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Bibi's Room: Hyderabadi Women and Twentieth-Century Urdu Prose

Nazia Akhtar – JANUARY 17, 2023

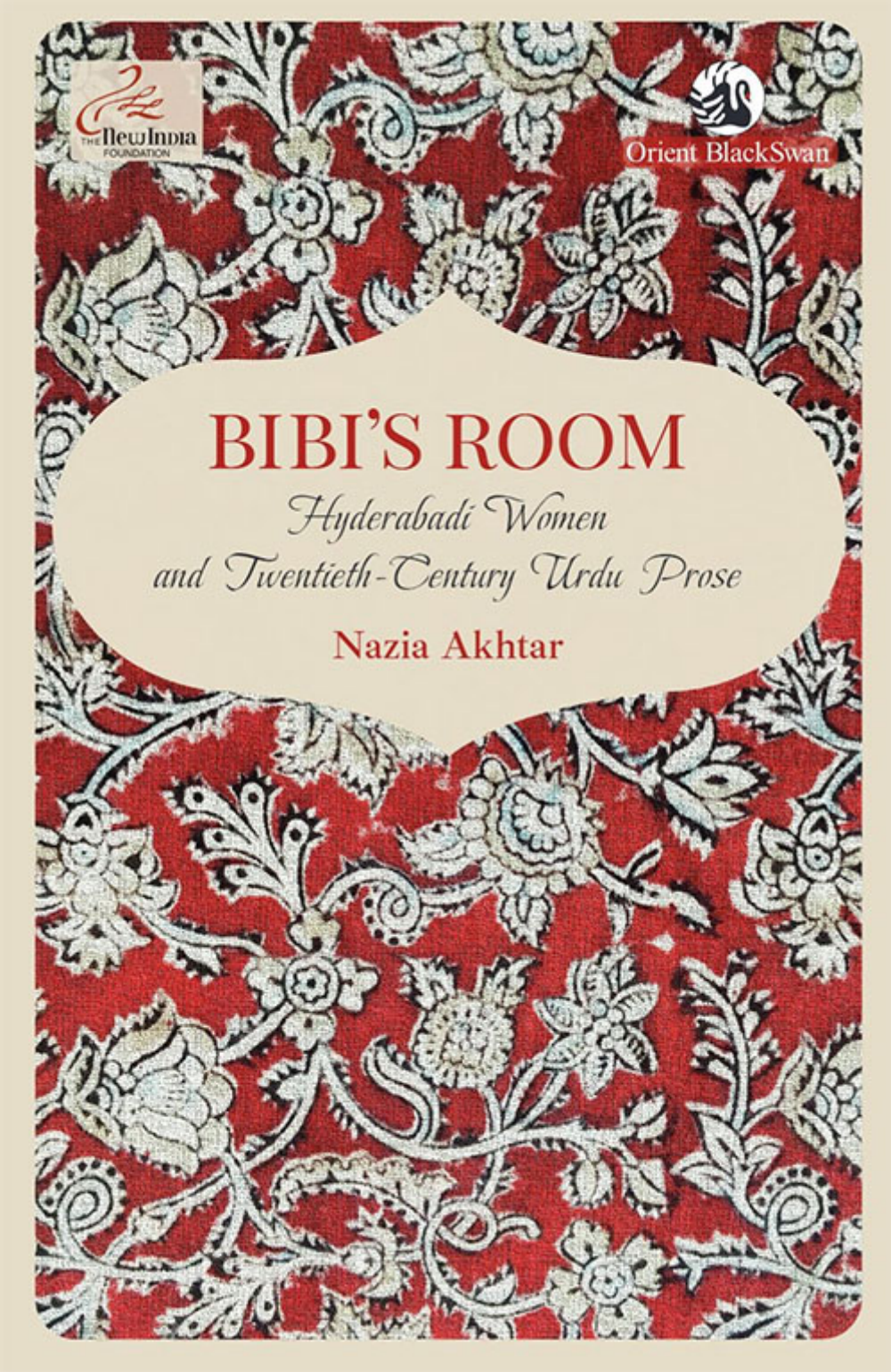
In addition to the general neglect of women writers, Urdu literary historiography in both English and Urdu has historically privileged north Indian and Pakistani writers while overlooking the many Urdus south of Bombay and Bhopal. Next to no work exists in English on the Urdu writers of Hyderabad, and only a handful of texts have been translated into English—an astonishing neglect, considering their contribution to the study of gender, political cultures, and regional histories.

Bibi's Room *(Orient BlackSwan, 2022) studies the lives and work of three women writers from Hyderabad who wrote in Urdu: Zeenath Sajida, Najma Nikhat, and Jeelani Bano. It addresses the absence of scholarship on Hyderabadi women writers in three ways: representative translations; short, nuanced biographies; and critical analyses of their oeuvres—all framed against twentieth-century Hyderabadi history, politics, culture, and society.*

The three writers showcased here offer rich portrayals of Hyderabadi urban culture as well as critiques of gender and patriarchy. Zeenath Sajida's insights into Islam dramatically alter what we know of Muslim women's engagements with fundamental theological questions. Sajida is also a skilled proponent of Urdu humour and satire, a genre notorious for its exclusion of women writers. Jeelani Bano's oeuvre, spanning three schools of Urdu literature, makes vital contributions to our understanding of gender, class, communalism, and national identity. Najma Nikhat's deodi stories powerfully narrate women's lives across class in feudal aristocratic homes, and their participation in revolutionary struggles like the Telangana movement.

The picture of Hyderabadi women's lives that emerges generates new knowledge about the conditions in which women live, write, and resist, and expands our understanding of their public participation in South Asia. Bibi's Room *is also a welcome and valuable addition to*

studies of Urdu literature, South Asian feminism, translation, and the history and culture of Hyderabad.



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Although the military term for this operation was 'Polo,' it became more widely known as the 'Police Action,' which is how it was euphemistically referred to by Indian officials and statesmen. The Indian public was surprised at the swift defeat of Hyderabad. The fact that the number of casualties was exponentially larger on the Hyderabadi side placed under scrutiny the rhetorical thrust of the Indian press about the Razakars, whose fanaticism, military organisation, and equipment had been greatly exaggerated in previous months.

Criticism of the invasion came from the Pakistani, British, and American press, and dispatches to major newspapers and magazines were censored by the Indian government.

Meanwhile, communist leaders protested that the aim of the invasion was only to disband the Razakars and that this alone, without ending feudalism, would not liberate the people (Ali 1962: 65; Gour 1973: 115–16; cf. Munshi 1957: 91; and Sundarayya 1972: 141). The new military regime hunted and arrested communists, but the people's struggle continued. There were labour and agricultural strikes with and without the resources and initiative of the CPI throughout late 1948 and 1949. But by 1950, civil liberties had been completely crushed in the state. Anybody could be arrested, detained, and held without trial, and any property could be confiscated (Sundarayya 1972: 305–06). Between February and August 1949, fifty-two people in Hyderabad city alone were in jails. Amongst these were communist leaders, organisers, and active workers, trade unionists, militant workers, students, professors, Progressive writers, newspaper editors, and government employees.[15]

Extreme repression resulted in the end of the people's struggle on 21 October 1951. P. Sundarayya, who was one of the leaders of the struggle, estimates that about 4,000–6,000 people were killed, and 50,000 beaten and tortured from 1946 to 1951 (Sundarayya 1972: viii, 1). More than 100 women are known to have died as a result of rape during the occupation by Indian forces. In the very first year of the military regime, more than 1,000 women were reported to have been raped (ibid.: 341). Women revolutionaries marveled at how their enemies had metamorphosed overnight (Stree Shakti Sanghatana 1989: 53, 223, 226). Although there had been rapes by state apparatuses earlier too, they felt that the actions of the Indian forces were 'nothing less than what we read of what a foreign army of occupation does in an occupied country' (Sundarayya 1973: 341 and, especially, 256–57).

Furthermore, not a single district of Hyderabad escaped communal violence during and after the 'Police Action' (Sundarayya 1973: 9; Reddy 1973: 59). The Sunderlal Committee report (1949), which is the only official report on this subject, states that between 27,000 and 40,000 Muslims were killed during and after the 'Police Action' (Pandit Sundarlal and Abdul Ghaffar 2013: 362). Muslim homes, shops, mosques, tombs, and ashurkhanas were plundered and destroyed in villages and towns (ibid.: 364–65). Women were abducted and raped, and many threw themselves into wells along with their children to protect their 'honour,' like women in other parts of the subcontinent had done just over a year ago (ibid.: 373). The report implicates locals (many of them from the HSC), Indian civilians who came with the invasion (some of whom were members of communal organisations), and the Indian forces themselves in the violence (ibid.: 362–63). Ten thousand government employees were dismissed, suspended, or otherwise penalised in

the name of being Razakars, or because it was assumed that they would act in the interests of Muslims alone. Forced conversions were rife, and women whose male relatives had been killed were made to convert along with their children (ibid.: 374). However, as in other parts of the subcontinent during Partition, where people had saved each other from violence, in Hyderabad state too, many Hindus sheltered Muslims (ibid.: 364).

While anti-Muslim violence on a large scale occurred mostly for a few weeks after the 'Police Action,' 'low-level, occasional violence' lasted for years, throughout the tenure of the military regime, which was in place till December 1949, and during that of the unelected civilian government under M. K. Vellodi until the first general elections of 1952. There was a prolonged sense of terror among Muslims in rural areas, who periodically fled their homes as a result of this violence, which was denied by the government in Hyderabad, which insisted that peace and calm had been restored soon after the 'Police Action' (Sherman 2015: 41).

Indeed, as Taylor C. Sherman's research vividly illustrates, for at least a few years after the 'Police Action,' Hyderabadi Muslims from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds —'wealthy landlords and poorer agriculturists, middle-class government servants, struggling artisans and businessmen, as well as people who identified as Arab, Afghan or Pashtun'—experienced great anxiety on account of their experiences of violence and dispossession. The central and erroneous assumption that prevailed among the highest echelons of power in both New Delhi and the new Hyderabad government was that Muslims and non-Muslims had suffered equally in the 'Police Action,' just as they had in other places during Partition, for which no one was particularly responsible (Sherman 2015: 21). Needless to say, Hyderabadi Muslims did not feel the same way, and although their experiences differed according to gender, class, caste, and locality, these came to be seen as a collective trauma in which Muslims had been persecuted as a group (ibid.: 40). But conflicting notions of the 'equal suffering' of Hindus and Muslims and justified retribution by Hindus on Muslims for Razakar atrocities were upheld by both the military and the unelected civilian governments, so that appeals for justice or redress and even distribution of relief materials were seen as redundant and undesirable (ibid.: 21, 39, 42).

In the process, the idea of a homogeneous Muslim community, whose history coincided with that of the Razakars, was propagated and widely accepted (Sherman 2015: 28). Indeed, the variety of political subject positions all Hyderabadis—whether they were Muslims or non-Muslims—occupied along a diverse spectrum of class, culture, caste, and religion were completely elided and replaced with reductive binary stereotypes.[16] Thirteen thousand Muslims had been arrested after the 'Police Action' on accusations of

being Razakars; 11,000 were later released for lack of evidence (ibid.: 31). Trust in the authorities was completely eroded.

The first democratic elections in Hyderabad state in 1951–1952 saw the Congress come to power. About ten Muslim candidates won, of which two were women. These were Masuma Begum and Shah Jahan Begum of the Congress, who were both re-elected in 1957 and remain till date the only Muslim women legislators in both Andhra Pradesh and Telangana state assemblies. The Congress also saw two more victorious women candidates: Shanta Bai and Sangam Lakshmi Bai. Mahadevamma Basawangowda won as an independent candidate, and Rajamani Devi, a Dalit woman who had been joint secretary of the Hyderabad chapter of the Scheduled Castes Federation, won from that organisation.[17]

However, Hyderabadis still had many reasons to protest. The sudden and rapid reduction of Muslims from 85 per cent to 50 per cent in government posts within two years rendered many thousands of people destitute and forced others to migrate out of Hyderabad.[18] Mulki agitations against the overwhelming induction of ghaer-Mulkis who were expressly invited to fill these vacant positions seriously began in Warangal and spread to other districts and urban locations in 1952. Seven people died and 150 people were injured throughout the agitations, which were short-lived and quickly ran out of steam (Sherman 2015: 111).

The communal narratives associated with Hyderabadi Muslims also inflected the future trajectory of Urdu, which contrary to historical fact, came to be seen as an exclusively 'Muslim' language. Its role as a link language that was understood by most Hyderabadis was denied (Sherman 2015: 150–53). In line with the language debates of the time, multilingual regions of the erstwhile Hyderabad state had been reimagined as discrete, territorial spaces with singular regional languages—Telugu, Marathi, and Kannada—whose people did not understand Urdu (ibid.: 148–50, 166). Andhra Pradesh was the first state in India to be created on linguistic grounds in 1953. It consisted of Telangana and the Andhra districts of Madras Province. Hyderabad state formally ceased to exist on 1 November 1956, when the Marathwada districts became a part of Bombay state, which later became Maharashtra, and the Kannada districts were subsumed into Mysore state, which came to be reconfigured as Karnataka. Ironically, despite the linguistic reorganisation, it was English that prevailed, and Osmania University too shifted to it as its medium of instruction.

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