

The colonial idea of girlhood and the Muslim identity: Grounding poverty and gender in urban Bengal

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Abstract

In this paper I intend to probe the discourses on Muslim girl's education as produced across the moments of colonial India and interrogate the idea of the stereotyped version of 'good' and ideal girlhood in the Muslim worldview. I shall then see the impact of such a colonial crust in moulding the girlhood in contemporary local contexts to see whether such colonial endeavours still remained powerful in chiselling the Indian girls today. For this I shall travel to an urban municipality in Kolkata to examine how instrumental Muslim education had been to form their identity. This ethnographic study had been conducted among the school going poor Muslim girls in Maheshtala municipality not far off from Kolkata itself. The questions I want to ask in this paper are quite pertinent: Who is an educated girl in colonial India? What was she expected to deal with? Who was her mentor? What kind of institutional support was she given and perhaps what was the sole purpose of her overall education? I shall then see through my ethnographic pursuits how far did the level of expectation change and how far did the ripples travel in this relentless flow of colonial knowledge. The point is to see if the colonial knowledge production about the self and identity formation of a Muslim girl had remained undeterred or was it wrought with changes. What is expected of a poor Muslim girl in an urban contemporary setting and how far is it different from what was expected in the colonial moments and what role does education play here.

Muslim education in India has a chequered history and especially girl's education has evolved through the thick and thin of the colonial leverage coupled with its local agencies. All these created a melange of ideas that provided the fulcrum for the growth of a Muslim girl steeped in a strong sense of self and identity that was etched strongly in her mind and soul. This girlhood was important for it put a leverage on her choice and directed her future courses of actions. I want to search for this girlhood and see whether it was already formed in colonial India or is still in its making. I shall see how this girlhood impacted her identity and whether and to what extent education played its share in doing and undoing the selfhood she had inherited over the time.

Keywords: poor, Muslim girls, young, self and identity, colony, local agencies, change, education, girlhood.

I . Introduction

Reproduction of women's education in colonial India had taken a very conspicuous turn of events carrying visibility especially for the Hindu girls and women. Our discussion can begin from the social reform movements in India spearheaded by the Hindu prodigies because they were the most prominent and far-fetched ones. Raja Ramohan Roy's campaign against Sati, Pandit Vidyasagar's efforts to bring down widow re-marriage and of course M.G Ranade's National Social Conference upholding legislations across the corners of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century India to increase the age of consent and of marriage demanded stark attention (Minault, 1999, p. 16). Aspiring Hindus from the middle class had from the very beginning of the nineteenth century been expressing their reservations about the compromised status of their daughters and recurrently harped for a better one (Heimsath, 2015, p. 15). Especially in the light of staunch criticisms from the British

administrators and Christian missionaries, the Hindus had started believing that whatever had been bestowed upon their girls was only a sheer pittance of what they deserved. There was a massive clamour for better rights for the Hindu women. They repeatedly claimed that Hindu girls were victims of the oppressive state staging a pitiable spectacle of airdropping only chicken-feed for its female beneficiaries. But the bigger question is what about the Muslim women? Was there a similar surge of concern for them or was there an adequate impulse to engineer still powerful social reforms for the Muslim women in colonial India? Was there a participation of Muslim women in Indian national politics in the early 19th and 20th century?

Here an important point to ponder over is that there had been an ongoing tussle between the British government and the Muhammadan aristocracy with the inception of the imperial regime. The British obtained the administration of Bengal from a Musalman Emperor on the assumption that they would sustain the Musalman system with diligence but to their utter dismay, the Musalmans soon found that the system they cherished this far had been mangled and tampered in tough ways by the British administration (Hunter, 1876a, p. 161). So it goes without saying that Muslims had gradually nurtured an abhorrence towards the Western rule and cultural penetration. That of course speaks a lot about the reasons why colonial impact could not breeze in the invincible walls of the Muhammedan social order. Women were cloistered behind the frills of their purdah so intensely that seeking social and cultural change was far-fetched and remote. In this context looking at the chances for germination of seeds for women's social reform and education seemed far too outlandish and improbable though not absolutely inconceivable.

The purdah though to an extent ruled out a considerable part of their political activities, nevertheless, Muslim women seemed proactive even beyond their seclusions, but of course they did not defy the normativities of the 'purdah'. However, they tried negotiating within their plotted periphery with utmost care lest their tradition gets usurped. They succeeded in extending the limits of their segregated world in their own way, often not challenging the delimitations of their separate world (Papanek & Minault, 1982, p. 246). They did not come out of their symbolic shelter, but had rather managed to extend it beyond the previously acceptable limits. But remember, they had persistently remained loyal to the idea of Islamic womanhood, one which was etched in their mind. This womanhood inspired them to defend their ideals and traditions as far as possible from the dusty storms of foreign invasion and cultural seizure or annexation in their onward march to social change.

However one thing must be very carefully spelled out that Muslim response to the British invasion and their civilizing mission had not been uniform and undifferentiated for the ways they retorted back, echoed across a continuum. Muslim voices in India were made along this continuum from outright refutation of European ideals and cultural ways to a moderate collaboration that was far less fundamental and more inclusive. There were Muslims who fit this melange very well for there were some who waged a jihad against whom they deemed fit to be a diffident while at the other end of the pole there were perhaps some Muslims who had allied and teamed up with the Raj. So it is quite palpable to believe that Muslims in India had never been a uniform community for there was a mosaic of diverse groups and ideals which must be taken note. Therefore their response to social reforms and women's education bore the stamp of this eclectic spirit and was seldom etched as a monolithic edifice. Though it is impossible to discuss any dimension of Muslim women's life in that particular context without any reference to the role of religion, to presume that these religious under-currents painted every Islamic women in monochrome was a misnomer. Thus, muslim women's life-world and the choices that follow from there are deeply influenced as much by patriarchy as by their diverse religious ideologies.

II The Sharif and the Zenana : The contrasts that seemed over-bearing

With the decay of the Mughal dynasty in 1857, the muslim personnel, I mean those who had been deployed as the Muslim service gentry and those who had served the Muslim rulers in various capacities had realised

their changing positions in the British administration. Now these men who had worked as military personnel, civil administrators and religious functionaries in the Mughal kingdom were fairly well-heeled and prosperous. They were entitled with the rights to collect revenues from lands, villages and small market towns, often called *qasbahs* in lieu of the services they provided to the Mughal empire. However their position was far different in the British era where they had gradually devolved into a professional and bureaucratic middle class. As far as I can see in this long drawn process there was a change in the status of the Muslim men as they took the long and strenuous road from the Mughal to the British Raj. In the heydays of the Khilji monarchs, the revenue claims made by the Muslim families were supposedly granted. Soon with the weakening of the state authority after 1715, it preordained a circumstance where the Oudh rulers granted *talukas* that presumed a hereditary character. It was easier now for the local personnel to set up areas of land control in which they could enjoy rental income. To ensure the survival of these families, the participation of some members in the military or administrative service of the regional rulers became an imperative condition. It is not surprising that throughout Doab and the Delhi catchment region, seasonal military service remained prevalent where thousands of Muslims were recruited. In exchange for this military service, the Muslims had secured a handsome grant from the Mughal dynasty in various forms. A very prominent instance may be the case of the Shaikhs of Manu Aima in Allahabad who are heard to have secured revenue free villages through their service in the Oudh army during Siraj-ud-Daula's regime (Heitzman, 2008c, p. 26). In this way the Ashrafs or the Sharifs of *qasbah*, a term they preordained for themselves had come to mean well heeled and a prosperous class of the Mughal dynasty.

If we look back, we find all those Muslims who claim to be the descendants of immigrants from foreign lands such as Arabia, Persia, Turkistan and Afghanistan constituted and formed the highest rank in the Muslim caste hierarchy. Both Sayyad and Shaikh are deemed to be the offsprings of the early Islamic nobility of Mecca and Medina. A Mughal traces its origin to the Mughal dynasty in India whereas a Pathan recounts his descent from the Afghan ruling families of the past. Ashrafs were an integral part of the Muslim society in which they ranked the highest and enjoyed utmost respect. If we are to believe that the Muslims had evolved a caste system in India distinctive of their own style, it must be reiterated that the Ashrafs had claimed the highest status for themselves, quite analogous to the positions enjoyed by the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas within the rigid caste hierarchy. Thus, the Sayyads and the Sheikhs as the well-endowed priests alongside the Mughals and Pathans as chivalrous warriors befit the positions and appellations kept aside for the Brahmins and Khatriyas in any traditional Hindu caste society. (Ansari, 1960, p. 16).

However with the inception of the British Raj, their positions, at least their socio-economic prosperity had somewhat declined. As far as my understanding goes, thereafter the term Sharif too underwent a sea change. From a well-endowed higher class, the Sharifs went on to scale down to a moderately placed middle class and thereby Sharifs meant somebody with etiquettes, in short, a noble man. We see a similar shifting paradigm in the Urdu literature where wealth gives way to a refined character as we breeze through the etymology of the Urdu word Sharif. Sharif as a term had plural tones but the transition from high born to honourable was quite striking. Sharifs were now thought of as a gentleman with a fine sense of ethics and morality which previously was not strongly attached to his character. Now he is a frugal man who is not wasteful, an educated one who of course was not pedantic and surely someone more sombre and controlled as far his emotions go.

We see here a wedge between the ideal procreated by the Nawabi Mughal, or say a landed noble who may have been a Sharif by birth, but was far too conspicuous in his styles of consumption and living. He often would ignore the tenets of the religion and indulged in otherwise immoral pursuits. This nawabi lifestyle, engulfed with tendencies to trifle or fritter away wealth, some argued was the ultimate cause of the decay of this dynasty.

Muslim reformers of the late nineteenth century were alarmed with this state for they had far less resources than perhaps what their ancestors serving the Mughal rulers had. Short of wealth did not mean they showed any slackened approach for they still claimed to have belonged to the higher class at least as far as their status and

privilege goes. They were unwilling to equate themselves with the nouveau riche who they believed were the wasteful Nawabs and their successors. They were extremely conscious of their nobility and tried defining 'high status' in their own terms unlike the nawabi Mughals. Reformers aimed at arresting conspicuous consumption and being frugal to the extent possible. This meant husbanding their scarce resources and retaining back their literary and religious culture with lofty ambitions so as to advance their professional positions, knowing that there was no forthcoming land grant or royal perks and incentives. There was no way to advance their positions harked on ascribed status but achieving the moral licence was the only way to push forward for the Ashrafs had learned it the hard way. They were taken by the belief that the lavishing and splurging of the resources had resulted in this decline of the Mughal kingdom that registered their penultimate downfall.

Here after a long time we see the reformers giving apt attention to women's role in the household, hearth and beyond for a very simple reason. That when Sharifs claimed to have become culturally more refined and morally upright, the claims must be percolated down to the women's quarters or zenana for morality was no longer a solitary phenomena achieved solely by male in his retired quietude. Women entered as if by sheer force into a recluse cloistered carefully by men lest their lonesome rights over morality gets exposed. This was to prove the point that men were the sole custodian of Islamic morality. Now that the Sharifs emphasised over their moral character publicly, they had to drive home the fact that not they but their wives in charge of their private homes are too ethical and bristled with high moral standards. It was all possible that women's role within the household and as the forebears of culture became more commanding and remarkable as against the way they were screened and curtained from any discussion on the public fora. Now they had taken up a more dramatic and impressive role for they craved for unabashed attention even in the writings of the Urdu reformers.

Reformers painted women in feeble, frail and wimpy characters who failed miserably in giving delightful and magical comradeship to their virtuous husbands or ambitious sons. What was more uproarious was that women were often ignorant of the core elements of their faith and religious ideology and therefore often displayed behaviours unlikely of moral canons. They indulged carelessly in extravagant and spendthrift religious rituals that bore no linkage with the religious verses. These feminine practices like exorcism, hosting strange spirits, saint worship and idolatry amounted to as much squandering and wastefulness as did the nawabi reckless generosity. It was now time to control the feminine behaviour and practices that the male reformers thought was misfitting for a sharif's wife. It was paradoxical that the social reform movements were growing by leaps and bounds and were soon encroaching on a giant area of women's issues that had free-standing in the pre-colonial period.

III. Life inside the Zenana

To sneak a peek inside the Zenana in the late nineteenth century was a formidable and arduous task for most works of that period, be it literary, historical or religious were essentially written by men and therefore there is all possibility that the work would be bristled with an egregious form of hegemonic or the patriarchal view. Throughout the different periods of South Asian history, the institutions, concepts, constructs were in ways designed by the early Muslim society

that has essentially formed the core narrative of Islam in defining a woman's place in the Muslim society. As far as the core discourse of Indian Muslim women counts, texts written by the Muslim reformers of the late nineteenth century play a very pivotal role. Two important texts to be considered here are that evolved from the educated middle classes associated with Aligarh movement and the other sprang from the ulama associated with the Deoband school. Thus taking Indian Muslim women as an undifferentiated mass in the South Asian melange would not be a very wise idea for there are differences and diverse problems which must be problematized in their own ways. The first one is a text pertaining to the Aligarh movement entitled, *Majalis un-Nissa* by Husain Hali and first published in 1874 was engaged with ordinary conversations among women hailing

from flourishing urban homes and Muslim households. The book was written with the sole purpose to instigate the desperate needs of women's education in that social context thereby barring unsavoury social customs and finally to espouse the ideal definition of a Muslim woman. The second text that we refer to here is Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi's *Bihishti Zewar* published in 1905. This discourse is formed to portray ways the Deobandis are seeking change in the quality of Islamic education. This 'quality' that the Ulema of Deoband speaks of is the way to instil personal piety and rigour in observance of Islamic laws in ever more stringent ways across India. This was claimed to be an advocacy voiced to reform Islam by the Deobandi movement which is again a steadfast mechanism to showcase Islam in SouthEast Asia as the ultimate champion in women's education with a Clear cut vision to emphasise women's Islamic practices, a strategy to Islamicize women's religious rituals and observances. *Bihishti Zewar* was discoursed and instrumentalized as a bandwagon of development of Islamic women by reforming veritable areas of family law, medicine and piety. The *Bihishti Zewar* became a standard yardstick to religious practices and observances to be followed by the Islamic women across the Muslim society in colonial India. Despite this pedantic approach, there are certain areas of female bastion where of course men cannot infiltrate. This especially belongs to the domain of woman and her womanhood to which men were supposedly excluded.

This comes out more clearly in their idiomatic usages which constituted the segregated world of women from which men were externally excluded. Their exclusion from this feminine world might seem gawky but men though aware of this exclusion showed aspersion and askance as if this exclusion did not strike him. The idioms used in women's conversations often dealt with their household chores and with relationships that are bristled with interjections which often were expressions of endearment and abuse. There were often forebodings and anticipations of disaster embedded in their conversations which they often negotiate in their own ways. These trends appeared prominently in Begamati Zuban, women's language in Urdu and these idiomatic expressions are still used in piecemeal ways in everyday conversations by Muslim women today. These aptly used terms like *nauj*, *dur par*, *chain putin*, *ab se dur* (meaning god forbid), *chal dur* (get out of here), *picchal-pai* (demoness, witch), *nagori* (unfortunate, without support), *rasna basna* (fortunate, one who stays at home), *jhulsa* (fiery, quarrelsome), *aag lago*, *bhar me jae* (burn up, go to hell) are somewhat relevant even in today's conversation. Altaf Hussain Hali's *Majalis un-Nissa* critiques women's language and takes a stern look at the lessons that a mother often teaches her son. A mother often taught her son to be wary of such women who use such language and keep a prudent distance from him lest he would be termed effeminate.

But of course this becomes very clear that women had been able to segregate for themselves a world absolutely shunned from men. They were sovereigns of their own kingdom who did not pay any heed to whatever men had to say. This was the essential element of the zenana culture which was under the sole dominance of the Muslim women in colonial India. They had developed their own unique ways of preserving it in these domains of household, where they essentially had their special prowess of competence, self-sufficiency and even power. This was the world they had spun for themselves where they could lay down their hair and be their own, a world away from the male gazes and their pedantic canons. The language of the zenana was down to earthy, graphic and colourful for it smelt of one's own muddy grass root. This linguistic style is straightforward and colloquial. It is true that we look out for a kind of deference in their behaviour but personalised Urdu does not play its part. These components went together to form a woman's identity for these nuances in their personality bundled up to mould a distinctive mould for the person she is. This identity not only gave her a distinctive aroma but also helped her to negotiate with her life her way. That distinctive mould made her robust enough to fight back her challenges and disputes with ease and elan. This was a world she felt her own with less inhibitions and hiccups. The zenana back then was a reserve for the royal women, but down the age, zenana has become a more supple and a willowy term. The female quarters and the feminine space for themselves have come to be recognized as viable sites where women assemble together for exchanges, laughs, sobs, giggles and pranks. These are the refuge where women confide in one another as the dusk settles after the days drudgery and exchange words that

give them succour. Here one may not be literally educated but the virtues of Muslim education pervade them all. Their behaviours though unruly must be fastened by the contours of Islamic education. It is difficult to do away with that however strong may be the rubrics of the female bastion. Religious education is stronger than other social dictums and therefore plays a key role in determining her feminine identity and girlhood. Klet;s now travel to a dingy slum in the heart of Kolkata to see how the young women in a dilapidated ghetto etched in a blighted area negotiates with her identity.

III The local context: The dingy hovels in Metiberuz

In the heart of Maheshtala municipality near Metiabruz which people often term as mini Lucknow, where the Hooghly River's gentle whispers blend with the bustling rhythm of life, lies Nayabasti – a land of shadows, where the sun struggles to pierce through the veil of despair that hangs heavy over its inhabitants.

For generations, Nayabasti has stood as a silent testament to the resilience of the forgotten, a sanctuary for those who sought refuge but found only echoes of neglect in the winds that swept across its barren plains. Here, amid the remnants of brick kilns and paddy fields, a community thrives in the shadows of legality, their existence a delicate balance between survival and oblivion.

At the crack of dawn, when the world awakens to the promise of a new day, Nayabasti stirs to life with a different kind of hope – the hope for a drop of water to quench parched throats and soothe weary souls. But hope is a fragile thing in these desolate lands, where the promise of a better tomorrow fades with each passing sunrise.

Nayabasti's landscape bears the scars of its industrial past, with remnants of brick kilns dotting the horizon alongside stretches of verdant paddy fields. These kilns, once symbols of economic prosperity, now stand as silent sentinels of a bygone era, their chimneys crumbling and their furnaces cold. The paddy fields, once fertile grounds for agricultural pursuits, now lie fallow, overshadowed by the encroaching tide of urbanization.

In the shadow of the kilns and fields, Nayabasti's crowded slums sprawl haphazardly, their narrow lanes and makeshift dwellings a testament to the desperation of those who call them home. Here, amidst the cacophony of noise and the stench of sewage, families eke out a meager existence, their lives overshadowed by poverty, squalor, and neglect.

The living conditions within Nayabasti's slums are abominable, with overcrowded living spaces, inadequate sanitation facilities, and limited access to clean water. Many dwellings lack basic amenities such as electricity and proper ventilation, forcing residents to endure sweltering summers and bone-chilling winters with little respite.

Through interviews and surveys conducted within Nayabasti, it becomes evident that the residents face myriad challenges in their daily lives. Access to clean water remains a pressing issue, with many forced to rely on contaminated sources or travel long distances to fetch water from municipal taps. Sanitation facilities are inadequate, leading to the spread of waterborne diseases and other health hazards.

Moreover, the lack of formal land tenure leaves residents vulnerable to eviction and displacement, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and instability. Many families live in constant fear of losing their homes, their livelihoods, and their sense of belonging within Nayabasti.

Aisha: That radiant Bhangi girl of Naya Basti

In the heart of Nayabasti, amidst the brick kilns and paddy fields, there lives a girl named Aisha. Her story was one of defiance against the strictures of Islamic tradition and the harsh realities of poverty, yet it is also a tale of resilience and unwavering determination.

Aisha's days began before the first light of dawn, as she rose quietly from her makeshift bed in the crowded slum where she and her family dwelled. Despite the disapproval of her conservative family, Aisha harboured a burning desire to pursue her education, to break free from the confines of tradition and carve out a future of her own making.

But life in Nayabasti was unforgiving, especially for a girl like Aisha. The lack of basic resources, such as clean water, took a toll on her health, particularly during her menstrual cycles when access to sanitation was scarce. Yet, undeterred by these challenges, Aisha pressed on, her determination a flickering flame amidst the darkness that enveloped her world.

As the holy month of Ramadan descended upon Nayabasti, Aisha found herself facing yet another test of her resolve. Despite the fasting and the oppressive heat, she kept her roza faithfully, finding solace in the rituals that connected her to her faith and her community.

But it was not only the physical challenges that Aisha faced. Living in an illegal urban settlement meant navigating the treacherous waters of poverty and social stigma. As a girl from a low-class background, she found herself at the intersection of multiple forms of oppression – religious, economic, and gender-based.

Yet, amidst the turmoil of her daily life, Aisha found moments of joy and triumph. With each passing day, she worked tirelessly to excel in her studies, defying the expectations imposed upon her by society and her family. And though her achievements may have been small in the eyes of the world, to Aisha, they were monumental victories – symbols of her resilience and her unwavering belief in a brighter future. When I asked her how she prepared for class twelve, she retired inside her zenana with a brisk smile. Her mother told me that girls within their bustee did not go to colleges and so would be with Aisha if she could manage to finish her high school but I could sense a strong sense of desire as I saw Aisha looking at me through her broken window with a pair of piercing eyes. It was as if she wanted to speak out but was stifled for words.

IV Conclusion

However Aisha was not complaining for she confided in me that religious education cannot be shunned away for it gave women a sense of identity and belongingness which she felt was a wanting need in today's society of reckless material needs and aspirations. It would be a mistake to take Aisha for just a lone follower of her faith for there are many like her with whom she relaxes at her zenana being oblivious of the external world. I was amazed when Aisha told me that she follows Islam not just because her family professes the same but because she has harvested the idea that Islam vouches for a syncretic culture which is a cornerstone of its peaceful coexistence with other religions over the ages. She quips that with her feminine brigade she does not while away time but even discusses issues that I never thought a girl bristling with such die hard challenges would even spare a thought about. Her zenana culture in her bustee has given her the freedom to be on her own and discuss such things with her feminine brigade that are far above the mundane world. It would be a misnomer to think that unlike the women in the colonial society, women today are engrossed with their own thoughts and predicaments but the 'zenana' in a dingy bustee like Naya basti has taken a zappy meaning. Digging out the darkness of the basti, these women are gaining their own grounds when they say institutional education does not make you sharif or a sharif's wife. It takes more than that.

Aisha, a girl from a lower caste, whose family had been a convert from unclean occupational caste of Bhangi (sweeper) had come a long way to negotiate in her own way the challenges that she faces in everyday encounter with her tough life outside. She says even if she cannot complete her dream to attain a college, she will nonetheless continue visiting her adjoining Madrasa for she has learned that despite its several odds Metibruz is still a microcosm for her that cherishes multiple faiths and undoubtedly Islamic education facilitates such

syncretism. Having gone to the nearby Rabindranagar High school and Satya peether Maaajar's Madrasa, her Bhangi identity had been no deterrent but had rather given her a distinctive niche to fight back exclusions etched in even deeper barrels of exclusion. Her zenana girls often give tuition to both lower caste poor Hindu and Muslim girls and there is no one stopping them. That perhaps is the reason when outsiders become loathsome at her when they come to know of her domicile and identity, she quickly retorts back that her place is sacred in its own way which has unparalleled forbearance and amenability when compared with the swanky urban hotspots. She takes pride in declaring how the place has served as a haven for education for different faiths for ages with no contestations. A boastful bhangi girl Aisha is and takes a sneered look at the hierarchies that thought would intimidate her.

As the sun sets over Nayabasti, casting long shadows across its crowded streets, Aisha returns home, weary but unbowed. In her eyes burned the fire of determination, a spark of hope that refused to be extinguished. For Aisha knew that despite the obstacles that lay ahead, she would continue to fight for her dreams, to carve out a path of her own choosing, no matter the cost. And in that knowledge, she found her greatest strength – the power to defy the odds and emerge triumphant, a beacon of hope in the darkness of Nayabasti. This Bhangi identity at the nooks and crannies of Nayabasti has empowered her because Islamic knowledge and its idiosyncratic education has given her an identity and a pair of wings which probably no Sharifs can.

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