



Pratidhwani the Echo

A Peer-Reviewed International Journal of Humanities & Social Science

ISSN: 2278-5264 (Online) 2321-9319 (Print)

UGC Enlisted Serial No. 48666

Impact Factor: 6.28 (Index Copernicus International)

Volume-VII, Issue-I, July 2018, Page No. 266-277

Published by Dept. of Bengali, Karimganj College, Karimganj, Assam, India

Website: <http://www.thecho.in>

Reading Between the Lines : The Writings of the Bengali Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal

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Abstract

Although women have played an important role in Indian society, yet they have received relatively less attention from scholars and Historians. The views and contributions of women have neither been appreciated nor knitted into the mainstream history. In the Nationalist History of Colonial India, the Bengali Muslim women are silenced and thus they remain invisible. There is hardly any written account on the Bengali Muslim women. If there is such a thing as a comparative degree of invisibility, Muslim women are even more invisible to history than any other Indian women. Till the nineteenth century, the denial of education and purdah completed the invisibility of Muslim women of Bengal in the public domain. However, from the 1920's there were encounters at some level to a certain extent with the outside world and Bengali Muslim women from middle class background could not be completely marginalized any more. On this matter, Muslim women themselves were not silent. The chief vehicle of their views was their writings. Writings not only served to make their voices heard on issues of reform and change, it was the mark of a new creativity which had touched the lives of men and women of that period. The ability and desire to write, along with education were the hallmarks of the new type of Muslim women bhadramahila. In this article, I have focussed on the writings of the Muslim women in Colonial Bengal through which they created an identity of their own. This essay is an attempt to look into the complexities and diversities in the life of the Bengali Muslim women through their writings.

The absence of Muslim women from the written history of the 19th century Bengal is typically explained in terms of their apparent 'traditionalism' and 'backwardness'. Although some attempts in this direction are being made, none the less Bengali Muslim women still remain almost invisible, in our academic discourses and historical literature. According to the conventional story of the Bengal Renaissance, Muslim women in Bengal, unlike many Brahma or Hindu upper castes were largely unable or perhaps even unwilling to participate in the nineteenth century reforms initiated by the Brahma or the Hindu bhadralok. Therefore since the historical accounts of the nineteenth century Bengal typically centers around the story of the Bengal Renaissance, Muslim women rarely appears in them except as footnotes, even when such accounts deal explicitly with women. Indeed from a survey of the Indian

historiography, one might get the impression that as far as the public life of late Colonial Bengal is concerned, Muslim women almost did not exist. During the end of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century Bengali Muslim women's world was undergoing vast changes. Bengali Muslim women were coming out of their isolated and exclusively domestic existence and started writing in the various journals that were beginning to be published in that era. Facing numerous constraints these Bengali Muslim women were giving public expression to their thoughts and feelings, through the printed world in a society which was very difficult for women writers. This act of writing by the Muslim women of the early 20th century was not taken favourably and whenever occasion arose these Bengali Muslim women writers were ridiculed and censured by conservatives. However, this did not apparently deter the Bengali Muslim women from the creative act of writing and publishing her writing. It was through these writings that these Bengali Muslim women declared her social presence and an identity of her own. In this sense, writing was a major activity of the Muslim bhadramahilas both as functional and as well as an expressive one.

Throughout the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century, the Maulavis views represented the general attitude of the orthodox Muslim community towards women. They recommended purdah and seclusion for the Bengali Muslim women and denied them institutional education. However, there were few Bengali Muslim women who dared such attitudes. By defying established social norms, they strove to venture on hitherto forbidden grounds. We have isolated references of such women. These women did not wait for any male protagonists to support them. They themselves were the pioneers. We come across the name of Rahimunnesa who wrote 'Padmabatir Punthi'. This is the first ever written work of Bengali Muslim women in late medieval Bengal. 'Padmabatir Punthi' was written in Bengali and reflected the woes and wishes of village women. The work gives an inner view of the prevailing folk culture of rural Bengal of the eighteenth century in the midst of which Rahimunnesa lived. In many ways 'Padmabatir Punthi' was a landmark. The first assertive murmurs were thus made.¹ An unknown Bengali Muslim girl studying in a remote village school, Boda Balika Bidyalaya in East Bengal raised the first voice of protest among the Bengali Muslim women against social discrimination of women². She was Taherunnesa. She considered education to be the natural right of women. Taherunnesa raised few valid points about education and social rights of women in the journal Bamabodhini Patrika which was sympathetic to the cause of women's education and their liberation from the antapur or the inner sanctum of the household. In 1866, in an article, 'Bamaganer Rachana' written in the form of a long letter to the editor of the Bamabodhini Patrika, Bibi Taherunnesa, wrote in chaste sanskritised Bengali about the usefulness of educating women and she referred extensively to ancient Hindu women of learning. Nothing else is known about Taherunnesa, apart from just this single piece published in Bamabodhini in 1868, which makes her the first Bengali Muslim women to write in modern prose.³ Taherunnesa writes this letter to the editor of Bamabodhini Patrika and in this letter she appeals to the men, "O civilized men of this land, do not remain neglectful of educating women. If you really want to see the earth a happy place, then make the effort to adorn your

women with the ornaments of education”.⁴ Her pleas for education of women was because she felt education was the best support for women in confined situations within the home. The argument in favour of education was that it would allow women to fulfil the role that society has allocated to them. As Taherannesa’s identity could not be traced, many doubted her existence. However Taherannesa’s this letter can be taken as the beginning of a movement.

The credit for being the first Bengali Muslim women in modern times to write a full length book goes to Nawab Faizunnessa Chaudhurani, the author of *Rupjalal*. Faizunnessa’s *Rupjalal* which was considered semi – autobiographical, was published from Dhaka in 1876. ‘*Rupjalal*’ is a remarkable, hybrid picture of an age in transition. Most scholars refer to it as a *Kabya* or long poem and the greater part of it is written in song *punthi* style. The book is considered to be an epic and has the flavour of the Islamic Hindu syncretism ethos of rural Bengal. Apart from *Rupjalal* she wrote some other excellent books like ‘*Tatyo O Jatiya Sangeet*’, ‘*Sangeetsar*’ and ‘*Sangeetlahari*’.⁵

Before Faizunnessa’s works were discovered, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was usually hailed as the first Muslim female writer of modern times. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932) the pioneer of female emancipation was born at Payrabandha, Rangpur district of East Bengal (today’s Bangladesh). She was a prolific writer and a social reformer with thoughts far ahead of her time. When Begum Rokeya took up the pen at the beginning of the 20th Century, many Bengali Muslim women had become active participants in the reform movement. The desire to make Muslim women receive modern education was top priority in Begum Rokeya’s agenda. She wrote that the existing practice of keeping women illiterate was doing incalculable harm to the Muslim society.⁶ Rokeya’s literary career started in 1901 with her essay ‘*Pipasha*’ (The Thirst) which appeared in *Nabaprabha*. Her next piece ‘*Alankar na Badge of Slavery*’ (Jewellery or Badge of Slavery) which was published in 1903 in *Mahila*, a women’s periodical edited by Girish Chandra Sen created quite a stir. It was a severe indictment of gender inequality in which she compares the gift of jewellery from a husband to his wife as chains of bondage. This essay by Rokeya, shocked many among the *Bhadramahilas* and they attacked Rokeya for her ‘unreasonableness’. There was almost no arena of literature where Rokeya’s pen did not venture- poetry, short story, satire, essay, novel or fantasy. Her writing combines women’s envisaged roles within marriage, conjugal life and household matters. A glowing example of this may be found in her only novel ‘*Padmaraag*’. *Padmaraag* written in 1924 is a narration of life in *Tarini Bhavan*, a sanctuary where women of all creeds have found refuge and live a life of dignity. The contemporary periodical *Samyabadi* reviewed *Padmaraag* and recommended it to ‘every man and woman’. Some of the essays written by Rokeya were exclusively concerned with the problems of women. Rokeya’s essays such as ‘*Stree jahir Abanti*’ (1905) and *Ardhangi* (1905) were considered as radical piece of feminist writing. ‘*Narir Adhikar*’ (Women’s Rights) was Rokeya’s last work which was published posthumously. In the remarkable fantasy, ‘*Sultana’s Dream*’ her only work in English,

Rokeya gave full rein to her imagination by depicting 'Lady Land', a realm where women assumed the public role and men stayed indoors.

Several of Rokeya's work are concerned with the role of women in the domestic sphere, as in 'Sugrihini', (The Good Housewife) Rokeya emphasizes the domestic role of women. In 'Griha' (The Home), Rokeya illustrates how though a woman may live in a household and continue most of the labour required for its upkeep; the home does not belong to her. She has no property rights or any effective power other than that which is bestowed on her by the considerate male member of her family. Through her writings, Rokeya concludes that a majority of women only inhabit their homes; they are in fact 'homeless'. In 1904 she wrote in Nabonur, that gradually Muslim women had turned into domesticated animals, she made an earnest appeal to the Bengali Muslim women to realise their miserable plight and to emancipate themselves from it. She reminded the Muslim menfolk that, women constituted a half of the society and any progress of the Muslim society would not be possible, if Muslim women lagged behind.⁷ Rokeya wanted equal opportunities for women who alone could pave the way for the progress of so called backward Muslim society. With a remarkable clarity of thought, and rational outlook Rokeya pursued her lifelong service for the upliftment of the Bengali Muslim womenfolk.⁸

Azizunnesa Khatun, wife of Hamidullah Khan (Zamindar of Tetulia in Khulna), one of the earliest English educated Bengali Muslim woman, was probably the first Muslim woman whose writing was published in a periodical, Islam Pracharak. Azizunnesa's poem, Hamd-Ishwar Prashasti (Hymn in praise of god) published in Islam Procharak in 1902 may be regarded as the first to be published in a Muslim edited periodical.⁹ She also translated Oliver Goldsmith's 'The Hermit' into Bengali in 1884.¹⁰ Azizunnesa pleaded for women's emancipation and female education which the backward Muslim society urgently needed. These Muslim women writers not only wrote for their own emancipation but also for the freedom of their beloved country.

One of them was Khairunnesa who wrote around the same time as Azizunnesa. Bibi Khairunnesa Khatun (c 1870-1912) is one of the many Muslim female writes, whose details seem to have been lost in the ravages of time. However from an essay written by Saiyyad Abdul Maqsood (a writer, reporter and researcher from Dhaka), one finds that she was born in a middle class family of Sirajganj. Khairunnesa served as a Headmistress in Hossainpur Balika Vidyalaya in Sirajganj during the end of the nineteenth century.¹¹ She organized a night school to educate the pardanasin Muslim girls and she went from village to village on foot to collect girl students and educate them in her night school. In 1904, she published an essay "Amader Shikhar Antarai" (The Impediments to our Education) in Nabonoor, (Vol. 8, No:-2) in which she propagated for female education. In this essay she also mentions that she is extremely worried about the financial crisis of Hossainpur Girl's School. In order to solve the financial crisis of the school, Kharuinnesa went from door to door and collected money and goods donated by the liberal Muslims.¹² In 1908, she published 'Satir Pratibhakti' (The Devotion of a Chaste Wife) which was a manual for women, listing the duties of a good wife. In this book she highlighted the husband-wife relationship, duties of a

woman to her family and women's emancipation. In her writing she has pointed out that female backwardness was the root cause of social decline. Women were not born to bear children and the household in which women are not happy, will never prosper.¹³ Khairunnessa was probably the first of the early women writers to formulate her ideas on social and political issues of that time. In 1905, she published an essay entitled "Swadeshanurag" in which she appealed to women to boycott foreign goods and to take a Swadeshi vow. Although Khairunnesa regarded herself as an ordinary woman, her writings actually bore signs of sufficient learning, culture and intelligence. She would be remembered as a lady who played active part in the anti – Partition movement of 1905 and made huge contribution to women's education.

Akhtar Mahal Syeda Khatun (1901-1928), a contemporary litterateur of Rokeya, depicted the pains and sorrows of the aborodhbasini throughout her life, through her literary works. She was born into a wealthy, educated and enlightened family of Faridpur district in East Bengal.¹⁴ Her brother Mujibar Rahman was among one of the first Bengali Muslims to enter the Indian Civil Service. The atmosphere at her home was truly conducive for literary and artistic pursuits and she was educated at home. In 1915, at the age of fourteen, Akhtar Mahal was married to Maqbul –ul-Khan, who belonged to a respectable family in Noakhali. However, strong opposition to her literary pursuit came from her father-in-law's house, and for that matter, she was compelled to continue her writings secretly. Her eldest son, F.M.Khan remembers how she would come to their room at night, to read and write secretly.¹⁵ She would preserve these writings carefully, and kept them locked away in a trunk, till one day Kazi Nazrul Islam discovered them. Sometime between 1924 and 1925, the poet Nazrul Islam visited Noakhali and was invited to the house of the zamindar. As the young wife of the family, Akhtar was asked to compose a laudatory piece for the poet. The poem amused Nazrul. He wanted to know if the lady had written anything else. That was when other writings by Akhtar Mahal were made public. At the encouragement of Nazrul, Akhtar's writings were published in Naoroze first under a pseudonym and later in her own name in Saogat.¹⁶ In a short piece, 'Shishu Palan' published in 1927, Akhtar Mahal discussed child care issues and added a new concept of motherhood and child care that was to replace age old notions.

At a time when merely reading a novel depicting romance and love was deemed immoral by many, Akhtar Mahal tried to grapple with the issue of love and attraction. Her first novel, Niyantrita, (1927-28) revolves around the heroine's Ayesha's intense lifelong love for a distant male relative.¹⁷ In a language and style that was reminiscent of Swarnakumari Devi and Nirupama Devi, Akhtar an antahpur educated Muslim woman approached the theme of desire in a women, which was a measure of great challenge at that period and had been inconceivable some decades earlier. Akhtar Mahal's novel 'Maran Baran' (Welcome Death) was published posthumously in Saogat. Akhtar Mahal Syeda Khatun was not just a writer of romantic novels, she wrote with acute social awareness. Through her writings, she narrated the painful lives of so many women living secluded in Muslim society. One of her

remarkable observations on society was ‘Marriage and rejection (talaq) are oft repeated children’s games in an unenlightened Muslim society’.¹⁸

When it comes to spirited and inspirational writings Mrs. Masuda Rahman (1885 – 1926) is second only to Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. Unfortunately, very little about Mrs. M. Rahman, one of the most noteworthy writers of the second decade of the twentieth century can be known from her books and the notes which she left. Masuda Rahman was born in 1885 in an enlightened and educated family of Sherpur in the district of Hooghly. She was deprived of higher education due to strong opposition from her father Khan Bahadur Mazharul Anwar Chowdhury who was a distinguished lawyer of the Hooghly Judge’s Court. As the daughter of a prosperous educated family in Hooghly, Masuda learnt how to read the Koran, and some Bengali and Urdu in her paternal home. Like Rokeya and Karimunnesa, she secretly took lessons from her paternal uncle’s son and their family accountant. Masuda was married off at a very young age of eleven (eight or nine, according to some) to the zamindar of Furfura in Hooghly, Kazi Mahmudur Rahman, who was the Registrar of Calcutta at that time.¹⁹ She began writing after the First World War, during which she had met the poet Nazrul Islam. The explosive articles of Rokeya Sakhawat, published in Nabanoor, had a deep impact on her mind and probably inspired her to write. Like Rokeya, she drew attention of the Muslim society to the lack of women’s rights, their economic helplessness and patriarchal domination. Mrs. M. Rahman did not hesitate to hit out at the male guardians in a Muslim family as well as the Bengali Muslim society of the time, through her incendiary writings. Rahman’s writings were mainly centred on the realization of the rights of women as sanctioned by Islam. It is her recklessness that marks her apart. Her use of abrasive words and aggressive views makes her a rebel, quite different from her contemporaries. In her article titled “Amader Swarup” published in Dhumketu in 1923 B.S. she wrote “there are myriad other ways to realize one’s womanhood other than marriage.”²⁰ She writes in an article in Saugat, Ashwin 1926, that “In this age of our awakening, she (woman) shall not blindly follow religion nor accept ritual as its substitute.”²¹ Mrs. M. Rahman insisted upon a liberal interpretation of scriptures, in the Sahachar (Chaitra, 1329B.S), Mrs. M. Rahman severely condemned Muslim society for keeping Muslim women under purdah. She wrote, “In the name of severity of purdah, we have been deprived of many good things in life, no longer must we remain so deprived of many good things in life, no longer must we remain so deprived. We demand honour, freedom and rights as bestowed on us by Islam. Who is there to hold us back? The Satanic society? No it will never succeed.”²²

The idea of women’s emancipation held by Mrs. M. Rahman has been expressed quite well in an article titled ‘Amader Dabi’ in which she deplored the inadequate education given to women in the traditional system. She writes “Both men and women must acquire knowledge and education. No discrimination should be made between a son and a daughter in this respect. In spite of this, the less than human followers of Mohammad treat sons as the guide who will lead them to deliverance and daughters like garbage..... A considerable amount is spent on the son’s education, but no one remembers to educate the

daughter.”²³ Mrs. Rahman raised the issue of women’s economic independence and the Indian male’s colonial domination. She wrote that liberty is meaningless unless women were given economic independence.²⁴ Through her bold writings she wanted to denounce patriarchal institutions which were considered to be the main obstacle in the way of women’s emancipation. Mrs. Rahman’s other articles, such as ‘Barbanal’, ‘Katha banam Kaaz’ published in *Bijli* in 1329 B.S and ‘Santi o Sakti’ published in *Dhumketu* in 1329 B.S are the wonderful literary creations relating to women’s awakening. Mrs. M. Rahman died on 20th December 1926. An article in *Saugat* said, “She was concerned with protecting the rights of women at all times and her writings strongly condemned the injustices meted out to women”.²⁵

Among the women in this generation of writers, Nurunnesa Khatun Vidyavinodini (1894 – 1975) was probably the most celebrated literateur of her times. She was born into a Sharif Khondkar family of Shahpur village in Murshidabad district and her father was in government service. We come to know from the scant material available on Nurunnesa Khatun that she had learnt some Persian from her maternal grandfather Syed Siyadat Hossain Nurunnesa herself recalls this gratefully in the introduction to her novel *Bhagyachakra* (The wheel of fortune). Girls from ancient respectable Muslim families, she says had very limited opportunities to study.²⁶ Nurunnesa wrote, she had never in her life ‘tasted the pleasure of sitting down on a school bench.’ The very use of the word ‘tasted’ indicates how intense this desire must have been. She wrote in the introduction of *Swapnadrishata*, “I never sat down in front of a teacher with a book. I picked up the alphabet to satisfy my curiosity and ultimately managed to read few books.”²⁷ Purdah was very strictly observed in their house. She wrote, “I was hardly aware of the social and worldly realities due to the strict observance of purdah in our family. To tell the truth, in my father’s house. I had not known the beauty of nature except for the moon and star-studded night sky like a canopy overhead.”²⁸ The strictness of purdah was relaxed a bit in 1921, after Nurunnesa was given in marriage to Kazi Golam Mohammad, a lawyer from Serampore (in Hooghly). He had liberal ideas, a taste for literature and was fond of travelling. He encouraged her literary activities. Nurunnesa used to accompany her husband on his tours. The experiences Nurunnesa gathered, while travelling with her husband helped her to become a writer.

Nurunnesa’s first novel ‘*Swapnadrishata*’ was published in 1923.²⁹ Her works includes one historical novel, five novels and several essays. For her marvellous literary works, she was given the title ‘*Bidyabinodini*’ by the Nikhil Banga Sahitya Samiti and *Sahitya Saraswati* by the Nikhil Bharat Sahitya Sangha.³⁰ Her novels were set among the emergent middle-class *bhadralok* in the Muslim society. Nurunnesa severely criticized the evil effects of purdah and *abarodh* and urged the secluded women to come out of it. She expressed liberal and sometimes radical views on women’s emancipation. According to Nurunnesa the main factor behind the backwardness of the Muslim community is their blind opposition to western learning and for the want of which the Muslims are more backward than the Hindus. Like many other female emancipator of her time, Nurunnesa often stressed the

necessity of being ideal mother, wife and companion in domestic life.³¹ Like those of her peers, her essays were also devoted to issues such as women's education, Hindu – Muslim unity, the evils of abarodh and the matter of Bengali Muslim identity. She strongly advocated for Muslim women's education which can be seen from her speech in the Bengal Muslim Women's Association where she says "I must declare that I consider women's education an absolute necessity. I am disappointed and grieved by the near-total lack of any effort in this direction in our society".³² Nurunnesa died in 1975 in Kamalapur in Dhaka.

Razia Khatun Chaudhurani (1907-34) during her brief life, made a name as an essayist, poet and short story writer. She was born in 1907 at Noakhali. Razia's father Abdur Rashid Khan was a close associate of Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das, the mayor of Calcutta Corporation at that time, who had appointed him as the deputy executive officer. Therefore most of Razia Khatun's childhood days were spent in Calcutta. Razia Khatun's education began by taking lessons from the Imam of the mosque in their house at Noakhali. At an early age Razia, learnt Bengali, Urdu, Persian and English from her elder maternal uncle Mohammad Abdul Quddus. Razia Khatun was married to Ashrafuddin Ahmad Chowdhury, who belonged to the zamindar family of Comilla and he was an active participant in Indian National Movement. Razia was perhaps one of the few female writers who had an opportunity to come very close to the politics of the time i.e. the Swadeshi Movement and the Khilafat Movement. Razia's political views are reflected in her short story 'Sramik'. The influence of Rokeya is evident in her comments as she says "Between a blindfolded bullock pushing the wheel in an oil mill and a Bengali Muslim woman, there is no particular difference."³³ Almost all the essays, written by Razia dealt with the education of Muslim women, women's role in the home and outside, purdah and its perversion abarodh and the status of women in Islam. Like Rokeya and Akhtar Mahal, Razia wrote on ideal motherhood and child care. In 'Samaje O Grihe Narir Sthan' (Women's Place at Home and in Society) Razia writes that 'For so long Muslim women suffered all oppression in silence. Today a few are getting education and their eyes have opened..... and though millions of women like us, are dying slow deaths in the dungeon of abarodh, no one turns a glance in this direction'.³⁴ Like many writers of the time, Razia distinguishes between purdah (modesty in dress and behaviour) and abarodh, a patriarchal distortion of purdah which makes women invisible, behind the andarmahal. She vehemently protested against this practice of keeping women in abarodh.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century there were also some other Muslim women, who aspired to come out of their traditional bounds. One such Muslim woman was Musammat Sahifa Banu of Sylhet, (1850-1926) who wrote poems in Urdu, Bengali and Hindi. In her poems, she urged for Hindu-Muslim unity and cultural assimilation. Sahifa Banu pursued a quiet literary career in the semi-rural Mofussil atmosphere. Among the Muslim female litterateur during the pre-partition days, Sahifa occupies a rank for her literary works. Born in Sylhet, Sahifa was the daughter of Ali Raja, the Zamindar-Dewan of Kauria Lakshmansiri. Her husband Abdul Wahed, manager of Ali Amzad's estate in Sylhet, encouraged her in her literary pursuits. Many songs in Hindi and Urdu were composed by Sahifa. Her Sahifa Sangeet was preserved in Sylhet Sahitya Samsad was

published in 1907 by Abdul Jabbar, a resident of Saodagartula in Sylhet.³⁵ *Sahifa Sangeet* is a unique poetical creation in which the writer's deep feeling and sympathy to Hindu neighbours have been expressed.³⁶

Following Rokeya's footsteps in a manner of speaking was Shamsunnahar Mahmud, a writer, educationist, teacher, social worker and later, a parliamentarian in East Pakistan. She was born in an aristocratic, cultured and an enlightened family of Nookhali, which had taken to western liberal education and government employment very early and had crusaded for women's rights. Her maternal grandfather, Maulana Abdul Aziz, was one of the founding members of the Muslim Suhrud Sammelani. Nonetheless, her childhood was spent in the strictest purdah in Chittagong. She obtained her Bachelor's Degree with distinction in 1932 from Calcutta University and was accorded a civic reception by Rokeya's Anjuman-i-Khawmateen –i- Islam the same year. In her address, Rokeya said; "We are assembled here on the occasion of Nahar's passing her B.A. This is an honour for all of us women..... I pray that more women follow Nahar's footsteps."³⁷ Shamsunnahar appeared for the Master's examination as a private candidate and she successfully passed M.A. in 1942. Shamsunnahar was married to the educated and magnanimous Dr. Wahiduddin Mahmud and her marriage opened the doors for her, to higher education and ended her days of confinement. Since then, there was no looking back, only a steady climb up the ladder. Shamsunnahar and her brother Habibullah Bahar jointly edited *Bulbul* from Calcutta in 1933. She was primarily an educationist and many of her writings concerned with the various aspects of education. Her main literary works are *Punnamayee* (1925), *Rokeya Jibani* (1937), *Begum Mahal* (1938), *Shishur Siksha* (1939), *Nazrulke Jemon Dekhechi* (1958) and *Amar Dekha Turaska*. At the age of ten Shamsunnahar started writing. Her first work *Punnamayee* (The virtuous women) was published in 1925, when she was only seventeen years old.³⁸ It contained short biographies of eight great women of the Muslim world who served as role models. She portrayed inspiring woman such as the Prophet's daughter Fatema and his wives Ayesha and Khadija and also Rokeya. In her *Begum Mahal*, Shamsunnahar recorded the lives of great Pathan and Mughal women of Medieval India. Her most well-known work was 'Rokeya Jibani', an authentic biography of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, her mentor and comrade in the crusade for women's education. *Rokeya Jibani* (The life of Rokeya) was published from Calcutta in 1937. Her work entitled 'Shishur Siksha' was highly appreciated by Rabindranath Tagore who was experimenting with the ideal environment for the development of children at Santiniketan.³⁹ In *Prabasi*, Shamsunnahar wrote an article titled *Shishu-Sahitya* in which she explained the child psychology, citing the educational ideas of Froebel, Montessori, Harbert Spencer and Rabindranath Tagore.⁴⁰ Her book *Nazrulke Jemon Dekhechi* (As I saw Nazrul) was about the common and firm belief that both of them shared, regarding the lamentable conditions of the women of the Bengali society. In 1926, Kazi Nazrul Islam visited their home from Calcutta with her elder brother Habibullah Bahar. On that occasion she did not get to meet him and she only heard him read and sing his poetry of protest from the inner chambers. Back in Calcutta, Nazrul wrote to Shamsunnahar, 'The girls in our country are very unfortunate. I have seen many girls born with enormous talent, but their potential dried up

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under demands of society.”⁴¹ Shamsunnahar was largely involved with issues concerning women throughout her life.

In conclusion, it can be said that by the end of the 19th century and early 20th century, this combination of outright silence, overtly unfaltering representation and oblique, negative allusion over time consolidated a picture of Bengali Muslim women as “backward” or simply “invisible” in the national imaginary. In fact, it is in the figure of the traditional women silenced and victimized by the barbarity of Muslim men, that Muslim women make their few appearances in the nationalist discourse. We see that the Bengali Muslim women were mostly incorporated into the larger story of Indian womanhood in this particular manner, and hence everything else that they did simply become invisible in the Nationalist Historiography. It is as if the subcontinent was colonized, the nation was born, the lives of Hindu (middle class/ upper caste) women changed immensely, and all these tumultuous changes simply passed by Muslim women who continued to languish in their misery because of their religion. Recent works by feminist scholars are being done on Muslim women and these are important in correcting a long standing lacuna in historical studies in India. It is because of their efforts that Muslim women are certainly noticed as subject with both voice and visibility in the public world. Thanks also to such efforts; Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain’s name has now found its way into the list of exceptional early feminist women writers from colonial India. However what has remained largely unnoticed are the works of other Bengali Muslim women writers such as Bibi Taherunnessa, Kharinnessa Khatun, Razia Khatun Choudhurani, Faizunnessa Chaudhurani to name a few who were writing on a wide range of issues pertinent to woman’s lives in the first half of the twentieth century. These Bengali Muslim women have gained respect and recognition for both their writing and their activism over time, but few readers outside Bangladesh and West Bengal would recognize their names. As historical sources the work of all these early Bengali Muslim women writers is important and they deserve much more attention from Historians and scholars of present day.

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