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BOOK REVIEW

'Bibi's Room' is a crucial step towards acknowledging Urdu women writers of 20th century Hyderabad

The focus of Nazia Akhtar's book is on writers Zeenath Sajida, Najma Nikhat, and Jeelani Bano, and the socio-political conditions in which they wrote.

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Nazia Akhtar.

Bibi's Room, to somewhat simplistically summarise this volume, is a detailed study of three women writers from Hyderabad who wrote in Urdu, and have largely escaped mainstream

attention owing to the triple marginalisation of region, language, and gender. Urdu literature from the Deccan remains in the shadow of its north-Indian sibling. Women writers in Urdu have oftentimes been ignored in favour of their male counterparts and not been translated enough into English or other languages.

There is an obvious gap in scholarship and in publication that has necessitated a book like this one, in a crucial step towards acknowledgement and redressal. While the focus of the book is on three writers – Zeenath Sajida, Najma Nikhat, and Jeelani Bano – the author, Nazia Akhtar, deftly weaves into the text the cultural and political history of Hyderabad, crucial questions of identity, a historically contextualised critique of patriarchy, and the ways in which fiction, particularly that emerging from marginalised and oppressed communities/spaces, contributes to historiography.

In her introductory chapter, Akhtar writes of her difficulty in choosing how to refer to the women mentioned in the text:

I was reluctant to abide by the homogenising principles of academic style manuals that originate in privileged, western, Anglophone locations and do not demonstrate any comprehension of the complexity of naming patterns in non-western, non-white contexts, especially in relation to caste, class, and gender. Adhering to such standards would mean that I would have to use the surname, usually patriarchal, ie belonging to the father or, more commonly, the husband. This was not amenable to me, especially in light of the fact that the patriarchal surname has contributed to the obscuring and forgetting of many a South Asian woman.

Akhtar quotes examples of women pushed into obscurity because the names that identified them were only markers of their relationships to men. Her solution is to "treat each name on a case-by-case basis, sticking to first names for the most part, and using second names only when I was reasonably sure that it belonged to the individual woman in question." For this simple yet assertive act that refuses to rob women of their selfhood, an erasure deemed acceptable across academia for the longest time, Nazia Akhtar has my gratitude and our collective patriarchy-smashing hearts.

Study of a writer at work

The title of the text is a welcome piece of sass and intertextuality and cocking a snook at patriarchal expectations. Virginia Woolf, tracing the history of women and fiction, almost a whole century ago, wrote, "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction." Zeenath Sajida, many decades later, in a clever re-working and re-contextualisation of Woolf's insistence on autonomy for creative expression, wrote an essay, an *inshaiya*, in which she lays bare the reality of a *bibi*, a young woman in a middle class household, who has a space notionally marked as hers but never really allowed to be claimed by her.

Addressing her reader, Sajida asks, "Tell me honestly have you ever seen any house where a homemaking wife or girl has her own truly separate room? In name, certainly, the room is separate. But the whole house is contained inside it. Bhaijaan's tie, Abba Jaan's sherwani, Bi

Aapa's crinkled dupatta, Dadi Amma's basket of paans, Bua's bundle, Ammi's box, Munne Bhaiya's wooden horse and toy sword, a torn rug with a dirty white cover, pillows, the sewing machine, mirror, comb, everything finds itself here. Obviously it is Bibi's room."

The irony is rich. The subversion is obvious. Women, in Sajida's world, as in our own, barely ever have the luxury of time, space and financial independence. It is the woman writer's insistence on carving out a space for herself, despite innumerable social, familial, and financial constraints, that Akhtar explores through the writers she has chosen for her study.

The book is structured in the form of six chapters, with a comprehensive introduction that engages with the aforementioned gaps in scholarship, followed by a review of literature and contextualisation of the problematics of literature, gender, identity, and politics. It dedicates a chapter each to the three writers under study.

Each of these chapters begins with a representative Urdu text translated into English, followed by a detailed commentary on the chosen piece as well as other works of the writer. Each chapter also includes a brief biography, situating the writer within their historical and cultural context. The choice of the translated text as the introduction to the writer is an obviously political one. Akhtar allows each of her chosen writers to speak to the reader, giving them a voice, instead of treating them as passive subjects of academic study.

Zeenath Sajida's essay, "If Allah Miyan Were A Woman", begins with the narrator's corporeal experience of what might possibly be menstrual pain, and goes on to pose difficult theological questions about gender and gendered oppression, based on the masculine gendering of god. Akhtar identifies in the essay a deployment of Spivak's subversive tool of strategic essentialism, to critique patriarchal constructions of religion.

Najma Nikhat's short story, "The Last Haveli", is an indictment of an exploitative feudal system that reduces women's bodies to either a womb or an object of pleasure, but is also an acknowledgment of the changing social fabric and the erasure of a cultural space.

Jeelani Bano's "God and I" also has the protagonist, Musa, asking questions of his god, but in a complete departure from Sajida's imaging of a benevolent, motherly Allah, Bano's god is masculine, and forbidding, the font of all power, against whom Musa finds himself powerless. Borrowing from Sufi and Buddhist traditions, the story hinges on a moment of self-assertion and retains a near-mystical quality of ineffability.

The pieces Akhtar has selected are as diverse as the writers themselves are. Both Zeenath Sajida and Najma Nikhat were active members of the Progressive Writer's Movement that insisted on engagement with class injustice, political freedoms, resistance to political repression and a representation of the voice of those who had hitherto been silenced. Many of Najma Nikhat's heroines, we are told, were women forced into servitude in the feudal system of deodis in the

state of Hyderabad. Nikhat's writing also takes cognizance of the Telangana People's Struggle, the politics of class and the role of women within this space of resistance.

Jeelani Bano, while consciously refusing all labels, also displays a Progressive bent in her writing, often critiquing the state and state apparatus and exposing the dangers inherent in the abuse of power. All three have strident feminist voices. Zeenath Sajida's "If Allah Miyan" constructs an argument for gender parity eerily reminiscent of Mary Wollstonecraft's "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman". Both look at gendering as socially structured and debilitating.

Nikhat writes of the solidarity of women within the zenana and draws attention to violence performed on women's bodies within and outside the institution of marriage. Bano, acutely aware of the patriarchal literary culture of her times, writes revolutionary women who wrest social change from within the system. The oeuvres of all are impressive and deeply embedded in their particular socio-cultural spaces.

The begum's tongue

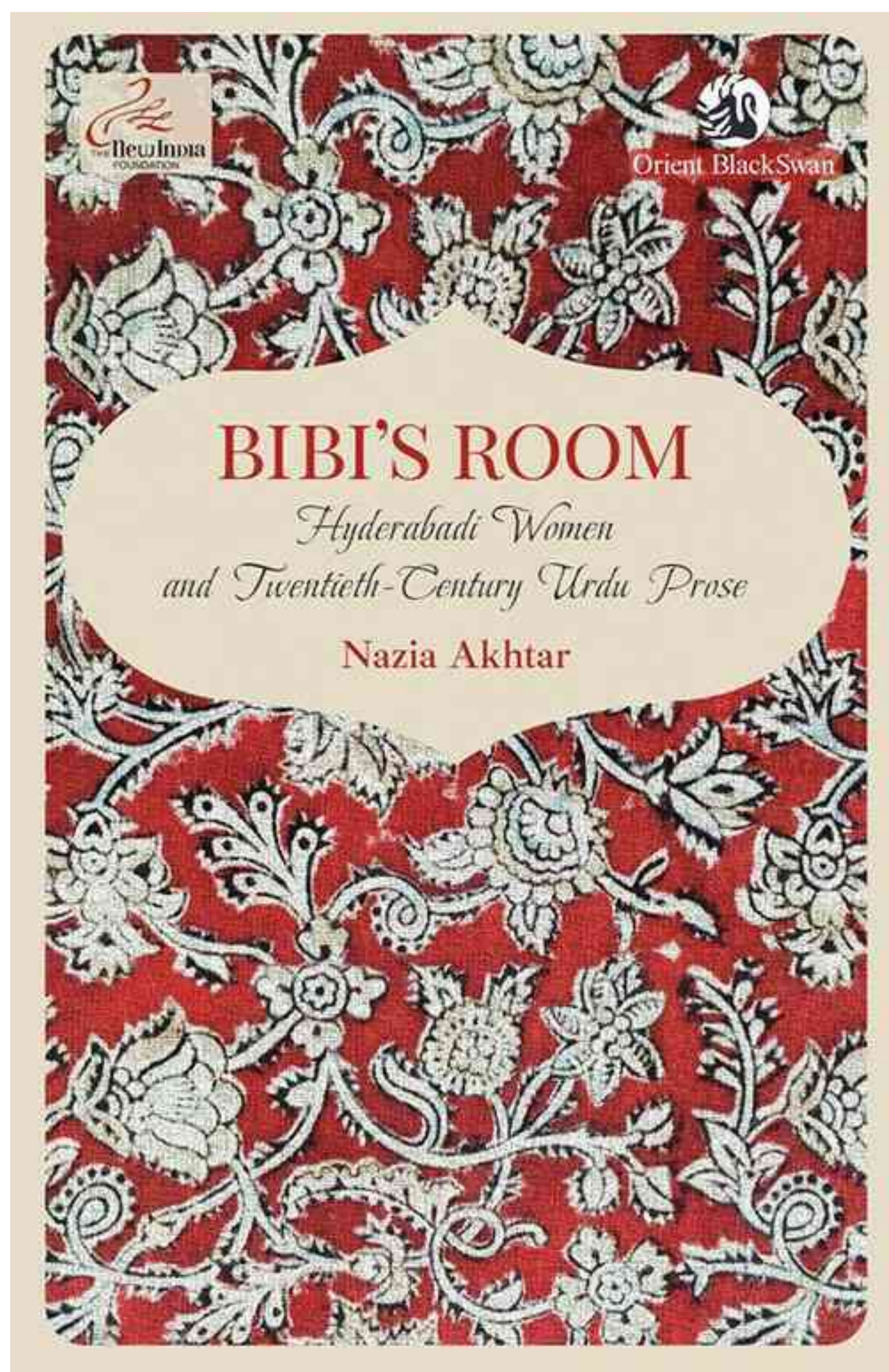
While acknowledging that all three writers followed literary convention and wrote in what will be recognised as standard Urdu, with very few inflections of the local Hyderabadi or Dakhni, Akhtar makes mention of the fascinating world of 'Begumati zubaan', the begum's tongue, the form of language women used to communicate amongst themselves, excluding men from certain discussions, certain spaces.

Gail Minault has identified Begumati zubaan as a "women's Urdu" that emerged from within purdah society in the 19th century and took its individual forms in Delhi, Lucknow, and Hyderabad. Language itself is turned into a tool of subversion in this distinctly unique shape it takes, much as is the case with Hélène Cixous's *écriture feminine*, an attempt of woman, to write herself. Akhtar points to Najma Nikhat's use of Begumati zubaan in her short stories, capturing "the imaginative, expressive, evocative, and richly connotative linguistic register used by women of the zanana."

In its attention to the woman writer's language(s), literary spaces, regional/linguistic identity, personal and political challenges, *Bibi's Room* emerges as a crucial text for South Asian feminism. As an academic study it has a little something to offer to a range of disciplines – literary studies, women's writing, gender studies, translation, at the least. It attempts also to map the literary and cultural space of Hyderabad, as a redressal of the pattern of marginalisation that the erstwhile princely states have been subject to.

Its greatest achievement, however, is closely aligned to the politics of translation. Translation, Akhtar writes, "does not happen in a vacuum outside ideology, but in a continuum embedded in history and politics (…) it is the conversion of an audience into the traditions and context of a text that translators seek to achieve." Just as the translator takes the audience to the text, necessitating immersion, *Bibi's Room* inspires the reader to delve deeper into the writings of Zeenath Sajida,

Najma Nikhat and Jeelani Bano. It unsettles the canon and creates space for more women writing themselves, for finally, perhaps, making a Bibi's Room of their own.



***Bibi's Room: Hyderabadi Women and Twentieth-Century Urdu Prose*, translated from the Urdu by Nazia Akhtar, Orient Black Swan.**