CHANGING ROLE OF WOMAN IN MUSLIM SOCIETY: PORTRAYAL IN URDU LITERATURE 1869 - 1989

By
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Benazir Bhutto told her closest political comrades in exile in the year 1986:

"I am thinking of going home'. They looked at me expectantly, not sure what I had in mind. I will probably land in Lahore or Peshawar, I continued. Their faces lit up. 'Home' did not mean 70-Clifton. Home meant the length and breadth of Pakistan". [1]

This resolve of a young woman to spearhead a fearless struggle against the ruthless military dictatorship in Pakistan reminds me of Asghari, the heroine of Nazir Ahmed's (1830-1912) as well as Urdu's first novel *Mirat ul-Arus* (the mirror of the bride). What a revolutionary transformation of the role of woman in Muslim society and what a radical change in the connotation of the word home in a short span of hundred twenty years? First published in 1869, the novel portrays the ideal Muslim woman in the person of Asghari. Home, for Asghari signifies the world within the four walls of her husband's house. With an utterly utilitarian outlook she teaches her husband a blind subservience to the establishment so that he could climb up the ladder of personal advancement with record speed. [2] As opposed to the self-centered Asghari, Benazir Bhutto disclosed to the surging sea of humanity in Iqbal Park, Lahore that:

"Some people advised me to leave politics. They warned me that I could meet the fate of my father and brother. Some said the Pakistani political arena was not for woman. My answer to all of them was that I have willingly taken the path of thorns and stepped into the valley of death". [3]

Today the role of Muslim woman is not limited to the efficient and profitable management of the household. Now she aspires to lead political and cultural movements aiming at the revolutionary transformation of the whole society. Her courtyard has been expanded into the arena of national and international politics. This widening of horizon and broadening of outlook could only be made possible by the move-

ment of education and reform of woman initiated in the second half of the nineteenth century.

The movement for woman's education was an integral part of an overall process of regeneration of Muslim society initiated by a group of intellectuals and creative writers centred round Sir Syed Ahmed Khan (1817-1898), founder of Aligarh Muslim University. Although Sir Syed's views on woman were less progressive as compared to some of his younger contemporaries, he did point out that the institution of *purdah* (seclusion) is responsible for woman's illiteracy and backwardness. [4] In spite of the realisation that woman's education was essential to his movement of revival and reform of Muslim society, he regarded female education on western lines as premature. He argued that Muslim women must wait until at least one generation of Muslim men had modernized themselves through western education. [5] But his younger companions parctically ignored this argument.

Nazir Ahmed was the first to carry the message of modern education and social reform to woman in a series of didactic novels. Four of Nazir Ahmed's seven novels deal with the problems of women ranging from denial of education to polygamy and prohibition of widows to remarry. In the words of C.M. Naim:

"Two major concerns inspire most of Nazir Ahmed's fiction: the uplift of *sharif* woman and the proper upbringing of *sharif* children. Together they form the foundation of what is critically important for him: the family. For him, the enrichment and fulfilment of the lives of individuals can take place only within the context of a family, within which each member has his or her share of responsibilities, that share determining the individual's worth. The uplift of an entire society, according to him, can come about only if its constituent members - the individual families - are brought to a state of enlightenment". [6]

The very first novel of Nazir Ahmed, *Mir'at al 'Arus* got tremendous popularity. It had innumerable imitators. Mir'at, the story of two sisters, one good and the other bad, was primarily written for the instruction of the author's own daughters, and then published for the wider circle of readers. Nazir Ahmed writes in the foreword:

"Although there is no female education in this country, yet ladies in well-to-do families in big cities can read the Qur'an in translation. In accordance with the family tradition, my daughters also read the text of

the Qur'an with its translation. I then began to look for a book which should inculcate morality and refine the minds of women. I searched the whole library, but found no such book. It was then that I thought of the plot of this book".

The good natured, sweet tempered and properly educated Asghari transforms the life in the courtyard and the kitchen of her in-laws with her rational approach and practical bent of mind. Nazir Ahmed embodied his vision of the ideal Muslim woman in the person of Asghari, a paragon of virtue. Nazir Ahmed's beloved Asghari provided many generations of middle class Muslim women with an ideal role model. Among those who were inspired by this work was the famous poet and critic, Altaf Husain Hali (1837-1914), who produced an unsuccessful work of fiction entitled *Majalis-un-Nissa* (Assemblies of Women), in 1874. Theme is the same but the treatment is less artistic. Perhaps Hali himself had realised his drawbacks as a fiction writer and soon abandoned it in favour of poetry.

Hali was the first in the history of Urdu poetry to present realistic images of the suffering women. His poems, *Munajat-i-Beva* (widow's prayer) and *Chup ki Dad* (homage to the silent), considered to be his masterpieces by some of the eminent critics, directed Urdu poetry into a new channel. In commonplace imagery and vigorous diction Hali sings in praise of the voiceless:

Oh mothers, sisters, and daughters!
The honour of the world
Comes from you.
Countries' populations
And the greatness of nations,
come from you.
.....
Alas! The world repays
your virtue by oppression.
Deprived of rights, in truth,
you endure untold transgression.
Often men were ready
For your assassination.
You were scratched, by stroke of pen,
From the page of imagination.

For years you were buried
Alive in the sod.
You had no defender
Other than God.
...
In this vale of sorrows,
For all you have had to face,
You should be remembered
The pride of the human race.
Those who are hard-hearted,
And who would see you burn,
Their cruelty is world-famous.
But where are you to turn?
You don't even get reassurance
Among your loved ones,
Whether they be husbands,
Or fathers, brothers, sons.
Even he who shares your home,
Whose affections you have won,
He too withholds his trust,
Oh, unfortunate one!

In a tender and pathetic tone, Hali gives a call of revolt against and resistance to those who deny woman's right to education:

That time has gone forever
When you found no comrades anywhere;
When the heavens looked the other way,
And even the earth was bare.
When all the learned doctors
Trembled in the fear,
Lest upon you fall the shadow
of knowledge somewhere.
After so long, the time is here
For obtaining your birthright.
Justice, veiled, has shown herself
Fleetingly, in the light.
But though obstacles remain
Facing your assistants,

There is no solution but must
Overcome resistance.
Oh, strength of the helpless!
Oh, the voiceless, speech!
The adventure of education
Is now within your reach.

These extracts are taken from translation of the poem by Gail Minault. [7] *Chup ki Dad* first appeared in Shaikh Abdullah's reformist Urdu magazine, *Khatoon* (Woman) in 1905. The Shaikh together with his wife founded Aligarh girls' school in 1906 in the face of mounting opposition. Eight years ago the first Urdu newspaper for women, *Tahzib un-Niswan* (Feminine Culture) had already been launched by Syed Mumtaz Ali (1860-1935) at Lahore. The successful espousal of the cause of woman's education and reform by creative writers like Nazir Ahmed and Hali inspired many an activist among Aligarh's first generation. The late nineteenth and early twentieth century witnessed mushroom growth of reading material for the secluded woman, whom feudal values of a vanished age could not allow to leave the home to attend school. Gail Minault is right in her observation that:

"This was not a movement for woman's liberation, but rather reform of a patriarchal sort. Muslim men, seeking to harmonize the private and public dimensions of their existence, also sought to impose on women their definition of what it meant to be a Muslim. It is significant that this movement in no way envisaged the removal of that other boundary, purdah. For the men, the desire to educate woman was connected to the desire to bridge gap between their own public and private lives, to have women who were better companions to their husbands, more enlightened mothers to their children, more competent homemakers, and more devout Muslims". [8]

In spite of all its shortcomings the reformist ideal of Nazir Ahmed and Hali is more radical than that of the reformist teachings of the religious scholars associated with the theological seminary at Deoband. As opposed to Aligarh movement, the Deobandi movement "looked back, not West." The Deobandi reformers "saw themselves in no way accommodating rulers". [9] The Deobandi movement was politically progressive but socially conservative. The anti-imperialism of the

Deobandies was in sharp conflict with the Aligarian's policy of loyalism to British Crown. That was but natural. But unfortunately they could not differentiate between British imperialism and Western humanism. Intellectually they were still living in the Middle Ages. The breakaway from the Middle Ages, which found its first expression in the Aligarh reform movement posed a serious threat to feudal values and medieval social norms. Central to the Deobandi reformist teaching was the concern to check the cultural transformation taking place under the influence of the new ideas emanating from Aligarh reformist teachings together with new forces set in motion by our contact with the West. No wonder then that the Deobandi reformers were anguished at the popularity of Nazir Ahmed's novels as well as at the spread of female education. The best reflection of the Deobandi attitudes towards woman is available in Bihishti Zewer (Jewellery of Paradise), by Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanwi (1884-1943). First published in 1905, the book is an encyclopaedic collection of over one thousand pages of dos and donts for Muslim woman.

Thanwi's syllabus for women excludes all social sciences. He warns parents about the inherent dangers of the art of writing for their daughters. He is against even the all female schools. Strongly condemning the fast spreading female literature he includes the novels of Nazir Ahmed among the list of "harmful" books for woman. [10] Professor Naim speculates that Nazir Ahmed's "portrayal of highly capable and dynamic women, who tower over the men around them" [11] might be one of the reasons for categorising these novels as 'harmful'.

But in spite of the best efforts of the conservative reformers the break with medievalism was final and irrevocable. The message of Nazir Ahmed and Hali caught the imagination of generation after generation of Muslim women. The creative writer followed Aligarh reform movement in letter and spirit till the early thirties. Only one author, Rashid-ul-Khairi (1870-1936) wrote some seven dozen books, mostly novels and romances depicting the sad plight of the suffering woman. Khairi started his literary career as a feminist and sustained this role throughout:

"The centre of the picture in a Rashid-ul-Khairi story is usually given to a woman. He wishes to bring home to us the untold sufferings of women in a social order in which man is all in all and women have to sustain a subservient role. However cruel and unjust the husband may

be, his women hug the wifely ideal implanted in their hearts and return cruely with devotion and constancy".[12]

Rashid-ul-Khairi passes away in the year 1936 and the same year proved to be the turning point in Urdu literature. Progressive Writers' Association was formed in this very year and the progressive writers transformed the reformist attitude of their predecessors into a revolutionary one. Upstill now the strictly guarded women, confined into the medieval cage of *purdah*, with their down cast eyes and submissive ways remained to be the ideal of even our feminist writers. They continued to portray her in stereotyped roles as mothers, daughters and sisters. One wonders how our creative writers could close their eyes on the real life situations. Bi Amma, who had become a legend in her life time, was addressing all-male political gatherings since 1917. In 1921, while addressing a mass meeting in Lahore, she lifted her veil for the first time. Khawar Mumtaz and Farida Shaheed's observation on the significance of this historic act is insightful:

"Bi Amma's act is important for two reasons. Firstly, the act itself is important as a symbol of Muslim women removing the veil which had confined them for centuries, to enter into the political reality of their times. But secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the circumstances and reasons for doing so are noteworthy. Bi Amma was a completely indigenous product. When she cast aside the veil she did not, like Hoda Sha arawy in Egypt, just returned from a woman's conference in Rome. Nor had she cast aside the veil as a symbol of women's emancipation. Bi Amma removed her veil simply because she found it bothersome in her own work, which was political in nature and not feminist. The fact that she was not asking for her rights as woman, but was speaking in lieu of her son from a platform that was demanding justice for all Muslims".[13]

It is ironic to note that exactly at the time when in the realm of reality, Muslim woman had assumed the role of leadership in anti-imperialist political struggle, in the world of literature she was being presented in the conventional key roles designed by man to be the pivot of the family. The same age old criteria of passivity, silence and obedience as the ideal of female beauty were reigning supreme. Muslim woman was still chained in the fetters of feudal customs and conventions not sanctioned by Islam. Urdu literature had to wait for more than a decade in order to hear the cry of revolt against domestic tyranny. It was

Rashid Jahan (1905-1952) who turned the docile, homely heroine of Rashid-ul-Khairi into the defiant and aggressive Malika Begum in her short story, *Dilli ki Sair* (Delhi Excursion). A gynecologist by profession, Rashid Jahan was a daughter of Shaikh Abdullah who had founded the first school for girls in 1906 which was eventually associated with Sir Syed's Muhammadon Anglo-Oriental College. She contributed this story to Angare (Burning Coals) [14], a collection of short stories by Sajjad Zaheer, Ahmed Ali, Muhmuduzzafar and Rashid Jahan, published and proscribed in 1932.

Rashid Jahan authored two collections of short stories entitled *Aurat Aur Digar Afsane* (Woman and Other Stories) and *So'la-e-Jawwala* (Raging Flames) but she has influenced the course of modern Urdu literature more by her dynamic role in the origin and growth of the progressive Writers Movement than by her creative output. A woman of formidable brilliance and charm, she became a source of inspiration, as a modern Muslim creative woman, for her younger contemporaries including Ismat Chaughtai, Qurratul Ain Haider and Khadija Mastur. These are the most prominent fiction writers who, alongwith a host of others, followed Dr. Rashid Jahan with devotion and created a new world of feminine consciousness in our radical literature. Their stories created a realization that the veil and seclusion means the denial of economic dimension of woman; economic dependence is the main cause of their subjugation; the customs and conventions of the society, do not necessarily reflect the true spirit of Islam and with education and economic independence they can break their chains and claim their status as enjoined on them by Islam. Thus the woman came out of her secluded, custom ridden world and started teaching in schools, working in hospitals and pleading in the courts of law. The advent of the career woman became quite a terror during mid thirties and early forties and conservative writers,

"felt called upon to point out the error of her way. They told her that independent woman always came to grief; they were ravished, had illegitimate children, were seduced by clerks and doctors and school-teachers with whom they came to contact, were shunned and despised by society. They put husbands and fathers to shame for living on the earnings of their wives and daughters. They warned parents that in the schools and colleges, their daughters would learn nothing but love-

making and would end up as unmarried mothers. Every other story written during this period is at pains to show how the school girl and her teacher succumb to temptation, have a passionate affair and come to a pitiful end". [15]

But the restless, outspoken and unblushing girl in progressive literature remained undeterred. With a determination mightier than the mountains she continued to march on the road to economic independence, in an age of economic stress and strain. Our next encounter with her was in *San'nata* (Howling Wilderness), a long short-story by Ahmed Nadim Qasimi (b.1916) [16] first published in 1952.

Ahmed Nadim Qasimi is famous for his stories and poems in rural setting. His stories yield fascinating insights into the suffering and pain of the rural woman. But San'nata is the story of a middle class urban family. Kalsum, the main character of the story, is young girl with an artistic temperament and literary bent of mind. She is forced by circumstances to reject the socially-prescribed role of woman as a commodity eventually owned by her husband to raise a family and adopts, instead, the role of the sole bread winner for her widowed mother and three sisters. She earns the title of Mard Bati (daughter with the attributes of a son). The mother is also presented in a different role. The traditional role of a mother is to find a suitable match for her daughter as soon as possible and marry her off at an early age. But here the mother rejects every proposal for Kalsum's marriage, on one pretext or the other, in the fear that she might also follow her elder brother to desert the family after marriage. While Kalsum makes the sacrifice of her personal ambitions for the sake of her family, the heroine in Khadija Mastoor's novels does the same for the greater good of a larger family: the suffering humanity.

Khadija Mastoor (1927-82) is known for her unmistakably firm commitment to progressive ideals. She has depicted, in her short stories and novels, the social,political and moral decay taking place in Muslim society through slow transformation of the patterns of behaviour of the members of the middle class families. It is worthwhile to note that in both of her novels, *Aangan* (courtyard) and *Zameen* (The Earth), the male characters are either busy in a feverish rat race to make money through permits, licences and allotments of factories, shops and lands or to capture power by foul means. Only Aaliya and Sajida, the heroines

of *Aangan* and *Zameen*, respectively, are the ones who resist the temptations in an atmosphere of utter corruption and remain faithful to their ideals and dreams. In the starkly disgusting picture of the state of our society that Khadija has painted, only the heroine shows honesty of purpose, courage of conviction and integrity of character.

Zameen, to a extent, is an extension of Aangan. The former starts from where the latter had ended. Sajida, central character of the novel is Aaliya of Aangan reborn. At the advent of Pakistan she migrates to Lahore alongwith her father who dies at the refugees camp. Caught in the whirlpool of the events beyond her control, Sajida has to live in a family which is in a state of moral decay. The father is an alcoholic, maintaining an illicit relationship with his sister-in-law, residing in the same house. The eldest son Kazim, a self-seeking bureaucrat takes pride in the open declaration: "I have no conscience and no scruples." This statement applies to everyone in the family except, Nazim, the younger brother of Kazim, who resigned from his bureaucratic assignment in disgust and takes up a teaching career. Sajida marries Nazim because of his commitment to build a progressive and egalitarian order in Pakistan. As a result of his involvement in radical politics Nazim is arrested. He comes out of the jail as a broken man, both physically and spiritually. He is reduced to the position of just an armchair revolutionary because of his assurances to the authorities during his confinement in the torture cell. He does not work while Sajida is doing a job to support the family. Nazim's political compromise with the establishment is sickening to Sajida. "What is the use of discussing politics in the Drawing Room", she tells Nazim and his comrades. "Why don't you go out on the street and rouse the people" ? [17] This is one of the most pertinent questions ever raised in Pakistan.

It is significant to note that this question has been raised by woman, not as a woman but as a person with a deep and abiding political commitment. *Zameen* is an honest and truthful portrayal of the realities of Pakistani life. The novel was published posthumously in 1983. This was the time when Benazir Bhutto was the most important political challenger to General Zia-ul-Haq. Threatened by Benazir's popularity in the masses, the military dictator made several attempts to limit women's participation in the political field by restricting their right to stand or vote in elections. He could not succeed to impose such recom-

mendations of Ansari Commission on the form of government but he did succeed in imposing a series of other laws, including the Hudood Ordinance to reduce woman's status in our society. A coalition of women's groups continues to put up a strong resistance against these laws. [18] Some of our writers such as Hajira Masroor (b. 1929) and Kishwar Naheed (b. 1940) have emerged as frontline fighters for human rights. Hajira Masroor and Kishwar Naheed did not content themselves with just writing a story like *Nia Na'ra* (New Slogan) or composing a poem like *Ma'in woh Aurat Na'in* (I am not that Woman) but came out of their studies to lead demonstrations against the imposition of these laws.

One of the most significant facts about Urdu poetry of the current decade is that woman writers are dominating the literary scene. Kishwar Naheed (b. 1940), Fehmida Riaz (b. 1946) and Parveen Shakir (b. 1952) are some of most assertive angry and anguished creative writers. These gifted poets and human rights activists are conscious of the fact that Muslim ideal of womanhood remains blurred, misunderstood and out-of-reach because of the prevalent tribal codes and feudal traditions. Kishwar asserts:

"With reference to Islam, so many false concepts came to be related to woman only because women were ignorant. They hadn't studied the Quran. They couldn't challenge the interpretations that went against them. They accepted the hand-me-down version of Islam by the maulvis. It requires concerted efforts to come out of a state of ignorance, to sift facts from fiction. It is only through spreading awareness that we can bring a change in women's conditions". [19]

Poet, translator and essayist, Kishwar Naheed is engaged in spreading this awareness, in a most uninhibited manner, since the past two decades. She has published so far five volumes of poetry, a handbook of women's conditions in Pakistan entitled, *Aurat: Khwab Aur Khak Kay Darmayan* (Woman: Between Dream and Dust) and a translation into Urdu of Simone de Beauvoir's monumental work, the Second Sex. She is the most outstanding example of the contemporary feminine sensibility in modern Urdu poetry. This new wave springs from an awareness that the struggle for emancipation of women is an integral part of the crusade to liberate the whole society from political, social and moral exploitation. Breaking at the male-female syndrome, Kishwar Naheed

speaks as a human being:
My voice is the voice of my city.
My voice is the voice of my age.
My voice will influence generations.
What do you think it is,
that you call my voice a clamour?
How can you call my voice
the voice of madness?
How can you think
the coming storm a mere illusion?
I am no prophet,
I only see today with open eyes.
Your barbaric acts
diffused like the stink of money,
you recline in the back seat
of your limousine
so that the harsh sunlight of poverty
will not destroy the surgical creation
that is your face.
Now you can remember each speech
by its number:
Speech number 10, To arouse the poor
Speech number 15, To create consciousness amongst women
Speech number 27, To advise the writers and intellectuals
Voices, voices, voices
What is a clamour?
A crescendo of conflicting sounds,
or waves of unconnected speeches?
Stones rolling down the hillside
Throw a stone in a desert
and it sinks noiselessly in the sand.
But my voice is not a stone,
it is lightening;
after its flash everyone can hear the thunder.
Putting your hands to your ears
will not stop the storm.
Why should those who read about the weather

and make speeches
come to see the flowing gutters in the alleys?
Sowing a little seed of revolution
in its season
will not create a forest of revolution.
You can buy red colour cheaply
but scarves stained with the red of blood
are not so easily bought.
If I am aware of all this,
why aren't you?
I speak the truth.
I am no prophet,
I only see today with open eyes.
That is all.
(Speech Number Twenty Seven Translated by Mahmood Jamal)

Not to speak of composing a poem or writing a novel, Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi had prohibited Muslim woman to even read a piece of literature. Many of the uncompromisingly conservative Ulama still adhere to the ideals of *Bihishti Zewer*, published at the turn of this century. It is against this background that Kishwar and her fellow poetesses are being identified as rebels and the role of woman as head of an Islamic state is being disputed.

References

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3. Benazir Bhutto, *Daughter of the East*, p.281.
4. Syed Ahmed Khan, 'Auraton ke Huquq' in M. Ismail Panipati, ed., *Maqalat-i-Sir Syed*, (Lahore: Majlis-i-Taraqqi-i-Adab, 1962) Vol. V, pp. 194-199.
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6. C.M. Naim, Prize Winning Adab, in Barbra Metcalf, ed., *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) p. 304.

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11. C.M. Naim, *Prize Winning Adab*, in Barbra Metcalf, ed., Moral Conduct and Authority, p.308.

12. Muhammad Sadiq, *Twentieth Century Urdu Literature* (Karachi: Royal Book Company, 1983) pp. 152-153.

13. Khawar Mumtaz and Farida Shaheed, *Women of Pakistan Two Steps Forward, One Step Back?* (Lahore: Vanguard, 1987) pp. 43-44.

14. For more light on *Angare* and Rashid Jahan see Carlo Coppola, *The Angare Group: The Enfants Terribles of Urdu Literature, in C.M. Naim, ed., Annual of Urdu Studies*, (Chicago: 1981).

15. Ismat Chughtai, *EK BAT*, (Lahore: Maktaba-e-Urdu, n.d.) pp. 114-115.

16. Poet, short-story writer and journalist, Ahmed Nadim Qasimi lives in Lahore. He is the most prominent literary figure in the contemporary world of Urdu literature. His seven collections of poetry and thirteen collections of stories have been published so far. He has led the Progressive Writers' Movement in Pakis-

tan since its inception to 1956, when it was disbanded. At present he is working as director of *Board for Advancement of Literature*. Some of his works have been translated into English, German, Russian, Chinese and Japanese.

17. Khadija Mastoor, *Zameen*, (Lahore: Idara-e-Farogh-e-Urdu, 1983) p.224.

18. For a detailed account of and struggle against the so-called Islamic laws see, Khawar Mumtaz and Farida Shaheed, *Women of Pakistan: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back?* (Lahore: Vanguard, 1987).

19. Interview with Zoenat Hisam, *Montage of Pain and Truth*, (Karachi: Dawn, May 31, 1985) p.v.