

Female voices in 19th century Urdu prose and Reform movements

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Abstract

In 20th century British India, the debate over the role and status of Muslim women was the attention of the reformers. In the movement for women's emancipation, the early efforts of reforms were directed towards defining the domestic role of women and dire need was felt to educate them. In a sense, this marks what could be called the beginning of a distinct feminist perspective. In 20th century Urdu literature and journalism male Urdu prose authors represented women problems in their writings due to lack of education and set agenda to provide religious and traditional education to them. The domestic and religious character sketches represented in Urdu writings by male authors were not acceptable to women due to their traditional agenda, they join Urdu Literature to write and represent female voices in a professional way to speak for them.

Key words

20th century Urdu literature, female voices, Prose authors, women education, reform movements,

Introduction

Feminism in Urdu literature effectively took root at the beginning of the 20th century. The regular writings began with the entrance of women writers into the field of literature, when they began producing works that presented the thoughts of women with a typically women oriented approach. They set the circumstances for reform movements for women to get higher education even in abroad through their writings. Although Deputy Nazir Ahmed, Altaf Hussain Hali, Mirza Hadi Ruswa and abDUL Halim sharer had written about women issues, the need was felt for women authors to inscribe their experiences and travails of their gender.

The reasons for the female voices to speak for themselves were the following:

- 1 The writings of the illustrious authors represented only the domestic and religious women who know how to cook, sew clothes, clean the homes, deal with the household maids, run the affairs of the kitchen and home, etc. In this regard the character of *Asghari*¹ by Deputy Nazir Ahmed can be put forward as an example.
- 2 They ascribed a lot of importance to the male characters. They showed them as having full authority over the women of their household and criticized those who were not authoritative towards their wives.
- 3 In their literary works characterization was not balanced and too categorically exemplified as good or bad. If someone was to be shown as having good qualities then he was a paragon of virtue and there were no defects in his personality; if he was shown to have bad qualities, then he would be the symbol of evil. This extremist representation was not acceptable to the women of that age therefore; they began to confront it in their writings.

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The example of the characters like *Asghari* and *Akbari*ⁱⁱ, by which Deputy Nazir Ahmed presented the extreme of good and bad respectively are opposite to each other.

- 4 Women though were presented in these writings as the protector of society and culture epitomized in the system of Indian families. But they were not depicted as human beings.

Female voices in Women Urdu journals

Women authors' writing and publishing novels and short stories marked a definitive change in Indian society. Their participation was made possible only due to the publication of various journals and magazines which proved to be a stepping stone for them to assume their new roles as fiction writers. Male authors also encouraged them and with their cooperation these women were able to express their literary bent.

The first journal of Muslim women was *Tehzeeb e Niswan* (Culture among Women) published from Lahore, Muhamadi Begum (1898) being its editor.ⁱⁱⁱ Her husband's name was Moulvi Mumtaz Aliwas and he was her guide. She introduced different segments in *Tehzeeb e Niswan* for training women and also for children. With her effort the *Dar ulIshat Tehzeeb Niswan* was established, from where she published various books for the training of women. She also started one journal for children *Phool* whose editor was Nazar Sajad. She covered all aspects of a woman's life in her writings. Her aim was to train the women domestically so that they could run the affairs of home effectively. She wrote *Rafiq e Aroos*, and *Adab e Mulakat* for new brides and a cooking manual by the name of *Namet Khana*. The story she wrote was titled *Hayat e Ashraf*, the protagonist was a lady teacher and by this character she tried to bring into focus the image of the perfect women. Syed Ahmed Dehlvi started his women journal from Lucknow in 1880 named *Rafeeq Niswa*.

Another magazine for the training of women was started by Sir Abdullah by the name of *Khatoon* (1904). On the cover page this statement was written, "The object of this magazine is to train and educate women and create a practical sense in educated women."^{iv} Through this journal women got an opportunity to express their feelings in their writings and a number of women authors emerged on the literary scene due to this journal.

The theme of *Khatoon* was the contrast between the modernist and traditional approaches regarding women's education and its impact on Muslim society. These themes reflected the progressive attitude of its contributors, who saw that the future of Muslim society would be brighter by improvement in the domestic skills of women, also through the training of their minds, by them being given equal opportunities and the development of greater self awareness generally among Muslims.

In 1909, a women journal was brought out from Bhopal and the aim was to express the feelings of veiled women and their attitudes for the benefit of other women. The editor of *Paisa Akhbar*, Munshi Mehboob Alam also started a journal for women by the name of *Shareef Bibi*.^v Fatima Begum was its editor. In this journal a number of sections were included for the training and education of women. Instructions on how to take care of children, cook food and tips for better dressing etc. formed the essential parts of *Shareef Bibi*.

The name of Rasheed ul Kheri is also very prominent for the publication of women journals; he started *Ismat* from Delhi in 1908. The statement on the cover page was, “This is the knowledgeable treasure of dignified ideas, educational and literary works in the Urdu language, which is published monthly.” He also published a weekly magazine *Saheli* and *Binat* in 1915.^{vi}

Besides these well known magazines there were several local magazines brought out by prominent women, such Beghum Ikhtesham Qamar ul Nisa in 1912. Beghum Nafees Dulhan was the secretary of Muslim Ladies Conference and also the author of the book *Naqash e Wafa*.
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Representation of women by female authors

These journals provided the opportunity to women to express their feelings, thoughts and aspiration to other women of British India. Stemming from the initiative set by Rashida ul Nisa, a number of women came into the field, but their resources were very limited, because women could not move outside their homes and their voices remained within these confines. No one knew their names. It meant there was veil not only on their names and on their voice as well. Therefore, in such circumstances women published their writings in the name of their male relatives. Akbari Beghum was an eminent example in this regard who published her first writing *Guldasta e Muhabat* in the name of Abas Murtaza in 1903 by the public press. Another famous piece of writing was *Goder ka Lal*, which was published in 1907 under the name of ‘mother of Afzal Ali’.^{viii} She criticized the veil, restriction of four walls of home and domestic life. She emphasized the socialization of women so that they can realize their identity and position in society.

Rashida ul Nisa

She was the first woman novelist, whose novel was published in 1894, under the pseudonym of her son’s name Muhammad Suleman. This shows that the women of the 19th century could not publish their works under their own names; therefore they perforce had to write under pseudonyms of their male relatives. She was born in Delhi on August 5 1905 into a Kashmiri family. Her father Sheikh Abdullah was also a very active feminist and started the first women journal named *Khatoon*. She got employment in the medical service. She wrote her first story in English *Salma* at the age of 18 years. This story was a representation of Muslim culture and traditions of the time.^{ix}

She also wrote *Islah un Nisa* to reflect the importance of women education , she criticized the practice of dowry, believing and practices of superstitions by uneducated women. She wrote in the preface, “The core problem in married life is education. In poor families both husbands and wives were uneducated, but in elite families husbands are educated and wives are uneducated. Therefore understanding and harmony could not be developed and the result was bound to be separation.”

In Urdu Literature the ‘Romantic Movement’^x writers gained impetus by the publication of the *Angaray* December, 1932. This book consisted of ten short stories and Sajad Haider Yeldram was the editor. With the publication of this there was a storm of anger and criticism among the people. In this group of ten there was only one female who represented women. This was the new and unique entry in the history of Urdu literature. Rashida ul Nisa participated as a

social reformer in this movement. She depicted middleclass women and their problems in her writings. She identified the reasons which caused women to lead depressed and helpless life. She also unveiled the hidden side of the character of middleclass women. The deprivation among women was due to the social restrictions and traditions which she criticized very strongly. The sexual relations and the helplessness of women is the main topic of her writings. *Dewar Kay Peechay* is the story of a married woman who is exploited physically and sexually by her husband. In the story of *Soda* she discussed the problems of prostitutes. Social problems and their impact on women were highlighted in *Chanda ki Maan*. She also explained the problem of *purdah* in the story of *Baezaban*. Being a woman she could understand the problems of women, therefore without any hesitation and shyness she wrote these topics very beautifully. She was also a doctor and a member of the progressive movement. Her vision was very clear and shows deep knowledge and this is expressed in her writings.

Her point of view is that economic independence creates independence in women. In this way she favoured working or professional ladies, and in reality she too was a working woman, being a doctor. In the story of *Chanda Ki Maan* she explained the medical fact that if a woman was not able to conceive, the reason was not a problem with the woman, but with the man or husband. She also pinpointed that the real enemy of a woman is only a woman. The domestic problems that emerged in a family are also mainly due to tussles amongst the women of the family. Ignorance and *jadoo toona* is also another major reason that causes women to suffer.

Being a doctor she also mentioned female health problems and diseases. *Asif Jehan Ki Bahoo*^{xi} is the story of a married woman who gives birth to four children continuously in four years. Consequently she becomes weak and ill. The whole women of the family gathered in the home and she received treatment from a *daya* (traditional healing women). When the treatment proved ineffective someone said, "Please call a doctor." At once the *daya* replies, "It is only tomfoolery of that lady. When there were no *maim sahibs*, then how was the birth of a child possible?" Pregnancy problems and the proper treatment were also the topics of Rasheed Jehan. According to her proper treatment was not possible by these ignorant *dayas* and this was the cause of the death of many women.

Being a member of the progressive movement she illustrated what a rational life of a woman was and therefore, it was possible to understand the problems of women and solutions to remove them in the real life.

Hajab Imtiaz Ali

She wrote a number of novels by which she promoted Romanticism as well as a rational approach of society by character sketches. The basic theme of novels reflected that modernism and the British educational system created confidence in women and made them active member of society. Her thinking is shown in the character of *Dadi Zubaida*. On the other hand the problems of young maidens and the difficulties of their lives are reflected in the characters of *Zonash*. *Sabohi* and *Rohi* as representative of the ultramodern elite class women and through these characters the writer expressed her feelings that education and modernity were essential for women.^{xii}

Muhamadi Begum

Muhamadi Begum was also a well known writer of the 20th century. She wrote a variety of pieces for women: *Tehzeeb Niswan*, *Shareef Baity*, *Ajkal*, and *Shareef Biwi*. She continued and followed the agenda of Deputy Nazir Ahmed to guide women as domestic and traditional member of family. She emphasizes the concept of a happy life with the good training of women.^{xiii}

Razia Zaheer

She was another significant entry in Urdu literature that highlighted the problems of middleclass women. She desired to see women free and enjoying equal rights with men. In *Neech she* relates the story of a woman who left her husband due to his dominated attitude and decided to live alone. After separation of husband she started a job and led independent life without any male partner. She also highlighted the theme of marriage out of caste and creed, so women did not sit at their parent's home due to unmatched partners.

Nazar Sajad Hyder

Nazar Sajad Hyder belonged to a prominent family of UP. She also participated in the cause of liberty for women through her writings. She wrote about child marriage, unmatchable couples and ignorance among families. She emphasized education for women so that she could gain equal status with men in society. She presented her feelings in *Akhtari Begum*. Through her writings she tried to persuade women to maintain a balanced conduct in their daily lives. For instance, her successive novels, *Najma*, *Malkan ki Baiti* (The owner's Daughter) and *Hasina* published in *Ismat* from time to time, proved a big lesson for those women who had been drawn to Western culture without fully considering its advantages and disadvantages. Her daughter *Qurat ul Ain Hyder* also followers of her thought and continued her agenda to pinpoint the merit and demerits of modernity.

Shaista Ikram Ullah

She was one of the foremost writers to contribute in Urdu journal *Ismat*. She was a highly qualified lady. Her writing reflected the feeling of an ordinary Indian Muslim woman who wanted to get rid of the social restrictions without losing her socio-religious identity. Her main works were *Khaandan* (Family), published on 1933 in *Ismat*, *Ala Talim Ka ek Rukh* (One Aspect of Higher Education), *Jahil aur Talim Yafta Bibian* (Illiterate and Educated Women), *Rail ka Safar* (Journey by Rail).^{xiv}

Reform movements by educated Muslim women

These educated women played active roles for the rebuilding of Indian society. This trend gained momentum and slowly had a far-reaching impact on their social and economic lives. Now women were able to play their role as both working and household ladies. They could work shoulder to shoulder with men in every walk of life. They also registered their personal and the professional experiences through the pen, so that they could inspire other women and the example of various women authors proved this, such as in 1902, Attia Faizy wrote her travelogue^{xv} in which she mentioned her experiences of her educational life and described the cultural profile of Britain. Besides all those mentioned above, many female students joined the educational field and their research and theses prove their ability.

Sultan Jehan Begum was also a prominent name in this regard. She was the Rani of Bhopal and provided financial aid for the establishment of women *Madrassas*. She started three *madrassas* named Victoria, Sultania, and Bilquesiass.^{xvi}

Muslim women participated both in *Purdah Clubs* as well as organizations, where they exchanged their ideas with each other and formulated their reformist work. Hyderabad, Deccan, became the hub of such activities. Besides this In 1901 *Anjuman Khawateen* was formulated, in which women of respectable families participated and the *Deccan Store* (*Zennana* Departmental Store) was established by women for shopping purposes in 1901. Gradually a large number of organizations were established in different parts of India, usually run by the women of prominent local families. Families like Tayyabjees in Bombay, Suhrawardys in Bengal and Shafis in the Punjab were actively taking part in the social transformation undertaken by the colonial state. For instance, the Begum Muhammad Shafi in Lahore founded the *Anjuman i Khatunan i Islam* in 1907 for the development of sisterhood among Muslim women. Through its monthly social meetings Muslim women had a chance to define their religious and social ideas and root out their superstitions. Any women could become a member and usually the membership fee was spent to fulfil the needs of poor women.^{xvii}

That modern education is necessary for the Muslim women was also the manifesto of All India Muslim Ladies' Conference, which was founded by the Begum of Bhopal in 1914, (Then the women of all creeds and castes joined together in the National Council of Women in India, and the All India Women's Conference), on the occasion of the inauguration ceremony of a new residence hall for Aligarh's Girls' School. The All India Muslim Ladies Conference further paved the way for the foundation of the Indian Women 'Association (1917). In 1913 the *Purdahnasheen Madras*, was founded for the promoting female education.^{xviii}

Women started to get educated and began engaging themselves in a variety of writing and research papers by the start of 20th century. Some women even opted for higher studies. Casting a cursory look at the period from 1917 to 1947, one can see the changing attitude of the Muslims towards female education. During the period 1917-22 there were only thirty Muslim female students who had received a college or university level education. By 1927 the number had increased exponentially to 537. Among them most of the students belonged to rather backward provinces like the United Provinces and the Punjab. In later years, the situation improved further in these provinces. In the Punjab, by 1946, 651 Muslim female students were getting higher education, among them 405 were in intermediate, 231 were in degree and 15 were in postgraduate classes. One, Miss Khadija Ferozeuddin, the Principal of Women's College Amritsar, was even awarded a doctorate degree by the University of the Punjab in 1940.^{xix}

By 1946 several Muslim women had entered the medical profession. Prominent among them were Dr. Noshaba Malkar, Dr. Afzal-un-Nisa, Dr. Burhan-un-Nisa, Dr. Humaira Saeed, Dr. Karima Begum, Drom Amina Ghori and Dr. Abida Lateef. Among the Indian states, Hyderabad was particularly advanced, and here there were many Muslim female students. College education too, was becoming popular among them.^{xx}

Facilities for overseas education to Muslim women

The most important and revolutionary impact on women education was that women were facilitated for the higher degree abroad. Now the women came out not only from the four walls

of homes but began to travel abroad for education. In the 20th century the British started a scheme of special scholarships for women's higher education particularly in Great Britain. They also provided hostel facilities for Indian female students. In 1920 at Henbury in North London they opened a hostel specifically for Indian students.^{xxi}

As it was the practice among other communities, Muslim female students too began going abroad for higher studies. The earliest example was the Faizy sisters, Attiya, Zuhra and Nazli. Many Muslim female students succeeded in getting government scholarships in later years. For instance, in 1923, Miss S Khan and Miss GM Ali received such scholarships. In 1924-25 Session Miss MA Shah Gillani was awarded a degree in Veterinary Science from the Royal Veterinary College, London.^{xxii}

The number of the female Muslim students increased every year. The experiences gained by these female students became an important source of information for ordinary Indian women curious to know about foreign culture and society. Sometimes their letters and daily dairies were published in the form of books and articles. For instance, the experiences of Attiya Faizi were published in 1932 in the form of a book entitled *Zamana e Tehsil* (The Period of Education). Another example was Muhammadi Begum, who was sent for higher studies to Oxford from the state of Hyderabad. She regularly wrote letters to her mother, which occasionally got published in *Ismat*. In one of her letters she expressed her appreciation of the hard work done by English women by citing the example of her landlord's daughter-in-law, who was running the household as well as dairy and poultry farms in the countryside thirteen miles away from Oxford. As compared to Indian women, she noted, English women were more industrious. In the end she advised her Indians sisters to follow this particular example of English womanhood.^{xxiii}

Conclusion

In the period of struggle for independence between the years 1900 – 1920, women participated in the political arena and the most significant movement they joined was the *Khilafat Movement*.^{xxiv} That movement was considered the turning point in the politics of Muslims, in which females also came to be seen with men. Before this, the woman's role was seen purely as being a housewife, with hardly any public role to play at all. Now they increasingly began to be seen as a major source of encouragement and support to the struggle in which Muslim men were deeply involved. The initiator was Bi Amman, the mother of Shoukat Ali and Muhammad Ali. Her real name was Abadi Begum. She appeared on the platform of the *Anjuman-e-Kddam-e-Kabba* in 1913.^{xxv}

Later a large number of women participated in various field. It was the consequence of the writings of male and female authors who encouraged the women to contribute their role in the freedom struggle.

ⁱ- The main character of the novel *Mirat ul Aroos*. Written in 1870, the character was presented as a role model of a housewife.

ⁱⁱ- The second important character of *Mirat ul Aroos*, by whose character the bad aspects of illiteracy and being ill-mannered were portrait, which cause of great disturbances in family life.

- iii- S.Das, *Purdah: The Status of Indian Woman*, (New Delhi:ESS publication,1929), p. 20
- iv- Azra, p. 213 quoted by *Mushtaq Ahmed Zahidi*, *Risalala pugdundi, yaldram no. p. 60*)
- v- Ibid. , P. 213
- vi- Dr. Ismat, p.p. 115- 120
- vii- Azra, p. 24
- viii- Hamad Beig Mirza, *Niswani Awazain*, Sarang publication Lahore: 1996. P.11
- ix- Azra ,p. 23
- x- Literature concerned with love or a love affairs, in which authors expressed highly imaginative feelings and emotions in their writings. In Urdu literature the era 1924- 36 and was specified as the Romantic Movement.
- xi- Dr. M. Alam, *Urdu Afsanay main Romanavi Rujhanat*, (Lahore: *Shirkat Printing Press*, 2002)
- xii- M. Hasan, p. 16
- xiii- Dr. Ismat, p. 213
- xiv- Azra Asghar Ali, p.272
- xv- She went to London in 1902, and wrote the travelogue *Sair-e-Europe*, in which she described her experiences of her visit to London.
- xvi- Dr. Ismat Jameel, *Urdu Afsana aur Aurat*, (*Shirkat Printing Press*, Lahore, 2001), p.
- xvii- Dr. Seimein,
- xviii- Ibid
- xix- Dr. Seimien,
- xx- Dr. Semein Samar, p. 57
- xxi- Azra Asghar Ali, p. 72
- xxii- Maitrayee Chudhari, *Feminism in India*, (Dehli: Women Limited, 2004) p. 19
- xxiii- Quoted by Azra and Dr. Semien (*Ismat* vol. 55, September 1935, pp. 255-56)
- xxiv- This movement was launched to protect to the Caliphate of the Ottomans in Turkey (1919-1924)
- xxv- Ali brothers, Molana Abul Bari, organized the *Khilafat* Committee, then many other prominent Muslim authors also participated in the movement