

Narrating Resistance: Representation of Nineteenth Century Bengali Muslim Women in Akhtar Mahal's *Niyantrita*

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ABSTRACT:

The participation and Muslim women's contributions of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century in the social reform movements in India have remained largely unexplored. The documented literary history of the period till date furthermore does not accord a reasonable space for Muslim women authors. The present paper attempts to intervene in the context of the gaps throughout recorded history where women, especially Muslim are posited almost overlooked in the discourses of society, religion, and literature. The paper intends to examine how Muslim women are portrayed in the social and religious discourses of India and/ or undivided Bengal, marking their challenges at multiple levels in literary and socio-cultural history. It intends to critically examine the Bengali Muslim writer Akhtar Mahal's pioneering novella, *Niyantrita* (1926) that explores Muslim women's aversion to hierarchical structures of the contemporary Indian society. Begum Akhtar Mahal (1901-1928) was an eminent Muslim writer who continued writing despite the adversities she faced after her early marriage at the age of fourteen. Born in 1901 in an aristocratic and educated family, Akhtar was introduced into an atmosphere that was truly conducive to literary and artistic pursuits, even though there was no question of sending the girls to school or college in the initial decades of the 1900s. But the feudal environment of her in-laws house was absolutely different from her paternal home. Women keen on education or music or art were not appreciated in her marital home. These are the aspects that led her to raise her voice of resistance against patriarchal oppression. Two of her seminal works are *Niyantrita* and *Maran Baran*. The Bengali Muslim negotiation with modernity and even with anti-colonial struggles has not been well recorded. Most accounts speak of 'backwardness', where the Bengali Muslim 'renaissance' takes place about fifty years after the Bengal renaissance. The institutionalized patriarchal setting was held responsible for an "enforced" seclusion. This rendered Muslim women significantly less visible to historical and social analyses than their Indian counterparts. Akhtar Mahal intricately weaves a tapestry of romance entangled with the heart-wrenching realities of forced marriages that often plague Muslim societies. The tale chronicles a life filled with sorrow, delicately narrated in a poignant and mournful fashion. This narrative touches upon the experiences of Muslim women, colonialism, patriarchy, and the echo of resistance.

Keywords: Muslim women, colonialism, patriarchy, resistance.

“Stories are”, as Yeasmin Saikia says, “the stuff of life. In the Indian subcontinent, storytelling is a highly developed tradition. People tell real and fantastic stories about humans and non-humans, monsters and gods – about seen and the unseen.” Speaking of South Asian Muslim women’s narratives, she continues, “Muslim women who created an edifice of original stories in the Indian subcontinent are no ordinary architects; they are extraordinary craftswomen who wrote transformative stories (Qadeer and Arafat 2022).

“Before we can begin to ask how the literature of woman would be different and special, we need to reconstruct its past, to rediscover scores of women novelists, poets and dramatists whose work has been obscured by time, and to establish the continuity of the female tradition from decade to decade, rather than Great woman to Great woman” (Showalter 1977).

In the context of the above argument, the present paper intends to examine Begum Akhtar Mahal’s contribution in the tradition of Muslim women writings that flourished in undivided India during 19th and early 20th century. The difference in the gender has been socially and culturally aggravated in the sense that it is turned into a discriminatory process. Indian patriarchy is largely based on the prejudice of male superiority. This is often complimented by the aspect of gender role which grants a set of code of conduct and attitudes for each sex. In this context, Kamla Bhasin says that nature makes diversity but not hierarchy and not inequality. She says nature never designated women as inferior to men or men, inferior to women. Nature’s discriminatory factors are turned by the society into the act of discriminations, and inequality. Nature has made everyone human but it has the least to do with any kind of labeling.

The 19th century marked a period of significant socio-political changes in India, and Bengali Muslim women found themselves navigating a complex web of societal expectations and constraints. Within the domestic realm, they were often confined to traditional gender roles. However, some Bengali Muslim women, particularly those from the relatively privileged backgrounds were able to challenge these restrictions to some extent by engaging in literary pursuits. Sonia N. Amin states, “The early twentieth century is celebrated as the period in which the Muslim community along with women were awakened into modernity, through education, writing and publishing, social and political work, and so on” (Amin 1995). The socio-political landscape of 19th century Bengal witnessed the emergence of various movements and reformist ideologies. Bengali Muslim women actively participated in these movements, asserting their agency and challenging oppressive norms. Women’s organizations such as Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam played a pivotal role in organizing social and educational initiatives, empowering women through education and vocational training.

Muslim women novelists traverse ‘the complicated gendered world of South Asia and ‘assert the existence of “speaking Muslim women,” ’ as Qadeer notes. The ordinary pleasures, the terrors of the domestic sphere as well as the ‘extraordinary political realities’ of colonialism, partition, and post-colonialism are voiced and powerful narratives emerge in consequences (Qadeer and Arafat 2022).

The Bengali Muslim women’s negotiation with modernity and even with anti-colonial struggles has not been well recorded. Most accounts speak of ‘backwardness’, where the Bengali Muslim ‘renaissance’ takes place about fifty years after the Bengal renaissance. Women’s position is a special marker of this backwardness. It is therefore possible to identify the contribution of Muslim women to the social, political, and cultural spheres by thorough research into the enormous gap in the archived narratives. Scholars such as Begum Rokeya, Faizunnesa, and Akhtar Mahal have depicted the issues that

Muslim women in their respective eras faced by examining historical and literary documents that are available in regional languages.

The enforced subjugation towards women is depicted in *Niyantrita*. Akhtar Mahal chooses a tale that is romantic on the one side but the catastrophic forced marriages that often take place in the Muslim societies are portrayed in the tale. It is from the beginning until the end, a chronicle of an excruciatingly sad life, described in a poignant, mournful style. Abul Fazl comments, “The environment created by the author – the house and the courtyard surrounded by walls – is familiar to the Muslim reader. The heroes and the heroines are men and women they know intimately” (Fazl 1926). At first glance, *Niyantrita* or (*The Woman Bound by Destiny*) appears to be just like any other narrative that deals with a common tale from life. However, Akhtar wrote this particular novella to highlight her own experiences pointing towards the stereotypes revolving women.

The story revolves around the life of Ayesha who is forced to an abusive marriage. She is abused both verbally and physically by her husband. The sufferings and pain that she undergoes is not unfamiliar to any other girl living in an unenlightened Muslim society. The differences in the experiences by males and females in a Muslim society are revealed by Akhtar Mahal. She also shows how even the women participate in the institution of patriarchy. Ayesha’s mother in law defends her son’s cruel behavior towards Ayesha. She never questions her son about the violence that has been done on Ayesha. Societal prejudices often weave through the family when it is about women. This is evident in the thoughts of Ayesha while she confronts Kader who expresses his dissatisfaction towards his family while forced in a supposed marriage. Ayesha remarks, “Ah, a man of conscience! Where do you leave your base instincts, you sprout a hundred arms to oppress a woman? When you grind the poor girl’s hopes and desires to dust, where is your sense of justice” (Mahal 1926)?

Ayesha’s monologue in one of the instances is suggestive of the suffocated and oppressed space a Muslim woman live in and how they are fated to lead a troublesome life. The ironic statements by Ayesha unveil the hypocrisy prevalent in the male dominated Muslim society. Akhtar Mahal speaks of the problems that a Muslim woman faces in her day to day life through Ayesha. She says,

Yes, I know, you’re not a woman at the mercy of other people, trampled under male feet. You are not one of the humiliated women of Bengal, unable to protest even when her peace and happiness, her dreams and desires are being trampled over! You are but a self-centered, mean male, strong like a beast, looking only for your own pleasure! I know you people well! Your hands won’t tremble as you prepare to sacrifice a hundred human beings for your own interest! You do not hesitate to suck the blood from the breast of another, simply to fortify your own demonic power! Nor do you flinch from laughing aloud, and clapping, to see the agony of a tortured soul (Mahal 1926)!

However, the inability of the women to raise their voice against such oppression is indicated in the story when Ayesha’s resistance is only visible through her thoughts. She does not articulate her disappointment to her husband and family except in one the moments. Akhtar Mahal also emphasizes on the importance of education that liberate people irrespective of their gender. Kader and Nur are symbolic of the educated Muslim society who do not intend to control the women and rather give them their due space.

Consequently, an examination of *Niyantrita* shows that Ayesha and other female characters reveal the lateral ties and influences that have maintained women under severe, hostile, and oppressive patriarchal regimes. This emphasizes the necessity of feminist participation across caste/class, religious, and communal divides. According to Yuval Davis, “it calls for cooperation and solidarity among

feminists, who may be positioned differently in different societies but are willing to work towards achieving certain common goals” (Davis 1997).

The novel itself becomes a form of rebellion against a society that overtly emphasizes men’s sexual desires and need for multiple marriages, meanwhile disregarding the health issues that women face. Amin claims that the story is full of sexually explicit imagery that presents women [Muslim] as nothing more than objects of desire for the men. Men’s sexual needs are met by misusing and abusing women’s bodies. Akhtar Mahal with her critical pursuit condemns this authoritarian facet of patriarchal society. The underlying tone of the text reveals how the author turns her women characters as rebels who stand powerfully against the dominant and unjust customs and traditions prevailing specifically in Muslim societies of undivided Bengal and Indian society at large.

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