationalist Resolution” 250). In *Sultana’s Dream*, Sister Sara boldly tells Sultana that “We shut our men indoors... They are fit for nothing. Only catch them and put them into the zenana” (5-6), thereby suggesting that in Ladyland women not only occupy the ‘masculine’ space but also are involved in nation formation, which is primarily attributed to the men in real life. Hossain thus contests the nationalist notion of modernity borrowed from the west by redefining categories such as ‘nationalism’ as defined by her own understanding and reading of feminist literature, and the dual notions of the oppositional strands associated with the concepts of ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ (as suggested Mukti Lakhi) in the Indian context, Hossain redefines her understanding of the concept of modernity in colonial India.

Mukti Lakhi in her essay “An alternative Feminist Modernity,” discusses the concept of alternative modernity which she believes would be fairer to women. For Lakhi, to think of alternative “modernities” would mean examining Rokeya’s “modernity” from a specific cultural context. Adopting the facet of fantasy, she rejects the patriarchal notion of control and repositions the status and role of the women of the Ladyland by adopting an alternative approach to modernity which is gendered as essentially masculine (5).

The utopian Ladyland is a creation of fantasy and a question one may ask is why a writer as deeply drenched in socio-political struggles of her times as Hossain resorted to 'fantasy', an escapist strategy in her story? One may argue that the element of fantasy allows Hossain to reflect on her own ideas vis a vis the position of women in society and conceive and construct the ideals she firmly believed in, that is, a world free from patriarchal hegemony. Hossain thus opens upon what Freud calls "unfulfilled but possible futures to which we still like to cling in fantasy, all the strivings of the ego which adverse external circumstances have crushed, and all our suppressed acts of volition which nourishes in us the illusion of Free Will" ("The Uncanny" 240). Ladyland for women becomes their true home where before the women go out for war, the men must "retire into zenanas... for the sake of honor and liberty" (10). Both the words are used by Hossain as contradictory to each other, which implies that men should be kept in purdah because they are the perpetrators of 'honour' and 'liberty'. She makes use of the fantastical element to ruminate and explain the familiar and to drive home her project of modernity, but modernity for Hossain herself remained a fragmentary project during her lifetime and therefore the entire debate surrounding 'women's question' remains unresolved.

Deconstructing Izzat/Honour Vs. Sharam/Dishonour Debate: Attia Hosain

Attia Hosain's writings are reflections of the various changes that occurred in the position of women in pre-independence and post-independence India. Her works distinctly highlight the dominant concepts of Indian behaviour- izzat/ honour, and sharam/ dishonour. The basic principles of Hosain's view of society, culture and art are influenced largely by the Marxist principles of the All India Progressive Writer's Association (AIPWA). As Hosain notes in the Introduction to her novel *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961):

I was greatly influenced in the 30s by the young friends and relations who came back from English schools and universities as left wing activists, Communists and Congress socialists. I was at the first Progressive Writer's Conference and could be called a "fellow traveler" at the time (viii).

The first collection of AIPWA writings, *Angare (Embers)*, published in 1932 paved the way for free expression of women life in India. Hosain's feminist impulses were inspired by the outspoken women of AIPWA like Rashid Jahan. At the same time, Hosain's writings place economic factors as the main reason for the oppression of women.

Some of the dominant themes of Hosain's novel are the social life of Muslim women and the culture of belonging to a Muslim family, education among the Muslim women, belief in purdah, treatment of the themes of love and marriage and the unequal status accorded to the women in the family. The novel traces the evolution of the *taluqdar* family of Lucknow from pre-independence to post-independence with a variety of changes in the characters during that span of time. The novelist highlights these themes by making comparison between the characters such

as Laila who contrasts with her cousin Zahra, Asad with his brother Zahid. It is Laila who questions her family's rules and societal norms,

The Muslim family presented in the novel is a rich and conservative, upholding the traditions of purdah which denies women the freedom to choose their future. Purdah is treated as sanctimonious to preserve their modesty and chastity. It becomes a symbol of tradition as opposed to the modernizing needs of the time. Purdah gives powers as well as dis-empowers women in the novel. It acts as a sign of patriarchy as depicted by Baba Jan, the oldest patriarch of the family. The very first sentence of the novel highlights the centrality of purdah motif in the novel. As Laila says: "The day my aunt Abida moved from the *zenana* into the guest-room off the father's room, we knew Baba Jan had not much longer to live" (14). This shows the segregation between the "*mardana*" and the "*zenana*" thereby alienating the space of the females. Young men and women are not allowed to mingle and with the help of purdah, the patriarchs of the family try to control the sexual impulses of men and women. As Hanna Papenek comments on the practice of purdah:

The institution of purdah provides symbolic shelter-and often very real shelter-for the women of the family, but what are these women being sheltered from... symbolic shelter is provided both against real dangers of a segregated world but also, and not least significantly, against the strong impulses such as sexual desire and aggression which are clearly recognized as being part of the human condition ("Purdah: Separate Worlds" 35).

The presence of male members in the *zenana* is disapproved even by the servants of the house just like Baba Jan. Laila, the protagonist grows up in the nestled world of *zenana* where transgressing the boundary is considered a sin. The motif of purdah is deployed by Hosain in such a way that it's meaning keeps changing from character to character. Zahra, who acts as a foil to Laila observes purdah before marriage but after her marriage, she comes out of purdah as desired by her husband and becomes a modern wife. Similarly, aunt Saira who as Laila tells us in the novel, "Before she was married, she had lived strictly in purdah, in an orthodox, middle-class household" (87), gives up purdah after her marriage in compliance with the wishes of her husband and to adapt her ways to the modern society.

Thus, does coming out of purdah bring about any change in the outlook of these women? Interestingly, Hosain herself observed purdah during her stay in India before independence. The point to be noted is that purdah or veil does not fasten a woman to narrow mentality as is the generally believed. Visibility does not necessarily guarantee agency just as veil does not necessarily mean lack of agency or authority. A similar thinking is portrayed by Laila in the novel. As a child, Laila resents the purdah system which puts a restrictive eye on her vision. But as an older woman, she nostalgically thinks of the female space of the *zenana*.

Amina Amin in the essay “Tension between Restriction and Freedom,” gives a series of adjectives to describe the feminine space of seclusion in the novel. She makes use of words such as ‘zenana’, ‘screen’, ‘bamboo curtain’, ‘curtained windows’, ‘curtained car’, ‘sheeted palanquins’, ‘high encircling walls’ (115) as used in the novel to depict the lives of women who have to comply with strict observation of purdah. Laila who acts as the voice of Hosain herself is descriptive of the female space. In the text, one gets to know that the women did not stray into the men’s quarters unless they were asked to. Hakimian Bua, who had fed and nursed Laila since she had lost her parents, kept a close eye on the movements of Laila and Zahra and did not allow even Asad and Zahid, their cousins, to remain in their room after a certain hour in the day. In fact, their presence in the girls’ room at any time was met with disapproval. However, the scrutiny of purdah does not restrict many of the women in the novel from acquiring education. Baba Jan, the patriarch, permits Laila to have English education. Her aunt Abida is also well read in Arabic, Urdu and Persian. She is a character bound with traditions and she regrets that Laila does not follow those traditions.

One can say that Hosain dexterously combines the traditional and the modern in the novel, whether it is the matter of the veil, education, marriage, notions of freedom, nationalism, or the representation of various characters. Zahra is a character who makes an overall transformation from traditional to the modern world. She is a subservient girl who follows the ideals of a traditional Muslim girl before marriage. But after her marriage, she changes completely: “She was now playing the part of the perfect modern wife as she had once played the part of a dutiful purdah girl...Just as she had once said her prayers five times a day, she now attended social functions morning, afternoon and evening” (140). She becomes a perfect modern wife in compliance to her husband’s wishes and chides Laila for her traditional thinking and ways of living. The two patriarchs are also caught in the complex tradition versus modernism web of life. Baba Jan stands for all that is old and traditional whereas his son Hamid emulates the western way of living to posit that he had acquired a modern lifestyle. Laila brings into view the modern qualities of Hamid’s character: “His relations no longer expected him to conform to traditional patterns; and he was too self-sufficient to care for what they thought” (86). But the two are not very dissimilar as they depict the patriarchal agenda of keeping the women in control. Aunt Saira, Hamid’s wife, acts as his resonance; she is ‘dominated by him’ and points to the differences between the two. After Saira’s marriage to Hamid, Saira comes out of the strict boundaries of purdah and Hamid ‘had her groomed by a succession of English “lady companions” (87). Therefore, Saira fits the role of what Partha Chatterjee calls the ‘new woman’. The focus of the ‘new woman’ of the reform movement, he believed, ‘was to be modern, but she would also have to display the signs of national tradition and therefore would be essentially different from the “Western” woman’ (*The Nation* 9). Hence, Saira blends the traditional and the western to appease her husband and her situation can be aptly summarized by Barbara Metcalf’s observation in the article “Reading and Writing about Muslim women in British India.” She points out how the reform movement brought about changes in the lives of

Muslim women. She argues: “While the teaching of the *ulama* implicitly distinguished Muslim women from non-Muslim women; they explicitly drew the line between the proper, well-brought up Muslim woman and the ignorant one...” (104). The main intention of their discourse was ‘the enemy within’: the unreformed, uneducated woman who did not know Islamic doctrine, was caught up in expensive and corrupting ceremonial practices, and handled badly the responsibilities of her everyday life” (104). Therefore, Saira is modern only superficially; underneath she is steeped in traditions which she was brought up with.

Thus, veiling and unveiling does not necessarily reflect empowerment or being bound by the strands of tradition or modernism. It is Laila whose education awakens her to the notions of freedom and selfhood. Laila’s character, which is based on Hosain’s own life, acquires western education and this brings out the rebel in her. Hence, the demarcation and segregation is grilled into the psyche of the women right from their early childhood. Laila, who receives liberal western education, places her happiness above her family and decides her future herself including her marriage to Amir who belongs a class lower than hers, even if that means having separate opinion from the family. Like Laila, her friend Sita too acquires western education, but that education does not give her the courage to transcend the boundaries of religion and traditions. She is unable to marry Kemal, a Muslim, and instead marries a groom chosen by her parents as she is aware that her love for Kemal would not be approved by her society. Unlike her, for Laila, marriage is not a break away or a compromise, it is her love for Ameer that gives her the strength to bear the estrangement between her and her family, as she believes her love for Ameer is pure.

Laila’s life, her decisions are intertwined with the life of her nation as it underwent the upheavals of the Partition. It caused not only the splitting up of the country but also the collapse of her family which once lived together. Partition leads to social, political, emotional and psychological dislocation in the novel as pointed by Sarla Palkar:

In the first place, one cannot neatly compartmentalize the personal history of Laila from the social-or national history- in fact what makes *Sunlight on a Broken Column* a three dimensional novel is the manner in which the personal, the social, and the national issues keep interacting and reflecting in one another (“Beyond Purdah” 115).

One can say that the personal history of the protagonist is linked to the social and national history and to the partition of the country. Here too she displays her free will as she chooses to stay back in India even as Uncle Hamid dies; aunt Saira lives in Hasanpur; Zahid, Asad’s brother dies on a train to Pakistan; Zahra too leaves for Pakistan. Vrinda Nabar points out:

Laila, Asad and Kemal (all Muslim characters who remain in India after partition), are important in the context of independence and the period following, because they debunk fundamentalist distortions about the Hindu-Muslim divide. While it would be simplistic to pretend that irrational suspicion and hatred do not colour attitudes on either side of the

border, significantly large number of Indian Muslims think of India as ‘home’, a choice made without any apparent mental conflict (“Fragmenting Nations” 133).

Hence, character delineation by Hosain is done in such a way as to portray a wide range of round characters that constantly trigger the sensibilities of the readers and push questions of modernity such as education, purdah, marriage, gender asymmetry in the Muslim society and the boundaries between the public and private sphere of identity, individuality, modernity and the nation to the forefront rather than sidelining them in the midst of Laila’s love story and the trajectory of her evolution into a resistant female. The novel is not just an autobiographical narrative; it is an intervention, a narrative of resistance by a Muslim woman writer who carved a literary niche for herself in times when the woman’s question was not engaged with reflexively owing to the backwardness of women in socio-political and educational field.

Thus, as Abha Avasthi and A. K. Srivastava believe, feminism is a constituent aspect of modernity (*Modernity, Feminism and Women Empowerment* 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 two writers who engaged with the ongoing project of modernity in India.

Therefore, what affianced especially Muslim women writers in the twentieth century, was the alliance they formed with the project of modernity, which though a western construct, came to imbibe new meanings in the Indian context.

Conclusion

The entire nineteenth and early twentieth century, driven by the imperial agenda, engaged with the issues pertaining to women’s situation in Indian society. The two novelists have, by problematizing all patriarchal representations of women, provided new literary tools to address Muslim identity. Refusing to abide by the patriarchal or reformist representation of women and yet not rejecting their Muslim identities, these writers lived oscillating lives, yet continually battled for superiority and self-assertion. Their writings offer possibilities of alternative modernity where all assumptions, perceptions and presuppositions can be challenged and their identities both as Muslims and as ‘women’ can be accommodated.

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