

LITERARY ACTIVITIES OF MUSLIM WOMEN OF BENGAL, 1905-1947

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ABSTRACT

Bengali Muslim women between 1905 and 1947 were deemed as backward in the realm of literary activities. In this article, I have tried to high light through research that the Bengali Muslim women of early 20th century had actively participated in literary domain. They had herculean task amid the conservative environment. They had to observe purdah (veil) system. Moreover, they were restricted to attend educational institutions. Despite this, they left indelible mark in the growth of Bengali and Urdu literatures.

KEYWORDS: *Bengali Muslim women, Purdah system, Conservative, Female education, Backward, Bengali and Urdu literatures.*

INTRODUCTION

Many claim that the Bengali Muslim women were absent from the world of writing domain of late Colonial Bengal. It indicates their 'unawareness'. According to the historical perspective view, during the emergence of the Bengal Renaissance, Muslim women, unlike their counterparts such as Brahmo or Hindu upper castes were largely unable or perhaps unwilling to participate in the 19th century reforms initiated by the Brahmo or the Hindu bhadralok.

Analysing the Indian historiography, one might come to the conclusion that Bengali Muslim women were extinct from the world of writings. However, at the end of the 19th century and from the beginning of the 20th century, there was a sea-change in the activities of the Bengali Muslim women writers. They were coming out of their cocoon and began to publish their writings and articles in the various distinguished journals of the era. Facing innumerable hurdles, they were giving public expression to their ideas and feelings, though the world of writing media was an uphill task and it was monopolised by men-folk. This bold initiative of Bengali Muslim women was criticised, ridiculed and censured by the conservatives. However, this did not apparently deter them from the creative act of writing and publishing their writings. It was through these writings that these Bengali Muslim women declared their social presence and an identity of their own. In this sense, writing was a major activity of the Muslim Bhadra mahilas both as functional as well as an expressive one. They expressed their presence, social status and their birth rights to be independent and equal to that of men inch by inch. Thus, in broad sense of view, writing was the weapon for them both as functional as well as a means to express themselves.

Mahua Sarkar argues that Muslim women in Colonial Bengal have been more underestimated than their Hindu sisters in nationalist debate and in subsequent historical accounts. An analysis of the existing literary studies indeed suggests that the representation of Bengali Muslim women writers of the past and present, compared to that of their Hindu sisters, has been meagre.

Throughout the 19th century and the early part of the 20th century, the orthodox Maulavis views, represented the general attitude of the conservative Muslim community towards women. They recommended purdah and seclusion for the Bengali Muslim women and denied them institutional education. However, there were a few Bengali Muslim women who dared such attitudes. By defying established social norms, they strove to venture on hitherto forbidden grounds. We have isolated references of such women. These women did not wait for any male protagonist to support them. They themselves were the pioneers. A few celebrated Bengali Muslim women and their literary achievements are discussed hereunder.

Azizunnesa Khatoon was one of the earliest English-educated Bengali Muslim women. Probably, she had the credit of publishing her writings in the periodical called 'Islam Pracharak'. She had composed her poem entitled 'Hamd-Ishwar Prashasti' (Hymn in praise of God) and got it published in 'Islam Procharak' in 1902. It has the honour to be the first poem to be published in a Muslim edited periodical by a Bengali Muslim woman. She contributed her articles mainly in the 'Nabanur', 'Islam Procharak', 'Kaikobad' and so on. She translated many poems from English to Bengali. The 'Hermit' of Oliver Goldsmith was one of them. She was more familiar and comfortable in Urdu than Bengali as it is evident from the preface of her work 'Sanyasi' (1906). She was a great champion for advocating the issues of women's emancipation and their education.

Karimunnesa Khatoon (1855-1926) a born poet and patron of learning, was the elder sister of Rokeya Sekhawat Hossain. Rokeya had immense respect for her sister and she used to call her 'hidden gem' because her works never saw the light of the day. She from her early life, was an avid and voracious reader of Bengali literature. She authored 'Dukshatarangini' (1878-1881) and 'Manasbikash' (1881-1901). She had religious bent of mind and she had enormous love for her deceased husband. That is why she devoted most of her poetry either to God or her husband. She preferred to use 'chaste Bengali' and in her writings the flavour of 'Punthi' influences both in terms of style and content, was felt. She was born and brought up under strict vigilance and purdah. She began to study at her in-law's house. It brought a great transformation in her thinking. She was a great linguist and had command over Bengali, English, Persian and Arabic.

Aziz-un-Nisha (1864-1940) was born at Jamalpur in 24-Parganas. She got her education at home in English, Bengali, Arabic and Persian. After the marriage, her husband, Moqaddas Ali took keen interest in her education but he died soon. She happened to come across an English book of poems of Thomas Carnal at Calcutta University. She translated it into Bengali with the title 'Udaseen Kavya'. She was a great social activist and worked tirelessly to provide neat and clean water to common masses. She even got innumerable wells dug. She did not have any child. She passed away in 1940.

Bibi khairunnesa Khatoon (C.1870-1912) was one of the early Bengali Muslim women who through her writings raised the question of women's pressing issues like education, social, political and so forth. She was born in a middle-class family of Sirajganj in 1870. In 1904, she published an essay on the need of female education in 'Nabanur' entitled 'Amader-Sikshar Antaray'. She also felt the need of making the women aware to be a good and dutiful house wife by her writings. Her 'Satis Pati Bhakti' was exactly a manual for the cause of transforming woman into an ideal house wife. She highlighted the husband-wife relationships, duties of a woman to her family and woman's emancipation.

Mrs Masuda Rahman (1885-1926) pleaded for the awakening among women through her inspiring writings. She was born in a conservative but educated family of Sherpur of the district of Hooghly. She was deprived of higher education due to strong opposition from her father. She secretly learned to read books from her paternal uncle's son and a family Hindu accountant. She acquired little knowledge of the Holy Quran, Urdu and Bengali at home. After her marriage, she became famous from Masuda Khatoon to Mrs Masuda Rahman. She contributed her article titled 'Amader Swarup' which was published in the 'Dhumketu' of Kazi Nazrul

Islam in 1923. The idea of women's emancipation held by Mrs. M. Rahman has been expressed quite well in an article titled 'Amader Dabi' in which she unfolded the facts that the inadequate education imparted to women in the traditional system, was of no use. She passed away on 20th December 1926. After her demise, a collection of her composition named "Chana Chur" was published in 1927.

Nurunnesa Khatoon (1894-1975) was a celebrated writer of her time and wrote for the cause of Muslim women and their problems. She had to follow the strict purdah system. She in her writings, severely criticised the evil effects of purdah and urged the secluded women to come out of it. In her novel 'Swapnadrishita' (1923), she condemned the indiscipline way of life in the name of women's liberty and emancipation. She expressed her resentment regarding purdah in her novel titled 'Bhagyachakra' (1929). Her other significant novels like 'Bidhilipi' and 'Niyati' depicted the pictures of the real worldly women and their platonic love. She was very fond of Bengali language and strongly pleaded for Bengali. It is evident in an article 'Amader Kaaz'. She had in her credit of composing one historical novel, five novels and several essays. For her excellent and matchless literary works, she was bestowed the title of 'Bidyabinodini' by the Nihil Banga Sahitya Samity and Sahitya Saraswati. She breathed her last in 1975 at Kamapur in Dhaka.

Akhtar Mahal Syeda (1901-1928) a contemporary literature of Rokeya, depicted the condition of Bengali Muslim women who suffered very badly due to strict purdah system in her literary career. She was born in an educated, wealthy and progressive family of Faridpur district of East Bengal (now in Bangladesh). In 1915, she was married to Maqbul-ul-Khan, the son of a respectable family of Noakhali. She was strongly opposed to her literary pursuit from her in-law's house. It did not deter her and she began to write secretly. Her writings were published in the 'Naoroze' first under pseudonym and later in her own name in the 'Saogat'. In a short article 'Shishu Palan' which was published in 1927. She discussed in this article about child rearing and a new concept of motherhood. Her other article 'Maran-Baran' (Welcome Death) was published, she defined here the characteristics of new romantic woman, both in fiction and non-fiction. Her first novel was 'Niyantrita'. As she was educated under strict purdah system, her writings appealed to provide women the freedom of education in the patriarchal society. One of her remarkable observations of the Bengali society was 'Marriage and Divorce'. Abul Fazal, a critique of Akhtar Mahal 'Niyantrita', said that through this novel, she narrated the painful life of so many women living secluded in Muslim society.

Mamlukul Fatema Khanam (1904-1957), one of Rokeya's colleagues, contributed to the cause of women's emancipation in the first half of the 20th century. She began her career as a teacher in Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School in Calcutta and Posta Girls' School in Dacca. She was voracious reader of Rabindranath Tagore and Sarat Chandra. She composed many short stories and till today only seven survive in the form of a brief reprint 'Saptarshi' (1964). She had also written many letters to Abul Fazal, the editor of the Tarunpatra. Among her short stories, 'Ashray' (1926), 'Sagar Sangjog' (1926) and 'Dor' (1930) are noteworthy.

Rahat Ara Begum (1910-49) is regarded as a great fiction writer of early Bengal. She composed the best fictions of her time. She was born in Calcutta in 1910. She received her early education in Calcutta and between 1920 and 1924 from Lucknow. Her articles were published in the renowned magazines like 'Tahzeeb-e-Niswan' and 'Asmat' of that age. Her collection of fictions like 'Inqlab', 'Premi' and 'Dilnawaz' earned her name and fame as an efficient writer. She had also the interest in composing the poetic couplets. She died at Chattagram (now in Bangladesh) on 21st February 1949. Fahmida Begum had compiled 'Fictionization of Rahat Ara Begum and Selected fictions' (New Delhi, 1993) and tried to throw light on her (Rahat Ara) literary activities.

Mahmooda Khatoon Siddiqua (1906-1977), a writer par excellence of Bengal, was born on 16th December 1906 in a progressive educated Muslim family at Pabna. She began her writing career with the pen name of Raqib-un-Nisa Mahmooda Khatoon and used 'Batashi' as sobriquet. She composed sonnets and poems in Bengali. She had keen interest in nature, society, humanity and environment. Her collection of poems like 'Pasha Rini' (1913), 'Maa O Mortika' (1960) and 'Aur Nere Sir' proved her as an efficient poetess. Apart from poems, she also composed short stories and articles on burning issues. Her first novel was 'Niyantrika' (1927-28). Her other well-known novel was 'Maran-baran' which was published in 1929. She portrayed the characteristics of new romantic women. She did it through her fiction and non-fiction writings. The Bangla Academy presented her the 'Sahetya Purushkar' in 1967 and the Bangladesh Government awarded her 'Ekshe Padak' in 1977.

Razia Khatoon Chaudharani (1907-34) was born at Noakhali. She learned Bengali, Urdu, Persian and English at her early age from her elder maternal uncle Abdul Quddus. She was married to Ashrafuddin Ahmed Chowdhery, a son of landlord in Comilla. She was a great feminist Bengali writer, essayist and author. She penned down a great treasure of literatures on women's education, women's role in home and outside home, strict purdah system, the status of women in Islam, motherhood and child care. Razia in her essay 'Mayer Siksha' published in the 'Saogat' supported the cause of women's education. In her article 'Samaj O Grihe Narir Sthan' published in the 'Saogat'. In her short story, 'Narir Dharma', she expressed that Islam is the only religion that granted women rights and hence it is superior to the Christianity and Hinduism.

Shamsun Nehar Mahmood (1907-1964), a poet and educationist was born at Gotama village of district Feni. She was married to Dr. Wahiduddin Mahmood in 1927. She was inspired to compose the Bengali poems by great stalwart, Kazi Nazrul Islam. She published her first poem 'Angur' in the magazine. She had been an active editor of feminist journals like 'Naou Rouz' and 'Shakrati'. She was the joint editor with her brother Habibullah Behar of Calcutta based journal 'Bulbul' in 1933. Shamsun Nehar's many compositions became very famous. The 'Pannya Mayee' (1925), 'Phool Bagicha' (1935), 'Begum Mahal' (1936), 'Rokeyar Jibani' (1937), 'Shishur Shikkha' (1939), 'Amar Dekha Tar Sekha' (1955), 'Nazrul Ke Jemuan Dekhechi' (1958), etc. are important. Her book 'Shishur Siksha' was highly admired by Rabindranath Tagore. She was a prolific writer who began to writing from the age of 10 years. Her first composition named 'Punnamayee' had short biographies of eight significant women of the Muslim world who served as role models.

Sufia Kamal was a poetess of a high stature and a promising social worker of the 20th century. She proved herself as a great exponent of Muslim women's emancipator. She was born in a zamindar family in Barisal in 1911. She from her childhood, had to observe strict purdah (veil) so, naturally she had no scope of getting formal education from school. Her collection of poems 'Keyar Kotha' and 'Sajher Maya' were published in 1937 and 1938 respectively. She was highly appreciated by Kavi Guru, Rabindranath Tagore for her 'Sajher Maya'.

Besides these stalwarts, Rabiya Khatoon (1935), Razia Khatoon (1936), Maqboola Manzoor (1938), Shamsun Nehar Rafat Ara (1939), Razia Rahman (1939), Saleena Hussain (1947), Panna Kaiser (1947), Shamim Azad (1952), Shreen Parweez Haque (1953), Taslima Nasreen (1962), Nasreen Jahan (1966), Monika Ali (1967), Tahmida Anjum (1975), etc. are other unmatched daughters of Bengal who by their writings and compositions in Urdu and Bengali brought the dawn of new era in Bengal. The above brief description proves the facts the Bengali Muslim women of early 20th century was active as far as literary contributions are related.

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