

# Writing as Muslim Women

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**N**azia Akhtar's *Bibi's Room: Hyderabad Women and Twentieth-Century Urdu Prose* narrates the life histories and writings of three women writers of 20th-century Hyderabad—Zeenath Sajida, Najma Nikhat, and Jee-lani Bano. Through a sensitive and careful translation of short stories, articles and diaries written in Urdu, Akhtar's book analyses the perspective, opinion and emotions of Muslim women amid the sociopolitical transition in the princely state of Hyderabad. While the state, since the 19th century, had undergone profound social transformations due to movements questioning the seclusion and strictures imposed upon Muslim women, the socio-economic discrimination against women was far from over. Writing at the cusp of these changes, Sajida, Nikhat, and Bano wrote about their lives, trials and tribulations, and the challenges they faced within homes as wives, daughters, and mothers; in institutions as writers, intellectuals, and professionals; and in the state as citizens and largely in the world as women. Their personal stories are accompanied with stories of women and men from different walks of life struggling and navigating their way through the changes, in their lives and social order, after the transfer of power in the 1940s. These transitions are narrated in the first section of the book where the institutional, social and political changes unfolding in 20th-century Hyderabad society are documented. The subsequent chapters foreground the voices of the women writers with an in-depth analysis of these texts.

## Capturing the Political Transformations in Urdu

The class, linguistic and religious divides in society were getting altered amid the political transformation of Hyderabad. These churnings also had an influence

## BOOK REVIEWS

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on the literary sphere of the state, shaped by institutions like the Osmania University and movements like the Progressive Writers' Association. This was the backdrop against which Urdu prose was shaping. Urdu literature under the influence of progressive writers' movement was used as a means to capture and critique the socio-economic hierarchies in society. Women like Sajida, Nikhat, and Bano being a part of these movements wrote as participants, critics and reformers of society.

Akhtar has beautifully interwoven their writings with their life histories to explain the context in which these women were writing. By doing so, she makes a methodological point that the histories of the oppressed cannot be written by firmly demarcating boundaries between fiction and history. She rightfully argues that the voices of the subaltern can be "recovered" through fiction, which is sometimes dismissed merely as a figment of imagination with no bearing with reality. In subsequent chapters, one finds that the women writers not only carefully recorded their observations but also collected written materials and conducted fieldworks to familiarise the readers with the subject and field they were writing on. These collections were often presented through literary tropes such as humour, sarcasm and fantasy to sometimes mock, lament and even imagine a society where women were denied space of their own.

The subjective position of the characters of Akhtar's book as middle-class Hyderabad women does not limit the ambit of their study. Lamenting the loss of equal opportunities provided to women

in professional fields owing to their domestic responsibilities, they also wrote about sexual and economic exploitation faced by women residing in feudal aristocratic households, in workplaces and in villages. The narratives of the loss of economic and political privileges of the aristocracy are suffused with stories of the wives of *nawabs* who had to face the wrath of society for not conceiving children and bear infidelity of their husbands. Along with the wives, the women attendants also suffered at the hands of their masters who economically and sexually exploited them.

Similar cases of oppression were found even in the urban and rural settings of the home. Within the households, women of varied ages had to conform to social expectations. While married women were expected to be dutiful wives, unmarried women and widows were seen as a burden to society. The condition of rural women was no better, especially where the feudal stranglehold made the case worse for those left at the mercy of the landlords. In the urban setting, the employers of working-class women exploited them by paying a meagre amount. Amid these struggles, we also encounter stories of female friendships and camaraderie. The relationship between mothers and daughters, and teachers and students mirrors the relationship shared among women Urdu writers of the 20th century. While the mother-daughter relationship inspired Nikhat's writings, Sajida as a head of the Department of Urdu at Osmania University wrote about the lives of young female students. She was able to vividly describe the lives of students because of the close relationship she shared with them. The endearing sobriquet "Zeenath Apa" coined by her students aptly captures the dynamics of their relationship. Apart from her students, she was also looked up as an inspiration by Nikhat and Bano. While focusing on the sufferings of women, the writers did not restrict themselves to women, but also reflected on the inner sufferings of the common people, the never-ending chase of the middle class, the loneliness of urban

homes, and estranged relationships between the family members. As the inner world was changing, the cultural efflorescence of the outer world—the vibrant cultures of *mushairas*, literary gatherings, and syncretic culture of Hyderabad—was also getting altered. The writings lamented these changes, and specifically mourned the rising communal tensions caused by the scramble for power among various political parties.

### Marginalisation of Muslim Women

The category “Muslim women” took some time to be recognised as a category worth studying. While the scholarship on women social reformers significantly contributed to the field of women’s studies, by showing how the women’s question acquires a different tenor when addressed by women themselves, they nevertheless restricted their analysis to the Hindu women. Through their works, one knows that women adopted different strategies and raised different kinds of questions as opposed to male social reformers who were often more inclined towards bringing about reform through the legislative intervention. How Muslim women attended to these questions remained unanswered (Sarkar and Sarkar 2007: 3).

Their absence made it convenient to portray them as powerless beings in the need of a saviour. The British officers or the Hindu male reformers in 19th-century colonial India often portrayed women of the Muslim society as the backward “other” to glorify and even justify patriarchal practices existing in their society. The otherisation was, in fact, not only restricted to colonial officers and reformers, but liberal feminists are also criticised for not accounting the role, contribution and voices of Muslim women (Sarkar 2008: 2). One of the reasons being, the dominance of the Hindu middle class in the reformist project. The other could be the perception of Islam and Muslim societies, which when assessed within colonial and liberal framework, appears static and backward. While the dynamism of Islam is a different debate, scholars working on Islam and Muslim women

argue that not only was the position of women often discussed among Muslim reformers across temporal and spatial stretch, but they also actively took part in these debates.

Works like *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* by Ruby Lal (2005), countering the voyeuristic view of women in the 16th century to the early 17th century Mughal harems, show how women played a crucial role in the making of empires and its cultures. This also reflects in the works of other historians, such as Barbara Metcalf’s (1992) *Perfecting Women: Maulana Ashraf ‘Ali Thanawi’s Bihishti Zewar*, which highlights the participation of the so-called secluded women in the social and economic life in Islamic societies. Though their role was rather restricted to good mothers, wives and as bearers of traditions, they continued to intervene in the debates concerning their position in society. Julia Stephens (2018) shows Muslim women in the late 19th century engaged with the legal system to claim their rights, thus unsettling the perception of them being communal and irrational. Scholars like Asiya Alam (2021) show how women discussed matters related to family, conjugality and kinship in Urdu newspapers of the 19th and 20th centuries. Their engagement was not restricted to familial concerns, but they continue to negotiate their gender and religious identities in the wake of the increasing attack on Muslims in contemporary society. Ghazala Jamil’s (2018) study maps the articulation and assertion of Muslim women against patriarchal and communal politics in independent India.

### Writing as Hyderabad Muslim Women

Akhtar has been able to do the same, by not only underlining the negotiations of Muslim women in their own terms but also by foregrounding the voices through a careful reading of women’s writings. While doing so, she is acutely aware of the perils of appropriation of the writer’s voice by the translator. To maintain transparency (between the reader and the translator), her translations of the Urdu texts are accompanied by explanations of the difficulties of translating some

Urdu words and phrases in English. Similar sensitivity is visible in her organisation or structuring of the book. The work and the characters appear before Akhtar’s analysis, thus facilitating an engagement with the text before dwelling into any analysis or the larger context of the writings.

Chapters 1 and 2 give a vivid backdrop against which these writers were writing. The reform movement in Hyderabad leading to the establishment of schools for women enabled the entry of Muslim women in the colonial public spaces. They were further facilitated by the associational and literary cultures of the time. The region-specific questions and concerns of the book like the issue of decline of traditional wealth leading to migration, marginalisation of Deccani culture and language, and the growing regional and religious strife in late 20th century Hyderabad are new additions for scholars who are attuned to reading reform movement from the perspective of north-Indian male writers.

Along with region, religion and gender emerge as significant categories in the women’s writings. While addressing specific regional history of Hyderabad, the writers also engaged with the question of religion and women’s rights. Some of the writings were critical of an ossified understanding of Islam. Sajida criticised patriarchy existing within the Muslim society and made a case for woman’s interpretation of Islam, which could lead to a more egalitarian understanding of the religious texts. Bano, in her text, *God and I*, also engaged with the

#### EPW Index

An author-title index for *EPW* has been prepared for the years from 1968 to 2012. The PDFs of the Index have been uploaded, year-wise, on the *EPW* website. Visitors can download the Index for all the years from the site. (The Index for a few years is yet to be prepared and will be uploaded when ready.)

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idea of God by demanding accountability from him in adverse circumstances. These writings demonstrate the possibilities of myriad interpretations of Islam and shows how it is far from a unified and homogeneous category. Akhtar's translations show that Muslim women were actively engaging with the category of Islam itself. This book's most significant contribution is precisely showing the dynamism of the then existing society without trying to fit or judge them according to the parameters of any particular ideological lens. Women's

voices are represented in the larger colonial socio-economic and political context, making it indispensable to scholars interested in themes such as gender, language, colonialism and region in South Asia.

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