

THE ABSENT-PRESENT WOMAN:
A READING OF THE MUSLIM WOMAN EXPERIENCE IN COLONIAL INDIA

*A dissertation submitted to the University of Hyderabad
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of*

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in
COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

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DECLARATION

I, Zeba Tamkanat Moazzam (Reg. No. 17HCHL01), hereby declare that the research embodied in this dissertation entitled “The Absent-Present Woman: A Reading of the Muslim Woman Experience in Colonial India” submitted by me under the guidance and supervision of Prof. M. T. Ansari, Centre for Comparative Literature, University of Hyderabad, in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy in Comparative Literature, is a bonafide research work which is also free from plagiarism.

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled “The Absent-Present Woman: A Reading of the Muslim Woman Experience in Colonial India” submitted by Ms. Zeba Tamkanat Moazzam, bearing Reg. No. 17HCHL01, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy in the Centre for Comparative Literature, is a bonafide work carried out by her under my supervision and guidance and which is plagiarism free.

**28 June 2019
Hyderabad**

**Supervisor
Prof. M. T. Ansari**

**Head I/C and Dean
Prof. Sarat Jyotsna Rani**

DEDICATED TO THE WOMEN IN MY LIFE

You know who you are

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I have never had a dearth of strong women in my life. Fascinated by them, annoyed by their strong convictions, riveted by their force of strength, and captivated by their resilient character, I grew up with a constant stream of compelling female personalities. It is because of these women that I learned to see what was not obviously evident. It is because of them that I have attempted to read women subjectively, to draw out as much of them as I dared to without thrusting my voice onto them.

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	v-vii
Introduction	01-11
Introduction	
Statement of the Problem	
Objectives	
Overview of Literature	
Research Questions	
Research Methodology	
Scheme of Chapters	
Conclusion	
Chapter One	12-36
The Making of the Absent-Present Women in Islam	
1.1 Introduction	
1.2 The Ideal Woman	
1.3 The Silent Woman	
1.4 Woman as “Other”	
1.5 Politics of Identity	
1.6 Politics of Conduct	
1.7 Conclusion	
Chapter Two	38-59
Historical Production of Womanhood: Political Narratives and Gender	
2.1 Introduction	
2.2 Political Narratives	
2.2.1 Syed Ahmed Khan	
2.2.2 Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanavi	
2.2.3 Sayyid Mumtaz Ali	
2.2.4 Muhammad Iqbal	
2.3 Literary Contributions	
2.3.1 Nazir Ahmad	
2.3.2 Mirza Mohammad Hadi Ruswa	
2.4 Conclusion	
Chapter Three	61-88
Re-imagining Women: The Absent-Present Muslim Women in Colonial India	
3.1 Introduction	
3.2 Archives and Autobiographies	
3.3 The Will to Knowledge	
3.3.1 Bi Amman	
3.3.2 Ashrafunnisa Begum	
3.4 Begamati Zuban	
3.5 Women’s Magazines	
3.6 Conclusion	
Conclusions	89-90
Works Consulted	91-95

INTRODUCTION

Audre Lorde's essay entitled "Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," contends that "Western European history conditions us to see human differences in simplistic opposition to each other" thereby portraying a simple duality of power/powerless, good/bad, and superior/inferior. This, she argues, brings forward a society "where the good is defined in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need" leading to groups of marginalized people who appear to "occupy the place of the dehumanized inferior." In our times, this group consists of "Black and Third World people, working-class people, older people, and women" (1). In the representation of these marginalized people, especially in the case of women, there seems to be an assumption of complacency and abject powerlessness. In an attempt to problematize this assumption, I have tried to highlight the complex web of social interaction, self-definition, and self-presentation of women. The time period that I have attempted to consider covers the period from the 1860s to 1910. I have focused on the Urdu-speaking people of the Indian Subcontinent.

When we analyze the Muslim women's situation in the late nineteenth century in colonial India, the "re-making" / "re-forming" of womanhood seemed like one of the major endeavors of the reformation movement. In synch with this understanding, Susie Tharu and K. Lalita in the introduction of their book, *Women Writing in India: 600 BC to the Early Twentieth Century*, have explained that the modern Indian Muslim woman was re-defined through the marginalization of the lower classes. By reading courtesans as prostitutes, and also through the new Victorian influenced notions of modesty, decency and piety "respectable women" adhered to in order to be proclaimed "natural" and "well-brought-up" women, the reformers attempted to "re-present" women in their society.

The reform movement appears to be the *re-forming* of womanhood. With the British assumption that the Muslim woman was highly oppressed came the need to re-examine the presence of women in Muslim society in India by Muslim men; the “irrational, deceitful and sexually perverse nature” of Indians needed to be reformed. An attempt was made to turn Indians into ethically and morally more in synch with their rulers’ sensibilities. This also meant that the Victorian notion of womanhood was transplanted into the Indian psyche. However, it was neither entirely British in nature nor did it allow the traditional notion of Indian womanhood to sustain itself. A fusion of the two appeared to have been created where the woman was both “modern” as well as “traditional”; the scrutiny over the behavior of women was intensified in order to re-form this new womanhood.

In this dissertation I will make an attempt to address these questions in a specific time frame: the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. I have tried to scrutinize the reconstruction of womanhood and to look at both the writings of men as well as women of this time period so that I can attempt to examine the attitudes and contexts in which they wrote.

Statement of the Problem

The study on feminism and the ambiguity of “representation” is of relevance today. In the context of Muslim women, these issues of representation appear to take on a bigger and wider complexity. Muslim women seem to suffer under the politics of representation where men have attempted to claim, reclaim and translate women until this molding of what women “should be” has transgressed and overpowered women’s narratives in literature, politics, identity and gender formations.

This study is an attempt to recover the women's voice outside the influence of male dominant narratives. I have humbly attempted to answer the questions that pestered me when I first began this study. This is a very small contribution to the study of feminism in the history of women in Muslim Indian context.

Objectives

The objective of this study is to understand the colonial influence in the re-making of the modern Indian woman who was at once traditional as well as modern. The study aims at taking into account different voices that re-defined womanhood in the nineteenth century including male representations of women and women's own understanding of themselves.

The study aims at taking into account different approaches including deconstruction theory especially from the lens of translation, colonial interventions in creating of the Indian subject and Islamic Feminism's defense of Islamic traditions without giving into misogyny.

Overview of Literature

Theorizing on the production of the Absent-Present woman, this dissertation has attempted to explore the writings of Islamic Feminists in order to understand the circumstances in which women were re-directed and re-produced in Islamic countries and contexts. When one attempts to apply this understanding to the context of the Muslim woman in colonial India, the Absent-Present woman emerges with many complexities. The first attempt is to unravel the male control over the narratives of women and their idea of womanhood followed by the analysis of anecdotes of women that transgress male-

centric, “traditional” ideas of womanhood as well as helps re-imagine women through their own voices and narrations.

The Absent-Present Woman seems to be a phenomenon. It is an attempt to subvert the notions of womanhood by tracing the unadulterated presence of women in history. It is an attempt to re-direct attention to the politics of women’s presence in the world they inhabited. The problems facing this challenge-ridden attempt can be highlighted through four different aspects of history writing and narrative strategies.

The first problem is the writing of history where men and their political agendas are given precedence. History, generally shrouded in political agendas highlighted by male interests, presents women as absent or irrelevant. Along with this is also the inconspicuous attempt to write female history to male advantage. The second problem with history writing today is the attempt to read women of the past through the feminist discourse of the present times. The third problem is reading the women of the Indian sub-continent through the Universalist discourse embedded in Humanistic and Enlightenment principles. The fourth problem is the writing of womanhood as having a clearly marked ‘naturalness’ that reads women as being shy, pious, self-sacrificing, self-effacing and motherly.

The making of this Absent-Present woman in the Islamic societies with particular interest in the late nineteenth century of Colonial India is the specific time period of this dissertation. Islamic culture in different societies has called for a capturing of women into a specific gender role. This has been the case with many other patriarchal societies in the world. However, Muslim women in the present times have come forward, for the first time, to re-read the various interpretations of Qur’an and derive a space for themselves. This had not been a possibility for a long time earlier. These new readings of Muslim

women to help them re-imagine their specific role in Islamic societies in terms of gender roles has led them to recapture their power once again. Tackling the presence of misogyny in Islamic teachings, Fatima Mernissi's book, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, argues that the Hadith has to be cautiously and properly read once again so that the position of women can be read more clearly. She argues that it is misogyny rather than an inherent bias against women in Islam that is the real culprit behind the distressful situation of women in Islamic societies today.

It is in the works of Fatima Mernissi, Nawal El Saadawi, Haideh Moghissi, Miriam Cooke and Leila Ahmed that I found the traces of female voices emerging against the largely male-dominated spectrum of Islamic concepts of gender roles. It is the translation of women as secondary, that the Absent-Present woman emerges. To comprehend the origin of this particular phenomenon, it was essential to look at the late nineteenth century in Colonial India to highlight the position women held in the Indian set-up after Muslims had lost power to the British. The clash of cultures between the English and the Muslims led to further re-evaluation of what had caused the loss of power on the part of the Muslims. It was determined that women were the reason for Muslim backwardness; it is in the support and unending dedication to men that Western women show that their society had emerged as the ruling power of the world. Clubbing the Victorian ideals with those of Islamic origin, the male writers of the nineteenth century scrutinized the women in their homes and produced the Ideal woman. This ideal woman was modern and yet adhered to traditions, she was at once decisive and meek, she stood staunchly for the betterment of society and yet was gladly submissive to her husband. This new construction of womanhood in the nineteenth century in the garb of reformation of society is of particular interest to the argument I have tried to focus on.

In Faisal Devji's text titled "Gender and the Politics of Space: the Movement for Women's Reform, 1857-1900," the words like *shareef*, *zaif*, and *fitna* are explored. He argues that it is in the nineteenth century the term *shareef* saw a shift in meaning where it no longer indicated the people of the feudal world but rather indicated morality, respectability and decent behavior. The other word that Devji explores is *zaif* which he includes the old and the weak who are women, children, youthful men and slaves. This *zuafa* poses a threat that is a form of *fitna* which is chaos. Women in the male sphere can cause chaos to the men's highly public and performative space. Because of colonialism and the Britisher's occupation and domination of the performative public space of Muslim men, the gaze turned inwards where the scrutiny of women become imperative. Men marked out their masculine space in a place that had been up until now a feminine area.

In a text titled "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks of the 'Indian' Pasts?," Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that the Victorian notion of womanhood brought on the attitude among the Indian men that read women as lacking in discipline which was the ultimate cause for the loss of power to the Britishers. Women brought the "virtues of discipline into the home" through education which Indian women lacked. An educated wife would also make a good companion to men which would eventually help them become friends with their husbands thereby taking care of his emotional and moral needs. This new definition of womanhood and the roles she is expected to fulfil is of a new making that is explored in this essay by Chakrabarty.

Yet another point that Chakrabarty makes in his essay is the exploration of the position of silence in power negotiations between the two genders. Taking snippets from Ramabai Ranade's autobiography, Chakrabarty lays out the power negotiation that can

take place between men and women in a seemingly patriarchal society where women are read as oppressed and without a voice. Instead of remaining an object to be sexualized or pitied, Chakrabarty's reading allows women to be presented in a more subjective light.

One of the voices recorded in this text states that while men ask women to do hundreds of things, it is in the hands of the woman to do a few and ignore the rest of them (16). In silence lies her salvation from being overworked and frustrated. Power seems to not just be forced from above but also seems to be sidestepped and navigated from below.

The hegemony of the western knowledge of eastern cultures can be questioned in situations like this where women are not read as simply being caught in a dichotomous relationship with men where they are powerless, oppressed and inferior while the man is powerful and the oppressor who is superior. The Muslim history recorded by western education and learning represents women as being the victims of oppressive Muslim men. The anecdotes of this period, however, indicate that there is a far more complex reality and power negotiations at play.

It is only by being vigilant and reading in the gaps, reversals, contradictions, differences and silences that one is able to bring out the complexities of womanhood of this period. Using Foucault's attempt to shift the gaze from the audible to the mute is explored in the chapter "Deconstruction" by Edwin Gentzler in his book *Contemporary Translation Theories*. This shifting of the gaze allows the marginalized voice to be found in the nooks and crannies of history. Additionally, the concept of *différance* used by Derrida helps in reclaiming and re-imagining womanhood. Women, caught in translation, leave traces of their voices unconsciously in many incidents, actions and anecdotes that can be unearthed and re-read in a better light. *Différance* is both to differ and to defer –

women not only differ from the male narratives imposed on them but also the constant postponement of meaning allows them the space to re-imagine themselves.

Added to this reading, I have used Adrienne Rich's "re-vision" argument, which, she maintains is "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction," I have attempted to re-capture the presence of women in the varied responses they left behind in articles, journals, novels, books etc. Rich's contends that the assumptions about women, "in which we [women] are drowned" are to be dispelled for a better understanding and appreciation of the complexities of women's presence in history. This "drive to self-knowledge" is not just about a "search for identity" but is also a "refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society" (18).

Gail Minault has, in her writings, recorded the many voices of women that spoke on a variety of issues during the nineteenth century. Women used the print culture to interact, communicate, and express themselves. In articles titled, "Women's Magazines in Urdu as Sources for Muslim Social History" and "Urdu Women's Magazines in the Twentieth Century," Minault elaborates on such anecdotal entries in journals that hint at the lives of women and their interactions with each other.

Using Gail Minault's books, *Secluded Scholars: Women's Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India* and *Gender, Language, and Learning: Essays in Indo-Muslim Cultural History*, various voices of women have become distinct that help understand the nature of women in this time period. Using the lives of Bi Amman and Ashrafunnisa Begam, I argue that the will to learn and acquire knowledge was stronger than the notions of "respectability" that was etched into the minds of women. Using blackmail or their influence on the men and boys in their lives, they managed to acquire

an education through great effort and determination. Bi Amman also uses the trope of motherhood (that was the most “natural” element for women) to discard the veil arguing that as she is the mother of the nation, she doesn’t need to perform the acts of purdah in front of her children.

It is through this dissertation that I have tried to establish that the dominant narratives manage to oppress the *voices* of women rather than women themselves. The attempt here is not to reclaim women’s voices or to represent them but rather to *re-claim* and *re-imagine* them in a manner that uncover the complexities of her illusionary absence; this attempt tries to establish the existence of the Absent-Presence of women and to unravel the intricacies of their realities.

Owing to the language constraint that I had to face, I was only able to concentrate on the resources available in English. I have tried my best to explore as many sources as possible.

Research Questions

The proposed study will examine the following research questions:

1. How Islamic Feminism has made an attempt to reclaim women’s narratives?
2. What role colonialism had to play in the re-forming of women who became a site of contention between the white man and the Muslim man?
3. Did women contest the male narratives regarding women and how did it influence their own idea of womanhood?

In this dissertation, I have made an attempt to answer these questions using various literary, political, social and cultural texts and contexts.

Research Methodology

The study will use both primary and secondary sources. Among the primary sources, the study aims at utilizing the novels and literary sources. The secondary sources would include scholarly articles and books by experts and scholars on Islamic feminism and other analytical texts on the Muslim condition in the late nineteenth century of Colonial India.

Scheme of Chapters

This dissertation is divided into three chapters along with an introduction and conclusion. The chapters are divided in a manner that allows the theoretical, historical and analytical subject matter is thoroughly dealt with.

In the first chapter of the dissertation, I have tried to explicate on the various complexities' women have to face in the expression of their identities. In a largely Islamic approach, I will try to examine the making of the Muslim woman in Islam especially the making of women into a contentious site for both western as well as Muslim men to lay out their religious, social and political identities. This has led to the creation of the Absent-Present woman in the Islamic context which is explored in this chapter.

In the second chapter, taking a more temporally and spatially exclusive approach, I will try to read the texts produced by men in order to construct a womanhood more suited to their new colonized status. I explored the Victorian notion of womanhood that was popularized during this time by means of speeches, novels and other kinds of literature.

In the third chapter, I have attempted to analyze this historical production of womanhood by attempting to search for the woman's presentation of herself and her need to accept or reject certain values set by men. The negotiation of power relations that

allowed women to exist in a society that overtly appears “oppressive.” Through four different instances of women’s existence in a highly patriarchal society, I have attempted to read women as not just passive being upon whom oppression is performed but women who actively negotiated to build their own senses of selves that they appreciated, applauded and adored.

Conclusion

This dissertation is a small attempt at reading the reformation movement from a new light. As an MPhil dissertation, this is, unfortunately, a very minor project. Gail Minault has done extensive work on this time period that explores the lives of women and the struggles they faced in getting themselves educated, and sometimes, financially and emotionally independent. I have tried to bring together some instances of these women which ultimately endeavors to remove the veil from the face of the Absent Present Muslim Woman in India.

CHAPTER ONE

The Making of the Absent-Present Women in Islam

No one asked what it meant for a writer to live in times and in situations where she was doubly “Other” – as woman and as colonized person – even in her own vision.

- Susie Tharu and K. Lalita (*Women Writing in India*, 1991)

1.1 Introduction

Women, in patriarchy infused Islamic societies, seem to be a conundrum. Riffat Hassan states, as quoted in Haideh Moghissi’s book, *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Limits of Postmodern Analysis*, that Muslim men have “arrogated themselves the task of defining the ontological, theological, sociological and eschatological status of Muslim woman” (40). Historically, they have been denied the chance to discuss, read and produce scholarship on Islamic thought independent of the all-pervasive patriarchal (and at times, misogynistic) reading of the Qur’an and Hadith. The Woman was constantly portrayed, re-adjusted, and re-presented to meet varied expectations of the Ideal Woman. In this quest for the perfect woman, the woman’s narrative is stolen, re-written, and translated to suit a certain male point of view. Here, it is made possible for the woman to be lost in this translation.

While theorizing translation in a gender paradigm, Lori Chamberlain argues in her essay “Gender and the Metaphorics of Translation” that translation is attributed the qualities traditionally viewed as feminine – not original, secondary, beautiful, impure, impassive and despite all efforts, infidel (455). It is the woman’s “nature” to be so. By extension of this argument, I wish to argue that women are a work of translation. It is in translation – in the lost, silent, re-written and caricatured facsimile of a woman in translation – that a space is produced where the Absent-Present Woman resides.

The Absent-Present Woman in Islamic societies is a woman hidden, removed and little considered in matters of the state, law making, and legal practices. She is a woman without her interests and needs clearly defined or even considered in Islamic society. This is made possible by the fact that Islam is not just a moral and ethical principle but rather a legal and political tradition. Haideh Moghissi, in *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism*, brings this to light by observing that the spiritual leaders (all of them male) were also, traditionally, the “legislators and administrators of the affairs of the Muslim community” (26). As such, the translating of women in a certain light has been a preoccupation with Muslim men. The sexual and moral conduct of women have been of a constant concern for them. They have translated this into “institutions, policies, legal practices and personal statutes codes which determine women’s life options and extent of women’s participation in public life” (19). The Qur’an makes men the “managers of the affairs of women” and when legally sanctioned, women’s existence is reduced to serving men emotionally and sexually (22).

It is in this situation that the term Translation holds specific meaning when applied to women in the Muslim context. She is legally, politically, traditionally, socially, morally and ethically translated into existence by her male counterpart to the point that she seems to be a silent existence, impassive to the point of non-existence. She is presented as the Absent-Present Woman.

Nawal El Saadawi gives another perspective to the idea of the hidden woman in her book *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*. Attempting to understand the construction of society, she confirms that ancient society was matriarchal. Quoting Letourneau to enhance her argument, she maintains that “in all probability it was woman

who first discovered the new technology of agriculture” given her experience in “picking fruits and nuts and extricating roots from the ground” (191).

She reviews the existence of God in historical studies and says that “most ancient of all gods were female” and the matriarchal societies were thriving in the time before “patriarchal family, land ownership and division into social classes came into being” (189). Later, societies owing to settlements, agriculture and social classes, began to become patriarchal in nature where the father was considered the head of the family as well as its religious head. Women were reduced to the level of “herds of cattle whose master holds their life and deaths in his hands.” The woman came to be “a part of his [man’s] possessions” (194).

Comparing the old pre-historic and pre-monotheistic religions with the Semitic religions, El Saadawi clarifies the point that women were gifted with creativity and intelligence ruling over the religious domain. She compares Isis (mythological goddess in the story of Isis and Orisis) and Eve (Adam’s wife created from his ribs by God as per the Old Testament) as having a lot in common. They were both creative, intelligent and active. The name Isis means “wisdom, knowledge and rapid action” (216) whereas if read in the story of the Old Testament, Eve comes across as “gifted with knowledge, intelligence and superior mental capacities” (217).

However, these stories have been interpreted differently so that “Truth was made to stand on its head” making man “the god, the creator, the being that gave birth to woman.” As Saadawi explains, historically, women held the predominant position that took a reversal when “Man usurped the throne of strength” with the advent of the Semitic, monotheistic religions (217).

Talking of the monotheistic God's view on men and women, she declares that "God glorifies the mind of man in his sacred books and makes of him the symbol of thought and intelligence, whereas woman personifies the body, a body without a head, a body whose head is a man" (211). Just as Isis' son Horus cut off her head, the Old Testament "decapitated woman and made of her a body without a head" and made the husband the woman's head. This invisibility attributed to the existence of woman explains Saadawi's emphasis in reading the Old Testament where she discusses "the beheaded and distorted image of woman" (197). One example of this is seen in how the man is allowed to pray with his head uncovered while the woman is ordered to cover her head. Woman was looked upon as the "animal body dominated by passion, sensuality, and an insatiable lust" and is therefore not created in the image of God (as man is). The paintings left behind by artists from the Middle Ages portray women as "kneeling on the ground behind Satan and trying to kiss his posterior." Sir Thomas Aquinas and Albertos Magnus advocated the idea that women "were capable of having sexual relations with Satan" (198). Deliberate misinformation of this kind has helped obscure the true identity and being of the woman in both Western and Eastern cultures.

Historically, the Muslim woman is doubly translated, or rather, translated from two extreme directions. On one hand, the woman is managed as a sexual being by the Muslim man and on the other hand, she is viewed as the ultimate victim by the white man. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's catch-phrase succinctly captures the attitude as the "white men are saving brown woman from brown men" in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (92). The Muslim woman, covered in her veil, hidden in her *zenana* (part of the house reserved for women) is produced as the epitome of the oppressed woman that is then used, in Malti-Douglas' words, both as a "stick with which the West could beat the

East” (qtd. in Moghissi 16) as well as help “obscure and legitimize sexual and cultural repression of women in Europe” (16).

Under the weight of the sexual fantasies of both the colonizers as well as the colonized men, the Muslim woman is hidden. She is the “enslaved source of sexual pleasure and sexual possession” for the Western male and this colonial construction of the Muslim woman greatly aggravated the Muslim male (Moghissi 15). “The ‘civilizing’ and ‘liberating’ colonial policies in the area of women’s rights” were held in disdain by the Muslim male which led to further resistance (Moghissi 17). The Muslim woman became the site of colonial struggle.

This translated woman, a purely male fantasy, has three dimensions – first, that of the ideal woman; second, as the silent woman and third, in the gaze where the woman is made the “Other.”

1.2 The Ideal Woman

The first dimension of the Ideal Woman can be understood through Homi Bhabha’s reading in “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse” in his book *The Location of Culture* of the colonial subject that becomes a “reformed, recognizable Other” through repetition and “a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (85). The Ideal Woman is a subject of great consideration and concern in the Qur’an and Hadith. She is warned not to refuse her husband’s advances. She has, at every level in her life, a role to play in relation to men “requiring them [women] to be ‘obedient, guarding the secret for God’s guarding,’ advising women to ‘cast down their eyes, guard their private parts, and reveal not their adornment ... save to their husbands’” (Moghissi 22). The Ideal woman of heaven, the paradisaal female model

called *huri* that represents the Ideal Woman in an ideal society, is the reward for good believers. She is “created to be consumed as a sexual partner, her value comes from her physical beauty, which God gives as a gift to the believer. She is passive and is stripped of the human dimension” (Moghissi 22).

There has been a constant need to translate this Ideal woman into society by Muslims. In order to be able to produce this passive being, Ayatollah Khomeini (one among many Muslim leaders in the modern world) lay down the rights and duties of women in Iran clarifying that a woman cannot leave the house without her husband’s permission and “must surrender herself for any pleasure that he wants and must not prevent him from having intercourse with her without a religious excuse” (qtd. in Moghissi 23).

The Ideal Muslim woman is a sexual being, a *huri* on earth. The Muslim male psyche is obsessed with her sexual conduct either as community honor /dignity or obsessed with her seductive power being destructive for the Muslim social order.

The experiences of women, as recorded literature demonstrates, proves that dire efforts were made by men to create such women in society. While in literature she was produced as having all the qualities of the Ideal Muslim woman, in reality, she existed only in the imagination of men. Nawal El Saadawi writes of women during the time of Mohammad who fought in wars beside him, who were great logicians, quick-witted, independent and expressed themselves competently. She mentions “Nessiba Bint kaab who fought with her sword by her side of Mahomet in the Battle of Ahad and did not abandon the fight until she had been wounded thirteen times.” She was a woman accorded a status higher than men (255). Another woman mentioned is Om Solayem Bint Malhan who “tied a dagger around her waist above her pregnant belly and also fought in

the ranks of Mahomet and his followers.” Hind Bint Rabia wore an armor and a warrior’s mask in the Battle of Ahad and “brandished her sword before plunging it with a mortal thrust into enemy after enemy.” She claimed her independence and her freedom to make her own decisions in her personal life. She was known for her logic and quick-wittedness even when speaking with the Prophet (256).

Existing records of these women (that are not commonly explored or discussed in conventional Islamic literature and studies) suggest that they were far from the Ideal woman that stems from the patriarchal, misogynistic imagination of the Muslim male. In the years following the death of Mohammad, the records established of women in Hadith took a misogynistic turn as Fatima Mernissi elucidates in her book, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women’s Rights in Islam*. She takes one such Hadith that declares that “The Prophet said that the dog, the ass, and woman interrupt prayer if they pass in front of the believer, interposing themselves between him and the *qibla*” (64). She then attempts to explain the importance of *qibla* in order to deconstruct this Hadith. She describes *qibla* as that which “gives to Muslim prayer – in addition to its spiritual objective (meditation) and its pragmatic objective (discipline) – its cosmic dimension” and is an “orientation toward the place of the Ka’ba, the age-old sanctuary taken over by Islam in year 8 of the Hejira (AD 630), when Muhammad reconquered his native city” (65). It is in “this choice of the Ka’ba as the direction that organizes the sacred and structures space” that has made “Islam what it has become: both a religion that is embedded in the Judeo-Christian monotheistic tradition and a separate religion which poses itself as a rival power and contends for universal domination, while nevertheless distancing itself from the elitist Jewish message. Islam addresses itself to all.” Mernissi then argues that by excluding women from the *qibla*, is to exclude them from everything including the “sacred dimension of life, as from the nationalist dimension” (69). It is this

Hadith of Abu Hurayra that labels women as a disturbance and this amounts to saying that “there is a fundamental contradiction between her essence and that of the divine.” It is by “lumping her in with two familiar animals the author of the Hadith inevitably makes her a being who belongs to the animal kingdom.” This Hadith suggests that a woman destroys the symbolic relation with God by her very presence, just like an ass, or a dog.

Mernissi quotes Hazrat Aisha’s response to this false Hadith (wife of Mohammad), recorded by Ibn Marzuq, as saying “You compare us now to asses and dogs. In the name of God, I have seen the Prophet saying his prayers while I was there, lying on the bed between him and the *qibla*. And in order not to disturb him, I didn’t move” (70).

This close re-reading of the Qur’an and the Hadith prove that women were not relegated to the position of being a mere animalistic presence in society by Islam. However, as Mernissi illustrates, the misogynistic tradition in Islam took its roots and shaped Islamic thought and the interpretation of the Qur’an later on. This gave way to the forming of a presentation of the Ideal woman who is at once an insatiable sexual being as well as the silent, impassive creature who obeys the commands of men, her superiors.

This double existence (one that is presented by men and the other that can be found in close readings of the traditions of Islam) of women has created the space for the existence of the Absent-Present woman.

1.3 The Silent Woman

The silent woman is both the silenced woman as well as the woman portrayed as being silent, impassive, weak and dependent. A woman’s silence is considered consent in

Islam. A woman who is silent is considered pious, patient, and a cultured woman. At the time of her wedding, her silence is viewed as consent to the marriage. In the face of misconduct by the world, men and authority, a silent and patient woman is considered pious, religious and cultured.

In this silencing of women's voices against atrocities committed against their person, the silent woman gets trained and educated from the very beginning to withdraw and hide her real self so that she appears weak and passive. She becomes defined by her "femininity and femaleness" which means "weakness, naivety, negativeness and resignation" (Saadawi, 159).

1.4 Woman as "Other"

The third category, the woman as "Other" is defined in her absence from public life and presence in the private sphere. Woman, traditionally in Islamic societies, is absented from all forms of public life. When theorizing this idea, Faisal Fatehali Devji in his essay entitled "Gender and the Politics of Space: The Movement for Women's Reform, 1857-1900" attributes new meaning to the word "public" where he says it neither means physical space or a popular place but rather allots meaning to "public" in "located action." This is a stage where the actors of the public sphere represent the people as a "moral collective" (25). It includes mosques, courts, schools and the market where these actors cultivate the "private" obligations binding on them by *faraiz* (compulsory actions that bind you into being a true Muslim). These *faraiz* were of two kinds – the public one which involved congregating for prayers, jihad, choosing or nominating a ruler, adjudging disputes while the more private aspect of individual duties included zakat, conduct, cultivating certain characteristic traits etc.

Women are barricaded from the “public” and are reserved in the “private” sphere. Her movement is limited owing to her sexuality (which can cause chaos in an otherwise organized world), her inferior mind (that is ignorant and superstitious) and her “natural” role in society as both a sinful temptress and the pure, self-sacrificing mother.

Devji, when theorizing the public and private spheres, also considers the politics behind the making of the private sphere. The private sphere, according to him, not only confines the *zaif* (weak, including slaves, youth and women) but also becomes the unregulated, uncultured “other” in contrast with the highly regulated and cultured public. He argues that the Shariat’s blindness and tolerant attitude towards the private (which was on the margin, neither looking nor looked at) “paganized its denizens by default” and also made them the other by encouraging them to “participate in non-Shariat forms of Islam (such as certain forms of Sufism and Shi’ism)” (26).

This private sphere that was inclined towards paganism was a threat in its ability to create *fitna* (social chaos) in the organized public world of Muslims. The sexual potency of this marginalized *zaif* (weak) was such that it could un-man the great patriarchy. This led to the eroticizing the body of women to such an extent that she “came to be commonly described as a living sexual organ (*aurat*) which had to be hidden” (Devji 26).

Even in the legal culture, the law almost obsessively maintains “not only a physical, but also a sartorial and behavioural separation between male and female.” It was not that the two were so different that they were to be pulled apart but rather that they were so similar. It is this similarity that threatened the power of the patriarchy that led to the paganizing of *zuafa* (*zaif*, plural) so as to deprive them of the “inherently integrative

legal status and agency which they might have claimed and which an early, struggling Islam had in fact extended to them in the plentitude of radicalism” (Devji 27).

The woman was the “Other” in the Muslim society is quite similar to the way in which the Muslim man (the Oriental man) is the “Other” to the white man (Occident). Devji argues that with the coming of the colonial rule, the “public” arena of the Muslim male was captured by the colonial master and the Muslim man took to intensely regulating the private sphere; the sphere that, until now, had remained distant, marginalized, unsupervised and unregulated. The stress shifted from the public sphere of outward appearances to the “inner belief” leading man to review the private – both within him as well as the erstwhile unfettered *zuafa*. This situation came about only “when the Muslim man joined the woman in the intimacy of the private” relegated to this position of masculine vulnerability through colonialism.

This otherwise unsupervised *zuafa* posed a sexually potent threat to the Muslim male that now needed to be neutralized. To do so, “just as the British were proceeded to “reform” the character and actions of their exotic, irrational Indian subjects through education, these same Indians were engaged in an identical task with their own ‘others.’” The motivation for the separation of the sexes was now explained differently. Once, the sexual potency of the *zuafa* could disrupt the world with *fitna* and now the rationale had changed – the world could corrupt the *zuafa*. The source of *fitna* was now the “Muslim man in the colonial public sphere.” (Devji 33).

Modern Islam is a re-interpretation of the Qur’an and the Shari’a in order to allow men to regain control over their “others” (the *zaif* including women) just as the colonizers were “reforming” their own exotic, irrational Eastern subjects. It is in this modern world that the Absent-Present woman becomes a site of constant battle. The Europeans

represented the oriental women in a certain light – firstly, as oppressed by the Muslim male and confined to the *zenana*, making their situation dire and distressful and secondly, the Muslim woman seems to be everything the European woman is not meant to be – the enslaved source of sexual pleasure and possession (Moghissi 15).

First as the source of chaos in the otherwise organized world being created by Islam, and later as the source of sexual fantasies for European men, the Muslim woman has been constantly defined and re-presented in varying lights by the male gaze. This led to the inevitable absence of the women's voice in the understanding and defining of the position of women in Islam. Even when eventually women strove to define themselves, the inherent patriarchal aspects of Islam cultivated, captured, imagined and established an image that nourished male interests.

Consequently, the Absent-Present Woman is the *crisis* in the politics of representation. Not just confined to the victimhood of misrepresentation as either *la femme orientale* (who was undemanding, impassive and surrounded by comatose silence which fed the European male erotic fantasies regarding the Eastern woman) or the Islamic notion of hierarchy regarding gender and sexuality that placed women in the position of “sexual objects at the service of men” (Moghissi 22). Woman is at the heart of the politics of representation, used by the West (to define Islam as an oppressive religion) as well as Muslim men (to draw the line between the brazen West and proper Islamic ideals). It is in this politics of representation that the “position” of women in Islam as well as Islamic Feminism becomes clear. In order to overcome the representation of women both of the colonial master and the Muslim *ulema*, Islamic feminism has found various arguments within the Qur'an that allows for female emancipation in and through Islam. In an attempt

to understand this new position of representation, there are two perspectives through which this phenomenon can be studied –

1. Politics of Identity

2. Politics of Conduct

1.5 Politics of Identity

Miriam Cooke, in her work *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature*, expounds her reading of women in the globalized world navigating “multiple identifications” for the common purpose of “projecting their voices as public intellectuals calling for justice and freedom” (xxviii). From the time of the nineteenth century, women have been protesting the male production of Islamic knowledge as official understandings of Islam. Moghissi argues that this has become translated into the legal systems of these countries.

This is the major point of contestation being raised by women in the globalized world, using the technological advances in communications to form networks that help mobilize women. One of these forms of mobilization is the Mosque Movement in Cairo that Saba Mahmood studies in her work *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Women have started to occupy the space originally allotted to male, i.e., the mosque by not only congregating to re-interpret the Qur’an but also to establish themselves as a single voice against the adversity posed by official orthodox Islamic teachings. As early as the first half of the twentieth century, the Lebanese writer Nazira Zayn al-Din argued that women are more worthy of interpreting the sections of the Quran that deal with their rights and duties (Cooke xiv). Cooke cites Leila Ahmed as positing

the idea that there has been an evolution of two Islams, one for women and one for men. It is this distinction that leads to the creation of identity within the sphere of Islam (but on the terms of women) while at the same time as responsible citizens of the world.

Identities based on religion, nationality, culture, gender, region, ethnicity, class and territory are being juggled by women in this new globalized world. Muslims are scattered across the world sometimes within an Islamic nation and oftentimes outside of it. Cooke projects the pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina as a “microcosm of the multicultural Muslim world” (xxiii) where the migrated Muslims of the rest of the world turn to Mecca as their center and their “home” both in the pilgrimage as well as in prayers. She reads the five prayers of the day as anticipation of this return to their “home” (xxiv). It is through this attitude, an essentially Wahhabi idea, that women are projecting themselves as a “diaspora, of the seventeenth century bedouin tribe in the Arabian peninsula.” This allows them to represent themselves as a “transnational consciousness” which forms a link to the “symbolic heart of their religion” in Mecca (xxiii).

This reading of a Muslim identity for women can be problematic as it supersedes any other form of identity, that is to say, a person is Muslim first and belongs to the Muslim diaspora scattered across the globe before addressing any other identity. These women, as described by Cooke don’t dismiss the other identities but rather distribute them under a hierarchy in the need to bring the Muslim women of the globe together. Cooke points out that to be *sharif* (noble) in Muslim terminology is the ability “to trace virtual roots back to a single place and a single family, those of the Quraishi tribe of the Prophet Mohammad in seventh century Arabia” (Cooke xxiii). Genealogy thus becomes yet another way of expressing identity though this can be highly problematic as it resonates dangerously with the Western reading of the Oriental Muslim identity as an all

pervasive, static, never changing focus on Islam without any credence given to the complex web of class, gender, ethnic, religious and regional differences. Huntington, in his work titled *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*, articulates his radical approach to the idea of civilizations in which he chooses to wrongfully establish Muslims as people of one identity. He packs all Muslims as one civilization. Words like “Muslim world” and “Islamic societies” completely does away with the complexity of multiple identities that Muslims across the globe carry within themselves. Taking Muslims out of the context of these identities “obscures the profound heterogeneity of peoples from Muslim societies within or without the Middle East.” Reading Muslims as a people who live under “Islamist politics” and who are bound together by a “metaculture” of Islam is a misinterpretation of various Muslims across the globe. The dichotomy of the Islamic and the Western way of life is how the “typical Orientalist and fundamentalist identification of people in Islamic societies as Muslim conformists” is perpetuated (Moghissi 5-6).

Identity in the post-colonial world is of great significance. The “social, economic, military and political failures” of the Arab countries have “galvanized reactionary, religious responses to Western domination, globalization, and the corrupt values they are thought to be spreading” (Cooke 53). This has led to a place of great insecurity for women who, while earlier were read under the banner of victims of the “unreformed and unreformable” Islam that is gender-oppressive, are now choosing to read themselves as a part of the “wholly dignified, spiritually empowered being” within the framework of Islam. This has led them to wilfully ignore the “crimes targeting women in the name of religion” in academic writings (Moghissi 7).

This Politics of Identity is best clarified through first understanding the difference between modernity and modernization along with the discussion of the usage of the veil as a symbol of Muslim identity – while the West reads it as a symbol of oppression, Muslim women use it as a symbol of liberation from the Western reading of their identity.

Haideh Moghissi finds a common ground between postmodernism and fundamentalism in the form of hostility towards “social, cultural and political processes of change and knowledge and rationality, originating in the West, known as modernity” (Moghissi 52). Postmodernism aims to tackle the “disenchantment with the foundation of modern social thought, with Western modernity” (Moghissi 50). However, in the specific case of Islamic world, modernity, Moghissi claims, “has not even begun.” Differentiating between modernization and modernity, she points out that modernization only means “economic growth, capital accumulation, and industrialization under the auspices of multinational corporations, led by the authoritative elite.” Modernity, on the other hand, includes “political and cultural as well as economic dimensions.” In Europe, modernity included “social justice, political democracy secularism and state accountability and the rule of law.” What Islamic societies see, condemn and are subjected to is the “grotesque modernization without modernism and without modernity” (Moghissi 54).

This distinction is not marked out by the fundamentalists that put modernization as European modernity. This inevitably is looked upon as an encroachment upon their culture leading to rampant Westernization. This is seen as the source of the cultural and identity crises in Islamic societies.

The question of identity is a predominant notion emerging in the nationalist and cultural opposition to the Western perpetuation of the idea of oppression in relation to Muslim women. The portrayal of women as the symbol (and of women actively taking on

this role especially in Iran in the 1970s) of religious and nationalistic agendas was an approach towards tackling the rapid westernization of the Islamic societies. This erosion of culture, sense of nationality and religious insecurity led to a crisis of identity. This crisis of identity can be elucidated on by studying the various approaches to the usage of the Veil as a symbol.

Leila Ahmed, in her book *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil's Resurgence, from the Middle East to America*, records Qasim Amin's debate regarding why women should unveil. "The notion that the presence or absence of the veil was a mark of the level of advancement or backwardness in a society" is the crux of the book *the Liberation of Women* written by Qasim Amin in 1897 and published in 1900 (Ahmed 20). The attitude that "Muslim societies must 'catch up' with Europe and emulate and import, in particular, European scientific and technological advances" (Ahmed 25). In an attempt to fight this attitude prevalent in Egypt (and the other Muslim nations) that the Muslim Brotherhood gained power offering Islam as the solution to the Western domination. Qasim Amin portrays women as mothers; by virtue of being good mothers, women bring up good men who then build great nations. He believed that what Muslim society needed above all was a "transformation – not simply of outward practices, such as veiling, but of the very character of its men." Amin believed that a grown man was a reflection of the person his mother had shaped him to become from his early childhood, and that it was impossible to breed successful men if there were no capable mothers to begin with. This was the very "essence" of his argument against the veiling of women, symbolizing their backwardness as well as that of the Muslim people. A similar idea was being posited by men in the nineteenth century in India that will be further elaborated in the second chapter.

This sense of inferiority was questioned in due time with the rise of post-colonial literatures as well as the Saudi Arabia's vigilant spreading of Wahhabi Islam across the world to Muslims through tapes, videos and any other technology. Saudi's spread of Wahhabi Islam, Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and Pakistan's Jamaat-i-Islami were some of the prominent Islamist organizations that rose to eminence during the 1970s. The majority of the members of these groups were engineers, pharmacists, doctors etc. so that these leaders were equipped to "draw the tools of modernity to interpret Islam" in ways that addressed the ordinary everyday problems of Muslims leading to the Islamic revivalism (Ahmed 99).

One of the many interpretations that Islam received was in terms of the role of women in Islamic societies. Qutb, an Egyptian author who was known for his criticism of the Westernization of Egypt wrote extensively on the lack of conscience of the West. He declared his hatred for all things Western and his ideas were spread across the globe. Lamia Shehadeh points out that though he wanted "individual liberty and freedom from servitude" for the Muslims of the world, he understood women as being synonymous with her biological functions in life. It was in being the caretakers of the family and children that her identity, importance and dignity was defined (Ahmed 108). Qutb was one among many who relegated women to the household once again, and the new veiling of women began in the Muslim world. With this new religious zeal came the new readings of Islam as a religion that could not allow for a specific woman question, as Zainab Al-Ghazali notes. She believed that the Islamic law was sovereign. By stating that Islamic revivalism was more important and that the question of women could not exist in Islam as a distinct idea, the stage was set yet again to procure the Absent-Present woman. In accordance with the political shifts on the national and international scale, the role of women was defined in Muslim society. Her presence has always been a symbol, an object to be used

to express discontent with the Christian notion of the Muslim inferiority or the Islamic revivalism.

Saba Mahmood, when studying the Islamic Revival through the mosque movement in Egypt, records this accelerated resurgence of the veil in Islamic households as a symbol of piety, helping women identify with the Islamic Revivalist movement and in opposition to the Western reading of the Eastern experience. She portrays the veil as a choice women are making politically trying to find emancipation within the patriarchal folds of society by re-interpreting the Qur'an and by adhering to the strict rules of piety.

However, to read women as having the choice to veil themselves is a privileged position as pointed out by Moghissi. She deconstructs the veil argument and argues that the element of choice that is taken for granted by man is in fact the source of coercion of many women in different parts of the Muslim countries. She gives the examples of Iran where the veil still represents the "country's torments" twenty years after the Revolution. In Algeria, Moghissi, using Bennoune's argument, implies that the veil brings the "choice" to women as either wearing it or "not staying alive" (Moghissi 43).

Questioning this new presentation of women as not victims of male oppression, Moghissi deconstructs the new "rosy picture of women's lives in Islamic societies" which she sees as having "little correspondence with reality." This new representation of women as "independent-minded, gender-conscious citizens who participate in the social and political life of their societies" and who have "adopted the veil as a brave act of defiance against the social corruption of a Western-oriented market economy and against consumerism" is portrayed as a "'creative alternative' developed by women to increase their participation in public spaces." Moghissi calls these "privileged snapshots from the much larger, often troubled ... multidimensional life drama of women in Islamic

societies.” This is so because “fundamentalism is not merely an ideology” but a “forcefully implemented policy of the state.” The element of choice is next to nil (41-42).

Moghissi cites Hala Shukrallah’s arguments stating that “Egyptian Muslim women ... have been made the objects of concerted cultural representations constructing them in relation to Western domination” where in the name of Islamic revivalism “women are pushed to assume the role of a symbolic antithesis to modernism and the West.” Looking upon women as the dignity of the community, and as the being at the heart of the community makes any “non-conformity ... the target of fierce attack” (Moghissi 44).

The argument that the veil protects women from male predators is debunked as well. In every war situation in Bangladesh, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait and Algeria, the Islamic code did not help women from men’s sexual advances. Citing Nazih Ayubi argument, Moghissi argues that “it may be sexually repressed Muslim men find aggression against women ... to be the only outlet available for the release of their frustrations.” (Moghissi 45-46). Nawal El Saadawi, quoted in Moghissi, remarks that “the veil and nakedness are two sides of the same coin. Both mean that women are bodies without a mind and should be covered or uncovered in order to suit national or international capitalist interests” (Moghissi 46).

Faitma Mernissi attempts to read this burning dilemma with regards to the veiling of women by understanding the past. She contextualizes the life of Prophet Mohammad and the time period in which the Qur’anic verse was revealed. She begins with the statement “the *hijab* – literally ‘curtain’ – ‘descended’ not to put a barrier between a man and a woman, but between two men” (Mernissi 85). The *hijab*, Mernissi establishes, was a method adopted by Allah to bring etiquette among Muslims, that of drawing a curtain

thereby demarking private from public. They were to learn not to enter a dwelling without asking for permission (Mernissi 86).

She argues that the concept of *hijab* in Islam is three dimensional – the first is a visual one (to hide something from sight), the second is spatial (to separate, mark a border) and the third is ethical (belongs to the realm of the forbidden). Therefore “the space hidden by the *hijab* is a forbidden space” (Mernissi 95).

Mernissi concludes her chapter by pointing out that *hijab* was to be an understanding of “breach in space that can be understood to be the separation of the public from the private ... the profane from the sacred” had now been interpreted as a segregation of the sexes. It has now come to be seen as a symbol that separates women “from men, from the Prophet, and so from God” (Mernissi 101).

1.6 Politics of Conduct

The politics of conduct is rooted in the behavior of all the followers of Islam. Piety, patience, moderation, and living a life conscious of God’s expectations of one’s conduct is an integral part of Islamic teaching. The politics in this situation, in my reading, is not entrenched in the politics of representation alone (either by the all-pervasive, all-knowing Western media or the Revivalist Movement in defense of Islamic principles) but is also ingrained in politics of gender and sex. A lot of exaggerated emphasis is placed on the conduct of women in Islam. Qur’anic principles are established in formulating a moderately behaved, pious society where the ground rules set for women (specifically) are always in relation to domestic aspects and the relation of women with the men who are present in their lives. This has been overly emphasized by the Islamist

Fundamentalists all across the Middle-East and North Africa. And this is the position that Haideh Moghissi, Nawal El Saadawi and Saba Mahmood have tried to problematize.

Islamist Movements have a fundamentalist leaning that more often than not sets up a scene where women lose much more than men on a general, traditional level in any Islamic society. To say that the Islamization politics of various countries has only been propitious for women is a gross negligence of facts. Given the growing Islamophobia perpetuated by the Western media, the “growing arsenal of racist imagery about Islam and Muslim women” have led to the building of a climate that makes certain scholars “deny the more punishing features of Islamic practices and traditions” (Moghissi 4).

Saba Mahmood’s reading of the Mosque Movement in Cairo, Egypt is one such example of accepting Islam (even in its fundamentalist aspect) in order to oppose the re-conditioning of the Islamic societies and their representation of women. Mahmood questions the dichotomy of freedom and oppression arguing that this is a Western, secular-liberal idea where the assumption that this is the only way of reading agency and freedom. Mahmood also brings into question the “assumption that there is something intrinsic to women that *should* predispose them to oppose the practices, values and injunctions that the Islamist movement embodies” (2).

The underlying argument in Saba Mahmood as well as the Islamic fundamentalists is Revival, or in other words, diverse movements which “directly or indirectly emerged in reaction to the humiliations experienced by Middle Eastern societies under imperialist domination and later superpower rivalries” (Moghissi 67).

A lot of academic work deliberately steers away from the word fundamentalist to prefer the term Revivalists, or even religious nationalists. Mahmood prefers to describe these radical movement under the banner of ‘Islamic Revival’ defining it as “a term that

refers to not only the activities of state-oriented political groups but more broadly to a religious ethos or *sensibility* that has developed within contemporary Muslim societies” (Mahmood 3; emphasis, mine). This *sensibility* is at the core of what she describes as the Piety Movement. However, Moghissi reads the fundamentalists’ project in a different light stating that the first principle of these fundamentalists is to “annihilate all that stays outside its closed, self-referential cultural and moral frame” where “difference, uniqueness, claims to individual or group identities” (all principles cherished by the postmodern outlook) is rejected (Moghissi 64). Looking back at Devji’s argument (explicated earlier in the chapter), one can assume that it is through the obsession with women and the private sphere that men chose to re-establish themselves in the game of politics and reproduce the idea of Muslim women as “emblematic of cultural revival, integrity and authenticity” (Moghissi 8). Another way of understanding this is through Moghissi’s argument cautioning us to stand against both and that “opposing foreign intervention in Islamic societies does not require one to obscure the actual conditions of women’s lives under Islamic rule or to soften the coercive power of Islamic movements and regimes” (Moghissi 6).

Fundamentalists draw a very exclusionary stance where the concentration is on the Muslim *umma* (brotherhood) and the rest are declared *kafir* (atheists). Mahmood’s reading of Egyptian society is narrow in this sense. It is a highly concentrated study that fails to contextualize the project of reading the Mosque Movement. She chooses to ignore men (as outsiders or narrated through the lens of women’s lives), the politics of the state in which the movement takes place, overlooks capitalism and even reads piety only in the context of a certain group of Muslim women.

A similar but more in depth reading of the Egyptian society is made by Nawal El Saadawi. Calling upon the idea of femininity, Saadawi describes it as a reduction of women to the “role of a wife devoted to the service of her husband and her children” making her share “characteristics laudable in obedient and efficient servants well adapted and resigned to their inferior position” (Saadawi 160). Feminism, the movement that questions these “naturalized” gender roles, is not a term that is greeted with alacrity by most writers likening them to a reductive reading of belonging to the West. Islamist movements challenge the secular-liberal politics in which feminism is rooted. However, to reject an idea for its assumed origination in the West does not serve the purpose or solve the problems Islamic feminists have attempted to address. Feminism may be a word made popular in the West but it is, as a sentiment, been integral to Arab society. Saadawi’s account of remarkable women including Nessiba Bint Kaab, Om Solayem Bint Malhan and Hind Bint Rabia makes the question of piety as an essential part of being “female.”

Mahmood discovers the form of agency “within the discourses and structures of subordination” where “agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one *inhabits* norms” (Mahmood 15). In order to do so, she reads the politics of piety in women “struggling against the secular ethos that permeated their lives and made them their realization of piety somewhat difficult.” The secular set up and the capitalist, consumerist society brought these women in regular contact with “unrelated male colleagues, riding public transport in mixed-sex compartments, overhearing conversations (given the close proximity of their coworkers) that were impious in character or tone” etc. This brings into question Islam’s exclusionary politics and also the idea of piety that glorifies the segregation of the sexes that can have serious psychological implications where “a tendency to exaggerate the need for a girl to

withdraw, and to shrink into an attitude of passivity” can bring her to the cusp of a superiority complex leading her to believe she is better than the “the image that has been created of her” (Saadawi 166). This distortion of personalities is expressed manifestly in the segregation of the sexes based on the idea that any meeting with the opposite gender can only lead to sexual behavior. The underlying idea behind this obsession is that all conduct on the part of the woman is sexual conduct and thus a woman’s movement needs to be curbed as much as possible.

Another example of piety that can be destructive to the full growth of an individual is supplied by Mahmood’s narrative of Amal, an “outspoken and confident” woman who “would seldom hesitate to assert herself in social situations with men and women.” She has difficulty in practicing “al-haya” or modesty/ piety, the enactment of the “virtue of shyness or modesty” which is a “coveted virtue for pious Muslims in general and women in particular.” Amal eventually learns to be “outspoken in a way that was in keeping with Islamic standards of reserve, restraint, and modesty required of pious Muslim women” (Mahmood 156). This “internalization of standards of effeminate behavior” is a way of establishing standards of conduct that are expected of a woman in Islam. This anecdote proves that passivity and modesty are not “natural” to a woman and this constant need to redirect, re-write and re-establish the normative functions of a woman’s behavior in society is psychologically draining and serves no essential purpose outside of a political statement.

The politics of conduct works on two different levels. The first is where a certain set of normative behaviors are regulated as customary female behavior and deviating from this is described as un-Islamic. To counter such an approach, Saadawi argues that

women were not always passive and submissive in Arab societies giving accounts of women who not only stood up for their rights but also fought in battles.

The second level on which rests the need for piety among Islamic Revivalist movements is in direct opposition to the Western society's "secular-liberal" feminism that wishes to provide for women a way out of patriarchal segregation of roles in society. To question the motives of the Western discourse is essential but to reject the idea of feminism on the grounds that it doesn't belong to the East is a narrow approach. Not only is it historically incorrect but is also harmful for the Muslim societies where the focus is shifted from more pressing issues of female circumcision, oppression of women and forcing them into household confines.

1.7 Conclusion

It is in the next chapter that I will elucidate on the nineteenth century's obsession with re-defining women with special reference to the Indian context. I will tackle the question of why men felt the need to turn the gaze onto women in India and the politics of the reform movement in India. Women were consciously constructed in this time period in an attempt to redefine the male existence in society. The next chapter will address the complexities inherent in the Indian Muslim situation that led to the historical production of womanhood.

CHAPTER TWO

Historical Production of Womanhood: Political Narratives and Gender

She [woman] had to refashion her nature to emerge as fit complement to the new man.
 - Susie Tharu and K. Lalita (*Women Writing in India*, 1991)

2.1 Introduction

Historically, especially when one reads history through the lens of Western dichotomies of Self and Other, of Subject and Object, women find themselves among the marginalized sections of society. Western readings of Muslim woman of colonial India, encased in purdah, does them a double injustice – not only are they culturally placed outside the public milieu, but this seclusion also promises to strip them of freedom and much worse, of “human” rights. The term human takes on an ambivalent presence when one realizes, in Susie Tharu and K. Lalita’s words in their seminal work *Women Writing in English: 600 BC to the Early Twentieth Century*, that “subsuming the female into the category of human was a political act” (16). They continue to argue, “With its universalist assumptions, literary criticisms systematically obscured questions relating to women as writers, women as readers, and the representation of women in literary texts” (16). While facing this Western interpretation of their existence, they also had to face the re-reading of their existence by Muslim men, compressed into following yet another political agenda set by them. Here they found themselves stripped of their sexuality and ensconced in the garb of piety and modesty, set firmly in the role of zealous motherhood. This dissertation attempts to deal with these various imaginings of the Muslim woman in the late nineteenth century both by the white man, the Muslim man as well as the women themselves, lost in the politics of a world where consumed in the category of human, women were still expected to be satisfied in a restrictive role (Tharu 16).

This particular chapter attempts to deal with the voices lent to women. The imagination of the New Muslim Woman took root in the writings of the late nineteenth century just alongside the creation of the new *shareef* Muslim man. This movement did not start independently as an awakening to colonial call for modernity and reform, but rather as a move to create a new “shurafa” (pl. *shareef*; noble/respectable) for a specific economic class of Muslims. This is analyzed by Faisal Fatehali Devji in his essay, “Gender and the Politics of Space: the movement for women’s reform, 1857-1900.” He argues that not only was this move to reform women’s lives a part of a common Islamic revivalism but also was “confined largely to a group of professionals ... called the *shurafa*” that was mostly in service of the government. The *shurafa* created themselves “in and through the colonial order” shifting the older ideas of Muslim space that ultimately needed and therefore allowed a certain kind of *movement* on the part of women (24). This movement, however, was highly regulated. This regulation was necessitated by the threat of *fitna* (social chaos or disruption) posed by the *zuafa* (weak – women, slaves and children). This threat of chaos consisted of an “extraordinarily potent sexual attraction” that “‘un-manned’ the patriarchate.” This led to the body of the *zaif* to be “eroticized to such an extent that the woman, for instance, came to be commonly described as a living sexual organ (*aurat*) which had to be hidden” (26). However, “marginalized by colonialism,” men faced a masculine vulnerability that placed men “in the intimacy of the private” with women. The British were “proceeding to ‘reform’ the character and actions of their exotic, irrational Indian subjects through education, these same Indians were engaged in an identical task with their own ‘others’” (33). This necessitated entry into the renewed public sphere of women but the threat of *fitna* had to be neutralized. This could only be done through the regulation of women’s movement through changing the meaning of *fitna* – when earlier the presence of women could

corrupt the public sphere, it was now necessary for women to be secluded so that they would not be corrupted by the outside world filled with disruptions and *fitna*. Through a very Victorian turn of events, “the woman, therefore, had to be secluded from this impure outside world not only to ‘save’ her from it, but also to render her into a sort of guardian of orthodoxy whose task was to ‘save’ men from the wickedness of the public.” These ideals were very similar to the Victorian notions of womanhood though tampered with to suit the colonized situation of Muslims. The *shareef* woman took on the image of a “pathetic or suffering woman-as-mother” which portrayed women as “passive, uncomplaining, silently self-sacrificing woman” making it the “great feminine ideal” (33-34).

This notion of Victorian womanhood did not come to India just as an imitation to be adhered. Rather, it was the European construing of Indian women as being in a humiliating condition, suffering great repressions that brought on the reform movement for women’s emancipation as a rectification of Indian “lack.” It also conceived a new definition of “womanhood” based on the principles of the Victorian woman who was the emancipated superior in comparison to the women of India. Dipesh Chakrabarty, in his essay, “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for “Indian” Pasts?” illustrates the imperialist critique doled out to Indian men about the abject domestic conditions in which they live. They found it “inferior to what became mid-Victorian ideals of bourgeois domesticity” and “the Indian middle classes generally felt answerable to this charge.” This immediately brought on the Reform Movement to improve the women’s condition. As Chakrabarty points out, this discourse on women’s conditions, largely interested in women’s education, was “emancipatory” (11-12). These women had to be liberated from their dismal situation and uplifted towards a better domestic life full of discipline and hygiene.

Muslim men contested that the reason for their loss of power was somewhere the lack of discipline among women. The reason why the British succeeded was also because of their women who “brought the virtues of discipline into the home” and they managed to do this through education (Chakrabarty 12). This is visible in the literature produced in this nineteenth century that dealt with the importance of education of women. Nazir Ahmed and Hali stress this in their novels as elaborated on below. The other shift in womanhood was in the sphere of marriage. This was again a Victorian ideal where the “wife should also be a friend to the husband” (Chakrabarty 14). She should be able to provide him with companionship, know better from worse and help him make the right decisions in life. She should help him become a better Muslim.

These new notions of domesticity and womanhood were Victorian in nature though they received a change when translated into the Indian context. Further still, these notions, appropriated by men for their women were yet again translated by women to suit themselves. Women were never silent consumers of these new changes taking place in the nineteenth century.

In this chapter, I will deal with the first idea - the Muslim Indian adopted the Victorian ideals but made sure to mold them to suit their personal context. The Ideal Muslim woman was produced with modern features and traditional goals – she was educated just enough to provide a companionship to her husband but never so much that she wished to break free from her traditional roles. She was educated enough to appreciate the modern changes that were needed to make the home an idyllic retreat but at the same time she was undemanding, unselfish and never self-indulgent hoping or even vying for an independence away from her family and her husband. She never demanded

anything for herself but was rather fiercely devoted and loyal to her husband and her home.

The rest of the chapter will scrutinize the gender representations in both political narratives and literary assumptions with special focus on the historical production of this new womanhood in the nineteenth century.

2.2 Political Narratives

2.2.1 Syed Ahmed Khan (1817-1898)

True to the Victorian maxim, “one good mother is worth a hundred schoolmasters” Syed Ahmed Khan declared, “There is no doubt that a good mother is better than a thousand teachers” (Minault 15).¹ Gail Minault begins her book *Secluded Scholars: Women’s Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India* with Sir Syed Ahmed Khan. His faith in the restorative powers of education were immense. He believed that Islam was a religion that could “march hand in hand with the growth of human knowledge” even if that knowledge came from Christians. He was opposed to the notion that the Western education contained the “contagion of Christianity” but rather urged the Indian elite to embrace western education by forming the Scientific Society in 1864 to “translate textbooks of western science into Urdu” (18).

Having grown in the aegis of his highly religious educated mother, his development sees a great deal of influence of his mother. Recounting his mother’s activities, Sayyid Ahmed Khan writes of her various charities, her methods of education

¹ For sources regarding the major historical events written with women in the forefront, I have used *Secluded Scholars* as my main source of reference.

adopted in his preliminary years and her assistance in getting poor widows remarried. She was a woman of great character who refused to fall into the clutches of everyday superstitions prevalent in her times. She preferred to have faith in God rather than in the auspiciousness of various days, dates, amulets and vows. She was the very essence of the new woman being debated into being at that time. Perhaps this is why Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, having taken his mother's education for granted, having never seen it as a 'lack', forbore to add his countenance to the project of women's education. He did not see any point in women's education beyond home learning. In Gail Minault's words, "He opposed starting schools for girls, and in a version of a trickle-down theory, preferred instead to emphasize the education of Muslim boys at Aligarh" (18).

His views on women's education were prejudiced by his own elite status, we must not forget when we read his statements regarding education for "Muhammadan females" whom he believed had to await their turn until such time as when Muhammadan men had been sufficiently educated (18). He believed that the whole scheme for educating women was premature and would "divert resources away from efforts, such as his own at Aligarh, to educate men" (19). He believed that the current education systems in place for the education of women were sufficient for them to have domestic happiness. This remained his view, persuaded by the situation of his mother who received the best kind of education. She was born at a time when girls of the elite class received quality education from *ustads and ustandis* (teachers). With the deteriorating conditions of Muslims under British rule, however, it was no longer the case that such tutors could be hired anymore.² Education for women dwindled in the later part of the nineteenth century, even for the women of elite households who had been the only ones receiving this education anyway.

² For a better analysis of this situation, refer Gail Minault's *Secluded Scholars*.

In his piece (recounted in Gail Minault's *Secluded Scholars*) on women's situation in India titled "Hisdustan Ki Auraton Ki Halat" (The Condition of Women in India), his position is made clear on not only the education of women but also on purdah. Drawing on the revivalist emphasis on the wonderful position of women in Islam in the past, he argues that the custom of purdah has been carried to an extreme in India. And in a manner typical to the men of this age, he holds women responsible for the resultant isolation of women preferring to believe that it was caused by the ignorance of women. Referring back to the old and glorious years of Islam, he recounts the noble and upright positions women enjoyed in society who were not only educated but also held properties. And in the management of these properties, they knew how to read scriptures, how to write and figure. He explains the psychology of the loss of women's positions in society in the same way as Mill explains (as quoted in Dipesh Chakrabarty's "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for "Indian" Pasts?") "the conditions of women" as a circumstance that is full of "abject slavery" in uncivilized nations and how these women emerge from this situation just as society advances towards civilization (11). And now when "Islamic civilization had fallen on evil days ... the status and rights of women had been abridged." At the same time, he was a great proponent of the purdah system and believed that "women should be confined to the home sphere, in order to protect their modesty." (Minault 30). In Gail Minault's words, "Sir Syed's position may seem contradictory, supporting purdah, yet blaming it for women's backwardness" (30). While he did believe women belonged to the home sphere, he still held them accountable for not being educated when at the same time, he desired to give preference to boys than to girls. This impossible ideal he set for women, which when analyzed may seem a tad bit out of touch with actual possibilities, was a thought not exclusive to Sir Syed. Many others during his time set up these impossibilities, in different variations.

The middle-class man of the nineteenth century, especially after the debacle of 1857 found himself associated with some form of English education. This was a certainty if he was to take on a Government post, which invariably meant the British. He “felt the influence of western science, law, and literature, and the need to respond to western cultural criticism” (Minault 59). Some of these criticisms have already been mentioned in the earlier section of this chapter which deals with domesticity. The loss of political power along with the cultural criticisms meted out by the British turned these men towards “revitalization of tradition” and a “hypothetical return to an idealized golden age” of Islam under the Prophet Muhammad (Minault 59-60).

2.2.2 Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanavi (1863-1943)

Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanvi wrote a book *Bihishti Zewar* that was partially translated by Barbara Metcalf into English with a commentary.³ This book is in the possession of every Muslim household, even today. This was written as a guide for Muslim women, who by reading it, could become as educated as the *ulema*. Thanvi believed that owing to the disease that was the lack of education among women, the Islamic society had crumbled into ruin. Women’s influence reached not just women but also that of husbands and eventually their ignorance and bad association wins out leading to the decline of society as a whole. As the hadith of Prophet Muhammad dictates that education was the duty of both men and women, it was necessary that both were educated. However, this new age’s reading of this hadith lead men to believe that the education of women was their “burden” to bear where, only through education could they

³ I have used Minault’s summary of the book here. For further reading, see Barbara Metcalf’s *Perfecting Women: Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi’s Bihishti Zewar* (1992).

manage their women. There was a natural deficiency in women that required them to be educated and guided by men.

Bihishti Zavar's earliest edition that Metcalf could find was 1905. This volume is in effect a one volume educational curriculum for women, notes Minault (65). In her words, this volume deals with, "household management and ritual observance ... the alphabet and the calendar, a review of numbers, weights, and measures, a guide to letter-writing style, a disparagement of *begamati* idioms⁴, a guide to Islamic (yunani) medicine, and nutritional information" (65).

Women, no longer being able to escape the public gaze, were now highly regulated. Maulana Thanavi believed, along with the others, that women were also equal before God and the injunctions of Islam were applicable to them just as they were to men. He believed that this book would stand in good stead for both men and women and in a later edition, he added "such matters as congregational prayer" that addressed Muslim men (66). As much as Maulana Thanavi would like to assume this work as being beneficial for both men and women, the clear misogynistic assumptions reveal a contradictory position. The main focus of this book was to produce a woman who was pious and religious in a manner that benefitted the service gentry. Age old customs that survived in the era under the Mughal rule could no longer sustain in the salaried gentry of the British. The customs became difficult to sustain and thus the new laws were written down that aired the wastefulness of women. One of the examples that Maulana Thanavi uses is that of eating *pan* which he says is an extravagance in women and wastes a lot of money. Very obviously, pan eating was not the custom of just women but also a

⁴ More on the *Begamati Zuban* (the language of women) will be discussed in the next chapter.

necessary item produced upon visits of guests to the house. Women were not the only one consuming them and thereby wasting money on it.

Maulana Thanavi, a propagator of simple life, admonished women against having extravagant festivals and unnecessary ceremonies. In his attempt to reduce expenditure and his emphasis on simple, pious life does not take into account that for women, these festivals and ceremonies were essential. These were among the few times when they were allowed to leave the four walls of their house. In Minault's words, he is "totally unable to empathize with women for whom a wedding was one of the few occasions for approved travel outside their own four walls" (68).

Begamati Zuban, the language of women, was put under strict criticism by him (just as Hali had done in his *Majalis*). Phrases that blessed women wishing that their husbands and sons lived long lives and that they would remain a beloved wife were condemned by him. He felt that this was not in tune with the Islamic injunction of a simple "*as-salamu alaikum*" (peace be upon you) which was the required mode of greeting for all Muslims. This control over the language of women indicates the yet another way of "managing" women in such a manner that, according to men, it allows them to be better exhibited in the presence of God.

In this fashion, Maulana Thanavi's book devoted a lot of pages to the faults and annoyances of women that he believed needed to be rectified. It is only when women fall into the pattern of male realities and ways of living that they could be appreciated as whole, pious and religious women.

2.2.3 Sayyid Mumtaz Ali (1860-1935)

Sayyid Mumtaz Ali differed from other men of this generation, note Gail Minault in her book *Secluded Scholars*. He chose to imagine a space for women quite different from that of Syed Ahmed Khan; unlike Syed Ahmed Khan who believed that women's education could wait, Sayyid Mumtaz Ali fought for their education with a rather earnest attitude. He believed that the future of society and households depended on it. What sets him apart is also his leniency in his views regarding women. Rather than an outright production of the Ideal woman, he prefers to widen the social space of existence for women and leaves them to decide what they could do with it. He does not subscribe to the notion that education would spoil women, he prefers to argue that we would not know what will happen until women are actually educated (82).

Gail Minault recounts an incident in her book *Secluded Scholars* where Sayyid Mumtaz Ali showed his manuscript to Syed Ahmed Khan, who in a fit of temper while reading it, tore it up and threw it into the dustbin. Retrieving it from there, Mumtaz Ali waited until his death to publish the manuscript of *Huquq-un-Niswan*. It did not win as much appreciation as *Bihishti Zewar* and was never republished after the first round of 1000 copies. This slim book was way ahead of its times where the undeterred gaze is not fixed upon women but also moves to scrutinize men's role in the subjugation of women in Islamic societies. He felt that the position accorded to women in society was far lower than that provided in Islam and this work is an attempt in reading Hadith to re-ascertain that which is lost to women. While he does lay down a clear path for women to follow as young girls and then as wives, he also holds men accountable for their actions. In his discourse on *Purdah*, he argues that because of the wrongful lust of some men, the confinement of *all* women to four walls of their homes cannot be justified. On the question of education for women, he believes that women deserved a far more humanistic and broad education rather than just that which deals with household issues. He believed

that women should be able to read good literature (Nazir Ahmed and his ilk) and improve their minds as Islam allows for the cultivation of the minds and the quest of knowledge for both genders equally (Minault 72-95).

Men of this age “produced” women as abstract, monolithic ideas and Mumtaz Ali was no different though he had a more benevolent attitude. He did not re-fashion women through a strict control rather preferring to break free from the popular discourse of the time (as seen in the other two writers mentioned above) and allowing women a space for renegotiation. The first attempt he makes is to widen the space allotted to women in these discourses. He gives them the ability to speak for themselves with other women through his Urdu magazine, *Tahzib-un-Niswan*, whose editor, he imagined would be a woman and so would be the contributors. It so happened that the editor became his second wife, Muhammadi Begam. The second attempt he made is to turn the gaze onto men for a while in his discourse on male-female relations in society. He condemns men for their horrible attitudes towards women, their superiority over women that they claimed and the male mistrust of women which resulted in strict *purdah*.

He then also defines the position women should take intellectually and morally. He held the opinion that through obedience, respect and affection, women could build better marriages. Unquestioning obedience, utmost respect and unwavering affection for their husbands is the right attitude that women should adopt.

The actual difference between Mumtaz Ali and the other men of his generation is his ability to prescribe behavior, not just to women but also to men. He scrutinizes the social attitudes of men and women providing a better platform for their co-existence. He, thus, subscribes to not the trope of “reformation” for women but rather to the “reformation” of social interaction between the two genders. Behavior, conduct,

deportment and mannerisms are a favorite among all Muslim revivalist discourse and his was no different. His unique approach lies in his ability to enfold men into this discussion.

2.2.4 Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938)

In two pieces (both to be found in *Speeches, Writings and Statements of Iqbal* compiled by Latif Ahmad Sherwani), Iqbal writes of women with a quick hand, succinctly putting together his thoughts on them. In his lecture titled “The Muslim Community – a Sociological Study,” after having spent the better part of the lecture discussing the Muslim Community from a sociologist perspective, Iqbal, in the last few minutes, analyses the position of women. He draws a distinctive character for men that would be Muslim, he comments on the uniqueness of Islamic Principle and its Universalist nature. After a thorough reading of Islam as a sociological entity and the need for education for Muslims, he makes a decided distinction by isolating the female experience and women’s education. While his lecture was for “Muslims”, he mentions women in a different section thereby confirming two things – his views for the Muslim community were referencing only the male section of society and that the assumption that Muslim (in his essays and lectures) specifically meant the male figure. His words “this is not a place to discuss the ideal of womanhood in Islam” attests to this fact (Sherwani 133).

Iqbal was a philosopher, an intellectual; he was not a reformer. His aim was to re-imagine a society which resisted the domination of Western individualism and he persisted in imagining Islam as the solution to the problems of rapid westernization of Indian societies. He wished for a nationalism that brought out the organic nature of

Islamic society where the larger economic, social and political forces did not just bring about the aping of the West. The sudden move to adopt all things Western would lead to the destruction of the social fabric that had served the Indian society well enough until the appearance of the West. His philosophy settles dangerously close to an unquestioning acceptance of the traditional “body-social,” especially when it comes to his position on women. Reading the women’s emancipation movement in the west as a product of “western individualism and a peculiar economic situation” that has brought on an unhealthy competition that would eventually and assuredly fail (134). In order to justify the need for women to follow the roles and positions set by Islam for women, he makes a superficial argument demonizing the movement for emancipation as a position that will cause the breaking up of the “physical life of society.”

He is content in allowing women to be the backbone upon which the society is built no matter how alarming the cost women have to pay for such a society. Though he debated and contested all Islamic positions writing anew a way of Islamic life in the modern life of Indian Muslims, when it came to women, his position was highly traditional. He believed that women should hold the “natural” position women have been allotted in Islam. In his words, “The woman is the principal depository of the religious idea” (135). He mentions that women should be given a religious education along with some principal subjects like Muslim History, Domestic Economy and Hygiene though he does not elaborate on it. This will allow her to serve her role as a companion/wife to her husband. According to Iqbal, the principal role of women is motherhood and to this end, any subject in her education that de-womanizes her should be excluded.

In yet another three-page note, Iqbal writes on the “Position of Women in the East.” He begins with a comparison of the women of the East with that of the West.

Women of the West have voluntarily given up the “pedestal on which she stood” in the name of wanting “emancipation, equal rights with the male sex” which has led them to not being treated with the courtesy deserving of them. He makes mention of the high esteem in which women are held in the East followed by a justification of the veil as well as polygamy. It is not because of jealousy that women are kept under strict *purdah* but rather because they are sacred (193). He believes that it is the surplus of women that is the great concern of Islam that has led it to institution of polygamy. Taking on the responsibility of characterizing what makes a woman truly a woman, he argues that the womanhood of women has to be protected from erosion. And when a woman has to earn her own livelihood, it deprives her of the “woman” in her (194).

It is through the reformative writings of these four men that I have tried to articulate the mood of the age; they were concerned with the degradation of the notion of womanhood through Western education. They picked and chose the right path for women and the right education for them. They discussed, spoke and volunteered to help encapsulate the essence of the male version of womanhood, thereby producing it. This historical production of womanhood was also thrust into reality through literature. In the next section of this chapter, I will analyze the novels of Deputy Nazir Ahmed and Mirza Mohammad Hadi Ruswa.

2.3 Literary Contributions

2.3.1 Nazir Ahmad (1830-1912) – *The Bride’s Mirror: A Tale of Life in Delhi a Hundred Years Ago* (1869, translation by G. E. Ward published in 1903)

The construction of gender in the nineteenth century left women in a situation subordinate to men.⁵ This was done through the various novels written in this time period. It is through this reading of women that they could build a world where women's aspirations would shift towards furthering the interest of men. There are three instances in the novel *Mirat-ul-Uroos* where this becomes clear.

The first is where with the constant instancing of Queen Victoria, the ultimate model of womanhood is produced. Just as the British had gained power over the world and the Muslim power had diminished, the remaking of women on the lines of British women could help build a whole society that would be modern and influential like the British. Deputy Nazir Ahmad mentions Queen Victoria in the novel when Asghari is teaching her students about geography and nations. When one woman in the novel wonders if a *woman* can be king, Asghari replies in a nonchalant tone, "What is there to be astonished at in that?"(124). This sets the tone for the rest of the discussion where Asghari describes the duties of the Queen, similar to that of the king though she still manages to have a husband (now dead) and children whom she dotes on. Even as a queen, womanhood in the nature of wife and mother were never forgotten.

The second instance is where, in the attempt at "making" of the new, ideal woman, Nazir Ahmad condemns the use of *begamati zuban* though he continues to use the same in his novel when his female characters speak except Asghari. This clearly shows that he did not condone it as part of the educated, new woman. In *Secluded Scholars*, Gail Minault describes this language as being a "dialect of Urdu spoken by women, which was down-to-earth, humorous, and riddled with homely truisms" (37).

⁵ Gayatri Spivak elaborates on this in her essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

The third situation is a lamentation narrated through Khairandesh Khan's letter to Asghari at the time of her marriage. He warns against women who, instead of thinking about their own treatment of their husbands sit about wondering and conniving ways to make their husbands treat them well. He begins with "It is great folly in a woman to suppose that her husband is on the same level with herself" and then moves on to discuss prideful boasts of women who have subdued their husbands that they never interrupt their wives or even answer them back. Another boast is that they never eat food until they had made their husbands coaxed them forever. The follies continue in the same vein. He mentions how women ignore the questions that men pose to them before muttering a short response and yet another instance where women try to get things done to their preference and to an exactitude. All these are follies he advises his daughter against. He then mentions the charms and spells that are bought by these women with the object of making the husband humble and obedient to his wife. I quote, "some collect lamp black upon the sole of a shoe, and use it for the husband's collyrium; that means that he is to get shoe-beaten all his life, and never say a word." The other charm he mentions is where "some make up a pawn, and put it under the great toe when bathing, and afterwards give it to the husband to eat, that means that he is to be always at her feet." Mourning the degradation of male authority and the undermining the dignity of men, Khairandesh Khan warns his daughter to behave far more circumspectly with her own husband (Ahmad 45-46).

The women's boasts of controlling their husbands show that they had a certain power over them that men resented. The popularity of black magic rampant among women to achieve these goals can suggest that these women had, through maneuvering their interests, managed to "control" men before women were "taught" the immorality of such behavior. This clearly marks women's negotiation with power while the male desire to restrict such manipulations. In a typical "she stoops to conquer" situation, Nazir

Ahmad, through Khairandesh Khan, then teaches that the right way of control is by exalting the male ego through cheerful submission (46). The virtuous, domestic wife knew how to tame her husband without any show of superiority, in the prescribed behavior for respectable women. The wives earlier, without the scrutiny of the public gaze (western gaze) upon them, had managed their affairs quite independently. Before the changes brought on in the nineteenth century, there had been no attempts at defining a certain kind of domestic life.⁶

When earlier the *zenana* (the part of the house where women resided) was itself a site of inaction (with regards to the public sphere), it was now (especially in this novel) the space of active action. *Zenana* was a site where men were the main focus and it was the wife's duty to make his business her own. Even though younger than her husband and someone who had never stepped out of her house, Asghari seems to understand the world better. She was the center of action though that action revolved around making her husband's life better. It was her duty to save him from bad choices, wicked and corrupt company and steer him on the right path, a feat she did manage to accomplish right from inside the four walls of her home.

In a tone that is often austere and unendingly righteous, Asghari, without fail, saves the day. From stopping her husband from indulging in nautches (dances) that reeked of old noble ways, she teaches him the new *shareef* way of doing things. She acquires for him a job through her well-intentioned, timely schemes. She even manages to arrange an advantageous marriage for her sister-in-law. She runs her household, controls the economy and has her eye on everything.

⁶ Refer Faisal Devji's "Gender and the Politics of Space: the movement for women's reform, 1857-1900."

The narrator, on the other hand, seems to have a rather persuasive tone. He *explains* what Asghari *does*. Hers is the action and his is the explanation; she is the result of the education that Nazir Ahmad is contesting for. In this attempt, he makes a woman that does, behaves and is such an exemplary character that she persuasively manages all those around her towards a better domestic life.

Nazir Ahmad defines the behavior of the respectable gentry. They do not associate with the lower classes. When Akbari's fault is that she associates with them, Asghari's estimable quality is that she shirks them, even to the point that she refuses to educate them in her school. She refuses the same education that Nazir Ahmad is struggling for, making it clear that his aim is only for the specific service gentry.

It is through these instances that Nazir Ahmad marks clearly his aspirations for the modern, educated woman of colonial India in a Muslim household. She heralded the traditions of her domestic household but still manages to, through education, change the domestic scene. It was now the center of her universe and her universe serves men scrupulously. This was to help men become better educated and to be of better service to their own country. This construction of womanhood allows for the re-writing of the Muslim present.

2.3.2 Mirza Mohammad Hadi Ruswa (1857-1931) – *Umrao Jan Ada* (1899, translation by Khushwant Singh and M. A. Husaini in 1982)

Studying Mirza Ruswa's *Umrao Jan Ada* at the end of the chapter serves the purpose of exploring the ideas of history making, narration and the sense of loss. It is the articulation of these tropes (from a male perspective here) that will allow for a reversal of the gaze in the next chapter.

Faisal Devji's essay "The Equivocal History of a Muslim Reformation" in the edited book titled *Islamic Reform in South Asia* by Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella articulates a few ideas about history with the help of two novels of this time period. The first is Ruswa's *Umrao Jan Ada* and the second is Deputy Nazir Ahmad's *Tawbat un-Nasuh*. This section will deal only with *Umrao Jan*.

It is in this essay that history making and history writing is scrutinized exploring the changes of temperament in the nineteenth century.⁷ In an attempt to "assimilate the modernity" of the British, the Muslims of India sought to recapture their past glory (3). They felt that the only way out was through modernity and the British ways. *Umrao Jan Ada* becomes important in this context because it is the very example of history writing to serve an end – that of procuring a past for Muslims in India that would prove the potential for the presence of modernity. History was proof of where they had gone wrong in losing their power and how modernity could rectify this loss.

The literature of this period, therefore, was at once a reminder of the discarded past as well as an embracing of it; in other words, a popular way of invoking the past was to use tropes from the past but in a manner that portrays it as regret. It is in this peculiar setting that Ruswa takes the courtesan to reveal the secrets of the old days that bring nostalgia and the sense of loss; he uses the courtesan as a symbol, as a representative of this old world. And at the same time, she is always portrayed as someone who has rectified her ways and given up her old life, and who has found God, morality and understood the distinction between good and evil.

⁷ He makes statements in this essay that are left unexplored in some ways from which I derive the ensuing argument.

The very character of Umrao Jan is an exemplification of this principle – it is only by giving up the past that Muslims could improve their condition. She is a courtesan (it is in this period that the idea of a courtesan shifts from being a connoisseur of arts to being just a prostitute) who had rectified her ways (just as history was doing). More specifically, the “ways” that she rectifies involve taking no more male “clients” and to live a life of blissful seclusion. She allows herself the company of only those men who do not demand anything except good conversation. She is a retired courtesan hidden away by her own will because she has realized this as the right way, the moral way. It is in this silencing of courtesans (the story is written and narrated by Ruswa and not Umrao Jan) who have been well-known poets and writers, and the attempt to read their history back to them, that the modernity project was initiated.

Courtesans were women in the masculine world who were not male and only through silencing them about their world could modernity play itself out. Here, in the space occupied by women outside the confines of the four walls, Muslim history could be read as wasteful and the leap could be taken towards rectifying this wastefulness.

Ruswa (or the narrator of the novel, there is an ambivalence here) meets her after her retirement proving to the readers that it is only after she has given up her old life that her narrative is worth narration and even in that, it has to be stolen from her. Not only is she not the narrator of her own life-story, her story is written down without her knowledge of it. Even in the little interludes where we can catch hold of Umrao Jan, not as Ruswa’s narration, but the “real” person herself (as real as a fictitious character can be), she assumes inaction over action. She discloses that Ruswa had given her a chance to make changes and she couldn’t even indulge such a thought as she “was not even aware

of what I [Umrao Jan] was doing” (142)⁸. Caught up in the emotions of having her own life being read back to her renders her completely mute and incapacitated.

The real fact is that Ruswa is the one writing this passage as well; he is *choosing* to project Umrao Jan as someone unwilling to recite her own story and who is rather willing to have her story spoken and written by someone else, someone male. Her complacency in this matter is suspect when everywhere else she managed to be a person of action (from running away from Khanum to the part where she saves Begum from decoits). Or rather it is in the “rectification of her ways,” in her attempt at finding morality that is the beginning of her inaction.

In the last chapter of the novel, in a fit of temper, Umrao Jan wishes to tear up the manuscript that was written without her permission, a gross betrayal of her trust. But she was stopped by a mysterious voice, a voice that reminded her that “the Recording Angels have already written down a detailed account of all the incidents of your [Umrao Jan] life” (141). These recording angels are none other than the ones in Islam who record all the good and bad deeds of one’s life. They sit on one’s shoulders and their word is the last one, no changes can be made in their narration. Ruswa, by invoking this image, is taking on the personality of these Recording Angels where his word on the life of Umrao Jan is the last one and Umrao Jan accepts it.

The second tricky part of this particular passage is Umrao Jan’s conviction that it is an authentic historical account without any “fabrications [unlike other stories] of the mind” and “without any truth or substance” (141). Facts of the life of Umrao Jan, an

⁸ This quote is taken from the *Umrao Jan Ada* translated by Khushwant Singh and M. A. Husaini, 1982, Orient Blackswan. I have not used the translation that Faisal Devji quotes in his essay in order to sustain a continuation as I analyze the rest of the chapter in the novel. However, this translation is worthy of note as it exemplifies what I am trying to convey here. It goes, “You have said to correct as I read, but I had no sense left to do so” (13).

object, narrated by Ruswa allows for the question of modernity and history writing to be manifest. Umrao Jan is ashamed of her past as any woman aiming for respectability should be. She finds assurance in silence, authenticity in Ruswa's narration of her life. She is the manifestation of the past that is being criticized in a quest for rectification through modernity.

2.4 Conclusion

It is through the works of these writers that I have sought to make evident the Historical Production of Womanhood in the Muslim colonial climate in the nineteenth century. The weight of modernity needed to be carried by women, their roles in society changed, their behavior monitored and their sense of self altered so that they became the site on which modernity played out. Alongside this was also the need to stall the image of the Eastern woman, to defend where defense was possible and to alter where alteration was felt to be due. This need to turn women into a representation of male honor, prestige and respectability rendered the voices of women silent or hidden.

In the next chapter, I dwell on the traces women have left behind of their aspirations, altercations and negotiations with these male representations. For even though the discourse was dominantly male-centric, the site of reception of these principles is fraught with power negotiation and interaction. Women sometimes rebelled against these traditions and sometimes, by the very force of acceptance of these traditions turned them into positions of power.

CHAPTER THREE

Re-Imagining Women: The Absent-Present Muslim Women in Colonial India

We [women] need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us.

- Adrienne Rich ("When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," 1972)

3.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I discussed the notion of womanhood, influenced by Victorian ideals, which were translated to suit the present situation of Muslim men in the nineteenth century. In this chapter, I would like to deal with the second translation of these Victorian ideals. While some men appropriated them for women, women themselves were never silently accepting these changes. They made their own choices, negotiating with patriarchy with whatever tools available to them. Power was re-negotiated at every turn making sure that the attempts at constructing the ideal Muslim woman produced a "doable" womanhood (for women themselves) and not just an impossible ideal. Dipesh Chakrabarty, in his essay, "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for "Indian" Pasts?" writes of Ramabai Ranade's autobiography where the voices of the women in her life are recorded that bring to light a rather unique argument. To quote, "... Even if the men want you to do these things, you should ignore them. You need not say no: but after all, you need not do it. They will give up, out of sheer boredom..." and "... If men tell you to do a hundred things, women should take up ten at the most. After all men do not understand these practical things! ..." (16).

These two instances of voices of other women in Ramabai's life are instrumental in perceiving the complexity of not just the introduction of a new patriarchal ideal but also the negotiations women performed in "accepting" them. Power was not just forced

from above but was also sidestepped and navigated from below. For this phenomenon to be studied, the time period of the nineteenth century has to be looked upon from a different perspective.

In the text “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference” by Audre Lorde, she argues that the overwhelming presence of dichotomy in Western historical knowledge and hermeneutics has allowed the world to be read as a dichotomy of either being powerful or powerless, superior or inferior, white or black (1). Lorde argues that history is written in a manner that conditions us to believe in this simplistic opposition especially in the discipline of the humanities and social sciences. This hinders us from critically analyzing the complex relations of power and their entanglement with history and history writing. It is this history writing that I want to bring into question in this chapter by analyzing the various historical narratives formulated around Indian Muslim women’s diverse past under colonial rule.

The act of translation allows for the questioning of this phenomenon as Tejaswini Niranjana succinctly argues in her text “Feminism and Translation in India: Contexts, Politics, Futures.” She believes that the western cultural hegemony can be questioned and investigations can be carried out into the political and cultural hegemonies of western knowledge. In turn one can critically read the representational histories that have been written of Muslims in colonial India. There is a need for double vigilance where it is not just the racist but also the gendered differences that are to be brought under scrutiny.

Michel Foucault argues that it is through the gaps, silences, reversals, contradictions and differences that this new reading can be possible. For this, one needs the help of deconstruction. It is in deconstruction that one can hear the unheard, the ungraspable becomes more available and the language will be able to speak for itself. In

Edwin Gentzler's work *Contemporary Translation Theories*, he explains Foucault's standpoint by arguing that "Deconstruction thus shifts the nature of the questions about a literary work and its meaning from the audible to the mute" (152). It is by concentrating on the mute that the silences inherent in the text can be brought out, highlighted in order to re-read a situation advantaging the marginalized instead of the conventional. Similarly, instead of concentrating on the ideal woman of the male fantasy, this chapter will attempt to deal with the actual reality of the woman to be found in nooks and crannies of history that have long since been silenced into oblivion. Foucault suggests that language became embedded in discourse and in order to even understand the philosophical truths of this time (eighteenth century and after), has to be "analyzed backwards from the opinions, truths and even sciences to the *words* that make them possible" (151).

Foucault prefers to reflect on the silences, gaps and contradictions in language itself in order to look closely at the constant and vigorous negotiations of power which are the nucleus of all societal relations. It is in the restorative aspects of translation that cultural and political representation can be questioned bringing into focus the changing and shifting nature of power relations that do not rest; that is to say, power does not follow the simple dichotomous formula but is rather re-negotiated at every turn.

Derrida's concept of *différance* forces us to focus on the unheard. His pro-active understanding of translation gives us a means of truly understanding the complexities and ambiguities of the Absent-Present woman, caught in translation, who leaves traces of her voice fleetingly and unconsciously. She is not unconscious in the sense that she is not aware of her attempts at voicing herself but rather that her the unconscious part lies in her not being aware of the inherent "rebellion" into which she gets translated for "voicing herself" outside the male translations of her being. What I mean to argue here is that

when women were being translated as silent, powerless and in need of a guiding hand, their ability of reception is not being taken into account. Their ability to hear, receive, conceive and achieve various degrees of freedom and voice is not to be under-estimated.

Derrida's concept of *différance* means both to differ as well as to defer. Governing the production of meaning, words and signs cannot bring forth the true meaning held in them and therefore call upon more words to explain their meaning eventually leading to a constant postpone of the chain of signifiers. If we look upon the various translations of women by the patriarchal men, we notice that women are never clearly defined, something is always left out and this calls for additional need for meanings. Eventually, we are led to the point where women are constantly represented, reproduced and redone. Instead of this, we could look upon women as constantly in motion, where women themselves are attempting to remodel their "meaning" to suit not the purposes of men but their own. In this constant postponement of meaning we find women rejecting the specific roles set out for them by men and are in turn finding different ways to find themselves.

Entangled in the narrative of enlightenment, the Indian women's movement has been read in the discourses of secularism and modernity. This helped fall women neatly into the categories set out by Western kinds of knowledge making. Using Foucault and Derrida's formulations of silences and *différance*, the disturbances in a unified narrative of modernity that are to be found in the colonial reading of Indian Muslim women's history can be questioned. This can be done through a re-examining of memory making in historical narratives written by men for women. I wish to argue that cultural translation will allow for a re-creation of identities for women in colonial India. By reading into the gaps and silences, I wish to find the voices of women of this particular period especially challenging the notion that any anti-sexist voice is an anti-Muslim one.

It is a dangerously ambiguous position that we find Muslim women occupying in many narratives. For the white man, she is the oppressed woman to be saved from the Muslim man's cruel societal structures (including purdah). For the Muslim man, she is the guardian of their culture and communal identity. It is here that we look upon them in a state of constant translation where while negotiating modernity and community, they seem to slip into a state of invisibility. This is the space which I theorize as the space occupied by the Absent-Present woman. It is in and through the theory of translation that I would like to explain this further. However, to first bring to the light the gendered reading of the very act of translation itself would help make clear my position.

Writers like Lori Chamberlain and Luise Von Flotow have extrapolated on the gendered reading of translation where translation is looked upon as the passive, secondary, impure and unoriginal with evident feminine traits. Translation has traditionally been made to hold the same metaphorical space in academia as women have in social relations. In recent times, translation theory has seen a critically explosive examination of such imagination and Flotow, in her text, "Gender and Translation," records Godard as calling for a "womanhandling" of translation where the feminist translators are urged to flaunt their agency in the text (94). By doing so, we can start to disrupt the dominant patriarchal narrative that haunts this discipline. I wish to use the tools adopted by translation theory in this inspection and alteration to also understand the cultural translation that Muslim women undergo when they are constantly being lent the voice of men. From the translation afforded to them by white men to that of the men of their own community, women seem to be caught in the space of invisibility, the space in-between translation where they seem to be lost.

By using these new readings of translation theory, I wish to “re-imagine” women, drawing them outside western representational and epistemological settings. Translation allows for a new space where the silences of the text can be read without falling into the western categories of knowledge nor in the nostalgic “cultural” debate that wishes to hold on to all traditional practices in their quest to criticize colonialism and modernity, however detrimental it may be for the position of women in society.

3.2 Archives and Autobiographies

Antoinette Burton records that the word archive derives from the Greek word *arkheion* which means “the house, residence or domicile of the archon (superior magistrate)” in her book *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India* (6). Justifying the choice of her title as well as the sources she uses in this work, Burton argues that archive can mean anything that records as evidence of women’s lives’ narratives including their memories articulated in autobiographies and other “subjective” writings. Burton contends that differentiating between “discourses” versus “reality” as a dichotomy can be detrimental to the point that history (discourse) will be de-alienated from the house (reality). She prefers to believe that these are “mutually constitutive sites of cultural knowledge and political desire” (5). With this in mind, she prefers to constitute her “archive” as including the site of domesticity as the possessor of the “dramas of remembrance” which are crucial in structuring historical narratives, especially about women.

Siobhan Lambert-Hurley argues in her essay “Life/History/Archive: Identifying Autobiographical Writing by Muslim Women in South Asia” that archive should include personal narratives including memoirs, journal articles, travel narratives and

autobiographies. She dwells on the idea of archive in the specific context of South Asia speculating on the reliability of these sources of autobiographies and memoirs, travel writings and journal articles. Quoting Hayden White's "persuasive interventions" she asks the same question – "are both [life writers and historians] not just aiming to 'tell a story' about the past?" (62). Recording her experience in trying to find the autobiographical traces in women's writings, Lambert-Hurley argues that fragments of women's personal life can be found in various works of this time period. Considering Shah Jahan Begum's manual *Tahzib un-Niswan wa Tarbiyat ul-Insan* from the perspective of finding fragmentary anecdotes of the woman writer's life, she found that this (and other works) could be read as self-representation or even life-writing. They contained "a woman's own rules for running a household and sometimes even incident from the author's life" thereby making them essential "archive" in understanding the situation and condition of women during this time (67).

Moving on to study the travel writings of women, including those of pilgrimages of *Hajj* by women as part of the self-presentation, she argues that these can also be looked upon as autobiographical archive. These writings helped realize the worlds of women that have, up until this point, been thought of as lost or shrouded in isolation so thoroughly that retrieving their lives was considered impossible.

Oral records of memory remembered by grandchildren are the next source that Lambert-Hurley found herself exploring. It is here that she found some scribbled notes or rare publications that helped her piece together the women's life. In lengthy pieces of autobiographical introductions to pieces of fiction to personal travel accounts by women all came in handy in formulating the slippage between novel and memoir to eventually produce an understanding of women's personal histories. The question to ask here is –

will this constitute an archive worth exploring as formulating the “true” knowledge of the time period? To answer this question, I have looked into the various literary and political figures of this time period including such figures as Bi Ammand, Muhammadi Begam and Ashrafunnisa Begam.

3.3 The Will to Knowledge

While reading the narratives of Bi Amman and Ashrafunnisa Begam, I would like to draw attention to the struggles they had to undergo in order to be able to achieve their dream of acquiring knowledge; they willed knowledge to find abode in their lives.

3.3.1 Bi Amman (1850-1924)

Bi Amman, the mother of the Ali brothers, is an example of a woman willing herself to be educated and sacrificing to safeguard her children’s education. Gail Minault mentions her in her books *Secluded Scholars* as well as *Gender, Language and Learning: Essays in Indo-Muslim Cultural History*. Abadi Banu Begam (1852-1924), affectionately remembered as Bi Amman, played an important role in the National Movement. She joined in the movement in the capacity of her traditional role as a mother - with the variation of her being that she described herself as the mother-figure of her nation. She was a forceful widow of many sons who pawned her gold ornaments to make sure that her children would get a good education. Gail Minault, in *Secluded Scholars*, records that she came from an administrative family and learned to read by asking her nephew to read aloud to her from a book of stories. She then committed it to memory and re-read the

stories partly from memory and partly from figuring out the letters that were similar to the Arabic script. She could read though she never learnt to write (26).

Bi Amman also had a strong political career that started in 1913 and continued into the 1920s. Gail Minault, in her book *Gender, Language and Learning: Essays in Indo-Muslim Cultural History*, notes that Bi Amman, by extending the meaning of home to mean the whole nation vocalized the influence women had on the men in their lives, an idea that was newly retained to rope in the help of women into the national movement. Touring the country, Bi Amman spoke of freedom from the Western rule, of calling out the tyrannical rule of the colonizers and the need for women to wake up to the need of the hour. Taking on the role of mother, she changed the rhetoric in her favor arguing that she needn't adhere to strict purdah as she was the mother of all the men, women and children present at a mass meeting in Punjab where she first unveiled in front of a crowd. She had initially only given speeches at all-women gatherings, before starting to address mixed crowds until one day in 1921, she discarded the veil altogether to become the mother figure of the nation, a mother figure *par excellence* (31).

Bi Amman is a particularly good example of women who used the traditional roles to suit their new identities. Using the nationalist movement to widen the scope of their influence, they amplified their strength taking their "subordinate" position and negotiating new meanings in the power equation.

Her various political endeavors spill outside the time frame of this dissertation though her attempt at educating herself is of significant importance here. Choosing to follow her earnest desire for knowledge, she took on the strenuous activity of learning to read on her own, a feat only few women in history have managed to accomplish.

Interestingly, there is yet another woman in her time who managed to do the same for herself.

3.3.2 Ashrafunnisa Begam (1840-1903)

Ashrafunnisa Begam, called Bibi Ashraf by her students, has a remarkable story about how she learnt to read and write. With amazing self-discipline and determination on her part, she finished her reading of the Quran. Her grandmother encouraged her to learn how to read the Quran and she eventually finished her first recital. It is when she learnt to write that her genius and hard work becomes admirable. Gail Minault in her book *Secluded Scholars* recites how Ashrafunnisa Begam learnt to write. She greatly wanted to be a part of *majalis* (poetry readings in the month of Muharram organized by her family) and so asked a relative of hers to find her the texts of the poems that are read during this time. She found some paper and using the coal blackening on the back of the kitchen griddle (*tava*) as ink, she copied the texts. With the help of another male cousin, she learnt the letters and eventually could read the poems she had painstakingly copied out. She then continued to read everything that she could lay her hands on until she had mastered the art. She was widowed early and using the skills at her command - she first took up sowing and later taught at Victoria Girls' School in Lahore - she brought up her children. Her description of how she learnt to read and write was published in 1899 in *Tahzib-un-Niswan*, the Urdu newspaper for women run by Sayyid Mumtaz Ali and his wife, Muhammadi Begam. At the time of Ashrafunnisa Begam's death, her biography was also published in the newspaper which became a source of inspiration for her many students and other women (29).

It is in the stories of such women, in their perseverance and determination to conquer the will to knowledge that it becomes obvious that women took the traditional roles afforded them to turn them around into success stories for themselves. They did not wait for the education to be given to them. They took it for them by themselves. Even though, at this time, the conversation and debates had started to turn towards educating women, these women did not wait for it to come to them. Using whatever means available, they exploited their power of influence and negotiated a space for themselves where education could be made possible. The story of Bi Amman is that of acceptance of her traditional role with a touch of transgression of its meaning while the story of Ashrafunnisa Begam is that of determination - a new “to do more” and “be more” than prescribed. The unique thing to note about these women is that they educated themselves out of a sheer will for education, for knowledge, for poetry and to put it more simply they willed themselves to have *more*.

3.4 Begamati Zuban

Gail Minault, in her essay “Begamati Zuban: Women’s Language and Culture in Nineteenth-Century Delhi,” argues that the “connection between language and society” seems to be conducive to understanding the “social roles, beliefs, and attitudes” of the people of any given culture and region (1). She argues that recently “linguists have devoted a good deal of attention to the differences in the use of language by men and women” (2). Quoting Robin Lakoff’s work *Language and Woman’s Place*, Minault draws attention to the observation that women are more likely to “make fine distinctions of color or to use certain effusive adjectives (‘adorable’ or ‘divine’).” They are also more likely to “use euphemisms: ‘passed away’ for died, ‘expecting’ for pregnant” (2).

Begamati Zuban, in the late-nineteenth century, had a similar history where it was a separate verbal speech practiced by the women of that specific era. Even though traces of this language can be seen even today, the earthiness and colorfulness of earlier days seems to have disappeared today. A detailed study of this linguistic difference has been done by Gail Minault in her book *Gender, Language, and Learning*. She concentrates on the speech patterns and the sociological history that can be gleaned from speech patterns from the novels of the nineteenth century.

Minault calls it a dialect, spoken rather than written, of Urdu language. It was a non-standardized speech out of the purview of control of men. Its first appearance in written literature is by male writers in an attempt to persuade women to abandon it. Deputy Nazir Ahmad, in his novel *Mirat-ul-Urus*, condemns the use of this language as bad-mannered, rough and discourteous. He, ironically, uses the same language so that he could reach out to his audience, women who spoke *Begamati Zuban*. His protagonist, Asghari, the paragon of virtue and respectability, refuses to speak in this language. Within a few years of its appearance in a written form, the language sees an end as women start to write for themselves. They preferred to write in the standardized Urdu that they learnt in schools which eventually saw the decline of this language. With the advent of men into the private sphere because of colonization and their subsequent attempt to gain control over this space, the language of women was declared unruly, indecent and it was subjected to control, garbed in rationality and examined until very little remained. In the demonizing of *Begamati Zuban* lay the conquest of women's autonomy of any kind.

While women's language in colloquial American, Minault argues in her essay "Begamati Zuban: Women's Language and Culture in Nineteenth-Century Delhi," seems to be "characterized as polite, deferential, indirect," *Begamati Zuban* seems "earthy,

graphic, and colorful” (4). She cites the reason behind this difference as the lack of scrutiny by men. She writes, “women are not worried about whether the men think them ‘ladylike’ or not, since men were not party to the conversation” (4-5). This autonomy dictates the linguistic style making it “straightforward and highly colloquial” (5).

Even though women lived in the *pardah* system, their communications, Minault maintains, with other women were not restricted or ever suffered dearth. She mentions that “women spent a great deal of time on their rooftops, conversing from one house to another; they visited one another frequently within their neighborhood or circle of relations.” They even went to the extent of “sharing food on festival occasions” as well as “adopting” female friends as sisters through “customs of marrying their dolls, exchanging dupattas (*dupatta badalna bahin*), feeding each other cardamoms (*ilaichi bahin*), or breaking a chicken ‘wishbone’ together (*zinakhi ka rishta*)” which served the purpose of creating “fictive sisterhood” that “survived their marriages and displacements” (5-6).

Begamati Zuban was rich in endearments, blessings, curses, lamentations, evading the evil eye and helped gain control over superstitious ailments. For women, the world inside the house was central while the world of men, the outside world was peripheral. This understanding is essential in realizing that having a language of their own allowed them to maintain this belief. This language maintained the hierarchy of the social order. Male endearments were bestowed on those children who please them. For example, they praised by saying *beta* (which means son) when the girl child had done something exceptionally praise-worthy. Minault explores these blessings further and adds that they took the “form not of blessing the women herself, but of blessing those she holds most dear” leading to phrases like “*kaleja thanda rahe*” or “*pet thanda rahe*” which meant “may your children be happy/have long lives/ never disappoint you” (6-7). Young

children were blessed with “*jite raho*” or “*jam jam jiyo*” meaning “may you live a long time” (7). Women blessed their children by either wishing their husbands with a long life or by warding off evil from their children’s head. Their curses were no less colorful as Minault records.

When it came to curses, they never cursed the husbands but rather the individual woman herself. Minault writes that women “felt no hesitation in telling other women to drop dead” but never uttered curses upon the heads of each other’s husbands or children. However, curses like “*bhar mein jae, chulhe mein jae* (into the fire/into the stove – which is the equivalent of ‘go to hell’); *dar gaur, gaur khaye, dunya se ure* (into the grave/drop dead); *janhar, marne joga* (worthy of death) were commonplace (7). Besides just cursing, women were also accusing each other of “shamelessness, immodesty, and dishonoring the family – the worst crimes a woman in purdah could commit” using words like “*bodli, randi, kasbi, bezaari, ghungru ki sharik*” which meant “transvestite, whore, street-walker, dancing girl” (7).

In this language, emotions ran awry, a subject of contention for men. In a world system where women had little to no control (the political world outside their own homes that influenced their lives drastically), women used the support of a language that is doused in superstition, emotion, and euphemism to ward off evil and to prepare for the worst. One of the accounts that Gail Minault makes available, in her book *Gender, Language and Learning*, the possibility of being thrown into utter chaos because of the politics of men is explored. In the bloody aftermath of the 1857 revolt, a circumstance completely out of their control, women were left on the streets with varied, mangled corpses, forced to find any work or food that they could (128). The memory of such instances where their world would be thrown into chaos where they found themselves on

the streets, women were ill-prepared to deal with the consequences. They were not the cause of any chaos but had to bear the consequences of it anyway. Neither did they have control over new situation they would find themselves in. They resorted to “ward off” the evil through charms and magic, something more *available* to them than the politics of the state.

Language, *Begamati Zuban*, is the only solace in a world where they had little to no control over the events that changed the course of their life. Along with this was the need to maintain the house and keep the children and themselves healthy. Owing to the fact that most doctors (*hakims*) were men and so out of their reach, various useful and useless recipes were cooked up to help fight diseases. Superstition was a need of the hour. It helped women maintain a semblance of control over their own lives. The secluded drudgery of housekeeping in the isolation of the house would not call for enough social interaction. However, if you laced it with a heavy dose of imaginary ailments, there was a possibility of human social contact. The “useless” (Thanavi is very vocal in his dislike for these) festivals and “special-days” that women celebrated, the blessings and the warding off of the evil eye were all socially acceptable means of entertainment, social interaction and communication. The summoning of women entertainers and exorcists provided a good night’s entertainment. As Minault puts it, “the possessed woman could also vent her hostilities and frustrations in a socially approved manner and feel better for it, whether ‘cured’ or not” (127).

Elaborating on these situations in the essay “*Begamati Zuban: Women’s Language and Culture in Nineteenth-Century Delhi*,” different euphemisms in speech patterns occurred. One good example was of pregnancy which was “embarrassing and mysterious” and the “mixed emotions and possible dangers to a woman’s life” were

mentioned discreetly. Phrases like “*as wali* (expecting), *do ji se hona* (living for two), *kathi chiz ko ji chahna* (having a taste for sour things), and *paon bhari hona* (to have heavy feet/ to walk with heavy steps)” were used. (12).

Non-medical ailments were also a subject of interest among these women. Belief in the evil eye and exorcism were some of the non-medical assistance women assembled to keep their loved ones healthy. As Hakims were men and were therefore unavailable to women, they “relied on household remedies, or on cures which at least led to the release of fears and nervous tension.” The calling of *domnis* who were “professional women entertainers and exorcists” allowed purdah system to remain intact as well as provide “a good night’s entertainment” (13).

Minault also records that “vows and oblations made to Shaikh Saddu, Allah Baksh, Sayyid Ahmad Kabir, Nanhe Miyan, and Darya Khan” were another side to these beliefs and religious practices. These men were believed to be fairies in whom women could place their confidence as they were believed to be the “brothers and sisters whom God placed in the service of Fatima, the Prophet’s daughter.” These vows were considered “women confiding in a fellow woman” (Fatima) that allowed women to confide in Fatima’s fairies as they relied on “servants to intercede for them in the world outside purdah.” These practices, though they were unorthodox, “they were congruent with the structure of women’s lives and with the high value place on mutual support and on venting hostility in acceptable forms” (13-14).

Women’s lives were full of activity despite the purdah system. Minault argues that though “such activity was drudgery” it was satisfying as they had cooperation from other women as well as men. Quoting Nazir Ahmad’s *Mirat ul-Urus* Minault points out that “...You must not suppose that women have no share at all in the business of the world ...

On the contrary, it is the women who do the entire work of housekeeping.” Ahmad records that while “men bring his earnings home” it was women who made the money last long and gave them a satisfactory lifestyle. While women may be dependent on men economically, men were dependent on women for “comfort and sustenance and for bearing and raising the children.” This gave them a “sense of competence, self-sufficiency, and importance” that should not be “overlooked in assessing the lives of women in purdah” (16).

Minault also quotes many other phrases in speech patterns that showcase “women’s positive self-image” where the “eloquent indicators of women’s sense of control over their environment” is showcased through the “colorful idioms they coined, based on common occurrences in their daily lives.” She describes these idioms as “graphic, witty, down-to-earth” (17). Some of the examples mentioned include “*ek tave ki roti kya chhoti kya moti* (bread from the same griddle; the equivalent of ‘cast in the same mold’ or ‘cut from the same cloth’)” or “*sas mere ghar nahin, mujhe kisi ka dar nahin* (I have no mother-in-law so I need fear no one; fearless, shameless)” or even “*dil mein ghar karna*” meaning “to find a place in someone’s affection.” Some humorous phrases include “*arsi tutna*” meaning “mirror breaking; very ugly” or even “*butta sa munh*” meaning “face like a grinding stone; ugly.” For servants who have served in one too many households, the expression “*bis handiyon ka maza chakhna*” was used meaning that they have tasted from twenty pots (17).

Minault concludes her chapter by pointing out that *begamati zuban* was a “dialect of Urdu spoken” rather than being a “written” language “spoken by purdah-observing women.” She observes that the spread of women’s education in the twentieth century and the change in the culture of the *zenana* changed the usage of *begamati zuban*. With the

breaking down of isolation “through education and the printed word, even though purdah was still widely observed, the dialect also began to disappear.” Even the men who were writing in this dialect found that women who read these works were dwindling with the spread of education and the standardization of Urdu language. Minault concludes by saying that *begamati zuban* was a “voice of a subculture, and its study tells us a great deal about the way Muslim women lived, thought, felt, and believed in Delhi and elsewhere” thereby giving us a glimpse into the lives of the Urdu-speaking, Muslim women of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries (20).

3.5 Women’s Magazines

Women’s magazines started out in various Indian languages and “championed women’s education, condemned social customs that kept women subservient and encouraged women’s self-expression” as Gail Minault records in her essay “Urdu Women;s Magazines in the Early Twentieth Century.” These magazines, she argues, “portrayed the ideal woman as skilful wife and nurturing mother, educated but wholly domestic, the helpmate to the educated, middle class man.” And though they appear to withhold women’s “subordination within the patriarchal family,” these magazines were still “brave pioneers, expanding the frontiers of women’s roles and consciousness at a time when those frontiers were severely limited” (2).

Minault records in her essay “Woman’s Magazines in Urdu as Sources for Muslim Social History” that the magazines for women began and gained prominence in the “mid-to-late 19th century, with Bengali leading the way” where periodicals named *Antahpur* and *Bamabodhini Patrika* became “fundamental sources for the study of social and religious reform in Bengal and for the lifestyles of Bengali middle class” (201). She

argues that for the study of the “middle class Muslim women in *purdah* and movements for their social and educational reform, women magazines in Urdu are essential” (201).

Founded by men, the earliest of the women’s magazines and Urdu periodicals for women saw a shift in the nature of interaction among women. It was now possible to reach out to women who were not just in their families and neighborhoods but also women who were far away from them but still within communicable reach. These magazines are rarely mentioned by standard histories of the nineteenth century though they had a remarkable role to play in the making of the new era. Women, as mentioned earlier, had begun to learn how to read. What they now needed was *something* to read that fit well with the role they played in society – of wives and mothers. These magazines gave practical knowledge and news – it taught women on how to attain respectability and what was the right behavior, it gave them information about health, child-care and nutrition, it provided them with news about the new schools opening up for girls and the new associations coming up for women. It also provided them with entertainment through stories, poems, and articles on embroidery etc. In Minault’s words, in her book *Gender, Language, and Learning*, these “women’s magazines in Urdu stressed enlightened domesticity and respectability, but also practical knowledge to cope with the changing times” (86).

These magazines were classified as either being educational or literary though Minault maintains that they were a mixture of “practical information about health, child care, and nutrition, along with recipes and embroidery patterns” and “news about schools for girls, women’s associations, and women in other countries” as well as “creative writing such as short stories, serialized novels, and poetry on themes deemed ‘suitable’ for female readers” (202).

There were three major women's journals and magazines of this time period worth mentioning. They included *Tahzib-un-Niswan*, *Khatun* and *Ismat*. *Tahzib-un-Niswan* was founded in Lahore in 1898 by Sayyid Mumtaz Ali with his wife Muhammadi Begam. Shaikh Abdullah started the monthly journal *Khatun* in Aligarh in 1904 in partnership with his wife Wahid Jahan. *Ismat*, a literary monthly, was started by Rashidul Khairi in Delhi in 1908.⁹

Tahzib-un-Niswan was the first Urdu newspaper to survive which was started by Sayyid Mumtaz Ali with his wife as the editor, Muhammadi Begam (1878(?)-1908) in 1898. "The success of the newspaper was surprising," Minault states in her essay "Urdu Women's Magazines in the Early Twentieth Century," as the first few copies were mailed out free to the civil list where these magazines were returned to the owners "often with obscenities scribbled on the label." Initially, Minault records, they had only 60 to 70 subscribers though that number increased to 300-400 after four years. This magazine lasted into the 1950s owing mainly to the "talents and energies of its founders" (2).

Sayyid Mumtaz Ali (1860-1935) came from a traditional family where his father was in the government service in Punjab. He was sent to Deoband for a year before continuing his English education in Lahore. He got himself involved in controversies for listening to and later joining in the "debates among Christian missionaries, Muslims and Arya Samajis that took place in public squares." His work *Huquq un-Niswan* had many radical ideas that he realized would only reach a few educated elite. In an attempt to broaden this horizon, he decided to "reach women with an enlightened message." He started his magazine for women with the aid of his wife, Muhammadi Begam. Educated at home with her numerous brothers, she learnt to write letters so she could be in touch

⁹ A detailed account of their subject matter and style can be found in Gail Minault's books *Secluded Scholars* and *Gender, Language, and Learning*.

with her married sister. After her marriage, she continued her education under the tutelage of Sayyid Mumtaz Ali (3).

In the first decade of the magazine, it aimed at reaching the “*purda* observing women at home and meeting her need for useful reading matter and broadened horizons.” Articles discussing “education, household management” appeared in the magazine regularly along with “advice to the daughter-in-law on how to get along with the mother-in-law” etc. As this magazine categorized itself as a newspaper, “a lot of news items, notices of women’s meetings, of fundraising drives for schools, and summaries of speeches by women to women’s organizations” were published. One letter written on April 4, 1907, spoke of why girls should also learn English stating that though parents are frowning at the idea of girls learning English, they do not realize that “boys who learn English also would like wives who know English” and also that if they knew English they could contact their husbands in their offices in case of emergencies (4).

As years progressed, the newspaper “reflected women’s increased level of education and variety of activities outside their homes.” The content of the writings also expanded and these magazines recorded women passing their BAs, MAs, and medical degrees. Readers also sent travel accounts, and *haj* pilgrimages. Women started to pursue literary criticisms and also took up discussions on social issues including *pardah* and polygamy (4).

*Khatun*¹⁰ was started as the journal of the Women’s Education Section of the All India Muslim Education Conference. It was started by Sheikh Abdullah of Aligarh (1874-

¹⁰ Bano, Farhat. *The Emergence of Feminist Consciousness among Muslim Women in the Case of Aligarh*. 2013. University of Calcutta, PhD Dissertation. *Shodhganga*, <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/165149>. It

deals with the journal in detail in the fourth chapter of the thesis titled, “Women’s Voices from the Urdu Journal Khatun.”

1965) and his wife, Waheed Jahan Begam (1886-1939). “Sheikh Abdullah was a convert to Islam who attended Aligarh College” notes Minault. The main purpose of the journal, she states, was to “advocate schools for girls,” especially the Abdullahs’ project to found a girl’s school in Aligarh (5).

This journal provides an important documentation of the history of women’s education. As Minault records, “The journal also contained much discussion of educational matters, curricula, the pros and cons of teaching English to women, the need for improved textbooks” etc., where focus was also laid out on the “need for fresh air and exercise” for women though this was to be conducted behind high walls for the sake of *purdah*.

An idiomatic article appeared in this journal in August, 1904 by A.W.J. Begam who commented on the urgent need for education for women stating that “I have heard a lot of noise about the fact that the quest for knowledge has not reached Muslim women, and that they are not interested in education in any way.” She continues further by observing that people have written articles about the need for the education of women but “if you ask them what they have done to spread knowledge among women ... the answer is simply nothing.” She then concludes by saying that “everyone says that our *gari*” (train/cart) “will reach its destination, but no one seems to be willing to hitch it to an engine, or a horse, or even a bullock and then everyone regrets that the cart is sitting in one place. If this keeps up, we will never get anywhere” thereby making a sharp comment on the slow progress the education of women was making in those days (6).

While the magazine’s attempt was to promote female education, it also gave tips on childbearing, household information, and also embroidery patterns. In 1914 when the

Abdullahs opened their hostel for girls (to accompany their school), the workload increased and *Khatun* stopped publishing (6).

Ismat was founded in 1908 by Rashidul Khairi (1868-1936) who was known for his Urdu novels. He was the nephew of the famous novelist “Deputy” Nazir Ahmad. His earnings helped finance the monthly journal which was focused on the literary. He wanted to “encourage creative writing by women.” It also had a substantial amount of writing by Khairi and other men and these articles were meant “to promote women’s education and the respectable domesticity so favored by social reformers of the day, whether Hindu or Muslim” (6).

The first issue of *Ismat* contained, Minault records, “stories, poems, several articles on education, one on housekeeping, a description of the Taj Mahal, and several letters of welcome.” There were entries by Waheed Jahan Begam Abdullah and even Muhammadi Begam Mumtaz Ali. The journal’s aim was to contain “edifying articles dealing with scientific and educational subjects, literature, and useful knowledge, but no political articles” (7).

The word *Ismat* meant “purity and chastity” and this coincided with the aims and subject of the “plots of Khairi’s novels” bringing to light clearly Khairi’s “literary endeavors.” Minault writes, “*Ismat* assumed the modesty, honour, and respectability, but also passivity of its readers” where women were looked upon as “objects of a programme of amelioration. These views were conventional of the times and Minault observes that “no matter how well educated and competent his [Khairi’s] heroines may be, they are always dutiful, even to the men who oppress them.” Women were not always content to go along with this portrayal of women in his novels as one account in *Tahzib un-Niswan* records a woman as saying, “He captures women’s idioms better than anyone ... But his

books, whose subjects deal with happenings we see every day are not very realistic.” She adds that he portrays their “weakness and inferiority, but this portrayal gives us nothing to build on or be proud of. It shows what should be changed without giving us any notion of how to get out of the situation...” She goes on to add that Khairi does not really help anyone when he portrays women as “in a state of crying day and night” (7-8).

This clearly shows that women did not see themselves as victims; their focus was not in objectifying women but rather to change their situation. It served a purpose for men to idealize these “sacrificing” women; women, on the other hand, wanted to get out of that image and work out an actual, viable solution.

The earlier years of *Ismat* saw articles that “were designed to inform women about how to make their husbands’ lives more comfortable, what sorts of difficulties they would encounter (and how to bear patiently) when they married and went to live with their in-laws, and so on” (8).

In 1918, when the Anjuman-e Khawatin-e Islam (All-India Muslim Ladies’ Conference) passed a resolution against polygamy calling the practice as going against the spirit of Islam and the Quran, Khairi attacked the resolution. His statement was clear: “I am not myself a supporter of polygamy, but for a Muslim meeting to make such a declaration, in the presence of non-Muslims only brings hatred upon Islam” going on to argue that this could have a “detrimental effect on the minds of young Muslim girls.” Gail Minault argues that Khairi would be astonished to see women demand rights for themselves. He regarded himself as a champion of women’s rights and he believed that “men must be the reformers of society and the improvers of women, not women themselves” (8).

Apart from these three major magazines, there were a lot more that emerged in the next few decades that were edited by both men and women. Minault records, in her essay “Women’s Magazines in Urdu as Sources for Muslim Social History,” that “some of them had long runs and good literary reputations” (209). She adds that “Articles on embroidery patterns, recipes, and letters to the editors remained popular features, varying according to whether the journal was more a ‘home comparison’ or a literary vehicle” (209).

One of the earliest magazines to appear that was run by a woman was *Shareef Bibi* from Lahore that first published in 1910. The editor was Fatima Begam, daughter of the editor of the most popular daily, *Paisa Akhbar*, Maulvi Mahbub Alam. She began her career as a literary journalist from Punjab and moved on to become the “superintendent of Muslim girls’ schools in Bombay in the 1930s” Her magazine, Minault writes, “exemplified the mixture of contents found in women’s periodicals at the time” including questions on women’s dress code in Islam (whether Muslim women should wear saris), sewing with a machine, and with regards to children’s health. It also included serialized novels one of which was *Gudar Ka Lal* that ran for two years in monthly instalments.

Magazines from Hyderabad were also appearing on the scene. *An-Nissa* was one such magazine that circulated around the sub-continent in the Urdu-speaking heartland. This magazine was edited by Sughra Humayun Mirza who was a “privately educated wife of a prosperous barrister” who “wrote many articles herself” and also encouraged others to contribute” (210). As her husband and she traveled extensively, this magazine also saw her serialize her travels. Later on, she also edited another magazine *Zebunissa* that published in Lahore from 1934 into the 1940s.

Minault records of yet another outspoken journal from Lahore called *Niswani Dunya* that was edited by Iqbal Jahan. In 1941, it ran an article on the “Women’s

Economic Slavery” where the anonymous author argues that those “women who think that once India gets its political freedom, all their troubles will be over, are sadly mistaken.” She argues that that as long as women are economically dependent, women could never truly “better their position.” She even argues that pretty clothes and jewelry are only signs of such slavery and that as long as they are economically dependent on men, they will always be able to control women’s livelihood (210-211).

One another magazine published at this time was *Anis-i-Niswan* which Minault mentions for its article titled “Ghungat” by Sheikh Abdul Qadir where he challenged that the “subordination of women in India, via purdah, was an artifact of Muslim rule.” She continues by arguing that “While Hindu social reformers and Indian nationalists were inclined to condemn purdah as ‘Muslim,’ this reformist Muslim posited the ill effects of syncretism upon women’s status.” This kind of differentiation, she argues, “led Muslims to draw away from Indian nationalism and begin to demarcate a separate political identity.” In this same strain, *Anis-i-Niswan* was supportive of the Muslim League (211).

The complex voices that spilled over from these magazines are of great importance. These magazines and journals aimed at producing a new version of Indian Muslim woman where she would not be westernized and yet find herself living in a better state than she had before the British rule. Taking the cue from the older days where Muslims were in power, Muslim social reformers wanted women to fall back into the roles of good housewives and better mothers. Though the woman produced was highly Victorian in nature, she was still “naturalized” enough to belong on the Indian scene. She was to be the Western counterpart; she was still in seclusion though the parameters of this seclusion had changed, she was to be a woman who was still ritualistic though these

rituals were to be purified, she would take care of her house though now she was better equipped.

It is the journalistic endeavors of women of this time period that are of great significance. While many characters in novels were written by men to describe the “ideal” Muslim woman, Muhammadi Begam is the real, breathing replica of the same. Minault, in *Secluded Scholars*, describes her as a wife, mother, companion in life’s work who was pious, educated, and a homemaker. Her various accomplishments included not just running her own house successfully but also making journalism for women a success and not just an acceptable norm. She wrote voluminously – novels, journal articles, books of etiquettes, housekeeping manuals and cookbooks. She was also overworked and died prematurely. It had been her attempt to make sure that women in purdah received a proper companionship through works that helped decrease unnecessary expenditure as well as promote pious behavior, and make good wives and mothers out of these women. She succeeded in many ways.

Women who had begun reading these magazines started to contribute to them as well. However, there was one contestation that they had to refute. Men wrote articles in the guise of female writers and justified this action by claiming that by reading fluent works, women would gain the confidence of writing as well as men. It was believed that women were in need of being enlightened through print. Until such time as when women would be able to write for themselves, the journal’s pages would be filled by male writers posing to be female. Gail Minault records of one incident when such an assumption is brought to question in her book *Gender, Language, and Learning*. A claim was published in *Tahzib-un-Niswan* that most articles were written by men under the guise of female authorship. Against this Rabia Begam protested in the newspaper *Khatun*. She argued

that even granting that some of the articles were written by men, it was “not justifiable to assume that every article that was well written or that made sense was written by a man.” She continues that if an article was broadminded, and the style was fluid with some Persian expressions, it did not immediately mean that these were writings by men (92).

It is obvious from these interactions that women have never been silent sufferers who had a say in the political, literary, social and religious development of the time and world they lived in. They were not passive where they did not attempt a change in their positions in society. With the emergence of print culture, women were given the chance to re-imagine themselves. Though they accepted the traditional roles of wife and mother, they did so by creating their own version/vision of such a role.

3.6 Conclusion

Gail Minault concludes her essay “Women’s Magazines in Urdu as Sources for Muslim Social History” by pointing out that these magazines “provide a lot of information about middle class Muslim society in India as it existed and evolved during the first decades of the 20th century” (212). Men’s vision of womanhood “owed much to similar bourgeois values that had emerged in Victorian society, but Indian reformers naturalized their model of the Ideal woman” (212). The men fell back on “their own tradition to call upon in meeting modern challenges” where they would re-interpret scripture, cite the prophet and ponder on the Hadith from a modern mindset. Women authors continued these new ideas but “developed their own variations on these themes” though they did not challenge the basic premise and ideology. They preferred to rather fall back on these traditions but at the same time, attempted to re-imagine themselves in a new light.

In the last few pages, I have tried to illustrate in order to realize Adrienne Rich's hope to re-vision women's lives, we must look into every detail of women's lives available to us. The fragmented narratives left behind that attest to the actual, living breathing women of the nineteenth century needs to be removed from the margins and thrust into the center of historical writings and political narratives. In Adrienne Rich's words, we need to re-vision women; Re-visioning is "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction." This "drive to self-knowledge," she claims, is not just a search for identity but rather "it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society." To understand our own selves, she asserts that women should "understand the assumptions in which we are drenched" (18). Through this chapter, I have attempted to dismantle the structures of society and more importantly, that of language in order to explicate the positions it thrusts women into. The dominant narratives suppresses the *voices* of women rather than the woman herself. It is through a thorough and close reading that these women's voices can be found. I do not claim to represent these women but rather to *re-imagine* them as they must have been. It is in this re-imagining that I have attempted to find the Absent-Present woman and uncover the complexities of her absence.

CONCLUSION

The inherent assumption that women have a certain space to occupy, a criterion to fulfill and need to adhere to a certain role in society is the basis for a great bias against the very nature of womanhood. In the constant objectification of women by men, and the apparent acceptance of this by women has eventually led to a situation where the constant ‘representation’ of women has done more harm than good.

As Adrienne Rich succinctly points out that women are longer mainly mothers and muses for men, one realizes that the patriarchal structure cannot be negotiated with; one has to go beyond and deconstruct the consequences this system has had on women and their perception of themselves. The re-construction of women in the nineteenth century was of particular interest to me in the writing of this dissertation because of the reformation movement. I have tried to re-read this period from a different perspective where reforming women was reworked as meaning that women were re-formed. This new formation of womanhood allowed a space for women to become absent-present in society.

Through continued and diligent efforts, I tried to understand why women ‘appear’ accepting of this new space they were meant to occupy. A close reading of the literature produced at them time revealed that men saw women very differently from how women were writing about themselves. One of the modes of constructing new realities and history by the dominant group is through literary production. It is when I explored the literature of this time period that it became clear that women were an Absent-Presence only when dwelling in the male-dominant archive. Women’s magazines, their language (Begamati Zuban), and the other pockets of print culture presents a strikingly different

picture. As I have argued in the third chapter, women held a voice that was entirely their own that did not adhere to the rulebook prescribed.

When I had first conceived of the Absent-Present woman, I had not realized that women were bleeding out of their texts profusely; it is just that our gaze was not directed towards them. In their silences, in their lack of obedience, their negotiations with powers reflected Derrida's idea of *differance* – they not only differed from the role that was projected onto them but also deferred these meanings to accommodate who they were without an actual, full-throated rebellion against the patriarchal norms.

By the end of the dissertation, I had realized the Foucauldian urge to read between the gaps and silences. As this is an MPhil project which is by nature a small endeavor, the attempts and “voices” found are way fewer than the literature suggests. This is a very small attempt to reconcile the injustices of ‘representation’ that can take away the woman's agency in presenting her own self, especially in this specific time-period.

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