



Analysing the Passivity and Feminist Consciousness of Colonial Bengal's Muslim women

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Abstract

The gender concerns in India are intrinsically attached to the communal variations keeping in view the heterogeneous socio-religious fabric of the country. However the majority of attention seemed to be garnered by Hindu majority to the exclusion of other sections of female population, for instance Muslim women, a minority within a minority for on account of their of gender and faith and have been struggling for a rightful place ever since the inception of feminist movement in British India. The image of Aryan woman, apparently a Hindu reconstruction developed during the colonial period was oblivious of other categories of Indian women including Muslim women who presently constitute sixty five million to population and whose minority concerns crops up incidentally in cases like 1985's Shah Bano case or the recent Rahim Bi's case in Bombay High Court indicating the void in scholarly pursuits in this area. In this backdrop, the present paper attempts an analysis of the condition of Muslim women of colonial Bengal who residing in a time and space shared by more illustrious *bhadramahila*, the modernised Hindu/ Brahmo women found little notice in the feminist historiography. Contrary to their deemed passivity and backwardness, these Muslim women did react to changing times and expressed their feminist consciousness, of course on their own terms specific to their unique social contexts and a study on it is but a step towards a more inclusive approach to gender studies.

Keywords: Female agency, colonialism, patriarchy.

Introduction

The colonial phase of feminist discourse in India was in large part a nationalist response to imperialism and was ultimately assimilated into the nationalist agenda which was mostly Hindu in character. As a result former too tended to be exclusively Hindu in character marginalizing other communities like Muslims. Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar in their introduction to *Women and Social Reform in Modern India* voice their concern for the lack of information on Muslims during the reform movements in colonial India.¹ In fact a general tendency of glorifying nation's Hindu past, at the expense of Muslims whose presence was made responsible of all the evils in the contemporary society, is evident in the writings of many popular writers of that time. For instance Sarat Chandra Chatterjee or Bibhutibhusan Bandhopadhyay identify India as solely Hindu nation exhorting the readers (supposedly Hindu) to overcome the stigma of inefficacy placed on them by British and seem oblivious of "the Islamic current in Indian life".²

Studies on Indian women in colonial society as discussed by Padma Anagol have tended to be focussed on Bengali *bhadramahila* as the region was the centre of reform movements for women. *Bhadramahila*, herself a modernised patriarchal reconstruction of woman (apparently a high caste Hindu/ Brahmo) has rendered a passive impression of female agency homogenizing the feminist experience to the exclusion

of all other women across different class, caste, region and community³. Sharing the time and space with these illustrious women, lived the obscure Bengali Muslim women in a deemed hyper-masculinised Muslim community unreceptive to reforms taking place in society and thus considered too backward or traditional to have exhibited any feminist consciousness to be rendered a place in archives.

Amin says that the relative silence over the Bengali Muslim women (the subject of present study) in the nationalist historiography is stark as admitted by scholars like Ghulam Murshid and Meredith Borthwick and is unjustified as the colonial Bengal's half population comprised of Muslims⁴. In a similar vein Mahua Sarkar questions the "eventual invisibility of Muslim women" in "dominant nationalist discourse in colonial Bengal and much of its subsequent historiography." her book *Visible Histories Disappearing Women* where she wrote,

The absence of Muslim women from the written history of nineteenth century Bengal is typically explained in terms of their apparent "traditionalism/ backwardness"... Indeed, from the survey of the extant historiography, one might get the impression that, as far as the public life of late colonial Bengal was concerned Muslim women almost did not exist⁵.

Thus Muslim women were generally held as docile and passive and thus unable to have taken part in the reformist wave that

was taking sway in colonial India. Consequently the former went ignored in the construction of colonial historiography as a non-entity or at the most a passing reference was made to them.

Questioning the absence of Muslim women in feminist discourse in colonial Bengal:

Nevertheless as Mahua Sarkar goes on to show Muslim women did respond to the changing times as “not all Muslim women were backward or victimized any more than all Hindu women were enlightened and emancipated.” Besides the ‘*baiji*’ (Muslim courtesan) connotation as the ‘sexualized consorts’ of hyper-masculinised Islamic construction calls for deeper reflection as the majority of women engaged in prostitution were reportedly from high caste Hindu community⁶.

Recent post-structuralist stance to colonial historiographers such as Sonia Nishat Amin and Mahua Sarkar have laboured to show that notwithstanding the seclusion and subjugation to which the Bengali Muslim women were subjected, they did experience the wave of change and responded positively to it. Towards the early twentieth century, there had been a notable rise in the visibility of Muslim women who were writing, doing social work to bring about some change in their status, for example Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Khairunnesa Khatun, Mrs M. Rahman, Akhtar Mahal Syeda Khatun, Nurunnesa Khatun Vidyavinodini, etc. to name a few, with Begum Rokeya considered the most notable and pioneering feminist force among them. However the sense of modernity had its own contexts and problematic attached with it. As the historians like Amalemdu De on Bengali Muslim reforms agree to their relatively later response to modernity on account of their differential economic placement which was based on rural gentry and thus they struggled to endorse the urban modernizing and reformative process⁷. Further, the location from which Muslim women spoke entailed a lot of diverse values as Firdous Azim notes in the Foreword of the anthology of Bengali Muslim women writers of the age by Shaheen Akhtar and Moushumi Bhowmik:

First she becomes the symbol of the backwardness of the community as a whole, and practices such as purdah, or the wearing of the burqa, or keeping women away from vernacular and secular education are seen as part of this process. She also becomes a symbol of mystery, hiding behind the veil a potent sexuality, a mystery to be unearthed. For women to write and voice their concerns, their feelings and emotions from within this site, which is loaded with meaning, becomes very difficult.

Akhtar and Bhowmik note that it would be useful to see her writings as well as the writings of these women “as part of the historical and political process through which a community of women were seeking to place themselves within an emerging social order in the emergent new post-colonial nations”⁸. Living in extreme form of seclusion in their lives, Muslim women posited the wretchedness of womenfolk in the patriarchal setup

of the society that constantly maintained watertight compartment of public/private spheres. Thus they seemed to be at war with this division which they attacked in her writings and all the social activities they undertook.

Muslim population in Bengal experienced an overall decline in social position with the advent of British rule in India. Abolition of Persian as the official language and the introduction of Permanent Settlement, etc. by the British government proved detrimental to them while Hindus adjusted with the situation. Thus the renaissance period experienced by the latter since early nineteenth century was realised by Muslims at a later date. Nevertheless apprehending the modernist trend they too followed the trail of Hindu and Brahmo reforms though after customizing it to Islamic trends.

Judith Walsh comments that in Muslim community too like that of Hindus and Brahmos the public sphere was reserved for men while women though allowed new roles were to be the guardians of homes and *nashihatnama* conduct books like Thanawi’s *Bahishti Zewar* (translated as *Heavenly Ornaments*) became popular as guidelines for growing girls which were in a similar vein as the Bengali conduct manuals like Dharendranath Pal’s *The Female Companion* (1884) and *Conversations with the Wife*, Jayakrsna Mitra’s *The Duties of Women* (1890), etc which were directed at Hindu women. All the conduct manuals dealt with issues like “hygiene and household management to cooking, child rearing, and relations” preparing “women for their role in family life”⁹. Thus, as Shamita Basu puts it: “Having become objectified and ossified symbols of community honour Muslim women were confined within the walls of patriarchal households and their voices silenced. They were frequently spoken of but never allowed to speak about themselves”¹⁰.

Some feminist voices from Muslim women folk in Bengal

Notwithstanding the patriarchal intrigues and the ‘exclusion’ of Muslim women from the colonial Bengal’s historiography, there were women who were availing themselves of the opportunities brought with the changed times and exhibited considerable feminist consciousness for their assumed passivity and invisibility. Mahua Sarkar attributes this invisibility to the relative foregrounding of the high caste Hindu woman for whom Muslim women served as the negative, inferior other¹¹. The Muslim women in the general imagination was too victimized to put up her view and was almost absent in a masculinised Muslim society. Contrary to this image of Muslim women, the provocative essay, “Alankar or the Badges of Slavery” by the then unknown Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was published in a women’s periodical, *Mahila* in 1903, it created an uproar and was criticised in the harshest tone by the Hindu intelligentsia. The subject of the essay as well as the author (being a Muslim woman) was too rebellious to be accepted by the normative standards and as Mahua Sarkar points out,

consequently the essay had to be edited and an apology was attached. Rokeya emphasized that women in Indian society were no better than slave living under men who keep them away from education and mental development. Amit Dey writes that with her radical stance, Rokeya questioned the “Authenticity of religious scriptures...[which] are nothing but man-made code” and exhibited a striking feminist consciousness¹². The response to Rokeya’s essay for her bold indictment of patriarchy in the essay was very critical as Mahua Sarkar alludes to some responses:

It seems that the author wants to see wanton behaviour among women. Instead of womanly modesty, grace, gentleness, devotion [and] the willingness to serve...[she] wants to see the development of a harsh, abnormal independence.

Another author wrote criticizing Rokeya’s stance that when submits to the will of her husband, it is not slavery, rather a woman’s pleasure and it should not be equated with the status of a slave¹³.

Begum Rokeya has been considered one of the most significant among them who was a pioneering spirit in the field of Muslim women’s emancipation in Bengal. Besides writing for women emancipation, she was also active in social concerns. Rokeya established Sakhawat Memorial Girls School in Calcutta in 1911, still functional and Anjuman-e-Khawateen, an association dedicated to the upliftment of downtrodden women of the society. Preceding Rokeya Nawab Faizunnesa Choudhurani (1834-1903) was yet another visionary from Bengal being credited for establishing the first school for girls in those regions. Amin says that Faizunessa ventured into the field of education post-1857, a time when Muslims had grown reluctant to towards western education. She established a free madrasa at Paschimgaon, primary school for boys and two primary schools for girls in Comilla on 1873. Besides she also contributed in establishing a hospital for women in Comilla. Also, she wrote *Rupjalal* (1876), a romantic tale with mixed influence of medieval and modern times exhibiting her literary prowess being well-versed in Urdu, Persian, Sanskrit and Bengali¹⁴.

Khujista Akhtar Banu Suhrawadia (1874-1919) was yet another scholarly woman from Bengali Muslim community who proved her mettle against the general attitude towards the fairer sex. Hailing from “politically and culturally prominent Suhrawardy family of Midnapore and Calcutta”, she was a highly educated woman who made valuable contribution in the field of women education. She founded two primary schools for girls and translated several novels from English into Urdu. Her niece, Begum Shaista Suhrawady Ikramullah (1915-2000) too was a illustrious name being politically active and for her works like *From Purdah to Parliament* and *Behind the Veil* which talk about the life in zenana (female quarter)¹⁵.

Apart from these significant ladies from Bengali Muslim community, there were innumerable more who were active in

writing and social work to bring about some positive change in the status of women. There were other Muslim women too who were responding to the changed times and speaking their minds in whatever mediums available to them, even though they failed to get the attention of archivists. Belonging to the early group of Muslim women writers, Rokeya shared the space with writers like Khairunnesa Khatun, Masuda Rahman (1885-1926), M. Fatema Khanam (1894-1957), Nurunnesa Khatun Vidyavinodini (1894-1975), Akhtar Mahal Syeda Khatun (1901-1928), etc. The major periodicals where Muslim women actively expressed their thoughts were *Nabanoor*, *Nabapratha*, *Mahila Saogat*, etc. Bengali, the “modern vernacular” became the medium of most of the Bengali Muslim ‘bhadramahila’ though they occasionally wrote in English too¹⁶. (Shamita Basu 40) Shamsunnahar Mahmud (1908-1964) and Sufia Kamal (1911-1999) are yet another women activists who have contributed significantly in the field of women emancipation.

Conclusion

Thus it is apparent that besides Rokeya, who is certainly the most illustrious of feminist voices from Bengali Muslim community, there were many other women before and after her who spoke with a feminist consciousness about the right and concerns of women. Thus it can be said that the passivity charge put on the Muslim women of colonial Bengal is not justified, for the socio-cultural milieu from which they spoke needs different paradigms to evaluate their responses. Specific to their own time and space, these women notwithstanding the strict purdah to which they were subjected and other disabilities, they seemed to possess a unique sense of feminist consciousness as is apparent from their writings. With a post-structuralist approach towards colonial historiography, many marginalized figures are surfacing who made meaningful contribution towards the making of feminist discourse in that era and Bengali Muslim women unarguably deserve a place in it.

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