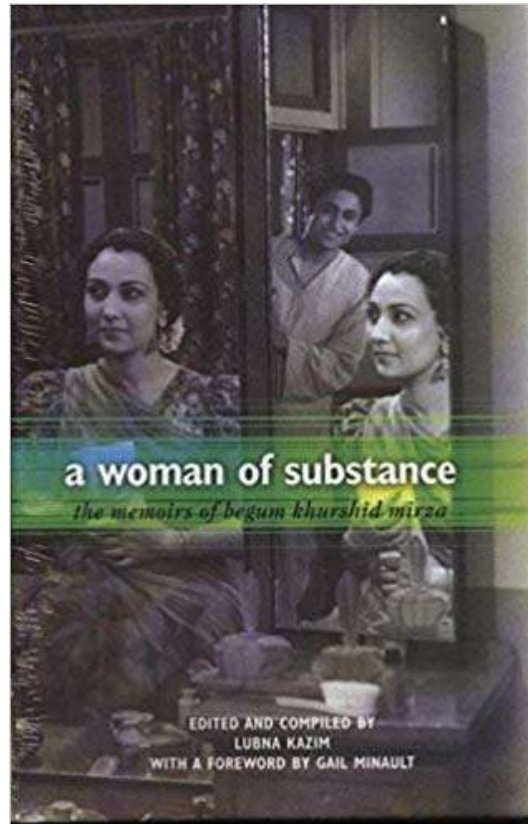


Debunking the Stereotypical Image of Indian Muslim Women Through a Study of Their Literary Works

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Courtesy: <https://www.amazon.com/Woman-Substance-Memoirs-Begum-Khurshid/dp/8189013319>

Abstract

This research article attempts to debunk the stereotypical image of Indian Muslim women, who are considered as illiterate, silent, invisible, having no voice, and living in seclusion in the Western Feminist discourse. This is done by presenting a study of the literary works of Indian Muslim women, written during the twentieth century.

Literary works in English literature means creative writing works which includes prose, poetry, plays, fiction, and many kinds of nonfictional writing like, life narratives and essays. Life narrative is a narrative written by the author about his/her own life experiences. The life narratives or autobiographies chosen for study in this article are Sultan Jahan Begam's *An*

Account of My Life (1912), Ismat Chughtai's *A Life in Words: Memoirs* (1979), Begam Shaista Suhrawardy Ikramullah's *From Purdah to Parliament* (1963), and Begum Khurshid Mirza's *A Woman of Substance: Memoirs of Begum Khurshid Mirza* (1982). These life narratives are the representation of Indian Muslim women as educated, having a voice and self-reliant.

This research paper may be regarded, as a contribution to the field of Marginality Studies. The term 'Marginality' is generally applied to interpret and analyze socio-cultural, political and economic spheres, where underprivileged people struggle to gain access to resources, and equal participation in social life.

Needless to add, Muslim woman stands out as a typical marginalized entity in view of both her gender and for being part of the Muslim minority community in India. Even the Western feminist discourse has traditionally been very patronizing to the third world woman. The typical third world woman has been defined as family oriented, domestic, religious, semi-literate and indecisive. The Third World 'other' is contrasted with the white woman who is depicted as sexually liberated, educated, secular and always in control of her life. This attitude has its roots in the western belief that the third world woman has not 'evolved' as much as her white counterpart and will be able to do so only when she adopts Western definitions and specifications. In such contexts, the significance of the local gender relations and cultural specifications are ignored altogether.

The article concludes, that Western perceptions of third world women are not always true and universally applicable. Even early literary works by third world women, when judged in their own historical, political and ethnic contexts, prove that the third world woman was not always a powerless victim of the patriarchy but was educated, aware and secular in her own way. All these Indian Muslim women in their life narratives have attained a social standing in the society. They challenged the patriarchal set up and made their own identity in their respective lives thus debunking their stereotypical image.

Keywords: Indian Muslim Women, Life narratives, Third World, Minority, Marginality Studies, Literary work.

Introduction

This research article attempts to debunk the stereotypical image of Indian Muslim women, who are considered as illiterate, silent, invisible, having no voice, and living in seclusion in the Western Feminist discourse. This is done by presenting a study of the literary works of Indian Muslim women, written during the twentieth century. Literary works in English literature means creative writing works which include prose, poetry, plays, fiction, and many kinds of nonfictional writing like, life narratives and essays. Life narrative is a narrative written by the author about his/her own life experiences. The term life narrative includes all types of self-referential writings like confessional writings, memoirs and autobiography. Therefore, the terms life narrative and autobiography are used interchangeably in the whole article.

The life narratives or autobiographies chosen for study in this article are Sultan Jahan Begam's *An Account of My Life* (1912), Ismat Chughtai's *A Life in Words: Memoirs* (1979), Begam

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 18:8 August 2018

Dr. Ayesha Siddiqua, B.Com, B.Ed., M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

Debunking the Stereotypical Image of Indian Muslim Women Through a Study of Their Literary Works

Shaista Suhrawardy Ikramullah's, *From Purdah to Parliament* (1963), and Begum Khurshid Mirza's *A Women of Substance: Memoirs of Begum Khurshid Mirza* (1982). These life narratives are the representation of Indian Muslim women as educated, having a voice and self-reliant.

Marginality Studies

This research paper may be regarded, as a contribution to the field of Marginality Studies. The term '*Marginality*' is generally applied to interpret and analyze socio-cultural, political and economic spheres, where underprivileged people struggle to gain access to resources, and equal participation in social life. Likewise, literature of Marginality is the literature that deals with the marginalized class of the world who are kept devoid of their fundamental rights to participate in the social, religious, cultural, political, educational and economic spheres of their lives and are kept aloof, alienated, or segregated physically from the general public.

Needless to add, Muslim woman stands out as a typical marginalized entity in view of both her gender and for being part of the Muslim minority community in India. Even the Western feminist discourse has traditionally been very patronizing to the third world woman. The typical third world woman has been defined as family oriented, domestic, religious, semi-literate and indecisive. The third world 'other' is contrasted with the white woman who is depicted as sexually liberated, educated, secular and always in control of her life. This attitude has its roots in the western belief that the third world woman has not 'evolved' as much as her white counterpart and will be able to do so only when she adopts Western definitions and specifications. In such contexts, the significance of the local gender relations and cultural specifications is ignored altogether. The life narratives of the Muslim women chosen for study in this article, when read in this perspective, reveals that Western perceptions are not always universally applicable. Even early literary works by third world women, when judged in their own historical, political and ethnic contexts, prove that the third world woman was not always a powerless victim of the patriarchy but was educated, aware and secular in her own way.

Early Representation of Indian Muslim Women

These four life narratives written by Indian Muslim women may be regarded as the early representation of Indian Muslim women. All these Muslim women have attained a social standing in the society. They challenged the patriarchal set up and made their own identity in their respective lives.

Synopsis of Nawab Sultan Jahan and her Life Narrative:

Nawab Sultan Jahan Begam was the last female ruler of Bhopal State. She was born in 1858. Apart from being an efficient ruler, Sultan Jahan was a writer and activist. She wrote a number of books discussing the aspects of human life, the book *Al Hijab* is one of them, which deals with the matter concerning purdah or veil system for women. She also participated in the All India Women Conference held during the twentieth century. The last ruling Begam Sultan Jahan was also deeply set in her religious ways but was wise and far-sighted enough to recognize the need to adjust to the change of times.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 18:8 August 2018

Dr. Ayesha Siddiqua, B.Com, B.Ed., M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

Debunking the Stereotypical Image of Indian Muslim Women Through a Study of Their Literary Works

The life narrative of Sultan Jahan Begam *An Account of My life (1912)* was written in three volumes, wherein she gives a detailed account of her life as well as an account of her Great grandmother Qudsia Begam, grandmother Nawab Sikander Begam, mother Nawab Shah Jahan Begam's reign and how these women provided benevolent services to the people. The volumes also talk in great detail about the internal politics of the Royal families in the most fascinating manner. In her autobiography Sultan Jahan Begum wrote the history of the Bhopal state in which she gave the biographical accounts of the previous female rulers of Bhopal and reflected upon her system of governance. The autobiography describes at length the various reforms undertaken by Sultan Jahan's mother, grandmother and by her, as female rulers. The autobiography of Sultan Jahan focuses on three major themes, the reform theme, female identity and the female seclusion (Purdah). (Please check this link for the text of this interesting narrative: <https://archive.org/details/accountofmylifeg00sult>).

The autobiography of Sultan Jahan provides the most valuable details about an outstanding, exceptional female dynasty of an Indian princely state during the British rule giving all the intricate details of the three generations of Bhopal State's Muslim female rulers, who ruled the State most effectively. The autobiography of Sultan Jahan focuses on two main themes the reform of the Bhopal state undertaken by her family members, Sikandar Jahan, and Shah Jahan and the reforms undertaken by her as a ruler. Sultan Jahan in her autobiography goes so far as to describe her grandmother's role in Bhopal as being comparable to that of Emperor Akbar within the Mughal Empire, both rulers, she claims, came to throne at a "critical" point, overcame the immediate "dangers", then brought the government to such a "high state of efficiency" that it continued to be "recognized and praised in every civilized country"(p. 5) Sultan Jahan eulogizes the female rule of her Grandmother Sikandar Jahan in Bhopal by asserting that "Sikandar Begam endowed with all sterner attributes of a ruler, she possessed, in addition, that softer quality, the love of peace and mercy, which only attains its full development in a woman's heart, and by which alone true happiness can be spread"(p.3). Sultan Jahan describing the previous queen in such words also has an implicit criticism of the British who had criticized the Indian men that they lacked the ability to govern because of their debased degenerate condition.

Sultan Jahan in her autobiography is full of praise for the reforms undertaken by her grandmother Nawab Sikandar Begam, in her autobiography she mentions that "the benefits of this happy reign may be summarized as follows, the state army was entirely remodeled, the revenue was increased from eleven to twenty-four lakhs, roads were widened to admit every kind of vehicle, and were properly illuminated at night; two large schools were opened; one the Sulaimania School, for the education of the inhabitants generally, and the other Victoria School for teaching trade and handicrafts" (p.14). Sultan Jahan says that "Not only did this achievement of Sikandar Begam bring credit and profit to Bhopal, but it raised the Begam, as a ruler, high above many of her contemporaries who could boast of wider and more ancient territories; and it showed to the world that a woman can rise superior to the weaknesses of her sex, and can challenge competition even in those spheres of action which demand qualities that men only are supposed to possess" (p.6). It is interesting to note that Sultan Jahan is critiquing the whole idea of what society determines a woman can do and what a man is capable of. According to the Indian society of twentieth century a woman is to be disciplined and controlled by religious authorities, but not for

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 18:8 August 2018

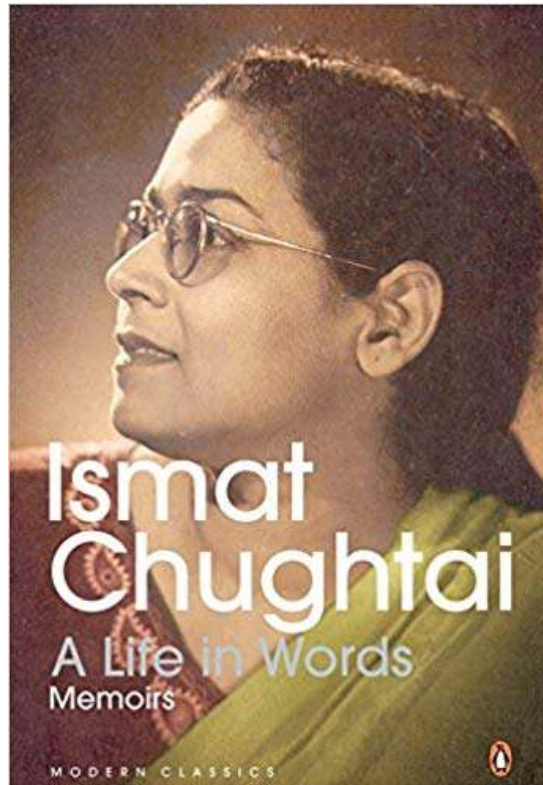
Dr. Ayesha Siddiqua, B.Com, B.Ed., M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

Debunking the Stereotypical Image of Indian Muslim Women Through a Study of Their Literary Works

Sultan Jahan. Even though she is not challenging the male supremacy directly but asserting it through the capabilities of her grandmother Sikandar Begam that, given a chance, women can rule better than men.

Synopsis of Ismat Chughtai and Her Life Narrative

Ismat Chughtai was the best-known author of modern Urdu short stories of twentieth century. She has remained Urdu Literature's most courageous and controversial writer. Ismat Chughtai (1911-1991), was born in Uttar Pradesh, but grew up largely in Jodhpur as her father was posted there as a civil servant. She was educated at Aligarh and permanently settled in Bombay. Chughtai has so far written over a hundred short stories. Her better-known collections of short stories are, *Kaliyan*,(1945) *Choten*(1943), *Ek Bat* (1942), *Chhui Mui* (1952) and *Do Hath*(1955). She has written a few plays as well. Her novels *Ziddi*, *Terhi Lakir*, *Ma'soomah* and *Saudai* display the usual gift of style and arrangement of facts. Chughtai has written six novels so far. Ismat Chughtai was the most controversial writer of her time as she was the first Muslim women writer to write on the issue of women's sexuality and women's emancipation in the conservative Muslim society of her time.



Courtesy: <https://www.amazon.in/Life-Words-Memoirs-Ismat-Chughtai/dp/0143420313>

The autobiography of Ismat Chughtai *A Life in Words: Memoirs* (1979) is a curious piece of work, it is about Ismat's life, her family and her growth and development as a writer. The most important themes of Ismat Chughtai's autobiography are, female seclusion (Purdah), education, religion and female sexuality.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 18:8 August 2018

Dr. Ayesha Siddiqua, B.Com, B.Ed., M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

Debunking the Stereotypical Image of Indian Muslim Women Through a Study of Their Literary Works

Ismat rebelled against the conventions of her family of denying a girl child higher education and get her married. "All the doors of my education closed suddenly. I begged and pleaded to be allowed to stay in the boarding house but met with a stern refusal. Girls who stay in the boarding house were thought to go astray. No one listened to my pleas" (p.106) Ismat Chughtai's life epitomizes a Muslim woman's struggle for education during the twentieth century India. She belonged to a conservative Muslim family who viewed higher education for women unnecessary.

Ismat describes her struggle for getting higher education "I would rather get an education and become independent. From that day I decided that I was going to be the sole navigator of my own life boat" (p.112). "In such a large family I stood alone in my battle" (p.113). Ismat Chughtai was a social rebel. She wanted to get educated and be self-reliant. Ismat exemplifies the struggle of woman to empower herself especially through education. Ismat's struggle to gain autonomy is reflected in her zeal to get educated and become independent.

Synopsis of Begam Shaista Ikramullah Suhrawardy and Her Autobiography

Begam Shaista Ikramullah Suhrawardy was a writer, politician, and diplomat. Throughout her life Shaista made significant literary contributions. She began by writing short articles on reformist topics for Urdu women's magazines such as *Tehzib-un-Niswan* (Lahore) and *Ismat* (Delhi) and later published in English-language newspaper such as *Dawn* (Karachi). After Partition she also wrote essays for the government's Information Department on Muslim ceremonies and Customs, these were collected in a book titled *Behind the Veil* (1953). Shaista Ikramullah was, the first Indian Muslim woman to gain a Doctorate from the University of London in 1939.

From Purdah to Parliament (1963), the autobiography of Begam Shaista Suhrawardy Ikramullah is an extremely interesting account of a Muslim Lady brought up under old Islamic traditions and culture, acquiring modern education at the same time, and gradually emerging as a modern, educated woman taking not only a prominent part in the social life of pre-partition India, but starting with political propaganda at social parties and finishing up as a member of the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan. The basic theme of Shaista's autobiography is that how she, being a Muslim woman from a cloistered family, skillfully combined adaptability and diplomacy that permitted her to come out of purdah and enter a domain of politics.

Shaista recalls in her autobiography how her father argued with one of the relative in educating Shaista "I am only doing what everybody else will do in another twenty years' time. Those who begin something new are always criticized, but if nobody had the courage to begin something new the world would never progress" (p.30).

And in 1948 when Shaista became a member of constituent assembly in Pakistan, she recalls an incident in her autobiography when she had to argue with the Prime minister of Pakistan, Liaquat Ali Khan on the matter that the constitution making body should meet in both provinces East and West Pakistan. Shaista supported the idea, but the Prime minister rejects it by saying "Women never understand practical difficulties to which I retorted if we had considered the difficulties in our way we would never have supported the demand for Pakistan. There was an

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 18:8 August 2018

Dr. Ayesha Siddiqua, B.Com, B.Ed., M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

Debunking the Stereotypical Image of Indian Muslim Women Through a Study of Their Literary Works

applause at that. So I began my parliamentary career with a dissent, and continued in this manner for as long as I was in the Assembly, and outside it" (p.158). This particular incidence shows how a Muslim woman from a cloistered atmosphere of her home was able to make her voice heard in constituent Assembly among its male members.

Synopsis of Begam Khurshid Mirza and Her Autobiography

Begam Khurshid Mirza was an actress by profession. She was the daughter of Sheikh Abdullah and Waheed Jahan Begum, the founders of Aligarh Women's College. Her father was a leading advocate of Aligarh and educationist who was keen to bring education and enlightenment to Muslim women. Khurshid Mirza grew up in Aligarh and married in 1934 to a Deputy Superintendent of Police, Akbar Mirza. Khurshid Mirza is one of the bold women who took up the challenge to choose the profession of an Actress at a time when working in film industry by women from respectable family was seen as a taboo.

The autobiography of Begam Khurshid Mirza *A Women of Substance: The Memoirs of Begum Khurshid Mirza (1982)* discusses at length about Khurshid Mirza's childhood, her education, her parents struggles in establishing the Aligarh Girls school. The autobiography gives an account of her early marriage to Akbar Mirza, her bold move to take the profession of an actress, even though she was criticized by both the families, her parents and in-laws, her leaving the Bombay film industry to take her of children and home. The autobiography also discusses the partition of India and Khurshid Mirza's subsequent migration to Pakistan, her life in Pakistan where she worked as an English newspaper critic, as an activist in All Pakistan Women's Association, as a radio artiste and finally she worked in T.V. Serials. The most important themes of the Khurshid Mirza's autobiography are, Women's education, women's economic rights and woman as a creative artist.

Khurshid Mirza, rejected the orthodox and conservative families on both sides (her parents and in-laws) and pursued her career as an actress. Her autobiography scrutinizes the close, almost claustrophobic kinship ties in Indian society, that can become oppressive and place major obstacles in the search for an individual identity and autonomy. Khurshid Mirza's husband opposed her decision of taking up a film career which she recalls in her autobiography "Akbar had decided against my taking up a film career. I had adopted a film name, Renuka Devi, to escape recognition but it did not mask my identity" (p.139). Khurshid Mirza's acting in film brought upon her the wrath of the Muslim community which she narrates "criticism and prejudice reared its ugly head and articles began to appear in local journals about Muslim girls from educated families setting a bad example to others. The newspapers were particularly vicious about Sheikh Abdullah, who was advised to stop his daughter from any further work in films. My father had to make a public statement to the effect that the responsibility for the behavior of married woman lay upon her husband and not on her father. My mother wrote asking me not to visit Aligarh until the hue and cry had died down. As a result, I did not meet my family for nearly two years" (p.139).

Even Khurshid's father-in-law showed his displeasure which she recalls " Abbaji was equally shocked and even though he wasn't pleased at all, he said philosophically that it was a matter to be sorted out between his son, Akbar and his wife. A close friend and class fellow of my brother-in-

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 18:8 August 2018

Dr. Ayesha Siddiqua, B.Com, B.Ed., M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

Debunking the Stereotypical Image of Indian Muslim Women Through a Study of Their Literary Works

law, Maqbool Mirza, came to their house to find the family sitting somberly looking down at the carpet, deep in shock and shame what they had just heard" (p.142). During the time when Khurshid Mirza acted in films, society did not approve of a girl from a respectable family performing before a camera. When she did that the conservative society of Aligarh vented its anger on her. Khurshid Mirza a Muslim woman from a respectable family entered the world of films, defying tradition and creating an identity for herself. She had the boldness to take the challenge. Khurshid Mirza never regretted her decision in working in films in fact she says after working in her film *Bhabi* she brought gift for all her family members with the money she got from working "I returned home with Rs.500 in my pocket, after having bought presents for everyone. Proudly, I presented my husband with an English tweed combination suit and sent off saris to my sisters" (p.141).

From Diverse Families, Important Stages in the Development of Muslim Women

These four life narratives thus mark some important stages in the development of Muslim women in some important historical stages and they unfold a map of differential perceptions of Muslim women's achievements in diverse fields.

The four autobiographies were produced by women who belonged to diverse Muslim families in India. Sultan Jahan Begam was the ruling queen of Bhopal and belonged to the ruler's dynasty in the Bhopal State. Ismat Chughtai was a writer and was from a middle-class Muslim family of Uttar Pradesh. Shaista Suhrawardy Ikramullah was a writer, politician, and diplomat and was from an upper-middle class family of Calcutta. Begam Khurshid Mirza was an actress, activist, critic, Radio and T.V. artist, and was from an upper-middle class Muslim family of Aligarh. All the four life narratives were written during the twentieth century.

Primarily Twentieth Century Experience

Even though the four literary works have different dates of their publishing the experience these Muslim women autobiographers record is around the twentieth century in India. Sultan Jahan Begam was born in 1858 and died in 1930. She records the experience of late nineteenth to early twentieth century in her autobiography. Ismat Chughtai was born in 1911 and died in 1991. She records the experience of early twentieth century in her autobiography. Begam Shaista Ikramullah was born in 1915 and died in 2000. Begum Khurshid Mirza was born in 1918 and died in 1989.

Sultan Jahan's autobiography *An Account of My Life* was written and published in 1912. The narrative spans from 1877 to 1911. Ismat Chughtai's autobiography was written for Urdu journal *Aaj Kal* from 1979 to 1980 which was later translated in English in 2012. The narrative of Ismat Chughtai's autobiography is not recorded in chronological order as well as it does not give the information with dates, it is a fragmented and jagged account therefore it does not show the accurate span it covers. Shaista Ikramullah's autobiography was written in 1964 in English and the narrative spans from 1915 to 1953. And Begam Khurshid Mirza's autobiography was written for the monthly magazine *Herald* in a nine-part serial from in 1982 to 1983. Later Begam Khurshid Mirza got it published as a book in 1986. The narrative of Khurshid Mirza's autobiography spans from 1857 to 1983.

Education of Muslim Women

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 18:8 August 2018

Dr. Ayesha Siddiqua, B.Com, B.Ed., M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

Debunking the Stereotypical Image of Indian Muslim Women Through a Study of Their Literary Works

The socio-political reform movement of the nineteenth and twentieth century of the Muslim community in India and their encounter with the colonial modernity provided Muslim women with educational opportunities. The goal of the men involved in the movement for women's education among Indian Muslims was to create women who would be better wives, better mothers, and better Muslims. This vision was entirely in keeping with the ideology enunciated by male social reformers in the late nineteenth century, in which women were to be trained better to fulfill their traditional roles, not to undertake new ones.

But the education which Muslim women received prepared the ground for the emergence of a new self-aware Muslim woman who questioned not only the traditional oppression but also the new ideology which continued to assign women a position where they were hardly allowed to face their life on their own terms and in their own way. Education facilitated the growth of individuality, a degree of enquiry and of self-expression. The four Muslim women autobiographers who are examined here are among the newly self-aware Muslim women. These women developed rational arguments in support of their point of view. Therefore, they are iconic of their times.

Upper Middle-class Muslim Women in Urban Areas

The autobiographies of these four Muslim women, gives details of four lives in the context of a changing environment. As these women were reacting to specific situations, a primary concern was naturally with their personal lives. The position of the upper middle-class Muslim women in the growing urban areas, had undergone substantial change. Some of these changes are explicitly mentioned in their autobiographies, other are merely hinted at. Three subjects which come up for clear and frank discussion are those of Muslim women's education, changing patterns of relationship between the sexes within and outside the home, and the taking up of profession by Muslim women. These Muslim women writers wrote their life-experiences, particularly about their positions in their families and communities. Their conceptualizations of their selves reveal the dominant structural barriers of the broader society.

These women are very diverse as they live in varied socio-economic circumstances even though they belong to Muslim community, and thus these women offer a spectrum of voices. They have written their autobiographies within different contexts which may already have their own distinct sets of values, distribution of power, and norms of interaction. These contexts include structures such as the family, class, profession, village and city in which these women find themselves. Within these structures, women are taught certain conventions, traditions, morals, which in most cases deeply influence their behaviour, their conceptions of themselves and of everything surrounding them, and their relationship with other people.

Importance of Time and Place of the Narratives – Creation of Own Identities

Apart from these factors the time and place in which an autobiography is written are important, for value change from one period to another and from one place to another. If one reads these Muslim women autobiographies by current standards, one might find their achievements very ordinary, if one reads them according to the standards of their own time, one might consider them revolutionary.

Ismat Chughtai, and Khurshid Mirza through a bold and defiant examination of their own intimate relationships, have rebelled against them to create their own identities in their life. Both the women Ismat, and Khurshid have taken a bold stand in writing about these oppressive relationships, they were also fully conscious of the sanctity in the Indian society of the very ties that they speak against. These autobiographers have written down the problems they faced in life, to create their own identities.

Family Relevance

Sultan Jahan Begam and Shaista Suhrawardy Ikramullah had the support of their family members in getting education. Sultan Jahan was given an education by her grandmother Sikandar, that intended to prepare her for the rigorous demands of statesmanship. She became a ruler of the Bhopal state and her husband assisted her in running the state till he was alive. In Shaista's family her father and husband helped her to create her own identity. Her father provided her a modern education against the wishes of his relatives and her husband allowed her to pursue a career in politics. In Shaista's progress towards autonomy, her husband's contribution was considerable.

Sultan Jahan Begam, Shaista Ikramullah, and Khurshid Mirza had a happy childhood as they hailed from highly educated and elite families. Whereas Ismat Chughtai did not enjoy her childhood days and have to rebel against the whole family for getting a higher education.

Placing each women writer within her relevant context is essential, for her act of writing is directly informed by it. The family seems to be the dominant context for most, if not all, of these women whose texts are examined here. Their consciousness is mainly embedded in familial ideologies, although other networks of social relations (such as friendships and circles of acquaintances through their professions) also affect them deeply. Although the act of writing one's life story is an act of self-acknowledgment in one way or another, these women could only assert their identities when they sought a departure from the restrictions of the family. The more daring the departure is, the clearer the sense of identity and selfhood.

Common Features

The four life narratives have some common features in them. First, the autobiographers are the rebelling spirits who attempted to live and act against the established norm about women. They challenged the social expectations and stepped out of the stereotyped roles through their strong sense of individuality and self-awareness. Second, the creative force in them is the source of their unconventional thinking and defiance of social, cultural and sexual patterns. Moreover, the education which they received facilitated the growth of individuality, a degree of enquiry and of self-expression in them.

Conclusion

All the four life narratives chosen for study in this article are the self-expression of Muslim women in Indian during the twentieth century. These autobiographies enhance our understanding of how Muslim women view themselves, how they establish connections between their experiences, their beliefs and the evolution of their concerns and aspirations and finally their achievements.

In this process of evolving consciousness of the self and a celebration of their achievements in writing, we recognize the constraints and influences of the gendered ideologies of their times. These four life narratives are testimonies of how these women autobiographers changed their mindset to acquire independent identities and independent thoughts, how they struggled a lifetime of conditioning to work for what they thought was right and just. These Muslim Women autobiographies have tried to debunk the stereotypical image of Muslim women, ingrained in the Western Feminist discourse as invisible, silent, having no voice, and living in seclusion.

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