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## Forcing Silence to Speak: Muhammadi Begum, *Mir'atu 'l-'Arus*, and the Urdu Novel

### I

AS I TURN to the literary histories of Urdu, my often abandoned mother tongue, I succumb simultaneously to the shock of discovery and a sense of loss. The reclamation of lost and hidden texts accounts for the first: entire intellectual trajectories—buried in the footnotes of colonial chronicles or sheathed in the dogmatic criticism of a bygone “progressive” era—emerge to make me aware of an age of quiet struggle of which I had only a dim or intuitive consciousness. The displacement and concealment of these texts and their creators is the reason for the second: as an expatriate from Pakistan, a sense of deprivation haunts me, for the stories and books that could have shown me the way or served as the foundation of the fictions and essays I may have written.

For me, as for my generation, Urdu literature begins with poetry. Historically, this privileged genre precedes romances, legends and fables. The poetic forms all evolved from Arabic models, usually through the filter of Persian, and retain Arabic generic forms and names: ghazal, *qaṣīda*, *maṣnavī*. The latter provided the closest equivalent to romance, and also offered early versions of realism, autobiographical and otherwise, from which we must insist an important strand of the later realist novel descends. But the earliest forms of Urdu prose fiction, as they began to emerge in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, drew largely upon the tradition of fantasy, oral and otherwise, derived from the Middle East's common treasure of folklore. Only in the second half of the nineteenth century does fiction, as we judge it today, begin to appear—the stern, though covertly humorous, moralism of Nazir Ahmad (1830–1912), the quixotic creations of Pundit Ratan Nath Sarshar

(1846–1902), the liberal Islamism of Abdul Halim Sharar (1860–1926), the picaresque of Mirza Muhammad Hadi Ruswa (1857–1931). Sharar is mainly remembered for his evocations of the great days of Islam, and his Middle Eastern settings, though his best works are set in realistic north Indian Muslim milieus; Sarshar used India as background, but was inspired by Cervantes, and thus returned, consciously or unconsciously, to Middle Eastern forms of narration. Of these writers, whose work spans half a century, only Ruswa has been given adequate critical acclaim, as the first modern novelist of the language.<sup>1</sup> Nazir Ahmad, whose importance as a stylistic innovator and embryonic realist is conceded, is nevertheless consistently discussed as a conservative colonial lackey by the critics of the left. And yet it was Nazir Ahmad who first raised, albeit with diffidence, the question of women and change in the context of a living social situation. This, in itself, is enough to reevaluate his importance; for predictably, the absence of women’s voices amongst those of the founding fathers of our fiction is a deafening echo.

This absence, though, was amply compensated by the appearance of the radical and feminist novelist Ismat Chughtai in the 1940s, fully armed, like Minerva, with the weaponry of Marx and Freud. In her wake came other voices; in any history of contemporary Urdu literature the names of major women writers who refuse to consider gender a restrictive category abound.

But where did it begin? As a migrant, I have always looked to literature for records of the subversive and subaltern voice—and the only early woman writer who stealthily revealed herself was Hijab Imtiaz Ali, a fabulist of the thirties who, in spite of a feminine first-person vein of social and sexual criticism in her short stories, hardly compared with her contemporaries in China or Japan, for example. But a thesis on the Urdu novel submitted in 1939 by Shaista Akhtar Banu Suhrawardy (later Ikramullah—the first Muslim woman to gain a doctorate from the University of London)<sup>2</sup> gave me, a few years ago, a partial answer to my question. An Urdu collection of essays on writing women had led me back to Suhrawardy, who claimed that women writers had, in the first

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<sup>1</sup>For a discussion of Ruswa and some of the other early narrative fiction writers, see Ralph Russell, “The Development of the Modern Novel,” in his *The Pursuit of Urdu Literature* (London: Zed Books, Ltd., 1992), pp. 83–111. —Eds.

<sup>2</sup>It was later published as *A Critical Survey of the Development of the Urdu Novel and Short Story* (London: Longmans Green and Co., 1945). —Eds.

decades of the century, proved to be the preeminent practitioners of the form. But the names she mentioned have been erased from the present canon, bar that of Nazir Sajjad Hyder (1894–1967), who was known as one of her time’s foremost novelists. But even Hyder is now only known as the mother of her daughter Qurratulain Hyder, who is Urdu’s greatest living prose writer and the only literary figure who has constantly, if not analytically, signposted the pioneering presence of women in Urdu literature’s evolution. Nazir Ahmad, whom Suhrawardy admired greatly, was according to her the inspiration for these early women writers—the first of whom, Muhammadi Begum, wrote her first novel in 1902.<sup>3</sup> This, according to Suhrawardy’s thesis, was *Sharif Bēti* (The Noble Daughter); she holds that it was inspired entirely by Nazir Ahmad’s first novel, the classic *Mir’ātu l-‘Arūs* (The Bride’s Mirror; 1869), written in the aftermath of the so-called Mutiny of 1857, in the repressed turbulence of the 1860s. Nazir Ahmad’s novel insists, humorously and affectionately, upon the need and importance of education for women. His heroine, Asghari, is a paragon of the required virtues of Indian Muslim womanhood: chastity, charity, piety and thrift. She is also highly literate, resourceful, shrewd, self-willed, independent and, when required, wily—qualities essential in a male-dominated world which, though he accepts it with a pragmatism characteristic of his culture, Nazir Ahmad only ambiguously condones. In fact, his heroines, who demurely mouth the moral principles of that world, consider themselves innately superior to their men as managers, administrators and ethical beings. Nazir Ahmad, though much criticized for his failure to articulate a condemnation of the colonial system in his fiction, actually highlights a significant social and intellectual trend of his time: the search for new-found cultural pride amongst the defeated, weary Muslims of the Subcontinent. Thus, perhaps in spite of his supposed conservatism, Nazir Ahmad may just as well be recognized as a seminal figure in the formulation of a nascent ideology of modernity and national liberation. With wit and irony, he struggles in his writings against the outdated and restrictive practices that had accumulated in the name of religion and tradition as a result of subjugation and colonialism and were holding back his people from progress. From within his scripturally sanctioned framework, Nazir Ahmad was quick to see that the predominant evil of his community was the growing ignorance, and resulting misuse, of religious doctrine and the Qur’an’s egalitarian

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<sup>3</sup>For a discussion of Muhammadi Begum, see *ibid.*, pp. 123–30. —Eds.

message, and even more importantly, the neglect of those Islamic laws that, far from negating them, upheld the basic rights of women.

Reading Nazir Ahmad at the close of the following century, I cannot help but note that the importance of his work is not merely restricted to the elegance of his style or his unerringly accurate portrayal of a society, struggling against decline. With regret, I remark that today's obscurantists who wage wars in the name of faith, using misinterpreted religious texts as arms and ammunition, have much to learn from him. Many of the oppressive practices that Nazir Ahmad decries have vanished, and the obscurantists perhaps would wish to reinstate them. Their disappearance is due, in large part, to Nazir Ahmad and his fellow-reformists. But it owes far more to his literary "daughters," many of whom would have regarded with pride those scholars—Fatima Mernissi of Morocco, Leila Ahmed of Egypt, Kishwar Nahid of Pakistan—who today work unceasingly to wrest from the hands of the self-appointed arbiters of Islam the interpretation of its laws, offering instead insights that are fresh, enlightened and pragmatic.

But how can the figure of Nazir Ahmad—who, at very best, we regard from our liberal perspective as a benevolent paternalist—have influenced his successors, many of whom were to declare their colors as feminists in the second decade of the century, when even in the imperialist Europe of the time feminism and the practice of fiction could in no sense be seen as synonymous? The answer, perhaps, lies in the fact that the educated, thinking heroines of Nazir Ahmad reflected not only his reformist ideology or his fantasies, but a growing truth of which, as a realist, he was aware. Faced by a world in which the ancient stable order had changed and their men were increasingly leaving home in search of employment in the colonial services, women were responding to what was, more than an idealistic project, a practical necessity by becoming managers of large households and their commerce. Sequestered in the customary *pardah*, they could act only by obtaining an education that would enable them to gain a measure of autonomy at least within their homes. This is, to some extent, the reason why Nazir Ahmad's highly respectable *Asghari* opens, with remarkable success, a school for the daughters of the rich.

It is the centrality of the *maktab*, Suhrawardy holds, that links Muhammadi Begum's *Sharif Bēhī* to Nazir Ahmad's classic. But, as she comments, the milieu to which Muhammadi Begum's heroine Sharifunnisa belongs is humble: it is, in fact, one of deprivation and near destitution. Like *Asghari*, Sharifunnisa sets up a school for affluent girls, but not as a pleasant occupation; she is driven to it by need. *Asghari* is a

married woman who disdains the commercial benefits of learning. Sharifa is an unmarried teenager; her father, a petty government clerk, is dead of sickness and her mother mad; her brothers, younger than herself, incapable of earning. To feed herself and her family, she first resorts to her mother's secret profession of sewing and embroidery—though poor, the genteel morals of the family forbid them from trafficking with commerce and trade. Then her reputation for literacy—she is self-educated—prompts the aristocratic women who patronize her to ask for her services as a tutor to their daughters. She consents; but, afflicted still with the residual proprieties inherited from her genteel mother, she refuses to leave her home and proclaim her need: thus, a school is created in her own house. We must also note that in her endeavors she is aided by an old working class woman, untrammled by the confinements of the veil, who shrewdly divests Sharifa of her lower middle-class proprieties and encourages her to work, without, however, causing her to break the boundaries of her *pardah*. It is the appeal of money to Sharifa's thrifty nature, and the possibility of educating her brothers, which makes of her the first educated single and entirely self-supporting working woman in Urdu fiction. She nevertheless remains apparently quite conventional in perspective, unlike the subversive Asghari who uses the status quo to her own advantage. She believes that her considerable achievements are for the benefit of her brother; her own autonomy is only marginally important. And in her piety—as a Western student of literature recently observed—she attributes her luck to divine providence and not to her own efforts or the help of the old woman. Yet a careful reading of the text—subtle, delicate and witty though it is—reveals another coded, religious message. God, we know, helps those who help themselves—but here, we are led to believe, He only helps those who do help themselves, and the help that comes from Him comes through others. So neighborly compassion is a sublime virtue, and it is mostly possessed by women and the poor. Providence, we can assume, also respects working women, puts few obstacles in their way, and eventually rewards them: Sharifa's doubts about her projected work have to do with the social and her position in it, not with God, His Prophet, His Holy Book. An interesting footnote to Muhammadi Begum's view would come from the theologian Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi (1864–1943), considered conservative by most, in his guidebook for women, *Bihishtī Zēvar*.<sup>4</sup> Exhorting them to work and enjoy

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<sup>4</sup>For a partial translation of this work, with commentary, see Barbara Daly

the results of their endeavors, he enumerates the professions (including teaching, calligraphy, and book-binding) that were open to God-fearing women who did not want to leave their homes, and cites the example of Zainab, one of the Prophet's wives: a renowned craftswoman, she worked with her hands and was praised for her charitable nature.

It is at this point, however, that I have to depart from Suhrawardy's reading of Urdu fiction's founding mother's writings. For the *Sharif Bēz*, upon which the case for the "derivative" nature of its author's fiction rests, is no doubt a tribute to her great predecessor; but far from being Muhammadi Begum's first novel, it is, as its preface reveals, the last of her dozen or so books (which, as Suhrawardy also details, include various works of non-fiction too). It was written in 1908, a few months before her death from what we can assume was influenza at the age of thirty. The writer and the publisher designated it not as a novel but "a tale for young girls"—the generic designation used for all Muhammadi Begum's fiction is the Arabic-derived "*qiṣṣa*," never the westernized "roman" or "novel" or the modernist "*aḥṣāna*." Thus, the significant and—as we shall see—highly original achievement of Muhammadi Begum has been negated by the chronological error of a twenty-four year old Muslim woman scholar who, writing in English, in an English academy, in colonial times, did her a disservice along with the service she sought to render for her and their shared mother-tongue.

## II

In 1994, fifty-five years after Suhrawardy submitted her thesis and influenced every critic—all women and woefully few—who mentioned Muhammadi Begum in their surveys of Urdu fiction, I found Muhammadi Begum's three novellas and one collection of essays, after a long search in the very university where I teach Muhammadi Begum's language and mine, and from which Suhrawardy graduated. (Later, I would piece together the writer's life from a variety of fragmented sources, most important of them Gail Minault's long socio-historical

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Metcalf, *Perfecting Women: Maulana Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi's Bihishti Zevar* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). —Eds.

essay,<sup>5</sup> particularly informative for those who favor a biographical approach. Minault does not examine Muhammadi Begum's fiction, summarizing for the most part Suhrawardy's synopses, and sees her mainly as Mumtaz Ali's companion and a pioneering woman journalist.) Two days of intensive reading were enough to revise Suhrawardy's mistaken chronologies, for the archives of SOAS had unearthed the first edition of *Şafīya Bēgam* (Lady Safiya), actually Muhammadi Begum's first novel, clearly dated 1902 on the cover above the publisher's imprint.

The date of the supposed first novel, of which I located a reprint, is reported, as I have mentioned, in its preface. This was written by Sayyid Mumtaz Ali (1860–1935), the author's publisher, who—as I was soon to find out, though he does not mention it—was also her husband, a highly respected Islamic scholar who had settled in Lahore. Mumtaz Ali was the author of *Huqūq-e Nisvān* (Women's Rights), a work of Qur'anic interpretation in favor of women and of reciprocity in gender relationships. He also founded a publishing house, and published *Tehzīb-e Nisvān*,<sup>6</sup> one of the earliest, most enterprising and celebrated Urdu magazines for women, which Muhammadi Begum would edit single-handedly from her marriage in 1897 until her death some eleven years later. Mumtaz Ali, though a regular contributor, offered no editorial interference or censure. In 1898, he published the work which remains the most radical on gender and Islam to appear during colonial times; its candor has rarely been equaled since by any male purporting to speak in tones of religious scholarship and authority. In it, he argues for equal rights of divorce and mandatory alimony in all cases for women, the abolishment of polygamy, and free access to public space with nominal and minimal veiling (i.e., a head covering)—if insisted upon by traditionalist women—instead of the confinement within which women suffered and with which they continued to collude. Passages from the Qur'an are quoted in their entirety and careful interpretations of their meanings offered in a moderate light. Much of his attention is focused harrowingly on women tortured, ignored, unilaterally repudiated and sometimes even driven to suicide or death by husbands who, though they

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<sup>5</sup>“Sayyid Mumtaz ‘Ali and *Tahzīb un-Niswan*: Women's Rights in Islam and Women's Journalism in Urdu,” in Kenneth W. Jones, ed., *Religious Controversy in British India, Dialogues in South Asian Languages* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 179–99. —Eds.

<sup>6</sup>It was a weekly magazine which lasted from 1898 to 1949. —Eds.

claimed to be Muslims, were oblivious to the cardinal sins they were committing.

Muhammadi Begum, the daughter of a father who had insisted on her education, would focus in her writings on social rather than religious criticism, using a low but steadily burning pitch which would render her argument more convincing. Assured of her freedoms as a Muslim woman and reassured, perhaps, by her husband's enlightened reading of the Qur'an, she was determined to pass on these freedoms to other women, not so much by berating prevalent spiritual practices as by highlighting those that were positive and empowering, albeit neglected and unused. We cannot compare Muhammadi Begum with her Western counterparts: she was no Muslim Colette, harangued into her vocation by an exigent husband, nor a retiring neurasthenic Woolf, propped up by an ambivalent one. Mumtaz Ali's encouragement of his wife was of vital significance, but her ultimate vision was to be resolutely her own: she seems to have had no need of intellectual guidance. A more fruitful comparison is with her exact contemporary, the aristocratic Indonesian Kartini, who wrote, in Dutch, about the evils women in Java bore, the socio-political rather than Islamic causes of these evils, and the need for women to express their creativity and autonomy. Kartini submitted to an arranged, polygynous marriage and died in childbirth at the age of twenty-four. Thus she resembled, as we shall see, one of Muhammadi Begum's heroines more than she did Muhammadi Begum herself. The latter appears to have been a poet of talent when she married. The editorial job came with the arranged marriage: it is tempting to believe, after reading her novels, that her own, as well as her husband's, knowledge of her nascent talent was the inspiration for their match. That her journalistic apprenticeship honed her literary skills and led gradually and inevitably to the writing of fiction to convey her message of female emancipation is self-evident. Unlike Kartini, she reached a wide audience of women during her lifetime, and more significantly wrote in Urdu, a language understood by far more women in her country than the language of the colonial masters. Her husband had opted out of colonial service, and their joint enterprise can thus be seen as an early NGO. Though they had links with the clerical aristocracy and the landed gentry, the couple lived a middle-class life as a nuclear family, both of them working full-time in their family business of publishing and journalism. In addition, Muhammadi Begum looked after their home, her stepchildren, and gave birth to one son of her own. Thus the influences she brought to her first novel seem to derive from her own unconventional and yet religiously sanctioned circum-



stances, her observations as a purdah-observing woman who came into touch with a multitude of voices during her work as a journalist, and her familiarity with her husband's reconstructive scriptural and social project. The influence of Nazir Ahmad, as we shall later see, she would assign to textual scrutiny, questioning and rewriting, ultimately reappropriating a woman's right to speak in her own voice. Suhrawardy's mistaken chronologies imply, instead, that the standards imposed by male authors, however benevolent, were those that Muhammadi Begum inherited and elaborated, thus writing her forever into the margins of patriarchal ideology.

And now to her first novel. *Şafīya Bēgam* is bleak, unrelenting, with a few technical imperfections which derive not from the realist Nazir Ahmad but from the older, fabulistic genres, which were rich in coincidence and correspondence. It is a tragedy, and is in my opinion entirely uninfluenced either by the older author or by Western forms, though one is reminded, by its structure and its content, of Chekhov the dramatist at his darkest, or the Ibsen of *The Doll's House* and *Hedda Gabler*. Safiya, the only daughter of adoring parents, is encouraged to study by her father, and is the peer of any son in her mastery of languages, arts, and even, under the tutelage of an English woman doctor, medicine. Betrothed in childhood to a close cousin, Safiya, now an adult, protests and convinces both her father and the cousin himself to dissolve the commitment. After some conflict, she succeeds, and even agrees to a more suitable match, only to be thwarted by the forces of reaction: her mother, in collusion with the father of the new groom-to-be, forces her to marry her sickly, rejected fiancé. Her refusals, though fervent, are shockingly conventional, perhaps an indication of the power of conditioning: she tries to convince her mother of the social disgrace of contracting and breaking marital transactions. After a night-long vigil in which she writes the story of her life as a warning to her "sisters," Safiya says her prayers for the last time and dies. Here irrationalism and innovation combine. Muhammadi Begum, a believing and practicing Muslim, is afraid, as Suhrawardy also aptly notes, to stage a suicide for her heroine. And though, in a scene reminiscent of Greek tragedy, the chorus of onlookers comments that she must have taken poison, the reader, who sees Safiya at the moment of her death, is left to draw her own conclusion, one being that Safiya was deprived of a burdensome life by some such natural cause as a heart attack (self-willed, or more appropriate, granted as an answer to her prayers by divine agency). The trope of heartbreak is evidently borrowed from traditional tales. On the other hand, the third-person narration is broken into by

Safiya's own written words: for the first time, a woman's *I* resounds in Urdu fiction. What is more, Safiya's last testament is addressed to the editor of *Tehzīb-e Nisvān*, Muhammadi Begum herself, subtly creating the impression that Safiya's is a real-life story retold by the author, slightly amended to protect confidentiality. This explains away the unlikely indication of a natural death.

But this scene, too, was to have a far-reaching effect: Muhammadi Begum's followers would, in later novels, present their readers with a cast of brides who, rather than submit to a feared marriage with a man not of their choice, commit suicide on their wedding night. Occasionally these bids are unsuccessful, as in the bewitching picaresque fiction of the Lucknow writer who called herself merely Khatun (a woman). Here Shaukat Ara, in the 1916 novel of that name, survives poison, and resolutely refuses the suitor her father compels her to accept. Faced with a choice between filial devotion and her own freedom, she finally writes to her father to tell him she is leaving to seek her own fortune (she is educated and, through her own creative efforts, financially independent). As evidence and defense, she refers to a Muslim woman's right to choose her partner, and says: Thus God and His Messenger have decreed. (This phrase of reprimand to the fathers will be used by later women writers, into the thirties, to defend women from outmoded and restrictive social practices.) In Muhammadi Begum's vision, it is as yet impossible for an educated and intellectually emancipated woman of the privileged classes to make a bid for an independent single existence. But a mere eight years later Nazr Zahra, later Nazr Sajjad Hyder, aged sixteen and writing then as Miss Nazrul Baqar—friend and protégé of Mumtaz Ali and Muhammadi Begum, published first in their magazine and then by their press—would enter and explore this contested territory.<sup>7</sup> The heroine of her novel, Akhtarunnisa Begum, forced into marriage with a man not her social or intellectual peer and widowed shortly after, escapes from a life of abjection and the threat of sexual abuse to the freedom of education and financial autonomy in a career as a teacher. She discards the veil as a

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<sup>7</sup>Nazr Sajjad Hyder is also author of "Purdah," an essay which offers carefully reasoned argument against women's confinement behind purdah; available in English translation by Vasantha Kannabrian and Rasheed Moosavi in Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, eds., *Women Writing in India, 600 B.C. to the Present*, vol. I: 600 B.C. to the Early 20th Century (New York: The Feminist Press at The City University of New York, 1991), pp. 392–93. —Eds.

matter of convenient necessity. Only then does she return to her negligent father. Hyder concludes by berating men as the arbiters of society and the oppressors of widows in a tirade unprecedented in Urdu fiction, calling upon beleaguered women to take up arms in their own defense. Within about eight years Hyder produced her next two novels. One, aptly called *Āh-e Mazlūmān* (The Sighs of the Oppressed), juxtaposes the lives of two women of vastly different classes, equally afflicted by their husbands' wanton polygamy. Both triumph before the author gives vent to her rage in a rousing demand for monogamy. In the second, *Hirmān Naṣīb* (Fated to Disappointment), polemic is suspended by a writer in command of her medium: Firoza, liberated and unveiled, sorrowing over the early death of her brother, rejects her loved and loving fiancé and dedicates herself to the practice of medicine, as Safiya, too, wished to do. When she reencounters her lover, married now, she sends him away again: she is wed to the hospital she has built as a memorial to her brother. Firoza is probably the first woman in Urdu fiction to prefer a profession to the promise of passion: with her, feminist modernism makes its first appearance. Paradoxically, her creator, who was soon to discard the veil in imitation of her creations, was by now happily married to the elegant writer Sajjad Hyder Yaldaram (1880–1943). The alliance had been masterminded by Mumtaz Ali; Muhammadi Begum had been dead four years.

### III

In Muhammadi Begum's early fiction, the terrible threat of the daughter's "sinful" suicide-as-protest is first introduced, indicating that the real sin is, however, the social practice of using women as commodities or chattels. The very institution of arranged marriages is called into question by the author who, ironically enough, had a happy one herself, in all probability because, in the manner of enlightened families of the time, her father not only sought her consent but asked for her approval. Thus, her first published work, a 1901 collection of linked essays called *Rafīqu 'l-'Arūs* (The Bride's Companion), appears at first glance to be cautious and conventional in comparison to *Huqūq-e Nisvān*, her husband's forceful and dynamic polemical work. However, the books are intertextually related in their common call for reciprocity, or what feminist critics have termed true reform in the personal domain: alliances based on love, mutual trust, and affectionate companionship, qualities lacking from the

unequal marriages the couple condemned. Also in her essays she raises for the first time, albeit tentatively, the question of women—in particular those of the respectable middle classes—and paid work, which she was later to examine in the novella *Sharif Bēṭī*. This was a matter hitherto regarded as unmentionable, not to say taboo, although perfectly permissible within the frame of Islamic morality. Later, she was also to interview—and subsequently write the biography of—Ashrafunnisa (note the similarity of the names Ashraf and Sharifa), a widow who had earned her living first as a teacher and then as the highly respected headmistress of a girls' school in Lahore.<sup>8</sup> Muhammadi Begum, unlike her heroines, had little respect for social proprieties when it came to women and work, accepting the matter as one of the inalienable rights granted to her sex by their religion, just as she chose to remain in purdah all her life.

Whereas the essays hold up a mirror to her ideals, Muhammadi Begum's fiction addresses the darker aspects of reality. Her feminism, in her essays relegated to subtext, would emerge more clearly in the ongoing process of her storytelling. Here her critique of forced marriages is couched in another critique: the more acceptable protest against the barbaric practice of betrothals and even marriages in childhood, which had nothing to do with Islam and every connection with the retrograde practices of almost all the Subcontinent's communities under colonial rule, during which preexisting social structures appeared to have worsened. The study of the writings of Muhammadi Begum and her successors raises another important question: that of the extent to which the oppression of peoples by regimes imperial, colonial or neocolonial parallels the subjection of women by society, and of the discontinuous coincidence of the rise of women's movements and those of national liberation. All too often the latter appropriates the former and, in the aftermath of independence, dismisses it as a secondary agenda. Then the demand for gender equality rises again, to be faced with fresh hostilities, political, social, religious; it is reformulated with ever more radical words of resistance, for which the documents of self-determination are essential material.

The call for self-determination—and prior to that, self-understanding—is inscribed in Muhammadi Begum's first two novels as a bond

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<sup>8</sup>For a biographical sketch of Ashrafunnisa Begum, a translation of her autobiographical account, and discussion of female literacy and widow remarriage issues, see C.M. Naim, "How Bibi Ashraf Learned to Read and Write," in *AUS* #6 (1987), pp. 99–115. —*Eds.*

between writing and death: it is the knowledge and the fear of immolation that forces silence to speak. Only in her final novel will writing link itself to life. In *Āj-Kal* (Today and Tomorrow), Muhammadi Begum's most restrained, compressed and pessimistic novel, the first-person narrator Fahmida addresses her sisters as she approaches her death. Whereas the prose of *Şafya Bēgum* is, though utterly devoid of sentimentality, prone to melodrama, the laconic monologue of Fahmida rejects both. The intertwined detachment and intensity of the earlier novella's third-person narrative and extensive use of dialogue is replaced in *Āj-Kal* by a tone that appears to articulate the damaging internalization of a limited and subordinate self-image and position, that of Woman. We are reminded of the more passionate Safiya, who nevertheless uses approved societal norms to protest against her marriage to her diseased cousin, and of Sharifa and her mother, who cross with trepidation the self-imposed fence of conservatism to earn a living. Early in her account, Fahmida tells us that the flaw that drove her to perdition was that of procrastination, putting off until tomorrow what could be done today.

The signaling of fatal flaws of character is a device that Muhammadi Begum may have taken from Nazir Ahmad's classic novels, particularly *Taubatu 'n-Naṣūḥ* (The Repentance of Nasuh; 1874), as she did the name of her heroine. But the older author had used this strategy to castigate masculine defects; Muhammadi Begum's, however, is a feminization of vice and virtue that can be read, we shall see, as highly ironic. It is certainly, if not a reversal of its initial premise, an equal indictment of collective as well as individual failings. Fahmida tells us that she was a brilliant child: if she had been a son, so her father said, she would have made him famous. But she was a daughter, and marriage—to a virtual prince—was her destiny. Her husband was enamored of her presence: her wit, intelligence and gift of repartee enthralled him, but even more, she implies, her physical charms. He surrounded her with gifts and servants; she was not allowed to move. In the absence of attendants he would raise her glass of water to her lips, wipe off the drops, and even pick up her shoes. Thus, she slyly interjects, the indolence which, though innate in her, had been kept at bay by her parents' vigilance and a woman's practicality, grew into sloth. She became a mother. Though she only indicates this, we learn that her husband was as slothful and negligent as she, or his love of pleasure made him so. His estates were being robbed and ruined as he lay in his wife's lap. He decided to act and in doing so requested his wife's assistance in accounting and paperwork. She, lost in her world of self indulgence, neglected both her tasks and her children.

But the subtext tells us that her husband, too, became neglectful of her, and delegated responsibilities to her which he did not oversee. When her servant woman robbed them of a neighbor's jewels and she tried to take action against the woman he dissuaded her, rendering her ineffectual. Then a wall needed repair: her requests for help were ignored, and when it collapsed and killed her child her husband sent her, with her younger son, to her parents. Her depression increased, but her husband took another wife and told her not to return; he would continue, however, to support her. He then arranged for the abduction of the surviving child. Her already fragile health deserted her; at the time of the narration, she has succumbed to tuberculosis and is awaiting death. She is writing her memoirs, defying death, putting her considerable talents to use, writing her way out of adversity. Her relentless—and socially sanctioned—self-criticism finally turns to protest:

I admit that I often failed; but O my husband, you who claimed to love me, to treat me this way at the end shames your masculine dignity. I was to blame. But you knew well that I did not have the courage to bear this punishment. You married again, and so be it; but to cut off a piece of my heart and take it away?... My child, my Asif, is lost to me like Joseph to Jacob. (tr. mine)

Now the text, too, announces what the subtext has already proclaimed. Fahmida is more sinned against than sinning: her laziness, a symptom of her unfulfilled existence, is scarcely reason for so complete and dire a punishment; her husband, too, has played his part in her downfall. But there are other, deeper resonances in this cautionary tale. We cannot, with our Freudian and post-Freudian insights, fail to see the link between Fahmida's "laziness" and the pampering of her father and husband who simultaneously laud her intellectual prowess and fail to accord her the dignity of self-determination. In her husband's case, her abilities are seconded as an auxiliary to his own requirements. Unlike the resourceful and resilient Asghari, a male author's projection of feminine identity, she is unable to use them to her own advantage. This theme is underlined by Muhammadi Begum's quiet depiction of a suffocating and claustrophobic feudal milieu, in which Fahmida is initially expected to enact the hetaera—at once witty entertainer and sexual object—for her husband; and later, as a mother, to transform herself into a feudal matriarch. Her "laziness" then transforms itself, as we watch, into a sinister dance of depression/repression: the Hedda Gabler-like self-destruction of

a gifted, privileged woman without a container for her energies. Yet, as we have seen, writing her guilt and then her repudiation and unmothering opens the floodgates of Fahmida's silences, allowing her to speak of inequality in the coded but eloquent vocabulary to which she has access.

Thus we see that Muhammadi Begum's fiction, rather than beginning as a diluted tribute to the writings of a reformist master and culminating in tragedy and despair, followed instead the opposite trajectory: as a movement from pessimism and a quiet call to arms, to optimism and hope. Her final fiction, far from being the derivative moral tract of a novice writer, was a seasoned storyteller's clever reformulation of a Cinderella-like traditional tale in terms of contemporary realism—a parabolic and yet pragmatic message to future generations, which would wean them from the *mir'āt* (mirror) on which they had hitherto been nurtured, and offer a text both complementary and contradictory. It was a vision arrived at after her long process of observing, analyzing and articulating collective despair. *Sharif Bēṭī* is also the highly sophisticated reclaiming, by a woman and for women, of women's territory. Muhammadi Begum reworks and amends, with affection and insight, the reforms suggested by Nazir Ahmad. The world she presents is a world of women, an underlying network of alliances which crosses class boundaries and encompasses an economy of surplus of which men are only faintly aware. Men, though often villainous, are phantoms in Muhammadi Begum's imaginative recreation of her world: fathers, like Safiya's and Fahmida's, sympathetic but weak, husbands and fiancés sentimental and treacherous. Hope lies with the young: the supportive brother in *Sharif Bēṭī*, still intellectually and ideologically unformed, is the ideal male.

Sharifa, even though unwittingly, achieves what Asghari could not: she regards her teaching as profession and vocation, and the education of her brothers as a goal. She, too, keeps a journal recording her travails, but it is a chronicle of progress from despair to aspiration. One of Muhammadi Begum's purposes was to reach the children of underprivileged families, and to do so she inscribes religious sanctions in the book: like her own creation, the comical working-class godmother to Sharifa's Cinderella, she divests young women of their genteel prejudices, encouraging them to earn their living both as a response to deprivation and contingency and as a source of self-fulfillment. She also offered to her followers the use of words, as weapon and gift. Her slender, compact novels created the first generation of women writers; the magazine she established and the press her husband ran gave them their platform. Nazr Sajjad Hyder wrote several more novels and also joined the movement for

national liberation: though her novels have been forgotten, her fame lives on in the person of her daughter, Qurratulain Hyder, one of India's most acclaimed and greatest living novelists. The daughter of Abbasi Begum, one of the earliest novelists to collaborate with Muhammadi Begum and Mumtaz Ali, was Hijab Ismail, who married Muhammadi Begum's son Imtiaz Ali Taj—writer, dramatist and filmmaker—twenty-seven years after his mother's death. She lives in Lahore, still writes and has enjoyed the renewed attention to her oeuvre that her predecessors deserve. The next step from writing to public activism was inevitable: Jahan Ara, later Begum Shah Nawaz, born in 1896, submitted essays to *Tehzīb-e Nisvān* as a girl, published a novel while still in her teens, joined parliament during colonial times and was a respected political figure, upholding and campaigning for women's rights after Partition and the creation of Pakistan. She abandoned fiction, but in her seventies, wrote her autobiography in English:<sup>9</sup> in its opening chapter she mentions Muhammadi Begum—whose influence, as we have seen, cuts across linguistic borders—with pride and affection. Her daughter Mumtaz, who died young, was also a novelist, poet and political activist. Suhrawardy published, after her thesis, a fine collection of short stories in Urdu, and then an autobiography and other works of non-fiction in English. As Begum Ikramullah, she, too, was a member of parliament and a diplomat. At seventy-nine, she is still writing. She is also the mother-in-law of the Crown Prince of Jordan.

In today's Pakistan—the leading center of the Urdu language which Muhammadi Begum used so well and so effectively—a woman prime minister serves her second term in office. Women writers, novelists, poets and columnists, are lionized or continue to struggle, but survive and insist on writing and forcing silence to speak. No “New Adam,” though—to borrow a metaphor from the poet Fahmida Riaz—has come to take the place of the enterprising and forward-reaching Mumtaz Ali. Unfortunately, the wrongs that continue to demand the attention of Muhammadi Begum's spiritual daughters, and which they address, obliquely or stridently, are those done to women. In the cause of their inalienable right to freedom, and to defeat the obscurantists, they refer to secular norms and the names of Western thinkers; but just as often they invoke, with confidence and intrepidity, the decrees of God and His Emissary. □

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<sup>9</sup>Jahan Ara Shahnawaz, *Father and Daughter: A Political Autobiography* (Lahore: Nigarishat, 1971). —Eds.