

Women's Learning and Urdu Literary Scene in 19th-century India

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A *Most Noble Life: The Biography of Ashrafunnisa Begum (1840–1903)* by Muhammadi Begum (1877–1908) is an extension of what C M Naim, a distinguished scholar of Urdu literary culture in South Asia, began in 1987 when he wrote the autobiographical account, *How Bibi Ashraf Learned to Read and Write*. He expanded his research on Bibi Ashraf by doing a complete translation of *Hayāt-e Ashraf*, an Urdu biography detailing the life of Ashrafunnisa Begum, a Muslim woman who excelled as a writer and educator. The biography, being authored by an equally noteworthy Muslim woman writer and editor, Muhammadi Begum, highlights the indomitable literary zeal and moral and religious proficiency of the two women. Both figures engaged actively in the public sphere, tirelessly championing various women's issues.

Ashrafunnisa Begum defied the traditional Muslim norms of her family by embarking on a personal journey to self-educate in writing and later by joining the Victoria Girls' High School to educate young girls in her community. Likewise, Muhammadi Begum etched her name in history as the first Muslim woman to edit an Urdu magazine, *Tahzeeb-e Nisvān* (the Instructions of Women). Her prolific published writings encompassed 22 books dealing with social issues and offering moral guidance to women and children.

Although scholars like Shenila Khojamoolji (2019) and Mohammad Afzal (2022) have extensively examined *Hayāt-e Ashraf* and its author Muhammadi Begum, Naim's work emerges as a pioneer in presenting the first complete translation of the biography. What sets Naim's contribution apart is the inclusion

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, *Orient Blackswan*, 2022; pp 188, ₹630.

of the additional contextual material, a key element that facilitates readers in situating the biography within the sociocultural and intellectual milieu of 19th-century North India. This is achieved through meticulous and insightful footnotes, which go beyond mere explanations of terms, actively enhancing the book's accessibility and broadening its appeal. For instance, Naim astutely demarcates the nuances between "Mem," representing an English woman, and "Miss," an appellation for an Indian woman (p 34), thereby elucidating the subtle layers of identity intertwined with language and colonial influence.

This contextual depth brings vivid clarity to the narrative. Expanding its scope, the supplementary material includes translations of Ashrafunnisa Begum's essays, which were published in the 19th-century Urdu magazine *Tahzeeb-e Nisvān*, a profound commentary on her biography, the biography of Muhammadi Begum and the reproduction of three contemporaneous essays on Victoria Girls' High School in Lahore, an institute where Ashrafunnisa worked, giving a peep into daily functioning of the school. This varied content paints a picture of women's lives, their professional ventures and their remarkable contributions to Muslim society. Visual elements of the book—the images of Muhammadi Begum and Victoria Girls' School and the title page of *Hayāt-e Ashraf* and *Tahzib-un Nisvān*—further enrich the narrative, allowing readers to forge a tangible

connection with the historical figures and texts.

Women and Early Urdu Literature

The book contributes to the scholarship on the 19th-century Urdu literary culture, which focuses dominantly on transformations happening within the Muslim community, religion, education, and women. Through Ashrafunnisa and Muhammadi Begum, Naim discusses women's education, their pioneering initiatives in establishing *maktabs* (educational centres), their gender and professional solidarity and their courageous battles against societal taboos, such as the stigma surrounding widow remarriage. Amid this narrative, Naim's incisive observation brings to the forefront an extraordinary connection bridging seemingly different sectarian backgrounds—Muhammadi Begum hailing from the Sunni tradition and Ashrafunnisa representing the Shia faith. A remarkable unity defined by their adherence to "scriptural Islam" and sharia underpins their profound bond, flourishing in a spirit of mutual trust and affection. Naim contextualises this Shia–Sunni bond within the rich fabric of the North Indian tradition, emphasising its significance in contrast to historical conflicts and contemporary tensions found in regions like Pakistan, Iran, and Iraq (p 88).

Naim's work redefines the role of women writers in literature and society, who offer a fresh perspective on contemporary issues addressed by male writers. Naim positions *Hayāt-e Ashraf's* notions of female education and widow remarriage as a seamless thread within contemporary scholarly discourse. He discerns a significant disparity between fictional male ideals and real female experiences. In Altaf Husain Hali and Deputy Nazir Ahmad's narratives, women's education was envisioned as a means to nurture "better mothers to the male scions of the Sharif Muslim families of North India." Intriguingly, it is only fathers who assumed the role of initiators for their daughters' education, with mothers relegated to the background (pp 71–72). *Hayāt-e Ashraf* emerges as a stark contrast, illustrating the arduous journey of Ashrafunnisa, who navigated a path bereft of paternal

support. Her education was self-forged, characterised by the acquisition of writing skills (as reading for women was accepted while writing was contentious). She ingeniously utilised pan blackening as a substitute for ink, copying *mujre* and *salām* (poems and elegies) in her pursuit of knowledge (pp 14–15). Shaista Akhtar Bano Suhrawardy, a pioneer scholar who analysed Muhammadi Begum's novels, also suggests that the fathers in Muhammadi's novel were weak and harm-causing heads, incapable of making informed decisions during difficult situations (p 129). In Naim's intricate examination, women writers emerge not merely as passive participants but as vibrant contributors to the discourse surrounding gender, education, and societal dynamics. Their stories and experiences interweave with the broader narrative of change, challenge, and resilience.

Ashraf and Literature

The book contains an extensive essay that delves into the life and literary contributions of Muhammadi Begum, with a specific focus on her involvement with *Tahzeeb-e Nisvān*, the Urdu magazine founded by her husband Mumtaz Ali. According to Naim, although the magazine initially faced challenges, it eventually achieved success and became a catalyst to inspire numerous women to engage in writing and editorial pursuits actively. Naim meticulously includes all published and unpublished literary endeavours of Muhammadi Begum, highlighting a selection of pieces with instructive qualities. Works such as *Sharif Beti* (the Noble Daughter), *Saffiya Begum*, *Aj Kal* (Today-Tomorrow), and *Chandan Har* (the Necklace) are presented as exemplars of this genre. However, Naim's scholarly curiosity is particularly roused by her two exceptional works—*Rafiq-e 'Arus* (the Bride's Companion) and *Zenana Mel-Jol ke Muhazzab Tariqe* (the Civilised Way of Zenana Social Interaction). These works offer guidance to *sharif* women for a successful marriage and effective interaction within their social circles.

All these instructional texts hint at a nuanced concept that lingers in the shadow but found space in all contemporary

writings—the concept of *sharāfat*. Muhammadi Begum's writings cast a spotlight on the embodiment of the ideal sharif woman, one guided by the tenets of sharia and dedicated to social and family welfare. For instance, *Hayāt-e Ashraf* records a case of a complaint made against the *chaprāsi* of Victoria School by the school girls. The complaint was made due to his failure to warn the palanquin bearer, the specifics of whose misconduct remain undisclosed. Despite this ambiguity, the *chaprāsi* was dismissed from his job and was reinstated only after the insistence of Ashrafunnisa. The episode was included in the text to illustrate the compassionate nature of a sharif *bibi* who saved the job of even an “inefficient” employee. It does not comment on the viewpoints of bearer or *chaprāsi*. Both Ashrafunnisa Begum and Muhammadi Begum, in their religious and moral directives for women and children, contribute to the cultivation of the quintessential sharif identity.

Naim appears to overlook this emphasis on *sharāfat*, which leaves no room for non-sharif voices. He acknowledges that girls of domestic servants and neighbours were included in the Quran learning session alongside the house girls and asserts that there was a certain degree of flexibility in relaxing

the hierarchies of class and gender in the context of religiously beneficial education (p 69). However, if we consider the concept of *sharāfat* here, we see that the education of servants and the poor was not solely driven by altruistic and religious intentions. An additional motive could have been upholding a sharif identity. In this period of transformations, the notion of *sharāfat* was not just rooted in genealogy, it inflated to include one's ethical conduct, social grace and religious propriety. This cultural refinement was demonstrated through both behaviour and literary (*akhlāq* and *'adāb*) expressions. A good treatment of servants and neighbours was also part of *akhlāq* and ethical conduct. Naim does refer to Ashrafunnisa's notion of gender solidarity but does not mention the text's restriction to sharif women, especially teachers who get less pay (p 33) or who do not get paid (p 47). Poor women or domestic servants exist in passing. Nevertheless, the book is a significant primary and secondary source for scholars working on themes of gender, education, Urdu journalism, socioreligious movement and South Asian literature.

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