

Naim, C. M., trans. and ed. *A Most Noble Life: The Biography of Ashrafunnisa Begum (1840–1903)*. By Muhammadi Begum (1877–1908). Translated from the original Urdu, with additional material, by C. M. Naim. Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2022. 188 pp.; Rs. 630.

C. M. Naim is a prolific scholar, writer, and translator of Urdu literature and its place in South Asian history. He founded *The Annual of Urdu Studies* in 1981 and published an English translation of Ashrafunnisa Begum's (Ashraf un-Nisā Begam) autobiographical account, "How Bibi Ashraf Learned to Read and Write," in the journal in 1987. Ashrafunnisa Begum (1840–1903) was born in what is now Uttar Pradesh, India to an *ashraf* (noble class) but not wealthy Muslim home. This book expands on Naim's fascination with Ashrafunnisa's life and broader interest in the lives of North Indian Muslim women (xii).

Ashrafunnisa's account was initially published in the Urdu-language magazine *Tahzīb-e Nisvān* (The Instruction of Women) which was founded by Sayyid Mumtāz 'Alī in July 1898 and edited by his wife Muhammadi Begum (Muḥammadī Begam), the first Muslim woman to edit an Urdu women's magazine (115–17, 151). The account then formed the first part of a biography of Ashrafunnisa's life entitled *Ḥayāt-e Ashraf* (1904), by the very same Muhammadi Begum—the two women had become firm friends after meeting at a betrothal party. Naim's English translation is the first full translation of *Ḥayāt-e Ashraf*, though other scholars have extensively analyzed the biography (Khoja-Moolji, 2019). As a scholar of Urdu, Naim is able to offer a deeper texture to the translation and South Asian Muslim culture by including extensive footnotes on the original Urdu text. Footnotes include annotations on the Urdu translation in the form of transliterated words, definitions, and explanations on customary and (occasionally) contemporary usages. Some in-text translation occurs in the afterword, such as the inclusion of words like *'ilm* (knowledge) and *ustānī* (female teacher), which are useful for a non-expert reader (68).

By translating a biography of a Muslim woman written by another Muslim woman, Naim offers a rich introduction into the life-worlds of *ashraf* North Indian Muslim women from the late nineteenth century. As scholars writing on female life-writing have pointed out "biography is always autobiography" (Lambert-Hurley citing Marilyn Booth, 2018, 35). Thus, *A Most Noble Life* provides rich accounts of two remarkable women—the author as well as her subject. The capacious book is structured as follows: (i) the translated biography of Bibi Ashraf (Bibī Ashraf), an affectionate name for Ashrafunnisa Begum, authored by Muhammadi Begum; (ii) an afterword containing thematic commentaries on the biography; (iii) translated essays written by Ashrafunnisa

Begum that had originally been published in *Tahzīb-e Nisvān*; (iv) a biography of Muhammadi Begum; and, finally, (v) three essays (one of which was written by Muhammadi Begum) about Victoria Girls' High School in Lahore, the school that Ashrafunnisa had worked in.

The Translated Biography

By titling her biography *Ḥayāt-e Ashraf*, Muhammadi Begum played upon her subject's name alongside the direct translation of "the noblest life" (xi). Ashrafunnisa's account at the start of the biography shows how the educational pursuits of women were supported by some male family members but neglected and condemned by others. It also illustrates the resourcefulness of girls themselves. For instance, her account alongside Naim's explanatory footnotes and afterword elucidate the daily religious customs of Shia households such as daily *majālis* (gatherings) that took place in the *zanānah* in which poems and elegies (*salām* and *mujre*) were recited to honour Prophet Muhammad and his family (11). Ashrafunnisa borrowed and copied *mujre* and *salām* using ink made from the blacking of a *tavā* (flat griddle pan) and twigs (14–15). This resourcefulness echoes many other remarkable stories of female passion and diligence in pursuing education beyond Muslim communities and across pre-colonial and colonial South Asia (Sarkar, 2014; Malhotra and Lambert-Hurley eds., 2015).

Muhammadi Begum's biography details Ashrafunnisa's childhood, her married life, and her work and habits including her time teaching at Victoria Girls' School in Lahore from 1878. Muhammadi also describes their first meeting, their close friendship, and a list of articles Bibi Ashraf wrote for *Tahzīb-e Nisvān*. Begum's inclusion of Bibi Ashraf's "Dispositions, Habits, and Manners," focusing on housekeeping, religiosity, *pardah*, charity, and "Ṣabr-e Jamīl" (Beautiful Patience) (32), follows the instructional idiom of much of the literature published by the husband-wife duo. The edification that forms the structure and content of Muhammadi's biography of her subject's exemplary life are continued by Naim in his translation of Bibi Ashraf's *Tahzīb-e Nisvān* essays "Anger" (*Ġhuṣṣah*) in 1899, "The Evils of Pampering" (*Nāz kī Kharābiyāñ*) and "On Adopting a Child" (*Farzandī meñ Lenā*) in 1900. By including translations of *Ḥayāt-e Ashraf* and Ashrafunnisa's essays before a broader analysis of female-targeted writing, the text acts as a micro-study for the kind of material published in *Tahzīb-e Nisvān* and allows Naim to dexterously map early individual reformist initiatives to their impacts on formalized education and periodical writing.

Commentaries as Afterword

One of the most illuminating parts of this new translated work is the way in which Naim elaborates on aspects of the biography to provide commentaries on female education, widow remarriage, and sectarianism—these issues, as Naim highlights, remain potent in twenty-first century South Asia. In providing this afterword, Naim also situates the biography in the broader genre of instructional writing of the late colonial period. He traces how women were educated through the male-authored domestic novel, including works by Naẓīr Aḥmad (b. ca. 1831–6; d. 1912) and Alṭāf Ḥusain Ḥālī (1837–1914) (63). By focusing on the characters and lives of their fictional heroines, Aḥmad's Aṣḡharī Kḥānam of *Mirāt ul-ʿArūs* (1869) and *Banāt un-Naʿsh* (1875) and Zubaidah Kḥāṭūn of Ḥālī's *Majālis un-Nisā* (1874), Naim expands on the trope of absent mothers who take little or no part in the education of daughters, which male authors employed to foreground a new schema of male instructional reform (69). He does this to show how a female account such as Bibī Ashraf's invokes a real experience of the hardship of pursuing literacy for readers more familiar with Ḥālī's and Aḥmad's works (71, 73).

Most strikingly, Naim touches upon the kinds of literacy Muslim women could obtain by expounding a longer history of education and *adab* (behavior) literature across the Islamic world that encouraged women to read but not always to write (66–68). Female writing as a potentially dangerous and destabilising skill continued to be debated into the twentieth century. Another popular instructional work, Maulānā Ashraf ʿAlī Thānavī's *Bihishtī Zevar* (Heavenly Ornaments), did not condemn teaching girls how to write but urged that it be carefully monitored (67–68; see also Metcalf, 1992). Naim also alerts the reader to the potential reasons that writing was more difficult than reading by citing a remark made by Ḥālī about writing styles and the extra letters of the Urdu alphabet in comparison to Quranic Arabic (71). Therefore, by situating Muhammadi's biography alongside other instructional literature, Naim underscores the enduring inspiration that stories of women striving for education provided for younger generations of women in early twentieth-century India.

In his second commentary, Naim again uses aspects of Muhammadi Begum's biography to examine cultural norms on widow remarriage. In Ashrafunnisa's account of learning, she had mentioned that an *ustānī* had taught the girls of her wider family at home and that after her remarriage, which had angered her grandfather, she was no longer permitted to teach the girls (74). Naim notes that although “scriptural Islam” allowed widow remarriage and some reformers encouraged it, widow remarriage was rare in the “lived Islam of South Asia” of the *sharīf* (upper and middle classes) and those who claimed ancestral

superiority (74–75). Naim further sustains his analysis of widowhood by revisiting the works of Aḥmad and Ḥālī, who were both concerned with the plight of widows in their country and express sympathy for cultural strictures on remarriage. Aḥmad wrote the novel *Ayāmā* (The Widows) while Ḥālī authored the long poem *Munājāt-e Bevā* (A Widow's Prayer), from which selected translated verses are included (75–86). Indeed, Naim highlights that widow remarriage continues to be uncommon amongst some South Asian communities (86).

In the final part of the afterword, Naim uses the close cross-sectarian friendship between Ashrafunnisa (a Shia Muslim) and Muhammadi (a Sunni) to explore Muslim coexistence and conflict in South Asia, from the early Shia Muslim kingdoms in the Deccan and ongoing historical violence to shared observances such as the commemoration of Karbala (86–87). Naim includes his childhood memories of growing up in the town of Barabanki and observing the elaborate Sunni *ta'ziyah* (adoration of replicas of martyrs' tombs) to emphasize the prevalence of shared rituals in which Sunnis and Shias lived together “amicabl[y], while still allowing for an undercurrent of self-awareness and difference” (87–88). Like his interrogation of present-day customs of widow remarriage, Naim goes on to reflect on the growth of inter-sect marriages amongst migrants from India to Pakistan in the 1950s and 1960s, and the hardening of these relations and rampant sectarian violence in South Asia from the 1970s, marking out Zia's Islamist policies as a spark for increased discrimination (88–89).

Translation as Reconstruction and Repository

Naim's work crucially moves beyond translation in his various reviews of female writing, publishing, and pedagogy by discussing Muhammadi Begum's work and the activities of Victoria Girls' School. He reconstructs a history of the school by collating and translating school reports and notices from women's magazines like *Sharīf Bibī* in the form of three essays. These essays give a sense of the broad readership of periodicals and offer quotidian details about the practicalities of girls' schooling such as donor outreach, how families were encouraged to send daughters to school, *pardah* arrangements, and spaces of shared education for Muslim and Hindu girls (156). Muhammadi Begum's life (1877–1908) is recounted by referring to another underutilized source: her sister Aḥmadī Begam's *Ḥālāt-e Zindagī-e Muḥammadi Begam* (110). In this section, Naim builds on the pioneering work of scholars like Gail Minault and offers a history of Urdu-language periodical literature for women, including *Aḥbār*

un-Nisā (Women's Journal) and *Sharīf Bibiyāñ* (Genteel Ladies) (115–16). Early publications speak to the growth of mass print in the late nineteenth century, even if some of these journals were short-lived. Innovations in vernacular print also allowed Muhammadi Begum to publish extensively. Naim's work is particularly rich in showcasing Muhammadi's prolificacy during her short life. He lists Muhammadi's works by genre and intended readership, including instructional books on housekeeping, novels, children's books, poetry, and periodicals for girls like *Phūl* (Flowers). This reconstruction also provides scholars of gender history and South Asian literature with an insight into the multivocality of female writing. Nazr-e Sajjad Hyder, mother of the famous novelist Qurratulain Hyder, for example, was *Phūl's* first editor (120). In this brief work, Naim also forays into literary criticism by selectively analyzing Muhammadi's literary work whilst commenting on the evolution of criticism of Urdu literature, citing Aamer Hussein's essay on Muhammadi Begum and the Urdu novel and Shaista Ikramullah's 1945 doctoral analysis of Begum's "tales" *Ṣafīyah Begam* (1902), *Sharīf Beṭī* (1908), and *Āj-kal* (1912) (127, 130). In doing so, this work adds to the investigation of female-authored domestic novels by historian Shenila Khoja-Moolji, who has examined a number of Muhammadi's novels alongside *Hayāt-e Ashraf* (Khoja-Moolji, 2018).

For the reconstruction of essays, translated articles, and the compilation of Muhammadi Begum's works, Naim is grateful to Ziaullah Khokar of Gujranwala (Pakistan), who has long kept extensive runs of periodicals like *Tahzīb-e Nisvān*, and the preservation work of the British Library's Endangered Archive Programme (xii). Indeed, digitization work is crucial for the continuation of research on vernacular mass print and on women's contributions in the colonial period. In offering a repository of noteworthy publications and an extensive bibliography for further reading, *A Most Noble Life* will become a crucial primary and secondary source for future scholars on women's education and everyday lives, print cultures, reformist efforts, and forms of life-writing. It is a great addition to the growing work on the history of South Asian Muslim women beyond hollow orientalised narratives of Muslim women as oppressed or overly sexualized subjects that was begun in the 1990s by scholars like Gail Minault and Barbara Metcalf and has been continued by numerous scholars including Fatima Rizvi, Asiya Alam, and Nazia Akhtar.

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