

The Writings of the Bengali Muslim Women Incolonial Bengal

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ABSTRACT

Although women have played an important role in Indian society, yet they have received relatively less attention from scholars and Historians. The views and contributions of women have neither been appreciated nor knitted into the mainstream history. There is hardly any written account on the Bengali Muslim women and thus they remain invisible. Till the nineteenth century, the denial of education and purdah completed the invisibility of Muslim women of Bengal in the public domain. However, from the 1920's there were encounters at some level to a certain extent with the outside world and Bengali Muslim women from middle class background could not be completely marginalized any more. The chief vehicle of their views was their writings. Writings not only served to make their voices heard on issues of reform and change, it was the mark of a new creativity which had touched the lives of men and women of that period. In this article, I have focussed on the writings of the Muslim women in Colonial Bengal through which they created an identity of their own. This essay is an attempt to look into the complexities and diversities in the life of the Bengali Muslim women through their writings.

Key Words: *Bengali Muslim Women, Colonial Bengal, Awakening, Writings & Identity*

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I. INTRODUCTION

During the end of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century Bengali Muslim women's world was undergoing vast changes. Bengali Muslim women were coming out of their isolated and exclusively domestic existence and started writing in the various journals that were beginning to be published in that era. Facing numerous constraints these Bengali Muslim women were giving public expression to their thoughts and feelings, through the printed world in a society which was very difficult for women writers. This act of writing by the Muslim women of the early 20th century was not taken favourably and whenever occasion arose these Bengali Muslim women writers were ridiculed and censured by conservatives. However, this did not apparently deter the Bengali Muslim women from the creative act of writing and publishing her writing. It was through these writings that these Bengali Muslim women declared her social presence and an identity of her own. In this sense, writing was a major activity of the Muslim bhadramahilas both as functional and as well as an expressive one.

Throughout the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century, the Maulavis views represented the general attitude of the orthodox Muslim community towards women. They recommended purdah and seclusion for the Bengali Muslim women and denied them institutional education. However, there were few Bengali Muslim women who dared such attitudes. By defying established social norms, they strove to venture on hitherto forbidden grounds. We have isolated references of such women. These women did not wait for any male protagonists to support them. They themselves were the pioneers. We come across the name of Rahimunnessa who wrote 'PadmabatirPunthi'. This is the first ever written work of Bengali Muslim women in late medieval Bengal. 'PadmabatirPunthi' was written in Bengali and reflected the woes and wishes of village women. The work gives an inner view of the prevailing folk culture of rural Bengal of the eighteenth century in the midst of which Rahimunnessa lived. In many ways 'PadmabatirPunthi' was a landmark. The first assertive murmurs were thus made.¹ An unknown Bengali Muslim girl studying in a remote village school, Boda Balika Bidyalaya in East Bengal raised the first voice of protest among the Bengali Muslim women against social discrimination of women². She was Taherunnessa. She considered education to be the natural right of women. Taherannessa raised few valid points about education and social rights of women in the journal BamabodhiniPatrika which was sympathetic to the cause of women's education and their liberation from the antapur or the inner sanctum of the household. In 1866, in an article, 'Bamaganer Rachana' written in the form of a long letter to the editor of the BamabodhiniPatrika, Bibi Taherannessa, wrote in chaste sanskritised Bengali

about the usefulness of educating women and she referred extensively to ancient Hindu women of learning. Nothing else is known about Taherannessa, apart from just this single piece published in *Bamaboddini* in 1868, which makes her the first Bengali Muslim women to write in modern prose.³ Taherannessa writes this letter to the editor of *Bamabodhini Patrika* and in this letter she appeals to the men, "O civilized men of this land, do not remain neglectful of educating women. If you really want to see the earth a happy place, then make the effort to adorn your women with the ornaments of education".⁴ Her pleas for education of women was because she felt education was the best support for women in confined situations within the home. The argument in favour of education was that it would allow women to fulfil the role that society has allocated to them. As Taherannessa's identity could not be traced, many doubted her existence. However Taherannessa's this letter can be taken as the beginning of a movement.

The credit for being the first Bengali Muslim women in modern times to write a full length book goes to Nawab Faizunnessa Chaudhurani, the author of *Rupjalal*. Faizunnessa's *Rupjalal* which was considered semi – autobiographical, was published from Dhaka in 1876. 'Rupjalal' is a remarkable, hybrid picture of an age in transition. Most scholars refer to it as a *Kabya* or long poem and the greater part of it is written in song *punthi* style. The book is considered to be an epic and has the flavour of the Islamic Hindu syncretism ethos of rural Bengal. Apart from *Rupjalal* she wrote some other excellent books like 'Taty O Jatiya Sangeet', 'Sangeetsar' and 'Sangeetlahari'.⁵

Before Faizunnessa's works were discovered, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was usually hailed as the first Muslim female writer of modern times. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932) the pioneer of female emancipation was born at Payrabandha, Rangpur district of East Bengal (today's Bangladesh). She was a prolific writer and a social reformer with thoughts far ahead of her time. When Begum Rokeya took up the pen at the beginning of the 20th Century, many Bengali Muslim women had become active participants in the reform movement. The desire to make Muslim women receive modern education was top priority in Begum Rokeya's agenda. She wrote that the existing practice of keeping women illiterate was doing incalculable harm to the Muslim society.⁶ Rokeya's literary career started in 1901 with her essay 'Pipasha' (The Thirst) which appeared in *Nabaprabha*. Her next piece 'Alankarna Badge of Slavery' (Jewellery or Badge of Slavery) which was published in 1903 in *Mahila*, a women's periodical edited by Girish Chandra Sen created quite a stir. It was a severe indictment of gender inequality in which she compares the gift of jewellery from a husband to his wife as chains of bondage. This essay by Rokeya, shocked many among the *Bhadramahilas* and they attacked Rokeya for her 'unreasonableness'. There was almost no arena of literature where Rokeya's pen did not venture- poetry, short story, satire, essay, novel or fantasy. Her writing combines women's envisaged roles within marriage, conjugal life and household matters. A glowing example of this may be found in her only novel 'Padmaraag'. *Padmaraag* written in 1924 is a narration of life in *Tarini Bhavan*, a sanctuary where women of all creeds have found refuge and live a life of dignity. The contemporary periodical *Samyabadi* reviewed *Padmaraag* and recommended it to 'every man and woman'. Some of the essays written by Rokeya were exclusively concerned with the problems of women. Rokeya's essays such as 'Streejatir Abanti' (1905) and *Ardhangi* (1905) were considered as radical piece of feminist writing. 'Narir Adhikar' (Women's Rights) was Rokeya's last work which was published posthumously. In the remarkable fantasy, 'Sultana's Dream' her only work in English, Rokeya gave full rein to her imagination by depicting 'Lady Land', a realm where women assumed the public role and men stayed indoors.

Several of Rokeya's work are concerned with the role of women in the domestic sphere, as in 'Sugrihini', (The Good Housewife) Rokeya emphasizes the domestic role of women. In 'Griha' (The Home), Rokeya illustrates how though a woman may live in a household and continue most of the labour required for its upkeep; the home does not belong to her. She has no property rights or any effective power other than that which is bestowed on her by the considerate male member of her family. Through her writings, Rokeya concludes that a majority of women only inhabit their homes; they are in fact 'homeless'. In 1904 she wrote in *Nabanur*, that gradually Muslim women had turned into domesticated animals, she made an earnest appeal to the Bengali Muslim women to realise their miserable plight and to emancipate themselves from it. She reminded the Muslim menfolk that, women constituted a half of the society and any progress of the Muslim society would not be possible, if Muslim women lagged behind.⁷ Rokeya wanted equal opportunities for women who alone could pave the way for the progress of so called backward Muslim society. With a remarkable clarity of thought, and rational outlook Rokeya persued her lifelong service for the upliftment of the Bengali Muslim womenfolk.⁸

Azizunnessa Khatun, wife of Hamidullah Khan (Zamindar of Tetulia in Khulna), one of the earliest English educated Bengali Muslim woman, was probably the first Muslim woman whose writing was published in a periodical, *Islam Pracharak*. Azizunnessa's poem, *Hamd-Ishwar Prashasti* (Hymn in praise of god) published in *Islam Procharak* in 1902 may be regarded as the first to be published in a Muslim edited periodical.⁹ She also translated Oliver Goldsmith's 'The Hermit' into Bengali in 1884.¹⁰ Azizunnessa pleaded for women's emancipation and female education which the backward Muslim society urgently needed. These

Muslim women writers not only wrote for their own emancipation but also for the freedom of their beloved country.

One of them was Khairunnesa who wrote around the same time as Azizunnesa. Bibi Khairunnesa Khatun (c 1870-1912) is one of the many Muslim female writers, whose details seem to have been lost in the ravages of time. However from an essay written by Saiyyad Abdul Maqsood (a writer, reporter and researcher from Dhaka), one finds that she was born in a middle class family of Sirajganj. Khairunnesa served as a Headmistress in Hossainpur Balika Vidyalaya in Sirajganj during the end of the nineteenth century.¹¹ She organized a night school to educate the *pardanasin* Muslim girls and she went from village to village on foot to collect girl students and educate them in her night school. In 1904, she published an essay "Amader Shikhar Antarai" (The Impediments to our Education) in Nabonoor, (Vol. 8, No:-2) in which she propagated for female education. In this essay she also mentions that she is extremely worried about the financial crisis of Hossainpur Girl's School. In order to solve the financial crisis of the school, Khairunnesa went from door to door and collected money and goods donated by the liberal Muslims.¹² In 1908, she published 'Satir Pratibhakti' (The Devotion of a Chaste Wife) which was a manual for women, listing the duties of a good wife. In this book she highlighted the husband-wife relationship, duties of a woman to her family and women's emancipation. In her writing she has pointed out that female backwardness was the root cause of social decline. Women were not born to bear children and the household in which women are not happy, will never prosper.¹³ Khairunnesa was probably the first of the early women writers to formulate her ideas on social and political issues of that time. In 1905, she published an essay entitled "Swadeshanurag" in which she appealed to women to boycott foreign goods and to take a Swadeshi vow. Although Khairunnesa regarded herself as an ordinary woman, her writings actually bore signs of sufficient learning, culture and intelligence. She would be remembered as a lady who played active part in the anti – Partition movement of 1905 and made huge contribution to women's education.

Akhtar Mahal Syeda Khatun (1901-1928), a contemporary litterateur of Rokeya, depicted the pains and sorrows of the *aborodhbasini* throughout her life, through her literary works. She was born into a wealthy, educated and enlightened family of Faridpur district in East Bengal.¹⁴ Her brother Mujibar Rahman was among one of the first Bengali Muslims to enter the Indian Civil Service. The atmosphere at her home was truly conducive for literary and artistic pursuits and she was educated at home. In 1915, at the age of fourteen, Akhtar Mahal was married to Maqbul –ul-Khan, who belonged to a respectable family in Noakhali. However, strong opposition to her literary pursuit came from her father-in-law's house, and for that matter, she was compelled to continue her writings secretly. Her eldest son, F.M.Khan remembers how she would come to their room at night, to read and write secretly.¹⁵ She would preserve these writings carefully, and kept them locked away in a trunk, till one day Kazi Nazrul Islam discovered them. Sometime between 1924 and 1925, the poet Nazrul Islam visited Noakhali and was invited to the house of the zamindar. As the young wife of the family, Akhtar was asked to compose a laudatory piece for the poet. The poem amused Nazrul. He wanted to know if the lady had written anything else. That was when other writings by Akhtar Mahal were made public. At the encouragement of Nazrul, Akhtar's writings were published in *Naoroze* first under a pseudonym and later in her own name in *Saogat*.¹⁶ In a short piece, 'ShishuPalan' published in 1927, Akhtar Mahal discussed child care issues and added a new concept of motherhood and child care that was to replace age old notions.

At a time when merely reading a novel depicting romance and love was deemed immoral by many, Akhtar Mahal tried to grapple with the issue of love and attraction. Her first novel, *Niyantrita*, (1927-28) revolves around the heroine's Ayesha's intense lifelong love for a distant male relative.¹⁷ In a language and style that was reminiscent of *Swarnakumari Devi* and *Nirupama Devi*, Akhtar an antahpur educated Muslim woman approached the theme of desire in a woman, which was a measure of great challenge at that period and had been inconceivable some decades earlier. Akhtar Mahal's novel 'Maran Baran' (Welcome Death) was published posthumously in *Saogat*. Akhtar Mahal Syeda Khatun was not just a writer of romantic novels, she wrote with acute social awareness. Through her writings, she narrated the painful lives of so many women living secluded in Muslim society. One of her remarkable observations on society was 'Marriage and rejection (talaq) are oft repeated children's games in an unenlightened Muslim society'.¹⁸

In conclusion, it can be said that by the end of the 19th century and early 20th century, this combination of outright silence, overtly unfaltering representation and oblique, negative allusion over time consolidated a picture of Bengali Muslim women as "backward" or simply "invisible" in the national imaginary. In fact, it is in the figure of the traditional women silenced and victimized by the barbarity of Muslim men, that Muslim women make their few appearances in the nationalist discourse. We see that the Bengali Muslim women were mostly incorporated into the larger story of Indian womanhood in this particular manner, and hence everything else that they did simply become invisible in the Nationalist Historiography. It is as if the subcontinent was colonized, the nation was born, the lives of Hindu (middle class/ upper caste) women changed immensely, and all these tumultuous changes simply passed by Muslim women who continued to languish in their misery because of their religion. Recent works by feminist scholars are being done on Muslim women and these are important in correcting a long standing lacuna in historical studies in India. It is because of their efforts that

Muslim women are certainly noticed as subject with both voice and visibility in the public world. Thanks also to such efforts;RokeyaSakhawat Hossain's name has now found its way into the list of exceptional early feminist women writers from colonial India. However what has remained largely unnoticed are the works of other Bengali Muslim women writers such as Bibi Taherunnessa, Kharinnessa Khatun, Razia Khatun Choudhurani, FaizunnessaChaudhurani to name a few who were writing on a wide range of issues pertinent to woman's lives in the first half of the twentieth century. These Bengali Muslim women have gained respect and recognition for both their writing and their activism over time, but few readers outside Bangladesh and West Bengal would recognize their names. As historical sources the work of all these early Bengali Muslim women writers is important and they deserve much more attention from Historians and scholars of present day.

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