

Great Ancestors: Women Asserting Rights in Muslim Contexts

Farida Shaheed

with Aisha L. F. Shaheed



THE NARRATIVES

نساء تحت مظلة الشريعة الإسلامية
Women living under muslim laws
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Femmes sous lois musulmanes



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Dedication

To all great ancestors:
past present and future;

To women who assert rights for themselves and others,
Fight for social justice, and dare to dream;
To the men who walked with them.

To my personal ancestors:
Rashida Shaheed & Anwar Ahmad Shaheed
who supported me to become who I am today

and

are the grandparents of Aisha Lee Fox Shaheed.

To Abbas who walks beside me, and to the future generation:
Zaair, Daanish; Aisha, Sehr, Rima, Samar, Alia and Ameer.

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Glossary

<i>ahadith</i>	sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (ص); plural of <i>hadith</i> .
<i>ahong</i>	teacher, scholar, religious teacher in charge of mosque, religious instructor, since late 18 th century also used for Muslims with advanced religious learning (China)
<i>alim</i>	learned person, often with reference to theologians and jurisprudential experts; singular form of <i>ulama</i>
<i>amir</i>	ruler, commander, chief or nobleman
<i>apa</i>	‘elder sister’; a title of respect appended to a name, in reference to an older sister; (Central and South Asia)
<i>artel</i>	traditional form of cooperatives where a group of people work together; found in production, supply and distribution activities; (USSR, Central Asia)
<i>bait al ta’a</i>	‘obedience to the house’; marital obligation of the wife to remain in the husband’s house
<i>bashlanmak</i>	a ceremony celebrating a child’s commencement of studies in early 20 th century Turkey
<i>bayt ete’a</i>	see <i>bait al ta’a</i>
<i>bazaar</i>	market
<i>burqa</i>	veil; stitched outer garment covering the whole body and head; the Afghan-style covers the face, others are like coats with a separate head scarf and face veil that can be drawn back
<i>da’i</i>	high religious office, see <i>da’ wa</i> .
<i>darogha mahaldar</i>	matron of the imperial palace; (Mughul India)
<i>darra</i>	co-wife (Arabic)
<i>da’wa</i>	high religious office; also a claim in a lawsuit
<i>dholi</i>	small palanquin (South Asia)
<i>divan</i>	council of state; hall of justice; holding court
<i>emir</i>	see <i>amir</i>
<i>farman</i>	binding authoritative decree
<i>fiqh</i>	Muslim jurisprudence

<i>fitna</i>	the cause of chaos
<i>guru</i>	teacher; (Malaysia) (in South Asia, a mentor)
<i>hadith</i>	see <i>ahadith</i>
<i>hammam</i>	bathhouse
<i>haq mahr,</i> <i>(haq mehr)</i>	bride / wife's right of dower
<i>hazrat</i>	blessed; literally, 'presence'; more often used in Persian texts than in Arabic ones
<i>hailifan</i>	person studying the Qur'an in preparation to become an <i>ahong</i> or religious instructor (China)
<i>hijab</i>	veil; the concept of veiling
<i>hilala</i>	intervening marriage contracted by a divorced woman before she can remarry her previous spouse
<i>huijiao</i>	Muslim/Islam (China)
<i>hujja</i>	highest rank of the <i>da'wa</i> in the Fatimid hierarchy
<i>imam</i>	religious leader
<i>ijazat</i>	certificate; (Arabic) also used for permission
<i>jaji</i>	appointed woman leader, in the educational system created by Nana Asma'u (Hausa)
<i>jarya</i>	female slave and/or concubine
<i>javab</i>	response; Persian (Iran, and South Asia)
<i>jiaozhang</i>	learned person (China)
<i>kaaba</i>	a large cubic structure in Mecca revered by Muslims, site for Muslim pilgrimage and the direction Muslims face for their prayers
<i>kanun</i>	law; imperial decrees in Ottoman Turkey
<i>khatun</i>	lady; noblewoman (Central Asia, South Asia, and Turkey)
<i>khudjum</i>	soviet 'offensive' against <i>purdah</i> , beginning in 1927
<i>khutba</i>	sermon
<i>khwahar</i> <i>khwandeh</i>	friendship; sisterhood (Persian)
<i>kolkhoz</i>	collective farm (USSR)

<i>adrassa</i> (<i>madrassah</i> <i>madressa</i>)	<i>school; now commonly used to denote a religious school</i>
<i>magajiya</i>	heir apparent; archaic term for a queen; (Nigeria)
<i>mahr</i>	dower; an essential requisite of a Muslim marriage, <i>mahr</i> is the money or property the husband is under obligation to pay to this wife on marriage
<i>majlis</i>	literally ‘assembly’; used in this context as a governing council
<i>majalis</i>	plural of <i>majlis</i> used in this context for collective recitations of <i>marsiahs</i>
<i>marsiah</i>	funerary elegy – relating the events of the kerbala martyrdom of the grandson of the Prophet (ص); usually in a <i>majlis</i>
<i>masjid</i>	mosque
<i>maulvi</i>	learned man or scholar; often used today as ‘preacher’ or ‘cleric’
<i>mehr</i>	see <i>mahr</i>
<i>mikiri, mitiri</i>	an ad hoc women’s meeting; (Nigeria)
<i>mufti</i>	expert in Muslim jurisprudence whose religious opinion or <i>fatwa</i> is considered binding on the community
<i>muharram</i>	first month of the Muslim calendar; the first ten days of which commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, and others, at Kerbala
<i>mullah</i>	preacher
<i>mushrif</i>	female superintendent of the imperial <i>zenana</i> ; (Mughal India)
<i>nafaqa</i>	maintenance during marriage of wife and children
<i>nikah</i>	nuptials; also used to denote wedding ceremony
<i>nikahnama</i>	marriage contract document; (South Asia)
<i>nisa’i,</i> <i>nisa’yah</i>	feminism; (Arabic)
<i>nu ahong</i>	female religious instructor, often presiding over a women’s mosque (China)

<i>nüsi</i>	women's mosque (China)
<i>paranja</i>	veil traditionally worn by Muslim women in Central Asia.
<i>pardanashin</i>	<i>pardah</i> -observing women; (Persian - Urdu)
<i>pardah</i>	literally, 'curtain'; the practice of secluding and segregating women; sometimes used for the veil
<i>qadi</i>	magistrate or judge in a Muslim judicial system
<i>raden</i>	title of nobility (Indonesia)
<i>raka</i>	section of Muslim prayers
<i>ribat</i>	literally a station or fortress, in this context a shelter for women or 'convent'
<i>rukhsati</i>	the 'sending off' of a bride to her husband's home
<i>sadr-i-ana</i>	female administrator of the imperial <i>zenana</i> (Mughal India)
<i>sangha</i>	organization (Bangladesh)
<i>sayyid</i>	man who claims descent from the Prophet Muhammad (ص)
<i>sayyida</i>	woman who claims descent from the Prophet Muhammad (ص)
<i>shaikha</i>	female <i>sheikh / shaikh</i> ; a venerable and learned person
<i>shariah</i>	literally, 'the way'; codification of Muslim laws based on the Qur'an and <i>Sunnah</i>
<i>sharif</i>	noble; honourable; in this context, 'respectable'
<i>shaykhah</i>	see <i>shaikha</i>
<i>souk</i>	market
<i>sufi</i>	a Muslim mystic
<i>sufur</i>	concept of unveiling (Egypt)
<i>sunnah</i>	traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (ص)
<i>suq</i>	market
<i>surah</i>	chapter of the Qur'an
<i>ta'a</i>	wife's obedience to husband (in return for being provided for)
<i>tahwildar</i>	female accountant of the imperial <i>zenana</i> (Mughal India)
<i>talaq</i>	unilateral divorce by a Muslim man
<i>talaq-i-tafwid</i>	delegation of the husband's power of <i>talaq</i> to the wife or to a third party

<i>tanzimat</i>	reform (Turkey)
<i>ulama</i>	plural of <i>alim</i> , i.e. scholar
<i>umma</i>	a people, a nation or a sect (Hebrew); used by Muslims to refer to the Muslim population at large
<i>urdubegi</i>	female armed guard of the imperial <i>zenana</i> in Mughal India
<i>uwar gari</i>	‘Mother of the Town’ (Nigeria)
<i>uztaz</i>	religious instructor (Malaysia)
<i>uztazah</i>	plural of <i>uztaz</i>
<i>vakil</i>	agent or representative; frequently used for a legal practitioner.
<i>vizier</i>	minister of state; political advisor
<i>wali</i>	guardian
<i>waqf</i>	endowment
<i>waziri</i>	see <i>vizier</i>
<i>yan-taru</i>	female disciples of educator Nana Asma’u; (Hausa)
<i>yarligh</i>	decree conferring power (Central Asia)
<i>yixue</i>	charitable schools run by mosques (China)
<i>zenana</i>	Persian term used for the female section of the household compound that could be a separate building or a portion of the main house
<i>zhenotdel</i>	female sections of the Soviet-era Communist Party
<i>zina</i>	sexual intercourse between persons not married to each other

Introduction

There is a myth that women's struggles for rights is alien to those societies that embraced Islam. This myth flows from a misconception that the contemporary women's movement is exclusively rooted in European and North American concepts and women's struggles in these locations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This myth enjoys credibility both outside and within Muslim contexts. In the latter, it is deliberately promoted to discredit women's rights advocates and their cause. When taken as fact, the myth can sometimes provoke a disengagement with the contemporary rights discourse and impede women's assertions for their rights and for justice. The truth is that women have taken steps to assert their rights and have intervened to bring about a more just society in every era and in every location. This is as true of Muslim contexts as elsewhere.

Tracing women's assertions from the earliest days of Islam through to the mid-twentieth century, *Great Ancestors: An Information and Training Kit* does more than just refute this myth; it provides a very different picture of the past. Far from the commonly held impression of silenced, cloistered and acquiescent women, the 'great ancestors' in this Kit are strong, determined and engaged women. I should clarify that *Great Ancestors* is *not* about women classified as famous or powerful in history; it is about women who intervened for women's rights and social justice, whether they were subsequently famous or not. The two categories overlap but do not coincide.

Three broad strands of women's assertiveness are visible from the start; at times the strands are interwoven, at others, they run parallel to one another. The first strand consists of women asserting control over their personal lives, especially in terms of bodily integrity, including sexuality, and rights within the family. The second, much less documented strand is women's solidarity actions, that is, initiatives by women to support other women. The third strand is women's efforts to improve their societies. In the earliest periods, women's engagement in this last strand was through mysticism and/or scholarship on the one hand and by influencing those who ran the affairs of state on the other. This evolved over the centuries: mysticism became less important; scholarship continued, supplemented by women's writing and efforts for education; women not only intervened with state rulers and administrators, they, themselves, were appointed to positions of authority and became heads of state. Later still, nationalist struggles and the modern political process provided an important framework for this strand. Regardless of strands, many of the 'great ancestors' led by example: by the life-choices they made for themselves, these women defied, and so challenged, existing structures and norms and in doing so, they provided an opening for other women (and men) to either follow in their footsteps or to emulate them by creating another path, another choice.

The Training Manual and Module

The *Great Ancestors* project started as a training module designed for the Feminism in the Muslim World Leadership Training Institutes jointly run by the international solidarity network, Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML) and the Center for Women's Global Leadership (Rutgers University).¹ Defining leadership as the ability to make things happen, the Center's regular institutes had been running for many years and had helped create an international pool of feminists skilled in women's human rights issues. The pool included a number of WLUML networkers. The joint institutes made this training available to more women from Muslim communities and countries. Aiming to mobilize new activists in the WLUML network, the joint institutes informally came to be called the NVI (New Volunteers Institute). The NVIs retained many of the Center's core modules, but added new components addressing the felt needs of current and potential networkers. One concern was to explode the myth that the struggle for women's rights is confined historically and geographically to European and North American locations.

In 1998, NVI participants were asked to collect narratives of women they considered to be 'great ancestors' from their own historical context to share with others. The results were uneven. Participants had disparate research abilities and not all the 'great ancestors' so identified displayed a feminist perspective: several were women who simply fit the definition of classical heroines, known for military conquests or supreme sacrifices; only a few had taken steps to promote

women's rights – whether for other women or for themselves as women. Consequently, for the second NVI, the decision was taken to prepare a training module; and I was asked to take on the task – and challenge.

My desire was to create a module that would bring to life the diversity of women's assertions through the ages - the different styles and issues they took up - and to ensure the inclusion of ancestors from roughly the same geographical location as the participants. With less than two months in which to conceptualise, research, and produce the training module, extensive research was impossible. Other than a few narratives collated in the first NVI and inputs from some networkers, the module relied on materials available in my personal library and in the documentation centre of Shirkat Gah – Women's Resource Centre. Yet, finding information proved easy, rather than difficult. Indeed, there were more worthy ancestors than could be used in the module. Admittedly, as I rifled my memory and rummaged through my shelves and the books I had collected for Shirkat Gah, I often felt that the years of seemingly random collecting had, in fact, been for this module. Early on, we started calling these women the 'great ancestors' and so the title of the NVI module and the two companion volumes of *Great Ancestors: Women Asserting Rights in Muslim Contexts – An Information and Training Kit*.

The training module is designed as an oral narrative to be read out by five different voices accompanied by illustrations on overhead transparencies. (Resource and time constraints precluded anything more elaborate.) The main part of the module is made up of short cameos of women's actions and thinking, with occasional linking commentary. Wherever possible, the script uses the actual voices of these women, that is, quoting their own writings or speeches. Where original voices are not available, as is the case for most of the pre-sixteenth century texts, the script keeps as close as possible to the original source(s) used, even when the material has been transformed into a first-person narrative. Some modifications were necessary to facilitate reading and comprehension. To keep attention focused no one piece is longer than a reading of 60 seconds; many are far shorter.

Great Ancestors: Women Asserting Rights in Muslim Contexts - A Training Manual is divided into three sections coinciding with the three strands of women's assertions: personal rights, social reform initiatives, and solidarity actions. The module runs through the centuries three times, tracing one strand at a time. (The companion volume of narratives is organised chronologically.)

Not counting discussion time, the module is designed as a 60 minute training session that allows for 45-50 minutes of presentation. Consequently, even where substantial information was available, the module is extremely selective, choosing only the strongest narratives on women's rights while ensuring regional representation. Amongst those excluded are a number of the better known and often cited examples of significant and strong women.

Conscious that women's assertions for rights, even within Muslims contexts, have never been limited to Muslim women, the training module (and *The Narratives* volume) deliberately includes the voices and lives of a handful of non-Muslim women. This is to signal that (a) within a given geographical area, women faced similar or identical socio-cultural norms and restrictions, (b) women often had a similar analysis of, and response to, the issues at hand and (c) women united in their struggles *as women* more often than as communities. Time constraints and the specific focus of this training module did not allow us to include examples of actions uniting women across religious and geographical boundaries. A similar module about women's assertions of rights within a geographical context, or focused on solidarity across identities, could be produced. Just as interesting, this would, however, be a different project altogether.

The earliest voices of women asserting their rights in this module date from the eighth century. The narratives could start earlier, but we deliberately omitted immediate family members of the Prophet Mohammad (ص); not because these women did not assert themselves, but in order to avoid any potential controversy. Hence, because opinion is divided on whether Sukaina bint al-Hussain (great-granddaughter of the Prophet (ص)) survived or was martyred at Kerbala, her story was excluded. This, even though various historical chronicles - including accounts from the early thirteenth century - maintain that Sukaina married several times, and, in at least one case, filed for divorce herself. According to these records, Sukaina's marriage contract with Zayd Ibn Amr, the grandson of the Caliph Usman, is notable for the long list of written conditions he was to comply with, including: he would never be the one to end the marriage, he would never touch another woman while they were married, Sukaina would be allowed to live near her friend Umm-Manzur, and he was not to refuse her any reasonable thing she asked of him.² These records relate that when Zayd violated the terms of the marriage contract by spending seven months at the residence of his female slaves, Sukaina called in the Governor of Medina to mediate, who then appointed a judge to hear the couple's case.³

Although this is one of the earliest illustrations of women's determination and ability to stipulate conditions in their marriage contracts to maximize their personal space, the narrative was dropped. A training module cannot afford to alienate its audience, and it seemed counter-productive to start with a narrative that had that potential. Fortunately, this determination to assert rights within marriage is corroborated by other narratives from approximately the same period, and these have been used instead.

An unfortunate propensity amongst historians to document a few powerful personalities over the masses - usually men in and close to the seats of power - means that available records from the earliest periods are limited to women mostly connected with powerful political men. Consequently, the earliest voices

of our 'great ancestors' are unavoidably restricted to those of women who wielded either some measure of power through their social and economic status, or influence through their scholarship and mysticism. This makes the narratives not focused on an individual woman and those of ancestors whose names have been lost in the records, all the more vital for they indicate women's activism amongst a much wider cross-section of society.

Run at the 1999 NVI, the module did exactly what it hoped to: it connected the contemporary struggle for women's rights with the participants' own historical past, engendering a sense of linkage with – and ownership of – both women's assertions in the past and the contemporary movement. Multiple requests for the training module followed. I was reluctant, however, to distribute just the script (and illustrations) without an accompanying document on the sources we had used. Quite apart from a concern that some of the narratives may leave the audience incredulous, not infrequently, there are several recorded versions of history, with nothing to suggest one is more accurate than another. For the module, I obviously selected the version that resonated most with our own perspective. I felt it was vital that potential users be adequately equipped to address any questions that may arise.

A separate concern was that the snippets of women's lives contained in the module do not do them justice. These women's lives aroused interest, piqued curiosity, and left me – and those helping me – inspired, provoking a desire to share a more complete picture with others than is possible in less than 60 second sound-bites. There was also the question of those women who asserted rights but had to be excluded to stay within a manageable 45-minute reading session. For all these reasons, I decided the training module needed a companion volume that elaborated the sources, that gave quotations and citations in full, and that provided more information. But, for *The Narratives* volume, I needed a research assistant devoted to the project – something that was easier said than done. It was not until 2003 that I found an appropriate person, Aisha Lee Fox Shaheed, to join me on an internship in 2004 to work on the second companion volume on completion of her masters' degree in history with a specialisation in women's history.⁴

The Volume of Narratives

Organised chronologically, the volume *Great Ancestors: Women Asserting Rights in Muslim Contexts - The Narratives* includes women who could not be accommodated in the training module and others 'discovered' by us over the last year. It also provides the exact and full quotations used in shortened and/or edited versions in the training module. The volume has biographical notes on 53 women. Dozens more are mentioned in narratives which are not about a single woman but a phenomenon or trend such as women's support for *ribats* (that were

both shelters for women and institutions for scholarship and heterodox religion between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries), the formation of women's organizations, the proliferation of women's journals and periodicals, the struggle for institutionalising women's education, and women's participation in political processes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Sources Used and Challenges Faced

Starting in the eighth and ninth centuries, a number of historical records do include women. Fifteen percent of the 4,250 persons entered in the earliest *Al-Tabaqat al-kubra* (The First Generations) are women.⁵ In the eleventh century, works conflating biography and history proliferated, written by scholars (mostly historians of the *ulama*) convinced of the need to record not only the lives of the rulers, but to "recor[d] the history of the *umma* as the sum total of the lives of its notables."⁶ Until the fifteenth century, these scholars included a significant number of women.⁷ Where records on the first generations largely centre on Mecca and Medina; those of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries cover women from Egypt to Syria. Importantly, in this second period, the lives of 1,300 women were recorded by their contemporaries (roughly ten percent of the total entries), for example by Al-Sakhawi in his twelve-volume tome, *Daw al-lami* (Brilliant Light). As expected, these documents record the lives of women from learned, religious, royal and elite families. More surprisingly perhaps, they also record the lives of women merchants, poets, concubines, midwives and entertainers.

After the fifteenth century, women unfortunately-and mysteriously-disappear. In his sixteenth century compilation of 1,647 illustrious personages, Al-Ghazzi (d. 1651) only includes twelve women; Al-Muhibbi (d.1699) includes no women at all; eighteenth century al-Muradi (d.1791) only mentions a single woman, al-Baytar's (d.1918) nineteenth century work only two.⁸ There may be many reasons for this. One possible reason is the fragmentation of the Arab-centred *umma* into disparate structures and empires each with its own priorities, its own court and languages. For these - and other - centuries, court records are a valuable - but still largely untapped - source of information, providing a different (and sometimes counter-intuitive) view of women's engagement in their societies.

Finding material about women in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries proved to be a challenge, probably due to language. Obligated to rely on information available in English (and some in Urdu) in Pakistan (and on the internet), we were unable to access the narratives of women written in other languages. Language presents an additional problem in the case of Turkey caused by the change in script from Arabic to Roman in 1928; a time when numerous women's organisations were actively demanding improved rights for women and some 40 women's periodicals were appearing in the Arabic script. Not only are there few contemporary writers on Turkish women who can read the Arabic

script, this transitional period may have experienced a gap in documentation as women activists, along with others, struggled with the challenge of the change in script.⁹ We have collated the scattered information we could gather on Turkish women's organisations in the opening decades of the twentieth century but, despite our best efforts, we were unable to trace the names and lives of women in these organisations.

Our compilation relies on the work of others. Inevitably, therefore, the narratives of 'great ancestors' are richer where others before us have documented women's lives and achievements, be this as autobiographies or biographies, or by collating women's speeches and writings and making these available in English. We have been helped by personal contacts in different countries, especially in Iran, Nigeria and Uzbekistan, who provided us with information we would not have been able to obtain otherwise. This has been supplemented by research on the net, in pursuit of names mentioned in passing in some document or the other. We regret that, our attempts to mobilise information notwithstanding, there are still relatively few narratives from sub-Saharan Africa, and from the Far East, and none to speak of from Europe other than Spain.

Insights from the Research

Our research provided some interesting insights and revealed certain trends. Some are not covered in either the training module or the companion volume; others do appear but are worth emphasizing. One interesting fact is that the need to document the lives and accomplishments of women is not only felt by contemporary feminists: periodically others have felt a similar compulsion, such as the scholars who compiled the biographical-historical records mentioned above from the ninth to the fifteenth centuries. Another example is a collection called *Javahir al-Ajayib* (Jewels of Wonder) written some time between 1501 and 1576 by a man, Fakhri of Herat (a.k.a. Sultan Muhammad b. Muhammad Amiri). This collection of biographical information on some twenty female poets and learned women includes extracts of their writings, and is dedicated to Maham (d.1562), the influential nurse of the Mughal Emperor Akbar.¹⁰ More recent efforts include work done by Hind Nawfal and May Ziyada at the turn of the twentieth century in Egypt. There are also several contemporary efforts in different parts of the world – many are still works in progress.

More significantly, two important aspects not highlighted in the narratives, need to be underlined. The first is that over the centuries, many men from within Muslim contexts have called for better gender relations and justice, and that innumerable men have been key supporters and facilitators of women's assertions of self. The notion that all men in Muslim societies are misogynistic is as much a myth as the notion that women are only silent victims. Amongst the earliest and best known was the Andalusian Ibn Rushd (1126-1198) (a.k.a. Averroës). The son and grandson of *qadis* (*qadi* in this context meaning the

supreme judge of a city), himself a *qadi* in Seville and Cordoba, Ibn Rushd was a reformer whose unorthodox views were severely attacked by conservative clerics. Underlining the need to reconceptualise women's role in society, Ibn Rushd noted that:

In these (our) states, however, the ability of women is not known, because they are merely used for procreation. They are therefore placed at the service of their husbands and relegated to the business of procreation, child-rearing and breastfeeding. But this denies them their (other) activities [b]ecause women in these states are considered unfit for any of the human virtues.”¹¹

Fast forward to the early nineteenth century and we have the Egyptian, Rifaat al-Tahtawi (1801-73) demanding that women be allowed social, economic and political equality with men, condemning the harem as a prison that needed to be destroyed, proposing that child marriage be banned and education made universally available to all girls and women.¹² By the late eighteenth century, a scattering of male reformers in different societies were advocating social reform including the need to reorient and expand the limited role assigned to women in their society. Indeed, in a number of societies under colonial rule, women's rights were supported by male reformers and nationalist leaders so that women and men forged a joint opposition to the colonial powers. Our more recent narratives from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century show that men played pivotal support roles in the lives of many of our 'great ancestors', often as fathers, brothers and husbands. If we have chosen not to speak of such men it is not because we do not think of them, too, as 'great ancestors,' only that we feel a more pressing need to highlight women's self-assertions.

The second important aspect omitted in the training module and largely hidden in the compilation of narratives is the solidarity women extended to each other in their struggle for their rights, especially recorded in the modern era. Whether in Egypt and other Arab countries, Nigeria or India or Turkey, women worked together for their rights, undivided by religious or ethnic identities. Nor was women's solidarity confined within geographical demarcations: women linked up with each other across continents and, at least in some contexts, also across the colonizer-colonised divide.¹³ Several British women were an integral part of the women's movement in the Indian subcontinent before independence in 1947; some were prominent in the nationalist struggle for self-rule (Annie Besant, for example, was jailed for agitating against British authorities). Women from the Arab countries, from Iran, and from Turkey attended women's conferences in Europe, and in Asia and the Middle East, women organised their own regional conferences across cultural and religious boundaries.

Supporting this internationalism were women's organisations and journals that proliferated in the late nineteenth, early twentieth centuries. The journals regularly reported events concerning women in other parts of the world so that,

for instance, reports of visits by Turkish women to Great Britain were translated and published in India. Then, as now, women learned from each other. Hence the news of women being inducted into the police force in England immediately inspired Turkish women to make the same demand and the idea was spread through women's journals.¹⁴

Transnational solidarity also took other forms. We know, for example, that denied access to official medical schools in their own countries, women in North America and England established their own private medical universities. Simultaneously, they sponsored some women from elsewhere (e.g. India) to benefit from these women's institutions.¹⁵ Limitations of space precluded incorporating information about this in the training module but, in an age where collective identities are increasingly being used to fragment the global women's movement – or inadvertently end up doing so – this unity of earlier feminists needs to be acknowledged and celebrated.

Certain themes of women's activism and assertions have remained constant. Women actively opposed polygamy – more accurately polygyny – from the start and did so in every period. They have repeatedly asserted the right not to veil, the right to choose their marriage partners as well as not to marry at all, and made multiple efforts to negotiate the contours of their personal lives in every way. Their success has depended on the political environment, their personal status and access to power as well as sources of support.

For its part, the socio-political environment has fluctuated. Periods of openness, that allowed women greater space in which to fulfil their potential and in which their public interventions are more visible, are followed by periods of rising conservatism where societal parameters narrow down, and women become obscured. Also, seemingly inevitably, this narrowing down is marked by strictures on women's personal lives, on their dress as well as mobility. The very calls to restrict women point to the wider space available to women at that particular point of time. History also suggests that whenever women's challenge to the existing social order is beyond the control of individual men, the state is called in to impose and enforce restrictions through law and policies. This is seen in the Andalusian and North African dynasties (711-1492), the Safavid dynasty (1501-1722), and the Ottoman empire (1300-1923), to mention only a few.

Finally, if the number of 'great ancestors' documented is relatively small, this is undoubtedly due to the fragmented nature of the chronicles available; the narratives are indicative of only the tip of the iceberg that constitutes women's self-assertions. Early on in conducting the research for the training manual, I came across a passage in Fatima Mernissi's book, *Hidden from History: The Forgotten Queens of Islam* which resonated deeply. Pointing out the dismissiveness of other (male) scholars when she started looking for women queens in the Arab history and their absolute conviction that no such entity ever existed, Mernissi makes the point that:

*Muslim women in general...cannot count on anyone, scholar or not, 'involved' or 'neutral', to read their history for them. Reading it for themselves is entirely their responsibility and their duty. Our demand for the full and complete enjoyment of our universal human rights, here and now, requires us to take over our history, to reread it, and to reconstruct a wide-open Muslim past. This duty, moreover, can turn out to be no drab, disagreeable task, but rather a journey filled with delight.*¹⁶

Certainly, my experience was precisely that: delightful. Indeed, I have had to enforce strict discipline on myself to stop reading in order to complete the volumes as they are today.

We know important gaps remain to be filled and hope that others will take up the relay baton from the *Great Ancestors*. Knowing that additional time and resources (most importantly people and multiple language skills) would reveal more 'great ancestors', we think of this as a continuous project. We are certain that there will be future editions and hope those with information on all the ancestors we've missed will make contact so we can produce an even richer collection of *Great Ancestors* in the future.

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References

- ¹ The Institutes took place in September 14-26, 1998 in Istanbul, Turkey, and on October 25-November 5, 1999 in Lagos, Nigeria.
- ² In *Women and Gender in Islam*, Leila Ahmed finds this reference in Umar Ridda Kahhalah's biographical work on women in early Islam, *Alam al-nisa: fi alami al-arab wa'l-islam* (vol.2) as well as in Jean Claude Vadet's 1957 article, "Une Personnalité féminine du Higaz au Ier-VIIe siècle: Sukayna, petite-fille de Ali" in *Arabica* vol. 4.
- ³ The account of this hearing is based on the medieval Persian encyclopediast Abu al-Farag al-Isfahani, in the *Kitab al-Agani*, cited in Wiebke Walther, *Woman in Islam*, (Montclair, NJ, Abner Schram: 1981) 78.
- ⁴ I am most grateful to Rights and Democracy, Canada, for sponsoring the internship.
- ⁵ Ibn Sad's (d. 845) *Al-Tabaqat al-kibra* (The First Generations). *The Cambridge Illustrated History of the Islamic World*. Edited by Francis Robinson, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge: 1998) gives an over view of these chronologies, 186-197
- ⁶ Robinson, 188.
- ⁷ The recorders include: al-Khatib al-Baghdadi (d.1071), Ibn Asakir (d.1176), Ibn Khallikan (d.1282), Ibn Hajar (d.1499) and his student, Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Rahman al-Sakhawi (d.1497).
- ⁸ Robinson, 188.
- ⁹ This may pose a challenge in other places which also underwent a change in script, such as Malaysia.
- ¹⁰ By the time the book was published, Fakhri had relocated to Sindh (contemporary Pakistan) explaining why the dedication is to Maham, considered to be one of the most influential women in the Mughal court, rather to someone from amongst the Irano-Timurid women that the book focuses on.
- ¹¹ Tariq Ali, *The Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihads and Modernity* (London & New York: Verso, 2002) 66. Ibn-Rushd was closely followed by Ibn Al-'Arabi (1165-1240) another Andalusian who emphasized the complementarity of the sexes and the feminine dimension of the divine. Born in Murcia (Spain) Ibn Al-'Arabi studied with several Sufi masters, including two women: Shams, mother of the Poor, and Nunah Fatima bint al-Muthanna; he was persecuted more than once as a heretic. Leila Ahmed: *Women and Gender in Islam* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1998) 99-101.
- ¹² Tariq Ali, 66-67
- ¹³ The illustrations are from South Asian history because this is the context I am most familiar with; others will undoubtedly have other examples.
- ¹⁴ *Valaiti Ma'lumaat*, (News from Abroad) section of *Tehzib-e-Niswan* journal; different issues and volumes 1915-1940.
- ¹⁵ In England parliament removed restrictions for women in 1876. See Chapter Five in Kumari Jayawerdana *The White Woman's Other Burden, Western Women and South Asia During British Rule* (Zed Books; London, 1996).
- ¹⁶ Fatima Memissi, *Hidden from History - The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, (ASR Publications Lahore 1994), 116.

Chapter One

The First Generations: The Eighth Century to Ninth Century

Asserting Personal Rights

We open our narratives of ‘great ancestors’ with women who lived in the first hundred years of Islam (the seventh to the eighth centuries in the Georgian calendar). Fragmented though the information is in this early period, the three strands of women’s activism that continue down the ages are already apparent. The first consists of women asserting control over their personal lives by, for example, choosing their future spouses, ensuring their husbands remained monogamous, or by refusing to veil in defiance of societal norms and/or the dictates of husbands. A parallel strand is women’s efforts to influence societal norms and/or the affairs of state for the better: in the realm of ideas through mysticism and scholarship, and in the affairs of state by influencing decision-makers. A third distinct strand is women’s solidarity actions: initiatives taken by women to support other women. Finally it needs to be said that, starting in this period and continuing in subsequent times, whenever a woman adopted a heterodox lifestyle, her example undoubtedly opened the way for others to do likewise, whether such emulations are recorded in history or not.

Aisha bint Talha (d. 728) Mecca (Saudi Arabia)

Aisha bint Talha was the niece of the Prophet's wife, Hazrat Aisha, and the granddaughter of the first Caliph, Hazrat Abu Bakr (through her mother, Umm-e-Kulthum). Historians relate that Aisha was known amongst her contemporaries as a physically beautiful, strong-willed woman who was also virtuous, intellectual and possessed vast scholarly knowledge. Her knowledge of Arab military history, genealogy and poetry equalled that of men from the ruling Ummayyad clan, and from her famous aunt she had also learned the science of astronomy.¹ Aisha was also vain about her beauty and consistently refused to cover her face.

Aisha contracted three marriages during her lifetime, apparently to no condemnation from her contemporaries. Though veiling was not prescribed for all ranks of society in the eighth century, it was generally expected that high-ranking women would cover their faces. One of her husbands, Musab ibn Zubayr, who was allegedly initially attracted to Aisha for her forthrightness and determination as well as her beauty, became upset with her decision not to veil. To his objections, Aisha is said to have replied: "God has honoured me with beauty. I want the people to understand what rank I enjoy before them. I will not veil myself. Nobody can reproach me with a fault." Though Musab readily admitted Aisha was "the best of all the earthly possessions [he] ha[d]," he obviously found Aisha's independent spirit difficult to handle. He ended up resorting to verbal and physical abuse to render his wife submissive and obedient,² without, it would appear, much success.

Aisha bint Talha had a tempestuous character and chronicles mention her frank attitude towards sexuality along with her love of jewels and riches. Despite these traits, she was known to be generous and knowledgeable and was well-regarded in political circles. For example, when Caliph Hisham invited her to his court she engaged in discussions with scholars, impressing the Caliph so much with her knowledge that he gave her a gift of 100,000 dirhams.³

Her reputation earned her not only monetary gifts, but also other privileges. The Governor of Mecca held Aisha in such high regard that when Aisha went on pilgrimage, he agreed to delay the hour of prayer so she could complete her circumambulation of the Kaaba. For this exceptional act, the Governor was promptly dismissed from his post. Aisha either could not – or did not – save his position.⁴

Umm-e-Salama (8th Century) Baghdad (Iraq)

Born into the eighth century Arab world, Umm-e-Salama was a thrice-married woman of aristocratic descent. That she had a will of her own is evident in the snippets history has left us about her third marriage to Abu al-Abbas as-Saffah – the man who would become the first Caliph of the Abbasid dynasty (750-1258).

Twice married to men from the ruling Ummayyad family, clearly Umm-e-Salama was a woman of some means as well as determination. It was Umm-e-Salama who first noticed al-Abbas, found him attractive, and, having no idea who the young man was, made her inquiries. She discovered he was of a noble background, and therefore a suitable marriage partner. However, she also discovered the gentleman in question was impecunious without the wherewithal to give her a *mahr* (obligatory marriage dower). Undeterred, Umm-e-Salama sent him a proposal through a maid and also sent him the money for her own *mahr*.

During the early years of their marriage, the inexperienced future Caliph relied heavily upon his more experienced twice-married wife in matters of the bedroom as in others. Al-Abbas continued to consult Umm-e-Salama on administrative matters up until the time he became Caliph (750-754) when the couple, who had two children, shifted to the seat of power in Baghdad. Chronicles relate that early on in their marriage, al-Abbas promised his wife that he would remain monogamous, taking neither a second wife nor a concubine during their marriage. It is unclear whether this was merely a verbal agreement or whether it was stipulated in the marriage contract. What is clear is that Umm-e-Salama took action to ensure that al-Abbas keep his promise of not taking a second partner after he became Caliph.

In his *Murug ad-dahab*, al-Masudi (871/888-957), an Arab historian, geographer and traveller, relates how a courtier tried to encourage the Caliph to break his promise and how Umm-e-Salama countered this move. Surprised that the Caliph was limiting himself to only one wife, the courtier, Khalid Ibn-Safwan, tried to tempt him by listing the physical types of women that al-Abbas was forgoing by remaining monogamous:

O Commander of the Faithful, if you saw a tall, white-skinned maiden or a brown-skinned with dark lips or a yellow one with round hips...you would see something wonderful.

Upon hearing of this attempt at enticing al-Abbas to break the promise of monogamy, or perhaps distressed that her husband and Khalid had been discussing women as if they were wares to be sampled, Umm-e-Salama dispatched some men to thrash the courtier. The next time Khalid had an audience with the Caliph, he sensed that Umm-e-Salama was present behind a curtain. To avoid another beating, he reversed his previous position and encouraged al-Abbas to stick to his promise of monogamy saying that the Arab word for co-wife (*darra*) had the same etymological root as that for 'damage' and 'misfortune.' He went on to assert that "None of those who had more than one wife was happy...and four wives are the worst thing that can happen to a man, they make him old and grey and sick." Khalid also emphasized that Umm-e-Salama was a noble and wise lady and that the Caliph should not concern himself with virgins, whom he compared to eunuchs. The story goes that Umm-e-Salama was unable to control her laughter as she heard Khalid retracting his

earlier words for her benefit.⁵ Apparently she richly rewarded Khalid for his hasty turnabout.

Arwa Umm-e-Musa (8th Century) Baghdad (Iraq)

Umm-e-Musa, whose given name was Arwa, was another woman from the Southern Arabian nobility of the eighth century. Arwa married the second Caliph of Baghdad, al-Mansur (r. 754-775), successor to Caliph al-Abbas, Umm-e-Salama's husband. Like Umm-e-Salama, Arwa agreed to the marriage provided that her husband bound himself to a marriage contract which decreed that he would not take a second wife or a concubine during her lifetime. But, unlike Umm-e-Salama, and possibly learning from her predecessor's experience, Arwa included this agreement in the signed marriage contract. Umm-e-Musa's efforts to ensure that the Caliph of Baghdad adhere to his marriage contract shows that women managed to assert their rights even against an all-powerful ruler and, in Umm-e-Musa's case, did so through legal means. Her story also indicates that there was a functioning judicial system that women - at least powerful ones - could access.

According to historical accounts, Al-Mansur soon regretted signing the marriage contract's stipulation of a monogamous relationship and, upon becoming Caliph, wished to annul the contractual agreement. Whenever the agreement was threatened, Umm-e-Musa went to court to prevent a breach of agreement. Finally, to resolve the matter once and for all, Umm-e-Musa called upon the highest judicial authority, the grand *qadi* (judge) of Cairo, to come to Baghdad for the sole purpose of adjudicating upon the matter. At the hearing she presented her marriage contract as evidence of this agreed-upon marital condition. Acknowledging the validity and legality of the document, the grand *qadi* definitively ruled in Umm-e-Musa's favour. Following the ruling, the marriage continued for the next ten years, until Umm-e-Musa's death - at which stage, al-Mansur was promptly presented with one hundred virgins and immediately built a large harem.⁶

But, at least in one way, Umm-e-Musa had the last word. Clearly concerned about the disadvantaged state of girls and women and knowing that women less powerful than she had more difficulties asserting their rights, in her will Umm-e-Musa left an endowment providing for concubines who gave birth only to girl children. Perhaps she was also aware of a generally deteriorating status of the rights of women that, with the benefit of hindsight, can be observed in the eighth and ninth centuries.⁷

Leila Ahmed argues that Umm-e-Musa, Umm-e-Salama, and their contemporaries, were living in an "age of transition." She believes these women were part of the last generations able to exercise their rights and use legal means to secure their position. By the ninth century, this power was eroding and the subservience of the wife to the husband was becoming both socially entrenched

and was being bolstered by religious discourses. Instead of using political alliances and legal documentation, Ahmed finds that “with the new ethos of the Abbasid world, women were reduced to manipulation, poison, and falsehood – the means of the powerless.”⁸

Still, the stories we have collected of women through the later centuries demonstrate that women continued to assert their rights, finding ways to exercise control over their sexuality within marriage and outside it. Furthermore, assertive women left their mark in other fields, such as mysticism and scholarship, challenging predominant male discourses without any recourse to the “means of the powerless.”

Scholars, Saints and Sufis

The first generations counted numerous well-educated women who were active in learned circles. One was Umrah bint Abdur Rahman (d. 723), the granddaughter of the Prophet’s companion, Asad ibn Zararah Ansari. Umrah served “like a secretary” for Hazrat Aisha (wife of the Prophet), according to the scholar Imam Bukhari. Imam Zahri affirmed that whenever he himself wanted to learn *hadith*, he went to Umrah, who he considered to be in a “deep sea of knowledge.” Imam Malik, the founder of one of the four schools of Sunni jurisprudence (*fiqh*), stated that Umrah would even correct the mistakes of her nephew, the Chief Judge of Medina. Umrah died at age 77 in 723.⁹ That women were active in the realm of religion is also evident from the fact that some women led prayers for both men and women. We know, for instance, that in the very early period of Islam, Umm Waqara bint Abdullah led the prayers for both the men and women of her clan.¹⁰ Later on, in Mamluk, Egypt (1250-1517) another woman *shaykhah*, or female sheikh, is recorded as leading prayers and preaching.

Rabia Basri (d.801?) Basra (Iraq)

Rabia al Adawiyya (a.k.a. Rabia Basri or Rabia of Basra), venerated as an important mystic of the Sufi tradition, is certainly the most famous woman Sufi of all times. Her life illustrates a different type of struggle and assertion: one devoted to God alone for which, in a society where universal marriage was the norm, she asserted her right to live alone and celibate.

Born in the early eighth century in what is now Iraq, Rabia spent her life in the city of Basra.¹¹ Highly respected by men of religion both in her day and in our own, Rabia was immortalized in the *Memorial of the Saints*, written in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century by the Persian poet, Farid al-Din Attar. Foreseeing criticism for including a woman in his taxonomy of Islamic ascetics and mystics Attar wrote:

If anyone says, 'Why have you included Rabe'a in the rank of men?' my answer is, that, the Prophet himself said, "God does not regard your outward forms...moreover, if it is proper to derive two-thirds of our religion from A' esha, surely it is permissible to take religious instruction from a handmaid of A' esha. When a woman becomes a 'man' in the path of God, she is a man and one cannot any more call her a woman."¹²

In contemporary language, this last sentence would probably be expressed as contending that mystics divest themselves of any sexual identity or that their sexual identity becomes irrelevant.

Amongst the forerunners of Islamic mystics, and preceding many of her male contemporaries, Rabia, a lifelong celibate who chose to live alone, dedicated her life entirely to God. However, she was far from being an aloof and inaccessible ascetic. The abundant stories about her portray Rabia as a woman with a quick wit and sense of humour who challenged the notion of male superiority and women's need for protection. One anecdote, for example, has a group of men insisting to Rabia that, "All the virtues have been scattered upon the heads of men...The Crown of Prophethood has been placed upon men's heads...No woman has ever been a prophet." To which she replied, "All that is true. But egoism and self-worship...have never sprung from a woman's breast...All these things have been the speciality of men."¹³

As a spiritual authority, Rabia discussed theology with men and women alike. The most famous of her associations was with the Sufi leader Hassan al-Basri. Rabia was his elder, and her reputation as a mystic appears to have predated his. According to the lore, the two would spend much time together, discussing matters of philosophy and theology. The tales of their camaraderie depict Hassan as struggling to match Rabia who, like all saints, is associated with miracles. In one tale, finding Rabia near a lake, Hassan is said to have thrown his prayer rug onto the lake's surface and asked her to join him in two *rakas* of prayer. To this Rabia responded: "Hassan, when you are showing off spiritual goods in this worldly market, it should be things your fellow-men are incapable of displaying." So saying, she threw her own prayer rug into the air, sat on it and asked Hassan to join her. When he was unable to do so, since he had not reached this station of spirituality, she went on to state: "Hassan what you did, fishes also do, and what I did, flies also do. The real business is outside these tricks. One must apply oneself to the real business."¹⁴

Their friendship led Hassan one day to bluntly ask her, "Do you desire for us to get married?" To this Rabia replied that she had forsaken her earthly existence and the only one she would ever live with was God.¹⁵ In the end, Hassan acknowledged both the irrelevance of their being of the opposite sex, and also Rabia's greater wisdom and piety, when he related:

I passed the whole night and day with Rabia speaking the Way and the Truth, and it never passed through my mind that I was a man. Nor did it occur to me that she was a woman, and when dawn came, I looked at her and saw myself as bankrupt and Rabia as truly sincere.¹⁶

Rabia's complete devotion to God is highlighted in another tale that has her walking through the streets of Basra carrying a torch in one hand and a ewer of water in the other. Upon being asked what she was doing, she calmly replied that she was setting fire to paradise and pouring water on the flames of hell, so that these two veils should drop away from the eyes of the believers to enable them to love God not out of fear of hell or a desire for paradise, but for God alone.

The significance of such anecdotes does not reside in their historical accuracy. Hagiographical texts, i.e. writings about the lives of saints, have a specific agenda in mind that may not always correspond with literal facts. On Rabia, for instance, Leila Ahmed muses that, "Such narratives perhaps capture some qualities of the historical Rabia, but they are doubtless mainly legendary. It is highly unlikely, for instance, given their dates, that Hassan and Rabia ever met, let alone enjoyed the reported exchanges."¹⁷ Nevertheless, the nature of such exchanges is crucial as they provide a narrative structure that allows for public female expression, religious pedagogy and platonic friendship.

It is not known exactly when Rabia died, and the date is given variously as 752 and 801. She was certainly one of the earliest female mystics of the Islamic tradition. Many other women were later recognised as important mystics, especially in Mughal India (1523-1857) where miniatures show women hermits surrounded by young men and women. One of these was Jahanara, the eldest daughter of Emperor Shah Jahan, who also left a book about her initiation as a mystic. In Turkey, Sidqi, who died in 1703, was famed as both poetess and mystic.¹⁸ Several women gained the status of saints and have shrines in their memory; others earned a reputation as religious scholars as well as Sufis.

Nafisa bint al-Hassan (762/3–823?) Egypt

One of Rabia's contemporaries was Nafisa bint al-Hassan (a.k.a. Sayyida Nafisa). A scholar who achieved sainthood, Nafisa was born in Mecca in either 762 or 763. A direct descendant of Prophet Muhammad (ص), the great-granddaughter of Hazrat Hassan, Nafisa grew up in Medina, was married at sixteen to Isq ibn Jafar, and moved to the city of Fustat, known today as Old Cairo where she is still revered as a saint today.¹⁹

It is in Fustat that Nafisa met the jurist Muhammad Ibn Idris al-Shafi'i, better known as Imam al-Shafi'i. A few years her junior, Al-Shafi'i would approach Nafisa with questions about theology knowing that she had memorized copious religious texts and was an authority on the *ahadith* (the traditions and sayings of the Prophet(ص)). During Ramadan, he and Nafisa would often pray together.

Al-Shafi'i, who went on to found one of the four great schools of Sunni Muslim jurisprudence, held Nafisa in such great esteem that when he died in 820, his body was brought to Nafisa's house, as had been specified in his will, so that she may pray over the body.²⁰

During her lifetime, Nafisa was known for her extreme piety, having been on pilgrimage at least thirty times. She also exhibited great charity and a vast wealth of religious and historical knowledge. But Nafisa also had a sense of civic duty and agreed in at least one recorded instance to act as an intercessor between the people of the city and the Governor of Egypt. When people's complaints about the Governor's tyranny fell on deaf ears, they appealed to Nafisa who decided that the only effective way to petition the Governor was to confront him publicly. She did this by physically blocking one of his official public processions to demand in full public view that he be more just to the community.²¹

Nafisa was obviously known to the community as a benevolent intercessor. One narrative recounts that an elderly woman was selling her home-spun thread in the bazaar, not only to provide food for her four daughters, but also to be able to buy them a book. The story goes that a bird snatched the thread from her hands and when the old woman began weeping, the townspeople urged her to go meet with Nafisa. During their meeting, a group of travellers arrived who told a wondrous tale: their ship had sprung a leak which had then been plugged by a ball of string falling from the sky. Believing that Nafisa's piety had saved them, they expressed their gratitude by offering her 500 dinars. Nafisa then handed this money over to the old woman, telling her to go buy the book for her daughters. So pleased was the woman at this gesture that she and her daughters then became part of Nafisa's household.²²

Nafisa died in Fustat (Cairo) in 823 or 824. Though it was more usual for the descendants of the Prophet to be buried at the cemetery in Baqi, Nafisa had been adopted by the community of Cairo and was buried there at the request of the city's residents.²³ She was laid to rest in a tomb that she had had built during her lifetime.²⁴

Fatima of Nishapur (d. 849) Balkh (Afghanistan)

Another mystic and religious scholar in the ninth century was Fatima al-Nisaburiya, or Fatima of Nishapur. Fatima's family was originally from Nishapur, in present-day Iran, and her father became the Prince of Balkh, in Bactra (now, Afghanistan). Fatima abandoned her royal life for the asceticism of Sufism. Unlike Rabia Basri, who opted for a celibate life, Fatima of Nishapur saw no contradiction between marriage and religious devotion. In fact, when she decided that she wanted to marry a prominent local, Abu Hamid Ahmed Ibn Khazruya al-Balkhi, she took the matter of engagement upon herself. She sent Ahmed a message urging him to ask her father for permission to marry her. Receiving neither news nor action, she then reportedly sent a second note,

reading, “Ahmed, I thought you were manlier than this. Be a guide, not a highwayman!” Ahmed heeded her insistence and asked the Prince for permission to marry Fatima.²⁵

Fatima combined her married life with intense religious devotion and spent her time in spiritual contemplation and in conversations with other mystics, ascetics and theologians. One well-known Sufi mystic with whom Fatima conversed was Dhu al-Nun al-Misri. He referred to Fatima as a true saint and mystic, even going so far as to assert that she was his ‘teacher.’²⁶ As a married woman Fatima was direct and forthright. As a mystic, she held her own in a male-dominated milieu where compliments for a woman’s intellectual abilities were couched in terms that denied her female gender. Hence, her long-time friend, the Sufi Abu Yazid (a.k.a. Bayazid Bistami), intended a compliment when he once exclaimed, “If any man desires to see a true man hidden in women’s clothes, let him look at Fatima of Nishapur!”²⁷

Fatima and Abu Yazid met regularly to discuss religious matters. On one occasion her husband, Ahmed, accompanied her, and to his surprise she lifted her veil in front of them both. He is said to have exclaimed, “What is this boldness you display with Abu Yazid?” to which Fatima assured him that romance was the furthest thing from her mind. She explained that, “You are intimate with my natural self...Abu Yazid is intimate with my spiritual way...You arouse me to passion but he brings me to God.”²⁸

Fatima remained faithful to her word and ended her friendship with Abu Yazid the moment she felt he saw in her a woman, rather than a spiritual friend. One day, when Abu Yazid asked Fatima why she had put henna on her hands, she exclaimed: “If you have discovered that I have hennaed my fingers, then you have looked at me with eyes other than those of intellectual friendship. The familiarity between us must now end!”²⁹

References

- 1 Charis Waddy, *Women in Muslim History*, (Longman Group, London & New York: 1980) 23. See also Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 77.
- 2 Abu al-Farag al-Isfahani, *Kitab al-Agani*, cited in Wiebke Walther, *Woman in Islam*, (Montclair, NJ: Abner Schram, 1981), 78-79.
- 3 “Leading Ladies Who Made a Difference in the Lives of Others” (approved by Mufti Muhammad Taqi Usmani and Mufti Abdul Qadir and published by Idara Talifat-e-Ashrafia), available online at <<http://members.tripod.com/worldupdates/newupdates10/id47.htm>>.
- 4 Cited in Walther, 79.
- 5 Corroborated by the fourteenth century chronicler, Umar Riddah Kahhalah in volume 2 of his *Alam al-nisa: fi a’lami al-arab wal-islam*. For a contemporary narrative based on these sources, see Walther, 79 and Ahmed, 77.
- 6 This narrative is based on an account of Abu Jafar Muhammad ibn Jarir at-Tabari (838-923), an Arabian historian and theologian, in his text *Tarih ar-rusul wa-l-muluk*, cited in Walther, 79.
- 7 Ahmed, 78.
- 8 Ahmed, 84.
- 9 “Leading Ladies Who Made a Difference in the Lives of Others” Idara Talifat-e-Ashrafia.
- 10 Ibn Sa’ad, *Kitab at-tabaqat al-kabira*, vol. 8, E. Sachau, et al., eds., (1904-1921), 335, cited in Wiebke Walther, 77.
- 11 The dates of Rabia’s life are not exactly known. It is thought that she was born between 712 and 717 and her date of death is given variously as 752 and 801.
- 12 Farid al-Din Attar, *Muslim Saints and Mystics: Episodes from the Tadhkirat al-Auliya’ (Memorial of the Saints)*, translated by A.J. Arberry, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1966), 40.
- 13 Attar, 48.
- 14 Farid al-Din Attar *Episodes from the Tadhkivat al-Auliya* translated by A.J. Arberry in *Muslim Saints and Mystics* 45.
- 15 Attar, 46.
- 16 Ahmed, 96.
- 17 Ahmed, 97-8.
- 18 Waddy, 128.
- 19 Walther, 77. It is not known whether she moved to Egypt with her brother or with her husband.
- 20 Waddy, 101.
- 21 Walther, 77.
- 22 Cited in Jennifer Heath, *The Scimitar and the Veil: Extraordinary Women of Islam*, (Mahwah, NJ: Hidden Springs, 2004), 178-81.
- 23 Walther, 77.
- 24 Waddy, 101. According to Heath, Nafisa dug her own grave during her lifetime and would spend time there, reciting the Qur’an (Heath, op. cit. 180).
- 25 Attar, 173-4.
- 26 Omaima Abou-Bakr, “Fatima of Nishapur,” *Letters from Memory*, No. 3, (April 2000), 15.
- 27 Attar, 175.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 174.
- 29 Walther, 76.

Chapter Two

Women's Experiences in the Middle Ages: The Eleventh to Fourteenth Centuries

The end of the tenth century yields the first traces of women's assertiveness in forms other than mysticism and religious scholarship on the one hand, and their attempts to ensure greater spaces and rights in personal lives on the other. To these strands of assertiveness are added women rulers who asserted their will and helped improve the conditions of women and their society as a whole; women who used their pen to express their views; women who provided safe spaces for other women. Finally, fragments of history bear witness to nameless women – some rich, some poor, some whose identity is simply unknown – resisting injustice and tyranny, both as individuals and in organised groups.

Sitt-ul-Mulk (970-1024) Cairo (Egypt)

In the first two decades of the eleventh century, women resisted tyrannical dictates in the face of overwhelming odds, when Cairo was terrorized by the Caliph Al-Hakim ibn 'Amri Allah. Rescue from the ruler's madness came with his death in 1021 and in the shape of a woman: his sister 'Sitt-ul-Mulk,' or 'Lady of Power,' who reigned as regent from 1021-1024. Sitt-ul-Mulk restored sanity and religious tolerance and revived the economy.

In 970, Sitt-ul-Mulk was born to the fifth Fatimid Caliph of Cairo, a Mamluk named al-Aziz, and a Christian slave-woman (*jarya*) of Byzantine origin who retained her religion. Proud of her dual ancestry, Sitt-ul-Mulk was influenced by her father's peaceful rule and his policies of religious tolerance and inclusion

from a young age. One example of inclusiveness was his appointing a Christian and a Jew respectively as his vizier and as ambassador to Syria, to the furore of religious conservatives.¹

On Al-Aziz's premature death at 42 years in 996, Sitt-ul-Mulk's eleven-year-old brother, Al-Hakim, became the sixth Fatimid Caliph. In practice, for the first few years the task of ruling fell to a 27-year-old Sitt-ul-Mulk, their mother, and a team of political advisors.² By the time he was fourteen, Al-Hakim assumed the reins of power, ushering in a period in which eccentricities quickly spiralled into madness. A peculiar preference for night time ambulating led to sessions of the governing council (*majlis*) being convened at night and an order that the bazaar be opened at night and closed during the day. Later on, al-Hakim gave up his royal fineries and started prowling the city streets at night unkempt, ill-groomed, and without his royal turban. He became displeased with the night-time revelry he had originally encouraged, and banned night-time activities, eventually imposing a dusk-to-dawn curfew.

Then, in 1005, al-Hakim ordered all the dogs of Cairo to be slaughtered. The thirteenth century Egyptian judge and scholar, Ibn Khallikan, recorded that, "when Al-Hakim ordered the killing of dogs, as soon as one appeared in the *suq*, the alleys, or the great avenues, it was immediately put to death."³ Al-Hakim next banned singing in public, then walking along the banks of the Nile, and finally banned certain foods from being bought, under punishment of death. Revoking his father's legacy of religious toleration, Al-Hakim targeted Jews and Christians – considered in Islam to be 'people of the book' – and required them to identify themselves by wearing special clothes. Dismissals, persecution and mass conversions followed.⁴ To enforce his decrees, Al-Hakim organized an army of spies and, on learning that someone had violated any of his prohibitions, he ordered the death of many. In the eleventh century, al-Hanbali documented that, "when [Al-Hakim] was enraged, he could not control himself, and so scores of men were executed and whole generations decimated."⁵

Al-Hakim developed a particular phobia of women; perhaps he believed that women were in fact *fitna*, the cause of chaos. At first, women were forbidden to leave their homes at night; then they were prohibited from laughing in public and participating in amusing pastimes. Conversely, women were also forbidden to weep at funerals, then to attend burials, and eventually women were banned from visiting cemeteries at all.⁶ Orders forbade women from entering the streets adorned or with their faces uncovered. Finally, they were barred from leaving their homes at any time, in any capacity. The *Encyclopedia of Islam* affirms that "soon women were no longer seen. Shoemakers were ordered to no longer make shoes for them, and their bathhouses were closed."⁷ If a woman needed to purchase something, the vendor would have to come to their home and push the goods through their door, so as not to see the woman within.⁸ For seven years and seven months, women vanished from the streets of Cairo.

Not all women accepted the Caliph's edicts, however. Many actively resisted – something we only know because many of those who defied the ban were killed on sight. One entire group of female protestors was drowned and many elderly women were targeted.⁹ Some banded together to defy the impositions. Delegations of women approached Al-Hakim to plead the case of women and to ask for a relaxation of the strictures that were literally killing women.¹⁰ We do not know what types of women opposed Al-Hakim's policies, nor do any of their names survive. What we do know is that both women and men refused to passively accept the reign of terror, and collectively resisted injustice done against individuals of either sex.¹¹

In 1020, facing widespread protest after he declared himself to be the divine incarnate, Al-Hakim ordered the old city of Cairo burnt down. Soon after, on the 13th of February, 1021, Al-Hakim mysteriously – and permanently – disappeared. According to the eminently respected historian, al-Maqrizi, in his late-fourteenth century tome, the *Khitat*, Al-Hakim was assassinated by an anonymous man who, after publicly declaring that he had plotted and carried out the murder, immediately committed suicide.¹²

All other chroniclers, however, indicate that Sitt-ul-Mulk orchestrated the assassination, not only because there were no legitimate means by which to end the Caliph's reign of terror, but also because Al-Hakim ceaselessly accused her in public of lewdness and fornication (*zina*) and had threatened to kill her only weeks before his disappearance.¹³ In these accounts, Sitt-ul-Mulk enlisted the help of one of Al-Hakim's generals, Ibn Daws – the man Al-Hakim most recently accused of being his sister's lover. Soon after Al-Hakim's death, a group of guards burst in upon a meeting of viziers and officials being attended by Ibn Daws, accused him of murdering the ruler, and killed him on the spot. Historians suggest this, too, was orchestrated by Sitt-ul-Mulk to eliminate the possibility of Ibn Daws subsequently implicating her in the murder of a Caliph.

For the next four years, Sitt-ul-Mulk governed the country as regent for her nephew, al-Dhahir, the seventh Caliph who was a minor and the ruler in name only. Sitt-ul-Mulk titled him 'al-Dhahir' (the eminently-visible) to signify that, by extension, her own power had to remain invisible.¹⁴ Though interregnums are often accompanied by chaos and disorder, Sitt-ul-Mulk's assumption of power was seamless. Indeed, as pointed out by Fatima Mernissi, during the four months of uncertainty regarding succession, Sitt-ul-Mulk actually filled the place not only of a secular ruler; in effect she fulfilled the duties of the grand Caliph of the Fatimid Caliphate.¹⁵ She did so without a murmur of public protest; the people of eleventh century Cairo were clearly happy to accept a woman ruler.

In her brief four years of regency (until her death), Sitt-ul-Mulk restored the shattered economy and returned peace and stability to the realm. Following her father's policies of toleration towards minorities, Sitt-ul-Mulk reinstated

non-Muslims to their earlier status. But it is the Sayyidas of Yemen, especially Arwa bint Ahmed, who stand out in this period as exceptional women rulers.

Sayyida Asma bint Shihab al-Sulahiyya (d.1087) & Sayyida Arwa bint Ahmed (1052-1138) Yemen

Female heads of state are rare in Muslim Arab history. Royal women were usually wives, mothers, daughters, consorts or concubines of the ruler; rarely did they officially occupy the throne. In the eleventh century, however, the Sulayhid dynasty in Yemen was ruled by not one, but two female sovereigns in succession. Both Asma bint Shihab al-Sulahiyya and her daughter-in-law who succeeded her, Arwa bint Ahmed, were recognized as the political leader of their times. Both had their names read in the Friday *khutba*: the unequivocal privileges of a Muslim head of state.¹⁶ They were both given the royal title Sayyida al-Hurra, meaning: “the noble lady who is free and independent; the woman sovereign who bows to no superior authority.” The Yemenis also called them *balqis al-sughra*: ‘little’ or ‘young queen of Sheba.’¹⁷ The two Sayyidas were remarkable for many reasons. Of particular note was Arwa who not only ruled for some fifty years but “who, in a unique instance in the entire history of medieval Islam, combined in her person the political as well as *de facto* religious leadership of Sulayhid Yemen.”¹⁸

Asma, the first queen of the Sulayhid dynasty of Yemen, ruled jointly with her husband, Ali ibn Muhammad al-Sulayhi, who founded the Fatimid Caliphate in Yemen in 1037/8.¹⁹ During this joint rule, the queen attended all council meetings and kept her face unveiled.

Asma’s husband, Ali, was killed in 1067.²⁰ En route to Mecca for pilgrimage, his party was attacked by a rival, Said ibn Najah, who killed Ali, his brothers and all of their male companions. Asma was taken captive and secretly imprisoned in the town of Zubayd where she was kept in full view of the decapitated head of her late husband. It took Asma a year to secrete a message in a loaf of bread to her son, Ahmad al-Mukkaram, telling him where she was. Al-Mukkaram stormed the town and rescued his mother but suffered an injury resulting in partial paralysis. Reverting to her custom when at court, Asma unveiled her face to greet her son.²¹ She returned to the capital Sana with her partially paralysed son and ruled over Yemen until her death in 1087.²² During this period of joint-rule, al-Mukkaram decreed that after his mother’s death, his powers were to devolve to his wife, Arwa.

A laudatory poem – commissioned by Asma - described her as one who:

*...hath impressed upon beneficence the stamp of generosity,
Of meanness she allows no trace to appear.
When people magnify the throne of Bilqis,²³ I say
Asma hath obscured the name of the loftiest among the stars.²⁴*

Arwa bint Ahmed al-Sulayhiyya assumed power and inherited her mother-in-law's royal title, Sayyida al Hurra, a title she proved worthy of. Born in Haraz in the Sahara desert around 1052, Arwa benefited from the emphasis the Shi'ite Fatimids placed upon female education.²⁵ Her father having died and her mother remarried, Arwa's education was supervised by her future mother-in-law, Asma. Her future father-in-law also played a part in her education by teaching her accounting.²⁶ Around 1066 Arwa was married to Ahmad al-Mukkarram. By all accounts, al-Mukkarram was a weak leader whether due to the facial paralysis brought on by his war injuries,²⁷ or merely because of his love of wine and music.²⁸ In any event, Al-Mukkarram retired from public life after his mother's death, leaving Arwa in charge. She ensured that her name was read in the *khutba* even during her husband's lifetime, immediately after that of the Fatimid Caliph-imam, al-Mustansir.²⁹ The *khutba* said in her name used the precise wording, "May Allah prolong the days of al-Hurra the perfect, the sovereign who carefully manages the affairs of the faithful."³⁰

Arwa's father-in-law, Ali bint Muhammad al-Sulayhi, had established his capital in Sana. One of Arwa's first acts on assuming power was to move the capital to Dhu Jiblah, present-day Jabala, Saudi Arabia.³¹ By moving the capital to Dhu Jiblah, Arwa was enacting a shift from a government of arms to one of agriculture, from "fighting to food production."³² She concentrated on developing the infrastructure of the dynasty by building roads through mountain passes, lowering prices and monitoring taxation. She also dealt directly with diplomacy and often broke military deadlocks with conciliation and treaties. In her personal sphere of influence, she ensured that the many young men and women under her care received an education, including her female slaves.

Unlike her predecessor, Arwa chose to remain veiled during her working sessions – the sole concession she made to tradition. She ruled despite her own protests that "a woman who was desired for the marriage bed could not be fit for the business of the state"³³ – an apparent reference to her being the mother of several children. But, on her husband's death, Arwa faced a challenge in attaining *de jure* status as a ruler.

As Caliph, Al-Mukkarram combined in his person both religious and temporal leadership. Before his demise, around 1084, al-Mukkarram had named a male cousin, Saba, as his successor to assume the high office of religious leadership of the *da'i* or *da'wa*.³⁴ Saba married Arwa in 1091, a marriage that subsisted until his death in 1102. This much is generally agreed upon. There is also no doubt that Arwa continued to reign in Yemen until her death in 1138 and that she was eventually accorded religious leadership by being appointed *hujja* of Yemen by the Caliph-imam Al-Mustansir.³⁵ This was the first time this high-ranking office was entrusted to a woman in the history of Ismai'liism. Arwa used this position to spread Ismai'li teachings widely, reaching as far as the province of Gujarat in India where her efforts led to the establishment of the Ismai'li Bohra and Tayyabi

communities. Historical records differ, however, on the nature of the powers transferred to Saba by Al-Mukarram, the manner of Saba's subsequent marriage to Arwa, and whether the marriage was ever consummated.

By some accounts only religious power was passed to Saba while temporal powers devolved to Arwa. Other sources maintain that no distinction was made between the two spheres of power and that Saba was technically sovereign of both temporal and spiritual matters.³⁶ In either case, to be confirmed as sovereign and to gain legitimacy to exercise power, Arwa required the official blessings of the Caliph-imam, Al Mustansir, something that the Caliph-imam was – at least initially – unwilling to grant.

We also find differing accounts of the marriage contracted between Saba and Arwa. According to Najm ad-din Omarah al-Hakami's history of medieval Yemen, Saba proposed marriage to Arwa some five months after her husband's death. She refused, and, in retaliation for her snub, Saba besieged her at Dhu Jiblah, prompting days of armed conflict. Saba then appealed to Arwa's brother who interceded and convinced his sister that this marriage was the direct wish of the Caliph-imam al-Mustansir – something that could not be disobeyed. A second version simply has Al-Mustansir ordering Arwa to marry Saba in a letter stating 'I give you in marriage to Amir of Amirs Saba' and Arwa submissively agreeing to this direct order by the infallible Caliph-imam.³⁷ Unless this was a calculated strategic move on Arwa's part, this submissiveness seems out of character for a woman who, within a year of assuming power after her husband's death, avenged her father-in-law's murder by luring the assassin, Said ibn Najah, into a trap and extracting a precise and reciprocal revenge: incarcerating his wife in full view of her husband's decapitated head.

Accounts are also divided on whether the marriage was ever consummated – some saying it was consummated but remained childless, and others that the marriage was never consummated.³⁸ According to one version, to save face, Saba arranged that the couple meet at least once to convey the impression that the marriage had been consummated.

There is general agreement that Saba signed the marriage contract in 1091/1092 and proceeded to Jabala to join his wife. There he entered Dar al-Izz palace and was shown into the nuptial chamber. Those who believe the marriage remained unconsummated relate that Saba was joined in the chamber by a woman dressed as a *jarya* (female slave). The *jarya* waited upon him all night long. Saba, a religious man, never lifted his eyes to see her face and therefore never discovered the identity of this woman. At dawn he said to the *jarya*, "Tell our lady that she is a precious pearl, to be worn only by whoever is worthy of her."³⁹ He then left the chamber, the palace, and Jabala never to return.⁴⁰

The ambiguity in this account makes it impossible to know whether Arwa disguised herself as a *jarya* to avoid consummating the unwanted marriage or

whether she simply refused to meet Saba that night. Regardless of these divergences, Arwa remained married to Saba – even if only on paper - for eleven years, until Saba's death in 1102. The marriage did not interfere with her ruling Yemen independently with only the advice of her viziers. Saba's death was preceded by the death of the Caliph-imam Al-Mustansir who had initially opposed Arwa's ascension to the throne. With Al-Mustansir's two sons fighting over the caliphate, there was no one to pressure Arwa into marriage after this second widowhood. She undoubtedly had the support of her army and her people. Both the army and the people united to repulse several attempts to dislodge her from the throne by local rivals, as well as the incumbent Caliph. Arwa ended her long career as an experienced politician and statesperson in her eighties.⁴¹

Almost a millennium later, we find a link with Sayyida al-Hurra Arwa in twentieth century Indian Gujarat in both the continued and exceptional support for women's education and in the persons of the two Fyzee sisters of the Tayabji family and Begum Sharifa Hamid Ali (see Chapter 7, this volume). All three women were part of the Tayyabi Ismai'li community in Mumbai established by the missionaries sent by Arwa. All three were ardent supporters of female education, as Arwa had been, and strong advocates for women's rights.

The Vibrancy of the Middle Ages

In the meantime, in the Middle Ages, women other than queens also asserted sexual rights and preferences. Indeed, women's efforts to maintain control over their bodies form a leitmotif in women's self-assertions.

In Baghdad, a medical treatise of the twelfth century describes the existence of sexually assertive women, and notes that some women made a different type of personal choice:

There are also women who are more intelligent than the others. They possess many of the ways of men so that they resemble them even in their movements, the manner in which they talk, and their voice. Such women would like to be the active partner, and they would like to be superior to the man who makes this possible for them. Such a woman does not shame herself, either, if she seduces him whom she desires. If she has inclination, he cannot force her to make love. This makes it difficult for her to submit to the wishes of men and brings her to lesbian love. Most of the women with these characteristics are to be found among the educated and elegant women, the scribes, Koran readers, and female scholars.⁴²

In a different location, eleventh and twelfth century Andalusia (the Iberian peninsula) and Morocco offered a synthesis of diverse ethnic and cultural elements and, in practice, women seem to have enjoyed a greater degree of freedom than in other regions of the Islamic Empire of the same period. As in

many Muslim contexts, the art of poetry was a key cultural pillar in Spain and flourished amongst both women and men.⁴³

Female Poets and Scholars of the 11th and 12th Centuries (Spain/Morocco)

Wallada, the daughter of Caliph Mohammed al-Mustakfi b'illah, made her own mark as an accomplished poetess. She remained unmarried up until her death in either 1087/8 or 1091/2. Whether drawing upon her personal life or upon her imagination, Wallada's poetry exhibits passion and sensuality. Her most famous works were love poems, which she exchanged with her contemporaries including her lover, the poet Ibn Zaydun.

Though people were aware of the daring nature of her verses, she was equally remembered for her level-headedness, virtue and sagacity of speech. She associated freely with artists and intellectuals, both male and female. The author al-Maqqari commented that "her circle at Cordova was a rendezvous for the noble minds of the region, her court a race course for the proud stallions of poetry and prose...she was of high rank, of noble heritage and virtuous nature." Clearly, Wallada ran what, in later centuries, would be referred to as 'salons' where issues were discussed and debated, and literature was nurtured.⁴⁴ Both men and women came to these literary gatherings, where they heard and shared poetry (including erotic poetry, most of which would never be published). However, these intellectual gatherings also fostered debate on non-literary matters, including the analysis of dreams.⁴⁵

A fashion of the time was to embroider verses on ones' clothes. The audacious, self-assertive Wallada literally wore her heart on her sleeve. Her right sleeve read:

*I am by God fit for great things
And go my way armed with pride*

and the left:

*My lover I offer the curve of my cheek
And my kiss to whoever desires it.*⁴⁶

Another poem that Wallada had sewn onto her sleeves boldly expressed her romantic desires:

*Must separation mean we have no way to meet?
Ay! Lovers all moan about their troubles.
For me it is a winter, not a trysting time,
Crouching over the hot coals of desire...*⁴⁷

Poetry often went hand in hand with other accomplishments. The well-known female poet of eleventh century Granada (Spain), Naz'hun daughter of Abu Bakr

al-Ghassani, was also known as an historian.⁴⁸ Famed for her kindness, beauty, literary prowess and her oratory, Naz'hun's poetry was also sensual, including accounts of her romantic experiences.⁴⁹ Similarly, according to Ibn al-Abbar's 13th century *Tuhfat al-Khadim*. Zainab and Hamda, the daughters of a Granada bookseller, "were excellent poetesses, thoroughly versed in all branches of learning and science...Their love of learning brought them into the company of scholars, with whom they mixed on perfect terms of equality with great composure and dignity."⁵⁰ There were also many others. Amongst these, Safia was an orator and calligrapher as well as poet; Maria of Cordova, the daughter of Abu Yakub al-Fasial, was both poet and scholar. In Seville, Mariam bint Abu Yakub al-Ansari was a teacher of poetry, literature and rhetoric. Her intellectual abilities, piety, and amiable disposition, "gained her the affection of her sex and gave her many pupils."⁵¹ Amongst numerous others, Umm al-Hina, the daughter of Qadi Abu Mohammed Abdul Hakk ibn Aatiyyeh, was a poet but, equally if not more importantly, she was a 'jurisconsult,' indicating women's presence in the legal system of her times. Women were active in many spheres of public life, and this period also records at least two women doctors in the family of the renowned medical philosopher of the time, Ibn Zahr (1091-1161).⁵²

The most well-known female poet of Muslim Spain was Hafsa bint al-Hajj ar-Rukuniya (or al-Ghirnatiyyah) who lived from around 1135 until 1190 and ended life as a well-respected teacher. She lived in a stricter age than Wallada and Naz'hun, for the Berber dynasties of the Almohads (1130-1269) prescribed more rigid social constraints for women than under the Almoravids (1055-1147). In the Almoravid period, women in Morocco did not wear the veil, for example, partly due to the influence of Zineb, the wife of the King Ibn Tachfine. This was a period in which "education of women was normal and quite widespread, and the princesses set an example for the people in this."⁵³

Though life under the Almohads witnessed greater restrictions upon women, Hafsa was evidently free to visit men fairly openly, as we can surmise from her surviving love poetry.⁵⁴ Hafsa had a long-lasting and well-known love affair with the poet Abu Jafar ibn Said. One of her poems addressed to him begins, "Whether I visit you or you visit me, my heart always inclines towards that which it desires."⁵⁵

This love affair was complicated by the appointment of a new Almohad Governor in Spain, Abu Said Othman, who later became Caliph. Fascinated with Hafsa, the Governor pursued her relentlessly. Though Hafsa seems not to have reciprocated the Governor's interest, her lover, Abu Jafar ibn Said, became very jealous. His jealousy, compounded by his well-known racial prejudice against the part-Moorish Governor, led to his being implicated in a plot against Abu Said Othman. Whether or not Abu Jafar had actually been conspiring against the Governor, he paid the ultimate price. He was arrested and later executed, in 1163.

After the death of her lover Hafsa went into mourning, writing such verses as:

*He outshone me with the brightness of a star,
But now I see the blackness of night.
I mourn his virtues full of sorrow,
Far from the grace and joy which he brought.*⁵⁶

Shortly afterwards, Hafsa abandoned poetry and moved to the Court of Marrakech, in present-day Morocco. There, she taught “advanced courses” to princesses and other women in King Al Mansour’s palace, and was acknowledged by the Andalusian historian, Ibn Bachkwal, as one of the most outstanding teachers of his time.⁵⁷

Female Educators and Women’s Spaces in the Ribats

Women educators and scholars, including those specialised in legal matters, were found throughout the Arab world. Between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries, women studied languages, arts and sciences in different Muslim communities and societies. They also imparted this knowledge to others. As elsewhere, the pursuit of knowledge in the middle-ages was primarily linked to religious matters and institutions.

Shuda bint Abi Nasr Ahmad al-Ibari was a woman educator who earned the title, “Fakhr-an-Nissa” – the ‘Pride of Women.’ Born in the Iranian city of Denvar, her father had ensured that she receive an education, believing that it was men’s responsibility to educate their daughters.⁵⁸ Shuda listened to some of the most illustrious scholars of her time. She taught history in Baghdad and gave lectures on theology and the *hadith* to many pupils of her own, some of whom went on to become well-known academics in their own right.⁵⁹ It appears that she was also given the title of *al-Khatiba* (The Woman Writer) because of her mastery of Arabic calligraphy.⁶⁰ Shuda died in Baghdad in her nineties, in 1178. Another woman who continued her teaching career until a very advanced age was Zaynab bint ash-Shari, who was over one hundred years old when she died in the Persian town of Nishapur, in 1218 or 1219.

Fatima bint Ahmed ibn Yahya was considered an expert in the field of religious law, which she had learned from her father. Her husband was an Imam and would reportedly consult her when he was stumped by a legal question raised by his students that he could not explain. Fatima may not have taught the pupils directly, but they seemed to have understood the arrangements. When they could not understand the second-hand explanations provided by Ahmad they would respond: “That does not come from you yourself but from [her] behind the curtain!”⁶¹ One famous woman jurist who had no need to conduct her teachings and work through a man was Zainab Umm al-Muwayyid. Born in 1130, Zainab lived to be almost 90 years old (she died in 1218-9). She received ‘diplomas of competency’ from some of the most prominent ‘doctors of the age’, and was officially licensed to teach law.⁶²

In other instances too, women were given formal recognition for their scholasticism. Zaynab bint Ahmad of Jerusalem (d.1339) was a scholar of the *hadith*. It is said that she earned a 'camel-load' of diplomas, earning her the name 'al-Kamal' (perfection). Zaynab gave lectures alongside her colleague, Ajiba bint Abu Bakr, and studied *hadith* with the famous Moroccan traveller and historian, Ibn Battuta. Some of her students also went on to become scholars in their own right, such as Daqiqa bint Murshid. Her impact was far-reaching: a Saxon world history written in 1467, the *Gotha Codex* No. 59017, relied heavily on her authority.⁶³

Women who were not scholars themselves, contributed by supporting both male and female Sufi mystics and the Dervish orders. Some were instrumental in making available the space needed by women to pursue their religious scholarship and mysticism. Women of means supported the pursuit of education and religious enlightenment by others. For example, Fatima al-Fihria established the famous Qaraouine University, in the eleventh century.⁶⁴ Having migrated from Al Qaraouine (modern Tunisia), Fatima settled in Fez and provided patronage for the University, though it would be nearly a millennium until women were admitted there as students thanks to the efforts of another woman.⁶⁵

Other well-to-do women operated their own institutions, called *ribats*, which served as places of contemplation and refuge for other women. The *ribat* offered a socially sanctioned space away from their natal or marital families for women who chose a different life pattern than the norm of marriage and children as well as for those who had no other choice or space.

The tradition of women establishing *ribats* for other women flourished between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries when these institutions existed in many parts of the Arab world. The first *ribats* emerged in Medina, Syria and Cairo, and then spread to Mecca. Baghdad was home to the renowned *ribat*, Dar al-Falak, which had been founded by a woman. Occasionally, *ribats* had male patrons. One *ribat* in Baghdad, for instance, was endowed by the last Abbasid Caliph, al-Mustasim (r.1242-1258) and his daughter was named its first director. *Ribats* were usually run by women and catered to female members of the community. Pointing to the dual role of these institutions, the term *ribat* has been variously translated as 'convent' and as 'shelter.'⁶⁶

As a sanctioned space for female mysticism, a *ribat* offered a rare opportunity for a woman to achieve a level of parity with her male counterparts within the parameters of acceptable norms. In this role, the *ribat* can be seen as the female counterpart to the male *khanaqah*, which can also be translated as either a monastery or a shelter.⁶⁷

Others maintain that *ribats* were carrying on an established tradition of women taking care of other women in times of need. The medieval historian of Cairo, al-Maqrizi (1364-1442), looked around his city at the large houses used as *ribats*,

and recorded that they were built “in the manner of the houses of the wives of the Prophet.” He noticed that the occupants of the *ribat* were often elderly women, widows and other unmarried women.⁶⁸ Unlike the Christian concept of a convent, *ribats* did not require celibacy. Like convents and monasteries, however, *ribats* offered a space for study, religious practice and above all, a place of refuge. Women who came to the *ribat* for shelter, rather than study, would often reside in the *ribat* for a specified period of time, leaving for instance when they had married, remarried or returned to their husbands.⁶⁹

The *ribat* therefore frequently represented a temporary or transitional stage in many women’s lives rather than a permanent residence. Given the hazy marital status of many of the women staying in the *ribat*, these institutions were not without their social critics. Leila Ahmed argues that women in the *ribats* “seem to have occupied a borderline status between the reputable and the disreputable,”⁷⁰ however it is difficult to generalize about the residents of the *ribats*, as these institutions served such a diverse population of women. A large proportion of the inhabitants of the *ribat* were of various Sufi orders. Like their male counterparts in mysticism, some came to these institutions not for refuge from an unstable or abusive situation, but for the freedom to practice heterodox forms of Islam.⁷¹

In Cairo, the famous *Ribat-i-Baghdadiyya* was established in 1285 by Princess Tadhkaray, a daughter of Sultan Baybars I (r.1260-1277). It was set up in honour of Sheikha Zaynab bint Abi’l Barakat (a.k.a. Zaynab bint al-Baghdadiyya), a female scholar and Sufi.⁷² This *ribat* was operational 150 years later when al-Maqrizi was surveying Cairo, though he noted it was somewhat falling into a state of disrepair. The last woman to govern it, that he knew of, was Umm Zeinab Fatima bint al-Abbas (d.1394), a scholar who inspired and influenced women in both Cairo and Damascus.⁷³ The *ribat* fell into decline due to rising economic pressures and the establishment of a women’s prison close by.

One institution of learning established by a woman in the middle ages still exists today. Rabia Khatun, the sister of General Salahuddin al-Ayubbi, was a highly educated woman who founded an educational centre in Damascus, between 1233 and 1245. She endowed the institution by establishing a *waqf* (trust) for the Hanbalite sect. The institution still exists in the Sahibiya quarters of the city, just north of the Old City walls, known as the Madrassa al-Sahiba. It continues to be a place of education, though it changed over time: first serving as a *madrassa* and, more recently, becoming a primary school.⁷⁴

Thirteenth Century Women Sovereigns

Unusually, the thirteenth century witnessed a number of female sovereigns in the Muslim world. Three of these women rulers stand out: the Mamluk queens, Razia

Sultana in India and Shajarat al-Durr in Egypt, and the Central Asian queen, Kutlugh Turkan.⁷⁵

The Mamluks, mostly of Turkish origin, served as slave-soldiers to various dynasties. The term Mamluk is derived from the Arabic word *malaka*: a thing owned. Though, technically, Muslims cannot enslave other Muslims, a loophole was devised so that every Mamluk was born an infidel or declared one.⁷⁶ In both Egypt and India, the Mamluk Turks rose from their slave status to become rulers of a sovereign dynasty.

Razia Sultana (a.k.a. Sultana Radiyya) (r.1236-1240) Delhi (India)

Sultan Iltutmish, a Mamluk slave ruler, established Muslim rule in India in 1229. With three children from different marriages, he recognized the need to name a successor. Exceptionally, instead of designating one of his two sons, he designated his daughter, Razia, as the Heir Apparent. She assumed power after her father's death in 1236 and ruled the empire from Delhi.

Some were critical of Iltutmish's designation of a daughter at the expense of his sons, but Firishta, a sixteenth century historian of Muslim India recorded that:

The Princess was adorned with every qualification required in the ablest kings and the strictest scrutineers of her actions could find in her no fault but that she was a woman. In the time of her father, she entered deeply into the affairs of government, which disposition he encouraged, finding she had a remarkable talent in politics. He once appointed her regent in his absence. When the emirs asked him why he appointed his daughter to such an office in preference to so many of his sons, he replied that he saw his sons giving themselves up to wine, women, gaming and the worship of the wind [flattery]; that therefore he thought the government too weighty for their shoulders to bear and that Radiyah, though a woman, had a man's head and heart and was better than twenty such sons.⁷⁷

Once in power, Razia was an undisputed ruler. Unmarried upon ascending the throne, Razia had no husband to eclipse her authority. One of Razia's first acts as sovereign was to unveil, a fact noted by the fourteenth century traveller, Ibn Battuta, who would later record that she "mounted horse [sic] like men armed with bow and quiver; and she would not cover her face."⁷⁸ Razia cut her hair short, wore a turban, and dressed in men's garments. Her choice in clothing also facilitated her movements throughout the city as noted by another commentator who wrote that "she walked in the *souks* dressed like a man, and she sat among us to listen to our complaints."⁷⁹

Like Nafisa bint al-Hassan five hundred years prior, (see Chapter One) Razia was recognized in the community as an easily approachable mediator who was concerned with the welfare of the disenfranchised. Upon coming to power, she

reinstated one of her father's laws which decreed that, because most people wore white clothing, those who felt themselves to be oppressed should wear dyed clothes. Razia and her officials could then identify those who needed assistance in a crowd and would listen to their grievances. In the same spirit, she reintroduced a bell on the palace gates to be rung by those seeking assistance or justice.⁸⁰

An absolute monarch in charge of the Mamluk military, Razia bestowed upon herself certain privileges of a head of state. The Friday *khutba* was proclaimed in her name and coins were minted reading:

*Pillar of Women
Queen of the Times
Sultana Radiyya bint Shams al-Din Ilutmish.*

She bestowed upon herself two noble titles: *Ismat al-dunya wa al-din* (The Blessed of the Earthly World and of the Faith) and *Bilqis Jehan*, invoking the Queen of Sheba, referred to in the Qur'an.⁸¹

For four years, Razia ruled over an area that stretched across much of South Asia, from western Bengal to southern Sindh. Minhaji Siraj Juzjani, a Muslim scholar, met the Sultana and provides us with the only eye-witness account of her reign. As may be expected, he lauded the queen, but he also identified the difficulties she faced as a female ruler: (see Razia Sultana).

*Sultan [sic] Raziyyat was a great sovereign, and sagacious, just, beneficent, the patron of the learned, a dispenser of justice, the cherisher of her subjects, and of warlike talent, and was endowed with all the admirable attributes and qualifications necessary for kings; but, as she did not attain the destiny, in her creation, of being computed among men, of what advantage were all these excellent qualifications unto her?*⁸²

Though her authority to hold power had been conferred by her father, Razia soon confronted opposition to her rule. Around 1239, rumours began circulating that Razia was having a romantic affair with Jamal al-Din Yaqut, an Ethiopian slave, known as the *amir al-khayl*, or 'The Commander of Horses.' Observers felt that she had bestowed special favours upon him, including honouring him with the title, *amir ul-umara*, 'The Amir of Amirs.'⁸³ An army was raised against her and the Sultana fled Delhi. She was captured by the commanding general, Ikhtiyar al-Din Atuniyya. However, in a strange twist of fate, he seems to have fallen in love with his hostage. He freed her, married her, and accompanied her back to Delhi to reclaim her throne.

Overpowered by the opposing troops, Razia lost the ensuing battle and was once again obliged to flee the city. According to Ibn Battuta, she presented herself as a man and was taken in by a peasant who, upon realizing she was a woman in disguise, murdered her. Travelling through India one hundred years after her

death, Ibn Battuta noted that Razia Sultana was still venerated as a saint in Delhi.⁸⁴

Even today, Razia Sultana is held in great esteem in South Asia: acknowledged as an able ruler and model for women.⁸⁵ A decade after her death, in Egypt another female ruler, Shajarat al-Durr, took the reins of power, ushering in a Mamluk regime.

Shajarat al-Durr (r. 1250) Egypt

The Mamluks had ruled in Egypt, but also continued to serve as slaves under the Ayyubid dynasty. The eighth ruler of the dynasty, Malik al-Salih Najm al-Din Ayyub, purchased his Mamluk wife, known to us only by her title Shajarat al-Durr: The Pearl Tree.⁸⁶ Like many women before her, Shajarat al-Durr opposed polygyny and made both al-Salih and her second husband vow to be monogamous. Al-Salih complied with this agreement, but her second husband apparently decided to rebel against this restriction, with disastrous consequences for both husband and wife.

In 1249, al-Salih was in Damascus fighting the Crusader army of King Louis IX of France. Shajarat al-Durr, who had already been assisting her husband rule, was appointed regent during his absence.⁸⁷ When al-Salih died soon afterwards in 1250, Shajarat al-Durr handed over power to his stepson, Turan Shah. Turan Shah, however was immediately assassinated by the army and, amidst the turmoil, Shajarat al-Durr succeeded him in May 1250.

The importance of formal recognition had not changed since the days of Sayyida al-Hurra Arwa, and Shajarat al-Durr sought to buttress her power as queen by seeking official recognition from the thirty-seventh Abbasid Caliph, al-Mustasim. Shajarat al-Durr was not as lucky as Arwa, however. The Caliph not only rejected her request outright, he sent back a message to the effect that if there were no men in Egypt capable of ruling, he would send some himself.⁸⁸

Initially, Shajarat al-Durr, who had the backing of the army and the loyalty of the people, ignored the Caliph's failure to recognize her as sovereign. A Syrian historian living during this period remarked that, "she was ... the most cunning woman of her age, unmatched in beauty among women and in determination among men."⁸⁹

In her short ninety-day rule, Shajarat al-Durr made a favourable peace with the Frankish Crusaders and released King Louis from captivity; she ordered her own coins to be minted and the *khutba* read in her name.⁹⁰ She conferred upon herself the lofty title *Malikat al-Muslimin* – Queen of the Muslims – and during her rule, between May and July of 1250, many Egyptians uttered the prayer:

*May Allah Protect the Beneficent One, Queen of the Muslims, The Blessed of the Earthly World and of the Faith, The Mother of Khalil al-Mustasimiyya, The Companion of Sultan al-Malik al-Salih.*⁹¹

The Mamluk emirs, however, opposed the idea of a woman ruling single-handedly, and decided in favour of the Caliph. On July 30th, they ended her three-month sovereignty by appointing as ruler the Supreme Commander of the armed forces, Izz al-Din Aybak. Rather than remove the Sultana from politics altogether, Shajarat al-Durr was wed to Aybuk in a marriage that lasted seven years. According to one historian, throughout their union it was she who exercised actual power via her husband: “She dominated him, and he had nothing to say,” except, it would seem, in his personal life.⁹²

Shajarat al-Durr had placed the same restriction of monogamy upon Aybak as she had on her first husband, al-Salih. But, after seven years, it seems Aybak decided to break this promise. When Shajarat al-Durr discovered that he was planning to take a second wife, she apparently orchestrated his murder in April of 1257.⁹³ In retaliation, a faction of the military assassinated her that same year, tossing her body over a cliff.⁹⁴ She was laid to rest in the tomb she had ordered to be built during her lifetime in Cairo complete with a mosaic of a tree of pearls. The inscription on the tomb reads: *Ismat al-dunya wa al-din* (The Blessed of the Earthly World and of the Faith).⁹⁵ Like Razia, this Sultana also wore attire which reflected her military and political authority: when her body was discovered, she was wearing only a shirt and a pair of trousers.⁹⁶

Kutlugh Turkan (r. 1257-1282) Central Asia

In contrast to India and Egypt, female sovereigns were fairly common in Central Asia where the people seemed to have inherited the openness of Mongols towards women. Badriye Uçok Un, for example, notes that after the Mongol invasion of Muslim states, numerous women ruled as sovereign queens, most with the blessings of Mongol princes.⁹⁷ Between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the region had no less than six queens.⁹⁸

In the fourteenth century, Ibn Battuta, more used to Arab societies, was taken aback at the gender relations he witnessed in Central Asian courts. He recorded with astonishment that during Friday services, women appeared unveiled beside their male relations at the court of the Mongol ruler of the Golden Horde (1312-1341). Of the noblewomen, he wrote, “As each of the *khatuns* comes in the sultan rises before her, and takes her by the hand until she mounts to the couch...All this is done in full view of those present, without any use of veils.”⁹⁹

In the thirteenth century, the Kutlugh-Khanid dynasty, ruling over the Persian province of Kirman, boasted two sovereign queens: Kutlugh Khatun¹⁰⁰ and her daughter Padishah Khatun, also known as Safwat al-Din Khatun.

Ruling for 26 years after the death of her husband, Qutb-al-Din (r. 1252-1257), Kutlugh Turkan was the more remarkable. Even more notable than the length of her rule was her background. A Turk of an unknown past, as a child she was purchased by Hajji Salih, a slave-merchant of Isfahan, who brought her up as his own daughter. Dazzled by her beauty the local *qadi* asked for her hand in marriage and, when he was refused, grabbed her by force. When Salih approached a prince to intervene, the Pir-Shah did indeed intervene, but then kept Kutlugh for himself. Passing through many hands, Kutlugh ended up with Qutb al-Din, a Mongol leader, and accompanied him to the Mongol *urdu* (camp). There the couple was given patronage by the Mongol leader, Ilkhan Helagu. When Qutb al-Din died, Helagu appointed Kutlugh Turkan to rule on behalf of her infant son in Kirman (present-day Iran). Dissatisfied with the powers given to her, Kutlugh successfully petitioned Helagu to issue a *yarligh* granting her full authority. She then ordered the *khutba* read in her name and, like other queens before her, she made it clear she ruled over religious as well as worldly matters, by assuming the title *Ismat al dunya wa al-din* (The Blessed of the Earthly World and of the Faith). Kutlugh was an effective ruler who secured her authority and wishes by successfully side-stepping both local and Muslim customs.

She raised her daughter, Padishah Khatun, as a boy, hiding the sex of her child from the rest of the court. We don't know exactly why Kutlugh engaged in this subterfuge. Maybe she wanted to save her daughter from the kind of traumatic experiences she herself underwent, or perhaps to avoid an arranged marriage, often imposed by Mongol rulers on the princesses of their colonies.¹⁰¹ In any event, Kutlugh eventually made it known that her child was a girl and, when Padishah was old enough, Kutlugh broke tradition by marrying her to the Buddhist son of Ilkhan Helagu, Abaka Khan. Later, several years after Abaka's death, Padishah married Gaykhatu (r. 1291), one of his sons by another woman - a union that was not considered taboo by the Mongols. At Padishah's insistence, Gaykhatu gave her the throne outright and she became the unchallenged sixth ruler of the dynasty until 1295.¹⁰² Once in power, she took the title *Safwat al-dunya wa al-din* (Purity of the Earthly World and of the Faith). The coins she had minted in her name still exist.¹⁰³

References

- ¹ Fatima Mernissi, *The Forgotten Queens of Islam* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis: 2003), 160-1.
- ² Mernissi, 162.
- ³ Ibn Khallikan's biographical encyclopedia, *Wafayat al-ayan wa anba abna al-zaman*, Vol. 5, cited in Mernissi 168.
- ⁴ Mernissi, 172-173.
- ⁵ Al-Hanbali, *Shazarat*, Vol.3, cited in Mernissi, 170.
- ⁶ Mernissi, 168-69.
- ⁷ *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, article: *Al-Hakim*, cited in Mernissi, 169.
- ⁸ Ibn al-Athir, *Kamil*, Vol.8, cited in Mernissi 170.
- ⁹ Ibn al-Athir, *Kamil*, Vol.1 and al-Hanbali's contemporary, eleventh century work, the *Shazarat al-dahab fi akhbar man dahab*, Vol.3, both cited in Mernissi 169-170.
- ¹⁰ Ibn al-Athir cited in Mernissi 169-70
- ¹¹ Mernissi, 159.
- ¹² Al-Maqrizi, *Khitat*, cited in Mernissi, 175.
- ¹³ Ibn Khallikan, *Wafayat*, Vol.5 and Ibn al-Athir, *Kamil*, Vol.8, both cited in Mernissi, 175.
- ¹⁴ Mernissi, 160.
- ¹⁵ Though Sitt-ul-Mulk performed a Caliph's duties during her rule, she never ordered the Friday *khutba* to be read in her name. Mernissi, 176.
- ¹⁶ Mernissi, 115.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 140-1.
- ¹⁸ Farhad Daftary, "Sayyida Hurra: The Isma'ili Sulayhid Queen of Yemen," in Gavin R. G. Hambly, ed., *Women in the Medieval Islamic World: Power, Patronage, and Piety (The New Middle Ages, Vol. 6)*, (Macmillan Press, London: 1998), 117.
- ¹⁹ The Yemeni caliphate fell under the broader Fatimid Caliphate centred in Cairo and established by Ismai'li Shi'ites in rivalry to the Sunni Caliphate of Baghdad.
- ²⁰ All dates are approximate and slight variations are offered in Fatima Mernissi, *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, Farhad Daftary, "Sayyida Hurra" and Charis Waddy, *Women in Muslim History*, (London & New York: Longman Group, 1980).
- ²¹ This account is based on Najm ad-din Omarah al-Hakami's, *Yaman, Its Early Mediaeval History*. The author was a poet, born during the reign of Queen Arwa and was executed for his disloyalty to the post-Fatimid rulers, in 1173. His narrative is cited in Waddy, 93-5.
- ²² Daftary states that she died in 1074.
- ²³ i.e., the Queen of Sheba. Fatima Mernissi points out that the poetic likening of Asma to Bilqis invokes the latter's place in the Qur'an itself, where in Sura 27, she is shown as a political female ruler.
- ²⁴ Cited in Waddy, 94.
- ²⁵ The Fatimids educated large numbers of women and men. Instruction for women usually took place at Al-Azhar university while Fatimid and other noble women were educated in the palace premises (Daftary 118).
- ²⁶ Jennifer Heath, *The Scimitar and the Veil: Extraordinary Women of Islam*, (Mahwah, NJ: Hidden Springs, 2004), 359.
- ²⁷ Daftary, 121.
- ²⁸ Waddy, 96.
- ²⁹ Daftary, 121.
- ³⁰ Mernissi, 115-6.
- ³¹ Daftary, 120.
- ³² Waddy, 92.
- ³³ *Ibid*, 96.

- ³⁴ The date of al-Mukkaram's death are variously given as 1084 (Daftary, 122) and 1091 (Waddy, 96).
- ³⁵ Daftary 122
- ³⁶ Mernissi, 154-5.
- ³⁷ Divergent views are offered by Zarkali's *Alam* and Thawr's *Hadhihi*. See Mernissi, 154-6.
- ³⁸ Thawr, *Hadhihi*, see Mernissi, 155.
- ³⁹ This narrative, based on al-Hakami's account, is reproduced in Waddy, 97
- ⁴⁰ Salah ibn Hamid al-Alawi, *Tarikh Hadramawt*, Vol. 1, p. 343, cited in Mernissi, 156.
- ⁴¹ Mernissi, 156.
- ⁴² T. Haddad (a.k.a. Abu Nasr al Isra'ili), *Kitab nuzhat al-ashab fi mu'asarat al-ahbab fi' ilm al-bah*, Part 1, paragraphs 6-8 (Medical Thesis, Erlangen & Nuremberg, 1976). Cited in Wiebke Walther, *Woman in Islam*, (Montclair, NJ, Abner Schram: 1981) 118.
- ⁴³ See Chapter 3 on Muslim women writers and poets in Safavid Iran.
- ⁴⁴ Walther, 105-6.
- ⁴⁵ Tariq Ali, *The Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihads and Modernity*, (London: Verso, 2003), 57.
- ⁴⁶ Walther, 106.
- ⁴⁷ Wallada, cited in Tariq Ali, 56-7.
- ⁴⁸ Ameer Ali, *A Short History of the Saracens* [1889], (Karachi: National Book Foundation, 1975), 569.
- ⁴⁹ Walther, 105-6.
- ⁵⁰ Ibn al-Abbar, cited in Ameer Ali, 569.
- ⁵¹ Ameer Ali, 578.
- ⁵² Leila Abouzeid, *The Year of the Elephant* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989) cited in Alison Baker *Voices of Resistance: Oral Histories of Moroccan Women* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998), 17.
- ⁵³ Ibid.
- ⁵⁴ Some of her works are reprinted in Arabic in al-Maqqari's early seventeenth century *Kitab nafh at-tib min gusn al-Andalus ar-ratib* (Leiden: 1855 & 1860), and in French in Louis Di Giacomo's *Une poetesse andalouse du temps des Almohades*, (Paris, 1949).
- ⁵⁵ Cited in Walther, 106.
- ⁵⁶ Cited in Walther, 107.
- ⁵⁷ Baker, 17.
- ⁵⁸ Heath, 147.
- ⁵⁹ Ameer Ali, 456
- ⁶⁰ See <www.webislam.com/numeros/2002/172/Temas/mujer_erudita.html> and <www.muslimtents.com/aminahsworld/Scholarly_woman.html>, for Shuhda bint Abi Nasr Ahmad al-Ibari.
- ⁶¹ These women are recorded in Omar Reza Kahhala's twentieth century encyclopedia of significant Arab women, the *Alam an-nisa fi alam al-Arab wa-l-Islam* (Damascus: 1977), and cited in Walther, 77.
- ⁶² Ameer Ali, 456.
- ⁶³ Heath, 147-8 and Ignaz Goldziger, "Women in the Hadith Literature," *Muslim Studies*, Vol. II, (Albany, NY: SUNY-Albany University Press, 1977), 366-368.
- ⁶⁴ Spelt variously as Qaraouine, Karawiyyan, Qara'win, etc.
- ⁶⁵ Baker, 17. See Chapter 5 this volume for Malika el-Fassi's intervention to open the university to women.
- ⁶⁶ In different contexts, the term *ribat* was used variously. In eighteenth century West Africa, for example, a *ribat* referred to a fortified army encampment. See Jean Boyd, *The Caliph's Sister: Nana Asma'u, 1793-1865: Teacher, Poet and Islamic Leader*, (London: Frank Cass, 1989), 23.

- ⁶⁷ The perspective that *ribats* were akin to convents has been advanced by J. Spencer Trimmingham in *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), cited in Hambly, 7-8.
- ⁶⁸ Al-Maqrizi cited in Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 110.
- ⁶⁹ Ahmed, 110.
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 115.
- ⁷¹ *Ibid*, 114-5.
- ⁷² Gavin Hambly, "Becoming Visible: Medieval Islamic Women in Historiography and History," in Hambly, *Women in the Medieval Islamic World*, 8.
- ⁷³ Al-Maqrizi, *Khitat* ('Topography'), cited in Ahmed, 110.
- ⁷⁴ Ross Burns, *Monuments of Syria*, (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd., 1992), 106. See also "Leading Ladies Who Made a Difference in the Lives of Others" (approved by Mufti Muhammad Taqi Usmani and Mufti Abdul Qadir and published by Idara Talifat-e-Ashrafia), available online at <<http://members.tripod.com/worldupdates/newupdates10/id47.htm>>.
- ⁷⁵ In the 16th and 17th centuries, South East Asia also had numerous women rulers. Starting in 1584, the sultanate of Patani (in the Isthmus of Kra) was ruled by sultanas for a century; in Aceh (north Sumatra) women ruled for 58 years starting in 1614. In Patani, the reign of the four successive queens was considered a 'golden age'. The queens were: Raja Hijau (the Green Queen), Raja Biru (The Blue Queen), Raja Ungu (The Purple Queen) and Raja Kuning (The Yellow Queen). In Aceh women's rule was opposed by *ulama* during the reign of the third queen (Sultana Inayat Syah r. 1678-1688). The *ulama* managed to obtain a *fatwa* from Mecca declaring women's rule illegitimate. Unfortunately, we have no information about how their rule improved the situation of women. See <http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/Pattani>; and Vivienne Wee and Asma Beatrix "Citizenship: South East Asia" pp 5-9 in Suad Joseph (ed), *Encyclopaedia of Women and Islamic Cultures, Volume 2: Family, Law and Politics*. Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers. 2004; Barbara Watson Andaya "Power in a Scarf" <http://www.thestar.com.my/lifestyle/story.asp?file=/2001/11/12/features/marker12&sec=features> 12, November 2001.
- ⁷⁶ Mernissi, 92-3.
- ⁷⁷ Firishta, cited in Waddy, 90.
- ⁷⁸ *The Rehla of Ibn Battuta: India, Maldive Islands and Ceylon* (Mahdi Husain, trans.) and *The Travels of Ibn Battuta AD 1325-1354* (H.A.R. Gibb, trans.) cited in Mernissi, 96.
- ⁷⁹ Muhammad Yusuf al-Najrami, *Al-alaqa al-siyasiyya wa thaqaifiyya bayna al-Hind wa al-khilafa al-Abbasiyya*, cited in Mernissi, 96.
- ⁸⁰ Heath, 363-9.
- ⁸¹ Badriye Ucok Un, *al-Nisa al-hakimat fi tarikh*, cited in Mernissi, 89.
- ⁸² Minhaji Siraj Juzjani (a.k.a. Minhag ad-Din), *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* cited in Walther, 82 and Hambly, "Becoming Visible" in Hambly, 23.
- ⁸³ Mernissi, 97.
- ⁸⁴ *Rehla of Ibn Battuta*, cited in Mernissi, 97.
- ⁸⁵ For a historiographical treatment of the primary sources on Razia and details of her rule, see Peter Jackson, "Sultan Radiyya bint Iltutmish" in Hambly, 181-197.
- ⁸⁶ She is variously referred to as Shajarat ad-Dorr and Shagrat al-Durr.
- ⁸⁷ Waddy, 88.
- ⁸⁸ Mernissi, 28 and Waddy, 89.
- ⁸⁹ G. Schregle, *Die Sultanin von Aegypten: Sagarat ad-Durr in der arabischen Geschichtsschreibung und Literatur* (Wiesbaden: 1961), cited in Walther, 81.
- ⁹⁰ Waddy, 89.
- ⁹¹ Mernissi 28-9 and 90.
- ⁹² Referenced in G. Schregle, *Die Sultanin von Aegypten: Sagarat ad-Durr in der arabischen Geschichtsschreibung und Literatur* (Wiesbaden: 1961), cited in Walther, 81.

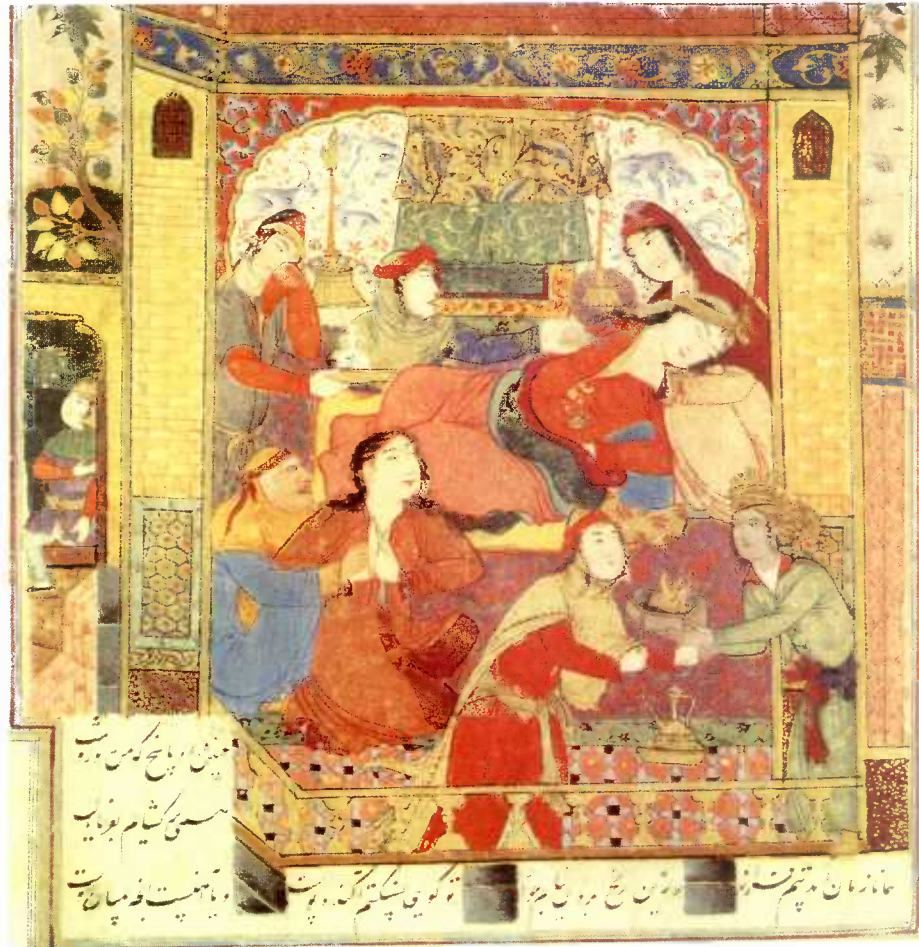
- ⁹³ Yasin al-Khatib al-Amri, *al-rawda al-fayha fi tawarikh al-nisa*, cited in Mernissi, 97-8.
- ⁹⁴ According to Charis Waddy, after Aybak's murder Sharjara al-Durr was beaten to death by the slave women of the harem, (Waddy, 89).
- ⁹⁵ Mernissi, 98.
- ⁹⁶ Walther, 144.
- ⁹⁷ Cited in Mernissi, 99.
- ⁹⁸ Central Asia's long tradition of female rulers predated the introduction of Islam, possibly extending as far back as the sixth century B.C.E. Of course, the presence of female rulers does not necessarily imply gender equality for a majority of women.
- ⁹⁹ Ibn Battuta, *Travels of Ibn Battuta*, cited in Mernissi, 103. Though the term 'Khatun' is usually traced to Turkish origins, it is also the Sogdian word for Queen or Lady.
- ¹⁰⁰ Various referred to as Kutlugh Turkan, Kutlugh Terken, Turkan Khatun or Kutlugh Khan.
- ¹⁰¹ Mernissi, 100.
- ¹⁰² Ibid, 101.
- ¹⁰³ The primary record for these two queens is Nasir al-Din's *Simt al-ula* (circa 1316), only available in manuscript form (BN Persan 1377, fol. 125, Paris). Nasir al-Din was the confidant of Kutlugh Turkan's husband, Qutb-al-Din.

Courts and Professions in the Earlier Centuries

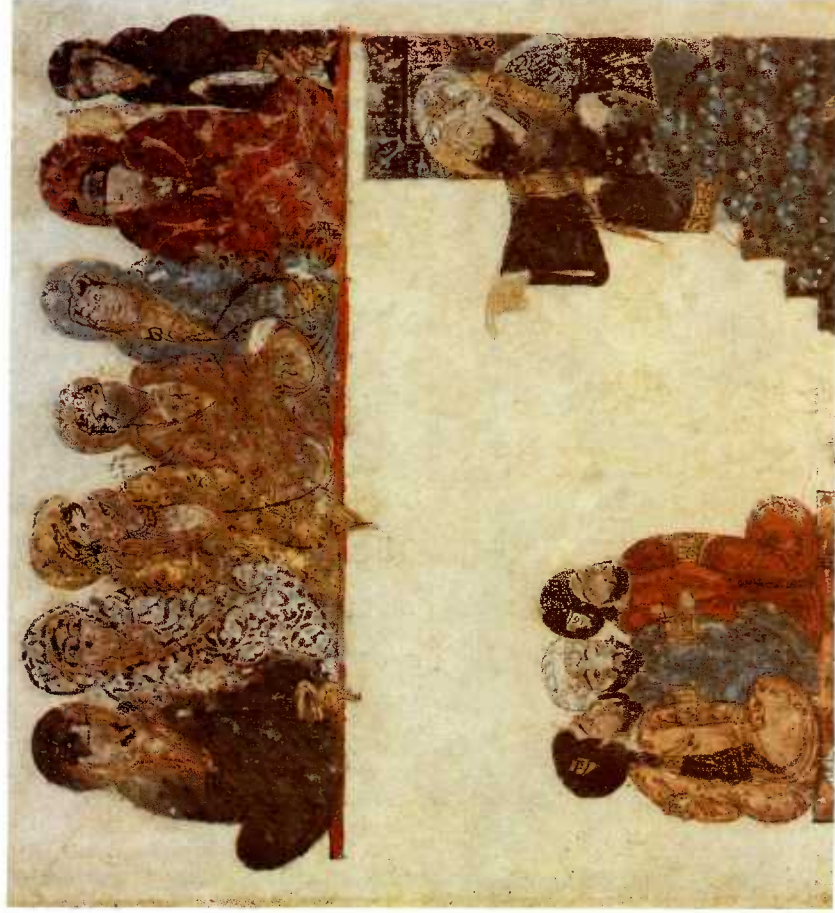
1. A husband and wife present themselves before a *qadi* (judge) over a dispute. (Early 13th century miniature, Baghdad) As illustrated in this painting, it was not unusual that women did approach the legal system to resolve their problems, whether it was on family or other matters; the chronicles indicate women's presence in legal systems from the 7th to the 16th century in different Muslim contexts.



2. Women assisting a birth. (16th century Persian miniature) Women have been active health providers but, as noted in 11th to 15th century chronicles, women engaged in other professions such as scholarship and education, trading and entertainment.



Scholars and Teachers



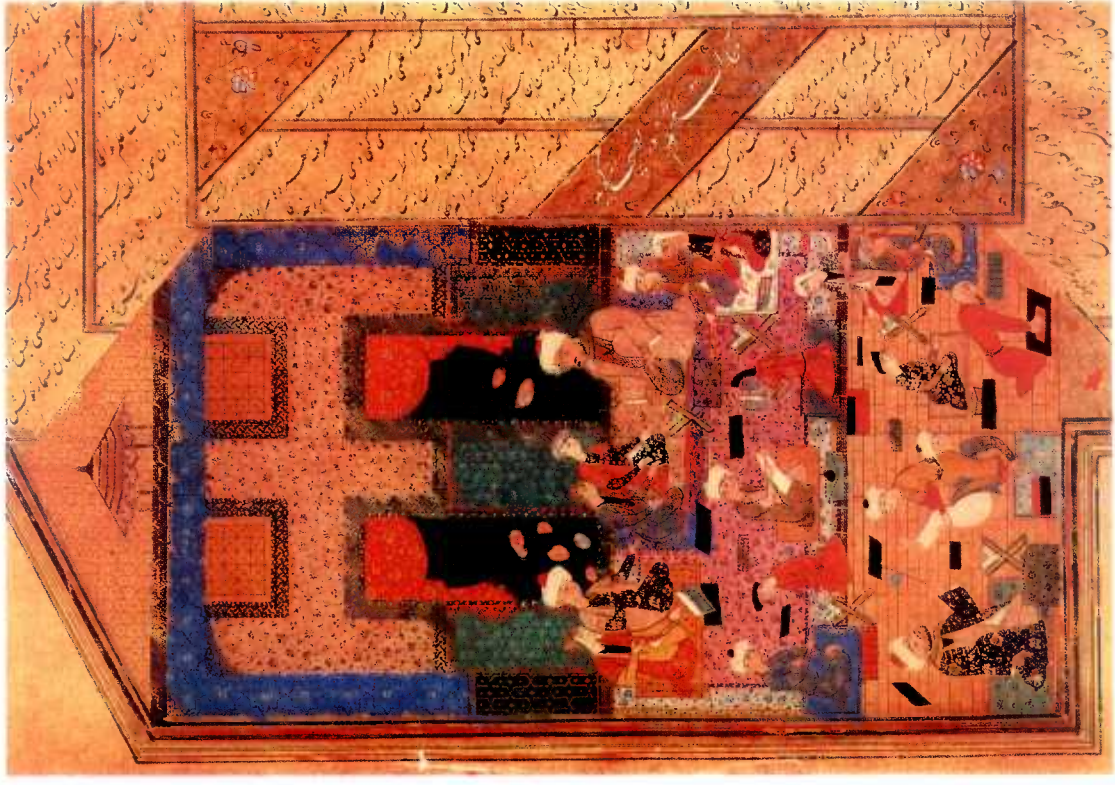
3. Learned women attend a lecture along with men. (Early 13th century miniature, Baghdad) Mosques were places of education, for women and men.



4. Mosque service being attended by women and men. (16th century miniature, Iran) Obviously, women took their children with them to the mosque. Interestingly the miniature shows women adopting different styles of the veil, some covering their faces, others not.



5. Women attending a mosque service. (Mid-16th century miniature, Iran) Women are sitting in a separate gallery, specifically for their use.



6. Qur'an school where boys and girls both study with a male teacher. (16th century miniature, Iran) No separate enclosure is provided for girls studying here.

Women Scholars

That women were active as scholars, teachers and thinkers is clear from chronicles of the 7th -15th centuries, their engagement is also visible in illustrations from the time.



7. A lady engages in lively discussion with a *sheikh* (learned man.) (1865 miniature, Iran)



8. Elegant woman engrossed in writing a letter. (Iran, circa 1600)



9. Noble woman holding a manuscript in left hand while receiving a bowl of wine from a kneeling servant. (15th century miniature, Iran)

Entertainment and Women Entertainers

Women were entertainers; they were also entertained by both male and female artists. The following illustrations show dancers, lute players, and acrobats.



10. Two women dancers pour wine.
(Early 9th century wall painting,
Baghdad)



11 A well-to-do Andalusian
woman and her attendants
are entertained by a male
lute player.
(13th century, Spain)



12. Woman lute player. (1640-1650 miniature, Turkey)



13. Woman dancer with castanets.
(Early 19th century, Iran)



14. Woman acrobat.
(Early 19th century, Iran)

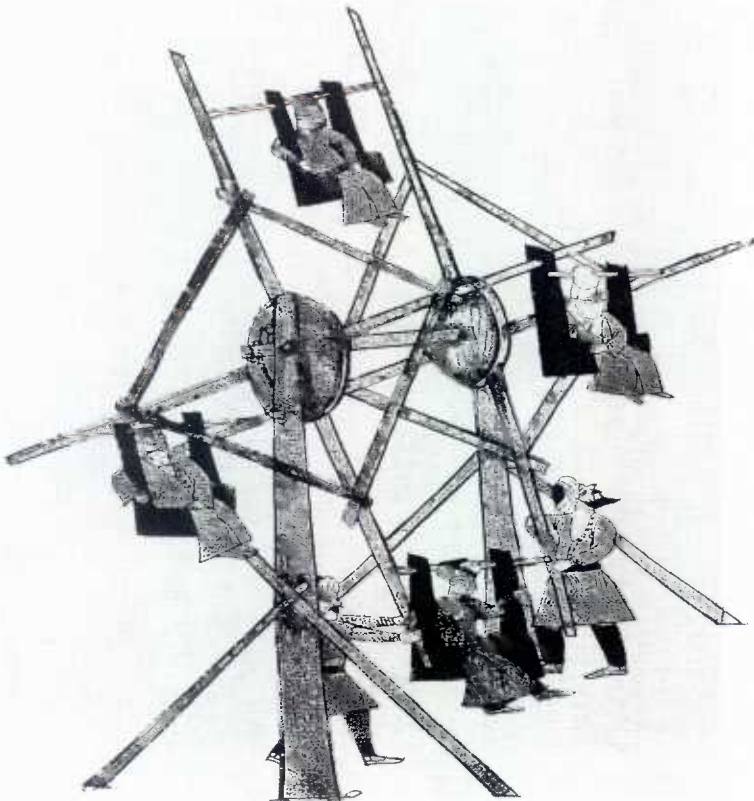


15. Woman Lute player. (Early 13th century, Iran)

Other Entertainment



16. Andalusian women play chess while being entertained by a woman lute player.
(1283 manuscript illustration, Spain)



17. Women enjoy themselves on the Great Wheel. (Early 17th century, Turkey)



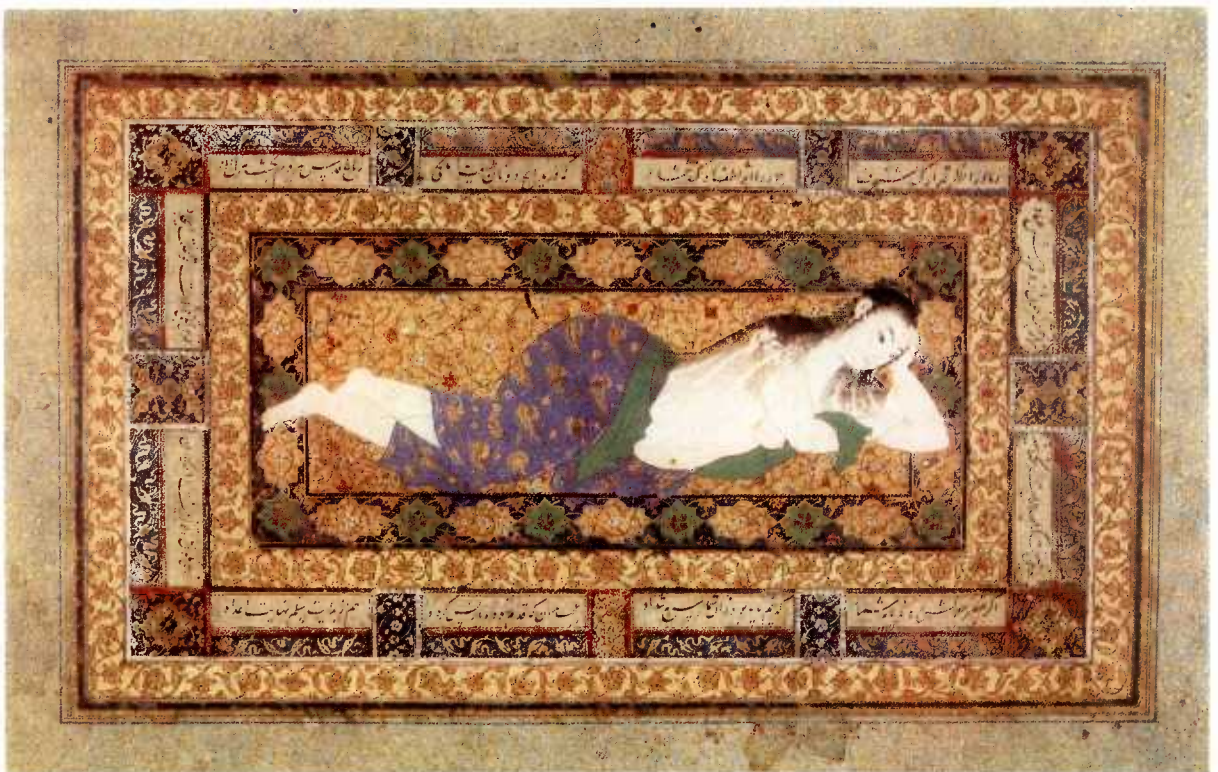
18. Women out on a picnic (16th century, Iran)



19. Woman smoking a hubble bubble pipe. (1673-74 miniature, Iran)



20. Expensively dressed lady, looking pleased with her appearance. (17th century miniature, Iran)



21. Portrait of a semi nude woman. (16th century from the album of Emir of Bukhara)

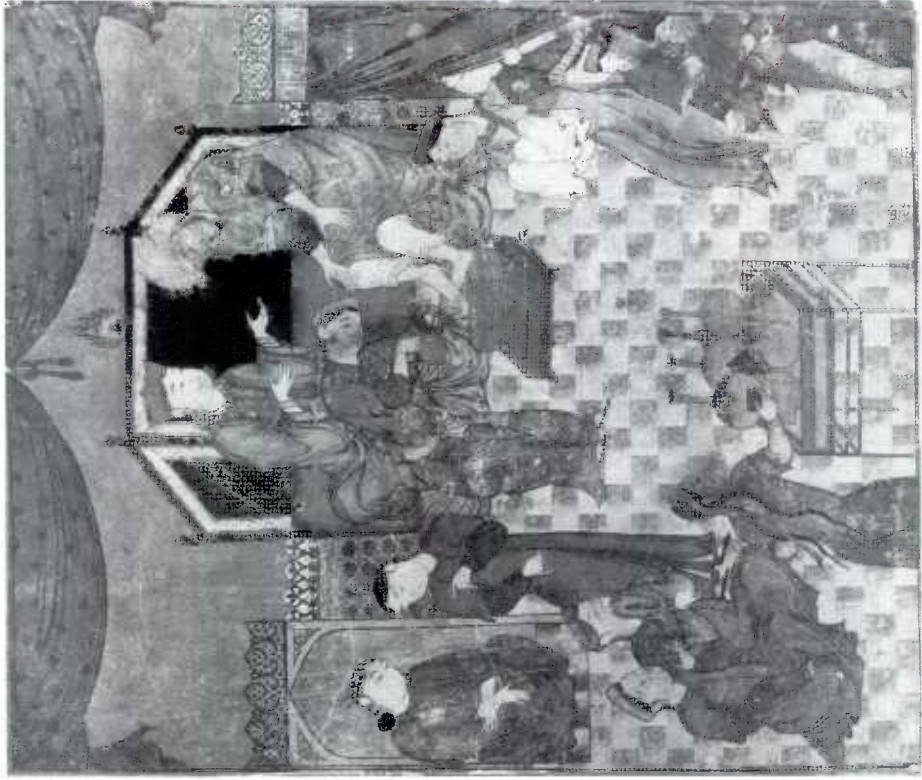


22. Women out hunting deer Avadh.
(1795 Mughal India)



23. Couple in love-nest,
with servant keeping
watch outside the door.
(Early 15th century,
Iran, Herat)

Both these illustrations are of Mongol women. Amongst the Mongols, women rulers were not uncommon and veiling was not a practise even amongst the well-to-do. Women receiving male visitors was also usual as seen in both.



24. Mongol lady and visitor who seems to have just arrived since maidservant is preparing a footbath. (1340-1370 miniature, Iran)



25. Crowned lady with courtier kneeling in front of her. (1330-1340 Iran, Ingu style)

Women in Turkey



26. Woman conducting business in the middle of a busy bazaar, or market. (17th century, Turkey)



27. Artist's impression of a woman with her servant, heading for a bath. (Circa 1742)



28. Turkish women out for a walk. (16th century miniature, Turkey)



29. Turkish lady on the way to the public bath, accompanied by a maid servant. (17th century illustration, Turkey)

Chapter Three

The Age of Empires: Courts of Justice, Courts of Power The Fifteenth to Eighteenth Centuries

Though most of the historical accounts available to us concern well-connected and well-known women, records of legal cases from fifteenth century Cairo and sixteenth century Istanbul bear witness to the fact that it was not only the rich and affluent who acted to assert rights for women. These records also testify to the existence of functioning legal systems that women were able to access as plaintiffs but to which they were also called as accused. Courts were not the only venue for women's assertions and they continued to use other forums and other strategies. And, of course, this age of empires also provides nuggets of information on women from the various imperial courts, royal harems and palaces who asserted their will in different ways and manners, depending on their temperaments as well as their inclinations.

Public Protest & Legal Redress for Marital Rape (1470) Cairo (Egypt)

A civil court case from fifteenth century Cairo shows that amongst the 'great ancestors' are to be counted neighbourhood women and men enraged at the violation of a minor indigent girl. The neighbours approached the court to obtain justice for a twelve-year-old subjected to marital rape and subsequently divorced.

The civil case took place in November 1470. The account we have is a first-hand record of the proceedings by chronicler and Hanafi jurist, Nur al-Din Ali ibn Da'ud al-Jawhari al-Sayrafi, primarily a judge who served as the *qadi* in the first part of this case. The account provides a rare glimpse into non-aristocratic Mamluk society. During the reign of the Mamluk sultan, al-Ashraf Qaytbay (r. 1468-1496), Al-Sayrafi pursued historical writing as a personal interest as well as a means by which to secure his position in the sultanate.

Al-Sayrafi relates the background of the case as follows:

*A young woman had filed a suit with the chief qadi, Muhib al-Din ibn al-Shihna al-Hanafi...the substance of which is as follows: 'The young Mamluka...the youthful virgin, bowed low [kissed the ground] stating that she was poverty-stricken and weary of begging. Her parents had been absent for a period exceeding three years from Cairo and its environs. Her petition was for a noble permission from one of the respected deputy magistrates to marry her off to one who was prepared to offer for her marriage a dower equivalent and appropriate, this judgment as a charity to her.'*¹

The young girl in question was of the military class but, being abandoned by her parents and economically impoverished, her status had been severely reduced. As an orphan she approached the court to invoke the Muslim jurisprudential concept that in the absence of parents and other guardians (*wali*), the state is a person's guardian. Her plea to the court was that, as her guardian, the state should arrange a suitable marriage. Al-Sayrafi reviewed the case and established that the girl's parents had indeed been out of Cairo for over three years and that she had no *wali*. The court arranged her marriage to a bondsman of a man of the military class, named Faris. The marriage contract drawn up by Al-Sayrafi stipulated that the marriage was not to be consummated until the girl reached maturity. However, the bondsman did not honour the agreement. As recorded by Al-Sayrafi, after raping the twelve-year-old girl, he then divorced her:

The contract had been drawn up [but] the girl had been deflowered – as a child of twelve years – despite her homely appearance. I had not allowed him [the betrothed spouse] to have intercourse with her. [But] it so happened that he divorced her, before the witness of [others] than us after consummation and intercourse.

Learning about this turn of events, the girl's outraged aunt informed her neighbours of the injustice that had taken place and mobilised them to act:

The girl's aunt had proceeded to her [place of] residence in Bulaq and informed [her neighbours] about her predicament [to wit]: How he [the ghulām spouse] had married [the girl], violated her virginity and then divorced her, after having [himself] written a deposition against her [the

girl], and complained of her to the magistrates, [nuqabā] and fined her one dinar.

Thereupon, the people of Bulaq gathered, raised the young girl aloft and conveyed her to the residence of the Grand Major-Domo [al-Dawādār-al-kabir].

The Dawadar asked for both the husband and his patron, Faris, to be brought to him. The former plead guilty to the charges against him, for which the penalty issued was a flogging. However, Faris spoke up, asking why his bondsman was to be flogged as the marriage had been arranged by the *qadi*. Al-Sayrafi admitted that, as the concerned *qadi*, he had arranged the marriage but insisted that the contract had been drawn up stating that the marriage must not be consummated until the girl reached maturity. He tried to legally defend marrying such a young girl by stating that the Prophet Muhammad had a wife, Aisha, who was only nine years of age when married. Reprimanding him, the Dawadar pointed out that this girl was a far cry from the Prophet's wife, and that no comparison could be made.

The Dawadar then ordered that the husband be flogged with 100 lashes and that both he and Faris be, "put on display in the town [as a warning] to those who deflowered girls...and from taking from them what was not entitled." Faris was also punished because the testimony made was that he had abetted his bondsman in the rape of the girl. He was stripped of his tunic and ordered to walk through the streets of the city, carrying the child on his back, as an act of public shaming. The bondsman was made to pay the girl a sum of four dinars.

Although the girl's former husband showed neither remorse nor shame after his punishment, the case highlights the action taken by the girl's aunt, the outrage of the informed neighbours, and their successful petitioning of a superior court. Even more significantly, this fifteenth century court acknowledged the concept of marital rape and denounced it as a violation of women's rights. It is ironic indeed that five centuries later, we should have elements in different Muslim societies who deny the very concept of marital rape as being non-existent or even contrary to Muslim jurisprudence.

Fifteenth Century Urban Culture - Egypt and Syria

That the young girl and her aunt in Cairo approached the law courts with their grievance was probably not as unusual as it may seem today. Some groups of people were highly mobile in the middle ages. This included *ulama* (scholars), merchants, and, of course, those serving in the military, such as the Mamluks. Women figured amongst the *ulama* and merchants, and though we do not know how mobile women merchants may have been, we do know women scholars travelled fairly frequently. We also know that women had access to legal courts

and the liberty to pursue an education, and that women continued to assert their rights in a multitude of ways: in contracting and dissolving marriages, travelling near and far, or taking charge of their economic affairs. Their assertions included representation in court and approaching notables to intervene, as well as more direct methods.

We know this from biographical works, which proliferated from the eleventh century onward, mostly written by historians of the *ulama*.² To avoid history being limited to narratives about the ruler, these works conflated biography and history, setting out to “reco[r]d the history of the *umma* as the sum total of the lives of its notables.”³ Of interest is that, until the end of the fifteenth century, women were included amongst the notables of society in significant numbers, even if they constituted a small proportion of the total.⁴

Contrary to popular perceptions, women were active in many spheres of life. Records show women had access to and control over economic resources: they participated in trade and commerce and held property in their own names. Some directly inherited capital (such as Umm-e-Hani, discussed below). Others, like midwives, merchants and entertainers were clearly earning a living for themselves. That women not only had their own finances, but had the power to control how those finances were used is evident from the endowments (*waqf*) they made (such as the *ribats* for women as we saw in the previous chapter, but also other purposes). Indeed, Ottoman *waqf* records show that women accounted for almost 40% of all endowments.

The lives of 1300 ‘notable’ women in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were recorded in biographical volumes; many were still alive at the time they were being written about, so these accounts are likely to be the most accurate. Two key sources which survive are the *Al-Durar al-kamina* (Hidden Pearls) of Ibn Hajar (d.1499), which records biographical information on almost 200 women, and the *Daw al-lami* (Brilliant Light), written by his student, Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Rahman al-Sakhawi (d.1497). In his twelve-volume tome, Al-Sakhawi devotes an entire volume to women. These 501 entries provide the most comprehensive source of Muslim women’s history of the fifteenth century.⁵ As may be expected, the biographies discuss women of learned, religious, royal and elite families. However, his subjects also include women merchants, poets, concubines, midwives and entertainers. One entry is that of Maryam, who later came to be known as Umm-e-Hani, and who was al-Sakhawi’s teacher.

Maryam Umm-e-Hani (1376-1466) Cairo (Egypt)

Umm-e-Hani, whose given name was Maryam was born and lived in Cairo. Her biography illustrates the importance of women scholars, their mobility and the respect they enjoyed. It provides other important insights. We witness, for example, a supportive family who fostered a young girl’s education and encouraged her to travel to continually supplement her learning. Like many of

her contemporaries, Umm-e-Hani had more than one husband over the course of her life. As a property-holder, she took official measures, approaching the court to secure her right of ownership and financial independence.⁶

Both of Umm-e-Hani's grandfathers were judges. Her maternal grandfather, Judge al-Qayati, must have decided the child was talented, for when Maryam was only eight years old he took her to Mecca to study *hadith* with eminent scholars, some of the most learned men of that age. Judge al-Qayati also contributed to her education. Maryam's efforts were rewarded and publicly recognized, when she received certificates (*ijazat*) from her teachers.

Umm-e-Hani's first husband was Muhammad Ibn Umar Ibn Qutlubugha al-Baktamuri, and the couple passed on the tradition of scholasticism to their five children. Though Umm-e-Hani herself was remembered as "the Shafiite," each of her sons excelled in a different branch of Muslim jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and became known by the school of thought they were affiliated with (al-Shafi'i, al-Hanafi, etc.). The absence of any commentary on this diversity within a single family suggests that the various branches of *fiqh* were not yet held to be fixed doctrines, and were seen rather as specialisations in the law.

Umm-e-Hani taught *hadith* for many years to men and – we presume – other women. She was obviously considered an authority for her student, al-Sakhawi asserted: "personally, everything I have learned from her teachers, [sic] I learned through her. Yet I believe that she knew much more than I was able to learn." It is difficult to believe that Umm-e-Hani taught al-Sakhawi from behind a curtain; it is much more probable that, as seen in Chapter One, female educators and their male students enjoyed a degree of personal interaction. In fact, Umm-e-Hani was only one of 68 female experts upon whose authority of the *ahadith* al-Sakhawi relied. Nor was he alone in this: Ibn Hajar cited 53 women as authorities of the Hadith in his *Al-Durar al-kamina*. Clearly, educated women, from the first generations of Islam at least until the close of the fifteenth century, were highly respected and the authority of women's scholarship was taken seriously.

Nor did marriage curtail Umm-e-Hani's scholastic life. As well as teaching, Umm-e-Hani continued the pursuit of knowledge throughout her long life. Her biography suggests that multiple pilgrimages (thirteen in Umm-e-Hani's case) signalled not only deep piety, pilgrimages to Mecca also represented an occasion to interact with other scholars and students. Umm-e-Hani, for instance, took the opportunity to study and teach for months on end during her sojourns in Mecca and Medina. There is no indication that her husband accompanied her in these periods. We can assume that her teachings influenced many men and women; as she obviously influenced al-Sakhawi, as he himself says.

After the death of her first husband, Muhammad, Umm-e-Hani contracted her second marriage, to Hasan Ibn Suwaid al-Maliki, and the couple had a son and a daughter. It is during this second marriage that her maternal grandfather, Judge

al-Qayati, bestowed an inheritance to Umm-e-Hani upon his death. (It is interesting that, again, this inheritance evoked no comment from al-Sakhawi, suggesting that inheriting directly from grandparents was not unusual). Though Hasan controlled the inheritance during his lifetime, upon his death Umm-e-Hani assumed complete control over the money. She promptly used her inheritance to purchase a colossal textile workshop. When the original owner challenged the legality of the sale, Umm-e-Hani went to court to settle the matter. The judge ruled in Umm-e-Hani's favour, and asserted that she was the sole legitimate owner.

After her second husband died, Umm-e-Hani evidently decided to devote her time to studying and teaching. She did not marry again. Women clearly had the liberty to both contract and revoke marriages, and some chose to remain single after widowhood. Remarriage after both divorce and widowhood was prevalent during this era, and neither divorce nor remarriage seem to have carried the social stigma they do today in some Muslim societies.

Marriages and Divorces

Al-Sakhawi meticulously noted the precise number of times the 501 women he recorded married: by the time the book was completed, a full one-third of the women had contracted more than one marriage. In fact, 24 of the women had been married over three times. One woman, Faraj, actually had eight husbands. Nor was this pattern of divorce and remarriage peculiar to the fifteenth century. Egyptian sources from between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries reveal that, in a sample of 273 women, a full 45% had married a second or third time.⁷

Divorce seems to have been fairly common though widowhood was also a constant theme in the lives of medieval women, especially amongst the military classes. In an age where both men and women travelled frequently, both within the community and over long distances, marriages were not always permanently binding arrangements. Husbands and wives were often separated for long periods of time, for example if a man went to war or on pilgrimage. This led to the practice of having a conditional divorce agreed upon stipulating that if the husband did not return within a specified period of time, the marriage would stand dissolved.

Based on the information in the *Daw al-lami*, women appear to have had a great deal of authority over their marriages and families. Often it was women themselves who instigated the divorce proceedings. Indeed al-Sakhawi's own niece demanded a divorce from her husband, and – importantly – received vociferous support from her family. Another woman managed to expel her husband from their home despite the appeals made by the *sharif* (a grand notable) of Mecca on her husband's behalf.

Equally importantly, while it was expected that all women in Egypt and Syria of the fifteenth century would eventually marry, polygynous marriages were virtually unknown. Where Islamic law permitted both polygyny and divorce, in practice, “The fifteenth century was greatly influenced by easy divorce, and practically untouched by polygamy.” This pattern continued into the early nineteenth century urban Egypt, according to one study.

In the fifteenth century, as in both previous and subsequent eras, women fought to curtail the practice of polygyny. Al-Sakhawi recorded cases of polygynous husbands in only nine instances, less than 2% of his biographical entries. Significantly, each of these cases was highly problematic and the women either ensured that their husband divorced the other wife, or they secured a divorce for themselves. There was Fatima who, when she decided to marry Ibn Hajji, insisted that he first divorce his existing wife. Then there was Kamaliyya, whose husband, Ahmed, had decided to marry a certain Umm al-Husayn. If Umm al-Husayn was not prepared to accept Kamaliyya, it was Kamaliyya who, refusing to accept Ahmed’s second marriage, successfully secured a divorce for herself. The fact that Kamaliyya and Ahmed already had a number of children, suggests that Kamaliyya was confident of accessing some means of support post the divorce. In the event, Umm al-Husayn died early, and Kamaliyya decided to remarry Ahmed. Significantly, al-Sakhawi does not seem to mention any intervening marriage (*hilala*) contracted by Kamaliyya, raising the question of when this became accepted practice in Muslim jurisprudence.

In the case of Habibat Allah, when her husband secretly contracted a second marriage, the threat of her wrath was sufficient to ensure that he promptly divorced his new wife. A similar instance is witnessed in the biography of Aziza. She entered into a delayed marriage contract with a previously married man, Ala Ibn Afif al-Din. Though Aziza travelled to join him, his existing wife learned of the second marriage and because he “was not able to deal with her anger,” he was forced to repudiate Aziza. These stories also imply that some level of social interaction must have existed between men and women, and women must have enjoyed relative freedom of movement for couples to be meeting and deciding to marry each other, regardless of whether they were previously married or not.

The women recorded in these biographies engaged with members of their communities as well as the authorities. Court records from the sixteenth century show that this trend continued into the next century, and beyond the Arab world.

Women and the Law Courts (16th Century) Istanbul (Turkey)

The legal records of sixteenth century Istanbul clearly show that women there also had access to the court system, exercised control over the legalities of marriage and divorce, and owned their own property. Moreover, the records depict a different picture of women's public activities and social lives in that era to the one painted by both indigenous writers (usually religious leaders and scholars) and foreign travellers. For example European observers did not know, and local writers often ignored, the fact that "Behind the walls [of the harem] that sequestered women of status...many actually owned the walls and the property within..."⁸

Court records from Üsküdar, one of the three districts of the imperial city of Istanbul during Sultan Sulayman's reign (r. 1520-1566), shows sixteenth century Ottoman women - both Muslim and non-Muslim - engaging in local and long-distance trade, the giving and receiving of loans, and the buying and selling of property. The legal records indicate which women brought cases to court, and which women had cases brought against them. Case details and the language women used in courts suggest that women had fairly free access to legal channels, and show that women also used this forum to be heard publicly and officially.

In one recorded case, a woman named Dervish bint Mehmed brought a case to court against a police officer for blocking her path when she was out walking. The officer, Nasuh bin Abdullah, was found guilty and charged with assault. Some women had cases brought to court against them for fighting with or attacking men. Amongst these women, Yvonne Seng notes three specific names: Husni, Fatima and Emine bint Abdullah.

In a different type of case, Nefise bint Abdullah was accused of sexually entertaining *na-mahrem*⁹ men in her husband's caftan shop for 'who knows how many days and nights,' as well as cursing, trickery and deception. Her husband initially defended Nefise and posted her bail. Then, soon afterwards, he divorced her - an action suggesting he may have concluded that she was guilty of adultery after all. Neither the accusation nor the subsequent divorce seems to have affected Nefise's self-confidence: when her ex-husband fell behind in his divorce payments, she took him to court. Furthermore, she used the opportunity of being in court to declare her innocence of the previous charges of adultery.¹⁰

Though women were frequently represented by a male proxy, such as a male relative, women appeared on their own just as often. Going to Turkey's sixteenth century law courts did not require either a great deal of legal knowledge or literacy. Legal procedure in the pre-modern courts privileged oral testimony and the verbal presentation of one's case.¹¹ Both women and men went to law courts, and both filed for divorce.

Broadly speaking, recorded divorce cases fell into three categories: those with implications of 'material considerations' were the most likely divorce cases to be taken to court; those relating to adultery appear in court records less frequently. The last category comprised of 'conditional divorce' cases which involved a husband's oath, for example, 'if I do such-and-such, may my wife be divorced.' Some of the cases that made it to court had an additional component, such as Nefise wanting her divorce settlement.¹² Adultery cases rarely followed the interpretation of *shari'a*, prescribing stoning for adulterers.¹³ Instead, the husband was expected to divorce his wife and if he chose not to, he had to pay a monetary "cuckold tax." In contrast to cases where the desire for divorce was reciprocal, in cases involving adultery, the wife usually forfeited her right to her dower (*haq mahr*) and/or other material rights.

Women's assertiveness in sixteenth century Turkey was not limited to courts, however; some chose a more direct form of intervention to make known a grievance and to redress a wrong, as we can surmise from the persistent efforts of one woman, Huma, to recover her lost daughters. The girls had been en route to Mecca for pilgrimage when they were captured by the Knights of Malta and presented as gifts to Catherine de Medici in 1558. Well pleased by the girls, Catherine christened them Catherine and Marguerite. The story may have ended there, had it not been for an Ottoman spy in the French court who, seeing and recognising the girls, promptly sent Huma a letter informing her of her daughters' fate. Unaware that her daughters had married French courtiers and were both safe and living a life of ease, Huma immediately launched an all out campaign to free them. Huma was either a woman of some standing, or was incredibly resourceful, for she directly approached the *divan* or council of state and quickly enlisted the help of two important women: Sultan Suleyman's own daughter, Mihrimah, and the wife of one of the Sultan's *viziers*.

The support garnered by Huma in her campaign is impressive: in 1565, the Ottoman administration sent envoys to France to negotiate the matter, and, in turn, French representatives paid a visit to the Sultan. So persistent was this mother, that every time Sultan Suleyman appeared in public, Huma physically importuned him to liberate her daughters. Sultan Suleyman came close to breaking off diplomatic ties with France simply in order to avoid encountering Huma. His son, Selim II, inherited this problem when he came to power: Huma continued her tireless campaign for her daughters' return, submitting multiple petitions for her daughters' release. Finally, exhausted from years of pleading with the authorities, the Sultan managed to persuade Huma to cease her campaign and to accept a modest pension in exchange. Quite possibly, Huma's decision to cease her lobbying had less to do with the offered pension than her having received eyewitness reports that her daughters were happy, healthy and living luxurious lives in France – news that must have finally put her fears to rest.¹⁴

In sharp contrast to the frequently held image of cloistered and submissive women, these gleanings from legal and other records suggest that women in sixteenth century Turkey were active, dynamic and self-assertive.

Amina Sarauniya of Zazzau (1533?-1610?) Zazzau (Nigeria)

There was nothing cloistered or submissive about Amina, who was born into royalty around 1533 in the city-state of Turunka, Zazzau (now, Zaria province in Nigeria). The ruling monarch was her grandfather, Sarkin Zazzau Nohis, whom she was very close to. Amina spent her entire childhood in his chambers and she was often literally by his side as he conducted the affairs of the state. As she grew older, the officials simply became accustomed to seeing her at court. Instead of the usual education given to girls, centred on housework and caring for children, Amina learned the arts of governance and warfare.

After her grandfather's death, Amina's mother, Bakura (or Bakwa), became queen. At sixteen, Amina became the Heir Apparent (*magajiya*),¹⁵ a role that required her to be responsible for a ward of the city and to participate in daily council meetings. Though Queen Bakura's reign was known for its peace and prosperity, Amina opted to sharpen her military skills.¹⁶

Amina's uncle, Karama, took power after the rule of Queen Baruka. He sat on the throne for ten years, during which time he focused more on warfare and preparing the soldiers of Zazzau for battle. Amina was part of these preparations, honing her skills as a warrior and perfecting her knowledge of military tactics. Never interested in marriage, Amina reportedly countered questions by proclaiming, "I will never be subject to the control of a man."¹⁷

When Karama died, around 1576, Amina was the obvious choice for the new ruler. She participated in her first military campaign within three months of coming to power and continued fighting until her death as a septuagenarian around 1610. In her 34 years of rule, she expanded the boundaries of Zazzau to its largest ever dimensions. However, this territorial acquisition was not accomplished through annexation, but by negotiating with neighbouring rulers and convincing them to accept vassal status.

Amina is also credited with the erection of defensive walls around each of her military camps; these walls were later filled with growing cities. The remains of these walls still exist today and are referred to as *ganuwar amina*, or Amina's Walls. There is also a saying still current in Nigeria: *wane ya cika takama da tsufa kamar ganuwar amina*, meaning 'as proud and old as the walls of Amina.'¹⁸

Female Poets in the Safavid Dynasty (1501-1722) Persia (Iran)

The limited view of outsiders – even those with access to the upper echelons of society – is evident in accounts of Persian Safavid society written by Europeans in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. Where these accounts portray women as

secluded, if they even mention women at all,¹⁹ indigenous documents – including courtly chronicles, miniature paintings, poetry and judicial records – record Safavid women's access to state politics. Women are seen sharing political power, involved in diplomacy, and ruling during periods of crises of succession. Additionally, Safavid women were theoretically able to ascend the throne if they were royally descended through either parent.²⁰

The Safavid Dynasty extended from 1501 until 1722 and included areas of present-day Iran and Afghanistan.²¹ In the early part of the dynasty, a synthesis of Turkic, Mongol and Persian cultural traditions allowed women to enjoy a certain degree of political influence.

The initial years of the dynasty (1501 to 1576) were more tolerant than later periods, and it is during these years that a remarkable book was produced: a biographical collection of some twenty female poets and learned women, written by Fakhri of Herat (a.k.a. Sultan Muhammad b. Muhammad Amiri), entitled *Javahir al-Ajayib* (Jewels of Wonder).²² Dedicated to Maham (d.1562), the nurse of the Mughal Emperor Akbar, the *Javahir al-Ajayib* reproduced extracts of the women's own writings.

Women in the *Javahir al-Ajayib* shared certain similarities. They were all upper-class and mostly urban. Many of them came from the nobility, the intelligentsia, or the administrative families of Khurasan and the provinces of eastern Iran. Some were of the military aristocracy or from religious circles. An interesting insight the book provides is that royal Safavid women were politicians, not poets or artists; conversely, artistic women were noble or learned, but not royal.

Some of the women stand out for challenging male superiority. One is Bija (or Bega) Munajima, a mystic, astronomer and mathematician well-known to her contemporaries. In Herat, she was known as the bitter rival of the male Sufi philosopher and poet, Abd al-Rahman Jami (d.1492), to whom she considered herself an equal in both literature and religious patronage. As a widow, she was wealthy enough to have endowed a *hammam* (bathhouse), a *madrassa* (religious school) and a mosque.²³

The sixteenth century was an age of religious heterodoxy where Sufis and Qur'anic literalists debated, discussed, and found common grounds. Women could be found strolling through public gardens, socializing in coffee-shops, and participating in Sufi and Dervish cultural activities. They also formed deep friendships with other women, which were known in Persian as *siqeh-yi khwahar khwadengi*. These friendships involved socializing, loyalty and could even include mutual inheritance but were not necessarily homoerotic. The equivalent term in modern Farsi is *khwahar khwandeh*, implying a deep friendship or sisterhood.²⁴

Women's scholarship and intellectual achievements continued into the seventeenth century. One self-confident Safavid woman was a poetess of the late

seventeenth century named Nihani. Her father was one of the grand *amirs* to Shah Sulayman (r.1666-1694), and Nihani was in the service of the Shah's mother. Nihani was known for her beauty, her familial prestige, and her literary prowess. She apparently also had a sense of mischief for it is related that she composed a quatrain which she hung at the crossroads of a city bazaar, possibly in Isfahan. She declared through an attached note that she would marry the man who could offer a worthy *javab*, or, response to her verse. It seems that no one took up her challenge.²⁵

The last Safavid ruler, Shah Sultan Husayn (r. 1694-1722), reversed the relative social freedom of the earlier period. Wine was prohibited, music and dancing were banned from weddings, and, as has happened in many periods of resurgent conservatism through the centuries, women were forced to wear the veil. The cultural and religious orthodoxy imposed by the state lasted until the end of Safavid rule in 1722.

Three Royal Women of the Mughal Court - India

In India, the Mughal Empire (1523-1857) also went through different phases: from pronounced heterodoxy under Emperor Akbar, to conservative orthodoxy under Emperor Aurangzeb. Royal women were largely confined to the Mughal imperial harem (*zenana*), but this female seclusion was imperfect.

Though the only men with free access to the harem were the eunuchs and the king himself, some of the *zenana's* noblewomen travelled with the emperor's convoy. Women also left the *zenana* to play polo or to go riding; they travelled on hunting expeditions, and went outside in groups for promenades in the gardens. Female traffic into the *zenana* was even greater. A constant flow of women poured through daily, including wet-nurses, servants, cooks, slaves, entertainers, midwives, peddlers and astrologers.²⁶

The *zenana* required a large and well-structured administrative system. Under the reign of Emperor Akbar (r. 1556-1605), the internal administration of the harem was formalized and remained highly organized under all subsequent rulers. The Emperor would personally appoint the *Darogha*, or matron, of the *zenana* who was entrusted with the supervision of the residents and employees alike. Some *Daroghas* were royal women themselves, such as Ismat Begum, the mother-in-law of the Emperor Jahangir (1605-1627), others were not of the royal family. After the *Daroghas*, high-ranking female officials included the *Mahaldars* or *Sadr-i-anas*, who served as chief officers, liaisons and unofficial spies. Beneath them in station were the *Mushrifs* (superintendents) and *Tahwildars*, who handled all accounts and salaries. These women were likely of noble families and were probably literate, to varying degrees. The highest-ranking officials read out news reports to the emperor and educated the royal daughters.²⁷ All the women who worked in the Mughal harem were well-respected and well-paid.

Seclusion also meant that the task of protecting the harem and its residents fell not only to sentinels and eunuchs, but also to armed female guards: the *urdubegis*.²⁸ These guards often hailed from Turkey, Central Asia, or Kashmir. Once resident at the Mughal court, they were often married, usually to men of the army, and lived outside the *zenana* when not on duty.²⁹

The most famous royal Mughal woman was Nur Jahan (Light of the World) (1577-1645), wife of Emperor Jahangir. Nur Jahan was not actually born or raised in the Mughal harem. Nur Jahan started life as Mihrunissa, the daughter of Mirza Ghiyas Beg of Kandahar (in present day Afghanistan), who had migrated to India at the turn of the seventeenth century. Mihrunissa was first married to a Persian officer, Sher Afghan. After his death, in 1611 she became the eighteenth wife of the Emperor Jahangir of Mughal India. She was 32 at the time and already a mother; her husband was some ten years older than her. She soon became the supreme authority in the harem, curtailing her husband's other relationships by having all other women moved out of the harem – either by marriage or by monetary means.

As her husband became preoccupied with opium and alcohol, Nur Jahan effectively governed the realm, taking charge of foreign trade and courtly politics. She enjoyed the right to give *farmans* – authoritative royal decrees – and successfully competed in commerce (both national and international trade) with both her mother-in-law and husband. Remembered as a great patron of architecture and a supporter of the arts, Nur Jahan took a philanthropic interest in the women of the realm. According to the official history of Jahangir's reign, the *Iqbalnama-i-Jahangiri*, she “put her seal on all grants of land ‘conferred upon any woman,’ and took special interest in orphan girls, promoting many of them through generous dowries in marriage.”³⁰ In his *Tatimma-i-Waqiat-i-Jahangiri* (Epilogue to Jahangir's Memoirs), Muhammad Hadi states that Nur Jahan spent much of her time and money providing for the poor, specifically alleviating the poverty of girls and young women by personally paying for their marriages. During her lifetime she directly sponsored about five hundred such girls, and countless more felt the effects of her generosity.³¹

Her political power grew to the point where she had coins minted in her own name. Dislodged from power by her stepson, Shah Jahan, after her husband's death in 1627, she went into exile in Lahore where she lived in seclusion with her daughter for the next eighteen years.³²

Shah Jahan's own daughter, Raushanara Begum (1617-1671), had a different sort of reputation and different constraints. As everywhere, royal marriages were made to advance political gains, and few women born to royalty could choose their marriage partners. Like others, Mughal women found their own individual ways of asserting their choices within the parameters defined for them.

Raushanara was born in Burhanpur, India and enjoyed the luxuries of a Mughal princess. During the succession crisis between her brothers, Dara Shukoh and Aurangzeb, she was an active partisan of the latter (while her sister, Jahanara, supported Dara) and after Aurangzeb became the emperor he conferred upon Raushanara the title 'Shah Begum,' in 1669.³³

Raushanara became the subject of scandalous reports after two men, said to be her paramours, were caught sneaking out of the harem after visiting her at night. Some believe that her niece, Fakhrunissa, leaked the story because she was upset at not having her share of Raushanara's many lovers.³⁴ Whether Fakhrunissa was involved in any way or not, it is generally agreed that Raushanara arranged for men to visit her chambers. But, temperaments differ and other Mughal princesses focused their energies on other matters.

Raushanara's niece, Zinat-un-Nissa (1643-1721), for example, had other desires. Along with her sisters, Zinat was educated in the harem by private tutors and scholars, particularly in the field of religion and theology. Having chosen to remain unmarried, she demanded of her father, the Emperor Aurangzeb, that he bestow upon her the full amount he would have spent on her dowry had she married. She then used this money to commission a mosque called the Zinat-ul-Masjid (also known under various names) in Delhi, where she was later buried. She wrote her own epitaph, which reads:

*In my grave the grace of God is my only help
It is enough if the shadow of the cloud of mercy covers my tomb.*³⁵

Women who were not 'from', or 'of' royalty also managed to find ways to circumvent the restrictions placed on them, as concluded by one visitor to Ottoman society in 1717.

Turkish Women (1717) Istanbul (Turkey)

In eighteenth century Ottoman society, clothing was an important signifier of social rank and religious identity. For example, a Muslim woman was to be distinguished from a non-Muslim by her choice of modest clothing; certain colours were officially chosen, such as green for Muslims. Because Istanbul saw itself as the Muslim metropolis within the Ottoman Empire, it sought to set a moral example.³⁶ Thus, the government – primarily through imperial decrees (*kanun* as opposed to *sharia* law) - exercised a great deal of control over the private lives of the populace. This included the imposition of modest dress codes for Muslim women and bans on drinking and smoking in public for men.

Women nevertheless found ways of asserting themselves, as surmised by an upper-class English woman, Montagu, Lady Mary Wortley, who visited the Ottoman Empire between 1717 and 1718. In a personal letter written to her sister, she drew her own conclusions on the styles of dress she had observed amongst Turkish women in Istanbul:

'Tis very easy to see they have in reality more liberty than we have, no woman of what rank soever, being permitted to go in the streets without two muslins, one that covers her face all but her eyes and another that hides the whole dress of her head...and their shapes are wholly concealed...You may guess how effectively this hides them, that there is no distinguishing the great lady from her slave, and 'tis impossible for the most jealous husband to know his wife when he meets her, and no man dare either touch or follow a woman in the street.

This perpetual masquerade gives them entire liberty of following their inclinations without danger of discovery...Upon the whole, I look upon the Turkish women as the only free people in the empire.

Lady Montagu's observations were of those women who chose to retain the veil. Unlike other European commentators, who saw in the veil a symbol of repression and subordination, this account underscores the potential for social levelling, personal choice and the option of anonymity that the veil also allowed for. Though most European visitors had little access to upper-class ladies, Lady Montagu was a keen observer. She commented, "Now I am a little acquainted with their ways, I cannot forbear admiring either the exemplary discretion or extreme stupidity of all the writers that have given accounts of 'em".

She was also aware of other styles of dress worn by Turkish women in the early eighteenth century which did not incorporate a veil, and she describes one such outfit as including: a pair of voluminous trousers, a smock with wide sleeves ("but the shape and colour of the bosom very well to be distinguished through it"), a long-sleeved waistcoat, a robe (*caftan*), a jewel-studded girdle, a cape, and a headdress. Describing the opulence of the jewels, fabric and craftsmanship of the ensemble it was obvious that some such outfits, worn amongst the upper-classes of Turkish society, were more concerned with high fashion than modesty.

Soon after Montagu's letter home, however, an imperial edict issued in May 1725 imposed restrictions on women's choice of apparel. The impetus for this decree was supposedly to prevent Muslim women from imitating the styles of European women of the period, said to be the fashion of 'infidels' and 'prostitutes.' The imperial edict sought to curb this trend, stating:

May God protect Istanbul, the spirit of the Ottoman State, from all trouble and disaster; it is the land of the ulama, of the righteous, and of the learned; and each section of the populace has its own established mode of dress. Yet in spite of this, certain brazen women have begun walking about in the streets dressed in finery, affecting all kinds of innovations in their garments and giving strange bizarre shapes to their headgear in imitation of shameless women, in order to corrupt the population. Their audacity in lifting the veil of virtue in defiance of decrees to the contrary: their improvisation of modes of dress which

violate all notions of propriety; and their appearance in diverse unseemly costumes, has reached the stage where even women of virtue have begun to fall under their influence. Virtuous and modest women have apparently been pressing their husbands to provide them with these new-fangled clothes. The matter has taken on such dimensions that those who refuse to permit their wives to wear these garments, have been divorcing from their spouses. These outlandish clothes are prohibited... If any woman is seen out in the streets or in excursion places wearing one of these new-fangled feraje with a wide collar, the collar will be cut there and then in public; and if any person persists in wearing them and offends for a second or third time, they will be exiled to the provinces. This matter will be communicated to all the women of Istanbul by the imams of each district. Let it be explained to women of virtue that their clothes will be torn in public and their modesty thus stained, if they persist in imitating women of iniquity.³⁷

The edict indicates both that substantial numbers of women were breaking with tradition and restrictions in order to express themselves and that the challenge posed by women was beyond the power of individual men to control. Hence, as so often happens, men resorted to state power in order to control the activities of individual women rebels.

References

- ¹ Al-Sayrafi cited in Carl F. Petry, "Conjugal Rights versus Class Prerogatives: A Divorce Case in Mamluk Cairo," in, Gavin R. G. Hambly, ed., *Women in the Medieval Islamic World: Power, Patronage, and Piety*, (Macmillan Press, London: 1998), 228. Section based on this text.
- ² Ibid 229 Including al-Khatib al-Baghdadi (d.1071), Ibn Asakir (d.1176), and Ibn Khallikan (d.1282), amongst others.
- ³ *Cambridge Illustrated History of the Islamic World*, edited by Francis Robinson, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge: 1998), 188. This section is based on "The Lives of Women" pp 186-197 of this text.
- ⁴ The marked attention to illustrious and learned women in the fifteenth century has been attributed to an "assertive promotion by the Syrian and Egyptian ulama of Aisha, wife of the Prophet... as the foremost female source of hadith, and the unrivalled source of hadith concerning women." (Robinson 191)
- ⁵ Al-Sakhawi's work is especially crucial, given the decline of women's inclusion in biographical histories after the fifteenth century. For example, al-Ghazzi's compilation of 1647 illustrious personages of the sixteenth century only included twelve women and Al-Muhibbi (d.1699) included no women; al-Muradi (d.1791) only mentioned a single woman and al-Baytar's (d.1918) work only two women. (Robinson 189)
- ⁶ Umm-e-Hani died at the age of ninety and was interred in the burial grounds of her grandfather. Her story is recorded in Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Rahman al-Sakhawi, *Daw al-lami* (Brilliant Light), and translated in *Cambridge Illustrated History of the Islamic World*, 190.
- ⁷ The *Daw al-lami* also suggests that during this period, family structure was more fluid than one might expect. The frequent instances of remarriage reinforced the general mobility of the urban elite. By extension, it was not unusual for families to be made up of various siblings and step-siblings, and children often did not grow up with both their biological parents.
- ⁸ Court cases referred to here are in Yvonne J. Seng, "Invisible Women: Residents of Early Sixteenth-Century Istanbul," pp. 241-268 in Hambly, *Women in the Medieval Islamic World*.
- ⁹ *Na-mahrem* (spelt variously) refers to all men a woman is not prohibited from marrying.
- ¹⁰ It would be interesting to know the post-divorce settlement, whether this was merely the *haq-mahr* (dower) being repaid or some other additional settlement as well. Unfortunately Seng's article does not give further details.
- ¹¹ General information on divorce courts in this section is taken from Leslie Peirce, "'She is Trouble...and I will Divorce Her': Orality, Honour, and Representation in the Ottoman Court of 'Aintab,'" in Hambly, 269-300.
- ¹² Peirce, 282.
- ¹³ According to Peirce in legal cases in the Ottoman provincial city of 'Aintab (today's Gaziantep) between 1540-1541, "To qualify for the penalty of stoning, the individual had to be Muslim, free, sane, adult and in a consummated marriage" (Peirce, p.287, n.39).
- ¹⁴ Godfrey Goodwin, *The Private World of Ottoman Women* (London: Saqi Books, 1997), 148-9
- ¹⁵ Before the ninth century this term meant Queen, after which it came to mean Heir Apparent. In the Western Sudan, however, the term simply meant 'female leader.' See, Jean Boyd, *The Caliph's Sister: Nana Asma'u, 1793-1865: Teacher, Poet and Islamic Leader*, (Frank Cass, London: 1989), 43.
- ¹⁶ Sa'ad Abubakr, "Queen Amina of Zaria," in *Nigerian Women in Historical Perspective*, edited by Bolanle Awe, (Lagos: Sankore, 1992), 16-17.
- ¹⁷ Abubakr, 23.
- ¹⁸ Ibid. 21.
- ¹⁹ Ronald W. Ferrier, "Women in Safavid Iran: The Evidence of European Travellers," in Hambly, 383.

- ²⁰ Safavid blood – male and female – was believed to have divinely-bestowed charisma; matrilineal legacy theoretically allowed daughters to succeed mothers; succession disputes could, and did, involve royal women (e.g., Pari-Khan Khanum (d. 1578) against her brother). Kathryn Babayan, “*The ‘Aqa’id al-Nisa’: A Glimpse at Safavid Women in Local Isfahani Culture,*” in Hambly, 350-2 and n.11.
- ²¹ See Stephen P. Blake, “*Contributors to the Urban Landscape: Women Builders in Safavid Isfahan and Mughal Shahjahanabad,*” pp. 407-28, in Hambly.
- ²² Fakhri of Herat flourished under the first two Safavid rulers, Ismail (r.1501-1524) and Tahmasp (r.1524-1576), and we can assume that the work was written during the reigns of one of these two Shahs. See, Maria Szuppe, “*The ‘Jewels of Wonder’: Learned Ladies and Princess Politicians in the Provinces of Early Safavid Iran*” in Hambly, 326.
- ²³ Szuppe, 329.
- ²⁴ Babayan, 370.
- ²⁵ Nihani is mentioned in Shir Khan Lodi’s *Mirat al-Khiyal* (‘Women of the Imagination’ or ‘Imaginations of Women’) written at the end of the seventeenth century, probably during Nihani’s lifetime. This anecdote is taken from Lodi’s work, and is cited in Szuppe, 330.
- ²⁶ Gavin R.G. Hambly, “*Armed Women Retainers in the Zenanas of Indo-Muslim Rulers: The Case of Bibi Fatima,*” in Hambly, 432.
- ²⁷ K.S. Lal, *The Mughal Harem*, (New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan, 1988), 51-2.
- ²⁸ The practice of employing *urdubegis* continued under the ultra-conservative rule of Aurangzeb in the mid-seventeenth century. The Italian historian and royal doctor, Niccolao Manucci, recorded that, “During his sleep he is guarded by women slaves, very brave, and highly skilled in the management of the bow and other arms.” (Cited in Hambly, “*Armed Women Retainers...*” 437).
- ²⁹ Lal, 14.
- ³⁰ Cited in Ellison Banks Findly, *Nur Jahan: Empress of Mughal India* (New York & Oxford) Oxford University Press: 1993, 46.
- ³¹ Cited in Lal, 78.
- ³² Findly, 3.
- ³³ Lal, 98-100.
- ³⁴ Lal, 105-6 and B.P. Saha *Princesses, Begams and Concubines* (New Delhi; Vikas: 1992) 27-8. Both authors rely on Niccolao Manucci’s primary source for this account. Though Lal insists that Manucci is a trustworthy source regarding the women of the Mughal court, Saha casts doubt on his reliability by referring to other (unspecified) sources which indicate that Aurangzeb had no daughter named Fakhrunissa (30, n.1).
- ³⁵ Lal, 110 and Saha, 33.
- ³⁶ Fariba Zarinebaf-Shahr, “*Women and the Public Eye in Eighteenth Century Istanbul,*” pp. 301-324 in Hambly. References in this section are made to this essay, unless otherwise noted.
- ³⁷ Edict reprinted in *Women of Istanbul in Ottoman Times*, by Pars Tuglaci, (Istanbul: Cem Yayinevi, 1984).

Chapter Four

Women at the Cross-roads: The Nineteenth Century

The end of the eighteenth century marked a period of transition. If a new Caliphate was being created in the environs of present day Nigeria, in many other regions, indigenous geographically contiguous empires were being, or had already been, replaced by new colonial empires with distantly located centres of power. Against this backdrop of changing state structures, women's traditional roles were being challenged by men and, increasingly, by women themselves. By the end of the nineteenth century, women started articulating visions of a different world in narratives that are available to us in their original form of poems, treatises, articles and books. Women started writing in news journals; some publications started giving space to women writers; the last years saw the appearance of the first women's journals and periodicals focused on women's issues. Women's actions for change in this century usually took the shape of personal interventions and assertions, even when they were articulating the need for change or attempting to institutionalise reforms. But their personal struggles and achievements were laying the ground for women's collective actions that multiplied and flourished in the twentieth century.

Nana Asma'u (1794-1865) Nigeria

In 1794, in what is now Nigeria, Nana Asma'u was born into a family of male and female scholars. Learned women in her immediate family included her paternal grandmother and two of her mother's co-wives. Nana Asma'u herself

became a famous scholar and educator, an accomplished poet, and support for women; during her lifetime her fame spread as far as Mauritania.¹ Her father was Shehu Usman Dan Fodio: a spiritual and political leader who established the Sokoto Caliphate and who was a strong supporter of women's education and of justice.² In his most popular poem, *Tabban Hakika*, still being circulated today, the Shehu warned:

He who becomes Caliph to eat up his people and...to plunder and cheat...will burn, it is an absolute certainty. Do not misuse authority to oppress the people or...prevent the oppressed from complaining...use lawful means to redress wrongs,...do not enslave free men, forcefully misappropriate land, loot the treasury, illegally take booty...break the trust vested in you...intercept and assault women...or be unfair to your wives...³

Nana Asma'u who lived to be 71 years old, was a key player in the affairs of the state. She is credited with asking of the Caliph, her father, when he was appointing men to official positions "What about us, the women?" to which he replied "You will be over all the women. The women of the Caliphate belong to the women and the men belong to the men."⁴ Attesting to her efforts for women's well-being and the general community's religious education, Asma'u was variously called *sarkin mata duko* (chief of all women) by captive women, *shaikha* (female scholar) by the intelligentsia and *uwar gari* or 'mother of the town' by the general populace.⁵

Asma'u not only insisted on women's rights to go out freely and to seek education, in the 1840s she launched a movement for women's education, *yan-taru*, which still survives. Not quite a secret society, this all-female 'movement' was a private and closed educational system, passing from one generation of principal teachers (*jajis*) to another. The system included rural women and, during Asma'u's lifetime, women from different ethnic groups trekked over 100 kilometres to attend her teaching sessions.⁶ Another of Asma'u's innovations that survived until the 1970s, albeit in an attenuated shape, was a market for women run by women near her home.⁷

This remarkable woman grew up in an extended family which privileged conviction of faith and intense studiousness. Her father insisted that girls must also be educated, writing that: "One of the things which have caused so much trouble in all the Hausa territories is the way many teachers are neglecting their wives, girl children and female slaves leaving them like beasts without teaching them what Allah demands."⁸ Consequently, Nana Asma'u and her siblings were taught literature, mathematics, theology and logic. Growing up in a house of scholars Asma'u enjoyed books throughout her childhood. She read and wrote in Fulfulde, her first language, Hausa, the language of the region, and Arabic, the language of Islamic scholarship. She was an avid student of Sufism, Arabic and various branches of literature and science.

Asma'u was especially close to her half-brother, Mohammed Bello (who became Caliph upon their father's death), and married his friend Gidado in 1807. The couple later moved to the newly built city of Sokoto. After her father's death in 1817, Asma'u became a prolific writer, composing poems in three languages and translating her own works as well as the writings of her father and brother. Upon becoming Caliph, Mohammed Bello appointed Asma'u's husband, Gidado, his Chief Advisor, or, *waziri*, and conferred upon Asma'u the official title of *Uwar Gari*, responsible for the welfare of women and the religious education of the community.

Women regularly approached Asma'u with their issues and problems. She first tried to resolve the matter herself through counselling based on her own expertise in *shari'ah*. Only when she was unable to do so did she refer it to formal legal courts. The problems she dealt with included "the locating of young children from whom [captive women] had been separated...requests for legal divorce made by women and refused by husbands, the right of a woman to have custody over her unmarried daughter or pre-pubescent son, and requests for release from marriage by unhappy young newly married girls who lacked any legal grounds for divorce but hoped for Asma'u's intercession."⁹

Asma'u devoted her life to educating women, teaching them basic values such as morality and devotion but equally – and more importantly from the perspective of empowerment – the academic subjects of law and theology. Though we have no specific account of the impact her teaching had, it is safe to assume that education coupled with knowledge of laws must have helped women assert their rights in their everyday lives then, just as it does today.

Continuing to write political and personal poetry, Asma'u became known as an elegist, immortalizing in poems her friends and family who had passed away. For one friend, (who was also her sister-in-law) she wrote:

[She] was pious and religious
She was generous, learned and just
She brought up orphans
And took charge of widows and other women in distress.¹⁰

Focusing on the woman's assistance to others, this tribute points to less celebrated women, who acted in support of other women. We have no idea about whether this woman was old or young, married or not, had children or not; we know nothing about her social or economic status. This is in keeping with all of Asma'u's poetry. Even when praising the male rulers in her family, Asma'u praised only what she saw as virtues and character, never wealth, military prowess, or 'feats'.

Widowed at the age of 56, Asma'u spent the last fifteen years of her life teaching, writing and continuing to serve as a pillar of her community. Upon her death in 1865, she was honourably buried next to her father in his home.

Her legacy survives to this day: women interested in education and charity still band together to serve the community. Through the streets of Sokoto, they follow a senior woman, known in Hausa as *jagaba* or *jaji*, and offer their prayers at Nana Asma'u's tomb.¹¹

Fatimih Begum Baraghani (1819?-1852) Iran

Fatimih Begum Baraghani, poetess and martyr and the first woman in recorded Iranian history to cast off the veil publicly, was born sometime between 1817 and 1820.¹² Her father, Haji Mullah Salih, was a prominent *mullah* (Muslim cleric) and, as a child, Fatimih received a rigorous religious education from her father and her two uncles, Haji Mullah Muhammad Taqi and Haji Mullah Ali.¹³ She studied the Qur'an, religious law, theology and languages. At thirteen, Fatimih was married to Taqi's son, Mullah Muhammad.

Unhappy during her marriage, Fatimih often stayed with her mother. Though she had two sons and a daughter, Fatimih was more interested in reading and writing than fulfilling domestic obligations. Accordingly, from her home in Qazvin, she began sending letters to Sayyid Kazim Rashti, a scholar in Kerbala. Then, after her sympathetic uncle, Mullah Ali, helped her obtain her parents' permission for pilgrimage, Fatimih and her sister set off to Kerbala in 1843. Fatimih spent the next three years studying with Sayyid Kazim Rashti, who first called Fatimih, 'Qurrat-ul-Ayn' (The Solace of the Eyes).

Her prolonged stay in Kerbala incurred the ire of the Ottoman Sultanate, who allowed Fatimih her freedom but ordered her to leave Ottoman territory. Fatimih returned to Iran accompanied by a team of female followers and friends,¹⁴ stopping at various places along the way. When she eventually reached Qazvin, Fatimih was severely beaten by her father-in-law (and uncle), Mullah Taqi who, as the Imam-Jumeh, had authority over the other *mullahs* and was very influential. Taqi and the rest of the family unsuccessfully tried to persuade Fatimih to return to her husband. Refusing to reconcile with her husband, Fatimih told him that had he been a faithful husband, he would have joined her in Kerbala. A few weeks later, her husband divorced her and her family pronounced her a heretic.¹⁵ The prevailing Muslim laws stipulated that their children must reside with their father. Fatimih criticized the limitations imposed and eventually separated from Islam, becoming a leader amongst followers of the Babi movement (later, the Baha'i Faith).

In 1848, Fatimih stunned the audience at the Badasht Conference by publicly addressing a mixed audience – without a veil. A member of the audience, Shaikh Abu Turab, recalls that:

suddenly the figure of [Fatimih] appeared adorned and unveiled...rose from her seat and, undeterred by the tumult that she had raised in the hearts of her companions began to address the remnant of the assembly.

Without the least premeditation, and in language that bore striking resemblance to that of the Qu'ran, she delivered her appeal with matchless eloquence and profound fervor.¹⁶

After the Conference, Fatimih was brought before the Imperial ruler, Shah Nasrud-Din, who is said to have remarked, "I like her looks: leave her and let her be." The Shah then sent her a letter urging her to re-embrace Islam, saying if she did so he would marry her and keep her as the guardian of the ladies of his household. She returned the letter with a verse written on the back:

*Kingdom, wealth and ruling be for thee
Wandering, becoming a poor dervish and a calamity be for me
If that station is good, let it be for thee
And if this station is bad, I long for it, let it be for me!*

Impressed, the Shah remarked, "So far history has not shown such a woman to us." He again called her into his presence and urged her to become a Muslim. Again, she refused. The Shah stopped pursuing the matter but this was not enough to save her from persecution by those enraged at her apostasy.¹⁷ Fatimih and the women and men who supported her were imprisoned and tortured. Endangered by the attack instigated by the Muslim clergy, she went into exile in Baghdad, but exile did not provide safety. In the early 1850s, many Babis were executed and Fatimih was sentenced to death in 1852.

Her last words, before her captors strangled her with a silk scarf and threw her body down a well, are said to have been:

*You can kill me as soon as you like, but
you cannot stop the emancipation of women.¹⁸*

Fatimih impressed both her contemporaries and subsequent commentators. In 1865, Monsieur Joseph Arthur, le Comte de Gobineau de Paris – ethnographer and historian – referred to Fatimih as one who, "turned not only against polygamy but also the veil, and she appeared with face unveiled in public places."¹⁹ Two decades later, the *Journal Asiatic* remarked:

How a woman, a creature so weak in Iran, and above all in a city like Qazvin, where the clergy possess such a powerful influence, where the ulamas [sic] because of their number and importance and power hold the attention of government officials and of the people, how can it be that in such a country and district and under such unfavourable conditions, that a woman could have organized such a powerful party...it was, as a matter of fact, unparalleled in the past.²⁰

In the early twentieth century, a Cambridge professor reiterated this sentiment: "The appearance of such a woman as Tahirih [i.e., Fatimih] in any country and in any age, is a rare phenomenon, but in such a country as Iran it is a prodigy...nay, almost a miracle."²¹

Others admired her poems. Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949), the Indian poet, politician and women's activist, once exclaimed, "for ten years I have longed to have the poems of Tahiri!"²² Fatimih's poetry was extremely rare. Many of her poems were destroyed after her execution, but, travelling in the 1930s, Martha Root noticed that "Some of her poems [were] set to music and I often heard the records on the victrolas [phonographs] in Persian homes."²³

Ashrafunissa Begum (1840-1903) India (Pakistan)

Ashrafunissa Begum, who ended her life as a respected professor at a girls' college in Lahore (in contemporary Pakistan), struggled hard to become even literate – the case of many women during this period. 'Stealing her education like a thief' was how she characterized her struggle when, many years later, she related her story to encourage girls and women to study.

Bibi Ashraf, as she came to be known, was an only child. Bibi Ashraf was still an infant when her mother died, and she was raised in her paternal grandfather's home in the small village of Bijnor, in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. Her father, Sayyid Fateh Husain, was a *vakil* (legal practitioner) who practised first in Bahnera, then Agra and eventually in the state of Gwalior. As 'Sayyids'²⁴ the family enjoyed a high social status but they were of modest means. The family had a history of teaching girls to read...but never to write. This discrepancy was fairly common amongst *sharif* or 'respectable' families at the time who believed that every member of the family should have the ability to read the Qur'an, but who felt that writing offered women – especially young women and girls – the means to correspond directly with men. This ability, it was feared, would allow women to strike up unsanctioned relationships – an unacceptable eventuality to be guarded against.

In keeping with this tradition, Bibi Ashraf's family arranged for a young widow to come and teach Ashrafunissa and her cousins to read the Qur'an at home. Around 1847, when Ashrafunissa was only seven or eight years old and had just completed seven *surahs* or chapters of the Qur'an, the 27-year-old widow-instructor remarried. There is, of course, no restriction on widow remarriage in Islam. Still, attesting to the power of geographically specific customs, so shocked was her conservative grandfather by this remarriage that he not only banished the young instructor from his home, he refused to engage a replacement.²⁵

Bibi Ashraf's cousins managed to continue studying with their mothers, an option not available to her. Ashrafunissa's grandmother consoled her and urged her to complete the Qur'an by first becoming an expert in the seven chapters she had already learned. Doing so, she managed to complete the reading of the Qur'an in Arabic. But, she still could not read Urdu, her mother tongue, while she had a passionate desire to participate in *majalis*: the reading of elegiac verses during the month of Muharram.

Driven by this passion, she conceived one scheme after another to pursue her desire. First, she managed to obtain copies of some verses by saying she was going to have someone copy out the *marsiya* (elegiac verses) for her. Then, scraping off coal blacking from the bottom of a kitchen griddle, she devised a sort of ink, and started copying out the verses. Telling her family she was having a siesta on the roof, Ashrafunissa would spend her afternoons secretly tracing the mysterious words. This enabled her to copy out the Urdu words, but she still could not read the script she had visually reproduced. She finally learnt to read Urdu when she made a deal with a male cousin who wanted her help in learning the Qur'an: she would assist him if, in exchange, he helped her learn to read and write Urdu.²⁶

This personal achievement became an asset for all her female relatives after her uncle, strongly opposed to women writing, left home to join Ashrafunissa's father in Gwalior. The women of the household first discovered her ability to write when she sent her father a letter discussing the recent 'Sepoy Rebellion', in 1857.²⁷ She soon became the scribe of the home, reading and writing all family correspondence.

At nineteen, Ashrafunissa left home, having married her cousin, Sayyid Alamdar Husain, in 1859 – a betrothal arranged in her childhood. The couple moved to Lahore, where Alamdar taught Arabic and Persian at the Government College. Eventually, he became the Deputy Inspector of Schools in the Punjab district. The couple had four children but only two survived past infancy, and Alamdar died prematurely in 1870.

Government scholarships enabled her two daughters to study and, initially, Ashrafunissa used her sewing skills to meet their other needs. She later accepted a teaching post at the Victoria Girls' School, where she continued to work until her death in 1903.²⁸ It was there that her students affectionately began referring to her as 'Bibi Ashraf.'

To encourage girls' education Ashrafunissa wrote her story. This rare first-person account of female literacy, entitled "How I Learned to Read and Write," was published in two installments in *Tehzib-e-Niswan* (Women's World) in March, 1899. She begins her account by stating, "It had long been customary in my family to teach the girls how to read – but not to teach them how to write, that was strictly forbidden."²⁹ Her grandmother was particularly proud of her achievements. When Ashrafunissa's father remarked,

The letter from the girl [i.e., Ashrafunissa]... made me very happy. She wrote what she had herself heard or seen. Her letter gave me the pleasure I get from a newspaper or a book of history. I read her letter every day. But do tell me, who taught her to write?

Her grandmother replied, "Even to this day no one has ever taught her. She had learned through her own efforts and out of her own desire."³⁰

Ashrafunissa was highly respected in the community. Influential families would send their daughters, who usually observed strict *purdah*, to visit with her. As a teacher her reputation was excellent; she was well-respected by her pupils and their parents. The editor of *Tehzib-e-Niswan*, Muhammadi Begum, herself a pioneer in many ways was so impressed by Bibi Ashraf's life and work that she wrote a short biography of her, entitled *Hayat-e-Ashrafi* (Life of Ashrafunissa) in 1913.³¹ The feeling was mutual. Ashrafunissa told Muhammadi that though she had promised her uncle she would never write to any married woman outside the family, she eventually broke her promise by writing to Muhammadi Begum.

Ashrafunissa also had a charitable disposition, going into debt to give alms and loans to the poor. She worked with widows and orphans and became the personal assistant to her elderly maid when the maid became blind.³² Combining a life of strict *purdah* with her teaching and charitable work – she travelled in a covered *dholi* (palanquin) when leaving her home. Ashrafunissa Begum used her hard-won education to support her family and educate others. Education – and the fight for education – was a prominent theme of women's activism during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as evident in this chapter and the next.

Raden Adjeng Kartini (1879-1904) Java (Indonesia)

Further east, Raden Adjeng Kartini emerged as a strong voice for Indonesian women at the turn of the nineteenth century. During this period, Indonesia was still administered by Dutch colonial rulers who, before the early 1900s, paid scant attention to the education of the indigenous people, especially girls and women.³³ Education for Muslims was largely confined to the mosque, which excluded girls and most rural and urban poor women had no formal education. Daughters of clerics, however, would receive some religious instruction, and the children of civil servants sometimes had the opportunity of receiving primary schooling or being taught at home.³⁴

Raden Adjeng Kartini was the daughter of an elite civil servant, the Javanese regent of Jepara, and she was fortunate enough to attend school until the age of twelve. Though she set out her feminist, nationalist and socialist goals very clearly, her activism was truncated by her death in childbirth at the age of 25. After her death, she was taken up as an icon of both the feminist and nationalist movements in Indonesia, and is still considered a national hero today.³⁵

Educated in the Dutch system, Kartini corresponded with Dutch feminists throughout her short life. In 1901 she wrote to the wife of one of the founders of the Dutch Socialist Party, insisting that:

It would be a blessing for Indonesian society if the women received a good education...the only road open to the Javanese girl...is marriage...Teach them a trade so that they be no longer a defenceless

*prey...The only way to escape from such a life is for the girl to learn to be independent.*³⁶

Devoted to female education, Kartini started the first girls' school in Indonesia. Catering to the daughters of Javanese officials, the school boasted 120 students by 1904.

Despite her fluency in Dutch and her ties to friends, literature, and culture in Europe, Kartini remained strongly critical of imperialism. She passionately defended Javanese culture against charges of savagery and barbarism, but Kartini's commitment to nationalism was tempered by her feminism. This led her to oppose a number of local customs. She was most critical of polygyny, and wrote: "nearly every woman I know here curses this right of the men [i.e., polygyny]. But curses do not help, we must act."³⁷ Protesting the practice of polygamy and the gender injustice of the prevailing social order, she wrote:

*The Moslem law allows a man to have four wives at the same time. And although it be a thousand times over no sin according to the Moslem law and doctrine, I shall forever call it a sin...And can you imagine what hell-pain a women must suffer when her husband comes home with another – a rival – whom she must recognize as his legal wife? He can torture her to death, mistreat her as he will; if he does not choose to give her back her freedom then she can whistle to the moon for her rights. Everything is for the man, and nothing for the woman, is our law and custom. Do you understand now the deep aversion I have for marriage? I would do the humblest work, thankfully and joyfully, if by it I could be independent.*³⁸

Ironically enough, despite her opposition to polygyny, Kartini was married off at a young age to the Regent of Remburg (or, Rembang), a man with numerous wives. Sadly, Kartini died in childbirth at the age of 25.

Kartini was hailed as a pioneering feminist soon after her death. In Indonesia, Kartini Day is celebrated on April 21st, her birthday. As practiced on Mother's Day, on Kartini Day, women receive a day off from work, and the men and children tend to all domestic work for the entire day. Others observe Kartini Day by making a pilgrimage to her gravesite near Rembang, in Central Java. Her letters were posthumously published as a well-known book, entitled *Letters of a Javanese Princess*.³⁹

Anbar-otin (1865?-1905?) Central Asia (Uzbekistan)

In what is now Uzbekistan, Anbar-otin, the daughter of poor weavers, was an ardent and fearless advocate for social justice and women's rights in the late nineteenth century. She consistently condemned injustice and exploitation and openly criticized community members who indulged in these. Retaliatory beatings eventually crippled Anbar, but undeterred, this brave woman continued

her activism for social justice, critiqued the cultural repression of women in the name of Islam and, in the midst of earning her daily bread, also managed to impart education to poor, working-class women.

The idea that the national intelligentsia of Central Asia – including those concerned with culture, science and ‘enlightenment’ – emerged only in the late 1800s as a by-product of Russian colonialism and the growth of capitalism, is a misconception. Central Asia had a long tradition of indigenous writers and thinkers.⁴⁰ Though largely confined to the urban middle and upper-classes, intellectuals addressed issues such as education, scientific progress and political mobilization. Education for women, however, was not generally available until after the Soviet Revolution of 1917. Nonetheless, some Central Asian women managed to become educated in the nineteenth century, and not all were of the middle classes. Some, like Anbar-otin, even dared to challenge the prevalent patriarchal norms.

A poet from a very humble background, Anbar-otin was born in Kokand, present-day Uzbekistan, around 1865 or 1866 to a family of weavers. After their parents separated, their mother, Ashurbibi, raised Anbar and her two brothers. When Ashurbibi remarried, Anbar found in her stepfather a kind man supportive of her education.

Anbar studied history, literature, and Muslim theology, from another poetess, Dilshod,⁴¹ and began writing poetry from adolescence. As she grew older, Anbar began to impart her knowledge of literature and religion. After her marriage, as she and her husband struggled to eke out a meagre existence, Anbar earned the honorific title of ‘-otin’ by teaching girls and women.

Living the hardworking life of a village woman, Anbar related to those she taught and wrote authoritatively about the difficulties confronting women. Giving a voice to the women of her community, her writings underscored the frequency of violence and injustice. Anbar’s verses and treatises condemned the exploitation by the rich and powerful, and promoted education as a means for rural labourers to improve their living conditions. She decried adverse customs and traditions which limited the potential of the poor in general and women specifically. Distressed at the cultural repression of women in the name of Islam, she composed an embittered poem directed towards men which stresses the importance of valuing women as individuals:

*...about women it is contemptuously said
that it is their destiny to give pleasure.
Men, you are fools just like them,
dripping with wolfish malice.
They are the buds of flowers in the garden,
barely strong enough to live.
My friend, with all your might help them not to meet a dark end.*

*And if you respect your mother, you will on all people bestow love.
Behold! twixt them is a multitude of beauties,
they are bright and luminescent.
Mother and sister are dear to you, but in obscure crowds
Women have little value to you.
You should know – they are beauteous and not faceless!⁴²*

Despite her personal difficulties, Anbar relentlessly continued to provide an education for poor girls and women until her death, at the age of forty.

Aïni Aïth Mansur (d. 1915) Kabylia (Algeria)

Many women have waged personal battles for their rights as women, and some for their survival, in struggles that have largely gone unrecorded. Fortunately, some narratives do exist, such as that of Aïni Aïth Mansur, a Berber woman. Aini's story was recorded by her daughter, Fadhma Amrouche in the autobiography she wrote between 1946 and 1962.⁴³ Fadhma's memories provide a firsthand account of the difficulties an unwed mother faced in nineteenth century Algeria and the courage needed to live independently.

Aïni Aïth Mansur's family was from the village of Tizi-Hibel in Kabylia, eastern Algeria. Aini was married young to a much older man and was widowed at the age of 22 or 23. Her husband had not yet been buried when Aini's brother tried to bring her back to her natal family. Defying her brother, Aini replied, "I will stay with my children, in my house." Challenging prevailing customs that insisted a widow return to her natal family but her children remain with the deceased husband's family, Aini stayed on in the village she married into with her children. She also resisted the attempts of her late husband's brothers to drive her out of the community and take over custody of her children, whose property they coveted. A formal court case was registered against the brothers of her first husband. To protect her children, the French magistrate appointed a guardian and a deputy guardian for the children, took an inventory of her property, and ordered that no harm come to Aini or her children.

Not long afterwards, Aini met another man from the same family as her late husband, developed a relationship and became pregnant (with Fadhma), but the young man refused to admit paternity. This was a very dangerous situation for a woman. According to local custom, any woman thought to have had illicit sexual relations was to be killed. Fadhma notes that, starting in the 1870s, the French colonial government was attempting to curtail such practices. This may explain why Aini was not killed outright by the villagers. Though physically untouched, Aini was shunned as a pariah. So completely isolated by the community was Aini, that when she gave birth to Fadhma, Aini was forced to gnaw through her own umbilical cord.

Nine days after the birth, Aini registered a case against the father in order to get him to admit paternity. The case dragged on for three years: years in which a defiant Aini continued to live on her own and care for her children. Though Fadhma's father never publicly admitted his paternity, Fadhma's resemblance to her father was so strong that "All the witnesses agreed that the man was indeed my [i.e., Fadhma's] father, for I was his living portrait." In the end, the magistrates ordered Fadhma's father to pay 300 francs in reparations to Aini.

A child born out of lawful wedlock, Fadhma was stigmatized by the community and assaulted – both verbally and physically. The abuse was enough to convince Aini that the only way to ensure Fadhma's safety was to remove her from the village. Aini's solution was to send her daughter to the White Sisters' convent. Between 1885 and 1886, Fadhma lived at the convent. Then, upon learning that the nuns were beating and humiliating her daughter, an infuriated Aini arrived at the convent to reclaim her daughter and exclaimed, "Was it for this that I entrusted my daughter to you? Give her back to me!" Aini then promptly bundled up her child in a scarf tied around her forehead, and kept Fadhma with her until the following year when she sent her to a school for girls.

Bibi Zainab (1880s) Iran

Bibi Zainab, or Zainab Pasha, who lived in the city of Tabriz in north-western Iran in the nineteenth century, engaged in another type of struggle: fighting for economic justice.⁴⁴ Bibi Zainab appears in history at the time of the general strike against the British tobacco monopoly in Iran in the 1890-92. Though history books make no mention of Bibi Zainab, we know her through the folktales and songs of Tabrizi women who have kept her memory alive. These Azerbaijani legends are supplemented by fragmentary information, recorded by officials who make passing mention of the challenges Zainab's women's militia posed to the administration during the national strike, as well as subsequently.

Little is known of Bibi Zainab's early life other than that she was born into a poor, urban family. Some say that her husband died, and she was left to care for four children on her own. Likewise, nothing is known for sure of her death, but to this day, likening someone to Bibi Zainab is to imply that they are brave and fair.

The Iranian government's concession to the British of a monopoly over the tobacco industry infuriated people: a tobacco boycott was organized and the nation went on strike. Called in to break the strike, the military forced shopkeepers to reopen their businesses. It was during this time that the first official mention is made of a female militia that stormed the bazaar, forced the state troops to back down, and re-closed the shops in protest against the monopoly. Armed with sticks, stones and firearms, this female militia was headed by Bibi Zainab. Acting in well-trained and highly-organized units, the women's militia helped the national movement that succeeded in having the British tobacco monopoly repealed.

While Bibi Zainab's militia challenged the British monopoly from the streets, elite women launched their own boycott. Anis ud-Daula, Shah Nasr ud-Din's third wife, had a personal grudge against the prime minister. So, when he came under attack for selling off the country's resources to the British, Anis joined the struggle to end the tobacco monopoly. She mobilized the royal harem to oppose the foreign economic domination symbolized by the tobacco monopoly.⁴⁵

Bibi Zainab and her female troops continued to be active even after the monopoly crisis was resolved. They intervened in situations where the rich and powerful were oppressing the poor by raising prices and hoarding goods, especially in times of food shortage. One anecdote tells of Bibi Zainab breaking open one of the granaries and distributing 70,000 tons of grain. Zainab escaped after the incident, but several militia women were killed by the landowners. In another instance, it is said that she and her militia stoned the house of the governmental representative in Tehran in protest against high prices and the state's apathy towards ordinary people's living conditions.

In one incident where men conceded they felt unable to continue to fight against the powerful rich, Bibi Zainab threw her scarf at them, saying that the men were free to go home; her women would fight the battle. This is the second time a woman discarded her veil publicly in Iran in protest against the existing social order. Zainab apparently freely frequented all-male tea-shops and engaged in discussions with the male clientele – not unlike Razia Sultana more than 600 years earlier (See Chapter Two). Poems and reports suggest the women's militia was highly organized with seven separate regiments, each under the leadership of a different woman. Residing in different parts of the city, individual units would mobilize the troops whenever they felt that the interests of the labouring classes were being disregarded. As women of modest origins and subversive activities, Bibi Zainab's troops were not written about in any detail and their individual stories are lost to official records of history. Luckily, the stories of Bibi Zainab and her troops have been kept alive by Tabrizi mothers and grandmothers who relate the tale of these outstanding ancestors.

Fatima Aliye Hanim (1862-1936) Turkey

Born in 1862,⁴⁶ Fatima Aliye Hanim started her activism during Turkey's *Tanzimat* (Reform) Period (1839-1876) when women's issues first became central to the project of 'modernisation' and women's advancement a marker of progress.⁴⁷ She is remembered as Turkey's first female novelist who used her writing ability to criticise the social restrictions on women and the misogynistic interpretation of Islam that deprived women of rights.

A pioneer in women's journalism and modern writing, Fatima was the daughter of Ahmed, Cevdet Pasha (a.k.a. Gaudat Pasha), a historian, politician and influential member of the *ulama* (religious scholars),⁴⁸ and one of the principal authors of the Ottoman Civic Code, the *Mecelle*. Educated at home, Fatima had

command over three languages: her native Turkish, as well as Arabic and French. Her self-taught French was good enough for her to translate a French novel into Turkish in 1890.⁴⁹ Two years later she was writing her own works, beginning with the novel *Muhahdarat* (Womanhood), which tells the tale of a gifted woman whose creative potentials have been stifled by traditional society.

Fatima aired her views on the need for reforms in a relatively receptive environment: basic education had been made compulsory for girls as well as boys by the first Constitution (*Kanunu-i Esasi*) in 1876 and male thinkers were advocating female education, for the better upbringing of children but also to enable women to become social actors.⁵⁰ The growth of the print media at the run of the twentieth century also helped. *Terakki* (literally: progress), the newspaper of the Union and Progress Party, had a women's section. Called *Muhadderat icin Gazetedir*, this section provided information about schools for adult women, argued for the equality of the sexes, denounced polygamy, and gave information on recent activities of feminists in the west. Before women like Fatima started writing, most articles were written by men. Women expressed their views through letters to the press, for example, complaining about polygamy and travel restrictions. Though the Turkish reformists were heavily influenced by western thinking, in this period they supported their positions and arguments by reference to the 'Golden Age of Islam.'⁵¹

With respect to women, Fatima brought the strands of this thinking together in her 1891 book *Nisvan-i-Islam* (Women of Islam)⁵², in which she denounced the prevailing, misogynistic interpretation of Islam. *Nisvan-i-Islam* was so popular that it was translated into three languages. Only subsequently, was Fatima's *Nisvan-i-Islam* overshadowed by a similar work by the male Egyptian writer Qasim Amin's 1899 *Tahrir-i al-Mara* (The Liberation of Women), even though Fatima had foreshadowed many of his arguments.⁵³

Fatima made her views public in the 1890s, despite attempts to censor her works. Her efforts carved the way for future dialogues on the rights of Turkish women; her thoughts on the state of women and Islam were aired prior to the Young Turk revolution of 1908-1909, which ushered in a period of 'state-sponsored feminism.'

In 1895, Fatima started publishing and contributing articles to *Hanımlara Mahsus Gazete* (The Ladies' Own Gazette). Though the first women's journal, *Terraki-i Muhadderat*, (Progress of Women) had been established in 1869, The Ladies Own Gazette is acknowledged as "one of Turkey's first and longest lived newspapers for women by women."⁵⁴ Like a number of other women's journals of this period, the *Hanımlara Mahsus Gazete* was progressive but did not broach the issue of political change as part of a broader feminist agenda. Its cover proclaimed that it served three principles: being a good mother, a good wife and a good Muslim.⁵⁵

Around this time, other journals that appeared devoted space to women's issues and the number of women's journals increased phenomenally. Between 1909 and 1923 there were 27 journals on women's issues, though most were owned and run by men. They included *Kadin* (Women), *Kadin Bahçesi* (Women's Garden) *Kadin Kalbi* (Women's Hearth) and, importantly, *Kadinlar Dunyasi* (Women's World).⁵⁶(Discussed in Chapter Six) Before the Turkish Republic under Ataturk adopted the Latin script in 1928, the number of women's journals in Turkey had risen to 40.⁵⁷ Journalism and women's writings played a vital role in women's activism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in different countries and contexts.

References

- ¹ Beverly B. Mack and Jean Boyd, *One Woman's Jihad: Nana Asma'u, Scholar and Scribe*, (Indiana University Press, Bloomington: 2000), 13.
- ² The Caliphate lasted until its defeat by the British in 1903.
- ³ Jean Boyd *The Caliph's Sister: Nana Asma'u, 1793-1865: Teacher, Poet and Islamic Leader*, (Frank Cass, London: 1989), 28.
- ⁴ Boyd, 100. Within Gobir, from which the Shehu and his followers were expelled, the state functions were carefully delineated and women performed a number of specific administrative functions (Boyd, 46). This organizational hierarchy is comparable to that of the Mughal harems in India described in Chapter Three.
- ⁵ Boyd, 49. The term *uwar gari*, implying symbolic motherhood over all of the town's inhabitants, both men and women, was a title also given Amina of Zazzau (See Chapter Three, this volume).
- ⁶ See Boyd pp. 74-83 and 93-101.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 49.
- ⁸ A. Koko and Jean Boyd, "Nana Asma'u," in *Nigerian Women in Historical Perspective*, edited by Bolanle Awe, *Nigerian Women in Historical Perspective*, (Lagos: Sankore, 1992), 41.
- ⁹ Boyd, *The Caliph's Sister...*, 44-5.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 49.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 48.
- ¹² Fatimih was given many names: her teacher, Sayyid Kazim Rashti called her Qurrat-ul-Ayn (The Solace of the Eyes); Bahá'ullah later called her Táhirih (The Pure One); other names were Zarién-Taj (Crown of Gold) and Nuqtih (The Point). After her execution in 1857, Fatimih's birth records were burnt, along with her worldly possessions. Her exact year of birth is therefore unknown but most historians agree that she was born between 1817 and 1820. See Martha L. Root, *Tahirih the Pure, Iran's Greatest Woman* (Karachi: 1938), pp. 2-8 and 15-17.
- ¹³ Root, 9.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.
- ¹⁶ Negar Mottahedeh, "Ruptured Spaces and Effective Histories: The Unveiling of the Babi Poetess Qurrat al-Ayn Tahirih in the Gardens of Badasht," *Occasional Papers in Shaykhi, Babi and Baha'i Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (February, 1998), available online at <<http://www.suppressedhistories.net/articles/qurrat.html>>.
- ¹⁷ Root, 62-3.
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- ¹⁹ Monsieur Joseph Arthur, *Les Religions et les Philosophies dans l'Asie Centrale* cited in Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism*, 2nd edition (ASR, Lahore: 1993), 61.
- ²⁰ *Journal Asiatic*, 1886, tome 7, p. 474. (Cited in Root, 2).
- ²¹ Professor Edward G. Browne cited in Root, 29.
- ²² The comment was made to Martha Root who then supplied Naidu with copies of Fatimih's poems. Root also made copies for Allama Muhammad Iqbal. Root, 86.
- ²³ Root, 86-7.
- ²⁴ Sayyids claim direct descent from the Prophet.
- ²⁵ Gail Minault, *Secluded Scholars: Women's Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India*, (Oxford University Press, New Delhi: 1998), 26.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.
- ²⁷ This is also referred to as the Indian Mutiny of 1857; many indigenous writers now call it the first war of independence.

- ²⁸ Muhammadi Begum, *Hayat-e-Ashrafi*. Imambara Syedda Mubarak Begum, Lahore: 1978 (reprint) and C.M. Nain, "How Bibi Ashraf Learned to Read and Write," in *Annual of Urdu Studies*, Vol. 6, 99-100. 1987.
- ²⁹ Ashrafunissa Begum, "How I Learned to Read and Write," reprinted in English in C.M. Nain, "How Bibi Ashraf Learned to Read and Write," 110.
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ Muhammadi Begum, *Hayat-e-Ashrafi*, (Lahore: Imambara Syedda Mubarak Begum, 1978). (See Chapter Six this volume).
- ³² Nain, 101-2.
- ³³ Indonesia was first colonized by the Dutch in 1619 who by the eighteenth century had brought the country completely under their control. Indonesia gained its independence in 1949, except for New Guinea, which remained under Dutch administration until 1963.
- ³⁴ Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries*, 1st edition, (The Hague: Institute of Social Studies, 1982), 153.
- ³⁵ Ibid., 156.
- ³⁶ Kartini, cited in Jayawardena (1st ed.), 154.
- ³⁷ Ibid., 155-6.
- ³⁸ Kartini, cited in Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism*, 2nd edition (Lahore: ASR, 1993), 142.
- ³⁹ Raden Adjeng Kartini, *Letters of a Javanese Princess*, translated from the Dutch by Agnes Louise Symmers, edited by Hildred Geertz, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1964). This edition has a preface written by Eleanor Roosevelt. In the 1940s, during the United Nations session on the Commission of the Status of Women, Eleanor Roosevelt cited Kartini as a source of inspiration when drafting the Declaration to Abolish Discrimination Against Women.
- ⁴⁰ Marfua Tokhtakhodjaeva and Elmira Turgumbekova, *The Daughters of Amazons: Voices from Central Asia*, translated by Sufian Aslam and edited by Cassandra Balchin (Lahore: Shirkat Gah, 1996), 16.
- ⁴¹ Dilshod, also known by her Farsi pseudonym, Barno, was born at Istravshan in modern-day Ura-Tube around 1808 or 1810 and lived into the twentieth century. Moving to Kokand with her parents, as prisoners-of-war, she began writing lyrical poetry and tutored aspiring female writers, including Anbar-otin. We are grateful to Ms. Tokhtakhodjaeva for providing biographical information for Anbar-otin and Dilshod.
- ⁴² Marfua Tokhtakhodjaeva, *Between the Slogans of Communism and the Laws of Islam: The Women of Uzbekistan*, Translated by Sufian Aslam and edited by Cassandra Balchin (Lahore: Shirkat Gah, 1995) 32-33.
- ⁴³ Fadhma A.M. Amrouche, *My Life Story: The Autobiography of a Berber Woman*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989). The major theme of her narrative involves the shifting identities of being a Berber woman caught between traditional Algerian society and the impositions of French colonialism. Information for this section comes primarily from pp. 1-8 of this text.
- ⁴⁴ We would like to thank Dr. Homa Hoodfar for the above information. Dr. Hoodfar is an associate professor at Concordia University, Montréal.
- ⁴⁵ Jayawardena, (1st edition), 51.
- ⁴⁶ The Palestinian-Lebanese writer and feminist May Ziyada stated in 1924 that Fatima Aliye was born in 1860. See Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke, eds., *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 240.
- ⁴⁷ Zeynep Şahin, *Philanthropic Women's NGOs as a way of Participation in the Public Sphere: Case of Women's Education and the Culture Foundation*, (MA Thesis, Bogaziçi University, 2004).
- ⁴⁸ The terms *ulama*, *alim*, *maulana*, and *maulvi* have been variously used through history. They all derive from *ilm*, or 'knowledge,' and were used, until recently, to refer to scholars who usually, but not necessarily, had religious knowledge.

- ⁴⁹ Jayawardena, (1st edition), 34. Though Jayawardena states that Fatima was taught French as part of her home-schooling curriculum, in “End of Empire: Islam, Nationalism and Women in Turkey,” in Deniz Kandiyoti, ed., *Women, Islam and the State* (London: Macmillan, 1991), Kandiyoti maintains that Fatima taught herself French.
- ⁵⁰ DGSPW & UNDP, *Women in Turkey 1999*. An earlier edict had declared as much earlier in 1845.
- ⁵¹ See Zeynep Şahin Op. Cit.
- ⁵² Kandiyoti translates it as ‘Muslim Women.’
- ⁵³ Kandiyoti, 26.
- ⁵⁴ Jayawardena, (1st edition), 34.
- ⁵⁵ Kandiyoti, 26.
- ⁵⁶ Şahin.
- ⁵⁷ DGSPW & UNDP, *Women in Turkey 1999*.

Chapter Five

Women Organizing for Change: The Late Nineteenth Century and Early Twentieth Century

By the turn of the twentieth century, education became a major arena of contestation. For women, education certainly represented a means to gainful employment in the new market system, but, even more importantly, a means for self-growth. Simultaneously, women challenged the rules constraining them, whether the rules were legally constructed or imposed through traditions and customs. They mounted their challenge through their writings and by starting and contributing to periodicals; in one country after another, women institutionalized education for girls and fought for recognition of this achievement through official examination certification; and women organized: they met each other in meetings and conferences, they formed their own organizations, and built bridges across countries.

Hind Nawfal (c.1860-1920) Egypt

Hind Nawfal was one star in a constellation of active Arab women, gravitating around life in Cairo and Egypt, who became visible and vocal in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Hind was born in 1860 into a Syrian-Christian family of authors and journalists with an interest in women's status. Hind's mother, Maryam, had written a biographical dictionary on notable women, published in the 1870s. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the

Nawfals relocated from Tripoli to Alexandria, where Hind's father helped her to launch the first Arabic monthly magazine specifically for women in 1892. *Al-Fatat* (The Young Girl) was owned and edited by Hind, who also contributed to the magazine.

Al-Fatat included biographies of well-known Arab and European women, news, travelogues, book reviews, poems and articles on various subjects. In the inaugural edition, Hind established the scope of the magazine, identifying both its breadth and its limitations:

scientific, historical, literary, honouristic magazine concerned with sex [i.e., gender], the first of its kind under the eastern sky. It has no goal in political matters, no aim in religious controversies, no objective in researching subjects which are of no benefit to women...¹

Hind began her first editorial with a creation narrative, beginning with God's formation of the cosmos, earth and humanity, and concluding with the establishment of the two sexes. Like many women of her time, both eastern and western, she ascribed separate spheres of influence to men and women: men governed political and economic matters; women were the custodians of the home and of morality. However, Hind did not see drudgery and solitude in women's lot. Instead, she emphasized God's creation of woman and the advancements individual women could make in worldly societies:

When woman stepped out from behind the veil, refined and cultured, man saw her as an angel in the garb of humans. And the source of her dazzling beauty was reflected in the sparkle of her wit and the rays of her perception. Then man said, "Bless Him who cloaked her with divine delight and made her a shining light in society.

We learn from history how many a deadly lion has emerged from the harem and how many hennaed hands have held the reigns of kingdoms...And how many daughters, educated by wealth and cultured by poverty, have become heads of the harem and directed its affairs. And how many women were noted for intelligence and perfection, whose learning was not dependent on that of men.²

According to Bouthaina Shaaban in "Arab Women Novelists: Creativity and Rights," Hind can be seen as inaugurating a larger trend in women's publishing in the Middle East. After Hind's early efforts, women's journals appeared in Cairo, Beirut, Damascus, and Baghdad. Indeed, more than 25 Arab feminist journals were owned, edited and/or published by women before the First World War. They included: *Anis al-Galis*, by Alexandra Afenuh (Alexandria, 1898); *Shajarat al-Durr*, by Sa'dya Sa'd al-Din (Alexandria, 1901); *al-Mara'a*, by Anisa Attallah (Egypt, 1901); *al-Saada*, by Rujina A'wad (Egypt, 1902); *al-A'rus* by Mary A'jami (Damascus, 1910); *al-Kitadir*, by Afifa Sa'ab (Lebanon, 1912);

Fatat al-Niyl, by Sara al-Mihaya (Cairo, 1913); and *Fatat Lubnan*, by Salima Abu Rashid (Lebanon, 1914).³

These publications dedicated their pages to poetry, prose and literary criticism and concentrated on issues related to women's lives. Many devoted regular space to western women and the relation between their liberation and Arab women's liberation, stressing the necessity of learning from other women's experiences. Another recurring theme was that a nation's political liberation was not possible without the emancipation of women, a particularly timely point as most men in the nationalist causes were arguing that women's issues should be deferred to a later stage.⁴

Not only did female writers argue that women had a role to play in nationalist politics, they maintained that women's education and creative productions only strengthened families and, by extension, society itself. Labiba Shamti'n, an Arab writer, wrote in 1898 that:

*I can't see how a woman writer or poet could be of any harm to her husband and children. In fact, I see the exact opposite; her knowledge and education will reflect positively on her family and children.... Neither male art nor creativity has ever been considered as a misfortune to the family, or an impediment to the love and care a father may bestow upon his children. The man who sees in a learned woman his rival is incompetent; he who believes that his knowledge is sufficient is mean, and the man who believes that woman's creativity harms him or her is ignorant.*⁵

(The linkage between women's issues and nationalism is seen in greater detail in Chapter Five.)

Education and Journalism in the Indian Subcontinent

Education was a key issue for social reformers in the Indian subcontinent during this period. Concern about education extended to female education with at least some reformers advocating a changing role for women. Many advocates appealed for reform as a return to previous traditions: Muslims referring back to the glorious days of a pristine Islam, Hindus to a golden Vedic age.⁶

Women patrons played a key role in establishing institutionalized education for girls. The Begums of Bhopal, rulers of their own princely state, promoted schooling for girls and boys.⁷ Begum Sultan Jahan was also a patron of the emerging women's organizations in India. She funded the Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam (Association of Muslim Women) from its inception in 1914 until just before her death in 1930, and was deeply involved with the All-India Women's Conference. A keen supporter of girls' education, Sultan Jahan was critical of simply enabling girls to be literate, saying:

*It is a stupid thing, to my mind, to teach the girls to read and write, and then leave them to their fate. The very least that should be done for them, is to give them a thorough grounding in things that matter, and to awaken the dormant soul in them.*⁸

Further east, in Bengal, Nawab Faizunnessa Chaudhrani (1834-1903) of Comilla, who was granted the title of Nawab even though she was a woman, was a key player. Born into aristocracy and brought up in purdah herself, Faizunnessa founded one of the earliest free *madrassahs* for girls. This school later developed into the Faizunnessa Degree College (granting bachelor degrees). Long before this, Faizunnessa opened schools for girls in each administrative centre of her estate. She also opened an English medium school, Faizunnessa Girls' Pilot High School, in 1873. The high school catered especially to *pardanashin* (or purdah-observing) girls. This novel institution took a while to gain acceptance but eventually flourished. Schools for girls started being opened in other cities of Bengal, such as Calcutta (1882) and Dhaka (1879). Not all schools enabled girls to sit for formal educational examinations, however, and some schemes aimed to provide female education within homes by means of visiting women tutors. Women persevered in education and, in 1896, Latifunessa became the first Muslim woman to graduate from the Campbell Medical College.

Side by side with initiatives for education, late nineteenth century India saw a flurry of magazines and periodicals emerging, as had been the case in the Arab world and in Turkey. Attesting to women's sense of solidarity across cultures and continents, the first journal for women in 1884, titled *Rafiq-e-Niswan* (A Woman's Friend), was funded by American women.⁹ Published bi-monthly, the journal appeared in Urdu, Hindi, Tamil and Bengali. Its impact does not compare, however, with that of indigenous journals.

The first Urdu journal specifically for Muslim women was *Akhbar-e-Nissa* (Women's Newspaper) launched by Maulvi Sayyid Ahmed in 1887. Three of the most influential journals of this period were: *Tehzib-e-Niswan*, *Khatun* and *Ismat*. Male reformers were involved in launching all three. Exceptionally, *Tehzib-e-Niswan*, started in 1898, was a joint venture of Maulvi Sayyid Mumtaz Ali and his wife, Muhammadi Begum. Muhammadi Begum would become the first sole woman editor of a journal. That same year Shaikh Abdullah, a lawyer and well-known reformist, started *Khatun* ('Lady' or 'Gentlewoman') as a platform to advance women's education. *Khatun* regularly reported on the annual meetings of the All India Muslim Education Conference and successfully elicited financial support for a proposed girls' school in Aligarh. Another long-lived publication for women was *Ismat* (Chastity), edited by Rashid-ul-Khairi. Khairi was an immensely popular novelist and many of his books - aimed at promoting a better status for women - were adopted by state schools as textbooks.¹⁰

In Bengal, women started contributing to magazines and journals sympathetic to their cause and point of view. These included a host of journals edited by

progressive Muslims such as *Mussalman*, *Nabanoor*, *Sadhana*, *Bulbul*, and *Saugat*. The earliest women contributors in the late nineteenth century included Bibi Taherunissa (1864), Latifunessa (1897) and Nawab Faizunessa (1876), all writing for *Bhamabodhini*, a journal that from its inception dedicated a separate section for new women writers.¹¹ By the turn of the century, Bengali women had powerful writers such as Rokeya Hossein publishing scathing critiques, as we shall see below.

Women's journals were an important means for women to voice their concerns, to engage with their social environment and to link up with each other. They were also a means of being inspired by others, and of inspiring others.

Muhammadi Begum (1878?-1908) India (Pakistan)

In 1904, Muhammadi Begum became the first sole female editor of an Urdu journal for women. Though publishing a journal may seem tame today, it was not easy in those days as attested to by Muhammadi Begum herself, who recalls that many copies of the first several issues of her journal, *Tehzib-e-Niswan* (Women's World) were returned scrawled over with obscenities. Attacks did not stop at obscenities on paper. In those early days, Muhammadi's home was also vandalized. Despite this, Muhammadi, supported by her husband (who co-founded the journal), continued to run stories about women's issues and the need to reform adverse customs.

Muhammadi Begum was born around 1878 to a middle-class Indian family, who favoured education. In her youth, Muhammadi was educated at home with her brothers, reading Urdu and memorizing the Qur'an. When the boys went to school, she stayed back and learned how to run a household, but in the evenings she would teach herself from the textbooks her brothers brought home. Her elder sister moved away from home when Muhammadi was about thirteen, galvanizing Muhammadi into teaching herself to write letters so the two could stay in correspondence.¹²

In 1897, Muhammadi married Sayyid Mumtaz Ali, a vocal champion of women's advancement and education. Her education continued in her married life: her husband taught her Arabic and Persian, an Englishwoman taught her English, a Hindu woman, Hindi and a neighbourhood boy gave her lessons in mathematics.¹³ Later, Muhammadi was sent to Oxford University by the State of Hyderabad, from where she wrote letters that were published in the women's journal, *Ismat*.¹⁴

Mumtaz Ali had two children from his first marriage and had left a government job for the publishing world in Lahore. In 1898, he and Muhammadi established *Tehzib-e-Niswan*. For the first five years of its existence, Muhammadi functioned as co-editor with her husband. She took over complete editorship in 1904, running stories such as Bibi Ashraf's account of how she learned to read

(that she later converted into a book),¹⁵ travel accounts the Fyzee sisters of (whose stories are in Chapter Seven) and the Begum of Bhopal's call for female education.¹⁶ The readership of the journal was largely purdah-observing women and, accordingly, the articles encouraged women to alter their own lives rather than imploring men to change their beliefs.

Along with articles, cookbooks and etiquette guides, Muhammadi also wrote novels. *Safiya Begam* tells a cautionary tale about marrying off daughters without their consent; *Sharif Beti* is about a woman who begins operating a school from her home.¹⁷ After 1904, Muhammadi founded a magazine for mothers, titled *Mushir-e-Madhar*, but *Tehzib-e-Niswan* was the longest-lived publication, appearing into the 1950s. After Muhammadi's untimely death in November of 1908, the continuation of the newspaper fell to her step-daughter Wahida. She took over the editorship from 1913 until her death in 1917, when the newspaper passed to Muhammadi's son, Sayyid Imtiaz Ali.¹⁸

Women Educators in Iran (1903-1962)

The right to education of girls and women, a central pillar of women's activism of this time, was often coupled with writing and journalism. The dawn of the twentieth century in Iran saw numerous women who, having acquired an education through individual efforts, fought to have girls' education generalised and recognized by the state. In 1898, a commission for public instruction was established and boys' government schools were set up. The *mullahs* were critical of the role of the state and generally opposed these schools. The idea of regular girls' schools also met with opposition.

Sadigheh Daulatabadi (1883-1962)

One of the Iranian pioneers for female education was Sadigheh Daulatabadi.¹⁹ Her father was so keen on girls' education that he sent a young Sadigheh to attend her brother's school dressed as a boy. Sadigheh later opened one of the very first schools for girls, devoted her life to education and went on to become a government inspector by the 1930s.²⁰

In 1903, Sadigheh started the first girls' school in Isfahan. Though only twenty years old, Sadigheh was the only qualified and willing female teacher in the city. Sadigheh's school, the *Shari'a Maktab Khaneh* (Shariah Schoolhouse) met with little resistance. The local *ulama* found it to be in strict accordance with religious principles and never condemned it. In time, they even sent their own daughters there to be educated. Within a few years, other privately initiated schools were established in Isfahan.²¹

Sadigheh was also active in women's journalism. She started a bi-monthly journal in 1919 entitled *Zabaun-i-Zanan* (Women's Voice) that propounded a

strong nationalist stance and never shied away from blunt political commentary. This was the third publication about women by women. The first, *Danesh* (Knowledge), was published in 1909 under the management of Ms. Kahal. The second was an illustrated daily, entitled *Shokufe* (Blossom).²² *Zabaun-i-Zanan* was different, however. Its forthright editorial comments on political matters stirred up controversy and the publication was eventually closed down.²³ Around the same time as founding her newspaper, Sadigheh established a *shirkat khatun* (ladies' association) in Isfahan.

In the 1920s, Sadigheh went to Paris to attend university. There, she participated in a conference in 1927 on women's voting rights (French women did not achieve suffrage until 1944). Graduating from the Sorbonne in Paris in 1928, Sadigheh returned to Iran and continued to work for women's rights. In 1937, she accepted the directorship of the *Khanuh-u-Banovan* (Women's Institute). Like many others, Sadigheh's activism was not confined to women's rights: between 1952 and 1953, she actively supported the Prime Minister, Dr. Mossadegh, who was considered a bastion of democracy under the Shah's leadership.²⁴ Sadigheh Daulatabadi died in 1962.

Tooba Azmoudeh (1879-1937)

A few years elder to Sadigheh, Tooba Azmoudeh was born in Tehran in 1879. Contrary to prevailing customs, she was educated, albeit at home, by her father, brother and a tutor. At thirteen, she was married to an Iranian army officer, who later became a general. Her husband encouraged Tooba to continue her education and to learn French. An advocate of female education, Tooba also organized women's discussion groups focused on women's role in society. Her husband passed away when Tooba was 27 years old.²⁵

Tooba soon returned to female education as a way of advancing women's position in Iranian society. Around the turn of the twentieth century, Tooba began teaching about twenty girls from her extended family in her home, and by 1909 she had opened the second non-religious girls' school in Iran.

In contrast to the first religious school for girls opened by Sadigheh a few years earlier to no resistance, the first two non-religious schools met fierce opposition. Bibi Khanum Estarabadi (Vaziri), who established the first girls' school in 1904, *Dushizegan* (Young Ladies), was immediately criticized. She was even labeled a heretic. Tooba's school was also heavily criticized by conservative *ulama*: teachers and students alike were harassed and made the subject of malicious rumours. Undeterred, Tooba continued her work, using various tactics to allay religious opposition, such as holding annual lamentations by the students in the memory of religious martyrs.

Tooba fought for her pupils to be able to sit for formal exams. This was the only way to ensure that girls obtained official government certificates that would

eventually open the door to gainful employment. The first time a local *mullah* was asked to invigilate the exams, he remarked, “No one believes girls can learn.” Though he opposed girls being granted official recognition, he eventually did agree to conduct the examination from behind a curtain. In 1929, Tooba proudly presented the nation with its first generation of certified female graduates.

Tooba continued the struggle for women’s education in Iran, established one of the earliest secondary schools for girls, and encouraged girls to seek employment with their newly earned diplomas. By the end of her career, Tooba, who had never had any formal schooling, was able to proudly display her honorary badges and the letter of appreciation presented to her by the Ministry of Education.²⁶

Tooba campaigned for education to be made universally available, never turning away a student for lack of financial means. Almost one-third of the student population of her Namus school studied *gratis*; there were 119 fee-paying students and 41 non-paying ones. For Tooba, education was not just about becoming literate and memorizing information. School was a venue for girls to nurture their creativity, intellect and self-confidence; education was a stepping-stone for the full realization of women’s potential in society. Tooba did not live long enough to see women entering universities but the first generation of college students in Iran included many of her former students. She died in 1937 at the age of 58.

The struggle for women’s education and rights continued, however, accompanied by public contestations. In 1934, Bibi Khanum Estarabadi took it upon herself to respond to the publication of Khwansari’s misogynistic treatise, *Resaleye Ta’adibe Nesvan* (On the Correction of Women) with her own treatise, *Ma’ayeb ol-Rajal* (The Faults of Men). She opened her treatise (that was never published but was circulated by hand) by thanking God for making her from the “left side” (‘left’ being negatively associated with women in traditional Iranian culture, and ‘right’ being associated with masculinity).²⁷

Women’s Organisations, Education and Politics in Indonesia

Even though it was not the only concern of women, the need for girls’ education was a common demand emphasized by the first women’s organizations in Indonesia. The first modern Indonesian women’s organization, *Putri Merdeka* (Independent Women), was formed by women in Jakarta in 1912, a few years after Raden Kartini’s death (1904). From the start, Indonesian women’s groups were closely associated with nationalist groups and initiatives, and *Putri Merdeka* was formed in association with the first nationalist organization, the

Budi Utomo (Noble Endeavour) that had been established in 1908. Women's organisations seemed to be an idea whose time had come, for soon after *Putri Merdeka* emerged in Jakarta, similar organizations were established in Magelang, Japara and Palembang.

Also, in keeping with developments elsewhere, women saw journals as an important means for articulating analysis and formulating demands for reforms. Many of these women's organizations published journals in which women wrote, taking up issues such as polygamy, child marriages, and forced marriages. Amongst women, one of the pioneers of journalism was Zubaidah Ratna Djuwita, the daughter of veteran journalist, Datuk Sutan Maharadja, who had been publishing a fortnightly as early as 1894.²⁸

Associations were formed by women from the *priyayi* (or elite), and mostly attracted other women from their own backgrounds. By comparison, the presence of middle class women was far more visible in the major religious organizations such as the Islamic reformist society, *Muhammadiyah*. Other women became involved in women's branches of regional youth associations, of which there were many. The 1920s saw women's groups becoming more politicized after major political parties established women's branches.²⁹ Women's organizations and nationalist groups grew simultaneously; often the two worked together, but sometimes they worked in tandem. While the close connection with nationalist groups probably encouraged women's engagement, this connection also curtailed the scope of women's voices, as became evident later on.

By 1928, women's organizations had been around long enough and there were enough of them to warrant the first Indonesian Women's Congress. The Congress, held in Yogyakarta in December 1928, brought together some thirty women's organizations. Asserting their voice, women delegates resisted the suggestion of nationalist leaders (e.g. Sukarno) to focus on the nationalist cause: their discussions focused on women's issues rather than nationalism. Nevertheless, to ensure harmony amongst the nationalists, women did avoid taking head on potentially controversial issues such as marriage laws and co-education. For the same reasons, the ensuing federation of Indonesian women, *Perikatan Perempuan Indonesia* (later renamed the Federation of Indonesian Women's Associations), decided to limit itself to 'social issues', avoiding politics altogether.³⁰

It is against this background of growing consciousness and organizing amongst women, that a young woman started her mission of educating girls.

Rahmah Al-Junusijah (b. 1900-?) Indonesia

Rahmah Al-Junusijah, born in Padang Pandjang on the last day of 1900, was only twelve years old when the first women's organization, *Putri Merdeka* was established. Rahmah's inspiration came from her elder brother, Zainuddin Labai.

In the absence of girls' schools, Rahmah was personally tutored by Labai, ten years her elder, until soon before his death in 1924.

By the time Rahmah turned fifteen, Labai had established the *Dinijah* co-educational school, in 1915. The idea of such schools caught on and by 1922, fifteen schools had been established on the *Dinijah* model. Though the *Dinijah* upheld religious discipline, the subjects it taught were of general knowledge: usually Islamic history, geography, arithmetic and languages. That same year, a 22-year-old Rahmah decided there was a need to open a separate girls' school, partly because she felt that some matters could best – or only – be taught to girls by women teachers. By the time she was 36, Rahmah was running a network of schools not only in her own community of Padang Pandjang, but also in Jakarta.

On November 1st 1923, assisted by the students' association that had been established at the suggestion of her brother, Rahmah opened *Al-Madrasatu' dдинijah*. The school opened with seventy-one students - mostly consisting of young housewives - even before any formal school premises could be secured. Unwilling to delay the opening of her school, Rahmah convinced the community to allow her to use the premises of the Pasar Usang Mosque (Padang Pandjang). For three hours each day, the young women were taught religion and *ilmu alat* (Arabic) in the mosque premises. (Mosques, including Al-Azhar were used for women's classes as far back as the eleventh century under the Fatimid Caliphate.)

Within the year, Rahmah raised the funds needed to rent a private house where she promptly installed desks and a blackboard, something that had not been possible at the mosque. Right from the start, as the only girls' school available in the area – and attesting to the desire for girls' education - the *Madrasatu* attracted girls from other localities. To accommodate them, Rahmah converted the second floor of the school premise into a dormitory. By 1925 the school had some 60 students. Simultaneously, Rahmah started a literacy campaign for elder women, starting with some 125 women. Unfortunately, she was unable to continue the adult literacy classes after the 1926 earthquake destroyed the school building, and she devoted herself to ensuring that the school flourish.

Determined to continue her work for women's education, Rahmah immediately put up a temporary bamboo structure for the school on land donated by her supportive mother as a *waqf*. Having ensured that schooling continued, Rahmah then set off for Sumatra to mobilize funds for a permanent building. She was obviously a resourceful woman, for, in just two years, she managed to raise the funds and complete the building in 1928. By 1930, the school boasted a full 7 years course at the primary level. To this, Rahmah added a secondary level with the aim of imparting skills that would help students become teachers.³¹

In contrast to Rahmah's girls' school that flourished, the *Dinijah Putera* (boys' school) started by her brother, had been deteriorating since his death in 1924. To

save the *Dinijah Putera*, it was added to Rahmah's girls' school in 1932, but classes ceased to be co-educational. Despite this merger, and a management board set up by Rahmah to help run the two schools, the boys' school fared poorly. By 1936, students had dwindled to a mere six boys. An incensed Rahmah accused the board of negligence and also objected to the board using money she had raised for the girls' section on the failing boys' *Dinijah Putera*. Unwilling to decrease her focus on girls' education and equally unwilling to see her brother's school disappear, Rahmah opened a separate boys school in his memory, starting with 100 students.

Rahmah's determination is also visible in her successful resistance to any attempts to subject reformist schools to outside authority and control.³² She maintained independent control over her first and subsequent schools. In 1935, she opened three girls' schools in Jakarta with the support of some Minangkabau traders and graduates from the Padang Pandjang institution. The student population of the girls' school continued to expand right through the 1930s (reaching 300 in 1933 and 400 in 1935) with pupils coming from as far off as Jogjakarta, Lombok, Ternate, Halmahera, Sulawesi, and Malaya. By 1937, Rahmah had a chain of girls' schools to her credit. She then moved to further institutionalize girls' education by opening a teacher training school for women (she later opened a similar school for the boys). Rahmah was only 36 at the time.

In 1930, Rahmah faced a challenge of a different nature and one posed by another woman, a teacher in her school. The late 1920s saw a period of intensified political activism amongst Muslim teachers in Indonesia's Minangkabau region. And, sometime around 1930, Rasuna Said, a teacher at the *Dinijah* school, started stressing the importance of politics and students' political engagement in the classroom and outside. Convinced that students required skills and tools needed for real life, Rasuna believed that key amongst these skills were the tools students would later require to become active politicians. Indeed, Rasuna felt political engagement and preparing girls (and boys) for this future potential role was so critical that she argued that, if need be, religious instructions and activities would have to be subordinated to the creation of political skills. This was not the view of Rahmah who believed that nothing could be more essential than a sound and thorough religious education. Rahmah also argued that children with a good education would automatically become involved in politics subsequently. In support of her argument, she pointed out that the political leadership in Minangkabau was entirely made up of people who had a sound religious education, none of whom had received special political skills in their education.³³

As founder and director, Rahmah could easily have taken a unilateral decision to fire Rasuna but she didn't. Instead, recognizing that Rasuna was a popular leader and that some students were attracted to her point of view (and also acknowledging that a number of religion-related regulations such as prayers were

not obeyed by students), Rahmah sought a meeting with Rasuna to try and come to an agreement. When the two women could not arrive at an agreement in their face-to-face meeting, Rahmah asked for third party mediation by setting up a three-person committee. The committee decided in Rahmah's favour, and Rasuna moved to Padang.³⁴

Rasuna Said continued her political activism, joining other women and men in the nationalist cause. In 1933, Rasuna was amongst several women activists arrested for their radical speeches. Along with Rasimah Ismail, Rasuna served a nine months term in a Semarang jail. Two other women, Fatimah Hatt and Ratna Sari, were imprisoned for ten days each.³⁵ The nationalist movement continued and grew, and the movement started by teachers and students educated in these institutions also influenced events in Malaya (present day Malaysia) as recounted in Chapter Six.

Rokeya Hossain (1880-1932) India (Bangladesh)

Born in 1880 in Pairaband, a village in Rangpur, northern Bengal (present-day Bangladesh), Rokeya Hossein emerged as one of the strongest feminist voices of her time. In an age when the driving political force of nationalism drew many women into its fold, Rokeya was one of the few who kept her distance, arguing that "the battle against gender subjection was more crucial than that against colonial subjection; the former was far older and more deep rooted than the latter though the latter appeared to be the key issue before her contemporaries."³⁶ Like all other active women of her age, Rokeya supported girls' education, but she was unusual in the emphasis she placed on including physical education for girls.³⁷ She was also clear about the nature of education she was advocating for, stating, "I ask for that kind of education that will equip women to acquire their rights as citizens."³⁸

A vocal spokesperson for women's rights, Rokeya wrote extensively on women's issues and oppression for different journals of the time, including a series of articles against the negative impact of severe *purdah* in the Bengali periodical *Monthly Mohammadi*. She set up a school for girls, established a women's organisation and served as an active member of several others.

Rokeya's father, Zahiruddin Saber, was a learned and well-to-do rural landlord who, like Raden Kartini's father, had four wives (including an Englishwoman). Fluent in Urdu, Persian, Arabic, English and Bengali, he sought to pass his educational legacy on to his sons by sending them to school in Calcutta. Regarding women, however, he was a diehard conservative: he opposed the education of his daughters and enforced the most rigid form of *abarodh*, or seclusion, on the women in the household. From the age of five, Rokeya had been raised in strict seclusion, expected to hide herself from everyone outside her immediate family and household: both men and women, including even maid

servants who accompanied visiting relatives. Not surprisingly, Rokeya later commented that *pardah* was a “silent killer, like carbon monoxide gas.”³⁹

Rokeya’s elder sister, Karimunnissa, was the first girl in the family to learn to read and write in Bengali. As other girls during this period, Karimunnissa had been taught to read the Qur’an by rote. She secretly learned to read by picking up the lessons her brothers repeated at home, and then to write, by tracing letters in the dirt with a stick. And, she started teaching her younger sister, Rokeya. The discovery of her reading ability so appalled her father that Karimunnissa was hastily married off at the age of fourteen.⁴⁰ Despite the fate of her sister, and having learnt some Bengali from her, Rokeya was determined to continue learning to read and write. Her eldest brother, Ibrahim Saber, was happy to teach her but the two had to keep their efforts a secret. The lessons therefore took place late at night after everyone else in the house was asleep. Rokeya was only sixteen when she was married in 1896 to Sayyid Sakhawat Hossain. Her marriage had been arranged by her brother Ibrahim, who believed Hossein would appreciate his sister’s talents. Though twenty years her senior and a widower with a daughter, Sakhawat Hossain was an educated man, liberal in his views, who encouraged Rokeya to read and write freely. Sakhawat taught Rokeya English, she in turn taught him Bengali.

Rokeya published her first article in 1902. Today, Rokeya is best remembered for her 1905 novella *Sultana’s Dream* where she critiques the injustices facing Bengali women at the turn of twentieth century through the depiction of an imaginary ‘Ladyland’ where women rule instead of men. But the second article she published in 1903 ‘*Alnakar Na Badge of Slavery*’ (Jewellery or Badge of Slavery) is probably her most radical piece. The article, in which she criticised men’s use of religion to keep women oppressed, first appeared in *Mahila*. In 1904 it was reprinted in another journal, *Nabanoor*, under the title ‘*Streejabr Abanati*’ (Degradation of Women). It was published again as ‘*Motichoor*’ (Our Degradation) in 1908, but this time in an abridged version, that deleted paragraphs considered particularly controversial. Amongst the deleted sections was the following passage:

Whenever a woman has tried to raise her head, she has been brought down to her knees on the ground of either religious impiety or scriptural taboo. Of course, it cannot be ascertained with certainty, but this appears to have been the case. What we could not accept as correct, we had to concede later in the belief that it had the authority of a religious dictum...Men have always propagated such [measures] as edicts of God to keep us women in the dark...⁴¹

Before the 1908 version, in response to criticism about why she broached the question of religion in her discourse, she explained:

*We must not allow ourselves to bow down to the undue authority exercised by men in the name of religion...Men are ruling over women under the pretext of laws prescribed by religion. That is why I am obliged to bring the question of religion in my discussion.*⁴²

Rokeya was a regular contributor to several periodicals, especially to the progressive paper, *Nabanoor*, and she continued writing throughout her life. She wrote her most renowned work, *Sultana's Dream*, in 1905 while her husband was away on a business trip. When he returned, she offered it to him to read. Far from being upset or offended, Sakhawat jokingly pronounced it a "terrible revenge." He immediately urged her to publish it. *Sultana's Dream*, written in English, appeared in the *Indian Ladies' Magazine* a few months later.⁴³ The story is a utopian-feminist satire that inverts the custom of seclusion by imagining a world where women incarcerate the men. Well ahead of its time, it even flags the need for environmentally friendly sustainable energy sources by depicting a solar-powered community. *Sultana's Dream* predates better-known works of a similar type written by European women, such as Charlotte Gilman Perkins' *Herland* (1915).⁴⁴

In *Sultana's Dream*, a young woman enters a strange world that looks and sounds like her own, until she realizes that women are free to walk about the streets and gardens while the men are locked up behind closed doors, cooking and cleaning the homes. Powered by solar energy, 'Ladyland' is governed by a benevolent Queen. In the dream, Sultana meets a friend and guide, named Sister Sara who asks Sultana why women in India allow themselves to be shut away in the harem as if they were "lunatics." Sultana argues that, "It cannot be helped as they are stronger than women." Sister Sara explains: "A lion is stronger than a man, but it does not enable him to dominate the human race. You have neglected the duty you owe to yourselves, and you have lost your natural rights by shutting your eyes to your own interests." Her interest piqued, Sultana asks, "would it be very easy to catch [the men] and put them inside the four walls?" Sister Sara says nothing: "She only smiled sweetly. Perhaps she thought it was useless to argue with someone who was no better than a frog in a well."⁴⁵ (The local saying, 'frogs in a well' implies being cut off from all external information and influences, living in a confined and dark space, like the bottom of a well.)

As distinct from most others of her age who argued for women's education for 'its own sake', Rokeya believed that education should lead women to gainful employment. Convinced that women's lack of economic resources was a key to their oppression, in arguing for women's education she averred that women should realize that "they are born as women to achieve certain particular objectives. Their life is not to be dedicated for the sole purpose of pleasing their husbands; let them not be dependent on others for their upkeep."⁴⁶ She further argued:

*Why should we not have access to gainful employment? What do we lack? Are we not able bodied, and endowed with intelligence? In fact why should we not employ the labour and energy that we expend on domestic chores in our husbands' homes to run our own enterprises?*⁴⁷

Rokeya's husband died in 1909, bequeathing her a large sum of money to use to advance women's education.⁴⁸ Following his wishes, Rokeya opened a girls' school in Bhagalpur, but local opposition to female education was so great there that she was forced to relocate. She reopened the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School in Calcutta in 1911. By 1930, it had expanded to a secondary school, combining academics with home economics and physical education, (the school still exists today).⁴⁹ She continued to promote female education and women's rights by establishing the *Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam, Bangla* (Bengali Muslim Women's Association) in 1916.⁵⁰ Ten years later she presided at the Bengal Women's Education Conference, held in Calcutta.

A devout Muslim who remained modest in her dress, manners and associations throughout her life, Rokeya who had first hand experience of the negative impact of extreme *purdah*, viewed the custom of mandatory seclusion, by its very nature, to be one in which women were made to suffer in silence. In her late forties, Rokeya started writing about the practice as she observed it and read about it. Her accounts, published in the Bengali-language *Monthly Mohammadi* during the course of 1929, later came to be known as *The Secluded Ones (Avarodhbasini)*. Though some Hindu women had written about their experiences of forced seclusion in personal documents and European women published their observational impressions, Rokeya was arguably the first indigenous Muslim woman in India to publicly write about *purdah*.⁵¹ Her accounts depict the more shocking consequences of *purdah*, including instances where women were injured or killed due to restrictions placed on their mobility and dress and due to bans on touching them or hearing their voices. Applauded by readers who shared the same indignity and anger as she did, Rokeya's accounts were denounced by her critics as works of fiction.⁵²

Rokeya remained active until the end. In the year of her death, 1932, she presided over the Indian Women's Conference at Aligarh.⁵³ Though other women also promoted education, took up jobs, and joined together in women's associations, few articulated the ideological assertions in quite the terms Rokeya did. Not only did Rokeya campaign against repressive practices and for various rights for women, she questioned the structures that kept women oppressed. Unlike others, she questioned the family structure and inequalities within it. She argued through her novels and articles that marriage was neither the ultimate nor only goal for women, who should have the right to decide when and who to marry or, indeed, to not marry at all. Rokeya spoke through her female characters. One said:

To care for one's husband and his home is not the be-all and end-all of a woman's life. God has given us a very precious life – not to be misspent

*in cooking and domestic chores and to moan over destiny. We must declare our war against this unfair society.*⁵⁴

Another:

*Are we no more that just clay dolls that men can either accept us or reject us at will? I wish to tell men that ... [we] no longer live in the times when you could kick us and we licked your boots. I have taken the vow to dedicate my life ...to serve the cause of women, and in the process kill the purdah system, roots and branches.”*⁵⁵

Malak Hifni Nasif (1886-1918) Egypt

In Egypt, Malak Hifni Nasif, better known in her lifetime by her pseudonym, *Bahithat al-Badiya* (Seeker in the Desert), died prematurely at the age of 33. The first woman to address the Egyptian parliament, Malak was part of the first generation of women to link women's rights with the modern political process. Malak saw gender as a social construct that had to be challenged, and challenge it she did through her writings and activism, consistently urging local women to be independent actors and to think for themselves.

Born in Cairo in 1886, Malak's literary family encouraged their daughters' education. She was the first woman to publish her poetry in a mainstream journal, at the age of thirteen.⁵⁶ Malak received her secondary education at the Saniyah School, where she later taught. She gave lectures to women at their special classes at the Cairo University, and many of her speeches were published in 1910 by the liberal, secular newspaper *Al-Jarida*, under the title, *Al-Nisaiyat* (Feminist Pieces).⁵⁷ These speeches addressed issues of marriage, divorce, veiled seclusion and female education⁵⁸

In 1911, Malak was the first female speaker to make public demands for women's rights at the all-male Egyptian Legislative Assembly in Heliopolis. Addressing the National Assembly was of the utmost urgency for Malak, since not a single item in the presented list of reforms designed to benefit the nation referred to women.⁵⁹ Demanding universal elementary education for all girls and a special emphasis on the training of women as doctors and teachers, she began her address, "If I had the right to legislate, I would decree:

1. *Teaching girls the Qur'an and the correct Sunna [Prophetic practice];*
2. *Primary and secondary school education for girls, and compulsory preparatory school education for all;*
3. *Instruction for girls on the theory and practice of home economics, health, first aid and childcare;*

4. *Setting a quota for females in medicine and education so they can serve the women of Egypt;*
5. *Allowing women to study any other advanced subjects they wish without restriction;*
6. *Upbringing for girls from infancy stressing patience, honesty, work and other virtues;*
7. *Adhering to the Shari'a concerning betrothal and marriage and not permitting any woman and man to marry without first meeting each other in the presence of the father or male relative of the bride;*
8. *Adopting the veil and outdoor dress of the Turkish women of Istanbul;*
9. *Maintaining the best interests of the country and dispensing with foreign goods and people as much as possible;*
10. *Making it incumbent upon our brothers, the men of Egypt, to implement this programme⁶⁰*

Not one of her ten points was adopted by the National Assembly.

When Malak married at the age of 21, her life took an abrupt turn. She stopped teaching and moved to the desert to live with her Bedouin chief husband. There, she was shocked to learn that he was already married to a cousin and had a daughter he expected Malak to tutor.⁶¹ It was at this stage that she adopted her pseudonym, under which she published her views.⁶²

Malak was a passionate detractor of polygamy, a position undoubtedly reinforced by her own marital experience. Using theological premises, she denounced the practice of polygyny and supported women's rights within marriage.⁶³ She once pronounced that "Divorce is less of a trial than polygamy. The first is misery plus freedom, while the latter is misery plus restriction."⁶⁴

Along with other Egyptian feminists, such as Nabawiya Musa, (see Chapter Seven), Malak argued that gender and sexuality were merely social constructs.⁶⁵ In a lecture given in 1909, she complained:

Men say to us categorically, 'You women have been created for the house and we have been created to be breadwinners.' Is this a God-given dictate? How are we to know this since no holy book has spelled it out? Political economy calls for a division of labour but if women entered the learned professions it does not upset the system. The division of labour is merely a human creation. We still witness people like the Nubians whose men sew clothes for themselves and the household while the women work in the fields... Specialized work for each sex is a matter of convention. It is not mandatory... If men say to us that we have been created weak we

say to them, 'No it is you who have made us weak through the path you made us follow.' After long centuries of enslavement by men, our minds rusted and our bodies weakened. Is it right that they accuse us of being created weaker than them in mind and body...

Nothing irritates me more than when men claim they do not wish us to work because they wish to spare us the burden. We do not want condescension, we want respect. They should replace the first with the second. Men blame any shortcomings we may have on our education, but in fact our upbringing is to blame. Learning and upbringing are two separate things... This is well-demonstrated by the fact that many men and women who are well-educated are lacking in morals. Some people think that good upbringing means kissing the hands of women and standing with arms properly crossed. Good upbringing means helping people respect themselves and others. Education has not spoiled the morals of our girls, but poor upbringing... has done this.⁶⁶

Malak exhibited a practical approach to the debate over unveiling. When insisting that men should be allowed to see their fiancées before marriage, she was not simply encouraging women's choice in marriage, but also that of men. On the other hand, she also stated that she did not support Egyptian women's immediate unveiling: she agreed it was a woman's right to unveil but argued that women should not unveil for reasons of fashion and that men were not mature enough to accept women's rapid unveiling.⁶⁷

Keenly aware, and wary, of the dynamics between Egyptian and international feminist issues, Malak Hifni Nasif was against feminist goals being executed in Egypt by either men or foreign women. She argued that the women's movement would have to be local, home-grown, and most importantly, autonomously run by indigenous women themselves. Linking feminism and nationalism, she warned that if men were not introduced to prospective wives before marriage, they would seek European women instead in an attempt to find a more equitable match: "If we do not solve this problem we shall become subject to occupation by women of the West [and] we shall suffer double occupation, one by men and the other by women."⁶⁸

In an open letter written to the Palestinian-Lebanese feminist May Ziyada (see below), active in Cairo, she wrote:

The majority of us women continue to be oppressed by the injustices of man, who in his despotism commands and forbids us so that now we can have no opinion even about ourselves... If he orders us to veil, we veil, and if he now demands that we unveil, we unveil, and if he wishes us to be educated, we are educated. Is he well intentioned in all he asks of us on our behalf, or does he wish us ill? There is no doubt that he has erred

grievously against us...in decreeing our rights in the past and no doubt that he errs grievously...in decreeing our rights now...

Stating that not all men who write about women would be wise reformers, and that women must remain vigilant and carefully scrutinize their words, she warned that man may be,

*...as despotic about liberating us as he has been about our enslavement. We are weary of his despotism.*⁶⁹

Malak Hifni Nasif continued her career by founding a women's association, a women's health service, and a nursing school, the latter being operated out of her own home. However, she did not live long enough to see Egypt gain its independence from colonial rule or Egyptian women achieve the right to vote. She died of influenza at the age of 33, in 1918.

May Ziyada (1886-1941) Palestine/Egypt

May Ziyada⁷⁰ was born to Palestinian and Lebanese parents in Palestine. But May became a part of the women activists centred in and around Cairo in the early twentieth century. Her family moved to Cairo when May was eighteen years old and her father became the editor of the newspaper *Al-Mahrusah*. Her earliest pieces, published in her father's newspaper, launched a prolific writing career.

Remaining unmarried, May Ziyada worked in women's associations, gave public speeches and wrote - both prose and poetry. Her political writings advocated women's gainful employment outside the home and access to education. Her works were collected during her lifetime in a ten-volume edition. Along with other pioneers of the Egyptian feminist movement, May was involved in two women's groups which struggled to create public spaces for women to meet, discuss and give shape to their voices: the Women's Refinement Union and the Ladies Literary Improvement Society.⁷¹

May did not see her efforts in isolation. Working with contemporary Egyptian feminists - such as Malak Hifni Nasif, of whom she had been a friend and correspondent since the 1910s - May conceived of herself as part of a broader women's movement. She wrote the biographies of Malak Hifni Nasif (in 1920) and of the nineteenth century Egyptian author, Aisha al-Taimuriya.⁷² May regularly contributed to *l'Egyptienne*, a journal founded by Huda Shaarawi (see Chapter Six).⁷³

Addressing a Young Women's Christian Association meeting in 1924, she identified herself as the inheritor of earlier Arab feminists, but maintained that the emerging generations must sustain the momentum of the movement:

I have only time to indicate in passing my esteem of what women from earlier generations have done to open up the way for us. I say: 'Open up the way,' even though all they did was to put up a signpost at the

threshold of unknown territories. However, this signpost has value and use..It was left to uncover and register in existence the nature of the eastern woman, and to struggle thereafter to make sure that we help it to grow and that we polish it so that it appears the way it is in essence as a work of art, as a resource and a treasure..May the women of Egypt remember [their] emergent Syrian sisters just as the women of Syria remember [their] emergent Egyptian sisters..I, the daughter of two continents, consider myself happy to have been able to draw the portrait, however pale, of an eastern woman for eastern sisters..Like them I cry out enthusiastically and...call for progress, understanding and the good of the nations!⁷⁴

In many ways, May's concerns to document the works of women activists and to link women with their history and with each other are not dissimilar to our attempt in this book.

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- ² *Ibid.*, 217.
- ³ Bouthaina Shaaban, "The Hidden History of Arab Feminism," *MS. Magazine* (May/June, 1993), 76-7.
- ⁴ Bouthaina Shaaban, "Arab Women Novelists: Creativity and Rights," available online at <www.macmag-glip.org/joussour.contribution.htm> (the Maghreb Gender Linking and Information Project).
- ⁵ Cited in Shaaban, "The Hidden History of Arab Feminism."
- ⁶ Bharati Ray, *Early Feminists of Colonial India* (Oxford University Press, New Delhi: 2002), 51.
- ⁷ From the mid-nineteenth century, Sikandar Begum (r.1844-1868) started opening schools for girls and encouraged scholars from far and wide to migrate to Bhopal to teach. This trend continued under her successor, Shah Jehan Begum (r.1868-1901), an accomplished poet in her own right, who established the relationship between the Bhopal dynasty and Aligarh University. The last Begum of Bhopal, Sultan Jahan (r.1901-1926) opened more girls' schools, hired qualified teachers, and launched technical institutes for vocational studies to enable girls to enter into the job market and become economically self-sufficient. Similar efforts were initiated by Leela Naag (see Chapter Six this volume) and Yang Huizhen (see Chapter Seven this volume).
- ⁸ Sultan Jahan Begum, *An Account of My Life*, Vol. II (Bombay, 1922), cited in Ayesha Khan, *Rhetoric and Reform: Feminism Among Indian Muslims, 1900-1940*, (ASR, [no date]), Lahore: 41.
- ⁹ The journal was established by the Methodists in India with funds from women in the U.S.A. Azra Asghar Ali, *The Emergence of Feminism among Indian Muslim Women, 1920-1947*, (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 24.
- ¹⁰ In 1920, Rashid-ul-Khairi proposed a school for Muslim girls in Delhi to a special board, consisting of editors, social activists, and his cousin, a *maulvi*. Their final recommendations were published in the March, 1921 edition of *Ismat*, supporting the opening of a purdah-observing school which would teach girls aged six to eleven a curriculum combining academic and domestic studies. See Asghar Ali, p.27, n. 68.
- ¹¹ Ray, p.131, n. 99.
- ¹² Gail Minault, *Secluded Scholars: Women's Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India*, (Oxford University Press, New Delhi: 1998), 111-3.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 29 and 112.
- ¹⁴ Asghar Ali, 73.
- ¹⁵ Minault, op. cit., 120. After publishing Bibi Ashraf's essay, Muhammadi Begum later wrote a short biography entitled *Life of Ashrafunissa* (1913).
- ¹⁶ From the start, the presence of women rulers interested in women, made an important difference to the status of women. This was the case of the Indian princely state of Bhopal, ruled for over 100 years only by women. (See Chapter Seven).
- ¹⁷ Minault, op. cit., 114.
- ¹⁸ Asghar Ali, 214. According to Minault (p.121), Wahida only edited the newspaper until her marriage in 1913, when she was succeeded by Mumtaz Ali's daughter-in-law, Asaf Jahan.
- ¹⁹ Also spelt Sadiqa Daulatabadee.
- ²⁰ Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries* (1st edition), 53.
- ²¹ Ruth F. Woodsmall says Sadigheh was fourteen when she started her first school, though this seems suspect. See *Women in the Changing Islamic System*, (Bimla Publishing House, Delhi: 1983), 145.

- ²² Fariba Davoudi Mohajer 'Women Journalists in Iran and Women in Iranian Press' paper prepared for *The Asia-Pacific NGO Forum on the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA) +10 "Celebrating women's gains.... Confronting emerging gender issues"* Bangkok, Thailand, 30 June -3 July 2004.
- ²³ Woodsmall, 365.
- ²⁴ Dr. Mossadegh (1882-1967) was a parliamentarian who, to counter British economic domination, nationalized the oil industry. He was ousted by the CIA in 1953, in their first covert operation.
- ²⁵ Woodsmall, 145.
- ²⁶ Ibid.; 145-6.
- ²⁷ We wish to thank Noushin Ahmadi for the information on Bibi Khanum Estarabadi.
- ²⁸ Deliar Noer, *The Modernist Muslim Movement in Indonesia 1900-1942, East Asian Historical Monographs*, (Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur: 1978), p.216, n. 1.
- ²⁹ Christine Doran, "The Indonesian Women's Movement," in *Indonesian Politics: Reader*, edited by Christine Doran (Townsville: Centre for Southeast Asian Politics at James Cook University of North Queensland, 1987). Available online at <http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/studyskills/nm/nm_nl_ln_sa_fe.htm>.
- ³⁰ Noer, 103.
- ³¹ Ibid., 52-53.
- ³² One such group who unsuccessfully attempted to bring Rahmah's school under centralized control was *Persatuan Muslimin Indonesia* (known as Premi or PMI). Premi was an organization of reformist students and scholars, that became a political party in 1932.
- ³³ Rahmah has been compared to Raden Adjeng Kartini, and Noer notes that she was "often called the Kartini among Muslim religious women, especially in the Minangkabau" [West Sumatra]. See Noer, 42.
- ³⁴ Noer, 54-55.
- ³⁵ Ibid., 156.
- ³⁶ Ray, 24.
- ³⁷ Ibid., 70.
- ³⁸ Rokeya Hossein 'Subeh Sadek' in *Rachanvali*, (ed) Abdul Qadir, (Bangla Academy, Dhaka: 1993) p. 272 cited in Ray, 71.
- ³⁹ Roushan Jahan, "The Secluded Ones: Purdah Observed" in *Sultana's Dream, and Selections from The Secluded Ones*, edited and translated by Roushan Jahan, (New York: The Feminist Press, 1988), 20.
- ⁴⁰ Minault, op. cit., 256.
- ⁴¹ Cited in Ray, 63-64.
- ⁴² Ibid.
- ⁴³ Roushan Jahan, "'Sultana's Dream': Purdah Reversed," in *Sultana's Dream...*, 2.
- ⁴⁴ Roushan Jahan, vii.
- ⁴⁵ Rokeya Hossain, "Sultana's Dream," in Jahan., 9-10.
- ⁴⁶ Rokeya Hossein, "Subeh Sadek," *Rachanavali*, (ed) Abdul Qadir, (Bangla Academy, Dhaka: 1993) 272, cited in Ray, 71.
- ⁴⁷ Rokeya Hossein, "Abanari", *Rachanavali*, (ed) Abdul Qadir, (Bangla Academy, Dhaka: 1993) 21, cited in Ray, 71.
- ⁴⁸ Rokeya never remarried and she had no children (she gave birth to two children but both died within a few months).
- ⁴⁹ Minault, op. cit., 258.
- ⁵⁰ This organization had no links to the Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam founded two years prior, at Aligarh.
- ⁵¹ Roushan Jahan, "The Secluded Ones: Purdah Observed," 21-22.
- ⁵² For excerpts of articles see Jahan pp. 24-26.
- ⁵³ Roushan Jahan, "Rokeya: An Introduction to her Life," in *Sultana's Dream...* pp. 37-57.

- ⁵⁴ Rokeya Begum, "Strijatir", (*Rachanavali*, 20-21) cited in Ray p. 72
- ⁵⁵ Rokeya Begum, "Padmarag", (*Rachanavali*, p.414) cited in Ray p. 72
- ⁵⁶ Nadia Wassef, "Malak Hifni Nassef: The Woman the Nation, and the Silent History," *Letters from Memory*, zero issue [sic], (January 1998), 6.
- ⁵⁷ Badran and Cooke, 134.
- ⁵⁸ Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism* (1st edition), 25.
- ⁵⁹ Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 184.
- ⁶⁰ Badran & Cooke, 237.
- ⁶¹ Badran and Cooke, 134.
- ⁶² Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 54.
- ⁶³ Badran and Cooke, 134.
- ⁶⁴ Malak Hifni Nasif cited in Badran, *Feminists, Islam and Nation*, 129.
- ⁶⁵ Badran & Cooke, 227.
- ⁶⁶ Nasif, cited in Badran and Cooke, 230-31.
- ⁶⁷ Ahmed, 180.
- ⁶⁸ Nasif, cited in Badran and Cooke, 235.
- ⁶⁹ Malak Hifni Nasif, cited in Ahmed, 181-2.
- ⁷⁰ Variously spelt as Mai and Mayy.
- ⁷¹ Badran, 55-6.
- ⁷² Badran and Cooke, 239.
- ⁷³ Badran, 104.
- ⁷⁴ May Ziyada, cited in Badran and Cooke, 240-3.

Huda Shaarawi (1879-1947) - Leading Egyptian Feminist and Nationalist



30.



31.



32.



33.

Huda Shaarawi founded the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU) and became its first president. At EFU's 1944 Arab Feminist Conference, women drafted a women's charter in a 51-point resolution. Seeing the veil as the "greatest obstacle to women's public participation," in 1923 Huda Shaarawi publicly cast off her veil in protest with two other colleagues, one being her protégé, Saiza Nabarawi (seen in the left bottom picture). Shaarawi joined the independence struggle in 1919, helped create the Wafdist Women's Central Committee in 1920 and became its first President. But she resigned from the Committee in 1924 to protest the Party's disregard for women's status and issues.



34.



35.

Malak Hifni Nasif (1886-1918)

Egyptian feminist who wrote under the alias “Seeker in the Desert” (*Bahithat al-Badiya*) was a woman of firsts: at age 13, she was the first ‘woman’ to have her poetry published in a mainstream journal; she was the first woman to address the all-male Egyptian Legislative Assembly in 1911. Her speeches were published in 1910 under the title *Feminist Pieces (Al-Nisayiat)*; she started a women’s association, a women’s health service and a nursing home from her home, all before her death at the pre-mature age of 33.



36.



37.

May Ziyada (1886-1941)

Palestinian-Lebanese feminist, friend of Malak Hifni Nasif; this prolific writer of prose and poetry lived in Cairo and started publishing poetry in her father’s newspaper, *Al-Marushah*. May Ziyada created spaces for women’s voices through the Women’s Refinement Union and Ladies Literary Improvement Society; she especially advocated women’s gainful employment outside the home. May documented women’s struggles, including Malak Hifni Nasif’s biography, and considered herself a part of a broader international women’s movement.



38.



39.

Nabawiya Musa (1886-1951)

Prominent Egyptian feminist of the early 20th century, a middle class woman who refused to marry and devoted herself to education and women's rights, Nabawiya Musa was also a nationalist, and insisted on teaching in local schools. Outraged at being paid almost half the salary of male teachers, in 1907 Nabawiya made headlines when she became the first Egyptian woman to (successfully) sit for the secondary school examination, thereby ensuring equal pay for female and male teachers. Unable to formally enroll in Cairo University, she gave lectures in the extracurricular "Section for Women". In 1924 she became Chief Inspector for girls schools. Her journalistic pieces were written under the alias *Damir Hayy fi Jism Raqiq* that is 'A Living Conscience in a Delicate Unfettered Body'.



40.



41. Students of Saniyah Girls School demonstrate in 1919.



42. Class picture of Saniyah School girls.

The Saniyah Girls School was an important institution in Cairo. Two of Egypt's leading feminists, Malak Hifni Nasif and Nabawiya Musa were both graduates of this school. Hifni Nasif later taught at the school.

Women's Conferences

With the growth of women's associations and movements in the early 20th century, women started meeting in conferences; both attending international conferences in Europe and organizing conferences of their own.



43. Huda Shaarawi and other delegates at a Pan-Arab Women's Conference on Palestine – Cairo 1938



44. Indian and Egyptian delegates at the International Alliance of Women Conference – Rome 1923



45. Women's Conference – Istanbul 1935



46. The All-Asian Women's Conference – Lahore 1931

Women's Journals

As women sought space to articulate their thoughts, women's journals mushroomed at the turn of the 19th-20th century. In Turkey, women's journals started in the late 19th century with *Hanımlara Mahus Gazete* (The Ladies' Own Gazette) Between 1909 and 1928 there were 40 journals on women, before the Republic changed the script from Arabic to Latin. Two of the covers shown here are in Arabic script: on the top left is *Mehasin* (No.5, 1908) and on the bottom right is *Hanim* (Women) (1921). *Ana* was produced in Latin script; the top right cover is dated March 1st 1939, the bottom left is 1938.



47.



48.

HER KADIN MUTLAKA BIRAZ ANADIR
ANA ★ AYLIK AİLE
 DERGİSİ



MAKALELER
 SÖZBÜTÜMLERİ
 HİKAYELER

TEMMUZ 1938
 SAYI 138
 15 KURUS

Evidansı
 Çocuk Hakları
 MODA

49.



50.



51. Tehzib-e-Niswan February 1929



52. Tehzib-e-Niswan July 1932

Tehzib-e-Niswan (Women's World), one of India's longest-lived Urdu language women's journals, was started in 1889 by Muhammadi Begum and her husband, Maulvi Mumtaz Ali. It continued appearing after independence in Pakistan until the 1950s. Muhammadi Begum became the first sole woman editor of an Indian journal in 1904. She recalled that some copies of the first issues, distributed free, were returned scrawled over with obscenities; their home was also attacked.



53. L'Egyptienne (The Egyptian Woman) March 1923



54. Nazatul Nissayah (The Emergence of Feminism) November 1921

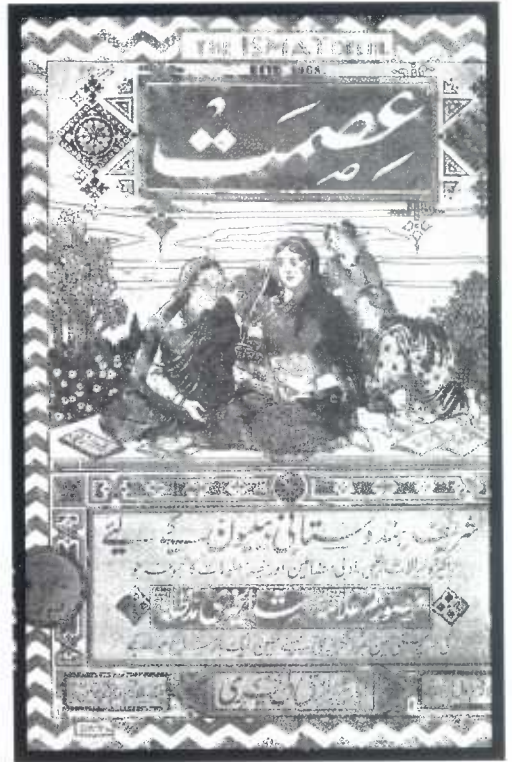
Before the First World War, more than 25 Arab feminist journals were owned, edited and/or published by women, including *L'Egyptienne* (The Egyptian Woman) and appeared from Cairo, Damascus, Lebanon and Alexandria.

Ismat (Chastity)

Another very popular and long-lived Urdu language journal for women in India was started by Rashid-ul-Khairi, an immensely popular novelist, many of whose books were adopted by state schools as textbooks.



55. Cover of *Ismat* October 1929



56. Cover of *Ismat* November 1930



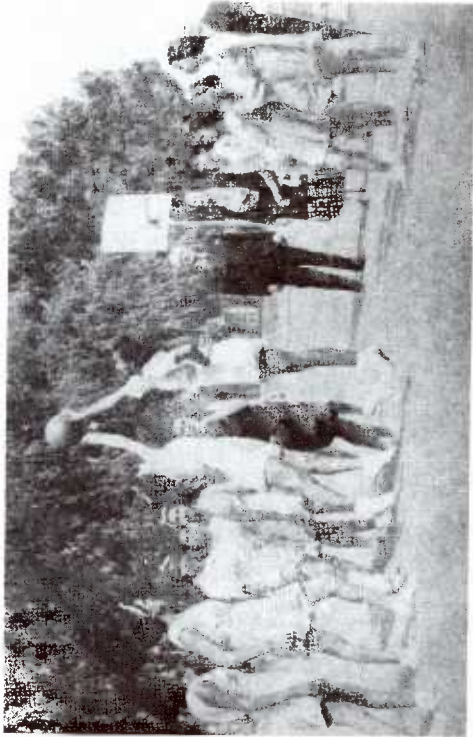
57. Cover of *Ismat* February 1938



58. Cover of *Ismat* September 1938

The Struggle for Formal Education

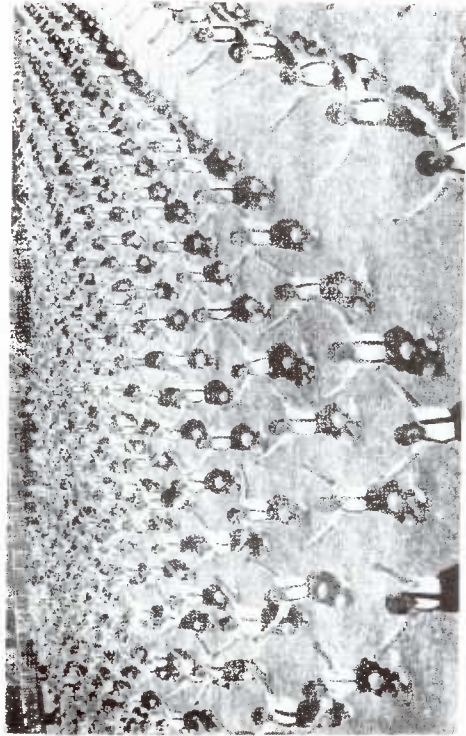
The struggle for formal education for girls and women was one of the most important struggles in the late 19th and early 20th centuries across the world, including in Muslim contexts. Women educators were important activists; many of them seeing formal schooling and certificates as essential to entering the labour market and also for the general self-improvement of women. Education extended to physical education, with girls being encouraged to engage in sports as seen in the two photographs on the left. Many schools were segregated, but seen below is Tehran's first co-educational kindergarten in 1920. Top left: Egyptian girls enjoy basketball at the American Mission Junior College, Cairo (undated). Bottom left: Sports day, on which hundreds of Istanbul school girls demonstrate the new ideals of physical exercise on modern Turkey (undated).



59.

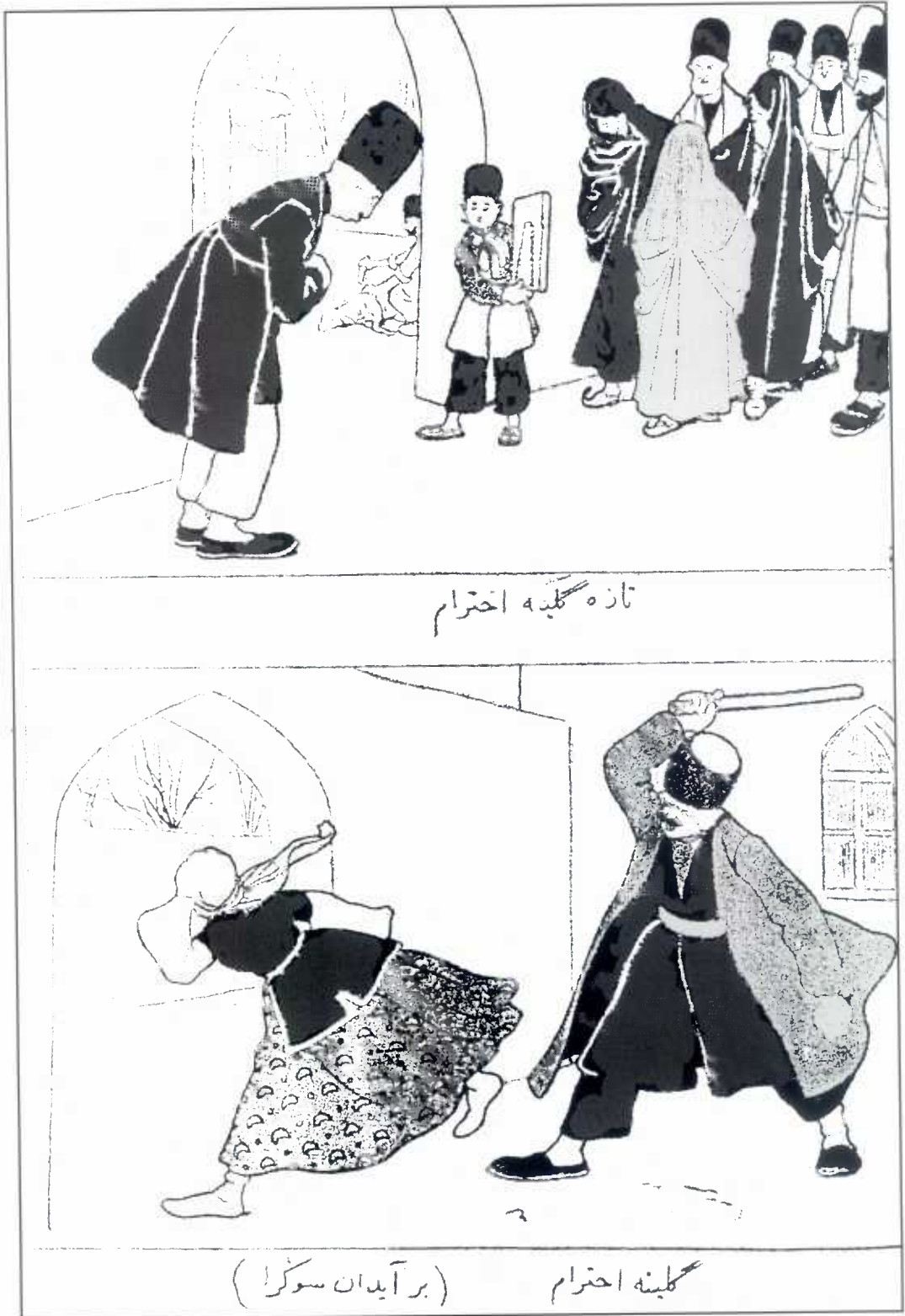


61.



60.

As early as 1908, some people started picking up the issue of violence against women, even if obliquely. This cartoon is from a lithographed newspaper, *Mulla Nasr al-Din* published in the Russian Caucasian city of Tiflis. (Mullah Nasr al-Din is a popular fictional character in many Muslim societies.)



The Women's War in Nigeria

In November 1929, women of Nigeria's Owerri Province started what they called the Women's War (*ogu umunwaynye*) to prevent the British colonial authorities levying a tax on them. 55 women died in the clash between the women and the colonial authorities (no men were killed). At the Inquiry, women also expressed dissatisfaction with the Chief Warrant System installed by the colonial rulers that gave authority to handpicked men. The Women's War overturned this system, brought about changes in the court system, greater consultation for women and ensured that no tax was levied on women's earnings. Below are extracts of *The Nigerian Daily Times* reporting on the events of December 1929.

THE NIGERIAN Daily Times

(THE RECOGNISED PAPER IN WEST AFRICAN COMMERCIAL CIRCLES)

VOL IV No. 1,150.

LAGOS, MONDAY, 16th DECEMBER, 1929.

PRIME ONE PENNY

In the early morning of the 16th December the District Officer met the people of Opobo at the Rest House—a great crowd of women had assembled the leaders being the wives of clerks or of the domestic servants, of Europeans. The women were armed with sticks, and a number of men armed with matchets landed from the numerous war canoes which had arrived, and hung around the outskirts of the mob. It is stated that a carefully prepared plan had been evolved, on the presumption that the women would not be fired on; the women were to rush the officials into the offices and the men were then to plunder the factories.

For one and a half hours the District Officer parleyed with the crowd, in spite of a great uproar. Apart from the demand that women should not be taxed, the complaints and requests of the people were frivolous. The mob surrounded the office and rest house, and cut off the small detachment of police twelve men in all, from the rest of the town.

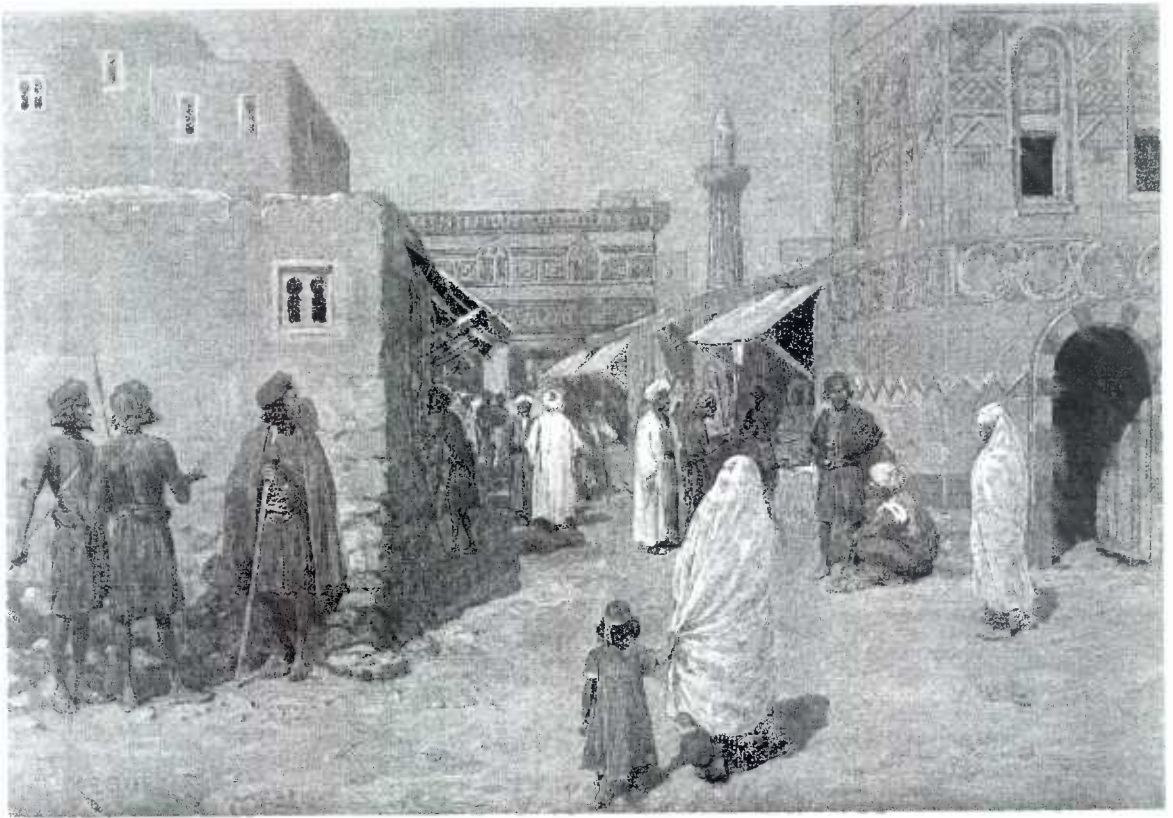
At about 8 a.m. a platoon of soldiers of the Nigeria Regiment, under Lieutenant Hill, arrived by motor lorries from Uyo and with some difficulty forced its way through the mob and joined the District Officer. The District Officer continued in his endeavour to reason with the women, but he and Lieutenant Hill, who had been hit with a stick, were gradually pushed back on to the troops who were drawn up with their backs to the office wall. Lieutenant Hill warned the people more than ten times that he would be compelled to fire unless the disorder ceased, and fired his revolver in the hope of frightening back the mob. At last, as attempts were being made to snatch the rifles from the hands of the troops, he gave the order to fire. Twenty women were killed, and a number wounded of whom eight have since died. The recoil of the mob after the firing pushed some of the crowd into the river and 6 were drowned.

About the same time, in view of possible disturbances in the Idub area of Abakaliki Division extra Police were sent there. No actual disturbance appears to have occurred and the situation there is normal. Subsequently to this it was reported that disturbances had occurred at Owerri and Aba. At the former place nothing serious seems to have happened, but at Aba a large mob composed chiefly of women, broke into factories, Government offices and private houses and did much damage. It became necessary to fire over the heads of the mob. No casualties are reported. There is now a sufficient force of troops and police at Aba to prevent any recurrence of disorder.

It is reported that the total number of casualties among the rioters during the disturbances is as follows:—

- At Abak, six women killed and number of wounded unknown.
- At Opobo, nineteen women and one man killed, ten women died of wounds, and eight women drowned.

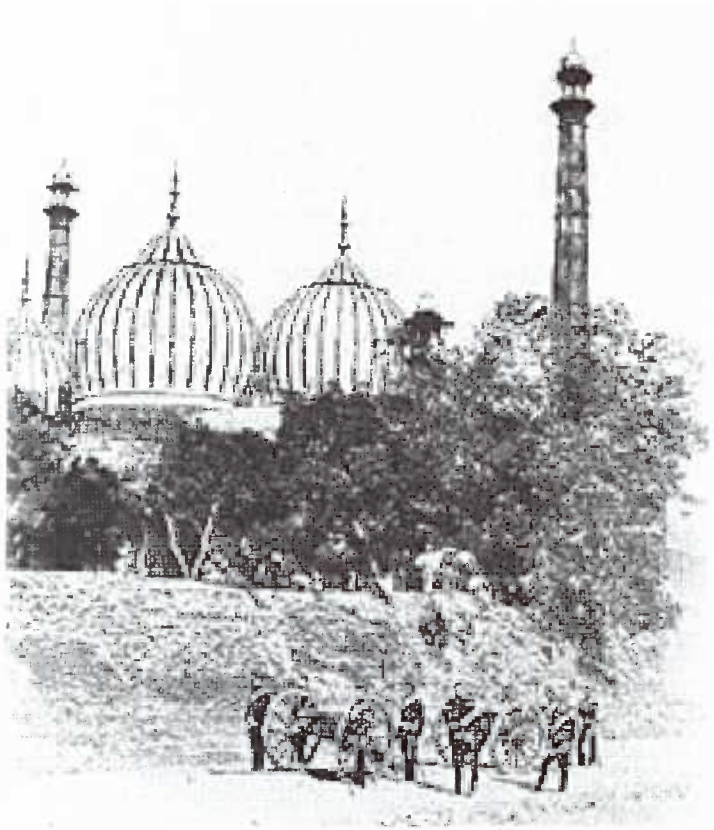
In the Owerri Province sufficient force of troops and police is available to prevent any overt acts of violence, although the women continue to be excited and to hold meetings, a few of which have had to be dispersed. Owerri and are quiet.



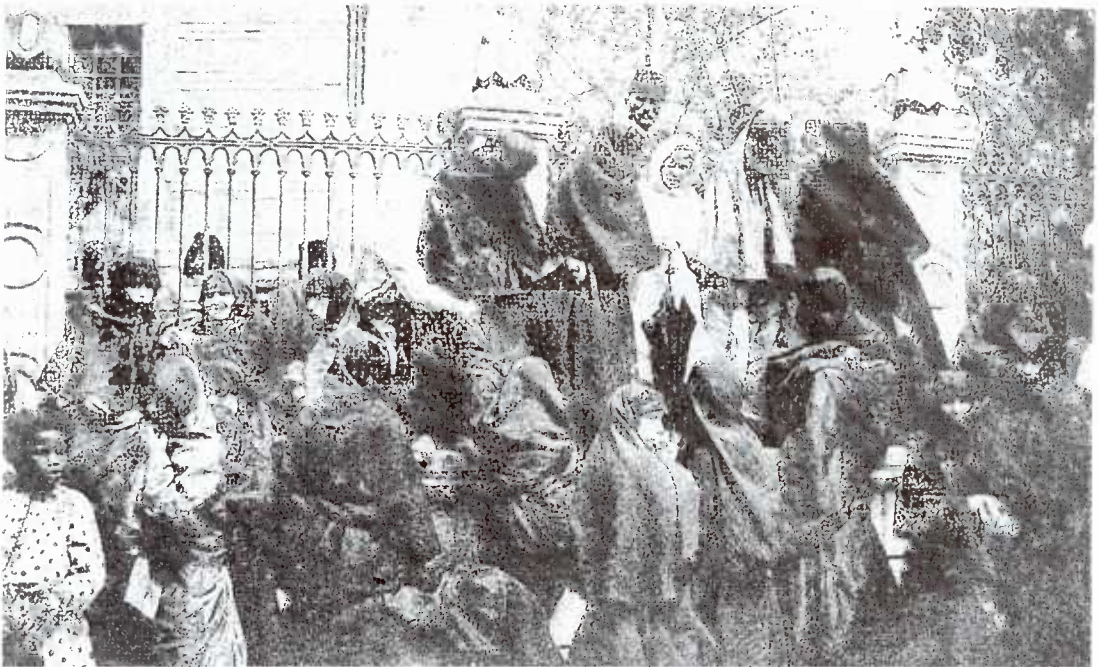
64. Artist's impression of the bazaar at Dhamar, Yemen



65. Artist's impression of Bab el-Mutawellee, Cairo



66. Zinat-ul-masjid, Delhi, photograph 1850. The mosque was commissioned by Zinat-ul-nissa (1643-1721), daughter of the Mughal Emperor Auranzeb. Zinat-ul-nissa never married; instead she demanded that her emperor father give to her the money he would have bestowed on her as *mahr* had she married. She then used this money to build the mosque that still exists in Delhi.



67. Women gathered in front of a mosque in Istanbul – photograph, late 19th century.

Women Educators of Iran



68. Sadigeh Daulatabadi (1883-1962) studied by attending a boys' school dressed as a boy by her father in Isfahan. In 1903, she started the city's first girls' school, the *Shari'a Maktab Khaneh*; soon after other schools were opened. In the 1920s, she attended university in Paris and became a government inspector of schools in the 1930s. Also active in journalism, Sadigeh Daulatabadi starting a bi-monthly, *Zabaun-e-Zanan* (Women's Voice) that had a strong nationalist stance and carried blunt political commentary.



69. Tooba Azmoudeh (1879-1937) was born in Tehran and educated at home by her father, brother and tutor. She established a girls' school in 1909 and fought for her students to be able to sit for formal examinations, later succeeding in getting them official government certificates. Amongst Iran's first batch of women college students, were many of her former students.



70. Cover of *Ma'ayeb al-Rajal*, (The Faults of Men) 1934; a treatise written by Bibi Khanum Estarabadi (Vaziri) in response to a misogynistic treatise, *Resaleye Ta'adibe Nesvan* (On the Correction of Women) published by Khwansari. Bibi Khanum Estarabadi (Vaziri) was a champion of women's education and rights. In 1904, she established the first modern (non-religious) school for girls in Iran, the *Dushizegan* (Young Ladies) to immense criticism, even being labeled a heretic. (It would seem that Estarabadi's treatise was never published, but distributed by hand.)



71. Raden Adjeng Kartini (1879-1904) is hailed in Indonesia as both a feminist and nationalist. Devoted to the cause of women's education, Kartini established Indonesia's first girls' school that by 1904 had 120 students. Indonesians celebrate Kartini Day on her birthday, April 21st, in much the same way as Mother's Day: women receive the day off and men and children tend to domestic work.



72. Yang Huizen (1913-1989) was born Wang Rong in China's Henan Province in an area known to Chinese Muslims as 'little Mecca'. Yang Huizen was a *nu ahong* (a scholar or religious instructor) and given charge of a women's mosque (*nüsi*) in 1942. This did not make her exceptional, however, since women's mosques and *nu ahongs* are fairly common in Henan. Yang Huizen, however, defied the male religious authorities first by regularly leaving the mosque compound to visit the poor and then by providing shelter and succour to refugees. Expelled from the All China Muslim Association, she later gained acceptance because of her outstanding work for refugees. This picture was taken on December 26, 1947 when members of China's Communist Party attended the distribution of relief supplies at Yang Huizen's Muslim Emergency Refuge in Jiaxing.



73. Zhao Nu Ahong, 85 years old, copies the Qur'an at the Hexi Mosque in Zhoukou, Henan Province (October 1996)

Halidé Edib Adivar (1884-1964)

Leading feminist of Turkey, was a journalist, writer and educator. The first Muslim graduate of the American College for Girls in 1901, Halidé Edib vehemently opposed polygyny and she divorced her first husband in 1910 when he announced his intention to take a second wife. Having joined Mustafa Kemal's Young Turks, she was the only woman to be condemned in absentia along with Mustafa Kemal and several other men. She was the first Turkish woman to address a public gathering in 1919. She authored several books and novels, taught in Turkey, Great Britain and the U.S.A. and helped set up education for girls in Syria, Lebanon and India.



74. Halidé Edib Adivar (undated photograph)



75. Halidé welcomes Mustafa Kemal, the Atatürk (undated photograph)



76. Turkish women in the streets of Istanbul, 1910s.



77. Halidé watching the streets from a balcony (undated photograph)



78. Fadhma Amrouche, the daughter of Aini Ait Mansour (d. 1915), with her infant son. Fadhma's mother, Aini, defied traditions in late 19th century Berber Algeria to live independently. Refusing to relinquish her children to their father's family after her first husband's death, Aini also refused to return to her maternal village. She gave birth to Fadhma unaided and when Fadhma's father refused to admit paternity, Aini went to court (and won her case).



79. Malika El-Fassi (born 1920) is credited with starting the Moroccan women's movement. Remembered for her contribution to the national political movement as much as for her contribution to the advancement of Moroccan women, especially in the field of education, one of Malika El-Fassi's achievements was opening the Qaraouine university (established by Fatima al-Fihria in the 11th century) to female students.



80. Etel Adnan (b. 1925), poet and writer, was born in Lebanon where she studied at the newly opened École Supérieure des Lettres in 1944 and taught before pursuing further studies in the Sorbonne (Paris) and then in Harvard and Berkeley universities in the USA. She divides her time between Paris, California, and Lebanon.



81. A Syrian woman and her child, in front of a heap of dung cakes prepared for the winter (Photograph-1930s)

First Women Legislators in India and Pakistan (and Bangladesh)



82. Jahanara Shahnawaz (1896-1979) was returned to the Punjab Legislative Assembly as soon as elections were open to women in 1937, and appointed Parliamentary Secretary for Education, Medical Relief and Public Health. In 1946, she was one of only two Muslim women elected to the Central Constituent Assembly of India. She went on to become a member of Pakistan's Constituent Assembly in 1947 and helped draft the human rights clauses of the constitution.



83. Leela Naag (a.k.a. Lila Nag) (1900-1970) was a Bengali women's rights activist born in Sylhet (contemporary Bangladesh) and the first woman to gain entrance to Dhaka University. A tireless campaigner for women's political rights and anti-colonial activist, Leela Naag was arrested numerous times by the British authorities. She was elected to the Central Constituent Assembly of India in 1946. After independence in 1947 she set up the Minority Welfare Committee and worked in East Pakistan until 1949 when she opted to move to India.

PEOPLE PROMINENT IN THE PUBLIC EYE



BEGUM SHAH NAWAZ, who has the honour of being the only woman to address an audience in the Guildhall in the 800 years of its existence.



HEER VON PAPEN, the German ex-Chancellor, centre of the political storm in Germany. He is a close friend of President Hindenburg.



SIR WILLIAM ARBUTHNOT LANE, the famous physician, has been removed from the Medical Register at his own request. He no longer practises.



SIR MALCOLM CAMPBELL is preparing to make an attempt to beat his own world's speed record. He hopes to achieve 300 m.p.h.



MR. R. D. BLUMENFELD, who has been editor-in-chief of the "Daily Express" for over thirty years has just retired from that post.



LORD DEEVERBROOK was refused a hearing when he attempted to address a meeting in Glasgow on behalf of his Empire Free Trade campaign.

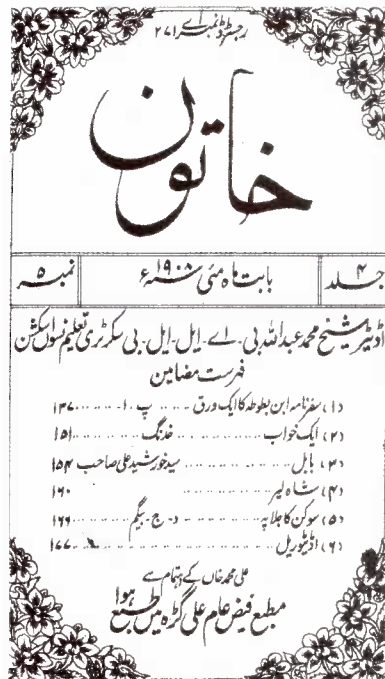
84. Jahanara Shahnawaz, on the extreme left, is the only woman amongst the "Prominent People" nominated by *The Statesman* in 1932.

A Family Tradition of Activisms

Reformers Sheikh Abdullah and Wahid Jahan campaigned for women's education in north India. They established one of the earliest Urdu language journals for women in 1904, *Khatun* (Woman) and the Aligarh Girls School in 1906. Their daughter, Rashid Jahan (1905-1952) was even more radical. A medical doctor and member of the Communist Party of India, Rashid Jahan also wrote short stories, using her medical knowledge to broach subjects considered taboo at the time, so much so that the collection of stories, *Angarey*, written by Rashid Jahan and her radical friends was banned by the Provincial government.



85. Sheikh Abdullah and Wahid Jahan (1930)



86. Cover of women's journal *Khatun* Volume 2, May 1908



87. Rashid Jahan (undated photograph)



88. Radicals Rashid Jahan and husband and comrade, Mahmud-uz-Zaman (undated photograph)



89. Nazli Fyzee and Atiya Fyzee 1906



90. Zohra Fyzee and Atiya Fyzee (undated photograph)

The Fyzee sisters: Atiya, Nazli and Zohra, were women's rights activists in India (and later in Pakistan) from a very liberal family. All three actively promoted women's education amongst Muslims. Atiya Fyzee (1877-1967), who studied in London in 1906, is especially remembered for having gate crashed the Jubilee celebrations of the Mohammedan Educational Conference in 1925 when – inexplicably – it excluded women. She started speaking from behind a curtain and continued until she was invited up to the dais.



91. Sharifa Hamid Ali, created a model *nikahnama* or marriage contract in 1937, stipulating greater rights and safeguards for women, including restrictions on polygamy, securing a woman's *mahr* (dower) regardless of who initiated the divorce, and the delegated right of *talaq* (a man's unconditional right to divorce) for women. She published and widely distributed her model contract.



92. Rokeya Hossein (1880-1932) is best known for her 1905 novella *Sultana's Dream* where she critiques the injustices facing Bengali women at the turn of the 20th century through the depiction of an imaginary 'Ladyland' where women rule instead of men, and men, not women, are in purdah. Rokeya's other articles on purdah but especially those on the general situation of women make Rokeya one of the most radical thinkers of her time.

Abida Sultaan (1913-2002) – The Rebel Princess of Bhopal

Abida Sultaan was born into the ruling family of the Indian princely state of Bhopal that was ruled for more than a century by women sovereigns (1819 to 1926). The heir apparent after her father, Abida was brought up by her strict grandmother, the Begum of the state, Sultan Jahan Begum. Rebellious from the start, as indicated in the title of her autobiography, *Memoirs of a Rebel Princess*, Abida Sultaan was unconventional by any standards. She refused to veil, cut off her hair and dressed in male attire; she drove cars, hunted tigers, played sports, and was one of the first women pilots. Separated soon after marriage, she fought to keep her son with her. She opted to Pakistan and, for a short while, became an ambassador, but she also lived for many years without electricity and running water in her new country.



93. Abida Sultaan aged 13 with her 67-year-old grandmother, Sultan Jahan Begum, the Begum of Bhopal. The last picture taken before Abida cut off her hair.



94. The young Heir Apparent, aged 17 years.



95. First Indian and 2nd Muslim woman licensed pilot, Juhu, Bombay (Mumbai) 1941. Having been forbidden to learn to fly by her grandmother, Abida Sultaan took lessons in secret under an assumed name.



96. At the book launch of her son, Shahryar Khan's book: *The Begums of Bhopal*. Paris, 2001.



Shaista Suhrawardy Ikramullah (1915-2000)

97. One of only two Muslim women elected to India's Constituent Assembly, Shaista Ikramullah went on to serve in Pakistan's first Constituent Assembly with Jahanara Shahnawaz and represented Pakistan in various capacities. This picture is of Shaista Ikramullah as the Deputy Chairperson of Pakistan's delegation to the United Nations (1956-1957).



98.



99.

Ismat Chughtai (1915-1991)

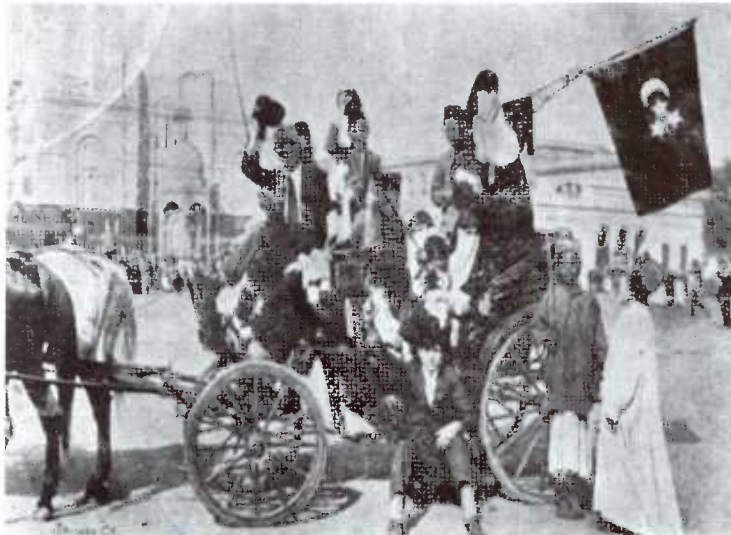
A rebellious Indian writer associated with the Progressive Writers Movement (*Taraqqi pasand adab*) whose stories sometimes shocked people, Ismat's story '*Lihaf*' (The Quilt) was banned by the British colonial authorities who charged her with obscenity; Ismat appeared in court in Lahore but charges were dropped.

Struggle for Independence and Rights

The struggle for education, women's rights and national independence were closely interlinked in the early 20th century in many places including Egypt.



100. Egyptian women celebrate gaining political rights in 1959, carrying portraits of earlier activists, Huda Shaarawi (on the left) and Umm Saber, the first woman martyr in 1919.



101. Women and men participate in an anti-colonial demonstration in Cairo, 1919.

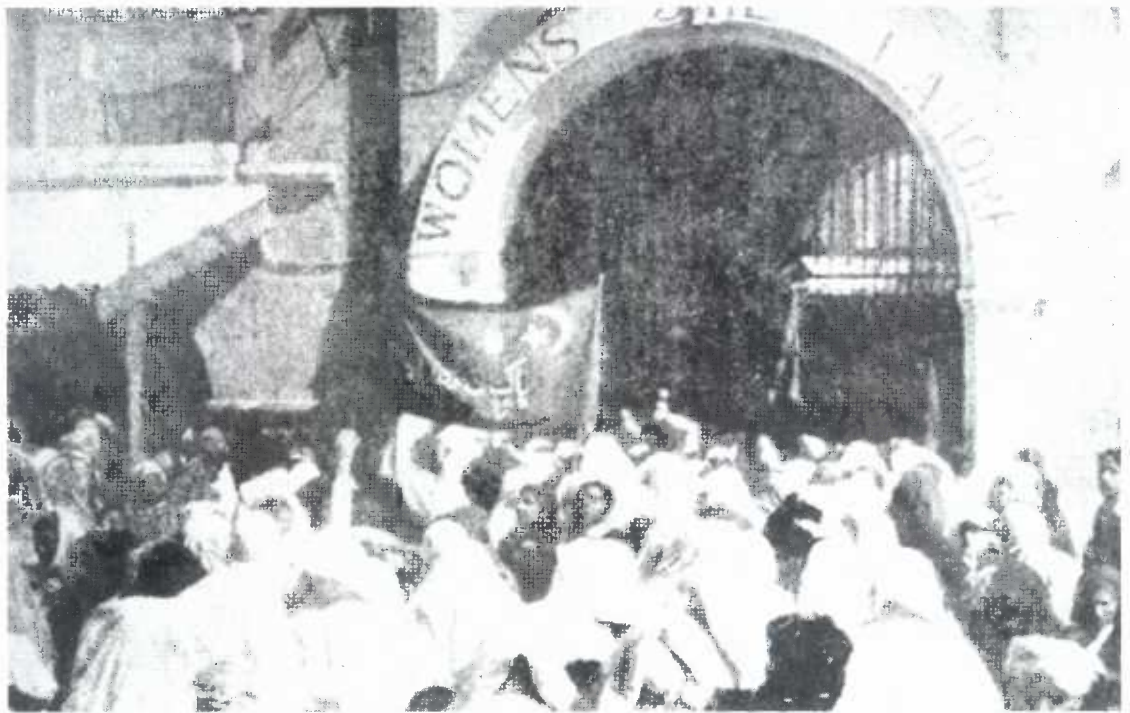


102. Students of the Cairo Saniyah School for Girls demonstrate bearing placards in French that read: "Educate your girls, Respect the rights of women; A people's civilization is judged by its women."

Indian Muslim women also engaged in the independence movement.



103. Jahanara Shahnawaz in the company of Mian Ifikharudin, Sir Shaukat Hayat and Nawab of Mamdot at the Muslim League quarters in Lahore, March 1947, from where the Civil Disobedience Movement was launched. The group was getting ready to court arrest.



104. Demonstration outside the Women's Jail, Lahore where many Muslim women were being held after being arrested during the anti-colonial Civil Disobedience Movement in the struggle for independence.

Chapter Six

Women in the Modern Political Process: The First Fifty years of the Twentieth Century

The opening decades of the twentieth century saw intense political activism. Nationalist movements sprang up in diverse parts of the globe, challenging the old existing orders of both colonial rule and traditional structures. Women had already joined nationalist initiatives in the late nineteenth century, but the early twentieth century has a qualitatively different feel for several reasons. The sheer number of movements worldwide was unprecedented but, of equal importance, is that women had managed to consolidate their voices. The women locally demanding or improvising changes reached the numbers required to become social movements for change. Not infrequently, women who became active in the political arena were socially conscious of – and contesting – existing gender roles. Internationalism was an important phenomenon: women linked up across boundaries and found common causes, especially in their demand for the vote, but also on other issues. In many Muslim contexts, nationalist movements came together with women's movements in a period of great changes. In some instances, women adapted traditional forms of collective action to their purpose.

Sitting on Husbands - Nigeria

Amongst the Igbo and Ibibio of Nigeria, the marital practice of exogamy meant that women married into other communities. Under the Igbo and Ibibio social systems, women were not absorbed into their husband's lineage, but retained their own patrilineage from which they derived certain rights – such as the

security of residence, personal protection, and the use of the husband's profits – though they could not directly inherit.¹ Women were thus a crucial link between different districts and were important to the political economy of their villages. Still, judicial matters were traditionally governed by village councils to which women had no direct access (as was common in many such institutions the world over); women could not inherit from their husband's property and the distance separating a woman from her natal family made divorce a rare occurrence.² Attesting to women's creativity, women in Nigeria's hinterland devised their own methods to deal with the problems of individual women through collective action: women formed their own associations, often comprising married village women.

Within the associations of wives, a democratic process was followed. One woman was elected by consensus as a representative for the group. A good candidate for leadership would be an older woman who could impart her wisdom and experience to the others. Another important qualification was strong oratory skills. Sometimes these groups would mediate between women who were in conflict. On other occasions, they would deal with marital disputes. If a conflict arose, the associations would call a meeting (*mikiri* or *mitiri*) where the women members would discuss the issue and find a solution. Tactics included staging strikes, boycotts, and public shaming. In their meetings, women would also discuss their interests as “traders, farmers, wives and mothers” and they found that “where individually women couldn't compete with men, collectively they could often hold their own.”³

If a husband was deemed to have wronged his wife or injured the community in some way, the women would collectively go to his home and sing abusive songs at him. Staging a sit-in, they would refuse to leave until he had addressed his wife's complaints. These tactics were directed towards individual men, though the group could also apply collective sanctions against the men: refusing to cook, withholding sexual favours, or threatening to leave the village.⁴ This traditional form of women's collective action was referred to as “sitting on a man” or “making war on a man.” ‘Sitting on a man’ was a bargaining mechanism used by women when they could not access official legal channels to redress actions they considered to be violating the rights of an individual woman, a group of women, or the community as a whole.

‘Sitting on’ a person was generally legitimated by traditional society; men would never dream of interfering in the women's demonstrations. But the British, who established their colonial administration around the turn of the twentieth century, did not appreciate the authority commanded by women's associations. Confused by the non-hierarchical nature of women's organizations and unused to women in political power, the British curtailed the powers of female associations. Following the upheaval of the so-called ‘Women's War’ of 1929 (see below) the British restructured their administration so as to eclipse women's collective

action. By curtailing group solidarity and extra-judicial forms of asserting dissent, the colonial administration effectively undercut women's traditional, public roles.

Despite curtailment by the colonial rulers, the practice of 'sitting on husbands' has persisted to the present day and has, in fact, evolved. Today, women still gather in groups to confront errant husbands, though this custom now involves moving into the man's house and eating his food until he is forced to listen to their grievances.⁵ In this way, women have adapted an old tradition in response to changing circumstances in ways that ensure it remains effective. In 1929, large numbers of women from different villages reshaped the traditional 'sitting on husbands' into a pre-emptive political strategy.

'The Women's War' (1929) Nigeria

What came to be known as the 'Women's War' in Nigeria is a prime example of women's collective actions to pre-empt a violation of their rights as women, and a testament to women's assertiveness. They also used the opportunity presented by this mobilisation to criticise the existing administrative structures and undue influence of local warrant chiefs imposed on them by the colonial rulers.

In 1929, a series of bureaucratic blunders led the women in Oloko (Bende division, Owerri Province) to believe the British colonial power had imposed a tax on them when an over-zealous census-taker from the District Office in Owerri attempted to update the records by counting women's property and possessions.⁶ The misunderstanding was due to the fact that earlier, in 1925, men had been obliged to pay taxes on the completion of a census-exercise that enumerated their possessions. Consequently, when the census exercise started in 1929, women concluded they, too, were going to be taxed - a serious economic threat in the midst of a worldwide depression. The net result was women's widespread and organised resistance that came to be known as the 'Women's War.'

On November 23rd, 1929, the census officer arrived at a compound where a woman retorted, "Are you still counting? Last year my son's wife who was pregnant died. What have I to count?" This woman, Nwanyeruwa, then proceeded to engage in a physical fight with the census official. Following her altercation with the official, she ran to a women's meeting which happened to be underway, and told them that the presence of the census-taker clearly indicated that the taxation upon local woman was indeed to take place. The women of the area protested by 'sitting on' the census official and began to devise other ways to stop the taxation.⁷

Little is known of Nwanyeruwa. Though she triggered the women's resistance, in the course of events, the leadership of the movement seems to have been taken up by others. Accounts say Nwanyeruwa was an elderly nurse from a minority

religious group. We do know that her feisty nature, which had led her to physically confront the census-taker, also got her into trouble later on for abusing a police inspector – for which she was fined for contempt of court.⁸ More important than her individual actions, the resistance initially led by poor farming women against the imposition of an unfair tax led to women's solidarity and networking across classes.

Women's associations from various regions banded together to prevent the proposed taxation. The women themselves named their movement the 'Women's War' (*ogu umunwanye*); the colonial administration referred to the uprising as the 'Aba Riots.' The confrontation between the colonial rulers and these women was intense. Between their first days of organizing and December 1929, ten local courts were destroyed, judges' houses were attacked, factories were looted and 55 women were killed.⁹ No men were killed in the conflict; the hefty property damages incurred were recovered by raising the Igbo's taxes.¹⁰

Many of the women involved in the uprising were middle-aged, illiterate women who stood in as the representatives of their sisters-in-arms. But women leaders included the wives, daughters and mothers of high-ranking officials, many of whom were literate. Women took equal part in the struggle regardless of class backgrounds. Amongst those later killed, for example, was the wife of a Chief of Etim Ekpo who had beaten the drum to summon a women's meeting on the issue of taxation.¹¹

The Nigerian Daily Times reported on December 16th, 1929 that troops had been deployed to quell the women's uprising and prevent any further insurgency. It stated that at Aba,

*...a large mob composed chiefly of women, broke into factories, Government offices and private houses and did much damage. It became necessary to fire over the heads of the mob. No casualties are reported. There is now a sufficient force of troops and police at Aba to prevent any recurrence of disorder.*¹²

On December 18th the press blithely reported that in the Owerri Province, "a sufficient force of troops and police are available to prevent any overt acts of violence [and] although the women continue to be excited and to hold meetings, a few of [them] had to be dispersed."¹³ But the violence continued. A report of December 23rd recorded the presence of male supporters, and implied that, in fact, the plan was for the women to act as shields for the men who planned to ransack the factories:

...a great crowd of women had assembled, the leaders being the wives of clerks or of the domestic servants of Europeans. The women were armed with sticks, and a number of men armed with machetes landed from the numerous war canoes which had arrived, and hung around the outskirts of the mob. It is stated that a carefully prepared plan had been evolved,

on the presumption that the women would not be fired on: the women were to rush the officials into the office and the men were then to plunder the factories.¹⁴

Lieutenant Hill of the Nigeria Regiment arrived on the scene and allegedly warned the women repeatedly. However, when the women attempted to snatch the rifles from the British troops, he gave the order to open fire. Twenty women were immediately killed and a number wounded. Even though the women were only armed with sticks, the troops continued to fire; they also pushed a group of women into the river, drowning six of them.¹⁵

As related, the tinder that ignited the fighting was the rumour – or belief – that all women of the area were to be taxed.¹⁶ On the other hand, the personal testimony from women involved in the Women’s War shows that the majority believed that it was the local warrant chiefs who were going to tax the women, not the government itself.¹⁷ The women asked Nwanyeruwa to present a letter on their behalf (proving that they had consulted with her) stating that the people of Oloko refused to pay the taxes. She wrote (or dictated) the letter in Igbo, and, emphasizing the collective nature of the statement, left it unsigned. It read, “Nwanyeruwa of Oloko Proper said that the [District Officer] said that women will not pay tax till the world ends – that chiefs were not to exist any more and that was the voice of all the women.”¹⁸

This letter shows that the role of spokeswomen - important to traditional women’s associations - was a key tactic in the Women’s War. Spokeswomen were often middle-aged, forceful and articulate, though usually illiterate persons¹⁹ delegated to represent their wishes by a collective of women.

Though taxation affected all members of the community, the women who rallied in protest self-identified on the basis of their sex. This is unsurprising as women in south-eastern Nigeria - unlike the majority of men - had long been allied through organizations and represented by nominated spokespersons, which facilitated their civil disobedience. There is scant evidence to show that men actively engaged in protests against the tax although some women stated that they also opposed the taxation of men because such measures inevitably affected women as well.²⁰

Women rebelled for many reasons. Their grievances were directed against the administrative setup of the Warrant Chief System that delegated local representatives to operate on behalf of the colonial administration; the protest had an economic element in its opposition to taxation. There was also an element of cultural assertion against British hegemony even though in official documents, women made sure to stress that they were not at war with the British or their government, but were simply trying to make their voices heard. Women are recorded as having explained their motivations by saying, “We sang so that you

might ask us what our grievances were. We had cause for grievances before taxation was introduced.”²¹

The women employed a number of tactics: traditional methods of collective resistance such as ‘sitting on the men’: the women convened in a *mikiri*, nominated spokeswomen, and raucously destroyed the Native Court Buildings. Their rituals and dress were those traditionally used when ‘sitting on’ men: the women met the British wearing ferns around their heads to symbolize war and carried sticks wrapped in palm leaves to invoke the powers of their female ancestors.²² Simultaneously, the women also relied upon non-traditional means: petitions, letter-writing campaigns, legal actions and armed confrontation.

The British seemed not to have understood the actions of the women involved. To them, the women’s public defiance seemed highly out of place and they failed to recognize the cultural symbols employed by the women. The colonial administrators did not see the women’s protest as a ‘sitting on’ the administration in order to have their grievances addressed. Nevertheless, in 1930, the Aba Commission of Inquiry (ACI) was established and tasked with investigating the reasons for the women’s rebellion.

Hearing the testimonies of the women, one male official asserted that, “No one listening to the evidence given before us could have failed to be impressed by the intelligence, the power of exposition, the directness and the mother-wit which some of the leaders exhibited in setting forth their grievances.” The women were not apologetic nor were they demure when questioned by the committee. When one was asked whether she had sought her husband’s permission to participate in the committee hearings, she snapped back at him, “Didn’t he see me when I was going about? I did not fly to come here!”²³

After the ACI inquiry of early 1930, the most immediate achievement of the Women’s War was that the issue of taxing women was dropped – though not that of their men-folk – and an assurance was made that no taxation of women had even been intended. Indeed, taxation would not be imposed again in the Eastern Region until the 1950s. There were other longer-term results of the women’s rebellion. Following the conflict, women brought forth legal charges against the warrant chiefs, hiring lawyers and letter-writers to do so. As a result, the warrant chiefs were prosecuted and the violence ended. The British revoked the Warrant Chief System, whereby local representatives had been authorized to operate on behalf of the colonial administration, ensured that women were consulted in appointing new chiefs and enacted other administrative reforms such as restructuring the courts along lines recommended by the women.

Finally, the collective action undertaken during the Women’s War continued a tradition of women’s activism that extended throughout the twentieth century and beyond.²⁴ During the worst period of violence, between December 1929 and

January 1930, about 25,000 Igbo women were targets of repression – but also the instigators of rebellion.

Bi Amman (1852-1924) India

Abadi Banu Begam's story, on the other hand, illustrates how women's involvement in mainstream political processes catalyzed assertions of women's rights as women. Abadi Begum is better known by the affectionate nickname bestowed upon her by her politician sons, Mohamed Ali and Shaukat Ali: 'Bi Amman.'²⁵ The nickname was then universally adopted after she entered the political scene. Although there must have been other women who publicly unveiled after Razia Sultana in the thirteenth century, in modern India, Bi Amman is the first known Muslim woman to unveil in public and to address mixed gatherings of men and women in the political process.

Born in 1852 to a middle-class family in the Indian state of Rampur, Bi Amman's life is recorded in her son's autobiography.²⁶ She taught herself to read after studying the Qur'an in Arabic, by memorizing and sounding out Urdu words. Throughout her life she read and told stories, though she never learned to write. Widowed at the age 27, Bi Amman was left to raise six young children on her own. She did not have access to her late husband's estate that was controlled by her brother-in-law, who was hostile to educating children.²⁷ She never remarried, and her son recalls that she pawned her gold jewellery to ensure that her five sons received a good education.²⁸

Bi Amman became politically active in the Khilafat Movement, a pan-Islamic movement that sought to enlist Muslim Indians irrespective of their class, ethnicity or sex and also recruited many non-Muslims.²⁹ Her two sons, Mohamed Ali and Shaukat Ali, were prominent leaders of the Khilafat Movement.

In 1913, Bi Amman made her first public appearance on the platform of the *Anjuman-e-Khuddam-e-Kaaba* (Society of the Servants of Kaaba) an organization established by her sons.³⁰ In 1917, Bi Amman spoke at an all-male meeting of the Muslim League, demanding the release of her sons and Annie Besant (see below) who had all been imprisoned. This was perhaps the first time an Indian Muslim woman had addressed a mass audience of men and women, though she delivered her speech on behalf of her incarcerated sons from behind the veil of her *burqa*.³¹ Continuing to regularly address mixed audiences, denouncing British rule and promoting the Khilafat Movement, in 1921 Bi Amman gave a speech to a mass meeting in Lahore. It was at this meeting that she publicly took off her veil, arguing that as an elderly woman the audience consisted of her "sons and brothers," and therefore she had no reason to feel immodest before them.³² Presenting herself as a 'mother figure' assisting her sons in a Muslim cause, Bi Amman came under little criticism for her unveiling, as she did not advertise it as a feminist act. Very much accepted in her role of a mother in public, she is still commonly known by her maternal nickname.

During her speeches, Bi Amman appealed to the women of the audience to do their part for the Khilafat Movement, urging her “sisters and daughters” to donate money and jewellery to support the Turkish Caliph. Her role in the Khilafat Movement makes Bi Amman one of the first Muslim Indian women to become actively engaged in the public nationalist arena.³³ She was then joined by the wives of high-ranking and influential men, many of whom were connected to Aligarh University, and by her daughter-in-law, Begum Mohamed Ali.³⁴

It needs to be said that, during this period, Indian women took collective actions, demanding greater rights and benefits for women, regardless of religious identities. Moreover, women’s international solidarity was so strong that initiatives to strengthen women’s rights in India included a number of prominent non-Indian British women such as Annie Besant and Margaret Cousins - women who, earlier, had been active in the suffragette movement in Great Britain and had then relocated to India. Annie Besant, who moved to India in 1893, was equally engaged in the Indian anti-colonial nationalist movement. In 1916, she formed the Home Rule League, and became its first President. Later that year the colonial authorities imprisoned her for her anti-British agitations.³⁵

Nationalist movements of this period provided unprecedented space for women to assert themselves in many places. In India, Margaret Cousins noted:

*Patriotism is playing an important part in emancipating Indian women. Things have gone very swiftly for women as well as men since [1916], and even Muhammadan [sic] women, like the mother of the Ali brothers, the political leaders of 1917, have come out of the zenana as their sacrifice to their patriotism. Whether we approve of their political polity or not, it is a wonderful fact that women’s ardent desire for the freedom of their country has given them such a personal freedom that they are now welcomed into the streets as volunteers, pickets, as politicians...the liberation of women is being most fundamentally aided by their devotion to the national movement.*³⁶

In her autobiography, Begum Shaista Ikramullah, herself an active politician, expressed a similar view when she recalled:

*One thing...this political struggle did achieve for us, it brought women into the forefront of public life...the political struggle had somehow generated such enthusiasm that all prejudices and taboos seemed to have been swept away.*³⁷

Achieving Political Rights in Turkey (1908-1935)

Women’s rights were an integral element in the nationalist movements and political process of Turkey. Women welcomed the Revolution of 1908 brought in by the Young Turks whose press proclaimed: “women must be liberated from the shackles of tradition,”³⁸ and whose proponents argued that reform and social

progress – and, for some, gender equality – were indigenous to Islam in general and Turkey specifically. (This synthesis of progress, religion, revolution and women’s advancement would later culminate in the republican regime of Mustafa Kemal, the ‘Atatürk’.³⁹)

A number of women’s groups were formed between 1908 and 1920; each had its own agenda, ranging from charity and the promotion of culture to feminist goals. Of the 50 or so organizations lobbying for independence/nationalism in 1919, 16 were women’s organisations.⁴⁰ One of the most important women’s groups – and certainly the most radical and active – was the *Osmani Mudafa-i Hukuk-i Nisvan Cemiyeti* (Ottoman Association for the Defence of Women’s Rights).⁴¹ The Association’s magazine, *Kadinlar Dunyasi* (Women’s World) became an important voice for women. Unlike most other women’s publications of this time that aimed at providing information and networking, the explicitly feminist views of the Association for the Defence of Women’s Rights (ADWR)⁴² were clearly reflected in *Kadinlar Dunyasi*. The journal was entirely staffed and run by women and only published the work of other women. The rebelliousness of the ADWR women came through not only in their articles, but also in their decision to regularly print pictures of their women members in *Kadinlar Dunyasi* despite public disapproval.

The general atmosphere of 1908 encouraged women: they started appearing in public ‘lightly veiled’; that year, women workers participated in 40 workers’ strikes in just four months.⁴³ The celebration was short-lived. The counter-revolution of April 1909 brought so many set backs that in 1911, the ADWR vented its disappointment in its anniversary issue of *Kadinlar Dunyasi*, declaring that the occasion was only a “festival for men.”⁴⁴

ADWR women also took up the cause of women’s education and employment. By 1913, the number of Turkish women having attained secondary education was enough to lead ADWR to press for the establishment of a women’s university. Their efforts were rewarded in 1914 when the state established the *Inas Darul Fununu* (women’s university). In turn, the Women’s University was to produce its own firebrands: in 1920 women students demonstrated in protest against gender discrimination in education and, to make their point, stormed the classrooms of both men and women demanding co-education.⁴⁵

ADWR also campaigned for women’s employment, especially in state institutions. In 1913 women activists from ADWR mounted a broad based and vigorous campaign to press for women to be hired as telephone operators in the newly established telephone exchange. The campaign included a women’s sit-in in 1913 to press for employing Muslim women as telephone operators.⁴⁶ In 1914, women were duly recruited in the telephone exchange as well as the postal services.

Given their activism on different fronts, it is logical to assume that women activists of the ADWR must have lobbied for reforms in personal status law prior to the promulgation of the 'Decree on Family Law' in 1917. The Decree gave women the right to divorce, made the wife's permission essential for a man to take a second wife, established a minimum age of marriage for men (18 years) as well as women (17 years), and took marriage out of the purview of the religious authorities and placed it squarely in the hands of the state. Three years later, the decree was revoked with the British Occupation of Istanbul in 1920.⁴⁷

In 1923, in the wake of the Proclamation of the Republic, a new group of women under the leadership of Nezihe Muttin tried a new strategy. They formed a women's political party, *Kadınlar Halk Firkası* (Women's Public Party) but the initiative met with strong state disapproval. To pre-empt censure or closure, within months Nezihe reconstituted the group as an association (in 1924) under a new name: *Türk Kadınlar Birliği* (Turkish Women's Union). Less radical than the ADWR, the Union was nonetheless a significant voice for women in the 1920s and 1930s. This is evident, for example in the number of complaints it received directly and those in the shape of letters and articles in the press written by men worried about the equality they, and other women, were demanding.⁴⁸ The men were especially concerned that women were taking over men's jobs.⁴⁹

Latife Bekir Hanim, the new president of the Turkish Women's Union, responded to these complaints and protested against the growing anti-women trend. She reassured men that women did not see them as rivals but as partners. In fact, she said, women were not seeking equality so that every woman could throw herself into life outside the home. They were doing so simply to prove that women were as capable and as mature as men. She also advised men not to complain about women working. To the contrary, she said, they should be delighted because women were now bringing bread home.⁵⁰

Women still did not have the right to either vote or to stand for elections. But, even though women were not – indeed *could not* be – candidates in the 1923 general elections, in several electoral colleges secondary voters gave their votes to women. (For example, Latifa Hanim, the wife of Mustafa Kemal, received 39 votes).⁵¹ But the resistance to women's political rights was enough to defeat a proposal made in 1924 by Recep Peker (the future prime minister) to amend Article XI of the Constitution to allow women to stand for elections. Women made important political gains in the next decade. They were granted the right to vote in municipal elections in April 1930, and exercised this right later that year. In 1933, women's franchise was extended to the village administration level. Finally, in December 1934, parliament unanimously passed a bill granting women franchise and the right to stand as candidates in legislative elections.

The first elections held under this new dispensation in February 1935 returned 18 women to the new house. They were all educated to some degree: 3 had middle school diplomas, one a high school education and the rest boasted even higher

educational credentials. With only two exceptions, all the women elected were from urban backgrounds. One exception was Şekibe İçel, a peasant woman, and the wife of a disabled soldier who managed their small farm in Bursa (Anatolia). Şekibe already had some experience in political leadership since she had earlier been elected village head in 1933 (also indicating that at least some women were elected in that tier). It was in the capacity of village head that she had met the Atatürk during his tours. Şekibe's intelligence and knowledge of the country's problems so impressed the Atatürk that he personally requested her to stand for the legislative elections and she was duly elected on the party's list.

Though the number of women is impressive, it seems this was achieved through an informal quota system for women, and not all women activists were satisfied with the women deputies.⁵² Soon after they were elected, Sabiha Sertel, a socialist feminist and full-time journalist, addressed them through the socialist magazine, *Projektor*, she contributed to. Criticizing a bill proposing taxes on working class women, Sabiha stressed that women were oppressed both as a class and a sex. She argued that women had not yet achieved equality with men who were still legally the head of the family, and that women's right to work remained dependent on her husband's approval while she carried the burden of all the housework and child caring responsibilities. In an article titled "Why do You Keep Silent, Ladies?" Sertel called upon female deputies to do more to protect the rights of working class women, arguing:

*We, as women, would also like to see you in the parliament on the side of working class, oppressed and abused women. After the big French bourgeois revolution, when they imposed income taxes on working class women, Rose Lacompe [a woman] came up, and with her strong voice in the parliament, she defended them. The time came, and they cut off Rose Lacompe's head, but her mission is still alive. Her followers are still screaming. Why do you keep silent, Ladies?*⁵³

Subsequently, Sabiha, who started *Resimli Ay* (The Month Illustrated) with her journalist husband in 1924, was also one of the few to protest the closure of the Turkish Women's Union. This happened soon after the Union hosted the Twelfth Congress of the International Alliance for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship in May 1935. With the full support of the state, the Congress was held at the Yildiz Palace and received a lot of news coverage. After the meeting, a delegation met the Atatürk who praised them and suggested that "just as the women and men of Turkey have joined forces to create the new Turkey so must the women and men of all nations join together to preserve the peace of the world." Yet, soon afterwards, the government summarily dissolved the Union of Turkish Women, saying that because women had achieved political parity with men, it was no longer required.⁵⁴ The Union held its last meeting on May 10th 1935, only months after all the pomp and glory of having hosted the Congress.

Sabiha Sertel registered her protest in an article stating that while it was true that women had acquired political equality with men, they had a long way to go to achieve social and economic equality. She warned that the struggle ahead would be long and hard and that women needed an organization to wage it.⁵⁵ Sabiha (who was forced to leave the country with her husband in 1950⁵⁶) was certainly proved right since the 18 women elected in 1935 represent the highest number of women ever elected to the Turkish legislature.⁵⁷

Halidé Edib Adivar (1884-1964) Turkey

Against the backdrop of intense nationalist mobilisation and sentiments of this period, some women stand out for the sheer number of arenas in which they became active, the number of activities they undertook and for their leadership qualities. In Turkey, Halidé Edib Adivar was one such woman.

Born into an upper-class Turkish family in 1884, Halidé – as other women in this period - craved education even as a child. Instead of waiting until she was seven years old to start reading the Qur'an as her father intended, a five year old Halidé persuaded him to let her start then, even though she missed out on the *bashlanmak* ceremony customary for children of her background.⁵⁸ An underage Halidé then entered the American College for Girls. Started in 1871, the college only had Christian students until Halidé joined. In 1901, Halidé became the first Muslim graduate of the college.⁵⁹

Halidé ended up marrying her tutor – a man old enough to be her father. The marriage was unsuccessful. Halidé had a nervous breakdown within a year and divorced her husband in 1910 when he announced his intentions of taking a second wife. Halidé's opposition to polygyny was grounded in her own bitter experiences of a polygynous family. She later remembered:

On my own childhood, polygamy and its results produced a very ugly and distressing impression. The constant tension in our home made every simple family ceremony seem like a physical pain, and the consciousness of it hardly ever left me.

She concluded:

When a second wife enters [a woman's] home and usurps half her power, she is a public martyr and feels herself an object of curiosity and pity. However humiliating this may be, the position gives a woman in this case an unquestioned prominence and isolation.⁶⁰

By the time she divorced, Halidé had already started writing – an activity she was to continue for the rest of her life. Her first article appeared in the *Tanine* newspaper, in 1907. Her writings led one literary-cum-cultural club to dub her the 'Mother of the Turks' – before Mustafa Kemal adopted his title of the Atatürk (Father of Turks). After the 1908 Revolution, Halidé founded the Society for the

Elevation of Women. The Society was mainly focused on philanthropic and cultural activities but also had links with the British suffragette movement.

As of 1910, Halidé was active in the Turkish nationalist movement. She and her second husband both served in Mustafa Kemal's Young Turks forces where Halidé attained the rank of corporal. Halidé joined the Turk Ojak (Turkish Hearth),⁶¹ a nationalist organisation formed in 1911. The Ojak, the first of many groups of the same name, started off as a cultural club that encouraged mixed gatherings and female speakers and later evolved into a more politicized body.⁶² The following year, Halidé was elected by the general congress as the only female member.⁶³ In 1918, she was one of eleven people elected to a council designed to draft the Ojak's constitution.

In May 1919, Halidé became the first Turkish woman to address a public rally (around the same time Bi Amman was doing so in India.) The occasion was a rally protesting the massacre in Izmir (formerly Smyrna) following occupation by the Greek contingent of the Allied military force. The rally was organised by the Ojak, and Halidé was asked to speak since the president, Ferid Bey, was away. Though unprepared, Halidé finally addressed the crowd of some 50,000 people that included male civilians, veiled women and soldiers. Recalling the event, she wrote:

*'I will speak,' I said at last, which pleased every one. Fatih, where the speaking was going to take place, was already crowded, and it was a serious and hazardous undertaking to address an excited monster meeting, with the Allies and the government looking on suspiciously and policing it with aeroplanes. Although I had been a public speaker since 1908, I had never addressed an outdoor meeting, having always considered such meetings undignified in the extreme, after witnessing the speakers in the streets shouting to the mob in 1908. But for the moment I was too much worked up to bother about ridicule, so we decided to start at half-past one for Fatih.'*⁶⁴

In 1920, Halidé was the only woman condemned to death *in absentia* along with Mustafa Kemal and several other Young Turks. After assuming power as the Atatürk, Kemal sought to eliminate religion from the legislative sphere and political process. Many felt the Atatürk distanced himself too much from Islam and was too westernized. His 'state-sponsored feminism' did not appeal to all progressives, and was vociferously opposed by religious conservatives. Halidé, however, was attracted by his assertion that, "Turkish women shall be free, enjoy education and occupy a position equal to that of men as they are entitled to it."⁶⁵

Halidé's activism was multi-faceted. She combined a career in education with writing, and her nationalism, tempered with feminist activism, with social welfare. During the First World War, she organized schools and orphanages in Syria and Lebanon.⁶⁶ Halidé's role as educator started in 1918 when she was

appointed a professor of Literature at the University of Istanbul. As a professor, her contribution extended well beyond her native Turkey: she helped establish girls' schools in Syria and Lebanon, and also taught in the United States and Great Britain as well as in her native Turkey. In 1935, Mahatma Gandhi personally invited her to teach in New Delhi. Eventually, in her sixties, Halidé also served a term as an independent member of parliament (1950 – 1954).

As a writer, Halidé published numerous newspaper articles and authored several novels, many on women's rights. Her two-volume memoirs, entitled *The Turkish Ordeal*, appeared in English in 1928, however, it did not appear in Turkish until the 1950s, as her version differed from the official account.⁶⁷ Her best-known work, *The Clown and his Daughter*, won a prize for literature in 1942 and went through 25 editions.

Huda Shaarawi (1879-1947) Egypt

During this period of intense political and social activism, another woman who appears larger than life is Huda Shaarawi. Huda, who joined the nationalist struggle for independence in Egypt, was equally vocal in asserting women's rights. More so, in fact, since after independence she resigned from the nationalist Wafd party in protest at its refusal to grant women the status and role she thought they deserved.

Born Nur al-Huda Sultan in Minya, Egypt in 1879, Huda spent her early years living within a harem. Though the word 'harem' conjures up images of isolation and mystery, Huda remembers the harem as nothing more than a separate portion of the house exclusively for women and children.⁶⁸ The late nineteenth century was a transitional time for Egyptian women: Huda was the last woman of her family to be raised in the harem from childhood through adolescence. Her father died around the time Huda, aged five, started her life in the harem. Apart from the eunuchs, the only male person in the household was her cousin, Ali Shaarawi, who was the official guardian of the harem, though for most of the time he lived at another residence.

Huda's father, Sultan Pasha, was an upper-class Egyptian and her mother, Iqbal, was a Turco-Circassian consort. She grew up speaking her mother's language (Turkish), the social language of the Egyptian elite (French) and the national language (Arabic). By the time she reached adulthood, and as the feminist base in Egypt spread, Huda started using Arabic more often and she recorded her memoirs in Arabic.

Educated within the harem, Huda learned Persian, painting, music, and had memorized the entire Qur'an by the time she was only nine years old. One day a well-known poet, Sayyida Khadija al-Maghribyya, came to the house and Huda recalled that she:

impressed me because she used to sit with the men and discuss literary and cultural matters. Meanwhile, I observed how women without learning would tremble with embarrassment and fright if called upon to speak a few words to a man behind a screen. Observing Sayyida Khadija convinced me that, with learning, women could be the equals of men if not surpass them. My admiration for her continued to grow and I yearned to be like her, in spite of her ugly face.⁶⁹

In 1891, the thirteen-year-old Huda was engaged to Ali Shaarawi. Not only did she consider Ali, in his 40s, to be like a father to her, his children by his concubine were older than Huda herself. Nonetheless, the two were married the following year. Huda was deeply miserable during the first months of their marriage. She remembers carrying a book around with her as “camouflage,” so when people asked why she looked so melancholic, she could say that she was reading a sad story. Despite the entreaties of her family to live with him, and though the custom of *bait al ta’a* (obedience to the house) decreed that a woman could be forced to reside with her husband, Huda asserted her will to remain with her family.⁷⁰ She lived apart from Ali for the first seven years of their marriage, until she was 21, not least because during this time Ali had been living with his concubine and their children.⁷¹

In 1900 Huda relented and moved in with her husband. She gave birth to her first daughter three years later, followed by a son. In 1919 she began her political career, coinciding with the Egyptian Revolution. Protesting British rule, the Wafd (Delegation) Party was created and for the first time women took to the streets, exhibiting their support for the nationalist cause. Nationalism united women across the boundaries of faith, and women sewed crescents and crosses onto red cloth to signify Muslim-Christian solidarity.⁷²

In 1920, Huda helped create the Wafdist Women’s Central Committee (WWCC) and became its first President. When her husband died in 1922, Huda decided not to go into mourning. Continuing her political activism, she announced to members of the WWCC, “Neither illness, grief, nor fear of censure can prevent me from shouldering my duty with you in the continuing fight for our national rights.”⁷³

In 1923, primarily in response to the withholding of female suffrage by the newly liberated Egyptian men, Huda founded and became President of the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU). That year she led the EFU delegation to an international feminist meeting in Rome.⁷⁴ During the conference, Huda asserted that the EFU aimed to restore the lost rights of Egyptian women and to reclaim their own heritage (*turath*) rather than merely emulating European feminist models.⁷⁵ Returning from the meeting in May, she joined two of her colleagues, including her long-time friend Saiza Nabarawi, in casting off her veil in the train station of Cairo. Though Huda was neither the first nor the only woman in her generation

in Egypt to discard the veil, her act was a form of public protest.⁷⁶ To Huda, the veil symbolized the “greatest obstacle to women’s participation in public life.”⁷⁷

The EFU signalled three paradigmatic shifts in the course of the Egyptian women’s movement. It unequivocally rejected both the harem and enforced seclusion. To achieve its goals and to mobilize support, EFU created a formal political structure. Finally, the EFU publicly identified as a ‘feminist’ (*nisa’i / nisa’yah*) movement rather than as a ‘women’s group’. The EFU headquarters set up in Cairo was proudly named “The House of the Woman”.⁷⁸

Disappointed with the Wafdist disregard for women’s political status, Huda resigned from the presidency of the WWCC in 1924. In an open letter of resignation she announced:

*Exceptional women appear at certain moments in history and are moved by special forces. Men view these women as supernatural beings and their deeds as miracles. Indeed, women are bright stars whose light penetrates dark clouds. They rise in times of trouble when the wills of men are tried. In moments of danger, when women emerge by their side, men utter no protest. Yet women’s great acts and endless sacrifices do not change men’s views of women. Faced with contradiction, they prefer to raise women on a level equal to their own. Men have singled out women of outstanding merit and put them on a pedestal to avoid recognizing the capabilities of all women. Women have felt this in their souls. Their dignity and self-esteem have been deeply touched. Women reflected on how they might elevate their status and worth in the eyes of men. They decided that the path lay in participating with men in public affairs. When they saw the way was blocked, women rose up to demand their liberation, claiming their social, economic and political rights. Their leap forward was greeted with ridicule and blame, but that did not weaken their will. Their resolve led to a struggle that would have ended in war, if men had not come to acknowledge the rights of women.*⁷⁹

Huda founded two journals during her career: *l’Egyptienne* (1925) and *al-Misriyya* (1937). In 1945, she supported the launch of another women’s magazine, *Al-Mara al-Arabiyya*, edited by Amina Said (1914?-1995), the first Egyptian woman to make a full-time, life-long career out of journalism.

In 1944 the EFU hosted the Arab Feminist Conference in Cairo. This pan-Arab meeting drafted a 51-point resolution concerning women’s political, social and economic goals – what today would be called a Women’s Charter. Huda opened the proceedings of the Arab Feminist Conference by announcing:

The Arab woman who is equal to the man in duties and obligations will not accept, in the twentieth century, the distinctions between the sexes that the advanced countries have done away with. The Arab woman will not agree to be chained in slavery and to pay for the consequences of

men's mistakes with respect to her country's rights and the future of her children. The woman also demands with her loudest voice to be restored her political rights, rights granted to her by the Sharia and dictated to her by the demands of the present.

She concluded the conference by insisting that:

Every man who is pushed by his selfishness to trespass on the legitimate rights of women...is impeding the advancement of his country... Arab civilization at the beginning of Islam was built on the co-operation and equality of the two sexes. Now after this feminist conference and the presentation of the cause of women to the public and the placing of its documents in a historical archive, it is incumbent upon man to record on his own page in the historical record that which will honour him and justify his stand before God, the nation, and future generations.⁸⁰

After the conference, in late 1944 or early 1945, the Arab Feminist Union (AFU) was created, months before the founding of the male-dominated Arab League.

Huda did not live to see Egyptian women gain the right to vote. Female suffrage was instituted in 1956; 33 years after the EFU had first demanded it. But, that same year, elections were banned and no independent political life was allowed. Though the EFU was forced to disband, the members reconstituted themselves as the Huda Shaarawi Association, which dedicated itself exclusively to performing social services.⁸¹

Jahanara Shahnawaz (1896-1979) India/Pakistan

A similarly multi-faceted activist was Jahanara Shahnawaz. Born in 1896, in Mian Mir village,⁸² Jahanara lived in that transitional period during which women went "From Purdah to Parliament" as indicated by the title of the autobiography written by her contemporary and political colleague, Shaista Ikramullah.⁸³ Jahanara was a pioneer for Muslim women's participation in Indian politics and she was responsible for ensuring that women were included in the fundamental rights clauses of Pakistan's first constitution – an inclusion that has survived in subsequent constitutions. By that time, Jahanara was a seasoned politician who understood the need for women in parliament to link up with autonomous women's groups and women engaged in public activism in order to achieve rights for women.

The daughter of the All-India Muslim League politician, Sir Mian Muhammad Shafi, Jahanara received a liberal upbringing in a family that encouraged men and women mixing socially, and the free discussion of political matters. Her mother, Amirunnissa, and her aunt, Zebunnisa, took an active interest in the advancement of Muslim women in India. In her memoirs, Jahanara remarks that her mother was "known as a rebel in the family...the Mrs. Pankhurst of the Mian family."⁸⁴ Her father was also an advocate of women's social and political

advancement, and would quote the Prophet's saying that "Heaven lies under the feet of the mother."⁸⁵ It was at his insistence that Jahanara, her mother, and her sister, came out of *purdah* in 1920.⁸⁶

By the age of seven, Jahanara could read and write and had studied the Qur'an. In 1908, her father, Secretary of a committee on education in the Punjab, recommended that a girls' school be opened. As soon as one was established in Lahore, Jahanara became the first one to enrol.⁸⁷ Her family also encouraged her public speaking, and her father and uncle, Shah Din, joined together to insist Jahanara and her cousin, Asghari, practice by making a speech to a gathering of the Mian family. Her uncle had declared that the girls should, "Become worthy daughters of today and develop into women who can be the leaders of tomorrow." Shah Din invited the women of the family to his home where he set up a mock women's organization – appointing the nine year old Jahanara as Secretary – and the girls and women practiced public speaking, record keeping and debating skills.⁸⁸

When Jahanara was ten years old and two years before she enrolled in school, her marriage was arranged with a maternal aunt's widowed husband, a man more than 21 years her senior. They were married in 1911, and she recalled later that: "I felt miserable about it, as I loved my studies and did not wish to get married at the age of fifteen."⁸⁹ She continued studying until June 1912, giving birth to her daughter in October of that year. Motherhood did not stop Jahanara from pursuing her studies and she spent three-and-a-half years at Queen Mary College learning Arabic, a period she describes as containing the happiest moments of her life. She then reluctantly abandoned her studies and settled into an amicable, if dispassionate, marriage.

Throughout her career, Jahanara showed a particular interest in the issues of women and children. She worked with orphanages, child welfare committees, and maternity hospitals but also took up controversial issues, publicly and vociferously denouncing the practice of polygamy. Declaring the practice anti-Islamic, she argued polygamy was based upon a misinterpretation of the Qur'an.

Nonetheless, Jahanara recognized that certain adverse customs and meagre educational opportunities were problems faced by women across India, regardless of religion or class. In a speech many years later she urged the audience to:

Picture to yourself the dark pools of ignorance and superstition in which the lives of the majority of [Indian women] are being spent. Steeped in rusty old customs, drowned in a sea of ignorance, living in an atmosphere of constant fear – fear of nature and fear of man.⁹⁰

For her outspoken remarks she was severely criticized, deemed blasphemous, and accused of being influenced by western feminism.⁹¹ Criticisms notwithstanding, her sentiments found resonance in other women. After Jahanara's anti-polygamy

speech to the Muslim Ladies' Conference in 1917, an elderly woman in the audience rushed up to her "with tears running down her cheeks, came and embraced [her] and said that she was proud to be alive on a day when such troubles and difficulties of women were being discussed on responsible platforms."⁹²

Supported by her father, Jahanara pursued a career in politics, first in colonial India and subsequently in the independent state of Pakistan. She attended the Round Table Conferences in London in the 1930s where the negotiations for a transition to self-rule in India took place, and was the only Muslim female delegate to speak at the third Conference. By this time, Indian women, who had been formally petitioning the authorities for women's franchise since 1917, had been granted the same voting rights as men in a limited franchise by all the provinces, but not by the central government. Jahanara advocated the inclusion of female suffrage in the new Constitution,⁹³ and recommended at the 1935 Round Table Conference that 10% of legislative seats be reserved for women. The Government of India Act of 1935 did include women amongst those with voting rights (though it did not introduce universal franchise) and reserved nine seats for women in the Federal Assembly and six in the Council of State.⁹⁴

As soon as women were allowed to hold elective office in 1937, Jahanara was returned to the Punjab Legislative Assembly and was appointed the Parliamentary Secretary for Education, Medical Relief and Public Health. An early member of the All-India Women's Conference, she later founded the women's branch of the All-India Muslim League.

In 1946 Jahanara and Shaista Ikramullah (from Bengal) were the only two Muslim women elected to the Central Constituent Assembly of India. In 1947, Jahanara joined the Civil Disobedience Movement, and was arrested along with other Muslim League leaders. After the creation of Pakistan, Jahanara and Shaista continued to serve in the Pakistan Constituent Assembly. Serving on the Fundamental Rights Committee, Jahanara ensured that ten seats were reserved for women: five each from East and West Pakistan, for a period of ten years.

Unlike many women politicians who were to follow, Jahanara was keenly aware of the need to link activism within the parliament to activism outside. In 1948, the two women legislators drafted a Bill on women's economic rights in Pakistan. When the Bill was dropped from the agenda at the last moment, Jahanara mobilized the autonomous United Front for Women's Rights (UFWR) - that she had helped create - to stage a demonstration outside the assembly building. This action ensured some gains for women in terms of property rights.⁹⁵

Recognizing the importance of women in political power, Jahanara said "some of the women will always be there to safeguard our interests and rights...It is now for us to organize ourselves and to have a strong women's voter's league so that women's interests should not be overlooked."⁹⁶

Leela Naag (1900-1970) India and East Pakistan (Bangladesh)

On the other side of the sub-continent was another woman of the same genre. Leela Naag (a.k.a. Lila Nag) was born in Sylhet, present-day Bangladesh, at the turn of the twentieth century. Her activism started with a successful struggle to gain entry into the hitherto all-male Dacca University (now Dhaka), and moved through social work and organising women's groups, to advocating women's right to vote. She was deeply involved in anti-colonial agitation and was eventually elected to the Constituent Assembly of India. Throughout, this exceptional woman stood up for what she believed was just and acted against injustice, whether it was based on gender, religion or class.

After completing her BA degree, Leela became the first female student admitted to Dacca University, an opportunity won only after much effort, and graduated in 1923 with a Master's degree in English Literature. Two years later, she had earned a second MA, in Sanskrit and Bengali, a remarkable achievement since only a tiny number of Bengali women pursued any form of secondary education at that time.⁹⁷ During her graduate studies, Leela met Anil Roy, her life-long friend and colleague, whom she eventually married in 1939.

Leela started doing social work at a young age. She was still studying when, in 1922, she provided relief to flood victims in northern Bengal by establishing the Dacca Committee. Beginning in the 1920s, Leela started schools for girls, establishing four secondary schools and twelve free primary schools during her career. Long before 'adult literacy' became a term, one of Leela's schools, the *Nari Shikkha Mandir School*, offered classes for elderly women as well as girls. In 1946, she established a residential home for destitute girls in Calcutta (*Jatiya Mahila Sanghati*), and provided services to teach them job skills.

Leela went on to launch a women's organization with a dozen of her female friends, called *Dipali Sangha*. The group set up study circles in several neighbourhoods. In response to the revolutionary fervour in Bengal during the mid-1920s, the *sangha* "instilled revolutionary political ideas in the minds of members...The *sanghas* soon opened centres for physical training where women were taught drill, parade, *bratachari*, sword fighting and *lathi*-wielding."⁹⁸

During the struggle for independence, when communal riots broke out in 1946, these women gave practical succour to those affected in Calcutta, Dacca and Noakhali. Leela then established the National Service Institute and served as its Secretary. *Dipali Sangha* raised money for those afflicted by communal violence by organizing a sale of handcrafts by needy women.

A tireless campaigner for female suffrage, Leela became the Assistant Secretary of the Bengal Women's Campaign for voting rights. She continued her activism by linking women's rights to national rights, and elaborated what women's role should be once independence was achieved. When it became clear that India was to be partitioned (into the independent states of Pakistan (West and East) and

India), Leela advocated that Hindus should remain in East Pakistan after Partition and that women's status should be improved. Moving toward this goal, she founded the *Purbo Pakistan Mahila Samity*, with Sufia Kamal as its President. She joined underground political groups involved in armed struggle against British rule and was involved in the Chittagong armoury raid movement. Leela was the first woman to be arrested without trial in December 1931. During the period between 1931 and 1938, and again between 1942 to 1946, she was detained in various prisons across the country for her anti-British agitation. In May 1931, she started a magazine exclusively run by women, entitled *Jayasri*, which was banned on two occasions: once while Leela was imprisoned in 1935-1938 and again in 1942. During her internment, she encouraged her fellow-inmates to continue their studies and sit exams from within the prison.⁹⁹

After being released from prison in 1946, Leela was elected to the Indian Constituent Assembly, where she assisted in drafting the Indian Constitution. After Partition, her relief work continued, and she set up the Minority Welfare Central Committee. A Hindu, she resided in Dacca in the newly created East Pakistan until 1949, when she moved to India. There, she joined the *Proja Socialist Party* of Jaiprakash Narayan and continued her activism for the next decade. She retired from politics at the age of 62 and passed away eight years later, in 1970.¹⁰⁰

Malika el-Fassi (b.1920) Morocco

Malika el-Fassi, who was born in Fez, Morocco in 1920, has been described as "all by herself constitut[ing] the first generation of the modern Moroccan women's movement, providing a model and mentor for the generations that followed."¹⁰¹ In an age of political activism, Malika combined her nationalist politics with women's rights, with a particular focus on female education.

Even though female education had been encouraged in Morocco a thousand years earlier, when Malika was born, Moroccan women had no access to formal education. Fortunately for Malika, her father was keen to educate his only daughter. When Malika was eight or nine years old, he started taking her to learn privately from a religious scholar or *fiqha*. Then, when she was ten or eleven, Malika's father mobilized some of the most eminent scholars of the day to educate her at home.

Malika's enriching experience of education led her to question why women were dissuaded from pursuing education. Ensuring access to education for Moroccan girls and women became a life-long pursuit for Malika, something she managed to focus on while being deeply engaged in the nationalist political movement starting around 1937. Malika is remembered as much for her outstanding contribution to the national political movement, as for her work for women's education and advancement.

When she was about nine years old, Malika's disapproving aunt saw her studying and exclaimed, "Why are you doing all that studying? I suppose you think you're going to go to the Qaraouine [University]!!" Malika's first thought was 'why not?' since, ironically enough, Qaraouine established in the eleventh century by a woman, Fatima al-Fihria, had never admitted woman.¹⁰² Much later, Malika, supported by other women, managed to have the university opened to women. In retrospect, she mused, "I think it was that [comment], from my aunt, that pushed me to open up education for girls, and to open up a women's section of the Qaraouine".

In 1935, a fifteen-year-old Malika wrote the first article to be published in Morocco by a woman. Her article, "*About Girls' Education*," was published in *Al Maghrib* magazine and was written under the pseudonym *Al-Fatat* (The Young Girl). Her initial submission spawned a series of articles and many readers wrote in to the magazine in response. In the article she asserted that women played a pivotal role in the past and should continue to do so in the present:

Those who have studied the conditions of civilized nations, either in ancient times or in our own time, discover women's wisdom and values. They realize that human society urgently needs women's contributions... because they are the first teachers of our youth... Will our young men be cowards, participating in false traditions and corrupt practices... [o]r will they be virtuous, proud, and self-confident? If we want the latter to be the case, then what is necessary is girls' education. (64)

Malika believed that girls should be permitted and encouraged to attend secondary school. This was a radical proposition in the mid-1930s when many Moroccan girls did not even receive a primary education and, upon reaching puberty, were expected to become secluded within the home. The article sparked off a debate in which Malika happily engaged, responding to the opinions expressed by others writing into the newspaper. Later that year, rebutting an article denouncing the local cause of women's education as an imitation of western values, an indignant Malika responded:

I didn't think that such ideas could be published [anymore], ideas that set back girls' progress and postpone their education... I was afraid of the influence that such an article might have; I, who cling to our language and religion and to those of our traditions that do not harm Islam or Moroccan civilization... It is no secret that the Moroccan woman's life is stillness and languor... she becomes a prisoner in the house. (66)

As passionately involved in the nationalist struggle for decolonization as in the promotion of women education and status, Malika joined the national action block party at the age of seventeen (1937). She saw the two sides of her activism

as inherently linked and used the party as a platform to discuss the problems of colonial rule and specifically those faced by women.

In 1992, Malika married Si Mohammed El Fassi, a teacher and cousin, who shared her nationalism and supported her work to advance women. At the time Fassi was teaching King Mohammad V's sons in Rabat. A few months after their marriage, Fassi was appointed director of the Qaraouine University (in Fez), and given the task of reforming the institute. It was in Fez that Malika and Fassi decided to mobilize a small group of dedicated nationalists to actively work for political reform and independence, whatever the cost. Malika was the only woman in the group, but she explained that the men looked upon her as their sister, "because nationalism had linked us together." This small group then decided to form a political party, the Istiqlal Party (Independence Party), to broaden the base of support for the demand for independence. The Party, formed some time around 1942-43¹⁰³, drafted an Independence Manifesto and presented this to the administration in January 1944. The Manifesto bore only one woman's signature: Malika el-Fassi's.

Other women may not have been involved in party politics, but they were politically active, especially in the violent repercussions which followed the Independence Manifesto. Malika remembers that during the ensuing wave of arrests and widespread violence, many women participated spontaneously: they marched in demonstrations, they dropped flower-pots from their terraces onto soldiers, and they tended to the wounded. "What is even more wonderful", as Malika says, "is the national solidarity which was evident in women's opening their doors to the demonstrators".

Malika continued her efforts to improve women's education and status throughout, ensuring that a parallel movement was fighting to safeguard women's rights and promote their education.

Though the first class of girls had completed primary school in 1942, Malika used the occasion of Princess Lalla Aicha's graduation from primary school a year later in 1925, to press for further actions for girls' education. She recalled, "I made the achievement of Princess Lalla Aicha an example, an emblem, a symbol of the renaissance of the Moroccan woman." This strategy seems to have succeeded in bringing the issue of female education to the fore, as the reigning king, Mohamed V, began extending his consideration of his own daughters' education to that of all Moroccan girls. Publishing an article entitled "The Renaissance of the Moroccan Woman," Malika buttressed her argument by mentioning the encouragement of female education within Islam as well as from the monarch:

Oh brothers! The future of our girls is in your hands from now on...carry out the duties which are demanded of you by reason and by the law of Islam...[His Majesty] has insisted several times on the

necessity of teaching girls...in order for girls to be able to plumb their share of knowledge". (72)

Malika signed this article under a new pseudonym: *Bahitat al-Hadara* (The City Researcher), and was then amused by readers' confusion over whether she was a woman or a man.

By 1947, the first generation of girls were completing their primary education, but there were still no options available for them to pursue their studies further under either the Franco-Moroccan or Arab school systems. As Malika surveyed the situation facing Moroccan girls, she concluded that, "There was a wall in front of them." Malika, who at the time headed the women's department of the Istiqlal Party, mobilized a group of women and men who came up with a two-pronged strategy: to demand the opening of secondary Franco-Moroccan schools to girls and, as suggested by Malika herself, to establish a women's branch of the Qaraouine University. She later recalled:

... the idea that I had as a young girl; I had kept that idea with me all those years, and now was the time to put it into effect. My husband was the rector of the Qaraouine, and I told him that I wanted to launch this idea, for the party and for myself. He said to me, "Go ahead!" ...[W]e formed some committees; we prepared our demands...[a]nd then we formed a delegation to His Majesty Mohamed V and also to the [French] resident general. (72-73)

The delegation was mainly young women (aged 17-18). The French administration readily agreed to open high schools to girls (though it only financed a few) but resisted the delegation's demand for a women's branch of the Qaraouine. Undeterred, Malika personally met with the king who told her that if she could raise the funds, the women's section of the university would be established. Accepting the challenge, Malika and other women supporters donated their own money and jewelry to pay extra salaries to the Qaraouine professors to teach the girls and arranged funds for a space. Their tireless campaigning and self-sacrifice resulted in the inclusion of women into the university and the establishment of secondary schools for girls. The first woman to graduate from Qaraouine was Ftoma Kabbej whose father arranged and paid for the first premise. Looking back on the struggle, Malika attributed these gains to the persistence of the women activists:

...you know, when women enter into something, they don't play around. Women are capable of doing anything...When women want to do something, they're serious; they move straight ahead without any zigzags...It all started with a little girl who had an idea. But as I told you, when women want something, they have to push for it, to push hard until the door is opened. (74-5)

After the king went into exile in 1953, Malika played an even more visible role in nationalist politics. She noted that a key tactic she used to undertake her campaigning was to adopt the veil, purely as a pragmatic measure:

I did this on purpose in order to move about without being noticed...The day that Mohamed V came back, I took off my veil, and all the other women did the same. I said "Now women have played their role; now it is time to take off the veil. (77)

From Education to Politics in Malaya (1900-1940s) (Malaysia)

In Malaysia too, the contemporary struggle for women's rights started with an emphasis on women's access to formal education that then merged with nationalist anti-colonial movements. Even under British colonial rule, a sizeable number of Malays continued to provide secular and religious instruction to their daughters. The local intelligentsia, educated in the Middle East and greatly influenced by the Arab reform movement of that time, also encouraged education. Consequently, by the turn of the twentieth century, a group of professional educated women emerged "comprising mainly teachers (*guru*) and religious instructors (*uztazah*)."¹⁰⁴ The promotion of women's education went hand in hand with promoting the need for legal reforms and an attack on the practice of veiling.¹⁰⁵

A qualitative change in women's activism came about after a group of young Malay women from religious families was sent to be educated at the Diniyah Puteri secondary school in Sumatra (Indonesia) in the 1930s. These women were sent to the Diniyah Puteri because their families desired them to be educated but were opposed to the type of education being imparted by the Christian missionary English medium schools established by the colonial authorities. These schools catered largely to the elite with the "general intention [being] to train girls to be alert and quick-minded and suitable wives for Malay officers who have received higher education rather than seek any high standard of technical education".¹⁰⁶ Few Malay girls were allowed to study in these English-medium schools, most of whom belonged to urban families.

In contrast to English medium schools, the Diniyah Puteri was famous for its radical Arab tradition of teaching. Students were taught courses in Arabic but also in English and Dutch. Most of the teachers were local Indonesians who held strong nationalistic and anti-colonial views and the majority of students were children of political detainees (*anak-anak buangan politik*). In keeping with traditional education, students were taught the skills of public oratory and political debate along with Islamic law and philosophy. Not surprising then, that by the time the young women left school to return to their villages and towns in contemporary Malaysia, they did so with a well-developed anti-imperial political consciousness.

Three women stand out: Aishah Ghani, Puan Sakinah and Samsiah Fakeh. Interestingly enough, all three were from rural backgrounds. Led by Aishah, the three laid the foundation for the first women's movement in Malaysia AWAS or *Angkatan Wanita Sedar* (literally: The Conscious Women Movement) that brought together locally trained teachers and religious instructors. The women's component of PUTERA, a Malay coalition of left-wing groups, AWAS was warmly welcomed by the Parti Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya (PKMM or Malayan Malay National Party set up in October 1945). PUTERA and its non-Malay counterpart the AMCJA had jointly drafted the 'People's Constitution' of 1947 which, amongst other things, promised equal rights and opportunities for all regardless of race, creed and sex.¹⁰⁷

Where AWAS was the women's wing of PUTERA, the AMCJA's women's wing was the Women's Federation. Consisting of twelve women's groups, the Women's Federation focused on demanding suffrage for women and women's political representation. All these groups collaborated to mobilize Malays in an anti-colonial nationalist movement. Women consistently demanded equal rights and the end to negative traditional constraints, but none of their demands was written into any of the formal manifestos. Aishah Ghani later mused that women were brought into the struggle to "add strength to the party in order to push for independence."¹⁰⁸ She was unconsciously echoing the sentiments of Huda Shaarawi who, as we saw, arrived at the same conclusion and resigned in protest from the Wafd party. In Malaya, the struggle continued and when, in 1947, the British authorities banned the use of vehicles for a celebratory procession marking the first anniversary of the PKMM Youth Wing, the AWAS women responded by marching for six miles on foot under the leadership of Sakinah Junid.¹⁰⁹

In an attempt to both control the growing nationalism and curtail collaboration with the Malayan Communist Party (formed in 1930), the British colonial government banned several parties. AWAS, still under the leadership of Aishah was banned, as was PKMM. The women tried to save AWAS by merging with the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) – considered the only acceptable party by the colonial rulers. The merger was short-lived however; it collapsed within a year in 1946. Unfortunately, so too did AWAS, resulting in the three leaders going their own separate ways. A different type of women's group that joined and stayed with UMNO was the *Persatuan Kaum Ibu Selangor* or *Kuam Ibu* (KI) (Mothers Association of Selangor). The KI started off as a social welfare oriented women's organization but assumed a more political character around this period in response to British proposals for Malaya's future under the Malayan Union.¹¹⁰

The KI later evolved into the women's division of UMNO and Aishah Ghani joined the KI in 1950, serving as a cabinet minister in the UMNO-led government. Her companion and schoolmate, Puan Sakinah who led the six-mile

march, joined the Pam Malayan Islamic Party (that evolved into the PAS or Parti Islam Se Malaya) after she married its Chairman, Datuk Asri and became the president of its Women's Section. The third schoolmate, Samsiah Fakeh was the most radical. She continued her revolutionary struggle underground after she joined the Malayan Communist Party. Eventually she went into self-exile in China and was only allowed back in the country in the 1990s.

Over the years, the Kuam Ibu involved more grassroots women, resulting in a change in its leadership from women who merely advanced the aims of their menfolk, to women who started developing their own leadership qualities and agenda. This culminated in the establishment of the Pergerakan Kuam Ibu UMNO (UMNO Women's Movement) in 1949 when it became an official section of UMNO. Everywhere it attracted formally educated women – whether educated in Arabic or Malay – and professionally trained primary and secondary school teachers. While the majority of the women were rural, leaders continued to be predominantly urban women from amongst the education or media professionals.¹¹¹

The appointment of Tan Sri Fatimah Hashim as a representative of *Kuam Ibu* to the UMNO Supreme Council brought about an important change. Though Fatimah was from an elite background as well as being married into UMNO's political leadership, like Jahanara Shahnawaz, Fatimah understood the need for linkages with grassroots women and their participation.

Later on, in 1972, when the leadership of KI passed to Aishah (now Datin Paduka Aishah Ghani) this marked yet another change and the emergence of the first mass leader within the movement. Earlier, in 1970, Aishah had called for reforming the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Laws that she described as 'a thorn in the flesh' for Muslim women.¹¹² Attesting to the changed environment for women's activism, her statements led to enough public outrage that she clarified that it was not the Islamic laws but unjust interpretations that were the problem.

One woman who tried to instil more gender equality within UMNO was Khatijah Sidek. An Indonesian by birth, Khatijah had been active in Sumatra where she had established a Women's Military Volunteer Corps. She visited Malaysia in 1944 and became involved with a group of radical Malay intellectuals who were proposing a united front of Indonesians and Malays in the anti-colonial struggle. She joined UMNO's KI as the only viable means of mobilizing a women's movement in Malaya. She was finally accepted as an Kuam Ibu member in 1953 whereupon she immediately asked for greater female representation in the UMNO General Assembly, autonomy for the women's section and a separate women's youth section. Frustrated at the refusal of UMNO men to support some of her resolutions for gender equality, Khatijah suggested the need for an independent women's political party to ensure women's issues were properly addressed. She also demanded that more women candidates be fielded in the 1955 elections. Khatijah was not given a party ticket, partly because she was

born an Indonesian but also because she was still in bondage to the police in Singapore where she had been a political detainee from 1948-50 because of her anti-colonial activism.

Her radical views eventually led to Khatijah being dismissed from the party in 1956. She then joined PAS that swept elections in several states in 1959, but left because she felt the party had developed a provincial state mentality. She continued her activism for women by joining the Muslim Volunteer Organisation (PERKIM) in Johore.

Malaysian women entered into and then made their mark in the political arena in record time, but women were also involved in other struggles, especially the labour movements and their protests in at least Kuala Lumpur, Ulu Langat and Sembilan.¹¹³ Importantly, demands for workers' rights were complemented by women-specific demands. For instance, in 1939 one of the demands made by workers striking in the Klang Estate was for an end to sexual harassment of women workers. Women's active involvement is also evident from the fact that three women tappers who went on strike eventually lost their jobs through a court ruling in 1947.¹¹⁴ Politics was a key arena for women's activism, but it was far from the only arena in the early decades of the twentieth century. Women also took up very specific causes and found new and different tactics to advance their agenda.

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- 4 Mba, op.cit., 28-9.
- 5 Asma'u Joda, participant in the Feminism in the Muslim World Institute, (WLUML & CWGL), 1998.
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- 11 Mba, op. cit., 84.
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- 15 Ibid.
- 16 According to M.E. Noah in "Aba Women's Riot: Need for a Redefinition": "the original tax scheme drawn up by higher authorities did not include the taxation of women. But within official circles, such proposals were made. Some officials argued that there was no reason to exempt women because whenever any community raised money for any public purpose, women were often called upon to contribute." Cited in *The Women's Revolt of 1929: Proceedings of a National Symposium to Mark the 60th Anniversary of the Women's Uprising in South- Eastern Nigeria*, edited by Chike Dike, (Nelag and Co., Lagos: 1995), 107.
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- 29 Khawar Mumtaz and Farida Shaheed, *Women of Pakistan: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back?* (Vanguard Books, Lahore: 1987), 43. Originating after the fall of the Ottoman Empire to the British, the movement the movement sought to mobilise support for the reinstatement of the Caliphate or Khilafat in Turkey.
- 30 Azra Asghar Ali, *The Emergence of Feminism among Indian Muslim Women, 1920-1947*, (Oxford University Press, Karachi: 2000), 44.

- ³¹ Minault, "Purdah Politics," 252.
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- ³³ Azra Asghar Ali, 44.
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- ³⁵ Dr. Annie Besant (1847-1933), was a women's rights activist in England in the 1870s engaged in the suffragette movement who also advocated the use of birth control. In the 1890s, she became a supporter of Theosophy. Having moved to India in 1893, she joined local politics in 1914, lecturing against child marriage and the caste system and promoting girls' education. After her release by the British authorities, Besant was elected President of the Indian National Congress in 1917 and unanimously voted in as the President of the All-India Women's Association. With Sarojini Naidu and others, Besant campaigned for women's suffrage from 1917 onwards. See Margaret E. Cousins, *Indian Womanhood Today*, (Allahabad: Kitabistan, 1941), pp. 27-30; 35; 63.
- ³⁶ Cousins, 57-8. Cousins was herself a member of several women's delegations who presented their demands to the authorities on behalf of women.
- ³⁷ Shaista Suhrawardy Ikramullah, *From Purdah to Parliament*, (London: Cresset Press, 1963), 127. Her autobiography is now available in expanded and revised versions published the Oxford University Press in Karachi (1998) and New Delhi (2000).
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- ⁴⁰ Nadjé S. Al-Ali, *The Women's Movement in Egypt, with Selected References to Turkey*, (*Civil Society and Social Movements*, Programme Paper No. 5), United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, April 2002, 21.
- ⁴¹ DGSPW & UNDP *Women in Turkey 1999*, <www.undp.org.tr/docs/women_turkey.pdf>
- ⁴² Unfortunately we have not been able to trace the names of any of the activists of the Defence of Women's Rights. In part this may be due to the change in script – from Arabic to Roman – in 1928.
- ⁴³ Zeynep Şahin, *Philanthropic Women's NGOs as a way of Participation in the Public Sphere: Case of Women's Education and the Culture Foundation* (MA Thesis, Bogaziçi University, 2004).
- ⁴⁴ Feroz Ahmad, 85.
- ⁴⁵ DGSPW & UNDP, op. cit.
- ⁴⁶ Al-Ali, 21.
- ⁴⁷ Şahin. In 1926 a new Civil Code restored rights granted to women under the 1917 Decree, and, going further than the Decree, prohibited polygamy altogether. The Code also introduced marriage registration and marriage licenses and equal rights for women in court. Unfortunately, in the final debates the minimum age for marriage for girls was reduced to 14 years (for men it remained at 18). It also legalized the right of the husband to decide domicile – a discrimination that was only recently overturned.
- ⁴⁸ Feroz Ahmad, 88.
- ⁴⁹ Already at 30% in 1908, women's participation in the workforce was spurred first by the Balkan wars (1912-1913) during which women had been 'forcibly' recruited to replace men at the front, then by state employment in the telephone and postal services.
- ⁵⁰ Feroz Ahmad, 88-89.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 88.
- ⁵² Report submitted by the Turkish delegation to a Council of Europe Conference, 1997. <[http://www.coe.int/t/e/Human_Rights/Equality/08._Conference-Seminars/1._Ministerial_conferences/MEG-4\(1997\)20+1.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/e/Human_Rights/Equality/08._Conference-Seminars/1._Ministerial_conferences/MEG-4(1997)20+1.asp)>
- ⁵³ Sabiha Sertel, "Mebus Bayanlar Niye Bagirmiyorsunuz?" (Why Do You Keep Silent Ladies?), *Projektor*, March 1936.
- ⁵⁴ Feroz Ahmad, 90.

- ⁵⁵ Ibid.
- ⁵⁶ A biographical note on her husband, Zekeriya Sertel, says he lived in Azerbaijan and France; was allowed to return to Turkey in 1977, after which he contributed to the newspapers Cumhuriyet and Vatan. See the International Institute of Social History website, at <<http://www.iisg.nl/archives/gias/s/10802764.html>>. No further information is available about Sabiha.
- ⁵⁷ DGSPW & UNDP, op. cit.
- ⁵⁸ *Bashlanmak* was the ceremonial celebration of a child's entrance into learning. The child would sit in an open carriage with a gold-embroidered bag around his/her neck, containing an 'alphabet', and school children would walk alongside shouting prayers/hymns until they reached the school. At the school, the child would kneel in front of the teacher and recite the alphabet after her, then the kids ate sweets and each were given a coin by the family of the new student. See "The Memoirs of Halidé Edib" excerpted in *Women in Islam and the Middle East: A Reader*, edited by Ruth Roded, (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999), 200-1.
- ⁵⁹ Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries*, (The Hague: Institute of Social Studies, 1982), [1st edition], 33.
- ⁶⁰ Cited in Roded, 202-3.
- ⁶¹ The two incontrovertible points of the Turk Ojak's mandate stated that they would promote the cultural development of Turkish people and never engage in party politics.
- ⁶² Clubs to encourage mixed gatherings and socialising were also initiated in India in the 1920s, such as the Cosmopolitan Club in Lahore, which was strictly for women only – men were only admitted if accompanied by a female relative. See Ruth F. Woodsmall, *Women in the Changing Islamic System*, (Delhi: Bimla Publishing House, 1983), 88.
- ⁶³ Jayawardena, 38.
- ⁶⁴ Cited in Roded, 206.
- ⁶⁵ Mustafa Kemal, cited in Jayawardena, 39.
- ⁶⁶ Jayawardena, 38.
- ⁶⁷ The second volume of her memoirs appeared in Turkish in serialized form between 1959 and 1960. It was published in book form in 1960. Kandiyoti, p.37 n.49.
- ⁶⁸ Huda Shaarawi, *Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist*, translated and edited by Margot Badran (Virago Press, London: 1986), 13.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid., 42.
- ⁷⁰ For more on the concept of *ta'a*, see Chapter Seven, this volume.
- ⁷¹ Huda and her mother mistakenly believed that a legal document, which stated that Ali was not to take any other wife, effectively annulled his marriage to Huda. This prompted them to insist upon a separation. See Shaarawi, *Harem Years*, 60.
- ⁷² Ibid., 116-7.
- ⁷³ Shaarawi, cited in Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Princeton University Press, Princeton: 1995), 84.
- ⁷⁴ In 1923 the organization renamed itself the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship (IAW). Huda became the vice-president of the IAW in 1935.
- ⁷⁵ Badran, 91.
- ⁷⁶ Nawabiya Musa, Huda's contemporary and colleague, for instance, had stopped wearing the veil much earlier – see Chapter Six.
- ⁷⁷ Shaarawi, cited in Badran, 93.
- ⁷⁸ Ibid., 91.
- ⁷⁹ Ibid., 88.
- ⁸⁰ Shaarawi, cited in Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke, eds., *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis: 1990), 339-40.
- ⁸¹ Badran, *Feminists, Islam and Nation*, 218-9.
- ⁸² Mian Mir village has since been absorbed into the city of Lahore, Pakistan.

- ⁸³ See Shaista Suhrawardy Ikramullah, *From Purdah to Parliament*, (Cresset Press, London: 1963).
- ⁸⁴ Jahanara Shah Nawaz, *Father and Daughter: A Political Autobiography*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford: 2002), 8.
- ⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.
- ⁸⁶ Minault, *Secluded Scholars*, 271.
- ⁸⁷ Shah Nawaz, 31.
- ⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.
- ⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.
- ⁹⁰ Shah Nawaz, quoted in *The Statesman*, 17 March, 1940. Cited in Ayesha Khan, *Rhetoric and Reform: Feminism Among Indian Muslims, 1900-1940*, (ASR, Lahore: [no date]), pp. 2-3.
- ⁹¹ Minault, *Secluded Scholars*, 289.
- ⁹² Shah Nawaz, 47.
- ⁹³ Minault, *Secluded Scholars*, 272.
- ⁹⁴ Shah Nawaz in the September 21, 1954 Constituent Assembly session, cited in Khawar Mumtaz, "Political Participation: Women in National Legislatures in Pakistan," in *Shaping Women's Lives: Laws, Practices and Strategies in Pakistan*, ed. Farida Shaheed, et al., (Shirkat Gah, Lahore: 1998), 341.
- ⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 210.
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- ⁹⁷ Nurul Huda Abul Monsur, "Participation of Women in Dhaka University: The Early Phase," *The Dhaka University Studies*, Part A, Vol. 47, No. 1 (January 1990), 192.
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- ¹⁰⁰ We would like to thank Sultana Kamal for biographical information on Leela Naag. Also, see the entry under 'Nag, Lila' in *Banglapedia: National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh*, Vol.7, edited by Sirajul Islam, (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2003). Additional material in Bangla may be found in Ajoy Roy et al, eds., *Leela Naag: Shotobarsher Sraddhanjali* (Dhaka: Shahitya Prokash, 2003).
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- ¹⁰² See Chapter Two, this volume.
- ¹⁰³ There is no clarity about the exact date the Party was formed. Dates given vary between 1939 and 1947. It seems likely that the Party was established around the time that the Independence Manifesto was drafted and presented, i.e. 1944.
- ¹⁰⁴ Wazir-Jahan Karim, "Malay Women's Movements, Leadership and Processes of Change" cyclostyled copy of paper printed in *International Social Science Journal*, No.78, 1983, p.4.
- ¹⁰⁵ Maznah Mohammad "Women in the Centre, Women at the Edge and the Democratisation of Politics" paper sent by the author. p. 2.
- ¹⁰⁶ A.C. Baker, *Annual Report of Kelantang*, 1938, p. 45 cited in Mohammad.
- ¹⁰⁷ Mohammad, 3.
- ¹⁰⁸ Virginia Dancz, p. 86 *Women and Party Politics in Peninsular Malaysia*, Oxford University Press. Singapore: 1987, cited in Mohammad.
- ¹⁰⁹ Ahmad Boestamam *Carrying the Path to the Summit*, (Athens Ohio, Ohio University Press), cited in Maznah Mohammad, 61.
- ¹¹⁰ Mohammad, 2.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 10.

¹¹² Ibid., 3.

¹¹³ Rohana Ariffin 'Hidden From History: The Struggle of Malaysian Women to Improve Their Position', *Herizons*, September 1994, cited in Mohamad, 4.

¹¹⁴ Mohammad, 4. Mohammad points out that in these early decades, the different strands of women's activism were often divided along ethnic grounds, reducing the general visibility of women's activism.

Chapter Seven

Forging New Identities in the Twentieth Century

Women's self-assertions took on many shapes in the first half of the twentieth century. Where some women took up the struggle for broad general rights in the political arena, others – though often engaged in nationalist movements - focused on specific issues. And, in the process of refashioning their own lives and those of others, women created new ways of intervening. Challenges to the restrictions imposed by *purdah* intensified, with women opposing not only the physical veil but also all the attendant limitations segregation and seclusion imposed on their lives. Some women were even killed in the process. Solidarity grew however, and women came to each other's support across identities of class, religion and nationality. The contours of gender roles started being reshaped by women's collective actions but also through personal interventions and assertions, including defying court orders of 'obedience'. Rebellion included trenchant critiques of the existing social order. Thanks to earlier activism, a second generation of women activists emerged in a number of places, including in the Arab world gravitating around Cairo and the Indian sub-continent.

Nabawiya Musa (1886-1951) Egypt

Nabawiya Musa, a prominent Egyptian feminist, was born in 1886 near the village of Zagazig, in the Eastern Delta region of Egypt. A middle class woman, Nabawiya fought to obtain her own education and then to pass it on to others.¹ Nabawiya's father was a military man who died in action. Refusing to remarry,

her mother supported Nabawiya and her brother from her late husband's pension. She took the children to Cairo to further her son's education. It was there that Nabawiya first gained a rudimentary education, learning at home with her brother's assistance. Nabawiya memorized the Qur'an and began interpreting the scriptures for herself. She went on to attend the newly opened Abbas Primary School in Cairo, passing the examinations with distinguished marks in 1903.²

Three years later, Nabawiya enrolled herself in the Teacher's Training Program at the Saniyah School. When her mother was informed, she told Nabawiya, "If that's true it is the end of you and me," to which the headstrong Nabawiya replied, "I have been admitted, and am starting school. If you stick to your refusal I'll enter as a boarder and pay my expenses out of the pension of my father."³

Nabawiya graduated from the Saniyah School in 1906 and then returned to the Abbas Primary School, this time as a teacher. She was furious when she discovered that women were being paid less than male teachers and took immediate steps to rectify this discrimination. She recalled:

My salary was six pounds. At that time the salary for the graduates from the Higher Teacher's Training School for Men was ten pounds a month. I was unhappy that the government treated us [women] in our pay the way that inheritance operates, that is, giving women half the amount men receive. I don't question that it may be all right concerning inheritance because what one inherits is not through one's own effort. But for the woman to do that same work as the man and receive half his salary is unjust. I was furious. I taught as the young men taught...Why did the Ministry [of Education] discriminate, paying them not only one or two pounds more but nearly double what they paid me? I worked with great effort so that I would be equal to the man in jobs and everything else.⁴

Told that the reason men earned more than women teachers was because men held secondary school certificates, Nabawiya determined to obtain one. However, colonial Egypt had no secondary schools for girls at the time. Nabawiya petitioned the Ministry of Education to allow her to sit for the baccalaureate exam without having attended secondary school. Duly granted permission to sit for the exam, she passed in the top third. Nabawiya later recalled the reaction of the male students who were also taking the baccalaureate exam in 1907. They had heard that for the first time a girl would be sitting the exam, but they knew nothing of whom she was:

I used to take the Sabtiyah train from the Abbas School, which passed the Saniyah School and then went to Darb al-Gamamiz. The male students living in Sabtiyah and nearby neighborhoods rode the same train. This tram did not have a special compartment for women, and so my brother accompanied me coming and going. We would sit at the back of the tram

not to attract the attention of the male students but their talk poured over my head. Some of them vowed to beat the girl student if she failed in the examination. And of course she would fail. She applied to sit for the examination only to show her beauty and charms. They paid no attention to me because I was not the person of their imagination. They thought that I was a frivolous, showy girl. The girl sitting at the back of the tram was modest, and no one would think for a moment that she could even read. When my brother heard what they said he smiled at me but I was careful not to answer his smile with one of my own. I got off the tram one stop before the Saniyah School and entered the school from the back door because I knew that male students had gathered in a crowd outside the front door of the Saniyah School to catch sight of me... I think I was the thirty-fourth out of two hundred who passed... Of course, I didn't have any fellow women students. It was not until 1928 [i.e., after Egyptian independence] that the next Egyptian woman would sit for the baccalaureate examination. My success was big news. The papers published the story under large headings with bold letters such as 'First Girl Student Wins the Baccalaureate Diploma' and "Egyptian Female Superiority." Had I conquered France at that time my name would not have reverberated more... It seems that those who corrected my examination were afraid someone might think that Nabawiyah Musa was a man, and decided to add a title to the name that would dispel any doubts, and so they wrote Sitt [Lady] Nabawiyah.⁵

Having obtained her certification, Nabawiya earned the right to be paid the same salary as the men – setting a precedent for equal pay for women and men that was later adhered to in post-independence Egypt.⁶

The next barrier Nabawiya tried to cross was entering the Egyptian University soon after it opened in 1908.⁷ In this she was unsuccessful, but, although she could not enrol as a student, the University did hire her to teach in the extracurricular 'Section for Women'. Nabawiya's lectures were reprinted in the *al-Ahram* newspaper in 1912. Her career progressed from teacher and lecturer to headmistress, then administrator for numerous schools under the Ministry of Education. Eventually, in 1924, she became the chief inspector of girls' schools. Two years later, however, she was fired by the Ministry over a dispute which, in today's terminology, would be called sexual harassment. Undeterred, she established her own private schools, and continued to combine teaching with administration.

Contributing to newspapers and journals under the pseudonym *Damir Hayy fi Jism Raqiq* (A Living Conscience in a Delicate/Unfettered Body), she wrote of female education and women's rights. At the height of the Egyptian independence movement, Nabawiya published her nationalist-feminist manifesto, *al-Marah wa al-Amal* (The Woman and Work) in 1920. Her numerous books

include treatises on girls' education, poetry and a novel. In 1937 she started her own journal, entitled *Majallat al-Fatah* (The Magazine of the Young Woman) in which she began to publish her memoirs in serial form starting in 1938.⁸

A nationalist, Nabawiya insisted upon teaching in the Egyptian state schools rather than in the British educational system, though she did not always agree with the status of girls' education in Egypt. Like others before and after her, Nabawiya did not advocate female education 'for the sake of it'. She viewed education as an indispensable tool for girls to become productive members of society. She argued that girls should receive an educational curriculum which was "equal but more" than that for boys, meaning that in addition to the same academic subjects as boys, girls should also learn domestic skills and trades.⁹ She also believed the only way local women could compete effectively with European women in the job market was by acquiring good education. Nabawiya worked closely with other feminists, and she accompanied Huda Shaarawi to Rome to attend the International Women's Alliance conference in 1923.

A firm champion of female employment, Nabawiya insisted that biological determinism was an illogical rationale for limiting women's opportunities. She elaborated the absurdity of this position in "*Women and Work*" in which she reasoned that:

Men have spoken so much of the difference between men and women that they would seem to be two separate species...Human beings are animals governed by the same rules of nature regarding reproduction, growth, decline, and death...If it were true that the instincts of the male cat were different from the instincts of the female cat it would also be true that there would be a difference between man and woman in mental gifts. No scientist has claimed that the female cat likes to jump and play and devours mice while the male cat is reasonable [and] serious...Likewise, nobody has said that the male dog is honest and intelligent and the female dog dishonest and stupid.. No one has asserted that because the male mouse is stronger than the female mouse, he should be her life guardian...The same applies to the man and the woman. While she is smaller in size and strength she can take care of all her needs. She is independent of him and does not need him more than he needs her. She can do everything a man can...¹⁰

Nabawiya refused to marry, choosing instead to concentrate on her education and her work. As a middle-class woman, avoiding matrimony was easier for Nabawiya than, for instance, the upper-class Huda Shaarawi who was obliged to marry. She saw her ability to exercise this right as stemming from her ability to earn for herself that made her financially independent. As she said, marriage "repelled me, and perhaps my leaving home at the age of thirteen to go to school was because of my hatred for marriage. If I had not worked I could not have remained unmarried."¹¹

Similarly, Nabawiya had greater freedom to discard the veil than her feminist contemporaries amongst the elite. Amongst the latter, Huda Shaarawi and Malak Hifni Nasif first used the veil as a means of entering the public arena to disseminate their feminist objectives and then discarded the veil in public protest in 1923. Nabawiya, on the other hand, simply stopped wearing the veil in 1909, when she went to teach at the primary school.¹² She argued that ‘veiling’ and ‘unveiling’ (*hijab* and *sufur*) were “academic terms” which ignored the fact that though rural women could unveil without their modesty being brought into question, the modesty of wealthy and/or urban women was often equated with and judged solely on the presence or absence of the veil.¹³

Nabawiya’s professional career abruptly ended after she was arrested for publicly protesting against the Egyptian government’s collusion with the British in 1942. Helped by a pro-feminist lawyer, Nabawiya was acquitted but her journal was closed and the career of this rebellious pioneer for Egyptian women’s education and rights came to a close. She died in retirement at the age of 65.¹⁴

Atiya Fyzee (1877-1967) India/Pakistan

Born in 1877, Atiya Fyzee was the daughter of Hassan Effendi Fyzee Hindli. An Indian ambassador to Turkey and Yemen, who travelled extensively in five continents and spoke nineteen languages, her father imparted his cosmopolitan outlook and liberal thinking to his children. The family was part of the Tayabji community established in Gujarat by the emissaries of Sayyida al-Hurra Arwa of Yemen in the eleventh century.¹⁵ From the beginning, the community maintained the tradition of educating girls started in the Fatimid dynasty. The Fyzee family of Bombay (now Mumbai) was known for being exceedingly progressive in social matters, promoting both gender equity and religious tolerance. Atiya and her two sisters, Zohra Fyzee and Nazli Fyzee, came out of *purdah* in the late nineteenth century, were amongst the first Indian women to study abroad, and devoted their time to women’s issues and education. In 1906, Atiya sailed to England for higher education on a government grant. Atiya Fyzee’s letters home about her experience of travelling to and studying in England appeared in different issues of *Tehzib-e-Niswan*. Nazli went on to marry the Nawab of Janjira, a princely patron of women’s educational institutions.¹⁶ Though all three sisters were active, Atiya seems to have instigated their more unorthodox methods of activism that centred around education. The Fyzee sisters worked especially to improve the status of Muslim women but saw this as part of the broader parameters of Indian society. As Atiya stated:

The social customs of India though they have nothing to do with religion are held paramount in Indian life, and one is forced to abide by the will, wishes, and dictates of the family. This method has caused the ruin of a number of men and women of genius... I am conscious of one or two instances of Indian girls of delicate and refined temperament and

intellectual capacity, [who] are marked out for such sacrifice, only because the family wishes her to be married to someone... their one concern is that she would be held respectable before such society. Her own life has no value; all matters [for] the elders [are] to satisfy the curiosity of the unthinking herd... I am appealing to my community to take this as a warning, and think seriously before interfering with young lives.¹⁷

Atiya and Zohra both contributed articles to the women's journal, *Tehzib-e-Niswan*.¹⁸ Both were active in the *Anjuman-i-Khawatin-i-Islam* (All-India Muslim Ladies' Conference) formed in 1914,¹⁹ and both attended the inaugural celebrations that coincided with the opening of the first girls' student hostels at Aligarh.²⁰ The *Anjuman* promoted female education and women's rights, including an end to child-marriages and a minimum age for marriage (sixteen years). Though Hindu women had been fighting against child-marriages since the 1890s, this was the first Muslim group to actively denounce the practice, arguing that early marriages cut short girls' education.²¹ Zohra further used the women's magazine *Khatun* as a platform to advocate consensual marriages.²² In 1934 she wrote a book titled *Tandrushti Hazar Naimat* (Health is Wealth), in which she addressed women's health care based on her experiences of travelling in the west.

The sisters' active promotion of Muslim women's education in India took different forms. They worked closely with Shaikh Abdullah and his wife Wahid Jahan who went on to open the Aligarh Girls' School in 1906, the first girls' school in Aligarh. Zohra later patronized the School and, before that, when Abdullah travelled to Bombay to raise funds, the sisters helped organize an exhibition of women's handicrafts. The exhibition was a success: both promoting women's work and raising money. More controversial was the meeting of Muslim women the sisters organized to coincide with the 1905 Mohammadan Educational Conference (MEC) in Aligarh. (This idea of a parallel meeting foreshadowed the strategy adopted by women activists more than seventy years later, of running 'parallel' NGO meetings to official United Nations Conferences.) Originally, the sisters intended to hold the meeting at the same venue. In the end, to avoid any unpleasantness that might result from a clash of the women's parallel conference and the official one, the women's meeting was relocated at the last moment from the Aligarh campus to a private home. Zohra presided over the meeting, and though there were only about forty women in attendance, it was the first time that *purdah*-observing Muslim women from around India convened separately to discuss women's issues.²³

Begam Wahid Jahan (See section on Rasheed Jahan below) gave a welcoming speech defending Muslim women's education and referencing various precedents. She argued that both Turkish and Egyptian societies had advanced after improving female education, and that the Prophet Muhammad (ص) had

enjoined women to become educated.²⁴ She asserted that, “when women meet among themselves, there will be more solidarity...now there is a division between educated and uneducated women.”²⁵ In the meantime, her husband, Shaikh Abdullah (who had been appointed the Secretary of Women’s Education for the 1905 MEC), used the occasion of the official MEC conference to speak of the efforts he and his wife were undertaking to promote female education through their magazine, *Khatun*, and their proposal to open a girls’ school. Thanking the Begum of Bhopal for her generous grant towards this project, Abdullah successfully appealed for further financial support.²⁶

Though the MEC had apparently included women as early as 1903, they were inexplicably excluded from the MEC proceedings in 1924.²⁷ An incensed Atiya decided to protest women’s exclusion at MEC’s Silver Jubilee in 1925. She and Zohra journeyed from Bombay to Aligarh, with the express purpose of gate-crashing the Jubilee. At the Conference proceedings, Atiya started delivering a passionate speech on women’s rights from behind the curtain that demarcated the women’s enclosure, and continued speaking until she was asked to come up to the podium. Though Atiya had stopped wearing the veil previously, appearing unveiled during a public function was seen as deliberately provocative. In her sarcastic speech Atiya castigated the Aligarh College – the premium education institution for Muslims - for ignoring both women’s situation and education:

Brothers and Sisters... please take a moment to reflect, is this really a day to celebrate? Has Aligarh truly fulfilled its responsibilities? .. Aligarh has not given up its narrow-minded, self-congratulatory one-sided policy. It has deceived itself and also the public

Today, you must take an oath that you will not sit still until you rectify the mistake of the injustice meted out by you [to women] by opening universities, madrassahs and schools in every city, town and village of India so that not a single woman can be found who has been denied the right of education and the right to educate her children... Until you do so, you will not succeed. This is the one and only solution to the problems that exist.²⁸

This intervention eliminated the exclusion of women; women participated fully and in subsequent sessions, even chaired the sessions. Atiya’s unprecedented actions caused a stir as can be read in a letter received by educational reformer, Sayyid Husain Bilgrami in 1926, from a friend who wrote:

I prophesy that in the course of the next generation, [purdah] is bound to be given up, whatever the orthodox may say or do. Although you and I may not live to see it, the younger generation is bent upon getting rid of the parda [sic]. You know what Atiya Begum of Bombay did at the Educational Conference at Aligarh? She with some other Muslimahs [Muslim women] cared nothing for our [conference secretary] Sadrus

Sudoor's strong protest but came up openly and got up on the dais, unveiled and delivered a strong speech demanding equal rights with men to go about on God's earth freely and openly. Another lady also delivered a strong speech and the poor Sadrus Sudoor as Secretary of the Conference did his best to send those Sufferagettes [sic] back into their place screened up for them. Failing in his efforts he left the hall himself! This movement among our ladies of the younger generation is very strong and men will have to give way in the end...Turkish women and Egyptians have led the way and I think after a time of misuse of liberty, things must settle down and parda [sic] will become ancient history.²⁹

In 1912 Atiya had married an artist nine years her junior. She had met (Samuel) Fyzee Rahamin, a South Indian Jewish convert to Islam, in London. The couple actively promoted cultural events, such as staging a play entitled *Invented Gods*, dealing with the status of women in India which Fyzee Rahamin scripted and Atiya performed in.³⁰ They settled in Karachi and established the Fyzee-Rahamin Art Gallery. Following her husband's death, Atiya established the *Aiwan-i-Riffat* museum in his honour. In 1932, the letters Atiya wrote home about her experiences travelling and living in England were collated and published under the title *Zamana-e-Tehsil* (The Years of Education).³¹

After the creation of Pakistan in 1947, Atiya supported a secular state and opposed pan-Islamism, stating that "charity begins at home".³² In Karachi, then the capital of Pakistan, Atiya acted as an informal diplomat, entertaining dignitaries from across South Asia and the Muslim world. She was also the subject of curiosity and scandal when it came to light that she had been in friendly correspondence with the scholar Shibli Nomani.³³ The poetic language in these letters was mistaken for a romantic involvement.

In later life, Atiya became an informal counsellor to women confronting unhappy marital situations. Deploring the veil, she was once introduced to a young woman wearing a *burqa*, to which she exclaimed that women need not hide their faces, as it was men who had greater reason to be ashamed of their deeds.³⁴

Zuleikha Buransheva (1920s) USSR (Uzbekistan)

Zuleikha Buransheva was born in Rostov-on-the-Don (present-day Uzbekistan) in the opening years of the twentieth century. Her generation lived through the upheaval of suddenly being absorbed into the Soviet Union. It was a period that saw many Central Asian women caught between restrictive cultural traditions and the new expectations of womanhood; between prevailing local customs and new Communist Party dictates: one being that all people – men and women – should work. This demanded a radical shift in societies where women's primary role had been a domestic one, centred on marriage and motherhood.

Zuleikha Buransheva was one of many Muslim women in the 1920s who rose to the challenge of her times and reached out to help others. Zuleikha herself left an oppressive marriage and joined the Communist Party. Subsequently she encouraged and supported many young women to pursue their dreams of independence and self-realization in the midst of a clash of old and new forces in Soviet Central Asian society, characterised by one contemporary American woman as a “war to the knife between the village leaders and the mullahs, against the modernists, the unveilers of women.”³⁵

In the early 1920s, Communist Party work among Central Asian women was mainly carried out by Russian women. By 1924, some local women, like Zuleikha, had joined the Party’s female sections (*zhenotdel*), but few Muslim women joined the All-Union Lenin’s Young Communist League (*Komsomol*).³⁶ To support women, the Communist government introduced a number of measures: in Bukhara, Infant Welfare Clinics were established and women were elected to city councils – some even joined the Central Executive Committee in the Uzbek region. Government-run collective workshops (production units) allowed women to elect their own management committees, and classes held at the close of each working day taught women to read and write.³⁷

At the same time, the Communist Party encouraged women to discard their traditional veils (*parandja*), prohibiting working women from wearing it. The *Khudjum* or ‘Offensive Against Purdah’ of the late 1920s coincided with Lenin’s New Economic Policy that started in 1921 and continued through the 1920s. Slogans from the *Khudjum* included: “In the Party and Komsomol there is no place for those opposed to women’s emancipation” and “In the land of the Soviets there is no place for oppression, slavery and violence against women.”³⁸

In the meantime, indigenous women formed their own strategies for women’s advancement, based on their own experiences. Fatima-apa Buransheva, a contemporary Uzbek woman, remembers her mother’s history during the early years of Soviet Communism in Central Asia:

*My mother Zuleikha Buransheva was born in Rostov-on-the-Don. In 1924 she was introduced to my father, who had studied outside Uzbekistan, married him and went to live with him in Andijan. She found herself in a patriarchal family, where she had all the responsibilities of a daughter-in-law, was under the complete control of her mother-in-law, and was expected to serve and obey her husband. To end her slave-like existence she left her husband and went to work in a school, joined the [Communist] Party, and then worked as a women’s organizer. She became the organizer of a silk-weaving artel and we still have photographs of her with the women working there.*³⁹

From personal experience she was familiar with Muslim women’s lack of rights and took an active part in encouraging girls to work in the artel so

they could become economically independent and determine their own destinies. Many of them discarded the parandja during the Khudjum.

In 1936, Mother became the organizer and teacher of a training centre preparing cadres for artels in Andijan city. She understood that it took great courage for girls to work or study in defiance of their parents, so she tried to help them settle in, especially helping those who needed to find somewhere to live. Girls who came from the village didn't even know how to find basic necessities. They were intimidated by people, who regarded them as if they were somehow rotten fruit or disobedient, and they really needed support.

Many of them had left home to avoid being forced to marry older men, or in the hope of securing an education or of leading a fulfilling life. Many dreamed of finding true happiness. But in reality, life could give them little except poverty and hard work. Women like my mother gave them genuine sympathy and moral support, and this became for them a raft in the sea of life...

In the years before the Second World War, Mother worked in the Party's regional committee but during the war she went out to the rural areas, working in the district committee. I remember how winter and summer she went riding out to the kolkhoz [collective farm] to organize help for the front...After the war she was brought into the Party regional committee where she headed the section dealing with Party work among women...⁴⁰

Many women welcomed the opportunity to unveil presented by the *Khudjum*. In the villages surrounding Bukhara, one popular song women sang was:

*Flower of the East...the hour has come
To cast off the veil and the paranja!
Hear me, you learners of the Red East!
For a thousand years you slept in the darkness under the yoke.
When you awake, when you rise from the deep sleep,
The Workers of the World await you.⁴¹*

One instance of mass unveiling occurred on March 7th, 1928. The event was marked by speeches, meetings, and torchlight processions. Women tore off their veils, burning them and tossing them into the street. Still, though many found it easy to unveil in the excitement of a public demonstration, many women had qualms immediately afterwards. Enough women feared the potential reactions of male relatives to their unveiling for women to write the following mocking song that gained currency:

*On the seventh of March I tore off my veil
But before I reached home*

*I bought three new paranjas
To veil myself more darkly.⁴²*

It did not help that the *Khudjum* also led to extreme acts such as burning the effigies of Muslim women at one International Women's Day (March 8th) meeting. Such acts could only have intensified polarity over the veil. Many Muslim women who participated in the *Khudjum* did, indeed, experience violence at the hands of their male relatives. In 1928 there were 226 registered cases of women's abduction and murder; a year later, this figure doubled.⁴³ Responding to the increase of violence against women, the Central Government declared wife-murder to be 'counter-revolutionary' – apparently they could convict perpetrators for 'counter-revolutionary' acts but not for the murder of one's spouse.⁴⁴ Given the conflicting social pressures experienced, it is not surprising that many women who abandoned the *parandja* at Party meetings later decided – or were forced – to take it up again.

Still, women used the opportunity presented by the *Khudjum* to leave *purdah* and become educated in significant numbers. In 1927, at the All-Russian Congress of Workers and Peasant Women (attended by women from across the USSR), a peasant woman from Dagestan, in the Caucasus Mountains, stood up during the proceedings and announced:

Comrades! Freedom and equality are not enough; we must learn, we need more schools, many more schools. It is dark in the mountains, and the way is difficult...and the men are less enlightened than we who have thrown aside the veil.⁴⁵

Ultimately, women from the diverse Muslim-majority regions of the USSR, discarded the veil and entered the workforce for both political and personal reasons. Some found support in women such as Zuleikha Buransheva; other less fortunate ones met with criticism and violence. The story of Zulfia Khan is tragic yet typical of the period, illustrating not only the fierce resistance women encountered during the *Khudjum*, but also the strength they gained from asserting their rights. In her village, Zulfia campaigned against child marriage, polygamy and the veil. In retaliation, her husband, aided by a group of local mullahs, killed her by burning down the house in which she was sleeping. However, the women at the teacher's training school (who related the story) preserved the memory of their 'Comrade' through song:

*O woman, the world will not forget you, and your fight for freedom,
Your flame – let them not think that in you were consumed.
Your flame in which you were burned is a torch in our hands
You fought against the darkness and they put you down in the dark;
But your cry: 'Away with the veil,' remains in the sun.⁴⁶*

Sharifa Hamid Ali (1930s-1940s) India

Begum Sharifa Hamid Ali was another member of the Tayabji clan of Bombay, established by emissaries of Sayyida al-Hurra Arwa of Yemen in the eleventh century. Like her relatives, the Fyzee sisters, Sharifa spoke out for women's rights. Married to Hamid Ali, a District Magistrate in the Bombay Presidency, Sharifa was more stridently nationalistic than her husband. She was also a dedicated social worker, and was particularly interested in girls' education and the uplift of village women. Sharifa's most interesting strategy, however, was to suggest precise legal reforms, including the drafting of a model marriage contract incorporating greater rights for women in marriage.

As president of the All-India Women's Muslim Ladies' Conference in the late 1930s, Sharifa proposed women be given the right of *talaq-i-tafwid*,⁴⁷ or 'delegated right of divorce.' The proposed right would allow the wife to divorce from her husband if certain conditions, stated and agreed upon in the marriage contract, were violated. Her proposal was grounded in the Muslim jurisprudential principle that a couple intending to marry may stipulate specific conditions in their marriage contract. As we saw in Chapter One, women had since long used this contractual measure to oblige their husbands to remain monogamous (including restricting them from taking concubines). Sharifa argued that a couple committed themselves to the conditions stipulated in the marriage contract by signing it. Therefore, if subsequently the husband violated the conditions, the wife should have the legal authority to divorce her husband.⁴⁸

As an example, she drew up a model *nikahnama*, or marriage contract, outlining stipulations and safeguards that women could choose to incorporate. Suggested clauses included restricting polygamy and the securing of a woman's *mahr* (dower) regardless of whether or not she initiated the divorce. The grounds for divorce which Sharifa Hamid Ali's contract spells out were:

- (a) *That the Husband failed to observe and perform the duties imposed upon a husband by Muslim Personal Law, namely,*
 - (i) *kindness in general behaviour and treatment,*
 - (ii) *the fulfilment of conjugal rights, and*
 - (iii) *the maintenance and support of the Wife.*
- (b) *That the Husband has married or gone through the form of marriage with another woman after the date hereof.*
- (c) *That the temperaments of the Husband and the Wife are incompatible or otherwise the Husband is unable to keep the Wife happy.*
- (d) *The grounds mentioned in Section 2 of the Dissolution of Muslim Marriages Act 1939 or any of them.*

Section 3 of her model *nikahnama* asserts the wife's authority to initiate a divorce based on such grounds. It stated:

*The said power to divorce shall be exercised by the Wife declaring before any two witnesses that in accordance with the power derived by her from this agreement she divorces the Husband and the said marriage shall stand dissolved as from the date of the declaration.*⁴⁹

Upon meeting Sharifa Hamid Ali during the Second World War, an Englishwoman commented that the Begum was "like a cement between the women of the two major communities [Muslims and Hindus] during the last 15 years," and that she had "made a popular unofficial Ambassadors of India in her tour through Egypt, Turkey, the Central European countries, and England." One of Sharifa's comments that gained notoriety in the early years of World War II was: "We have suffered from many Hitlers in the home of every generation."⁵⁰

Ta'a (obedience) in Marriage (1940) Sudan

In the early 1940s, legal records indicate the persistent activism and self-assertion of women whose names have been lost to us but who remain symbols of women's resistance. One example is of a sixteen year-old Sudanese defying even court orders to return to her husband under the pretext of *ta'a* (or wife's obedience). Eventually, supported by her father, this teenager successfully challenged the constraints of marital obedience.

The obligations owed between Muslim spouses vary in different social and legal contexts. The concept of *ta'a*, found in some schools of Muslim jurisprudence, refers to a wife's obedience to her husband within marriage. It is bound to the idea of *nafaqa*, or maintenance, which is the husband's reciprocal obligation towards his wife. Thus, support and cohabitation are linked under the law. Conversely, a wife who is disobedient cannot expect her husband to maintain her.⁵¹ If either party feels that this marital contract has been violated, they are free to bring the case to a legal court. In theory, the law can intervene if the husband has refused to maintain his wife, just as it can intervene if the wife has been disobedient to her husband.

Court records show that on February 2nd, 1940 a sixteen-year-old Sudanese woman, who had recently fled her marital home, was issued a decree by the local Sharia Court of Shendi, stipulating that she must remain obedient to her husband. In pursuance of this decree, she was returned to her husband's home by force five days later.

On August 17th of that year, the couple returned to court where the husband complained that his wife had again been disobedient to him. A second decree was issued, urging the woman to demonstrate *ta'a* towards her husband, but she left his house a second time. Two weeks later, a third decree was issued by the Sharia

Court insisting that the woman obey her husband and reside with him. Once more, she refused to follow the order.

Over the course of these numerous appearances in court, it became apparent that not only was the young wife expected to share her husband's house with his second wife and her child, she had been "badly treated and frightened by the husband." This young woman's father appeared with her in court and supported her refusal to return to her husband.

Social distinctions and class prerogatives also played a role in this case. The husband in question was the *muezzin* of the local mosque while the girl and her father were of a lower social class. Nonetheless, the Court decided that, "this does not justify the handing over of the girl by using undue force," which the husband's family had admitted to, and which seemed to be "the only means of execution of this decree."

The practice of returning disobedient wives to their husbands is known as *bayt eta'a*, and may have been introduced under Ottoman imperial rule. *Bayt eta'a* can be translated as 'obedience to the house.' In many regions it has been enforced as *sharia* law, though it is not necessarily Islamic in origin. Women's rights activists in the Sudan, campaigning against this practice of forcibly returning wives during the 1950s and 1960s, managed to have the law reformed in 1969. The practice was finally abolished in the Sudan (and Egypt) in the 1980s.⁵² This achievement was made possible by the consistent resistance of countless women such as the young sixteen-year old in 1940.

Abida Sultaan (1913-2002) India / Pakistan

Abida Sultaan, heir to an unbroken dynasty of women rulers that spanned more than a century, was born in 1913 in the Indian princely state of Bhopal during the reign of her grandmother, Sultan Jahan Begum. Abida's own mother was not quite thirteen when she gave birth and considered too young to care for her first born, so it was the formidable Sultan Jahan Begum who reared the young Abida, training her to be a future ruler. Abida, a *Rebel Princess*, as she calls herself in her autobiography,⁵³ inherited the independent streak and strong will of her women ancestors.⁵⁴ The first Begum, or ruler, Qudsia Begum, declared herself regent for her infant daughter in 1819. Forestalling anticipated critics, she issued a document attesting her right to govern and ensured this was signed by the state *Qadi* and the state *Mufti*, as well as by members of the nobility and her own family.⁵⁵

Muslim rulers of a Hindu majority state, the Begums all promoted communal harmony and supported education. Sikandar Begum, who began her rule in the mid-nineteenth century, was known not only for her physical and intellectual ferocity, but also for her visionary reforms. These included establishing schools for girls and a nominated parliament.⁵⁶ The first Muslim ruler - male or female -

to go on pilgrimage to Mecca from India, Sikander reasoned that Islam did not prohibit women from political rule, nor did the Qur'an prescribe purdah.⁵⁷

Sultan Jahan Begum raised Abida with 'draconian discipline.'⁵⁸ However, Sultan Jahan had the best of intentions for her granddaughter: in 1928, after a protracted dispute, she succeeded in persuading the British Crown to officially recognize the fifteen-year-old Abida Sultaan as Heir Apparent. Sultan Jahan then immediately abdicated in favour of her son, Abida's father, Hamidullah Khan who became the last Nawab of Bhopal. After Abida's marriage in 1933, her father appointed her his Chief Secretary.

Sultan Jahan Begum, a forward thinking woman in many ways, remained in purdah throughout her reign. She unveiled in 1928 at the age of seventy. She introduced municipal elections, improved healthcare, and built schools for girls and women staffed with capable teachers. Like the Begums before her, Sultan Jahan championed women's education and was an important patron of the Women's Reform Movement in India at the time. In 1911 Sultan Jahan presided over the All-India Women's Conference of Educational Reform. In 1914, she became the founding President of the All-India Muslim Ladies Conference, advocating female education and criticizing child-marriage. She was also nominated the first Chancellor of the Aligarh Muslim University by the Viceroy of India, and participated in the Mohammadan Educational Conference.⁵⁹ Raising Hamidullah's three daughters, Sultan Jahan Begum encouraged them to ride horses, swim, shoot, hunt and cycle. The young princesses were taught by tutors until they were old enough to go to school. Their education included the Qur'an and *Hadith* as well as a western curriculum.

Abida Sultaan was an unconventional woman for her times by any standards. Not only did she engage in activities widely considered to be exclusively those of boys and men, she also refused to conform to contemporary standards of femininity. At fourteen or fifteen years old, Abida decided to wear slacks and shirts, an apparel she found more comfortable than clothing customary for women and, unconsciously emulating Razia Sultana in the thirteenth century, she cut off her long hair. Abida recalls:

Around 1927, intoxicated with the independence that my father had given me [accepting her refusal to observe purdah despite her grandmother's protests], I suddenly chopped off my waist length hair. Since that day, I have kept my hair short – a style that has often shocked people of traditional tastes. There were several underlying reasons that made me take this sudden decision. First was my yearning to be treated like a man when I was the only girl inhabiting my father's exclusively male domain, playing polo, shikar, hockey and squash. I was also, as Heir Apparent, being trained in the army discipline ready to take the salute at military parades. I felt that my long hair inhibited me from playing that role symbolically and physically. Next, the rebel in me wanted to adopt a

defiant role against Sarkar Amman [i.e. Sultan Jahan Begum] whose drudgery I had undergone in studying the Qur'an and more recently being 'imprisoned' in purdah. I wanted now to break out of that cage. Thirdly, I have always had a revulsion for long hair – beards, facial hair and long tresses. I had not, of course, consciously thought of taking this decision, which came to me on the spur of the moment.”⁶⁰

This took place one year after Abida, an athletic and gregarious royal child, suddenly discovered that a marriage had been arranged for her. The *nikah* (marriage vows) took place that year, when Abida was thirteen years old, but was not consummated until the *rukhsati* (sending off) in 1933. When she learnt of the marriage in 1926, Abida says she “was nature’s child, a tomboy, not in the least interested in marriage or aware of sex.”⁶¹ Later, she became more optimistic about marrying Sarwar Ali Khan, whom she referred to as ‘Dadabhai,’ believing that marriage would provide her with greater personal freedoms to pursue her sports and other interests.

As it turned out, Abida found she could not adjust to conjugal relations and the marriage turned sour within weeks. The couple separated; Abida moved back into her grandmother’s home. Though the marriage subsisted on paper, she never returned to her husband’s home. However, Abida was pregnant. Soon after the birth of her son, Shaharyar Khan, in 1934, Abida got caught in an acrimonious dispute with her estranged husband over the child’s guardianship. Finally, exasperated with the constant threats and demands, Abida left her nursing child at home and, in the middle of the night, drove the 100 miles to her husband’s home in Kurwai to confront him about the custody of their child. On reaching there, she announced to him:

‘I have come alone to inform you, once and for all, that I will never part with my son. I would rather die. I am giving you a very sporting chance to kill me and say that I was responsible for it,’ I replied, my heart pounding.

Taking out my revolver, I threw it in Dadabhai’s lap and said, ‘The weapon is mine and loaded – use it and shoot me or else I will shoot you.’

Dadabhai visibly squirmed: ‘But I am his father. I have a right to my son,’ he stated. The reply sent my heart pounding and we then had a physical confrontation in which he came off second best, eventually hiding under his quilt and holding up his pillows to protect himself. He began pleading, ‘Go, please, go from here. I am not making any more claims on my son – just leave me and go away.’

Sensing that I had overpowered him and put the fear of God into him as well, I picked up the revolver, put it back in my pocket and walked out of his bedroom.⁶²

Abida then drove back home in the pre-dawn hours. She retained custody over her son and remained a happily single mother for the rest of her life. (She later permitted Sarwar Ali Khan to take another wife.) In reflection, her son later described his mother as, “tough, sporting, headstrong and principled – modelling herself on Sikandar Begum, her great-great-grandmother.”⁶³

Abida spent the years between 1935 and 1949 raising her child and balancing her political pursuits and her love of sport and adventure. An avid tiger-hunter, Abida often went on hunting expeditions, sometimes with only her female friends. She regularly played sports, including polo, field hockey, cricket, tennis, swimming, sailing and squash. In 1948 she became the All-India Women’s Squash Champion. Abida then began taking pilot lessons at the Bombay Flying Club, and was determined to obtain her licence. She later recalled, “The flying genie that was in me led to my next escapade. On 15 December 1939...I drove non-stop, to Calcutta, registered in the Great Eastern Hotel again as Miss A. Sultan and enrolled in the local flying club, hoping that they would not recognize the errant Heir Apparent of Bhopal.”⁶⁴ Abida became one of the first Indian women to receive her pilot’s license and only the second Muslim woman worldwide to do so.

Abida remained the Heir Apparent to the Bhopal throne until the state’s merger with the Indian Union in 1949, two years after the Partition of India. Personally and politically close to her father for many years, Abida fell out with him when he took a second wife after 45 years of marriage to her mother. In 1949 she slipped away to London with only a few belongings. From there, she migrated to Pakistan the following year...undertaking another of her “hair-brained schemes” and driving a jeep station wagon across Europe to reach her new country!⁶⁵ Having renounced her royal title and parted ways with her father, she initially had no income. She sold her jewellery to pay for her migration, to build a house outside of Karachi, and to send her son to university.⁶⁶ For many years, this rebel princess lived in a semi-built house with no electricity and no running water.

Abida went on to become Pakistan’s ambassador to Brazil and served as a UN delegate in 1954. She also supported Fatima Jinnah – the sister of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of the Pakistani state – in her electoral campaign against the military dictator, Ayub Khan in 1964. In the 1980s, Abida continued to defend democracy (through newspaper articles and statements) and used her extensive knowledge of Islam to champion women’s human rights under the military dictatorship of General Zia-ul-Haq (1977-88) who instigated anti-women legislation under the pretext of ‘Islamisation’. She retained the indomitable spirit of a rebel until her death in May, 2002 at the age of 89.

Yang Huizhen (1913-1989) China

Née Wang Rong in 1913, Yang Huizhen was born in an area called ‘little Mecca’ by Chinese Muslims in Zhoukou, Henan Province. Yang was a learned woman

who ran a women's mosque, but this was not the reason she was notable. Women's mosques, or *nüsi* were common in her part of China, and it was not unusual amongst Chinese Muslims for women of mature age, for widows, women married to an *ahong* and those who had retired from household duties to enter Islamic schools to prepare themselves for a religious career.⁶⁷ Though *nüsi* were closed for many years at the start of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, the tradition was revived and continues today.⁶⁸ Bi Jinlan (b. 1922) for instance, a senior Islamic teacher (*jiaozhang*) for five schools, comes from thirteen generations of *ahong* (Islamic teachers). Her leanings towards the Sufi tradition make Bi Jinlan (whose Muslim name is Fatima) exceptional amongst Hui Chinese female *ahong*.⁶⁹ Another outstanding female *ahong* is Du Shuzhen (b.1924) from Kaifeng, Henan Province. Married at fifteen in compliance with her father's wishes, she refused to remarry when her husband died two years later. Instead, she continued studying at the women's mosque and graduated at the age of 25. In 1954 she became *ahong* of a rural women's mosque in Zhengzhou from where she transferred to the women's mosque in Xingyang (Henan) in 1954. In 1981 she was made *jiaozhang* of Beida Street Women's Mosque in Zhengzhou. Made lifelong *ahong* of this mosque in 1983, she developed an eighteen room institution into one of the most beautiful *nüsi* in Zhengzhou with over eighty rooms and modern facilities.⁷⁰

What makes Yang Huizhen stand out amongst a pool of exceptional female *ahongs* and *jiaozhang* is that:

*She was officially accused of improper use of the mosque; unseemly independent action in violation of the proper (i.e. patriarchal) authorities; lack of consultation with the men's mosques and a general air of defiance inconsistent with the code of conduct of a female ahong.*⁷¹

All this because Yang Huizhen defied traditional authorities and regulations in order to care for the needy. She also put their needs above her own reputation.

Little is known of Wang Rong's early life, except that she was fortunate enough to have a father who taught her to read and write in Chinese at a young age. As an adult, she became equally fluent in Chinese, Arabic and Persian.

In the 1930s, Wang Rong married the son of a rich pawnbroker of Kaikeng, Yang Pengxiang, and assumed the name Yang Huizhen. She moved with her husband to Shanghai, where she started studying with Mai Junsan (1888-1967), a well-known and respected Muslim male *ahong*, who encouraged women by having a curtain installed whenever he delivered a public lecture.⁷²

Yang Huizhen's marriage was not a happy one. Her opium-addicted husband ruined the family business, and after their daughter died in infancy, Yang Huizhen turned whole-heartedly to religion and education. Some time around 1942 her husband died and Yang Huizhen adopted an orphan boy.⁷³

By this time Yang Huizhen had gained a reputation for being learned. In 1942 she was invited by the people of Jiaxing (Zhejiang province) to be the first resident *jiaozhang* (female teacher) at their new women's mosque, and appointed for the usual three years period. Close to Shanghai, Jiaxing was almost 600 kilometres away from Yang Huizhen's birthplace and this first women's mosque in Jiaxing also served immigrants from Zhoukou and other places in Henan, where *nüsi* were more common. Initially, Yang Huizhen kept to the traditional activities of a *nü ahong*: a female religious professional responsible for running a *nüsi* as well as teaching, offering counseling, sermonizing, and representing the community. In keeping with the general practice, the *nüsi* was built adjoining the main men's mosque and living apartments were built above this for her to live and teach in. Yang Huizhen began her teaching career at an Islamic School for Women (*Qingzhen Nüxue*).

Though many people in the community called her Yang Shiniang or Yang ahong (wife of Yang, the *ahong*), Yang Huizhen was quick to point out that her husband was not an *ahong*, so technically they should call her Wang *ahong* (her maiden name and the title of *ahong*). Non-Muslims usually referred to her respectfully, as Yang *Jiaozhang* (Teacher Yang).

As a *jiaozhang*, Yang Huizhen's duties included teaching Muslim women about Islam and directing their religious life. Her teaching methods, however, were more practical than scholastic. She did not enroll any *hailifan* (a person studying the Qur'an with the aim of becoming an *ahong*), and was more interested in teaching women the Arabic alphabet and individual *surahs* of the Qur'an. About twenty women came regularly to pray and another eight came specifically to learn to recite the scriptures.⁷⁴

Traditionally, *nü ahongs* were expected to live and work inside the *nüsi* and cut themselves off from the outside world. Yang Huizhen, however, had a mind of her own and she soon started moving out of the *nüsi* to visit the poor and to teach in people's homes. This did not go down well with the traditional male leadership of the mosque; the male leadership was further shocked when Yang Huizhen expanded her charitable work to include the large numbers of Huizu refugees the Sino-Japanese war brought flooding into Shanghai and the surrounding regions.

Yang Huizhen decided the need of the hour was to organize an 'Association of Widows' inside her mosque to shelter and care for widows and orphans. This led to a rapid deterioration of relations with the traditional leadership: the *Zhongguo huijiao xiehui* or All China Islamic Association (ACHA) and the leaders of the local men's mosque. The ACHA Chairman complained to the county magistrate that Yang Huizhen had not informed them about the association for widows and orphans; the ACHA expressed displeasure at her fundraising campaign done in her own name, rather than under the ACHA umbrella. Finally, deeming her activities to be illegal, in August 1946 the ACHA terminated her contract, ordered her to vacate her apartment in the *nüsi*, and issued an expulsion from the

Zhejiang Province branch of the Huijiao Association. Yang Huizhen, who was immensely popular with the people, unafraid of opposition and prepared to initiate social change, remained unrepentant and determined to continue her work.⁷⁵ She moved out of the *nüsi* and rented a building in the Huizu district of Jiaxing. Refusing to abandon the people she had been providing assistance to, she took all the refugees with her to the new building.

Between 1946 and 1949 Yang Huizhen set aside her religious duties and devoted herself entirely to charity and public welfare. She set up a *Huijiao* (a Muslim Welfare Centre) called the 'Muslim Women's Association for the Widowed and Orphaned,' to which was attached a *yixue* (charitable primary school). The Centre took in over one hundred people, mostly women, children and the elderly. In addition to providing shelter and running the primary school, Yang Huizhen established soup kitchens, and helped refugees find work. Eventually, her efforts gained her the approval and support of the ACHA.

After the defeat of the Japanese army in 1946, the conflict raging between the Nationalists and Communists until 1949, brought more refugees into the area. Yang Huizhen continued to provide education and shelter, turning the rented building into a *Huijiao Jiaoyangshuo* (House of Refuge and Relief for Muslims). Yang's shelters took in non-Muslims as well as Han refugees. Realising she would have to raise more funds to provide care for the refugees, Yang Huizhen made overtures to the Huijiao Association, even offering to hand over control to the Association, and wrote a letter, addressed to various individuals and organizations, stating:

*These people, who have no food or clothes, are suffering untold miseries in this freezing cold weather. You all carry the responsibility of this enormous task of promoting the [Islamic] religion building the country and relieving as many people in need as possible. Now I am again begging for your compassion on behalf of the helpless poor, please be kind enough to inform the Winter Relief Association of our frustration, and ask them to bestow their kindness on those who are lingering on in a steadily worsening situation and supply us with some relief. Your kindness as our benefactors will be appreciated and remembered forever.*⁷⁶

Though she did receive a letter in June 1947 stating the Association's support, no one was ever appointed to succeed her nor did she receive any funds. Yang Huizhen single-handedly did her own fundraising. She traveled to mosques in Nanking, Shanghai, and other cities to ask for donations and support, and petitioned local and regional governments for financial aid. Though Yang Huizhen's membership to the ACHA had been revoked in 1946 when she was expelled from the mosque, she attended the second membership Conference in June 1947 as one of only two female representatives. Pleased with her successes, the ACHA finally agreed to re-extend its support.

The refuge established by Yang Huizhen in Huizu came to be known as the *Huijiao Jioyangyuan* (Muslim Emergency Refuge), and for as long as it lasted, it was under her direction. Referring to herself as the ‘Director’ or ‘Acting Chair,’ Yang Huizhen witnessed the numbers of refugees rise from eighty in 1947, to 166 two years later. About half of the refugees were young boys and the other half comprised girls and women of all ages. The children were provided with a basic education and able-bodied adults were taught job skills in cooperative settings, such as rope making. To cope with the rising number of inhabitants, Yang Huizhen expanded the staff, initially hiring ten people.

Yang Huizhen’s efforts created a reputation in Jiaying for Muslim charity; charity had previously only been associated with Christian and Buddhist organizations. The Muslim Emergency Refuge was praised by the authorities and in December 1947, Party representatives attended an event where Yang Huizhen distributed relief materials to 91 people.

The Muslim Emergency Refuge closed in 1950. Yang Huizhen moved to Shanghai but visited Jiaying often, staying at the home of Mai Yaoshi, a widowed woman she had previously given shelter to. Apparently she never remarried. In 1988, Yang Huizhen revisited Jiaying once more before returning to Shanghai, where she passed away the following year.

Always immensely popular with the people who saw in her a champion willing to intervene on their behalf and for social change, Yang Huizhen is remembered as a popular local hero in Jiaying Muslim folklore; and despite her expulsion by the official authorities, women cite her as a paragon of Muslim piety. In the end, as stated by Maria Jaschok and Shui Jingjun:

Yang Huizhen’s significance lies not only in her sharing with other Chinese women the economic and social hardships of China’s entry into the twentieth century, but also a defiance of patriarchal and religious strictures in performing duties as a resident female ahong. Her independence and integrity as much as her compassion inscribed her extraordinary gifts and charisma in the communities with whom she worked.⁷⁷

Rasheed Jahan Zafar (1905-1952) India

Rasheed Jahan was the eldest of the five daughters of the well-known reformers Shaikh Abdullah and Wahid Jahan.⁷⁸ Born in 1905, Rasheed Jahan therefore grew up in a family that strongly advocated social reform and education. From a young age, Rasheed Jahan voraciously read all Urdu-language magazines and pamphlets that her father subscribed to. When she was old enough for formal education, she joined the Aligarh Girls’ School that her parents helped establish in 1906. Rasheed Jahan later commented to her sister-in-law that she and her

family had, “slept on the mattress of women’s education and covered ourselves with the quilt of women’s education from our earliest consciousness.”

Rasheed Jahan studied science at Isabella Thoburn College in Lucknow, where she also published short stories in Urdu and English. In 1924 she entered the Lady Hardinge Medical College in Delhi, graduating five years later with a specialization in obstetrics and gynaecology. While studying she mobilized her classmates to help her run literacy classes and free medical clinics for the city’s impoverished women.

Around the age of twenty, Rasheed Jahan bobbed her hair keeping with the prevailing fashion. Two years later, after an outbreak of head-lice in 1927, she chopped off her younger sisters’ hair and gave them a haircut to match her own. Her sister, Khurshid Mirza, recalled in her autobiography that, “From that day, we said goodbye to tightly plaited hair. It was freedom at last.” Rasheed Jahan was no slave to fashion, however. Throughout her adult life she wore no make-up and, a strong proponent of Mahatma Gandhi’s *swadeshi* campaign, only wore simple, homespun clothes.

Rasheed Jahan always took a hands-on role in helping the more vulnerable members of her community. On one occasion, she brought home a young girl from Delhi who had suffered physical and sexual abuse at the hands of her father. Rasheed Jahan begged her parents to help the girl, and Shaikh Abdullah made arrangements for her to stay in a nearby hostel. Khurshid Mirza remembers another instance of her eldest sister’s benevolence towards women. Once, the sisters were approached by an impoverished woman in Old Aligarh who said that her daughter had given birth and was bleeding profusely; the other sisters gave some money and wanted to continue with their outing. Rasheed Jahan, on the other hand, leapt down from their carriage and spent the entire day with the woman. When she finally came home, she explained that she had arranged for the new mother to be admitted to Lady Dufferin Hospital and that she, herself, was going to pay for the food, milk and medicine the patient needed.⁷⁹

After graduation, Rasheed Jahan returned to Lucknow and became involved with four like-minded and politically conscious male friends, one of whom was Sahibzada Mahmud-uz-Zafar, the son of the Lucknow Medical College principal. The group published a collection of short stories in 1932, entitled *Angaray* (‘Sparks’ or ‘Embers’). Rasheed Jahan’s contributions, *Dilli ki Sair* (A Visit to Delhi) and *Parde ke Piche* (Behind the Veil/Curtain) portrayed women’s plight with a heavy dose of irony. As a whole, the collection demonstrated a use of forthright language, a frank approach to sexual matters, general social critiques and a challenge to orthodox religious views. The daring language and subject-matter of the publication incensed many readers and the work was considered indecent. It was even banned by the government of the United Provinces.⁸⁰

Two years later, Rasheed Jahan married her friend and co-writer, Mahmud-uz-Zafar. Educated in India and England, Mahmud had received a degree from Oxford University. On his return to India, he joined the anti-colonial movement and, like Rasheed Jahan, only wore homespun. The couple had no children and was content to live on the slim allowance Mahmud received from the Communist Party of India and the small medical fees Rasheed Jahan charged. Their house became known as a centre for intellectuals, writers, and political activists and Rasheed Jahan's sister once remarked that their home was a "living example of a commune," where no one was discriminated against on the basis of religion, class or caste. Rasheed Jahan spent much of her time reading and writing short stories and radio plays. Like her husband, (who served as the General Secretary of the Party in the United Provinces), she was also involved in the Communist Party.

Rasheed Jahan's literary career was only one facet of her life and work. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Rasheed Jahan provided medical treatment, especially for the poor and particularly for women. Though she always charged fees for home visits to wealthier patients, for poorer patients she accepted reduced fees or payment in kind, or provided free treatment. As part of her consultations, Rasheed Jahan also dispensed family planning advice to women and their families. She encouraged the poorer families to educate their daughters and argued that more Muslim women should enter the nursing profession.

Celebrated as a trailblazer by liberals and progressives, Rasheed Jahan epitomized for conservatives the dangers of educating women and liberating them from *purdah*. Combined with her sympathy for the poor, Rasheed Jahan's medical training led her to write about the sexual problems facing women with a frankness that shocked her society. Through her writing and medical practice, Rasheed Jahan exposed the dangers of misinformation regarding women's health and the dangers of relying upon superstitions instead of science. Rasheed Jahan often remarked to her friends and family that, "women ought to be more than child-bearing machines for the pleasure of men."

When she was in her 40s, Rasheed Jahan discovered that she had cancer. Though, at the time, Indian Communists were being denied passports to prevent them from visiting the USSR, Rasheed Jahan and Mahmud managed to obtain travel documents and to go to the Soviet Union for medical treatment. Unfortunately, three weeks after arriving in Moscow, Rasheed Jahan died at the age of 47. After burying her there, a grief-torn Mahmud travelled across the USSR. He later wrote his account, *Quest for Life*.⁸¹

Her sister-in-law, Hamida Said-uz-Zafar wrote in her autobiography that Rasheed Jahan consistently addressed herself to the myriad problems faced by Indian women. Invoking Rasheed Jahan's fiery spirit and frank literary style, Hamida concluded that she should, "rightly be called Urdu literature's first 'angry young woman.'"⁸²

Fadwa Tuqan (1917-2003) Palestine

Born in Nablus, Palestine in 1917, Fadwa Tuqan devoted her life to poetry. Her mother had been one of the first members of the Society for the Welfare of Women founded in 1921 that, as of 1929, was affiliated with the Arab Feminist Union.⁸³ Her brother, Ibrahim, was a poet, playwright and Radio Palestine broadcaster who died in 1941. His poems became rallying cries for Palestinians during the anti-British revolt of the 1930s. Ibrahim tutored Fadwa in poetry via letters posted from Beirut where he was lecturing. Though her father had also encouraged Fadwa to write, she felt stifled by the life of the harem:

I was asked by my father to write political poetry. He wanted me to follow in the footsteps of my brother... Through writing my father wanted me to respond to our national despair, but his demand made me miserable. I was unable to compose poetry while the corrupt laws and customs insisted that I remain secluded behind a wall, not able to attend assemblies of men, not hearing the recurrent debates, not participating in public life. Oh, my nation, I want you to know the face behind the veil when I was forbidden to travel freely...

Given the many prohibitions imposed on women, their movements in the home strongly resembled those of domesticated poultry who can come and go freely until they find fodder and then suffer constant temptation... As in other societies where women's lives make no sense, the lives of Palestinian women, in every epoch, and in every house, seemed devoid of significance. Such an environment had a stifling grip on me, which intensified as I approached sexual maturity...⁸⁴

This society created barriers to restrict me. The world of the harem stood between me and society. A spirit of impotence prevailed and I could not write poetry... I became very thin and my brain felt fragmented... My afflictions tore me apart, but if my wretchedness increased my tears, it also expanded the sensitivity of my soul. I found relief when I thought of the wisdom of the ancient saying, 'If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, who am I?'⁸⁵

Fadwa published collections of poetry throughout the 1950s and 1970s, evidencing an increasingly politicized tone. In 1984 she published her first work of prose: her own autobiography. *A Mountainous Journey: an Autobiography* was translated into English in 1990.⁸⁶ She received various international awards and recognition for her poetry, and was the subject of a 1999 documentary film directed by novelist Liana Bader, entitled *Fadwa: A Tale of a Palestinian Poetess*. She passed away in 2003.

Ismat Chughtai (1911-1991) India

In 1911, Ismat Chughtai was born in Badayun, United Provinces (now Uttar Pradesh) in India. Her three elder sisters, all married while Ismat was still a child, had studied Persian and the Qur'an, as well as sewing and cooking. Though Ismat's mother tried to raise Ismat to adhere to the prevailing standards of femininity like her sisters, Ismat was critical. She recalled later, "To me this femininity seemed just a hoax. To my mind, this display of contentedness, cowardice and hypocrisy was deceitful. To me even make-up, dressing up and wearing gaudy clothes seemed to be the means of covering up faults and engaging in deception."⁸⁷ Always a tomboy, Ismat preferred to spend her time with her brothers, especially Azeem Beg Chughtai,⁸⁸ who helped her learn to read translations of the Qur'an as well as newspapers and Muslim history.⁸⁹ Azeem Beg, who grew up to be a well-known, progressive writer, encouraged his sister to write, and in their adulthood he defended her from public criticism.

In 1922, Ismat entered the girls' school at Aligarh and ten years later left with a matriculation exam certificate. It was during this period that she began writing short stories, which she would hide beneath her pillow. In 1928, Azeem Beg published two treatises critiquing the custom of *purdah* with recourse to the Qur'an and the *ahadith*. That same year, a seventeen year old Ismat defied *purdah* as she got off a train in Jodhpur having shed her *burqa*, much to her uncle's dismay.⁹⁰ Ismat's mother had tried to persuade her to wear a *burqa* to Aligarh, as was the custom for adolescent girls, but Ismat found ways around it: sometimes she would tear the *burqa* and claim it was too ragged to wear, other times she would simply "lose" it.⁹¹ Encouraged by her brother's arguments against *purdah* and the recent example of Atiya and Zohra Fyzee's public defiance of the veil and bolstered by her own sheer determination, Ismat refused to observe *purdah*.⁹² She later wrote that, "*Purdah* had already been imposed on me, but my tongue was an unsheathed sword. No one could restrain it."⁹³

1932 not only signalled the completion of Ismat's secondary education, it was also the year *Angaray*, a collection of progressive and critical short stories including Rasheed Jahan's contributions, was published. As an older student at Aligarh, Rasheed – or Rasheeda Apa, as Ismat and others affectionately referred to her – greatly inspired the young Ismat. When *Angaray* came under attack, Ismat composed a speech published in the Aligarh Gazette, criticizing one of the more vocal detractors, Mullah Ahrarvi:

As it is, Muslim girls are backward and deprived, on top of that bigots like Mullah Ahrarvi have become our enemies. By all means close down the college, but only our dead bodies will go out from here. Who will come forward to close it down! We'll take them on! Moreover we have six thousand brothers in the university; will they sit back and watch while our bodies are being trampled? Whenever we think of Mullah

*Ahrarvi, we remember our six thousand brothers, our senior professors and teachers. That gives us courage.*⁹⁴

After Ismat's statement was published, a group of boys in the school took it upon themselves to beat up Mullah Ahrarvi, whom Ismat never heard of again. Looking back on her youth, Ismat acknowledged Rasheed Jahan as a mentor: "Rasheeda Apa was the only person who instilled a sense of confidence in me. I accepted her as my mentor. In the hypocritical, vicious atmosphere of Aligarh she was a much-maligned lady. She appreciated my outspokenness and I quickly read up all the books recommended by her."⁹⁵

Though Ismat's career mostly involved writing, she was also an educator. In 1933, Ismat graduated from Aligarh and enrolled at the Isabella Thoburn College in Lucknow for her undergraduate degree. Upon completing her Bachelor of Arts degree, Ismat went to Bareilly, in modern-day Uttar Pradesh. As the only female graduate in the state, the local Nawab immediately appointed her as the Principal of the Islamia Girl's School, where she was employed for nine or ten months. On her unique position at the girl's school, she once commented to a friend:

*I'm the headmistress of the only Muslim girls' school in the town. I may be half-mad but I detest irresponsibility of any kind. I know what struggles Muslim schools have to face. I know what expectations the members of the community have from us...I can't change the attitude of the community in a day. It'll require a lifetime.*⁹⁶

In 1938, Ismat returned to Aligarh for teachers' training. Though there were no facilities at the time, she and six of her fellow female students persuaded the principal to allow them to attend classes by sitting behind a curtain at the back of the classroom.⁹⁷ Ismat resumed teaching, at the Raj Mahal Girls' School in Jodhpur, until 1941, when she moved to Bombay (now Mumbai) where she was appointed the Inspector of Schools. Ismat's stay in Bombay was marked by excitement: she went against the wishes of her brother, Mirza, and refused to marry her cousin; she nurtured her relationship with her soon-to-be husband, Shahid Lateef; and she was exposed to the heretofore forbidden world of motion pictures.

Throughout Ismat's years at school and as a teacher, she had sustained her writing, publishing short stories and poems in various publications. Ismat gained notoriety with the publication of her story, *Lihaaf* (The Quilt) in 1942, two months before she married Shahid.⁹⁸ The story was considered scandalous, as it dealt with an unhappily married woman who finds comfort in a lesbian relationship with her female servant. The mixture of inter-class consorting and homoeroticism was considered risqué, even by some progressive thinkers. This, even though *Lihaaf* was written from the perspective of an innocent youngster who does not fully understand the implications of what she is witnessing. In December 1944, Ismat received a summons: the British Crown – via the

Government of Punjab – had brought an obscenity charge against her because of *Lihaf*. The charges were ultimately dropped, perhaps due to the fact that her lawyer argued that only readers with a prior knowledge of lesbianism could have possibly understood the narrative. Though Ismat eventually won the court case, the public furour over *Lihaf* prompted Shahid to urge Ismat to stop writing. She reflected, “He might as well have asked me to quit breathing.”⁹⁹

When Ismat and Shahid became engaged, he was working for the film production company, Bombay Talkies. Even though Ismat’s father had been relatively broad-minded, she had not been permitted to see films in her youth. Before moving to Bombay, Ismat had only seen two films, both of which had left a lasting impression on her. One American movie, she recalled, featured a scene of Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford kissing, and the second was called *Duniya na Maane* (Let the World Disagree), a story in which a young bride refuses to consummate a marriage with her elderly husband. Spending time with Shahid and his colleagues, Ismat became intrigued by the world of film. In the early 1940s, she was becoming well-known, and the film-director Ashok Kumar eventually bought one of her stories for the handsome sum of 20,000 rupees. *Ziddi*¹⁰⁰ was produced for Bombay Talkies in 1948. Throughout the 1950s, Ismat and Shahid collaborated on and contributed to about a dozen films.¹⁰¹ Ismat won the highest cinematic award in India for the film version of her story *Garam Hava* (Winds of Fire). Always adventurous, in 1978, a 67 year old Ismat even ventured into acting.¹⁰²

Throughout her long literary career – before and after Shahid’s death – Ismat wrote numerous short stories, dramas, novellas, reportage, novels, radio plays and screenplays. Ismat wrote her last story in 1987, and passed away in Bombay in October 1991.

Etel Adnan (b.1925) Lebanon

Etel Adnan was born in 1925 in Beirut, Lebanon. Coming from a mixed heritage (her father was a Muslim Syrian and her mother, a Greek Christian) she says that, “the landscape of my childhood represented two poles, two cultures, two different worlds and I liked both,”¹⁰³ words that could well have been spoken by Sitt-ul-Mulk in Cairo in the tenth century (See Chapter Two).

First educated at a convent school, Etel went on to attend the newly opened École Supérieure des Lettres in 1944. She taught at a girls’ school in Lebanon before emigrating to France in 1950 to take a degree in philosophy at the Sorbonne. She continued her studies at Harvard and Berkeley Universities in the United States. She has devoted her life to poetry, literature and the fine arts.

In a keynote address to the Association of Middle Eastern Women’s Studies in 1986, she recalled her childhood in the late 1920s and early 1930s, saying:

I was much aware that I was a little girl. There was something nice about being a little girl, something warm and comfortable. Something electric also...

My parents sent me to school at the age of five..I started speaking French and then, only French, as Arabic was a forbidden language in these French schools...These schools were for boys or girls only. The co-educational system was instituted in Lebanon in the fifties...

One day I was caught by the nuns while climbing the fence of the courtyard...the nuns caught me and with a stern voice accused me of being a 'tomboy' which in French is called 'garçon manqué' ('something that failed to be a boy')! It made being a boy both appealing as a fact and shameful as a desire...

I was made aware early in my life that little girls were in 'danger.' My mother never let me go alone anywhere...Looking back on those years, I also wonder if my mother didn't suffer from the fact that I was her only child and that she didn't have a son.

It must have been the month of June, when school was out and summer was officially ushered in; I was ten or nine when she bought a piece of black satin and made a costume for me on her sewing machine: billowing and extremely short pantaloons of shining and black satin, and a white satin blouse with long sleeves. She also made a flowing black tie. She asked [the hairdresser] to cut my hair very short, 'à la garçon,' [like a boy] a hairstyle I discovered later was very chic and popular in French fashion magazines of the time...

Being dressed as a boy made me feel very happy. I felt special: no other girls that I knew ever dressed like that. (In fact no boys either). It was a dress suitable for the movies or the theatre. I thought I looked beautiful in it, if not beautiful, certainly touched by some magic. In fact it must have reinforced my identity of being neither just a girl, nor a boy, but a special being with the magical attributes of being both.¹⁰⁴

Etel is still alive and moves between California, Paris and Lebanon.

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- 1 Margot Badran, in *Feminists, Islam and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995) finds that according to Nabawiya's own memoirs, she was born in 1886 (p.38). However, elsewhere it is stated that she was born in 1890 (see Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke, eds., *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990) 257.
- 2 Badran, *Feminists, Islam and Nation*, 38.
- 3 Nabawiya Musa from her memoirs (*Dhikrayati*), cited in Badran., 41.
- 4 Musa, *Dhikrayati*, cited in Badran., 42.
- 5 Musa, *Dhikrayati*, cited in Badran., 43-44.
- 6 Badran, 44.
- 7 Women were only admitted to the Egyptian University, renamed the Fu'ad University, in 1925. In 1933 they were granted equal degrees to men, and the university was later renamed Cairo University. See Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, (Yale University Press, New Haven: 1998), 177.
- 8 Badran, *Feminists, Islam and Nation*, 39.
- 9 Ibid., 148.
- 10 Musa, from *Women and Work*, cited in Badran and Cooke, *Opening the Gates*, 263-264.
- 11 Musa, *Dhikrayati*, cited in Badran, *Feminists, Islam and Nation*, 44.
- 12 Badran, *ibid.*, 23.
- 13 Ibid., 58 and 68.
- 14 Ibid., 40.
- 15 See Chapter 2 this volume
- 16 Gail Minault, *Secluded Scholars: Women's Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India*, (Oxford University Press, Delhi: 1998), 186-7.
- 17 Atiya Fyzee, cited in Masud-ul-Hasan, *Life of Iqbal: General Account of His Life*, Book I (Ferozsons Ltd, Lahore: [date unknown]), 79.
- 18 Minault, 120. *Tehzib-e-Niswan* was published by Muhammadi Begum discussed in Chapter 4.
- 19 The first meeting was presided over by the Begum of Bhopal. See Section on Abida Sulnaan for the Begums.
- 20 Minault, 268-9.
- 21 Ibid., 286.
- 22 *Khatun* was jointly run by Shaikh Abdullah and his wife Wahid Jahan.
- 23 Minault, 234-5 and 135 n. 80.
- 24 Minault, 235-6.
- 25 Published in *Khatun*, Vol. 3, no 1 (January 1906), cited in Minault, 127.
- 26 The *Aligarh Zenana Madrasa* (Aligarh Girls' School) was established the following year, in October 1906. Minault, 238.
- 27 Though it appears that a Women's Section of the MEC was established prior to the turn of the twentieth century, 1903 is the first recorded instance of women actually being present at the proceedings. See Minault, *Secluded Scholars*, 123 and Ayesha Khan, *Rhetoric and Reform*, 5.
- 28 Atiya Fyzee, quoted in Maulvi Mohammad Ameen Zuberi *Muslim Khwateen Ki Ta'alim* (Muslim Women's Education) (All Pakistan Educational Conference Karachi, Academy of Educational Research, Karachi: [1956] 1997), p 149. Translated from the English into the Urdu; retranslated into English by author.
- 29 Extract from a letter from Ahmed Husain to Sayyid Husain Bilgrami, 10 January, 1926, from Husain Bilgrami's personal papers, cited in Minault, 268-9.
- 30 We are grateful to Mr. Naeem-ur-Rahman for bringing this text to our attention.
- 31 Azra Asghar Ali, *The Emergence of Feminism Among Indian Muslim Women, 1920-1947*, (Oxford University Press, Karachi: 2000), 73.
- 32 Naeem-ur-Rahman Justuju, "Portrait of a Lady", *Dawn*, 13 April, 2003.

- ³³ Shibli Nomani was a distinguished religious scholar of the Indian sub-continent in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.
- ³⁴ Personal communication with Mr. Nacem-ur-Rahman, April, 2004.
- ³⁵ Olive Wyon, *The Dawn Wind: A Picture of Changing Conditions Among Women in Africa and the East*, (Student Christian Movement Press, London: 1931), 138.
- ³⁶ Marfua Tokhtakhodjaeva, *Between the Slogans of Communism and the Laws of Islam: The Women of Uzbekistan*, (Shirkat Gah, Lahore: 1995), 52.
- ³⁷ Wyon, 139-40.
- ³⁸ Tokhtakhodjaeva, 57.
- ³⁹ An *artel* was a traditional form of cooperatives where a group of people worked together, in any of the stages of production, supply and/or distribution.
- ⁴⁰ Fatima-apa Burnasheva, quoted in Tokhtakhodjaeva, 52-54.
- ⁴¹ Cited in Wyon, 142.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 140.
- ⁴³ Tokhtakhodjaeva, 60.
- ⁴⁴ Wyon, 140.
- ⁴⁵ Cited in Wyon, 137-8. At the conference, 58% of the participants were “Russian” and 42% were from other parts of the USSR. We do not know the ethnicity of the peasant woman from Dagestan, given the extreme diversity of that region. However, it is important to bear in mind that many Slavic, Christian women also traditionally wore a head-covering.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 141.
- ⁴⁷ In South Asia, often referred to as *talaq-i-tafweez*.
- ⁴⁸ It was not until 1961 that a standardized, official *nikahnama* was introduced in Pakistan under the Muslim Family Law Ordinance, providing women the right of *talaq-i-tafweez*. India still does not have a standardized marriage contract for Muslims.
- ⁴⁹ Reprinted in *Talaq-i-Tafwid: The Muslim Woman's Contractual Access to Divorce: An Information Kit*, edited by Lucy Carroll and Harsh Kapoor, (London: Women Living Under Muslim Laws, 1996).
- ⁵⁰ Margaret E. Cousins, *Indian Womanhood Today*, (Kitabistan, Allahabad: 1941), 158.
- ⁵¹ Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, *Islamic Law and Society in the Sudan*, (Frank Cass, London: 1987) 75, 116-117.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, 86.
- ⁵³ Abida Sultaan, *Memoirs of a Rebel Princess*, (Oxford University Press, Karachi: 2004).
- ⁵⁴ Bhopal, a sovereign princely state until 1949 when it was merged into the Indian Union, was founded around 1709 by Dost Mohammad Khan. In its 250 year history, four women sovereigns ruled for over a century: Qudsia Begum (r.1819-37), Sikandar Begum (r.1844-68), Shahjehan Begum (r.1868-1901) and Sultan Jahan Begum (r.1901-26) This excludes Mamola Bai's 63 year regency (1744-1807) during the reigns of her stepsons Faiz and Hayat. The last ruler was a man, Nawab Hamidullah Khan 1928- 1960.
- ⁵⁵ Shaharyar M. Khan, *The Begums of Bhopal: A Dynasty of Women Rulers in Raj India*, (I.B. Tauris, London & NY: 2000), 72.
- ⁵⁶ Khan, 92.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 117.
- ⁵⁸ Sultaan, xlvii. Sultan Jahan Begum also ensured that young Maimoona was educated at court, studying the Qur'an, *ahadith*, calligraphy, Muslim history, Urdu, Farsi, Arabic, English and French, as well as playing the piano and violin (pp. 8-9).
- ⁵⁹ Khan, 172-180.
- ⁶⁰ Sultaan, 81.
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 77.
- ⁶² *Ibid.*, 111-12.
- ⁶³ Khan, 232.
- ⁶⁴ Sultaan, 114.

- ⁶⁵ Ibid., 192.
- ⁶⁶ Khan, 232.
- ⁶⁷ Maria Jaschok and Shui Jingjun “Yang Huizhen” pp 616-618 in Lily Xiao Hong Lee, (ed.) *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Women – The Twentieth Century 1912-2000*, University of Hong Kong Libraries Publications, No. 14, (Hong Kong University Press; M.E. Sharpe, Hong Kong: 2003) 616.
- ⁶⁸ Maria Jaschok and Shui Jingjun “Ba Jinlan” pp 8-9 in Lily Xiao Hong Lee, 8.
- ⁶⁹ Like Yang Huizhen, Ba Jinlan is from Henan Province; village Jinzhai in Xingyang. She was appointed *ahong* in Xingyang in 1955 while her husband later became the *ahong* in Qinghua township of the same province. Both stopped their activities at the start of the Cultural Revolution. Bi Jilan was invited to resume her responsibilities in 1983 when she was sixty-one years of age. Maria Jaschok and Shui Jingjun “Ba Jinlan” 8-9.
- ⁷⁰ Du Shuzhen’s Muslim name is Aminah. Maria Jaschok and Shui Jingjun, “Du Shuzhen” pp.153-154 in Lee, 153.
- ⁷¹ Maria Jaschok and Shui Jingjun “Yang Huizhen” pp 617-618 in Lee, 617.
- ⁷² Maria Jaschok and Shui Jingjun, *The History of Women’s Mosques in Chinese Islam: A Mosque of Their Own*, (Curzon Press, Richmond, UK: 2000), 276-7.
- ⁷³ Maria Jaschok and Shui Jingjun, *The History...*, 278.
- ⁷⁴ Ibid.
- ⁷⁵ Jaschok and Shui “Yang Huizhen”, 617.
- ⁷⁶ Yang Huizhen cited in Maria Jaschok and Shui Jingjun, *The History...*, 280-281.
- ⁷⁷ Jaschock and Shui “Yang Huizhen”, 618.
- ⁷⁸ Her father had a law degree from Aligarh University, and her mother had been educated at home by her father. The two devoted their lives to campaigning for women’s education. (See Chapter 5, this volume page 72 and this chapter pages 132-133).
- ⁷⁹ Lubna Kazim, *The Making of a Modern Muslim Woman: Begum Khurshid Mirza (1918-1989)*, (Brite Books, Lahore: 2003), pp. 102-3 and 106-111.
- ⁸⁰ Minault, *Secluded Scholars...*, 275. *Angaray* was banned when it was first released and reprints are still not available, though stories from the volume have been reprinted in various journals. Public outcry was so severe, that one rumour circulating after the book’s release was that critics had threatened to cut off Rasheed Jahan’s nose. See Lubna Kazim, op. cit., 118.
- ⁸¹ Kazim, 112-7.
- ⁸² Cited in Kazim, 123.
- ⁸³ Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke, *Opening the Gates...*, 28.
- ⁸⁴ At the age of puberty, Fadwa was no longer allowed to attend school.
- ⁸⁵ Fadwa Tuqan, *Difficult Journey – Mountainous Journey*, cited in Badran and Cooke, 27-39.
- ⁸⁶ Fadwa Tuqan, *A Mountainous Journey: an Autobiography*, edited by Salma Khadra Jayyusi, translated by Olive Kenny, poetry translated by Naomi Shihab Nye and Salma Khadra Jayyusi, (St. Paul, Minn. Graywolf Press, 1990).
- ⁸⁷ Ismat Chughtai, “Caravan Dust”, translated by Meenakshi Bharat, in *Ismat: Her Life, Her Times* edited by Sukrita Paul Kumar and Sadique (Katha, New Delhi: 2000) (original: Ghubare Karvan, *Kaghazi hai Pairahan, Ajkal*, (Urdu), Delhi, Nov. 1970).
- ⁸⁸ Apparently, Ismat was the only member of her family to spell her last name ‘Chughtai,’ the rest spelling it ‘Chughtai.’
- ⁸⁹ *Ismat: Her Life, Her Times*, edited by Sukrita Paul Kumar and Sadique (Katha, New Delhi: 2000), 24-5.
- ⁹⁰ Minault, *Secluded Scholars...*, 278.
- ⁹¹ Chughtai, from an interview with Jyoti Punwani, *The Independent* (18-10-1989).
- ⁹² Kumar and Sadique, 69.
- ⁹³ Ibid., 64.
- ⁹⁴ Cited in Kumar and Sadique, 78.

- ⁹⁵ Chughtai, "In the Name of Those Married Women," translated by M. Asaduddin. The original "*Un Biyahtaon ke Naam*" appeared in *Kaghazi hai Pairahan, Ajkal*, (Urdu), Delhi, March 1979-May 1980. Reprinted in *Ismat: Her Life, Her Times*, 65. Ismat did not indiscriminately take Rasheed Jahan as her mentor. Once, when friend asked her, "You take Rasheed Jehan as your guru, don't you?" she replied, "I do. But I don't imitate the guru blindly. I take my decisions according to my understanding..." ("Under Lock and Key," translated by M. Asaduddin. The original appeared as "Taale" *Kaghazi hai Pairahan, Ajkal*, (Urdu), Delhi, March 1979-May 1980. Reprinted in Kumar and Sadique, 45.
- ⁹⁶ Chughtai, "Under Lock and Key," translated by M. Asaduddin, in Kumar and Sadique, 82.
- ⁹⁷ Minault, *Secluded Scholars...*, 279.
- ⁹⁸ "*Lihaf*" first appeared in *Adab-e-Lateef*, edited by Shahid Ahmed Dehlavi. Dehlavi – and the hapless calligrapher who had transcribed Ismat's manuscript – also had obscenity charges brought against them.
- ⁹⁹ Minault, *Secluded Scholars...*, 279.
- ¹⁰⁰ '*Ziddi*' refers to someone who is defiant, insistent or stubborn.
- ¹⁰¹ Chughtai, "Film Maker Scriptwriter," *Bombay*, April 22nd - May 6th, 1988.
- ¹⁰² The film *Junoon* depicts events around the 1857 Indian War of Independence, also called the Indian Mutiny or Sepoy Rebellion.
- ¹⁰³ Badran and Cooke, 3.
- ¹⁰⁴ Etel Adnan, excerpts from 'Growing up to be a Woman Writer in Lebanon,' cited in Badran and Cooke, 5-9.

Concluding Word

There is little we need to add, indeed little we can add, to the powerful voices and narratives of these ‘great ancestors’ we can only agree with Fatima Mernissi that “[o]ur demand for the full and complete enjoyment of our universal human rights, here and now, requires us to take over our history, to reread it, and to reconstruct a wide-open Muslim past.” And, we happily confirm her prediction that “[t]his duty, moreover, can turn out to be no drab, disagreeable task, but rather a journey filled with delight.”¹

Our journey has been one of not only multiple surprises and enjoyment, but an empowering experience, full of inspiration. Our only regret is having had to close our research in order to share these voices and narratives. We are convinced that there are many, many more voices to be heard and lives to be narrated that eluded us because of language and access. We hope others will take up the challenge of re-reading history and bringing women assertions from the margins into the centre.

What we do want to say is that designed as it is for the international solidarity network, *Women Living Under Muslim Laws*, this particular information and training kit focuses on Muslim contexts. This, however, is only one way of slicing history. Slicing history through a different perspective (by geographical regions or some other perspective) and undertaking the same kind of exercise will reveal the same determination of women to fight oppression, to assert themselves, to make a better world. For instance, though we have included a few non-Muslim voices from Muslim contexts; we could have done more. We could, in fact have focused on women’s consistent efforts of solidarity across religious and other identities, both within their own societies and across nations and states. We could just as well have brought forth the many voices of Muslim men for women’s rights through the centuries that we came across in our research. A different perspective would have produced equally interesting, but different books. We know, too, that this book is only a small part of the larger project that women (and some men) have engaged in over the centuries: documenting women’s assertions for their rights and the rights of others and their visions of, and interventions for, a more just society within Muslim contexts. In moving forward, therefore, let us listen to one ancestor, Rokeya Hossein, who, a century ago gave a clarion call and left a message for us, the subsequent generations:

My sisters rub your eyes and wake up – march forward. Mothers, please declare that you are no more animals. Sisters, please deny that you are inanimate objects like furniture. And daughters, please aver that you are not decorative pieces to be conserved with jewellery and preserved in a safe. And together shout: we are human beings. And demonstrate

*through your work that we women are half of the best of the world. In truth, we are the begetters of the world.*²

We conclude with the words of Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, Rokeya's contemporary, whose message from a non-Muslim Bengali context is the same as ours:

*Get to know about the achievements of your ancestors...Try to fix in your mind that these achievers were no more than flesh-and-blood people like yourselves and, therefore, you ought to be able to emulate their feats...Delve deep in your country's history with assiduous research. And convert that glory into present reality...dream the impossible dreams.*³

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- ² Rokeya Hossein "Subeh Sadek," *Rachanavali*, (ed) Abdul Qadir, (Bangla Academy, Dhaka: 1993) 20, cited in Ray p. 87-88.
- ³ Sarala Devi, "Udbodhan" (The Inauguration), *Bharati*, Baishakh, 1918, cited in Bharati Ray. *Early Feminists of Colonial India*. (Oxford University Press, New Delhi: 2002).

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 102. *Students of the Cairo Saniyah School for Girls demonstrate bearing placards in French that read: “Educate your girls, Respect the rights of women; A people’s civilization is judged by its women”*; reproduced with permission from Margot Badran.
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 104. *Women demonstrating outside the Women’s Jail, Lahore where many Muslim women were being held after being arrested during the anti-colonial Civil Disobedience Movement in the struggle for independence*; WLUML archives.

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