



**Narratives of Resistance: A Study of Select Indian Muslim Women  
Writers of the Twentieth Century**

**ABSTRACT  
of the Ph.D. Thesis**

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## **Narratives of Resistance: A Study of Select Indian Muslim Women Writers of the Twentieth Century**

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The entry of women (especially Muslim women) into the public domain or to put it the other way, bringing Muslim women out of invisibility was undertaken at the turn of the twentieth century in India by various socio-political and religious reformers. While it was believed that ignorance and illiteracy kept these women out of the public sphere, patriarchal control was held responsible for not allowing women folk to step out of 'enforced' seclusion. What is surprising in all these discourses regarding Muslim women is the conspicuous absence of their voices. They were secluded from the public space by the customs of purdah, which further isolated them from social and cultural transformation than were male counterparts. This made Muslim women substantially invisible to historical and social analysis as compared to other Indian women.

My thesis aims to study the long and short fiction by Muslim women writers of the twentieth century to explore Muslim women's resistance to patriarchal structures of the state and the community. By doing so, it aims to deconstruct the dominant perception of Muslim women as frail, submissive, backward or victimised creatures. A rigorous analysis of works by Muslim women writers alongside the intra and inter communal discourses concerning them helps us displace and delegitimise stereotypical identity of Muslim women produced in dominant

discourses as well as popular culture. It reveals how Muslim women were capable of producing narratives which became synonymous with defiance.

The works and writers have been carefully selected to exhibit diverse forces/voices of Muslim women concerning women-centric issues such as marriage, domestic space, social, religious and political reforms, education, veiling, sexual exploitation and nationalism. Muslim women's mediations on these subjects on the one hand exhibit their negotiations with Muslim patriarchy within the Muslim society. On the other hand, they also open our eyes to the exclusions they have been subjected to in the dominant discourses concerning women both during the anti-colonial nationalist struggle as well as in post-independence India.

The writers chosen for scrutiny include Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Iqbalunnisa Hussain, Rashid Jahan, Ismat Chughtai, Qurratulain Hyder, Attia Hosain, Zeenuth Futehally, Siddiqa Begum Sevharvi, Wajida Tabassum and Anees Jung.

These writers made foray into the male dominant literary world to make interventions in the reform discourses by voicing their opinions. Their women characters are strong-willed, defiant and dissenting, putting up resistance against the clichéd normative perceptions. While dealing with these writers, one is conscious of the weakening of Muslim women's voices in the literary sphere in post-independence India, the reasons for which could be attributed to the 1947 Partition and the subsequent ever-declining condition of Muslims in general on education and employment index as evidenced by the Sachar Committee Report (2006). The present thesis, as it explores the above

mentioned writers to study how they paved the way for women's emancipation through their respective works, also acknowledges the linguistic, social and cultural diversity of these writers, as well as the fact that Muslim women as a category do not constitute a monolithic group.

The thesis comprises an "Introduction," four chapters and a conclusion. The "Introduction" to the thesis attempts to place the research enquiry in perspective. Accordingly, it traces theories of resistance as propounded by theorists such as Albert Camus, Michel de Certeau and traces how rebellion by a common man can trigger resurgence in his position. It also analyses the category of 'Muslim woman,' and highlights that it is not a homogenous category. Besides, the relevance of social and religious reform movements undertaken for the reformation of Muslim women during the first part of the twentieth century will also be traced. These reform movements were undertaken to deal with the issues of veiling, seclusion, marriage etc. in the Muslim community by reformers such as Mumtaz Ali, Altaf Hussain Hali, Maulvi Chiragh Ali, Zakauallah etc. Women reformers such Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Waheeda Begum, Muhammadi Begum, the Begums of Bhopal, took positive steps towards the renewal of Muslim women's position in the Indian society.

Muslim women's position in Indian society cannot be understood unless their relation with women's movements in post-independence is studied. Right from feminist movements to movements in favour of a Uniform Civil Code, women's movements in post-independence India gained momentum post 1970s. While women's movements were an indication of resistance and refutation undertaken by Indian women, Muslim women's problems and concerns were brought to focus only after the Shah Bano case came to light. Highlighting the Shah Bano case, it is argued

how state interference in community governed decisions was not acceptable to the community and this triggered unrest between the state-governed legislative bodies and the community (in this case the Muslim community). The community's decision proved to be more powerful as against the government in Shah Bano case and it highlights how this case triggered various feminist movements in India, urging the state and community to reconsider the position of Muslim women in Indian society. Islamic feminist movements in India, based on feminist movements started in the Middle East, worked on the premise that the Quran needs to be understood and re-interpreted from women's point of view, rather than just being governed by patriarchal understandings of Islam. The "Introduction" also argues how post-Partition, Muslim women's position suffered a huge set back and they lagged behind their non-Muslim counterparts socially, economically as well as educationally. A broad overview of the prominent Muslim women writers of the twentieth century is also provided here.

The first chapter looks into the question of education as one of the prerequisites for bringing Muslim women out of forced seclusion. This chapter looks into the writings of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Attia Hosain, Ismat Chughtai and Siddiqia Begum Sevharvi. While social reform for Muslim women was undertaken to make them aware of their rights, educational reform was meant to establish Muslim women as independent beings who could improve the future of coming generations with the help of literacy and learning that they acquired. The chapter points to the circumstances that initiated the need for educational reform of Muslim women and how with the spirit of nationalism on the rise, a need for equal partners was felt by the men. The reform towards Muslim women's education was jointly undertaken by male reformers as well as by the British. Women themselves were not far behind when it

came to the regeneration of their position in society. While a number of British reformers hinted at the absence of educated Muslim women, they urged the men of the community to work towards the uplift of the women of their community. A number of government reports highlighting the deplorable conditions of Muslim women in the educational area have been mentioned in this section

The chapter further looks at the establishment of various schools and colleges in support of Muslim women's education that were undertaken during the first half of the twentieth century. These establishments, aware of the constraints of purdah among Muslim women, arranged for rooms as well as conveyance adhering to the customs of purdah so as to ensure safety of Muslim women who came to study. The chapter also elaborates upon the kind of material that was termed appropriate/inappropriate for the Muslim women to read. While the works of many reformers were denounced and proscribed for the Muslim women, fearing that such kind of reading material would lead them astray; a few writers and their works were considered suitable for them to read. This was undertaken to prevent Muslim women from getting morally corrupt and to prevent the Muslim community from being shamed.

The prominent Muslim figures like the Begums of Bhopal are studied as pioneering examples of modern, educated, liberal and independent Muslim women who set examples for innumerable Muslim women keen on acquiring education. The Begums, apart from being just rulers, were social reformers as well and they established various schools, colleges and purdah clubs to enable Muslim women to gain access to education. The Begums became pioneering examples of being powerful figures that inspired millions of women to be educated and independent.

The chapter also looks into the question of education of Muslim women in the twentieth century with respect to select writers chosen for study. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain through her works “Sultana’s Dream” and *Padmarag*, points to the change that women’s roles demanded with the turn of the twentieth century. She presents these works as acts of resistance against the male dominated society where women were at the lowest ebb of the ladder. Through her writings, Hossain presents a daring and courageous picture of Muslim women struggling to attain education and economic independence amidst the social bounds of purdah. Her non-fictional writings also posit and exhibit the spirit of rebellion as her way of expressing her disapproval of the patriarchal society that was biased against women.

Attia Hosain, herself educated and liberal-minded, penned her novel *Sunlight on a Broken Column* on similar lines. She constructs the entire novel around the protagonist Laila and her quest for freedom- both personal and national. She fights not just against imperial forces but also against patriarchal forces that try to stop her from attaining education. Laila is presented as a rebel with a cause. She voices her growing concern for the dismal position of Muslim women in the Indian society and urges the men to reconsider and adopt various measures to bring about positive changes in the lives of women, especially through education.

Ismat Chughtai’s protagonist Shaman in *The Crooked Line* is another bold example of what Muslim women aspired to achieve through their writings- their writings were not an outright rejection of everything patriarchal. They aspired to bring Muslim women to the centre of the public sphere where they could have access to education and express a change in their position in society. Shaman is sketched

around the life of Chughtai herself in her struggles to attain education by fighting against the family and becoming independent.

Siddiq Begum Sevharvi, through her story “The Stars are Trembling,” brings to light the biases in society against daughter-in-laws. The daughter and the daughter-in-law are treated differently in a family and where the daughter pursues higher education while the daughter-in-laws interest in attaining education is shrugged off as unimportant. The story closes on the hope that in the near future women would not be differentiated among themselves for education and each one would have access to knowledge and learning.

The last section of the chapter explores the reasons for the dearth of literary writings during the post-independence period and argues that that may be attributed to the general backwardness and poverty of Muslims in post-independence India. It is also linked to the lack of importance given to Muslim women’s education by their own community as well as by society at large.

The second chapter is about the role of Muslim women in the public sphere through two modes— journals by and for Muslim women and through their participation in the nationalist struggle. In the first section I trace the journey of journals catering to Muslim women during the beginning of the twentieth century and how these journals became markers for the emergence of Muslim women on the public sphere. The print medium became an important as well as popular medium of instruction for Muslim women and their contribution as well as readership of these journals points to their keen interest towards their socio-cultural advancement. In this section I point out the reasons for the rise of these journals where the articles in these journals became leading examples for Muslim women to learn from.

The next section highlights how Muslim women started voicing their resistance and rebellion through these journals by contributing as well as becoming readers of these journals. I study a select number of journals that were immensely popular during this time such as *Tahzib un-Niswan*, *Ismat*, *Khatun*, *Saheli*, *Sharif Bibi* and how these journals became exemplary mediums of change and resistance for the Muslim women to emerge on the public space. In this section I also trace some of the important Bengali journals that were popular during the first part of the twentieth century and reflected the plight of Muslim women in the Bengal area. I also highlight how some of the most prominent Muslim women writers were contributing to these journals such as Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Ismat Chughtai, Qurratulain Hyder, Saleha Abid Hussain etc.

The next section highlights the role of Muslim women in the nationalist struggle. I bring to light important Muslim women freedom fighters whose rebellion and resistance against the imperial forces earned them the name of being daring and courageous. Though being in purdah and not being highly educated, these Muslim women managed to contribute in their own small ways towards the freedom of the nation from the shackles of imperial domination.

The next section highlights Muslim women writers' interventions to the cause of nationalist struggle through their writings. Attia Hosain through her novel *Sunlight on a Broken Column* discusses various measures adopted by Muslim women to lend a helping hand in the freedom struggle. Her women characters can be seen grappling with two kinds of struggles—personal as well as the collective national struggle. The women in the novel are not mute observers, they are equal participants in the nationalist struggle and their contribution is invaluable for the nationalist politics.

Ismat Chughtai's "Roots" is a heart-rending story of a Hindu and a Muslim family, who once inseparable, crumble after the struggle for nation's freedom begins. The two families turn against one another in the hour of need but the elders of the family decide to stick to their roots— roots of brotherhood and friendship. The story is about the horrors of Partition and its subsequent depiction of disintegration of families. The main protagonist Amma ji is presented as a rebel— a woman who refuses to leave her home amidst violence as she cannot think of parting with the house in which she spend her entire life.

Qurratulain Hyder, through *My Temples, too*, depicts the lives of a high-class Muslim family. Rakshanda and Peechu, along with a group of college friends posit resistance against the British by contributing articles to a magazine and by becoming actively involved in the satyagraha movement. The entire group of friends disintegrates after Partition and Rakshanda is left to muse about the loss she has suffered along with the millions of Hindus and Muslims. The novel is a poignant description of the helpless of people during the freedom struggle. Thus, Muslim women writers through the depiction of Partition and its struggle, focus on the role of Muslim women and their angst against the oppression at the hands of the British. Through their works, they fight the dominant power structure and resist as well as rebel against the same.

The next section is about post-independence public sphere and Muslim women. I look into some of the popular journals in circulation after 1950s such as *Huda*, *Huma*, *Mashriqi Anchal* etc. and their gradual decline post 1990s, after the arrival of satellite television and internet. I also highlight some prominent Muslim women personalities in journalism, films, television and academics, bringing to light

how these Muslim women, through their respective vocations, were instrumental in bringing positive changes in the position of Muslim women in the latter part of the twentieth century. The chapter highlights how, Muslim women through various means have successfully emerged on the public sphere to react and reject unjust subjugation at the hands of patriarchy.

The third chapter focuses on veiling and (un)veiling as acts of feminist subversion in select writings by Muslim women writers. I begin the chapter by discussing the position of veil in Islam, as perceived by the West and the position of Islamic feminists regarding the same. Tracing the etymology of the word 'veil' I point to the fact that veil is not inherently an Islamic construct. I also posit how the veil has been perceived as a symbol of oppression and backwardness by the West and how a woman wearing a veil is associated with being 'exotic,' 'mysterious' and hence the interest in her.

The next section focuses on the colonial politics on veiling in India and how purdah became one of the most debatable topics in the colonial times in India and was directly blamed for Muslim women's backwardness. This section points how various reform movements were undertaken to awaken people from the slumber of ignorance towards the practice of purdah which was by default regarded as a reason of backwardness of Muslim women.

The next section highlights the interventions of select Muslim women writers towards the issue of veiling in the twentieth century. Beginning with Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's "Sultana's Dream" and *Padmarag*, I bring to light the attempts of Hossain who fought against the concept of purdah all her life—whether through her writings or through her educational establishments. Her writings are endearing works

that talk about Muslim women's lives in the *zenana* and how spatial seclusion was detrimental to the health as well as social development of Muslim women.

*Purdah and Polygamy* by Iqbalunnisa Hussain is a fitting example of a woman's angst against the customs of purdah and polygamy. While polygamy was regarded as a befitting excuse for the Muslim men to marry more than once, for women it was like a nightmare, having to share their husband with another woman. The practice of purdah further isolated Muslim women from the outside world and this is what Hussain highlights through the novel. Bringing out a sharp contrast between the four wives of Kabeer, Hussain very diligently covers the issue of purdah and expresses her rebellion against the same through her character Maghbool.

Ismat Chughtai's "The Veil" is a befitting example of the agonies of purdah life for Muslim women and how the veil was imposed upon Muslim women on the pretext of protecting them. The usage of the two veils— one depicting marriage and the other widowhood, is symbolic of the burden of veil that a woman has to carry all her life. However, Gorbi's refusal to lift her veil for her husband is symptomatic of her resistance against him and the patriarchal society that tried to curb women on the pretext of safeguarding them

The last section looks into the contemporary position on veil with respect to the writings of Anees Jung, namely *Unveiling India* and *Beyond the Courtyard*. The two works, first-hand accounts of Indian women's personal experiences of purdah life, are a realistic representation of Indian women, especially Muslim women who are not considered religious and pious if they do not practise purdah. Jung through various accounts of women from all over the country highlights the imposing and domineering effects of purdah on women and therefore urges for its removal.

This chapter, through the trope of purdah, exposes the loopholes prevalent in the Indian society, that stops the women from progressing but the writings of select women are instrumental in highlighting the rebellion of Muslim women against the constructs of purdah

The next fourth chapter is about Muslim women, marriage and procreation and how there are debates and discussions relating to female embodiment. This chapter looks into the crucial issue of female sexuality in Muslim community and how Muslim women are regarded as guardians of faith, whose sexual purity is utmost important. The first section traces the writings of Iqbalunnisa Hussain and Zeenuth Futehally. Both *Purdah and Polygamy* and *Zohra* look into themes of marriage and procreation— two essential duties ascribed to women as a part of their natural process of growing up. While Hussain critiques the concept of polygamy or multiple marriages, she highlights the deplorable conditions in which Muslim women are forced to live in during and immediately after pregnancy. *Zohra* is a fitting account of an educated woman caught between her husband and her love for her brother-in-law. The novel explores the theme of marriage, the problem of marital discords, and also discusses how a Muslim woman, even if trapped in a loveless marriage, cannot dare to think of separation from her husband lest the society ostracise her.

Rashid Jahan's play "In the Women's Quarters," and short stories, "The Ostler's Mother," "Asif Jehan's Daughter-in-Law" and the "Reticent Maiden" bring to light the depressing conditions under which Muslim women were living during the twentieth century. Rashid Jahan gives a vivid account of the deplorable medical facilities available for women during and after child-birth. She focuses on the need for hygienic medical practices during child-birth and also points to the importance of

sanitation among women. Her women characters highlight how they have to make a space for themselves in the male dominated society. Rashid Jahan's writings itself become an expression and anger against the society that ignores the health conditions of women and just lays stress on men and their sexual needs owing to which they marry multiple times.

Ismat Chughtai, known for her bold treatment of the theme of female sexuality, has to her credit some of the pioneering stories depicting the intricate theme of sexuality of women such as "Gainda," "Eternal Vine," "Homemaker" and "Tiny's Granny. These stories are replete with sexual imageries depicted Muslim women as mere objects of desire for the men. The women's bodies are used and abused for the sexual needs of men. Chughtai out rightly rejects this domineering aspect of patriarchal society. She turns her women characters as rebels and forces the men to stop considering them as mere sexual dolls. Her treatment of sexuality is a means of her rebellion against the society.

Wajida Tabassum's "Cast-Offs" also explores the theme of women's sexuality. Her protagonist Chamki, turns her sexuality in her favour by using her body as a means of taking revenge for her friend. She surrenders herself to her friend's fiancé, thereby, passing down her cast-offs to her friend who had passed down her old clothes to her all her life

The chapter focuses on the bold use of the issue of sexuality by Muslim women writers for whom marriage, procreation and sexuality were not to be a burden on women. For them, women had an equal right to enjoy sex in marriage. The way their characters rebel, speaks volumes about the bold ventures undertaken by Muslim women writers.

The conclusion brings together the resistant modes of writings undertaken by select Muslim women writers. Resistance by these women can be seen at multiple levels— they resist the patriarchal society, their community as well as state dominated control on them. While covering wide areas such as education, public sphere, nationalism, veiling, marriage, polygamy, procreation and female sexuality, these writers turn these issues in their own favour. Their writings are not just an exposure of the loopholes in the society. Their writings are important even in contemporary times as women centric issues continue to attract negative attention. These women refuse to be dominated by unjust customs and traditions. Unbridled, these women paved the way for a revolutionary thinking among Muslim women who refuse surrender to the nation-state's marginalisation in the name of Personal Law (as is evident in the Shah Bano case). Another point of observation is that these women refuse to be constricted to a stereotypical representation of their lot of being weak, backward or oppressed. They do not act against the teachings of Islam but against the patriarchal teachings of it. Their narratives are symbolic of rebellion against their community and the society at large, not against Islam. They retain their Muslim identity and only react against patriarchy.

## Profile of the Scholar

### Academic Qualifications:

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 Place of Birth : Delhi  
 Nationality : Indian  
 Languages Known : English, Urdu, Hindi

### Academic Qualifications:

Exam/Degree	Year	Board/University	Marks Obtained	Percentage
AISSE	2000	CBSE	330	66 %
AISSCE	2002	CBSE	378	75.6 %
B.A.(H) English	2005	University of Delhi	465	51.6 %
M.A. English	2008	IGNOU	492	61.5 %
M. Phil English	2010	Jamia Millia Islamia	469	67 %

### Professional Qualifications:

1. Taught as a Guest Teacher at Amity University, Noida between January-March, 2011.
2. Taught as Guest Teacher at Kalindi College, University of Delhi, between September, 2011 -April, 2012.
3. Taught as Guest Teacher at Ramanujan College (Evening), University of Delhi, between February- May, 2013.

### **Academic Achievements since 2010**

Participated in various seminars and conferences within and outside Delhi. These conferences have helped in broadening my outlook towards literature and especially my work.

### **Paper Presentations since 2010.**

- a) Paper presented on “Colonial Modernity and Muslim Women: Interventions by Three Muslim Women Writers in English in the Twentieth Century India” at the National seminar titled “Muslim Women and their Contribution in Society,” on the occasion of International Women’s Day, 8- 9 March, 2011 at Department of Sociology, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi.
- b) Paper presented on “Islam, Women and Patriarchy: Reading through Select Indian Muslim Women Writers of Early Twentieth Century” at the “International Conference on Status of Muslim Women in Indian Sub-Continent,” between 6- 8 March, 2013 at Maulana Azad National Urdu University, Hyderabad.
- c) Paper presented on “A World of Refutation and Resistance: An Insight into the Select Writings of Ismat Chughtai,” in the Students’ Seminar at *Miraas*, an inter-university cultural festival, between 26- 28 February, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi.