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## Urdu Literature and Women (Student Paper)

ACCORDING TO the commonly-held understanding, Indian civilization, whether Hindu or Muslim, is male chauvinist and hostile to women, but, at least from the literary point of view, women writers have contributed enormously to the progress of Indian literature, especially in the case of Urdu. The fact is that, although in ancient times Hindu women enjoyed considerable freedom and held positions of responsibility and prestige, they lost most of their rights from the third century C.E. onward, as soon as the Laws of Manu came into force. Afterwards, even though they were ostensibly considered goddesses, in practice they were reduced to servitude. Furthermore, when Muslims settled permanently on the Subcontinent, they showed a certain tendency to adopt, as far as women were concerned, Hindu customs, even when Islamic precepts were by and large more liberal. The result was that women had to submit to the most restrictive rules codified by both religious systems (Bhushan 1980, 5–10). The many cases of female preeminence mentioned by Rizvi (1987, 200–2), Rekha Misra (1967), Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi (1990), and Annemarie Schimmel are just some exceptions proving the rule.

When writing about the relationship between women and Urdu literature, it seems advisable to make a distinction between literature aimed at women and literature written by women. Literature aimed at women, although mostly written by men, is extremely important, for it reflects female identity as patriarchal society saw it or, at least, as it wanted it to be. For this reason, we can distinguish still further between works addressed to women in the strict sense of the word, such as guidebooks to correct behavior and didactic novels, and literature meant for women only in a broad sense, such as novels meant for the general public which

focused on the lives of various kinds of women who could constitute alternative female role models.

It was in the second half of the nineteenth century, especially after 1857, that Indians embarked on a systematic reinterpretation of their culture. This phenomenon was even more pronounced in the case of Indian Muslims, who had recently lost their political supremacy and had to deal with a brand of Western literature which was rather hostile towards Islam (see, among others Said 1978). One of the most evident examples of the reaction among Muslims was the emergence of Islamic Modernism, a movement led by Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan. Among the points at issue, in the context of Modernism, the status of women gained increasing importance and, although Sir Sayyid himself cannot be considered a staunch advocate of female education, some of his supporters felt a deep urge for renewal. Among these intellectuals Mumtāz ‘Alī<sup>1</sup> holds a special position, not only because of the work he carried out in the field of women’s journalism,<sup>2</sup> but also because he wrote *Tahzīb-u’-Nisvān* (Women’s Rights), published in Lahore in 1898, a particularly important title in the category of “literature addressed to women.” The book begins with a review of the traditional Islamic arguments supporting the privileged position of men, but soon afterwards proceeds with confuting them. So, according to Mumtāz ‘Alī, ancient theologians’ misogynous interpretations were more the product of the customs of those days, than the result of Islam’s true message. Women, he contended, had never been inferior to men, just different in terms of their biological functions. They should, therefore, receive a proper education, enabling them to become suitable wives and mothers for the men of future generations (see, among others Ahmad 1967, 72–6). The book initially caused quite a stir, if not harsh criticism, among men, since times were probably not ripe enough for such a philosophy. Among women, as well, the work proved unsuccessful for its content was too pedantic, so it quickly went out of print (Minault 1998, 95).

Completely different was the fate of a work written by Maulana Ashraf ‘Alī Tḥānavī (1864–1943), another scholar educated at Deoband, but much more conservative than Mumtāz ‘Alī. Tḥānavī’s bulky *Bihishtī Zēvar*

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<sup>1</sup>Mumtāz ‘Alī studied at a conservative Deoband theological school but was also influenced, before coming in contact with Sir Sayyid, by the thought of Christian missionaries (Cf. Minault 1998, 74).

<sup>2</sup>With the publication of the women’s magazine *Tahzīb-e Nisvān*.

(Jewel of Paradise),<sup>3</sup> published in 1905, became a roaring success and was soon an integral part of every Muslim bride's dowry. The book, which looks like an encyclopedic treatise meant primarily for women (but, in a certain sense, highly expected to be read by men as well), contains notions ranging from religious instruction to domestic science and was intended to reform the manners of Muslim women by means of a reversion to the true dictates of Islam and a rejection of the pagan habits that had progressively distanced them from the real faith. Far from questioning traditional institutions of Islamic society, such as *purdah*, the treatise considers men and women equal and stresses women's important role in the management of the household and in the context of family alliances. The ideal woman, according to Thānavī, has a good knowledge of modern standard Urdu<sup>4</sup> and traditional Islamic sciences, is able to raise and educate her children adequately, cooperates in the management of domestic economy, and remains aware of her limits within the community (see, among others Minault 1990, 1–38).

Many other works which flourished in the years that followed, imitating *Bibishtī Zēvar*, could be mentioned, but they would not provide any starting point for further considerations. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that women also put themselves to the test producing this kind of material. Minault mentions the famous example of *Tahzībun-Nisvān va Tarbiyatun-l-Insān* (Women's Progress and the Education of Mankind), written by Shāh Jahān Šāhibā, Begum of Bhopal, published for the first time in 1882, more than twenty years before *Bibishtī Zēvar*. Thānavī, in fact, included this work in his list of books suitable for good Muslims (Minault 1998, 101)

A complete outline of the literature addressed to women cannot, however, be limited to behavior guidebooks and pedantic works. The first Urdu novels, especially those written by Naẓīr Aḥmad and his imitators, were deeply influenced by their authors' moralizing goals and reforming purposes. Once again, the status of women was the male writers' primary concern and the lack of textbooks suitable for girls was the immediate

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<sup>3</sup>Two English versions of this work are available, one by al-Hasmi (1973) and a second, partial translation by Metcalf (1990).

<sup>4</sup>The knowledge of modern standard Urdu recommended by Thānavī should not be understood as an exhortation to cultivate literature. In fact, he severely stigmatizes all poetry and fiction as morally harmful for both sexes. But, for an exception, see footnote 7 below.

cause for their writing stories that conveyed strong educational messages. Nazīr Aḥmad was born in Bijnor in 1830. His parents were poor, but his father was one of the descendants of Shaikh ‘Abdu’l-Quddūs Gaṅgōhī, a pir who lived in the sixteenth century. In 1846 Nazīr Aḥmad was awarded a scholarship at the prestigious Delhi College. After that his career improved steadily. Following a short period as a teacher, he became Deputy Inspector of Schools in Allahabad, then *tahsildār* of Kanpur, then Deputy Collector, and, eventually, member of the Revenue Board in the princely State of Hyderabad.<sup>5</sup> He was famous as a translator (notably his legal translations), as an orator, and as an author of religious treatises, but there is no doubt that his novels are his main contribution to Urdu literature, even though he never called himself a “novelist.” In fact, in a booklet about Urdu handwriting, published a few years before his death, he wrote:

I began writing books at the time when my own children were of an age to start their schooling. I had my own experience both of learning and teaching. I knew in every detail all the defects of the educational methods of the books in use. “Once you have seen the fly in your drink, you cannot swallow it” and so I began to write books on my own account and to teach from them. This was the motive which first impelled me to write.

(quoted in Russell 1992, 92)<sup>6</sup>

Nazīr Aḥmad wrote seven novels. The first one he published was *Mirātu’l-‘Arūs* (The Bride’s Mirror, 1869) in which he draws a comparison between two sisters, Akbarī, the eldest, who is spoiled and lazy, and the virtuous, hardworking and clever Aṣgharī, who makes her family happy. *Banātu’n-Na’sh* (The Daughters of the Bier, which is another name for the constellation of Ursa Major, 1973) is the continuation of the first novel telling the story of Aṣgharī managing a Muslim girls’ school she had founded. *Taubatu ’n-Naṣūḥ* (The Repentance of Nasuh, 1877) is about

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<sup>5</sup>Nazīr Aḥmad’s life is documented in several biographies including: Şiddiqī (1971) and one of the author’s students Beg (1992). Russell’s “Nazir Ahmad and the Aligarh Movement” (1992, 112–20) is based on Şiddiqī (1971).

<sup>6</sup>Şiddiqī’s version is a bit different. In his account, Nazīr Aḥmad wrote his first novel after the Government had established a 1000 rupees award in 1868, to be given to those texts which were considered most suitable for educational purposes. Nazīr Aḥmad was awarded the prize for each of his first three novels. Cf. M. Asaduddin (2001, 87–8).

family religious instruction. It is worth mentioning that, among Naẓīr Aḥmad's works, *Taubatu 'n-Naṣūḥ* was the novel found least objectionable in orthodox circles since its content was more edifying and there were no troublesome examples of female virtue.<sup>7</sup> *Fasāna-e Mubtalā* (The Story of Mubtala, 1885) highlights the evils deriving from polygamy. *Ibnu'l-Vaqt* (Man of His Age/Opportunist, 1888) is a criticism of Muslims excessively imitating Western habits. *Ayāmā* (1891) is an apology of widow remarriage. In his last novel, *Ru'ya-e Ṣādiqa* (Sadiqa's Dream, 1892), Naẓīr Aḥmad gives an account of the basic principles of Islam by means of a dialogue between a husband and wife.

Within this reformist trend, Naẓīr Aḥmad had many imitators, among them his son Sayyid Aḥmad Dehlavī, another relative by the name of Rāshidu'l-Khaiṅ, and Bashīru'd-Dīn Aḥmad (Minault 1998, 95–103), but his merit, in comparison with the others, lies in his greater ability to combine didactic intentions with literary quality. His novels met with outstanding success, praised by Muslims and awarded prizes by the British Government, for no one had ever before depicted daily life in such simple and colloquial language or offered educational material disguised in the form of a conversation taking place in a middle-class Muslim family. A bourgeois mentality was indeed the main requisite of middle-class Muslims at a time when they were trying to adopt a new lifestyle (Schimmel 1975, 232–3).<sup>8</sup>

Even though he was not an imitator of Naẓīr Aḥmad, mention should be made of Alḫāf Ḥusain Ḥālī (1837–1914), one of the greatest reformers of Urdu poetry. He put himself to the test with other genres as well, such as literary criticism and historiography, and he also wrote a novel, *Majālisu'n-Nisā* (Women's Assemblies, 1874), which dealt with the problem of female education. The main character, Zubaida Khātūn, became a

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<sup>7</sup>It was, therefore, the only novel whose reading was recommended in *Bihishtī Zēvar*. Naẓīr Aḥmad's most popular novels, however, were *Taubatu'n-Naṣūḥ* and *Mirātu'l-'Arūs*. Pritchett writes: “*The Bride's Mirror* (*Mirāt ul-'Arūs*) may or may not have been the first Urdu novel, but it was certainly the first Urdu bestseller. Released in 1869, within twenty years it had appeared in editions totalling over 100,000 copies ...” (2001, 204). For an English version of *Taubatu'n-Naṣūḥ*, see Aḥmad 1884.

<sup>8</sup>Minault too writes about the phenomenon of *bourgeoisification* among Indian Muslims towards the end of the nineteenth century as one of the main reasons for the need of a new kind of woman (1998, 101).

model for female virtue in Muslim society, just like Naẓīr Aḥmad's heroines (Minault 1998, 38–56; Zaidi 1993, 241–3).

The other Urdu novels of the time presented even less different female role models. So, in *Fasāna-e Āzād* (The Story of Āzād), written by the Hindu author Ratan Nāth Sarshār (1844–1902), the main female character, Ḥusn Ārā, still reminds us of the atmosphere of the *dāstān*, the fairy-tale like romance, typical of the beginning of Urdu prose literature. While in 'Abdu'l-Ḥalīm Sharar's (1860–1926) self-proclaimed historical novels, such as *Flōrā Flōrindā* (for a short account of this novel see Russell 1992, 103–5), the characters, both male and female, do not always ring true, placed as they are, from Europe to Central Asia, in the first centuries of the Muslim expansion.

Therefore, it is only with Mirzā Rusvā's (1858–1931) *Umrā'ō Jān Adā* (1899), that a new kind of female role model is presented to readers, that of the courtesan, excluded by common social standards, yet authentic and typical of the culture of the time. Notwithstanding T. G. Bailey's negative opinion about women's presence in Urdu literature (Schimmel 1975, 235), it is not surprising that Rusvā chose a courtesan as the heroine of his masterpiece, for, despite being among the lowest ranks in the Islamic social hierarchy, the majority of Indian women poets writing in Urdu, at least until the end of the nineteenth century, were dancers and courtesans, the rest being highborn women of good reputation and observing purdah.

Making reference to the figure of the courtesan, a guardian of traditional culture and arts in nineteenth-century Muslim India as dancer, singer and poet, we can now examine the main representatives within the category "literature written by women." Once again, it is necessary to distinguish between poets and prose-writers. As one may easily guess, it is to poetry that the first examples of literary works written by women must be ascribed. Umrā'ō Jān herself, the leading character in Rusvā's novel, seems to adumbrate a poet-courtesan who actually existed, maybe the same Umrā'ō Jān "Zohra" mentioned by Garcin de Tassy (1870–71, III, 347–8), who lived in Lucknow and was a pupil of Mirzā Āghā 'Alī Shams.<sup>9</sup> In his bulky *Histoire de la Littérature Hindouie et Hindoustanie*, Garcin de Tassy mentions various other poet-courtesans who flourished between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Outstanding among them are Qamran Jān "Mushtarī," another pupil of Shams Lakḥnavī and a rival of Umrā'ō Jān; Zīnat Jān "Nāzūk" were both lovers of the Urdu poet Mirzā

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<sup>9</sup>Perhaps the poet referred to as Shams Lakḥnavī (Zaidi 1993, 171).

Ibrāhīm Bēg Maqtūl; Rām Jī “Nazākat,” born in Narnaul and lived in Delhi; and Naṣībān “Zohra,” a singer and poet at the court of the last Mughal emperor of Delhi (1870–71, II, 400–1; 461–2; 340; 456; III, 348). As already noted, at least between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, poetic activity was a prerogative of courtesans. Among the few highborn women of good reputation who composed poetry, Garcin de Tassy mentions Gannā Bēgam, wife of ‘Imādu’l-Mulk, Nawab of Farrukhabad; Nawab Bahū Bēgam, known as Dulhan Bēgam, wife of Āṣafu’d-Daula, Nawab of Awadh; and Suraiyā Bēgam, wife of Mirzā ‘Alī Khān, spiritual advisor of the Emperor of Delhi.

Prominent among these women poets, as she is mentioned not only by Garcin de Tassy, but also by Afeefa Bano (in Tharu and Lalita 1993, I, 120–2), is Māhlaqā Bā’i Čandā (1767–1824). She was born in Aurangabad, during the reign of the Asaf Jahi dynasty, but she moved to Hyderabad along with the court after the shift of the capital. She must have been a very powerful courtesan because Garcin de Tassy calls her “the queen of Hyderabad” (1870–71, I, 386–7). She was a very talented performer, composed songs, and, obviously, in line with her leading position, was a patron of the arts. Like the other courtesans of her caliber, she wrote poetry in Urdu, but her works, unlike those of her colleagues, are still extant, collected in a divan entitled *Gulzār-e Māhlaqā*.<sup>10</sup> Urdu literary critic Samīna Shaukat regards her as the first Urdu woman poet.

Far from showing signs of declining in the twentieth century, the female poetic tradition experienced a period of strong development. While, as will become apparent, women prose-writers had been springing up rapidly for some time, as a result of the diffusion of women’s magazines, writing poetry now ceased to be an activity suitable only for men, for courtesans, or at most for highborn ladies. Of course there are still some cases of singer-, dancer-, and actress-poets—among them Jānkī Bā’i (a poet, dancer and ghazal singer, b. 1889, Allahabad; d., tragically, in the 1930s) and Meena Kumari “Nāz” (1932–72), an esteemed actress and heroine of the famous movie *Pākīza* (1971)—who might be considered successors of the ancient courtesan. But there are also examples of modern intellectuals such as Sajida Zaidi (b. 1926), former lecturer in Education at the Aligarh Muslim University; Zahida Zaidi (b. 1930), literary translator and lecturer in English Literature at Aligarh and at Delhi’s Jamia Millia

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<sup>10</sup>A copy of this work is kept in the library of the East India Office in London (Garcin de Tassy 1870–71, I, 386).

Islamia; Jameela Nishat (b. 1953), Hyderabad activist engaged in social work on behalf of women; and Pakistani poets, among others Fahmida Riaz, Kishwar Naheed, Azra Abbas, Parveen Shakir (1952–1994), and Zahra Nigah.

According to Christina Oesterheld (in Bredi forthcoming), it is in poetry that the female voice is differentiated most from its male counterpart, because of the greater depth of subject matter, increasingly dealing with female issues, although there is no lack of universal topics such as love, fate, death, God, social ills, etc.<sup>11</sup> Although a few women poets may sometimes have a preference for classical diction and closely follow traditional conventions (metrical patterns, rhyme, assonance, alliteration, figures of speech, etc.), many more consciously refuse to accept the male poetic legacy which gives enormous importance to form and conveys, by means of stilted language, an idealized message no longer apt to reflect social reality. Emblematic, in this respect, are the following verses written by Jameela Nishat:

Faulun, Faulun  
this is not me  
Do not see me through the windows  
of iamb and trochee  
for I'm off  
on my journey  
breaking the walls  
of metre and syntax.

(2000, 3)

Such is also the case with several Pakistani feminist poets, whose poetry is a real instrument of denunciation and political struggle. The most popular among them, being included in almost every anthology, and one of the boldest in terms of content, as will be clear from the excerpts below, seems to be Kishwar Naheed. The most prolific poet of

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<sup>11</sup>It is important to point out that, until the beginning of the twentieth century, women poets did not employ a language of their own to distinguish themselves from their male counterparts. Women have never written in the form of *rēkhtī*, which uses a language typical of the *zenana*, rather they have always tried to use standard Urdu. When making reference to a certain “lady,” Mīr Yār ‘Alī Jān Šāhib, known as “the glory of *rēkhtī*,” Garcin de Tassy makes a serious mistake because, in fact, Jān Šāhib, author of a successful *divan* in *rēkhtī*, was a man. Cf. Naim 2001, 3–26.

her generation, she has, despite being a woman, held quite important positions. She has been associated with the Pakistani journals *Pāk Jamhūriyat* and *Adab-e Laṭīf* and has also edited the prestigious literary monthly *Māh-e Nau*. The following are the opening lines of her famous poem “Ham Guṇahgār ‘Auratēn” (“We Sinful Women”), a sort of manifesto of feminist writing in Urdu:

It is we sinful women  
who are not awed by the grandeur of those  
who wear gowns

who don't sell our lives  
who don't bow our heads  
who don't fold our hands together.

(in Ahmad 1991, 31)

The same tone can be seen in another poem, “Khud Kalāmī” (“Talking to Myself”):

Punish me  
for if I live you might lose face  
Punish me  
for if my sons raise their hands you will  
meet your end  
If only one sword unsheaths itself to speak  
you will meet your end

Punish me  
for I love the new life with every breath  
I shall live my life and shall doubly live  
beyond my life.  
Punish me for then the sentence of your  
punishment will end.

(*Ibid.*, 55)

Interestingly enough, another poem, written by Parveen Shakir, bears the same title as the above but is completely different both in tone and in its author's attitude:

To preserve the sanctity of my words I sit  
tongue-tied;

I only talk to the walls, to myself, or my  
shade.

I am afraid the time may come  
When getting more and more withdrawn,  
I may lose the frequency,  
The self-communing faculty,  
(The link that joins me with me).  
And I may sit and shout one day,  
(Without knowing what I say) "May Day,  
May Day!"

(in Kanda 1998, 355–7)

There is no doubt that Parveen Shakir, who died tragically in a 1994 car accident, cannot be considered a feminist poet. She is very well-known and highly regarded, but her poetry is largely apolitical, sentimental and conformist: whenever she tried to explore the theme of physical love, for instance, she did it with full acceptance of the sexist values predominant in Pakistani society (Ahmad 1991, 6–7). So, her "Khud Kalāmī" is not an instrument of denunciation like Kishwar Naheed's, but "a cry of pain, the poet being no longer sure of any possibility of human communication" (Naim 1993, 172).

Eventually, the new woman, both Indian and Pakistani, claims for herself a new kind of emotional gratification which is physical as well as spiritual: poetic language is freed from the conventions of Persianized poetry, depicting women as objects of male love, incomparably beautiful, but void of any kind of personality. The works of these women are apt representatives of poetry used as a means to challenge male-dominated society, even with an awareness of every day's compromises and defeats. This trend can be seen in the works of Indian poet Jameela Nishat:

If only I could rain tears  
on your shoulders!  
  
may my breasts  
glued to your lips  
cleanse the heart!  
may the whirlwind  
of your being  
embrace the storm  
raging within me!

may my cunt  
 kiss your eyelashes!  
 may your minaret  
 plant itself twixt my domes  
 and turn my body  
 into a Taj!

(2000, 35)

Among all these women, Fahmida Riaz deserves special mention for her attitude towards language. According to her, “rural” language is more vital and more adequately reflects everyday life; therefore, she deliberately chooses a vocabulary of purely vernacular and Indic origin instead of the high-flown Persian terms usually preferred by male poets which are less easily understood by an audience belonging to the lower strata of society and lacking proper education, and which therefore make poetry a genre suitable mostly for the élite (see, among others Riaz 1986).

The poem “Akleema” (“Aqlīmā”), drawing its inspiration from the figure of the sister of Abel and Cain, is particularly enlightening in that sense:

Imprisoned by her own body  
 burning in the scalding sun  
 She stands on a hilltop  
 like a mark etched on stone  
 Look at this mark carefully  
 above the long thighs  
 above the high breasts  
 above the tangled womb  
 Akleema has a head too  
 Let God speak to Akleema some time  
 And ask her something.

(in Ahmad 1991, 99)

A close examination of the Urdu text will reveal an abundance of words of Indic origin, uncommon in classical poetry, and even the Arabic and Persian loanwords (perhaps with the exception of the word for “breasts,” *pistān*) belong to the core of the common language. Furthermore, it should be pointed out that, even if Fahmida Riaz deliberately discards the traditional ghazal form, her compositions are extremely musical, as is clear from the following transcription:

*vō apnē badan kī qaidī*  
*taptī hū'ī d'ūp mēñ jaltē*  
*ṭilē par k'harī hū'ī hai*  
*patī'har par naqsh banī hai*  
*is naqsh kō ghaur sē dēk'ḥō*  
*lambī rānōñ sē ūpar*  
*ub'rē pistānōñ sē ūpar*  
*pēčīda kōk'ḥ sē ūpar*  
*Aqlīmā kā sar b'ḥī hai*  
*Allāh kab'ḥī Aqlīmā sē b'ḥī kalām karē*  
*Aur kuč'ḥ pūč'ḥē!*

(*ibid.*, 98)

If the number of women writing poetry in Urdu has been large, their contribution to Urdu fiction has been even greater, and the topic has aroused great interest as can be seen from the number of anthologies published in the last few years. At the beginning, women's magazines were the channel through which Muslim women could put their writings on the literary scene, at first with the help and encouragement of their male relatives (husbands, fathers, and brothers), later on, more independently. To give an example, Mumtāz 'Alī's wife, Muḥammadī Bēgam, the first feminist of Muslim India, was editor, on her husband's advice,<sup>12</sup> of the first successful women's magazine in Urdu, *Tahzīb-e Nisvān*,<sup>13</sup> which began publication in 1898 and continued until the 1950s. Journalism offered her the opportunity of writing not only articles, but also novels, guides to correct behavior, books on domestic science and cookery, etc. In the midst of the voices of the various male writers who, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, put themselves to the test with the genre of the "reformist novel," Muḥammadī Bēgam's voice was authentically feminine, as can be seen from her works, especially her novels, which

<sup>12</sup>Mumtāz 'Alī contributed articles regularly but did not interfere in any way with his wife's editorial activity. Cf. Hussein 1996, 77.

<sup>13</sup>Other famous women's magazines in Urdu included *Sharīf Bibī*, edited by Maḥbūb 'Ālam; Rāshidu'l-Khairī's *'Ismat*; and Shaikh Muḥammad 'Abdu'l-Lāh's *Khātūn*.

have aroused the interest of some scholars.<sup>14</sup> According to Shaista Akhtar Bano Suhrawardi Ikramullah, the first Indian Muslim woman to obtain a Ph.D. from the University of London,<sup>15</sup> Muḥammadi Bēgam's female characters were entirely based on the figure of Aṣgharī, the heroine of Naẓīr Aḥmad's first two novels. In the opinion of Aamer Hussein, on the other hand, the inspiration for her leading female characters came from the countless experiences of her own life. Despite being a Muslim woman who strictly observed purdah, Muḥammadi Bēgam was deeply influenced by her father, Maulvī Muḥammad Shafī' of Lahore, an extremely enlightened man who encouraged her to study, by her husband Mumtāz 'Alī, and by the multitude of people she came into contact with during her career as a journalist (Hussein 1996, 78–9).

Many women, in the following years, followed in her footsteps. There was, for example, Ṣughrā Humāyūn Mirzā, a novelist and editor of two ladies' journals, *an-Nisā'*, published in Hyderabad, and later *Zēbu'n-Nisā'*, based in Lahore (on her see Tharu and Lalita 1993, 1, 378–9). There was also Ḥijāb Imtiyāz 'Alī, an author of novels and short stories, and the editor of *Tahẓīb-e Nisvān* together with her husband Imtiyāz 'Alī Tāj (son of Muḥammadi Bēgam).

Naẓar Sajjād Ḥaidar, mother of Qurratulain Hyder, one of the greatest living novelists writing in Urdu, also entered the world of literature thanks to women's magazines. She was born near Sialkot in 1894 into a Shī'a family known for the learning and scholarship of its women. Her father, Mīr Naẓru'l-Bāqar, was appointed military supplier in the army department and assigned to the North-West Frontier Province. Educated at home, Bint Naẓru'l-Bāqar (this was her maiden name) was among the first women subscribing to *Tahẓīb-e Nisvān*. At the beginning her main contribution consisted of the letters she sent to the editor, but later on she started writing brief articles. Her contributions became so frequent that she was soon known as *tahẓībī behan*. When, in 1910, Mumtāz 'Alī decided to establish a magazine for girl children, the famous *Pbūl*, Bint Naẓru'l-Bāqar became its editor, a position that she retained until she married Sajjad Hyder Yildarim. Her first novel, *Khairu'n-Nisā Bēgam*, was published in Lahore in 1908 when she was only 14 years old. After her mar-

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<sup>14</sup>For example, Hussein discusses two of her novels, *Ṣafīya* (1902), about the evils of arranged marriages, and *Sharīf Bēṭī* (1903), about a woman opening a school in her house (1996, 78–86).

<sup>15</sup>Her doctoral thesis was later published (see 1945).

riage, in 1912, she started writing using the name of Naẓar Sajjād Ḥaidar. She also took part in social and political activities: she was among the first ideologists of the All-India Muslim Ladies' Conference, she modified the design of the traditional burqa and *gharāra*, and she herself came out of purdah in 1923 when she joined the struggle for independence. Naẓar Sajjād Ḥaidar opened several schools for girls in various cities of Uttar Pradesh and it seems that, thanks to her influence, many North Indian Muslim families started sending their daughters to school and university. Her second novel, *Āb-e Mazlūmān* (The Sigh of the Oppressed, 1913) deals with the troubles deriving from the custom of bigamy. *Ṣuraiyā*, published in 1933, draws its inspiration from the issue of arranged marriages, and *Najma*, 1939, depicts the dangers connected with massive Westernization of Indian society. Today, her works, mostly out of print, are considered affected and sentimental, but during her lifetime, they were published in installments in women's magazines and avidly read (on her see Tharu and Lalita 1993, 1, 391–3).

The real watershed marking the beginning of contemporary Urdu fiction written by women was the rise of the Progressive Writers' Movement which undermined, from the 1930s onwards, most kinds of gender distinctions. The turning point for the development of progressive literature, or *taraqqī pasand adab*, was the publication of *Aḡārē* (Burning Coals, 1932), a collection of ten short stories by four different authors (Sajjad Zaheer, Ahmed Ali, Mahmuduzzafar, and a woman, Rashid Jahan). The technical quality of the stories was not very impressive, nevertheless the themes of the stories were extremely innovative and reflected the disillusionment of the new generation of writers who were prone to atheism, to frankness regarding sexuality, and to revolt against traditional Indian morals. There is probably no need to remind the reader that the collection was immediately banned by the British Government and all the unsold copies were confiscated.

Many women writers took an active part in the Progressive Writers' Movement and met with outstanding success dealing with all sorts of topics, even those traditionally considered being taboo, such as sex and communal violence which were previously confined to the writings of audacious male writers like Sa'adat Ḥasan Manṭō (Flemming and Naqvi, 1985). Prominent among the women belonging to the Progressive Writers' Association were Rashid Jahan, Ismat Chughtai, Razia Sajjad Zaheer and Ṣiddīqa Bēgam Sevḥārvī. Among those who migrated to Pakistan after 1947, the sisters Khadija Mastur and Hajira Masrur deserve special mention.

A cousin of Qurratulain Hyder, Rashid Jahan (b. 1905, Aligarh) was a pioneer of female progressive literature and a role model for all the women writing in the following years. Her family was particularly enlightened and progressive, especially in terms of women's issues: her father, Shaikh Muḥammad 'Abdu'l-Lāh, was the editor of the magazine *Khārūn*, two of her sisters became headmistresses, and a third an actress.<sup>16</sup> Rashid Jahan studied in Lucknow, at the famous Isabella Thoburn College, then at the Lady Hardinge Medical College, where she obtained a degree in 1931. In 1934 she married another member of the Aṅgārē writers' group, Mahmuduzzafar, who in those days was deputy headmaster of a college in Amritsar. During her stay in Amritsar she came into contact with a group of Marxist intellectuals based in Lahore, among them the noted poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz. In 1937 she and her husband moved to Dehra Dun where she became deeply involved in the activities of the Progressive Writers' Association. From that time onward her life was very busy, divided between her professional work as a gynecologist, her political activity in the Communist Party, her literary career, her editorship of the political magazine *Āṅgārī*, and, obviously, her family life. Physically weakened, she recovered with difficulty from an operation on her thyroid in 1944. In 1949 she was even arrested, together with other leading figures of the Communist Party. Her life came to an untimely end in 1952.

Since the primary aim of her writing was to promote her ideas on women's issues, all of her stories dealt with women's problems, including sex-related problems and female abuse. She was particularly interested in theater: in fact, she believed that the dialogues she used in most of her stories were the most effective means to convey her message. In *Pardē kē Pīḥē* (Behind the Veil), a one-act play included in the *Aṅgārē* anthology, and in one of her short stories, "Dillī kī Sair" ("A Visit to Delhi"), Rashid Jahan depicts with great mastery the plight of the majority of Indo-Muslim women using a dialogue occurring between two ladies. One of them, Muḥammadi Bēgam, complains about the problems she has to face daily. For instance, this is how she describes the death of her son Nasir:

"Oh dear, sister. You weren't here when Nasir died. Poor little chap, he was only four months old. I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy all that *he* had to suffer. Even strangers couldn't bear to look at him. His wetnurse

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<sup>16</sup>Her name was Khursheed Mirza, but she was better known as Renuka Devi. She also wrote some short stories.

was quite a strapping girl. She looked quite healthy. But she had V.D., and no one had the least suspicion of it. The baby caught it. He got huge blisters all over his body, and when they burst the flesh was all raw and there was pus oozing from everywhere. [...] Anyway he rotted away for two months and then died.”

(in Russell 1995, 38).

It's quite clear here that Rashid Jahan is writing from the perspective of her knowledge and her practice as a woman doctor. Some of the troubles discussed during the conversation with Aftāb Bēgam, such as female sexual problems, unwanted pregnancies, a husband's unfaithfulness, etc., were considered, in those days, taboo subjects and it was indecorous for women writers to even mention them. Such topics might be common during a private conversation, but women would never make them public. This last observation is even more appropriate in the case of Muḥammadi Bēgam's final embarrassing secret:

“[He] was off in Chavari<sup>17</sup> all the time. That suited me fine. As God's my witness, the day he goes off somewhere I sleep soundly at night. But every day it's, 'You're always ill. How long am I to put up with it? I'm going to marry again.' [...]

“I live in fear all the time. God take me away before I have to see the face of a co-wife. And I can't tell you all the things I've done from fear of that. I've had myself operated on twice. [...]

“My womb and all my lower parts had fallen. I got it put right so that he could get the same pleasure again as he'd got from a newly-married wife. But when a woman has a baby every year how *can* she stay in good shape? It slipped down again.”

(*ibid.*, 45–6)

Rashid Jahan's first spiritual heir was certainly Ismat Chughtai,<sup>18</sup> from the 1940s onward another prominent representative of the Progressive Writers. She was born in 1915 in Badayun, a town in Uttar Pradesh, into a well-to-do family, and she always showed her firm intention to

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<sup>17</sup>Delhi's red light district.

<sup>18</sup>For details about Ismat Chughtai, see Tharu and Lalita 1993; Hameed and Mehdi 1996; Hameed and Farrukhi 1998; Hussein 1999; Holmstrom 1990; and Russell 1992, 224–8. For some good translations of her works, see Chughtai 1990, 1993 and 2001.

follow in the footsteps of her brothers, refusing to do embroidery or play with dolls. Indeed, some of her female characters seem to resemble her. Here is an apt example, excerpted from her story “Liḥāf”:

I was then a small girl and fought all day with my brothers and their friends. Often I wondered why the hell I was so aggressive. At my age, my other sisters were busy drawing admirers, while I fought with any boy or girl I ran into.

(Chughtai 2001, 13)

The first person to influence Ismat Chughtai significantly was her brother, the famous writer Azim Beg Chughtai who taught her English, history, the *Qur'an* and Ḥadīṣ, and kindled in her a deep love for literature. Notwithstanding the relative freedom she enjoyed during her childhood, she had to struggle for her right to an education, so when, at the age of fifteen, her parents began arranging her marriage, Ismat rebelled against them with the threat to run away to a missionary-run school and be converted to Christianity. Eventually she escaped from the “tragedy” of arranged marriages and obtained permission to study first at the Isabella Thoburn College and then at Aligarh Muslim University.

In 1941 she married the film director Shahed Lateef. For several years, she held appointments as a teacher, but from 1943 onwards, she completely devoted her life to fiction, so deeply was she influenced by Rashid Jahan, a woman she greatly admired and on whose life she moulded many of her heroines. The fictional situations usually described by Ismat were taken from life in middle-class families, and she was able to explore them with incomparable insight and frankness. She was charged with obscenity and had to stand trial, but she never checked her pen nor was she afraid of later writing short stories such as “Pḥiṣāḍḍī” (“The Laggard”), about a girl sexually harassed by her cousin during summer holidays, or the famous “Liḥāf” (“The Quilt”), about the lesbian relationship between a landlord’s wife and her female servant as seen through the innocent eyes of a child. In the latter the Begum is uncared for by her husband, the Nawab, who is apparently homosexual. This is how the narrator introduces him to the reader:

Her poor parents had agreed to marry her off to the nawab who was of “ripe years” because he was very virtuous. No one had ever seen a nautch girl or prostitute in his house. He had performed hajj and helped several others undertake the holy pilgrimage.

He, however, had a strange hobby. Some people are crazy enough to cultivate interests like breeding pigeons or watching cockfights. Nawab Saheb had only contempt for such disgusting sports. He kept an open house for students—young, fair, slender-waisted boys whose expenses were borne by him.

(*ibid.*, 13–4)

The Nawab's portrait is not unequivocal. Likewise, this is how the child discovers, without realizing it at first, the relationship between the Begum and the servant Rabbū:

I woke up at night and was scared. It was pitch dark and Begum Jaan's quilt was shaking vigorously, as though an elephant was struggling inside.

"Begum Jaan ..." I could barely form the words out of fear. The elephant stopped shaking, and the quilt came down.

"What is it? Get back to sleep." Begum Jaan's voice seemed to come from somewhere else.

"I'm scared," I whimpered.

"Get back to sleep. [...]"

"May I come to you, Begum Jaan?"

"No, child ... Get back to sleep." Her tone was rather abrupt. Then I heard two people whispering. Oh God, who was this other person? I was really afraid.

"Begum Jaan ... I think a thief has entered the room."

"Go back to sleep, child ... There's no thief."

This was Rabbū's voice. I drew the quilt over my face and fell asleep.

(*ibid.*, 17–8)

Countless women, under the auspices of the Progressive Writers' Movement, and influenced by authors such as Prem Chand and Krishan Chandar, followed the example of Rashid Jahan and Ismat Chughtai, both in India (e.g., Jilani Bano and Vajida Tabassum), and in Pakistan (e.g., Altaf Fatima and Jamila Hashmi). Many of them have become quite important in the field of contemporary Urdu literature and their works deserve to be investigated in more depth.

Before concluding this brief outline, it is necessary to mention the greatest living woman prose-writer of Urdu literature, Qurratulain Hyder, born in Aligarh in 1927, the daughter of Sajjad Hyder Yildarim and Naẓar Sajjād. She studied at Isabella Thoburn College and went on to obtain an M.A. in English Literature from Lucknow University. A very prolific author, she has produced at least seven novels and five collections of short

stories in Urdu alone. *Āg kā Daryā* (1959), considered by general acclaim to be her masterpiece, is a novel about the flux of Time and the various strains of Indian civilization.

Hyder began writing during the 1940s, but she cannot be set in the frame of progressive literature, even though she must have been deeply influenced by the Progressive Writers' Movement as well as by the works of all the women who came before her. Her fame and importance, however, are so universally acknowledged that she stands out as a giant among the multitudes of Urdu prose-writers, both men and women, and it would not be fair to consider her exclusively in relation to other women writers.

In this respect, Christina Oesterheld wrote that during the first two decades of the twentieth century women writers followed the rules established by men, but in the 1930s and 1940s the authentically feminine voices of Rashid Jahan and Ismat Chughtai began to rise, marking a real watershed. These two writers began to radically question male supremacy and the traditional role of women. Hyder, however, did not seem much interested in this kind of perspective, confident that she would be able to assert herself as a writer without a gender distinction. Therefore, although she frequently wrote about women in her works, female issues were not her primary concern. Muhammad Sadiq argues that "in her stories it is women who are in the centre of the picture and men are there to enable her to dramatise their misfortunes" (1983, 320). This is true of only a part of her fictional output, stories such as "Patjhar kī Āvāz" ("The Sound of Falling Leaves"), "Ḥasb Nasb" ("Honor"), "Ḍālan Vālā" ("Dalan Wala," the author herself has translated the short story as "Memories of an Indian Childhood"), and "Sitā Haran" ("Sita Betrayed") that may be said to focus in some sense on the plight of women. However, it is not possible to label the rest of her fiction as "feminist." Even in *Čāndnī Bēgam* (1990), where Hyder has depicted the emerging career woman in Indo-Muslim society, many other themes can also be singled out: "changing social relations in the context of the abolition of the zamindari system, the shallowness of leftist positions exhibited by members of the privileged classes, the complexities of relations in families divided between India and Pakistan, the commercialization of folk art, etc." (Oesterheld forthcoming).

This paper has attempted to survey the relationship between Urdu literature and women, focusing not only on women writers but also on women as recipients of edifying works and as leading characters in works of fiction written by men. No doubt this study is incomplete, but it was

necessary to circumscribe such a vast topic. Many of the authors mentioned here would deserve their own book-length study. Nevertheless, my hope is that this brief outline will provide a clear sketch of the essential developments in Urdu literature related to women within the more general context of Urdu literature. □

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