

# Islamic Feminist Discourse in India: Exploring the Muslim Women Writers' Perspective

Dr Juhi Gupta  
Assistant Professor  
Advanced Centre for Women's Studies  
Aligarh Muslim University,  
Aligarh  
Advt. Anam Wasey  
Research Scholar  
D/O Law,  
Jamia Millia Islamia,  
New Delhi.

## Abstract:

Rise of feminism in India and the subsequent evolution of the women's studies have been highlighting women's issues from different perspectives – sexuality, gender, caste, etc. The long, painful suffering and the struggle for existence were the two key reasons behind the evolution of Indian feminism. Feminist thoughts and beliefs from the western countries have significantly impacted and directed the feminist culture that evolved in India. Women today have realised the importance of education, literacy and self-empowerment to curtail the patriarchal domination and comfort. Many Indian feminists from the past have contributed their efforts towards exploring female subjectivity for establishing their identity, which was once imposed as a part of patriarchal society. Before the evolution of the feminist waves in India, women were never acknowledged as individuals or autonomous beings. They had to face many obstacles, even while stepping out of the house. During such difficult times, women writers stood tall with their bold writings to encourage Indian women in believing and equipping themselves as a major weapon for driving the social change. Islamic feminist movements in India began with the aim of achieving the goals of gender equality under the Muslims Law. A significant development witnessed in the past few years has been seen through the emergence and evolution of Muslim women's activism for promoting Muslim women's rights. The purpose of the paper is to explore the perspective of Muslim women feminist authors on different gender issues.

**Keywords:** *Muslim women, Islamic feminism, authors, women writers, Indian feminism*

The feminist outbreak in India can be significantly divided into three different phases – the first one which broke in the mid-nineteenth century, where the European male columnist spoke against the social practises of Sati. The second phase was witnessed with the inclusion of the women's movement in the Quit India Movement and evolution of the independent women's organizations. The third phase of Indian feminism was noticed in the post-independence era where the women's movement mostly focused on receiving fair treatment at their marital home, in the society, and at the workplace.<sup>i</sup>

Islamic feminist movements in India began with the aim of achieving the goals of gender equality under the Muslims Law. A significant development witnessed in the past few years has been seen through the emergence and evolution of Muslim women's activism for promoting Muslim women's rights. The poor socio-economic status of the Muslim community reflects a lack of socializing opportunity of the female Muslim sect. Islamic feminist writers have been keenly contributing their efforts in strengthening the status of Muslim women through compulsory education, raising economic status, and their autonomy.<sup>ii</sup>

## Indian Authors –

### Ishmat Chughtai –

Scratching off the powers of morality to seek a withdrawal from agony, frustration, and exploitation, Ishmat Chughtai challenged the exploitative patriarchal structures hidden deep under the carpet. Nevertheless, she

was accounted amongst the most prolific Urdu fictional writers of the 20th century. ‘Lifting the Veil’, ‘A Life in Words’, ‘Obsession and Wild Pigeons’ are some of Ishmat Chughtai’s essential contributions.

She stood firm with her writings when women writing skills and their narration about their socio-physical, cultural, and economic status were highly subjugated. In fact, society accounted for her thoughts as something that aimed to transgress the boundaries laid off by respectability and morality. Her iconoclastic Urdu literature highlighted her as an unafraid and non-conformist representative of the Islamic feminism.

Ishmat Chughtai was greatly distressed with the social patterns and hence, picked up the weapon of the rebel. Being greatly influenced by the thought process of the Western writers, the themes of sexuality are quite evidently visible from her writings. Her writings primarily focused on the middle-class sect of the Muslim households and the unspoken verdict of the hypocritical society.

Her writings highlighted the Muslim women’s alienated situation that prevailed in the patriarchal society. She focused on all aspects of Muslim women’s life – right from her unwelcomed entry into the community, to her thwarted aspirations and to her socio-cultural and economic suppression. Her thoughts were both bold and innovative in their suggestiveness. The cheeky tone along with the characteristics of humour, wit, and irony enabled her to attack the forbidden terrains of the Muslim female sexuality. This contributed to an honest and open position of her writings in the Urdu literature.

Believing women’s oppression to be a reflection of her sexual abuse, Ishmat Chughtai’s writings are highly based on the concepts of radical feminism. She believes that female sexuality exerts control over every single aspect related to female struggles for establishing her identity and autonomy. Her Urdu literature collection targets women issues related to marriage, sexuality, illiteracy, women abuse, and ignorance.

Most of her writings focused majorly on the limited accessibility of the growth opportunities available to Muslim women. By attacking the patriarchal believes, she aimed at encouraging women for shedding off their artificial notions so that they can own a respectable position in the society by virtue of being a human.

In one of her stories named Chui-Mui, Ishmat directed her attention on the pressure exerted on women by her immediate family and the society. Infertility, according to her, is the first ill-fate of a woman’s life, where the society blames her biological body for its inability to bear a child. This inability labels her as a massive socio-cultural failure, which at most of the times, is internalized. The narrative ‘Chui-Mui’ highlights similar suffering of Begum who has been a victim of personal and societal condemnation. The character of this narrative was desirous of attaining pregnancy, not just to satisfy her motherhood desires, but because, marriage was the only surviving source for her. In case of her infertility, she has to suffer from the threat of forgoing all the bridal comforts, and there was a constant threat of second marriage hovering all over her. While the other women were horrified when a pregnant woman delivered a baby and breastfed her in public, Begum remained unnerved. Attaining the concepts of both spirituality and creativity, the lactating woman attained the true meaning of self-embodiment. This narration sums up Ishmat as a radical feminist who critically cites the social concept of Muslim women’s oppression.

### **Begum Rokeya –**

The one who first introduced us with the concept of Islamic feminism was Begum Rokeya – a legendary Bengali writer cum activist. During British rule, she stood as an advocate for safeguarding Muslim women’s rights throughout the Indian subcontinent. Her charismatic and re-silent leadership defied all the obstacles put around her by her immediate society. ‘Sultana’s Dream’, and ‘Educational Ideals for the Modern Indian Girl’ are essential contributions of Begum Rokeya.

She believed that the women must continuously try to uplift their rightful and deserving place in the society and aim to equate with their better halves on all fronts. She thought that if mothers were illiterate and possessed low self-esteem, their children may not learn how to be self-reliant, energetic, intellectual, and independent. In her narrative ‘The Female Half’, Begum Rokeya explained the reasons for the economic backwardness of a majority of the Muslim families. According to her, the prime reason for this is that most of the Muslim men prefer to keep their women behind the closed doors of their house and make them care for the family, cook food, etc. This limits Muslim women’s ability to showcase their skills and talent and assist their husbands financially.<sup>iii</sup>

Her writings were majorly focused on raising her voice against the challenges faced by Bengali Muslim women. She sharply criticised the misinterpretation of Islam by the society and the strong patriarchal norms to be the prime reasons for keeping women behind the closed doors of their own house and deprive them of their rights to life, liberty, and equality. She majorly focused on women's oppression and created awareness amongst them to educate and establish themselves as financially independent women. She was of the firm opinion that Muslim females were held back due to the self-ignorance of their rights and responsibilities. Intending to educate women, she even ran a female literary program in the slums of Kolkata, where she taught the slum women how to read, write, maintain personal hygiene, and child care. She tried all that she could to instill a strong desire of renaissance amongst Muslim women for emboldening them about their independence and right to liberty. She stood as the cornerstone for the Islamic feminist movement of Bengal.<sup>iv</sup>

### **Qurratulain Hyder –**

Qurratulain Hyder was a prominent personality with several recognitions under her belt – language novelist, journalist, educationist, and a short story narrator. Her works were majorly focused on targeting the stereotypical representation of South Asian women. The female characters depicted in her writings were strong and bold, however, suppressed by their patriarchal family norms; who if given proper opportunities could represent as better halves on both the personal and professional front. She was firm with her words which attacked the subjugation and stereotypical perceptions of the society that revolved around her. Marking her existence amongst Urdu literature specialists, she raised her prominence as the most elegant first female Urdu novelist. Nevertheless, she rose as an inspiration for many to follow her legacy. 'Aag ka Darya', 'River of Fire', and 'Fireflies in the Mist' are some of her valuable contributions to the world.<sup>v</sup>

Both her witty reviews and cosmopolitan sensibility are quite evident in all her narratives. She was the one to deliberately portray women's destiny and expose their level of sufferings. The best part of the Hyder's feminine characters was that they neither rebelled against the pains caused by men; nor did they crib when they stood at the receiver's end. Yet, the effect that they create on the minds of the readers are immensely reliable. The sensibility towards females and feminist issues are brilliantly portrayed by Qurratulain Hyder across all her feminist writings. All her illustrations present a powerful expression to the social, physical, and emotional concerns of women.<sup>vi</sup>

Her narratives employ a meaningful blend of pastiche, cinematic presentation, a magical realm, and a stream of consciousness modes. She was equally stupendous with her vast and diverse knowledge and deep understanding of human nature.

### **Rashid Jahan –**

Rashid Jahan is amongst those first few Indian women who heard and highlighted the plight of women in India both with courage and forthrightness. With her bold talks on the rights to life, liberty, and security, Rashid Jahan emerged as the most radical and controversial Islamic feminist of the 20th century. She was both a doctor and writer by profession which backed her to remain on the forefront on all issues concerning other women of that era. She is acknowledged as a woman with a great charisma who believed and strived for establishing gender equality in society. 'Angaaray' and 'Dr. Rashid Jahan: Selected Short Stories' are two of her valuable contributions to the world of literature.

Her writings, such as 'Angaare' boldly criticized the oppression and sufferings of the Islamic women. They highlighted the implications of both patriarchy and faith. While other Islamic women writers were involved in suggesting reforms under Muslim domestic and social life, Rashid Jahan brutally attacked the cultural and social set-up by highlighting the issues related to Islamic women body and sexuality.

Amongst all her contributions, 'Dilli ki Sair' was the prime one, where she highlighted the society where the Muslim women were debarred from occupying public places. With her simple, clear and straightforward sense of narration, Rashid Jahan questions the privilege of Muslim men penetrating through the confines of the burqa system.

On a concluding note, it can be said that Islamic feminist movement in India is not yet an organised social movement and has a long way to go. Instead, it is being pursued as an amorphous assortment of Muslim

feminists against the negative impacts of the Muslim Personal Law. Such movements will continue to share goals regarding – spread of the true meaning of women in Islam, securing Muslim women’s rights, and finding ways through which they can help Muslim women to gain practical access of these rights. Several Muslim-led women’s NGOs have come forward for educating and empowering marginalized Muslim women. It is now the time for the Muslim woman to realise her hidden inner strength, step out and empower herself by virtue of being a human and live a life of dignity and honour.

---

<sup>i</sup> <https://www.wattpad.com/259870147-chapter-5-history-of-feminism-in-india>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://southasiajournal.net/understanding-islamic-feminism-in-india/>

<sup>iii</sup> - <https://www.newageislam.com/islamic-personalities/begum-rokeya--tale-of-a-visionary,-bengal%E2%80%99s-earliest-muslim-feminist/d/9642>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/tribute/news/begum-rokeya-trailblazer-womens-rights-1670908>

<sup>v</sup> <https://feminisminindia.com/2017/01/20/remembering-qurratulain-hyder/>

<sup>vi</sup> <http://www.indiatogether.org/qurat-women>

