

Akhtar, Nazia. *Bibi's Room: Hyderabad Women and Twentieth-Century Urdu Prose*.

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Begums with Pens in *Bibi's Room*

Bibi's Room: Hyderabad Women and Twentieth-Century Urdu Prose by Nazia Akhtar (2022) focuses on three women writers in the unique sociopolitical backdrop of twentieth-century Hyderabad. The work is critical to the landscape of women's writings in Urdu outside North India. It presents the writers beyond the categories of essentialized or romanticised Muslim women, focusing on their agency and positionality. At its core, it tries to unpack the simplified binary between fiction and history, "to effectively challenge positivistic assumptions about objective and subjective representations" (7), through an engagement with women's writings as a discursive space that still lies unexplored in the context of Indian women's writings. This work could be a beginning of a larger critical discourse, one that explores dialogue and negotiation between historiography, literature, and politics. Akhtar's engagement with writers from diverse backgrounds opens up a new space to discuss the question of what constitutes archives, beyond the terrain of colonial institution, and how the lived experiences, agency, and political legibility of the marginalised, which had been considered missing or erased from mainstream discourse, become for historical contextualisation. The book adds nuance to a well-established scholarship on epistemological approaches to archival studies and encourages readers to re-evaluate both what constitutes an archive, and who is likely to find space within it. It will prove to be an inaugural work on Urdu writings by women outside the North Indian nucleus.

The translations of Zeenath Sajida's "If Allah Miyan Were a Woman;" Najma Nikhat's "The Last Haveli;" and Jeelani Bano's "God and I," engage with theological debates, socioeconomic turmoil in post-independence India, questions of mysticism, etc. Though Akhtar feels unsure about how Sajida would think about "Islamic feminism" or "Muslim feminism" in "If Allah Miyan Were a Woman," this story should be read as a "feminist" text even if the writer did not use those terms (since the terminology did not exist as a defined concept at the time); the concerns raised by Sajida, mirror contemporary patriarchal interpretations of Islam. "The Last Haveli" by Nikhat is a lamentation and critique of an oppressive socioeconomic system; it describes the *jāgirdārī* cultural opulence in the backdrop of crushing poverty experienced by working-class women, their exploitation, and the denial of their subjectivity. Jeelani Bano's

“God and I” is a mystical, multilayered text that brings in the Sufi dimension and a multifaith perspective to understand the search for God. It touches upon metaphysical questions, the existence of God, and the concept of morality, while drawing from stories of Moses, Karbala, Christ, and Ram. Such writings have a long history in Urdu literature (Ismat Chughtai, Attia Hosain, Qurratulain Hyder, Rashid Jahan, etc.); therefore it is important to see the North and South not as isolated entities but in constant dialogue with each other, and these writers as comrades across geographical and class divides. *Bibi’s Room* has a localised focus on the political backdrop of post independence Hyderabad. The geopolitical dynamics are that is historically critical because it draws attention to the political and cultural complexities of princely states. The analysis in this book goes beyond the stories translated, to describe the underbelly of aristocratic homes, and engage with questions of feminism and class. It places the domestic experiences of women squarely in the realm that is influenced by the outside world.

That said, the book falls short of directly calling these literary and biographical writings political and historical archives. The author mentions that she tries to “listen to women’s lives and experiences as they emerge from the white spaces between words, lines and indeed in the margins of pages” (11). These white spaces and silences should not be misunderstood as an absence of sources—they are overcome, if one reads women’s writings as archival documents. A transformation of the epistemic structure and praxis around historical methodology to produce new kinds of history and to recalibrate our default setting towards biographical research is a fundamental methodological reorientation for overcoming historical amnesia.

Structurally the book leaves some questions unanswered about historical and social contexts in which women were writing, such as: What kinds of negotiations or rebellions did they need to undertake with the patriarchal structures of the day? The structure of the book is interesting, but it leaves certain gaps. The commentary that is followed by translations offers an important yet limited engagement with the social context of these writers and their texts because the analysis lacks references to the many interesting translations and key texts to which it so frequently refers. Additionally, the way in which the idea of the subaltern voice is tackled is complicated, because it seems to privilege one archive/voice over another. The book talks about the “problematic nature of elite voices conveying, appropriating, and/or co-opting the subaltern voice, of course these representations cannot equal scenarios in which working-class and Dalit women speak their own lives or write their own histories.” (37). Considering a section of women’s writings as hegemonic is a questionable generalization which has historically plagued Western scholarship.

The linguistic debate on the North/South divide around Urdu and what is seen as “multiple erasures” (10) is discussed. However, a discussion of the political context and the sociopolitical role of Urdu writings and their translations, as well as the current climate of linguistic othering and the communalisation of Urdu writing, has not found space here. This would have been important in order to contextualize the marginalisation of a language and a literary community. It would have enabled the reader to fathom the political and cultural importance of Hyderabad women’s writings in Urdu. This book could be the start of an investigation for the future, but it also seems to be a lost opportunity to engage in debate and inquiry about the importance of Urdu literature, the politics of language and identity in contemporary India. This book is expansive in its breadth, as it is a work of translation, historical documentation, and literary criticism, but because of its desire to do so much, at moments it loses sight of its target audience. The sheer diversity of archival engagement and the tackling of political and personal stories make this book an inaugural text toward a much wider and dynamic project that could explore the writings of women from Hyderabad, and Urdu writings more broadly.

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