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## Forging New Paths: Revisiting the Urdu Popular Writers and Periodicals and Their Contribution in Shaping the Muslim Women's Imagination in Nineteenth Century Colonial India

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The notion of respectability (*Sharafat*) and reform (*Islah*) became the highpoint feature of the Urdu literature produced in the colonial India. The Urdu periodicals, newspaper columns and the fictional writings played a significant role as proponent of the much-required reform in the Muslim society, however apart from that it also endeavored for recuperation of respectability of the *Ashraf* of the 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial India. A close look into the Urdu novels and journals written for targeted audience simply draws attention to its emphasis on making of *Sharif* (respectable) women and their education as its core concern.

This article examines some of the well-known Urdu works that address issues of education and the appropriate conduct for the respectable Muslim women and henceforth contributing to inculcate the notion of respectability among the *Sharif* women in Colonial India. The Urdu works that are under analysis are *Mirat-al-Urus* (The Bride's Mirror), *Taubat-un-Nasoo* (The Penitence of Nasoo), *Sharif Beti* (The Gentle Daughter), few extracts from Urdu Journal *Moallim-e-Niswan* (1896) and other texts. *Mirat-al-Urus* and *Taubat-un-Nasoo* were written by renowned author Nazir Ahmed who rose to an eminent position after publishing a number of Urdu books during colonial era. Muhammadi Begum who wrote *Sharif Beti* popularly holds the distinction of being the first woman to have ever edited an Urdu magazine. While *Moallim-e-Niswan* was edited by Maulavi Muhib Hussain. The essay hence, tend to examine how Urdu texts and writings contributed to fashioning the notion of respectability (*Sharafat*) and its recuperation. It has also been tried to analyze the socio-political and cultural milieu of Indian Muslims during which these texts were produced.

## Introduction

In the early nineteenth century, it was the concept of the *Sharafat* that got prevalence in the society and played a pivotal role in defining and shaping not just the notions of ethics, morality, but also the further unfurling to the Muslim imaginations and hence immensely contributing to the defining and solidifying the idea of Muslim identity. Urdu literature and the Urdu journals that were produced during this era, through its varied encompassed genres such as poetry, prose (fiction and non-fiction) and plays endeavored to incorporate and discuss the theme based on the ideals of integrity, civility and honor thoroughly embodied in vast concept of *Sharafat*. Varied journals, novel and the piece of fiction strived hard to give an addressal to the queries and the doubts filled in minds of its Muslim masses in colonial India.

## Gender, Muslim Social Reform and the *Sharafat* (Norms of Respectability)

The early nineteenth century was marked by the distinct stratification of Muslim community into two discrete social classes: the *ashraf* (respectable) and the *ajlaf* (the common or the low-born). The *ashraf* which were considered distinguished by the ethnic origin and lineage, belonged to the upper class and encompassed the descendants of foreign Muslims like Arabs, Persians, Turkic, and Afghans.<sup>1</sup> There can well be identified varied cultural elements and the factors like dress, mannerisms, aesthetics and the knowledge of the Persian and Urdu and its literary trends that signified a person as belonging to a stratum of a certain class.

What is of utmost importance is that how this specific kind of social stratifications distinguished by the ethnic origin and patronized by the Mughal era rulers defined and shaped the later age Muslim politics on the advent of the British rule. The socio-economic challenge that was felt by the *ashraf* on the arrival of the British drastically altered the scenario of the privileges previously enjoyed by the *ashraf*. After the rebellion of 1857 a series of changes were introduced by the British administration which not only led to diminishing of the socio-economic advantages such as stipends and the titles and employments but also the changed law in regards to the inheritance and tributes that previously conferred upon them also marked a shift in the positioning of the *ashraf* in the colonial society. There emerged, in the post-1857 context, a visible pattern of the reconstruction of social stratification.<sup>2</sup> And it was in this backdrop that there can be understood the desire and attempt on the part of the new *ashraf* to mark the peculiarity through the medium of the renovation of the *sharafat* in the colonial society. The consistent endeavor on the part of the Muslim in regards to redefining and reclaiming the social position and experimenting with the varied concepts like reform (*Islah*) and modernity also influenced social fabric of the society. This phase marked an era when there can be noticed the novel voices regarding the women's issue and the concerns with an attempt to bring the major concerns in broad daylight for the purpose of an addressal that it deserved. Margrit Pernau while exploring the notion of *sharafat* strived to analyze that how the focus of discussion now shifted to women and their behavior.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Imtiaz Ahmad, *The Ashraf and Ajlaf categories in Indo-Muslim Society*, Economic Political Weekly, vol.2, No.19 (May13, 1967), pp.887

<sup>2</sup> Shenila Khoja-Moolji, *Forging the ideal educated girl: The production of desirable subjects in Muslim South Asia*. University of California Press, India. 2018. pp.24

<sup>3</sup> Margrit Pernau, *Ashraf into middle class: Muslims in Nineteenth-Century Delhi*. Oxford University Press, Delhi. 2013. pp.355

This period as has been asserted previously opened the vista for the varied pattern of the Urdu literary culture. It echoed the voices which emphasized the role of women as nurturer, guardians of morality and the defenders of family honor. Furthermore, the responsibility of securing and defining home and notions of respectability lay with the women of the household. The highly prorogated notion in the society regarding the women was that they could be a pivotal factor in reshaping the values and customs of Islamic traditions and norms of *sharafat* (respectability) as well as reconfiguration of the Muslim identity. Hence there can be seen a visible attempt to scrutinize and channelize the varied domain of women's lives presenting them with guidebook and advice texts through the mediums of print journals and the fictional piece of writings that were produced during the phase with a clear agenda of taking the reign of reform and refining the domestic spaces and its inhabitants.

### Urdu Literature and Muslim Women's Issues

The domestic domain which marked a transformation also left a remarkable imprint on the body of the Urdu literature as well. The literary trends produced during that period showed immensely positive inclination towards addressing the aspects of multifarious issue of the women and rightly invited them to explore the literary domain of public sphere and spectacular usage of the printing press which presented a marvelous opportunity to the women to experiment with the novel ideas and amalgamation of the same in the personal and public life.

The Urdu journals and the literary trends right after its origination succeeded to gain enormous attention on account of its selection of themes and social issues. One of the significant issues that was raised in these pieces of writings and journals was the question of Muslim women's education and reform in the traditions and the custom that they followed within the domestic spaces. In no times journals like *Tehzib-un-Niswan*<sup>4</sup>, *Khatun*<sup>5</sup> and *Ismat*<sup>6</sup> were striving hard to bring in the issues of social awareness and women's socio-political condition. Female education was considered by most as the ultimate solution of the problems of Muslim society. In a volume of *Tehzib-un-Niswan* there was a mention of an Urdu couplet (Rubaiyat) which highlight the importance of the civilization in contributing to the propagation of the knowledge among the general masses. The couplet simultaneously brought to attention the women's sincere endeavor and fervor to pursue this knowledge. The English translation of the couplet goes as:

<sup>4</sup> *Tehzib-un-Niswan* was started by Mumtaz Ali in year 1898. It has often been categorized as one of the first women weekly magazine and newspaper. It was published with an intention to promote the education and encourage to addressal of the concerns of the women through the means of writing. It included range of themes and sub-section encompassing poetry section, illustrations, letters and so on.

<sup>5</sup> *Khatun*, which was started by Shaikh Muhammad Abdullah, who also had had been active as the secretary for women section at Aligarh. he was concerned with the issues and the challenges faced by the women in the Indian society. keeping that issue in mind he took initiative and published the magazine '*Khatun*' in year 1904. The magazine soon gained public attention and strived to address the social issues and challenges of the women.

<sup>6</sup> *Ismat* was an Urdu magazine (monthly) which was published from Delhi. Sheikh Muhammad Ikram (editor) started the journal in 1908 for which his wife also assisted him. The periodical rose to fame and was considered to be one of the oldest and most published magazines in Urdu language in colonial India.

*'Civilization has spread knowledge*

*Knowledge has reached through this among the sisters*

*This is the treasure of every knowledge and art*

*It is the moral capital of civilization'<sup>7</sup>*

The call for the female education was just not confined to the Urdu periodicals but was also raised as an issue of utmost importance by great leaders and reformers like Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, Altaf Hussain Hali and Deputy Nazir Ahmad who continued to express their view on the significant social concerns through the medium of print. On varied occasions there were noticed the call for the unified approach and initiative for the cause of Muslim women's education. An article titled as '*Salaah-wa-Falah*' published in *Khatun* vociferously propagated the female education and also brought into discussion multifarious endeavors on the part of Muslim women like Mrs. Nasiruddin Haider, Begum Bhopal for the educational endeavor. Apart from that a wide range of issues were covered in these periodicals and pamphlets of the time. In an attempt to dispelling stereotypes regarding the women's inferior mental faculties the periodicals continued to emphasize the need for the subjects like Mathematics, Medicine, History, Geography and literature. Also, addressal was given to issues for articles supporting women's property rights and women's political awareness and political participation in the colonial India. In *Tehzib-un-Niswan* a translation of the poem of the renowned poet *Qazi Nazr-ul-Islam*, who belonged to Bengal, was published by the editor. This famous poem which was originally titled as 'woman' was translated by Akhtar Hussain. Significant emphasis was put by the editor of the periodical for the important message that the poem carried and stressed on the importance of the enlightened women readers. The famous initial lines of the poem are as following:

*"I sing the song of equality,  
In my view, there is no disparity between man and woman."<sup>8</sup>*

The poem translation sincerely attempts to do the justice to original poem and highlight how women are living in the worsening position in the society and their sacrifices have all been neglected.

A popular novel *Mirat-ul-Uroos* (The Bride's Mirror) by Nazir Ahmad which was published in 1869 soon gain immense popularity.<sup>9</sup> It well illustrated that how the ever-changing social dynamic within the public sphere defined the private spaces of women. The novel displayed in succinct manner how the multifaceted range of the women's actions soon came to be garbed and linked to the familial respectability. In Nazir Ahmad's reformist writings there can well be identified the signs of inherited notions of respectability (*sharafat*) which soon became constituted, institutionalized and amalgamated in novel ways and henceforth, *sharafat*, notions of respectability turned out to a dominant theme here. Yet another novel called *Taubat-un-*

<sup>7</sup> Tehzib-un-Niswan, 3 July 1909, vol.12

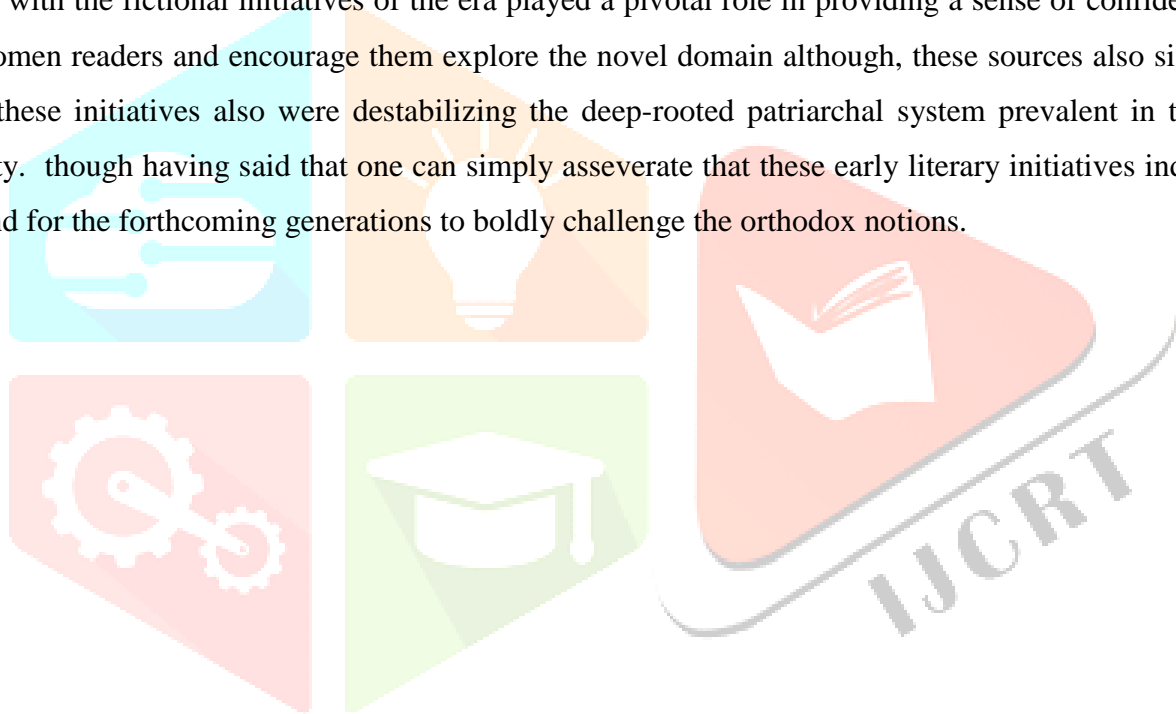
<sup>8</sup> Tehzib-un-Niswan, 14<sup>th</sup> January, 1939

<sup>9</sup> Ruby Lal, *Gender and Sharafat: Rereading Nazir Ahmad*. Journal of the Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, vol.18 No.1, 2008. pp.15-30

*Nasooah*<sup>10</sup> (The Penitence of Nasooah) written by Nazir Ahmad gathered quite an attention among its readers. The predominant word that was most frequently used in the *Taubat-un-Nasooah* was *Islah* (reform). In the novel the protagonist berates himself for causing a bad impact and ruining his kid's lives. He finds himself in constant fear that his bad deeds (*badi*) would adversely affect his children. Hence, he decides to devote himself to *islah-i khandan*, (Reformation of family) that is, trying to set things right in his household.

## Conclusion

The analysis of the periodicals and magazines as well as the vast body of literary works during the period present a vivid picture of women's imaginary world and a visibility of the issues and the challenges that they were grappling with. Though when one dive deep into the multi-faceted dimension of these journals, there can easily be noticed that a small fraction of these writings aimed at reforming and refining women's conditions rather than evoking a revolutionary spirit. The journals like *Ismat*, *Tehzib-un-Niswan* and *Khatun* along with the fictional initiatives of the era played a pivotal role in providing a sense of confidence among its women readers and encourage them explore the novel domain although, these sources also signified that how these initiatives also were destabilizing the deep-rooted patriarchal system prevalent in the colonial society. though having said that one can simply asseverate that these early literary initiatives indeed set the ground for the forthcoming generations to boldly challenge the orthodox notions.



<sup>10</sup> *Taubat-un-Nussooh* is a classical Urdu novel by Deputy Nazir Ahmad which was completed in 1873. The author was a prolific writer who strived to brought into limelight varied social issues and themes and published numerous books in diverse genres.