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Female Voices: Women Writers in Hyderabad at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century

IT has for a long time been an established belief that the invisibility of respectable Muslim ladies in the public sphere corresponded to their silence, that it was next to impossible to retrieve the voice of ladies living in purdah. If anything, this would hold even more true for Hyderabad, widely held to be one of the most conservative among the princely states.

This article, however, proposes to show that there has been a whole movement of female writers in Urdu, both of poetry and of prose, which started from the 1880s and reached a pinnacle at the beginning of the twentieth century.[1] At first I shall try to reconstruct the historical context of this movement and, next, I shall elucidate the social and biographical background of these ladies. My thesis is that this movement, at least in its origins, was closely linked with the group of north Indian bureaucrats and professionals who migrated to Hyderabad in the second half of the nineteenth century and who were among the foremost propagators both of reformist Islam and of women's education. Finally I will focus on the work of two outstanding writers, Ṭaiyiba Bēgam and Bēgam Ṣughrā Humāyūṅ Mirzā, who were prolific in the production both of fictional and non-fictional texts for female readers. Here my thesis is that although the writings do, to a certain degree, show a specific female sensibility in the choice of topics and in their presentation, these gender differences are

[1]It is by chance that while working on the pre-history of the foundation of the Maḥbūbia Girls' School I realized the extent to which women in Hyderabad had found a voice in Urdu. This article can offer only a few preliminary remarks, but it is certainly worthwhile and possible to pursue this subject further through oral history and through research in the many private libraries of Hyderabad.

overarched by common goals, both religious and social, which these women shared with the men of their community.

Non-Mulkis, Reformist Islam and Class Formation

Hyderabad was the largest of the more than 500 princely states which made up almost a third of the Indian territory. While "British India" was under direct British rule, the system of government of these states was more complex. In theory, the relations between the Crown and the Nizam were based on a number of treaties which had evolved since the end of the eighteenth century. These treaties, whose validity had been reconfirmed by Queen Victoria in 1858, established a subsidiary alliance between the two rulers while guaranteeing the internal autonomy of the Nizam. This system proved highly flexible, allowing the colonial power to stress the "oriental" character of the rule, and thus to profit from the indigenous legitimation of government, and to interfere in the administration of the state whenever imperial interests were at stake. Debts, which the British claimed the Nizam had incurred, led to the confiscation of the rich cotton-growing province of Berar—temporarily in 1853, permanently in 1902. This annexation provided the starting point for the reforms of Salar Jang I, Minister of Hyderabad from 1853 to 1883. Hoping that the clearing of the debt would lead to the restoration of the province and, above all, determined to strengthen Hyderabad's financial position so as to eliminate the pretext for further encroachments on the state's sovereignty, he strove for the enhancement of the efficiency of the bureaucracy.

An essential prerequisite for this reform was the training of competent administrators. The first school initiated by Salar Jang, incidentally the first school ever under government control in the state, was the Dāru 'l-'Ulūm, conceived as a "centre of Oriental learning in the Deccan and the means of diffusing a taste for culture through our own classics."[2] Although the school continued to expand until the beginning of the twentieth century, the attainments of the scholars it produced did not enable them to fulfil the role of modernizers of the state bureaucracy.

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[2]Arthur Mayhew, *Report on Education in HH the Nizam's Dominions and Proposals for Its Reorganisation* (Hyderabad: Government Central Press, 1912), p. 191.

Instead, Salar Jang initiated a close collaboration between Hyderabad and the Aligarh College, the state contributing up to 30% of the college budget and providing career opportunities for a considerable number of its alumni.[3] Although the graduates of Aligarh constituted an important percentage of those invited by Salar Jang, they were by no means the only ones to reach positions of great influence, as the examples of Dr. Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya, father of Sarojini Naidu and founder of the prestigious Nizam College, and, a little later, Sir Akbar Hydari, linked to the Tyabji family in Bombay and for a long time finance minister, then prime minister of Hyderabad, prove.

Salar Jang's original intention to make use of the technical knowledge of these men, while at the same time preventing them from becoming a social ferment by isolating them from the old nobility as well as from the British Residency, proved impossible to realize. While the fact that the "Non-Mulkis" appropriated many of the more lucrative posts at the middle and higher echelon of the administration continued to be resented by those who considered these their birthright, already at the time of the great Minister's son, Salar Jang II, an alliance was established between them and the families of Shīʿa nobles. This alliance also included the family of the senior Hindu noble, Maharaja Kishen Pershad and persisted well into the twentieth century.

The problems of this nascent professional class—administrators, but also an increasing number of doctors, lawyers and writers—were by no means specific to Hyderabad. More work certainly needs to be done on the origin of these groups. However, from what is known at present, it seems that they mostly came either from families with a scholarly tradition or from a landowning background. They were no "newcomers" in the sense that they certainly belonged to the ashraf and hence took part in their traditional respectability. At the same time, this inherent social status was decidedly lower than that of the old nobility. The difficulty of legitimating their own social position between a traditional élite, to which they were refused admission and whose lifestyle they could not emulate for lack of funds, and the lower classes was exacerbated in Hyderabad by their largely foreign origin and the still very dominant position of the old nobility.

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[3]For details, see Margrit Pernau, "Reaping the Whirlwind: Nizam and the Khilafat Movement," *Economic and Political Weekly* 18 September 1999, pp. 2745–51.

The propagation of bourgeois values—achievement against birth, husbanding of resources against demonstrative consumption, the emphasis placed on the importance of education, and the turning towards reformist Islam with its accent on the scriptural sources against charismatic legitimation and popular syncretistic forms, on the value of personal piety against salvation through mediation and intercession—can be regarded as elements contributing to the formation of a new cultural habitus. It endowed this group with internal cohesion and also provided it with a respectability which potentially even superseded that of the old nobility.

To this project women were of central importance. The influence they exercised within the families as housekeepers and educators and the role they had in the life-cycle rituals made it imperative to at least gain control over the female sphere, better even to ensure their active collaboration. It is against this background that the emphasis placed on education in schools and through journals and literature has to be read.

Girls' Schools and Women Writers

Whereas the first foundations of schools for girls by the Hindu reformist movements, notably the Brahmo Samaj, the Theosophical Society and the Arya Samaj, dated back to the 1870s but really took off in the 1890s,[4] the first Muslim girls' schools in British India followed suit only after the turn of the century. The female counterpart to the Aligarh College, the Aligarh Zenana Madrasa was established by Sheikh Abdullah and his wife in 1906. Rokeya Sakhavat Husain came next along with the Sakhavat Memorial Girls' School in Calcutta in 1911. The foundation of the Karamat Hussain College in Lucknow followed in 1912.[5] Surprisingly, Hyderabad predated these efforts, establishing Urdu-medium schools for girls almost two decades earlier. The information on these early foundations is scanty, and none of these schools seems to have survived longer than a few years, probably originally being based on the desire to provide a new kind of education for members of the founder's own family.

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[4]Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, vol. IV, part 2 of *The New Cambridge History of India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 41–54.

[5]Gail Minault, *Secluded Scholars: Women's Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 215–66.

Aghorenath Chattopadhyaya established a Hindu Anglo-vernacular school for girls in 1881, educating 76 girls, both Hindus and Muslims.[6] An article, dated 1897, mentions a "Madrassa A'izza Niswan," that had been running for eight or nine years, financed by the state and caring for the daughters of the respectable classes.[7] One of the girls studying there was Ṭaiyiba, the daughter of Sayyid Hussain Bilgrami Imad ul Mulk, the Director of Public Instruction of the state, who went on to become one of the first Muslim ladies to obtain her Bachelor of Arts.[8] Unfortunately, concluded the article, in other cases the results left much to be desired.[9] The same source mentions another school, called Madrisa Nisvāṅ, which was founded, financed and supervised by Nūru 'n-Nisā' Bēgam, the eldest daughter of Salar Jang. Her personal involvement, stemming from the education she herself had received from her father,[10] was said to have brought about excellent results. Under her tutoring the daughter of Munir ul Mulk (the later Salar Jang II), Karīmu 'n-Nisā', learned not only Persian, Urdu and English, but also appeared for the Middle School Examination along with her contemporaries[11]—thus reflecting the transition from private schooling in the homes, where everything centered on the individual and where the culture of a woman was to be judged by the way she spoke, wrote, and behaved, to formal education of a group, aiming at standardized results which could be controlled through examinations which were in turn considered as "proof" of having attained a certain level of culture.

Aside from these educational ventures, in the same year there existed a "Zenana School" that provided education up to the Middle Level in English, Arabic, Persian and Urdu. Here 32 girls were taught in four classes by three European and two Indian ladies. The school kept strict purdah and addressed itself to sharif families, who insisted on

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[6]Sheila Raj, *Medievalism to Modernism: Socio-Economic and Cultural History of Hyderabad 1869–1911* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1987), p. 245.

[7]*Mu'allim-e Nisvāṅ* (Hyderabad) 11/8 (1897), pp. 7–9.

[8]See Sakīna Khediv Jaṅg, *Rasā'ol-e Ṭaiyiba* (Hyderabad: Idāra-e Adabiyāt-e Urdū, 1940), pp. 5–9.

[9]*Mu'allim* 11/8 (1897), p. 8.

[10]She had been the first lady in Hyderabad to receive education through a French governess and had learned Arabic, Persian, Urdu and English. See Raj, p. 246.

[11]*Mu'allim* 11/8 (1897), pp. 8–9.

respectability but were not necessarily affluent.[12] The turn to English-medium education came with the foundation of the Nampalli School in 1890 and the New Zenana School in 1907 (renamed Mahbubia Girls' School in 1910).

While there are some indications that Hyderabad had for a long time known a traditional female poetical culture, little of this had passed the walls of the zenanas. This changed dramatically through the influence of schooling. In his work *Khavātīn-e Dakkan kī Urdū Khidmāt*, published in Hyderabad in 1940, Naṣīru 'd-Dīn Hāshimī gives the biographies of about 150 female poets writing in Urdu in Hyderabad between 1880 and 1940. It would be tempting to use this wealth of biographical information to back up the qualitative arguments established so far with a solid quantitative analysis. However, the data should be interpreted with caution as the information collected by Hāshimī was by no means complete. Beginning his professional career in the Finance Department, probably under the patronage of Sir Akbar Hydari,[13] he later taught at the Urdu Department of the Osmania University—both institutions which were heavily dominated by the Non-Mulkis. His information seems to have come on the one hand from a rather careful reading of the back issues of the different Hyderabadi and north Indian ladies' journals and noting the contributors who came from the state. On the other hand it came from personal knowledge and inquiries among his acquaintances, a procedure which probably favored the inclusion of Non-Mulki ladies publishing for a wider audience rather than the daughters of traditional Hyderabadi families who would be reciting and writing for more domestic circles. Still, some trends can be gauged, viz.:

(1) Right up to the 1940s, even for women who came out of the seclusion of their homes at least to the extent of publishing poetry and prose in their own names, private education remained the rule rather than the exception. This private education, however, was no longer limited to Urdu and Persian and a reading of the classics, but included the teaching of English. In a number of cases Hāshimī mentions girls being taught not

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[12] *Ibid.,* 11/9, pp. 22–3.

[13] Naṣīru 'd-Dīn Hāshimī refers to Sir Akbar Hydari as "Madadgār Nāẓim-e Daftar Dīvānī Finānṣ Sarkār-e 'Ālī" (Assistant Director of the Office of Public Finance of the Government), in his "'Ahd-e 'Uṣmānī mēṅ Khavātīn kī Ta'līmī Taraqqī," in *Yādgār-e Silvar Jubilī* (ed. anonymous, probably Hōsh Yār Jaṅg, Hyderabad: n.p., 1936), pp. 275–82.

only the Qur'ān and the Ḥadīṣ, as was to be expected, but also *tafsīr*, the exegesis of the scripture, and *fiqh*, Islamic jurisprudence, and passing the Munshī Fāẓil examination supervised by the University of Punjab. At present we still know too little about traditional Muslim girls' private education to judge whether this was a continuation of an older trend; it seems at least possible that this might also be a result of the endeavors of reformist Islam to provide women with a greater knowledge of scriptural Islam.[14]

(2) Insofar as Hāshimī mentions the professions of the women's fathers and husbands, state officials of the middle and upper ranks dominated, supplemented by some medical doctors and college teachers. *Jagirdars* and traditional officials (for instance private teachers of the noble families or administrators in the private estate of the Nizam) are rare. What is astonishing, however, is that the number of teachers from the Dāru 'l-'Ulūm whose daughters took up writing seems to be almost equal to those from the Osmania University. If this trend would prove true, it might further corroborate the thesis that "traditional" Islamic education, no less than a Western curriculum, may, under the conditions of a direct or indirect colonial situation, act as a "modernizing" agent.[15]

(3) Women authors in Hyderabad up to the 1940s preferred either to write traditional poetry or to contribute articles on a variety of topics to the diverse ladies' journals. Very rarely do we come across experiments with "new" literary forms, either in poetry or in prose, such as political verses or novels.

Writings for and by Women

In 1886 or 1887—the dates given differ—Muḥibb Ḥusain founded the first Hyderabadi journal for ladies in Urdu, the *Mu'allim-e Nisvāṅ*.[16] Together with a group of like-minded men, not only from Hyderabad but also

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[14]See Barbara D. Metcalf, ed. and trans., *Perfecting Women: Maulana Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi's Bihishti Zewar* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 1–38.

[15]Jamal Malik, *Colonisation of Islam: Dissolution of Traditional Institutions in Pakistan* (Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1996), pp. 14–24.

[16]For his biographical background, see Andhra Pradesh State Committee Appointed for the Compilation of a History of the Freedom Movement in Andhra Pradesh, *Freedom Struggle in Hyderabad*, vol. 3 (Hyderabad: n.p., 1957), pp. 10–76; Minault, *Secluded Scholars*, pp. 108–10.

from north India, he fought for a world in which women would no longer be deprived of the rights granted to them by the Qur'ān and the Ḥadīṯ of the Prophet, but would be enabled by education to lead virtuous lives as defined by reformist Islam. Specially the custom of purdah, as it was practiced by Muslims in the Subcontinent, was strongly attacked as un-Islamic by the journal over and over from the turn of the century, even in articles written by women and, moreover, at times signed with their own names.[17]

The *Mu'allim* was read, and read with approval, by a number of families whose ladies were among the first to come into the open with their writings. Therefore it is worthwhile to have a closer look at its content and at the image of women that it conveyed. Next to literary texts—poems, many of them by the editor himself, dramas, stories and novels—news on women from all over the world occupied the first place. These might be ethnographic reports on the living conditions of women in other places and countries, as well as stories about strong women: young girls who successfully fought against *dacoits* and wild animals, or women who pursued their studies and proved their professional ability. In addition, reports on the Indo-Muslim ladies' movement were printed and new activities were promoted, such as the foundation of a girls' school, or a maternity hospital in Hyderabad, or the admission of women to law studies as only a female lawyer would be able to freely communicate with purdah-ladies and thus defend their rights.

Social evils were sharply denounced: violence against women, the killing of newborn girls, the oppressed condition of widows, polygamy and, of course, again and again, the custom of purdah. This discussion often took the form of an amusing literary quarrel between husband and wife. She, being much better versed in the Qur'ān and the Traditions of the Prophet than her not too bright husband, proves that the form purdah has taken in India is contrary to Islam, which only enjoins women to veil their bodies with the exception of the face and hands, but never calls for the segregation of women. Her husband tries to defend the

[17]See, for instance, Khatun-e Hyderabad Dekkan, "Rasm-e Gōsh kē Muta'lliq Pāṅč Aham Savāl-o-Unkē Pāṅč Munāsib Javābāt" [Five Questions on the Custom of Purdah and Five Appropriate Answers], in *Mu'allim* 11/3 (1897), pp. 53–6; Maulvī Maryam Bēgam Ṣāḥiba, "Parda," in *ibid.*, 11/2 (1897), pp. 54–9.

traditional customs but regularly runs out of arguments—until the next issue.[18]

Though this endeavor to unlock the women's quarters seems highly commendable at first sight, it nevertheless gains a certain ambivalence if one looks at the structure of the arguments in some detail. In a short article, Muḥibb Ḥusain demands the reform of the female ways of dressing. He says there should be efforts to develop garments which enable women to leave their houses and make use of their Islamic freedom, instead of sitting idly "in shameful solitary confinement"[19] in some corner of their houses. What is emphasized, however, in the following arguments is not freedom as a human right even for females, but the fact that it is a duty for women to leave their quarters in order to recognize their faults and mend them through closer contact with the world and through "social intercourse" (in English in the text). Where this does not take place, when women never leave the zenanas, a separate women's world evolves with its own customs and even its own shameless language—the same reformist attacks against the *begamātī zabān* which are also to be found in Maulānā Ashraf ʻAlī Tʰānvī or Ḥālī.[20] In their own quarters, Muḥibb Ḥusain argues, the women were not exposed to the influence of their social equals but of servants and women from lower classes. This intercourse is the reason, he explains, why superstition and evil and superfluous customs still flourish among the women, even of good families.

However, what Muḥibb Ḥusain refers to as superstition to be reformed and what he terms "shameless women's language" was the language of women also in a metaphorical sense. It was their own interpretation of the world, as expressed through songs, proverbs, rituals and customs. This female culture is the price to be paid for the kind of emancipation which reformist Islam is willing to accord to women, or even to force upon them.

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[18]For instance, "Pardē kī Nisbat ēk Miyāṅ Bīvī kī Guftagū" [A Talk on Pardah Between Husband and Wife], in *ibid.*, 8/3 (1894), pp. 5–8; 8/5 (1894), pp. 30–6; and 11/6 (1897), pp. 9–12.

[19]"Hamārī ʻAurtōṅ kā Libās," in *ibid.*, 8/9 (1894), pp. 18–23, quotation on p. 19.

[20]Gail Minault, "Other Voices, Other Rooms: The View from the Zenana," in *Women as Subjects. South Asian Histories*, ed. Nita Kumar (Calcutta: Stree Publishers, 1994), pp. 108–24.

How did women react to these programs? Were they merely a silent audience, victims of reform as they had been of traditionalism? If women spoke out, did their voices differ from their male counterparts? What were the topics they emphasized, which arguments did they use? We shall seek answers to these questions by looking at two of the most prolific—and influential—women writers in Hyderabad at the beginning of the twentieth century, Ṭaiyiba Bēgam and Ṣughrā Humāyūṅ Bēgam. As mentioned above, Ṭaiyiba Bēgam (1873-1921), the daughter of Sayyid Hussain Bilgrami Imad ul Mulk, had been one of the first Muslim girls to pass a university examination. Unlike many others, she was encouraged to pursue her scholarly interest even after her marriage to Dr. Khediv Jang. Her daughters, Ma'ṣūma and Sakīna, were among the first girls enrolled in the Maḥbūbia school, in whose foundation and promotion she took an active interest. Moreover, she was the moving force in almost all the Ladies' Associations set up in Hyderabad since the turn of the century and regularly addressed female audiences both in Hyderabad and in north India.[21] Her speeches and articles have been collected by her daughter. They permit us to gauge not only her breadth of interest, but also her ability to convey new ideas through homely images drawn from the everyday experiences of her audience.

Ṭaiyiba Bēgam is strong in her condemnation of ignorance, for women no less than for men. Not only does the refusal to get the girls educated have no sanction in the Qur'ān and the Ḥadīṯ—the arguments she uses against the excesses of purdah are similar to those deployed by Muḥibb Ḥusain—on the contrary, it will lead to the destruction and downfall both of the faith and the community. For instance, in her "Taqrīr-e Iftitāḥ" (Inaugural Speech), she says:

> Superstition, whose reason is ignorance, is a destroying force. Like some illnesses, which lead to the death of [a] living being, like the malady of a tree, which destroys its roots, the effect of superstition upon religion is like that of a white ant, which ruins the foundations.[22]

In spite of the strong religious overtones, with which both ignorance and knowledge are endowed, at least in the speeches to Muslim audiences, Ṭaiyiba Bēgam claims that education for girls should by no

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[21]Jaṅg, pp. 5–9; Naṣīru 'd-Dīn Hāshimī, *Khavātīn-e Dakkan kī Urdū Khidmāt* (Hyderabad: n.p., 1940), pp. 28–30; Minault, *Secluded Scholars*, p. 208.

[22]See Jaṅg, p. 165.

means be limited to religious instruction. Like British ladies, they should develop the skills to create a comfortable and peaceful home for their husbands and have enough knowledge of the world to share their interests and worries, so that husband and wife may become true friends.[23] If they refuse these self-improvements, she warns her audience, they might well lose their husbands to the foreign competition, who are proficient in the art of housekeeping as well as in keeping the heart of a man.[24]

This education of girls, shown to be in the interest of both the religious leaders and the women, should nevertheless not be understood to be aiming at equality of the sexes. "The contemporary western society has made equality an idol, before which every head bows," she explains. But they don't meditate on the fact that equality goes against nature. "God himself gave man and woman completely different dispositions and desires" and hence different responsibilities. The tasks God created them for may seem menial to them, but housekeeping and education are important even to the extent of constituting the center around which the world revolves. "Men search for the food of the belly, but to provide the nourishment for the soul, this power is given to women. It is they who transform the thorny life in the world into a flower-garden."[25] Therefore girls should not try to compete with men and should not, without necessity, wish for the heartbreaking toils of a profession, but instead attend to their duties in the house and the community, organize the work of the servants, educate their children and care for the poor.

These topics are worked out in great detail in the didactic novels of Ṣughrā Humāyūṅ Bēgam. Born in 1884 to the family of a north Indian doctor who had migrated to Hyderabad, she was married at the age of 16 to Mirzā Humāyūṅ Mirzā, the advocate we met above as the friend and legal advisor of Muḥibb Ḥusain. Like her mother, who was famous for her Arabic and Persian scholarship, Ṣughrā Bēgam had never been to school but had received her training from tutors in the paternal home. Her husband was enchanted by her beauty, wealth and education, and was happy to allow her to reform not only his household, but the entirety of his living habits.[26] Besides contributing regularly to various journals, she edited

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[23] *Ibid.*, p. 157.

[24] See her "'Aurtēṅ aur Mulāzimat" (Women and Service), in *ibid.*, pp. 85–96.

[25] *Ibid.*, pp. 170–1.

[26] Humāyūṅ Mirzā, *Mērī Kahānī*, (Hyderabad: privately published, 1939), pp. 295–9.

her own journal, *an-Nisā'*, renamed *Zēbu 'n-Nisā*, after she moved to Lahore in 1934. Although she wrote 14 major novels, literature for her was never more than a means to coat what she wanted to teach with some sugar so as to make the bitter medicine more palatable.[27] However, the reader is aware on every page that it is medicine that she is supposed to take, and just in case she should forget, Ṣughrā Bēgam regularly summarizes the main lessons.

Sarguzisht-e Hājira is a modernized version of the *Čahār Darvēsh*: four ladies meet and take turns telling their life stories. Mrs. 'Aūn, on whose reform the novel centers, is a young woman spoiled by an English education which provided her with much bookish knowledge, but no training for the heart. Therefore, she is neither able to organize a household nor to interact harmoniously with her in-laws. For her instruction her friends tell their own stories. Hājira shows how she won the heart of her husband, a drunkard who spent more time with his *bazari* woman than with his family, by conforming to his wishes and renouncing her own desires. Patiently and without complaining or taking refuge in her father's house, she bore her sorrows. However she combined her willingness to suffer and to hold onto the truth in the best Gandhian manner, with non-cooperation when her husband tried to approach her tenderly. Jagat Ustānī relates the story of her daughter-in-law who tried to expel her mother-in-law and sisters-in-law from the house in order to become its sole mistress. When this plot failed, she returned to her father's house where she soon found herself under the command of her brother's wife, who responded to her quarrelsomeness by throwing her out of the house. She now has to earn her way as a beggar, a just punishment. And Sāra's story proves that a good woman can care for the children of her husband's former mistress like a real mother.

These tales bear fruit. After the friends had drunk tea together for some days—the only direct action the novel can boast of—Mrs. 'Aūn is reconciled with her husband. In order not to limit the success of their efforts to this one case, the women decide to publish their talks, to found a girls' school in Hyderabad which seeks not only to impart knowledge but also to mould hearts and manners, to set up an association for the remarriage of widows, and to influence parents not to marry their

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[27]Ṣughrā Humāyūṅ Mirzā, preface, *Sarguzisht-e Hājira* (Hyderabad: Shamsu 'l-Maṭba', 1926), p. 2.

daughters to men who are known to be either already married or to keep a mistress and children.

Zohrā,[28] published in 1911, banks on the traditional theme of the good and the bad woman. Zohrā, a beautiful and charming girl, is engaged to her cousin Nāṣir, who is also beautiful, physically and mentally. It becomes clear from the first introduction of the protagonists that they are destined for each other. However, a journey to Delhi ends in disaster. The train derails and Zohrā and her parents are believed dead. Nāṣir marries another cousin, Ruqaiya, who is no less beautiful than Zohrā but lacks her education. Ruqaiya is lazy, susceptible to flattery, and occasionally bad-tempered. Nāṣir hopes to be able to educate her to his standard once they set up their own household, but she proves incapable of controlling the servants, managing the resources, or taking care of her own and their child's health. Quickly, she ruins the items of her dowry, runs into debt, and drives her husband out of the house since he can tolerate neither the dirt, the incessant quarrelling and shouting of the servants, nor her complaints. An illness finally seems to open up her heart to him but before things can be mended she dies, having refused to take the medicines Nāṣir provided for her, relying instead on a fraudulent sufi healer.

Meanwhile, unknown to Nāṣir, Zohrā is not dead after all, the news of her recovery having been suppressed by Ruqaiya's mother. Zohrā completes her education in Delhi with a sagacious old uncle who helps her to overcome her grief at her parents' death by charging her with the administration of his worldly belongings and his library. She becomes interested in the topic of Islamic reform and women's education and prepares a wonderful lecture for a conference at which Nāṣir happens to be present—marriage to him being her immediate reward.

However, her problems have not ended yet. She has to cope with her husband's debt, the wrath of her aunt who cannot bear to see her in the place of her daughter, and the neglected education of Ruqaiya's son. It takes another two years for her education, her intelligence and her sweet nature to overcome these difficulties. A blissful, happy end follows.

The novel is strewn with good advice: how to fight the insects and mice which threaten the beauty of the flower garden, how to keep a family in good health, how to choose a husband for a daughter, and

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[28]Ṣughrā Humāyūṅ Mirzā, *Zohrā, al-Ma'rūf be Mushīr-e Nisvāṅ* (Hyderabad: Maṭba' Akhtar Dekan, 1911).

which items to include in a dowry. More importantly however, Ṣughrā Bēgam emphasizes a well-ordered lifestyle for both men and women. She enjoins her protagonists to carefully reflect on the goals of life and on how to achieve them, and to meditate and consciously prepare themselves to fulfill their duties pertaining to each stage in life. Such a lifestyle is not possible without knowing the value of time and money and spending them cautiously, avoiding laziness, extravagance, and, above all, debt. Without being stingy, Zohrā cuts all unnecessary expenses; for herself, by dressing in a simple way and stitching her clothes herself, and also for her family, by avoiding demonstrative consumption, reducing the number of servants, and moving to a less expensive neighborhood. Even her husband is not spared. For as long as his debts are not paid he must read his newspapers at the club and is demoted to the cheaper second-class membership. When he argues that he would be ashamed to face his friends, Zohrā explains that there is no reason for shame in reducing expenses, but only in spending more than one can afford and accumulating debts.

While the writings by Ṣughrā Bēgam qualify more as fictionalized preaching than as literature, Ṭaiyiba Bēgam has produced a charming little novel which need not shy away from comparison with those of the well-known early Urdu novelists in north India. *Anvarī Bēgam*, written in 1905 and serialized a few years later, was published in book form only after the author's death. It is the story of a prosperous Hyderabadi family which had opened itself up to Western influence. While the girls are educated within the premises of the house—being taught not only the classical languages and arts but also English language and literature and Western music—the sons are sent to England for their studies. The story opens with a dangerous illness of Anvarī, against which the Western-trained Muslim doctor as well as the hakim prove powerless. However, as soon as her fiancé, Sajjād, the son of her paternal uncle, receives the news, he hastens his return from England and nurses her back to health. A retrospect introduces the reader to the history of their love. Two years ago Sajjād had had to interrupt his studies and return to Hyderabad for reasons of health. He had been taken care of by his two cousins until he recovered. Deep love had arisen between him and Anvarī which, however, they had not dared to admit since Sajjād had already been engaged to another cousin when he was a child. After much heartache, restlessness and tears, the old promise was revoked and the engagement of Sajjād and Anvarī was announced in an unpretentious ceremony.

The novel returns to the description of their courtship, the wedding, and their first married years. In spite of all of Sajjād's loving care, Anvarī remains weak and dies after the birth of her third child, not, however, without having, on her deathbed, exacted the promise from her husband that he will henceforth devote his life to the propagation of Islam. From the wealth of issues the novel raises and develops masterfully through secondary plots and characters—for Ṭaiyiba Bēgam is a poet who really enjoys telling a story and calling figures to life—we will take a closer look at only four.

(1) The action takes place only within the private sphere of the family, in the space which is shared by women and closely-related men. Compared to this, the outer world remains peripheral. The men do practice a profession, but it is made abundantly clear that this is due to their own choice and not because of any financial necessity. Accordingly, they have no difficulties in obtaining time off and extended leave whenever the novel requires their presence. Though it is stressed again and again that everyday life should be structured by rules regulating the use of time and by continuous work, professional or otherwise, this submission to an external law, which had been crucial for the development of the bourgeois identity in Europe, is still, to quote Max Weber, "a light coat which can be thrown off at any moment" and not the "iron shell" of the bourgeois secularized ascetic ideal.[29]

(2) A great part of the novel is taken up by illness—the illness of Sajjād which sets the plot moving, the indispositions of the different characters, and, of course, Anvarī 's ailments. These maladies, on the one hand, permit a comparison between the figures of the Muslim doctor, pious but modern educated, and the superstitious and ignorant hakim, as well as a discussion of the methods of diagnosis and treatment. Medical science in this context develops into a paradigm of the entire culture, to be changed or preserved. On the other hand, the illnesses preserve a certain dynamism of the novel, even after the lovers have been happily united, and allow the author to avoid the description of the possible tedium of a rationalized everyday life.

(3) The counterpart to this family, which is open to Western influences but at the same time led to deep piety by the teachings of reformist Islam, is drawn in the picture of Sajjād's former fiancée and her

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[29] *Die Protestantische Ethik* (Gütersloh: Guetersloher Taschenbuecher, 1979), p. 188; my translation.

widowed mother. While Anvarī's family keeps the rules of purdah and limits the contacts of the women to closely-related men, the house of Qudrat is similar to a prison with high walls in which women are not even supposed to enter the garden. The interior is dirty and badly kept, animals run about everywhere, the servants do not obey but quarrel loudly. Qudrat and her mother are ignorant and therefore do not know how to restrain their tempers and to express themselves with dignity. They are at the mercy of superstitions and cling to customs and rituals. The question of whether the marriage rituals should be performed or not becomes the reason for breaking off the engagement between Sajjād and Qudrat. Sajjād is not willing to "make the fool in this spectacle"[30] and Qudrat's mother refuses to give away her daughter without rituals, like a common servant girl.[31] Although the position of the author concerning "superfluous and obnoxious rituals" is unequivocal,[32] she is so much of a poet painting from life that her description of the conflict allows a glimpse of the meaning given to these traditional rituals by women and of the resistance and fear engendered by attempts at "reform."

(4) As with Nażīr Aḥmad, the novel gains dynamism through the dialogues between the protagonists, which allow a discussion of topics close to the author's heart, such as companionate marriage, in which women become the helpers of their husbands and bear the burdens of life together with them; the education of girls, which should not aim at turning every daughter into a little Aristotle, but which should develop both the moral and the intellectual forces of the child; the God-given right of ladies not to be locked up in a house but to move about freely in the enclosed garden and to play games, even to learn how to ride and to shoot like the women of early Islam. If all these are forbidden, she makes her protagonist and her sister say, then one might as well declare eating and being born alive as *ḥarām* for girls, that is, as forbidden by the religious law. "If all the joys of the world were made *ḥarām* [unlawful] for women, except being obedient to the husband, I would prefer death immediately following birth."[33] Such oppression of women could in no case be justified by Islam, but stood in opposition to the words and deeds of the Prophet who had liberated women from the times of ignorance.

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[30] Ṭaiyiba Bēgam, *Anvarī Bēgam* (Hyderabad: n.p., 1905), pp. 68–9.
[31] *Ibid.*, p. 75.
[32] *Ibid.*, pp. 88–91.
[33] *Ibid.*, p. 186.

Anvarī Bēgam certainly is a book with a message. Nevertheless, the message is nowhere allowed to reduce the life stories of the protagonists to caricatures. Contrary to the speeches and articles by Ṭaiyiba Bēgam referred to above, here the argument for women's emancipation is by no means reduced to the progress of society and to the greater comfort of the male part of it. Instead the feelings of the women, their sufferings, and their craving for joy are endowed with a legitimacy of their own. They are feelings which, although they certainly cannot set aside the commands of religion and morality in the name of an unrestricted "freedom," must be taken into consideration as long as they remain within the limits set up by a more liberal interpretation of the Qur'ān.

Conclusion

For anyone looking for a specifically female program, these texts remain a little disappointing. While the presentation of the arguments of these Muslim lady-reformers takes into consideration the requirements of the audience to some extent, still they are largely the same as those used by their male counterparts, although with a significant difference in degree between non-fictional and fictional texts. Whether this is due only to the difference of genre—literature lending itself more easily to the portrayal of the diverging sensibilities of the protagonists—can be assessed only through comparison with novels written by male authors coming from a similar background.[34]

These findings could be attributed to an obligatory apprenticeship women underwent "echoing" the male voice during the time they learned to handle the new media—semi-public lectures, articles and journals, and didactic novels—but it might also be argued that women could not achieve their aims, that is, both female education and the gradual lessening of the purdah restrictions, without the collaboration of men and therefore searched for arguments which would convince men that they had nothing to fear, and much to gain, from their wives' emancipation.

While these explanations hold true to a certain extent, they are both based on the assumption that for a woman the female identity is, or

[34]While Muḥibb Ḥusain was a prolific author as far as poems and articles, he seems to have written only one novel, *Sōhān-e Rūḥ*. Its surviving fragments are to be found in *Mu'allim* II/9, pp. 2–16; II/II, pp. 13–32; II/12, pp. 22–37.

should be, the primary and encompassing point of reference. However, considering that multiple identities are playing on every character—gender, religion, social status, lineage, language, region, etc.—this assumption would at least call for specific investigation.

Taken as a common discourse of reformist Islam the writings of Muḥibb Ḥusain, Ṭaiyiba Bēgam and Ṣughrā Bēgam can be characterized as aiming in two different directions. On one side the target is the close association within the women's quarters between the ladies of the house and their female servants. By bridging social differences this intimacy provided an entry point for popular culture, especially in the fields of religion, medicine and the life-cycle rituals, which at the same time strengthened the ladies in their resistance to the type of education men were willing to extend to them.[35] Interestingly, at this stage in time, it was not so much the popular culture, as such, which came under attack in the name of a purified Islam—the education and enlightenment of servants was not yet a topic—but rather, the association of the ladies with it.

On the other side the dissociation which is to be effected is from the traditional culture of the Nawabs, a culture in which prestige and legitimacy were gained through the refusal to be tied down by a spirit of accountancy and methodical planning. The anecdotes of Nizam Mahbub Ali Pasha, "the Beloved," and his Minister Maharaja Kishen Pershad abound in instances where they gave spontaneously and without counting, where they proved their charisma, their "extra-ordinary" quality, by living a life of overflowing abundance which more often than not was not justified by their financial situation. Though generosity retained its position in the universe of values of the reformers, it was transformed into a well-planned system of efficiently relieving what were perceived as the real needs of the poor.[36]

Women's education thus became part of a larger undertaking: the evolution of an identity for those striving for social ascendancy but who lacked the resources for a feudal lifestyle—the lower nobility and the higher officials of the state. This establishment of a sharif identity, as Gail

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[35]Kumkum Sangari, "Women Against Women" in her *Politics of the Possible: Essays on Gender, History, Narratives, Colonial English* (Delhi: Tulika Publishers, 1999).

[36]Cf. Margrit Pernau, "Creation of a Royal Personality: The Yadgar-e Silver Jubilee of Mir Osman Ali Khan, Nizam of Hyderabad, 1936," in *Internationales Asienforum* 31 (2000), pp. 255–73.

Minault called it, in opposition to the older *nawabi* identity,[37] was a common concern of both men and women. Women under these circumstances acted, in the first instance, not as representatives of a female community encompassing different religions and economic standards—the "classical" zenana—but as the members of a social status group whose respectability was based on a reformist expression of piety and on education, and it was in this capacity that they made their voice heard through literature. ❐

[37] *Secluded Scholars*, p. 5.